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## Reducing school violence: A peace education project in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Violence occurring in South African schools takes various forms and is a concern for all stakeholders. All forms of violence have negative effects, i.e. physical and psychological, educational damage and societal breakdown. The overall aim of the study reported on here was to explore the nature, causes and consequences of school violence, and then to design an effective intervention strategy to reduce it. In this study we used action research methodology in which stakeholders were empowered to interrupt the occurrence of violence, stop the spread of violence and change group/community norms regarding violence. This strategy of violence reduction was tested at 1 school in Umlazi, in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, in 4 stages: initial data collection, formation of an action team, design and implementation of a strategy, and evaluation of its efficacy. The action team was composed of teachers, community members, parents and learners who developed a strategy entitled, We Care (WC). Initial from both schools data showed that schools were unsafe, with school violence caused by substance abuse, theft, vandalism, physical violence, religious discrimination, sexual violence, cyber bullying, gender-based violence and gambling. WC clustered abnormal behaviour patterns demonstrated by learners into categories: violent cases and behavioural indicators of physical, sexual, alcohol and drug abuse. WC assisted high risk learners who had decided to act non-violently, help victims and assist parents and community members who perpetrated violence. A preliminary evaluation was conducted 1 year later and WC reported that they had developed capacity to assist with these categories of violence, leading to a reduction in violent behaviour at the school.

**Keywords:** conflict transformation; empowerment; non-violence; participatory research; school violence

### Introduction

The scourge of violence in South African schools is a grave cause for concern: daily reports appear in print and electronic media regarding the high levels of physical, psychological and sexual violence (Meyer & Chetty, 2017:121). Increasingly, knives, guns, and other weapons are part of daily school life (Hendricks, 2018:76). Prevalent forms of school violence include bullying, fighting, stabbing, rape and murder (Mncube & Steinmann, 2014:204). Burton and Leoschut (2013:7) found that in 121 South African secondary schools, more than a fifth of learners had experienced violence at school, 12.2% had been threatened with violence, 6.3% had been assaulted, 4.7% had been sexually assaulted or raped and 4.5% had been robbed at school.

As early as 2001, the Department of Education (DoE) launched preventative and punitive programmes to

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