



Safe and Sound? Violence and South African Education

Prepared by TIMSS South Africa Authors

- Although concerns about school safety are increasing internationally, violence in schools is considered to be more serious in South Africa than elsewhere.
- There is a clear link between the prevalence of school-related violence and high crime levels in communities.
- Compared to public schools, independent schools are somewhat safer but even in

these schools, one in five learners reported being bullied on a weekly basis.

- The socioeconomic status of learners is an indicator for potential exposure to acts of violence, with the chances of being bullied regularly being higher for learners from poor families.
- There is a higher frequency of bullying for boys than for girls

who attend schools with similar characteristics.

- Fee paying and independent schools where both discipline and academic success are emphasised are more academically successful.
- Schools where there are fewer discipline or safety problems achieve better results but this relationship is dependent on the size of the school.

South Africa ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and committed itself to protect and promote children's rights.

1993



The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Section 28 of the South African Bill of Rights, deals specifically with the rights of children. Sub-section 1(d) provides that every child has the right to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation. Sub-section 2 provides that a child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child. Children thus have a constitutional right to appropriate care and to be protected from abuse.



1996

The South African Schools Act abolishes any form of corporal punishment in schools.



1996



2005/2007

The Children's Act (2005) and Children's Amendment Act (2007) serve as instruments for fighting child poverty and of promoting the rights of children.

Concerns about school safety in South Africa are more serious than in other countries

The issue of safety in schools has come under renewed scrutiny as a result of a number of high-profile episodes of violence that have been reported in the media¹. Concerns about lack of safety in South African schools are far reaching, and violence in schools is often an extension of violence in communities. Existing safety concerns include bullying, homophobic bullying and sexual harassment; and new threats, such as cyber bullying are growing rapidly. Children may be exposed to unsafe conditions – both at home and at school – from a very young age. Children need to feel safe in order to achieve their full potential at school. These experiences can have a devastating impact on their ability to learn and to live healthy and productive lives². Existing legislation to protect school children from the worst forms of physical violence is not always enforced. For example, the use of corporal punishment is forbidden in the South African Schools Act of 1996³ but it is still practised.

It is a legal requirement⁴ for cases of violence against school children to be reported to law enforcement officials, but news of horrific incidences in schools continues to grab headlines. In some instances, teachers are the perpetrators of violent acts. Female learners are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment from male teachers⁵. But it is also possible for teachers to be victims of violence. The negative effect on teacher morale and the sense of helplessness that many teachers may feel can further damage the climate for learning. The National School Safety Framework has been developed to specify the roles and responsibilities of school officials in ensuring safety in schools. The document has been designed with input from the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention and the South African Police Service. The framework also provides guidelines on how provinces and districts can monitor school safety at a local level⁶.

TABLE 1: TIMSS MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE ACHIEVEMENT SCORES, BY PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVE ON SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND SAFETY, 2011

School Discipline and Safety – Index	Hardly Any Problems		Minor Problems		Moderate Problems	
	% learners (SE)	Average Achievement	% learners (SE)	Average Achievement	% learners (SE)	Average Achievement
Mathematics (SA)	8 (2.1)	367 (19.5)	63 (3.6)	355 (3.9)	29 (3.3)	338 (5.3)
Mathematics (Int. Avg.)	38 (0.5)	478 (1.0)	49 (0.6)	463 (0.9)	13 (0.4)	434 (2.2)
Science (SA)	8 (2.1)	338 (28.1)	63 (3.6)	336 (6.1)	29 (3.3)	317 (7.2)
Science (Int. Avg.)	38 (0.5)	488 (1.0)	49 (0.6)	473 (0.9)	13 (0.4)	446 (2.2)

Sources: TIMSS 2011 International Results in Mathematics, Ina V.S. Mullis, Michael O. Matrin, Pierre Foy, and Alka Arora
TIMSS 2011 International Results in Science, Michael O. Martin, Ina V.S. Mullis, Pierre Foy, and Gabrielle M. Stanco

The 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) study collected information from school principals, teachers and learners in 285 schools across the country. An index of school discipline and safety was created based on eleven questions posed to principals about the safety of their school environments. Table 1 shows that South African school principals expressed greater concerns about school safety than their international peers. Responses regarding the extent of school safety problems ranged from hardly any problems (for schools with very few safety issues) to moderate problems (TIMSS defines this group as having the most serious problems). Thirteen percent of all international learners attended schools with moderate problems whereas more than double that figure (29%) of all South African learners attended schools with moderate discipline and safety problems. Predictably, learners in safer schools tended to perform better in mathematics and science. It could be the case that the relationship flows in the opposite direction, and parents of higher achievers enrol their children in safer schools. It is also likely that learners with greater support systems outside of schools could rely on adults to advocate for their safety at school.

¹ Ncontsa, V. N., & Shumba, A. (2013). The nature, causes and effects of school violence in South African high schools. *South African Journal of Education*, 33(3), 1–15.

² Nansel, T. R., Haynie, D. L., & Simonsmorton, B. G. (2003). The Association of Bullying and Victimization with Middle School Adjustment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 19(2), 45–61.

³ Burton, P., & Leoschut, L. (2013). *School Violence in South Africa: Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study*. Cape Town: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.

⁴ Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007.

⁵ UNESCO. (2015). *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2015*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

⁶ DBE. (2014). *Annual Report*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.

There were also large differences in learner performance between learners in schools with hardly any discipline and safety problems and learners in schools with minor or moderate problems, compared to similar international figures. This phenomenon could point to the severity of the discipline and safety problems experienced or the vulnerability of the education system in South Africa.

Provincial differences in school safety are related to levels of crime in communities

There is also a clear relationship between school-related violence and tolerance of crime levels in society. Provincial results from the 2012⁷ National School Violence Survey⁸ were compared to the 2011 TIMSS results on the frequency of bullying in schools (see Figure 1). The TIMSS survey asked learners about how frequently they were bullied at school. Different forms of bullying were considered in the study design (including being made fun of, left out of games and activities, having lies spread about them, having something stolen from them, being hit or hurt, being made to do things they did not want to do, having embarrassing information shared about them, and being threatened). Responses were combined to form a single bullying index.

In over half of the country's provinces, more than 50% of learners had been exposed to some form of crime. In the North West, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, Mpumalanga and Limpopo, at least one-third of learners were victims of bullying on a weekly basis. On the whole, provinces where the threat of crime to learners was high also experienced high concentrations of bullying at schools. There were some exceptions, such as the Western Cape, where children were at relatively high risk of exposure to crime, but where reports of learners being bullied at school on a regular basis were lower than in other provinces. These patterns raise serious questions about practical measures that can be used to improve the safety of schools in communities where gang violence and crime are widespread, and how to prevent community tensions from filtering into schools.

FIGURE 1: COMMUNITY VIOLENCE AND SCHOOL SAFETY, 2011



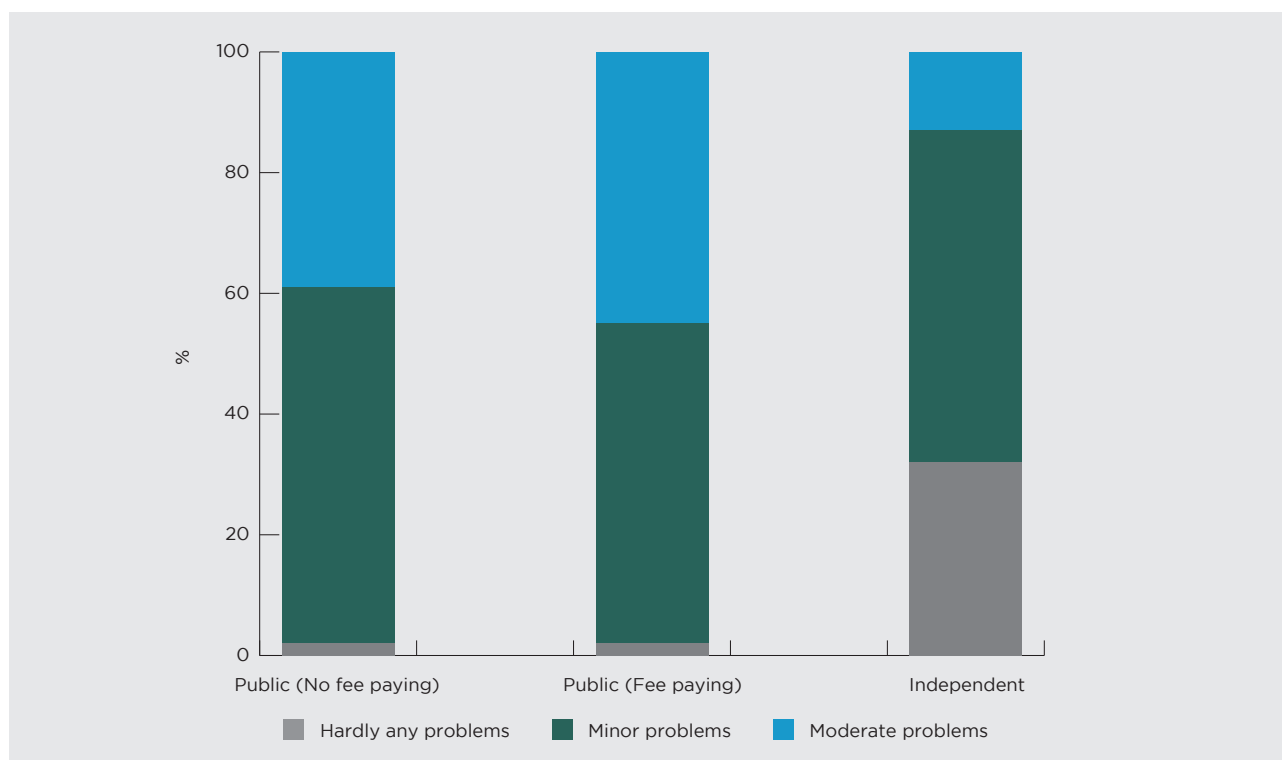
⁷ The survey asked respondents to reflect on events in the previous year, which coincided with the TIMSS study.

⁸ Burton, P., & Leoschut, L. (2013). School Violence in South Africa: Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study. Cape Town: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.

Independent schools are somewhat safer, but bullying still happens

Although the problem of school safety exists across South African schools, independent schools were viewed as safer than public schools according to school principals. Principals of fee paying and no-fee paying public schools had similar views about the nature of the problem of safety in their schools. In both types of schools, less than 5% of learners attended schools where the principals reported that they had hardly any problems with school safety. In contrast, over one-third of learners in independent schools attended schools that were viewed as safe by the principals.

FIGURE 2: PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVE ABOUT THE PERCENTAGE OF LEARNERS AFFECTED BY SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND SAFETY CONDITIONS, BY SCHOOL TYPE, 2011

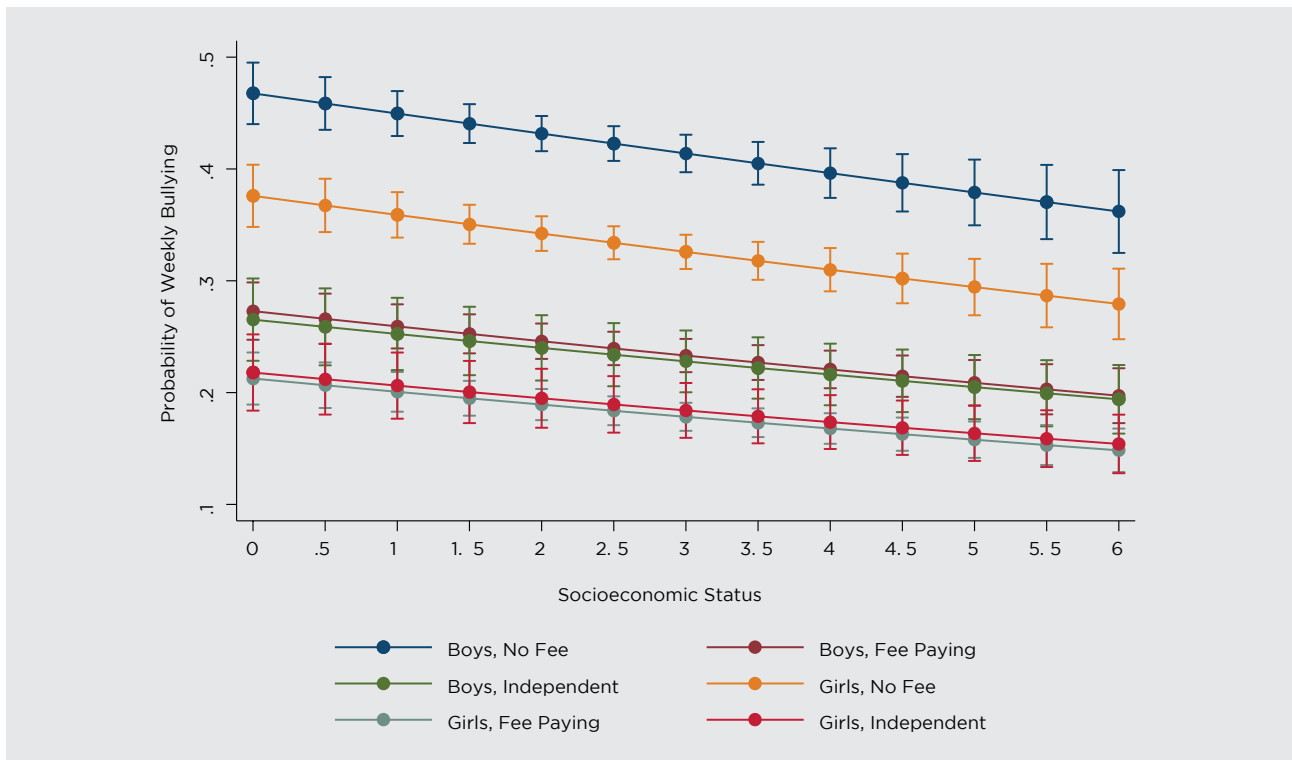


The chances of being bullied regularly are higher for learners of lower socioeconomic status

Our analysis reveals some worrying trends about the victims of bullying within different educational environments. In line with other studies, the chances of being bullied regularly were higher for boys than for girls. Overall, they were highest among boys and girls in no-fee schools, and lowest among girls in fee paying and independent schools. A summary scale of socioeconomic status (SES) was also created and included in the analysis. The frequency of bullying for boys from low-SES households was quite alarming. The probability of weekly bullying was nearly 50% for the least wealthy boys in the least resourced schools. The probability of bullying for learners of a similar socioeconomic status in fee paying public schools and independent schools was very similar. Although the likelihood of regular bullying was lower in these better resourced schools, one fifth of low-SES learners attending independent schools were bullied on a weekly basis.

The link between social status and bullying within different types of schools (no-fee, fee paying and independent) is worrying. Learners of a lower socioeconomic status were more likely to be victims of bullying than learners of higher socioeconomic status. This is after taking into consideration other background factors such as age, gender and academic achievement. What this implies is that irrespective of whether resource-rich or resource-poor schools are considered, the most vulnerable learners within a school appear to be those who arrive at school with the least private support relative to their peers. This implies that status categories from outside of school are recycled within schools, leaving the most disadvantaged children consistently worse off.

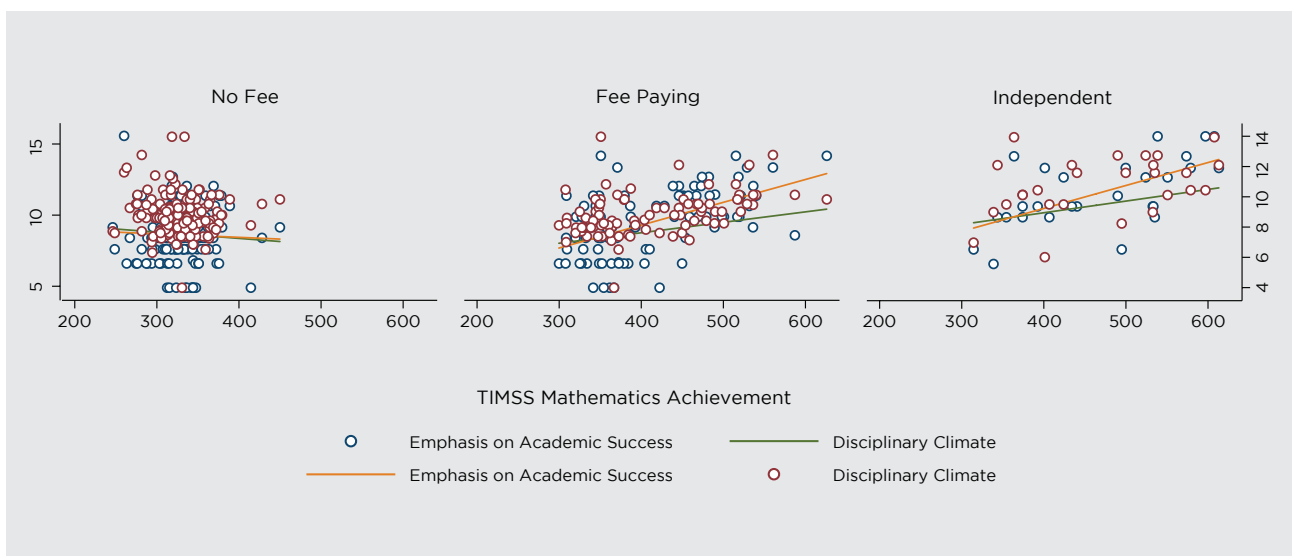
FIGURE 3: BULLYING, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND SCHOOL TYPE, 2011



Fee paying and independent schools where both discipline and academic success are emphasised are more academically successful

We compared the disciplinary and academic climate of schools with the level of achievement in TIMSS mathematics for the different schooling environments. Each circle represents average achievement for a school, based on the climate of discipline and the emphasis on academic success. In fee paying public schools and independent schools, there was a strong positive association between greater discipline and higher average test scores. Even stronger was the relationship between emphasis on academic success and academic achievement. However in no-fee public schools, this link did not exist. Further investigation is needed to determine other factors that could be influencing these patterns.

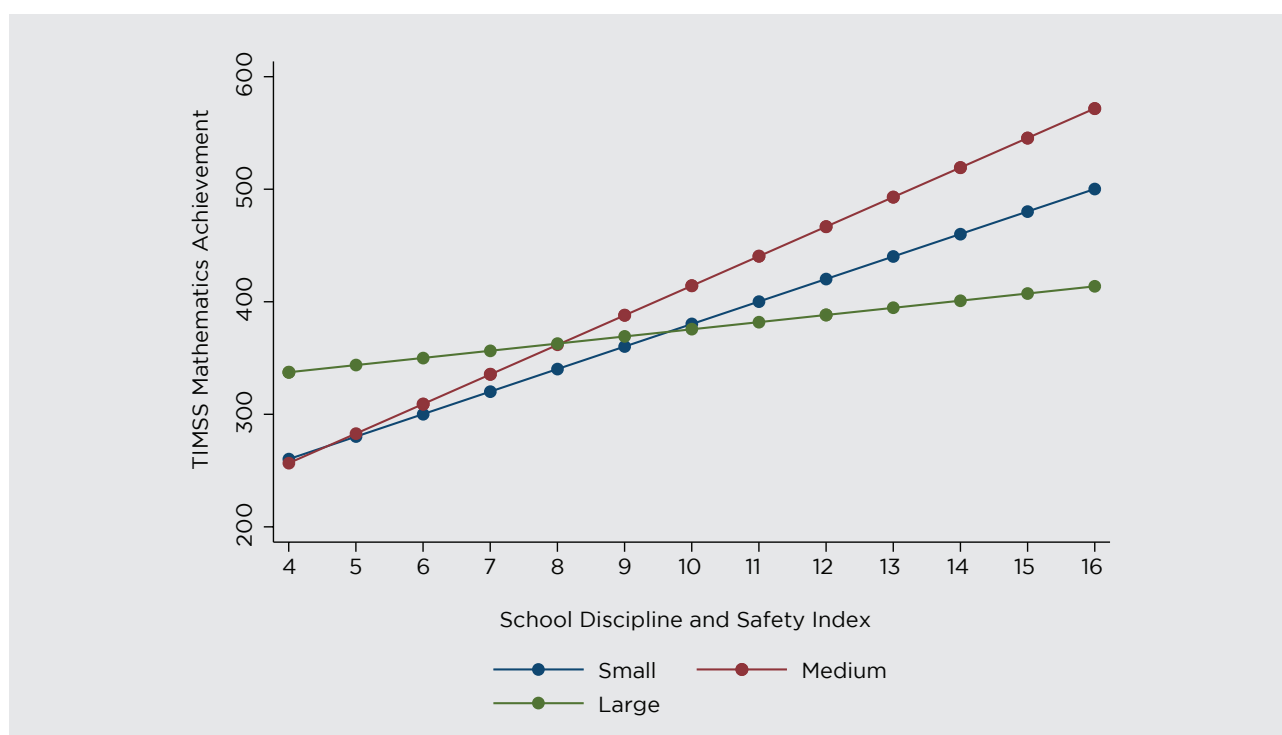
FIGURE 4: ACADEMIC SUCCESS, DISCIPLINE AND TIMSS MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENT



Schools where there are no discipline and safety problems achieve better results but this link is dependent on the size of the school

Both the size of the school (based on enrolment) and the climate of discipline were compared to academic results. In small- and medium-sized schools, with average enrolment of 450 and 900 respectively, maintaining discipline had a positive relationship with higher test scores. However, in very large schools (with average enrolment of over 1 400), the link between achievement and greater discipline was far weaker. This result suggests that the requirements for larger schools to ensure an orderly environment are somewhat different. Interestingly, among schools where safety and discipline were poor, larger schools performed slightly better than smaller schools.

FIGURE 5: DISCIPLINE, SCHOOL SIZE AND TIMSS MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENT, 2011



Summing it up

This policy brief has shed some light on school safety and education, based on the results of the 2011 TIMSS study in South Africa. There is growing recognition of the role that school safety plays in education. Because school-related violence may be linked to conditions in communities, perhaps more than other policy issues, partnerships among different stakeholders are required for improvements to be made. School-based violence is on the increase globally. In spite of this trend, South African principals reported a greater level of concern about a lack of school safety when compared with their international peers. The extent of school safety problems largely depends on the type of school that learners attend. Children attending public schools experienced more frequent threats of violence than children attending independent schools. Nonetheless, bullying was still relatively common in independent schools.

The experience of school violence was found to be different for boys and girls, especially in no-fee schools. Boys in no-fee schools were at the highest risk of being bullied, and low-SES learners within a school were the most vulnerable group. About half of boys and one-third of girls from the poorest households attending no-fee public schools were at risk of being bullied on a weekly basis. The benefits of a school climate where discipline and academic success were actively promoted were found in fee paying public schools and independent schools. In addition, schools with fewer discipline and safety problems tended to achieve better results on the TIMSS assessment, although this was dependent on the size of the school.

So what can we do to develop and maintain safe schools in South Africa?

- At the school level, monitor the nature and frequency of bullying and identify hotspots so that schools can develop targeted interventions.
- Partner with parents so that the early signs of bullying are detected and addressed.
- Ensure that there is a zero tolerance policy in schools towards violence and bullying. School leaders and teachers should set the tone for a disciplined and safe school environment.
- Monitor the implementation of the National School Safety Framework in schools. It is important that different stakeholders, including parents, governing boards, teachers, principals and learners are aware of how threats of violence are managed and how victims and perpetrators of violence should be treated.
- Work with law enforcement officials and the South African Council of Educators (SACE) to ensure that teachers who are convicted of abuse are not recycled within the system.
- Promote a climate of discipline, tolerance and respect, and ensure that larger schools have adequate resources to enforce standards of discipline. Workshops on training personnel in the management of bullying in schools have been introduced in some provinces. Such initiatives should be extended to all provinces and their impact monitored closely over time.



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