

# Comment: Samurai Attack

School violence made news headlines once again in South Africa when Morné Harmse, a final year student, killed another student by slashing his throat using a samurai sword. He then went on to wound another student and two of the support staff who worked at the school. Newspapers reported that Satan had told the student to do it. Another newspaper reported that Morné had been bullied at school and that he had low self esteem because he was physically smaller than his peers. It was also reported that Morné had discussed with his friends how he would go about perpetrating a Columbine-type of massacre at the school. Another article in the same newspaper blamed the influence of a Satanic heavy metal rock band Slipknot. A tabloid magazine focussed more closely on the influence of Satanism in the school rampage. The article also alluded to rumours that the principal used a cattle-like prod to punish students who misbehaved. In the aftermath of the violence, the school was reported to say that Morné was not a troublemaker, but they had noticed that he was behaving differently and had planned to offer him help.

This vignette, based on popular media reports, blames a range of factors for the killing: Satanism, bullying, poor self-esteem, heavy metal music, copycat action, and behaviour change. Violent attacks like the one described are rare, even in the United States. The reality is that millions of young people watch violent programmes, listen to heavy metal music, or are bullied and alienated but don't go out and kill people. What makes some students snap and do such terrible things?

In the United States of America Newman and associates carried out over a hundred interviews with victims, bystanders and perpetrators after a wave of mass shootings. They reviewed the various hypotheses that had been put forward to explain these shootings, including media violence, bullying, gun culture, family problems, mental illness, peer relations, demographic change, a culture violence and copycatting. Their conclusion was that most of these killings contained an element of truth, but that one factor was not enough, and that a combination of factors acted as a trigger. Newman and associates developed a theory and proposed that five necessary, but not sufficient factors needed to be present in rampage shootings. These can also be applied in the Krugersdorp stabbing case. The first factor is the perpetrators perception of himself as being on the periphery of the social group. Elements such as bullying, exclusion and isolation, being different and on the fringe underpin this factor. The second factor is that perpetrators suffer from psychosocial problems that magnify alienation. Severe depression, abuse, mental illness and other vulnerabilities reduce resilience. The third factor is cultural scripts. These scripts provide models for solving problems, such as killing peers and teachers resolve problems. The fourth factor, and the one I will focus on later, is the failure of the school to notice that things are not going well and that a child requires closer attention. In some cases the United States perpetrators

gave some sort of signal of what was going to happen. The fifth factor is the ease by which perpetrators can access guns or in the Krugersdorp case a sword.

High levels of violence have become endemic in South African society and schools need to offer an alternative way to deal with conflict. Some argue that we should not view social problems through an individually focused lens, and that we should approach these issues from a more nuanced understanding of social problems. From a school perspective then we need to immediately do away with the many of the practices that foster violence. Practices such as corporal punishment, which teach children the values of degradation, force and humiliation, have to be eliminated. Intimidation by leaders and teachers also needs to be avoided in school situations. Discipline is best done privately, and schools should avoid humiliating students publicly.

Teaching and learning need to be made central in schools, particularly since performance is a measure of self-worth for most students. Each student needs to be assisted to achieve the best he or she can. Schools need to make sure that teaching time is used effectively, and that students of all abilities are engaged in classrooms. All students need to experience a sense of accomplishment and their efforts need to be recognised and rewarded.

Teachers need to be vigilant and monitor student behaviour. If there are changes in the way in which a student behaves then they ought to do something about it. In reflecting on the Virginia Tech massacre in the United States of America, Kim notes that the high expectations of parents to perform placed incredible stress on the perpetrator. Had there been a more caring environment, then someone might have noticed that reclusive and cloistered way in which Seung-Hui Cho lived was abnormal. Kim goes on to argue that schools should empower students so that they are assertive, autonomous, and interdependent and possess a sense of social responsibility. Students should be able to communicate or negotiate their own interests and needs and to seek help when necessary.

From a policy perspective, school policies must ensure that the safety of students is ensured. Policies and codes of conduct that are developed collaboratively should be communicated and understood by everyone in the school community. The codes need to be repeated as often as necessary, and students should be encouraged to follow the rules. From a conflict resolution perspective, it is important to teach students how to deal with conflict when it arises. Schools should not just expect students to solve all their problems on their own as if they have the means to do so, rather students should be involved in problem-solving and violence prevention wherever possible. The rampage in Krugersdorp highlights the fact that learning how to behave in a group is a very important life skill for any student to learn.

Schools need to ensure that there are adults to supervise students, and that they are visible in high risk areas. These

adults need to take an active interest and make sure safety is a real concern. If drugs and weapons are a serious problem then the school needs to conduct regular unannounced searches. Parents and guardians should be informed that searches will take place as part of the school's routine, and students need to be made aware of the risks of using illegal drugs and of the dangers of guns and other weapons. Students need to understand exactly what weapons can do.

In the final analysis, it is difficult to predict where and when the next school massacre will happen. The context of violence in schools and as well as in broader society, together with poor levels of pastoral surveillance in schools provides fertile ground for further school violence. Individuals in schools will just have to take time to listen, to respond, to empathise and to care for the students whom they teach.

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