

## **The Resurgence of Pupil Power: Explaining Violence in African Schools**

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Presenter: Reuben Mogano

Reuben Mogano is a former Researcher at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.

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### **Introduction**

This paper seeks to analyse some of the dynamics which shape the character and intensity of violent behaviour in black schools, particularly in the years after February 1990. Recent attacks on white teachers by black township pupils have focussed public attention on the sustained "culture of violence" in these schools. This is obviously not new. The legacy of apartheid has been the politicisation of these places of learning and through its transformation into a site of political struggle, the schoolyard has frequently become a place of violence. This political legacy is, however, not a comprehensive explanation of the violence which has become prolific over the past two years. It is necessary to examine the dynamics and the forms of this violence more closely in order to move beyond an explanation which is locked into the rhetoric of the past history of the education system in South Africa. It is with this in mind that this paper will attempt to revisit and re-examine the crisis in the township schools of the PWV.

Referring to the schools in the Pretoria townships of Mamelodi and Soshanguve, Katlehong in the East Rand and Diepkloof in Soweto, a recent report claimed that:

**Pupil power has taken over as frustrated youths turn on their teachers in traditional hotspots of militancy.<sup>1</sup>**

Another set out how the education crisis, which has manifested itself in random disruption at schools, the large scale of collapse of discipline and erosion of the culture of learning, continues to rob South Africa of two-thirds of the country's potential leadership.<sup>2</sup>

It is not possible here, given limitations of space and time, to offer a comprehensive analysis of all the violent trends in schools countrywide. Consequently, this paper will draw primarily from events in Vosloorus and Katlehong whilst occasionally drawing on some examples from other parts of the country. Furthermore, violence in black schools during the period under review, has taken a range of forms, including "pupil-pupil violence", "pupil-teacher violence", and "teacher-teacher violence". This paper will mainly concern itself with what I regard as the central problem in schools – "pupil-teacher violence."

This particular form of violence not only poses a serious challenge to the educational authorities, but it arguably constitutes a serious threat to the general social order. It not only reflects a challenge to the legitimacy of the education system of the past but, more importantly and perhaps ironically, it poses a fundamental challenge to the political leaders and educational authorities of the future – as it is these people who confront the major task of inculcating the "culture of learning" in a disillusioned and marginalised youth.

The irony referred to above resides in the fact that it was largely the liberation struggle which (understandably in the context of Bantu Education) transformed the schoolyard into a site of political struggle. The complex problem of depoliticising and indeed demilitarising the schooling environment is nonetheless likely to continue to plague the leaders in the liberation movements as the most likely leaders in a future government. This does not in any way suggest that the blame for the current violence should be sought in the actions of the leaders of the liberation movements or that it is they who are responsible for the lack of discipline among the youth or this "militancy that has lost direction". It is simply argued here that these political movements have played a cardinal role in raising awareness around educational issues. In so doing, they have correctly identified loopholes in the apartheid education system and have in many respects encouraged vigorous debate on the relevant curricula for pupils. However, it is inevitably teachers who are the ones who implement the existing curricula and who are frequently situated at the cutting edge of the aggression of their pupils. It is no surprise that in the context of the frustrated expectations of change on the part of this desperate and marginalised community, it is schoolteachers who become the primary targets of the violent outbursts of their frustrated pupils. Teaching has, indeed, become the most dangerous vocation in South African townships today.<sup>3</sup>

The implications of this for the future are extremely serious. One can expect a serious backlash if the new-look curricula in the "new South Africa" does not live up to the expectations of the pupils. Furthermore, the empowerment potential of the education system will most likely continue to be judged by its capacity to prepare school-leavers for employment. The likelihood of a contracting economy and increased joblessness will therefore in all probability continue to plague the legitimacy and credibility of the education

system for the foreseeable future. And as immediate agents of authority, teachers are, and will often be, the focus of their anger.

This paper has been based on a limited range of interviews and consultations with student bodies, teacher organisations and other bodies with some interest in the education of the black youth. This paper is therefore in many respects a reflection and assessment of their views.

The paper will examine a range of factors which, I believe, are indispensable in informing our understanding of pupil-teacher violence in African schools. It will briefly revisit some of the effects of apartheid education and will examine the schools as a traditional terrain of struggle. It will then consider the effects of a changing political environment in the context of a lack of any real change in material conditions experienced by pupils in the schools. The paper will also examine the issue of pupil violence in the specific context of marginalisation theory and will consider the particular influences of any "agent provocateur/third force" as well as criminal elements within the violence of the past few years. This broad approach has been taken in order to provide a more generalised picture of this particular form of pupil-teacher violence in township schools. Consequently, other internal and inherently violent dynamics, such as sexual harassment of female students by teachers, or the pervasive use of corporal punishment, have been dealt with sparingly if at all. This and some other factors merit equal attention and should undoubtedly be areas of research and publication in their own right.

#### "Pupil Power": An organic crisis?

An organic crisis refers to a situation where the dominant hegemony is disintegrating and the masses' ties to the dominant and traditional ideologies are broken.<sup>4</sup> In other words "organic crisis" is basically a crisis of authority. As one teacher observed in the South African educational context:

**The crisis of authority as experienced in our schools has one root and that is that the highest authority in this country, the Government of South Africa, is not acknowledged by our pupils. In consequence, every institution, however remotely connected with the state bears the taint and is similarly challenged. Any person or institution who either works or**

## **acknowledges the government is strained and accused of compromise with the authorities.<sup>5</sup>**

The first signals of an "organic crisis" in African schools became apparent during the 1976 school uprisings. If the student protest of 1976 vented a generally felt hostility toward Bantu Education and the "system", then the next round of protests beginning in 1980 began to target teachers as "representatives of white autocracy and agents of oppression."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, by 1980, the system had acquired a human face and it was frequently that of principals and teachers. For example, the Transvaal United African Teachers Association (TUATA) reported that in the Western Cape many teachers chose to stay away from school during the 1980 boycott out of fear of being attacked by students. The Natal African Teachers Union also complained that during school strikes,

## **... teachers [were] not only disparaged, and their dignity and authority tarnished, but [they were] also molested and assaulted by students, their property destroyed and their persons escorted off campuses.<sup>7</sup>**

While an uprising like that of 1976 seems unlikely at the present time, minor revolts by gun-toting 1990s youths, unemployed and hardened by factional violence of the past two years, may in fact raise an even worse spectre. Already, arbitrary and gratuitous violence has become part of life in township schools.<sup>8</sup> The authority structures in the schools are mistrusted at best, and at worst, are the direct targets of the students' anger towards a grossly inadequate education system. It is highly unlikely that in the near future, students will take accept the moral authority of teachers or principals ... if anything, teachers may continue to be the targets of much displaced hostility. This is not to deny that the students themselves are concerned with their education or that there are teachers in the schools that have been deemed "progressive" – usually owing to their allegiance to one or another political organisation.<sup>9</sup> The point is that there seems to be the re-emergence of the phenomenon that I will loosely refer to as "pupil power".

Pupil power essentially means a change in power relations, a new source of authority and a new set of self-generated rules and regulations. Institutional or organisational forms of authority in schools during the 1980s seem to have given way to a more personalised authority of the 1990s. Corporal punishment by teachers as a form of maintaining discipline has, to a very large extent, been replaced by subtle forms of intimidation and violence by

students as a way of resisting discipline. Instructive in this regard were the experiences of a Soweto school teacher, shared with a journalist from Drum magazine:

**A student, known to be a non-hoper in class came to me while we were marking papers. His approach was respectful. He apologised for bothering me, saying he was on his way to town and had just popped in to find out how things were going. As he spoke, he produced a lethal-looking hand-gun and fiddled with it ... I got the message. He was telling me that I either made sure he passed or I would suffer the consequences. I told him things were going well for him, although I knew he had performed hopelessly. After he left, I fiddled his paper to make sure he passed.<sup>10</sup>**

This example illustrates a simple tale, the student-teacher relationship of the 1990s is characterised by curious anomalies, those who possess institutional and intellectual power (teachers) are no longer able to dictate the terms and pace of the learning process in schools. This reflects the ultimate crisis of authority which the education system of the 1990s must confront.

### Apartheid Education

State policy on black schooling from 1953 to 1976 was based on the proposal set out by the Eiselen Commission 1949-1951 on "Native Education". The Commission made numerous recommendations most of which were implemented in terms of the Bantu Education Act of 1953.<sup>11</sup> It is common knowledge that state policy was concerned to insure that the vast majority of black children would receive a schooling that did not equip them for anything other than unskilled manual labour. At the same time, the state, through Christian National Education, was endeavouring to ensure that whites were prepared for an almost complete monopoly of the dominant positions in the society.<sup>12</sup>

This legacy of apartheid education remains intact. There is a chronic shortage of classrooms in black schools. The pupil-teacher ration is also unacceptably high. According to the latest Race Relations Survey, although there was a slight improvement between 1988 and 1990, overall pupil/classroom ratios at African schools in 1990 remained unworkably high, especially at primary level where ratios were as high as 51 students to a class. The ratio for secondary schools was 41 to a class.<sup>13</sup>

Mr James Maseko, Assistant General Secretary of the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC), suggests that this is a conservative estimate. He argues that:

**... the ratio of students to teachers in the urban areas is as high as 60 pupils to a teacher and the situation is even worse in the rural areas where it is often as high as 90 pupils to a single teacher.<sup>14</sup>**

The former Minister of Education and Training, Mr Stoffel van der Merwe, admitted in parliament in 1991 that for the ideal ratio of 30 students to one teacher to be met, an additional 16,205 teachers would be required by the DET.<sup>15</sup> This situation has only been exacerbated by the recent controversial retrenchment of over 2,000 white teachers.

All these statistics tell a simple tale: the backlog in education has serious implications and the situation is far from being resolved. On the contrary, the education crisis has merely been intensified over the past two or three years and the legacy of apartheid education lives on.

The condemnation of the apartheid education system by various interest groups has forced the DET and indeed the government to play a reactive role. Whilst recognising that the system did not enjoy any considerable degree of legitimacy, they have remained intransigent and unwilling, until recently, to address the problems seriously. It is arguable that what we have witnessed during the 1980s has been the reform of Bantu education in which educational reforms constituted a dimension of a "counter-revolutionary strategy" rather than a genuine attempt to transform the education system. This was a critical dimension of the politicisation of the education system which placed the schools at the centre stage of the mass-based resistance to apartheid. This is important because it reflects on the implications of political change heralded by the decade of the 1990s. For many black school pupils, the expectations of political change revolved not around some new constitutional dispensation (although this may have been important to them), but around the

prospect of a transformed educational system and the likelihood of employment opportunities on leaving school.

These heightened expectations which resulted from the unbanning of the mass-based organisations, the prospects of political transition and a new latitude in the political arena in the wake of February 1990, were a source of zeal to young school-based activists. Yet the slow progress made in the political process, coupled with unrealistic expectations of short-term advances in the heartfelt domains of housing, education and an improved lifestyle, rapidly turned zeal into frustration.<sup>16</sup> For black schoolchildren and especially school-leavers, the 1990s have so far delivered only degenerating conditions and growing despair, pouring a cold dose of reality over hopes of what imminent freedom would bring.<sup>17</sup> These unmet expectations have arguably become a recipe for increased violence in themselves.

The burgeoning black population in schools has unsurprisingly responded, occasionally with unpredictably ferocity, to the continuing crisis in education. Inevitably, the people that pupils have most contact with are their teachers in whom most of them have lost all faith. These teachers have come to represent the most immediate symbols of school-based authority and often become the butt of student anger.<sup>18</sup>

It remains important to recognise that not all the anger and frustration that leads to violence in the schools can simply be directly attributed to the legacy of a resilient apartheid education system. There are several other mutually reinforcing factors which have led to the present situation in schools and to which I now turn my attention.

### **Schools as Traditional Terrain of Struggle: 1976-1992**

The centrality of student and youth movements in the South African conflict has been a salient feature of the period since 1976.<sup>19</sup> The ideological content of black consciousness had a pervasive influence on urban youth (during the 1976 uprisings), feeding into and off the frustration and deprivation which they experienced.<sup>20</sup> Black consciousness stressed the need for blacks to reject liberal white tutelage, the assertion of a black cultural identity, psychological liberation from notions of inferiority and the unity of all blacks including "Coloureds" and "Indians".<sup>21</sup>

The emergence of a militant black consciousness movement in the schools was manifest as a response to the introduction of Afrikaans by the government as a medium of instruction. This move significantly institutionalised conflict between students and teachers at the time. Teachers, caught between the demands of their students and the instructions of the Education Department, were obliged to impose what students viewed as the "language of the oppressor".

The importance of the 1976 uprisings lay in the fact that, for the first time in the history of black education, politics became inextricably linked with broader educational issues. In the process. The potential for conflict between students and their teachers was entrenched. This politicisation of the education system became a permanent feature of the 1980s.

However, in the aftermath of the banning of the Black Consciousness Movement in 1977, school students began to look for other forms of political expression. A considerable debate ensued on the type of political orientation to adopt, marked by the emergence of a strong current orientated to the political tradition of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in 1979 – a school student organisation which explicitly took a position founded on the Freedom Charter. COSAS viewed the struggle in schools as part of a much larger struggle against oppression and exploitation by the South African regime. By contrast, those who continued to identify with the Black Consciousness tradition established a political home in the Azanian Student Movement (AZASM).<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, the 1980s were marked by the declining influence of black consciousness and there are a number of historically specific reasons for this decline which warrant discussion here and which cast considerable light on the subsequent trajectory of student struggles.

Firstly, this was closely related to the re-emergence of the ANC in the 1980s as a dominant force in the political struggle (particularly through the "militaristic mythology" contained in the symbolic activities of Umkhonto we Sizwe) which significantly overshadowed political differences between school-based organisations. At the tertiary level, the decade saw moves towards "non-racialism" in the form of joint campaigns between the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and the Azanian Students Organisation (ASASO). Ironically, pioneers of black consciousness in the 1970s became pioneers of non-racialism in the 1980s. Thus, the shift away from black consciousness exclusivity among educated youth at this time helped to close the gulf that had existed between black and white students. For NUSAS, 1980 was a year marked by closer cooperation with black student groups (than at any time) since 1968). During the years which followed, the relationship strengthened as white students brought to township-based organisations useful resources: media skills, communications equipment, a superb range of newspapers (the most detailed information on black political organisations was available in the student press), and most important, ideas.<sup>23</sup> This development heralded a qualitatively new level of resistance to state policy and rapid politicisation of youth on a mass scale.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, growing consensus on strategies and tactics during this period, militated against sharp ideological differences. The perception amongst the majority of students was that "the regime" had to be confronted through whatever means were available and the boycott strategy proved to be one such option which, if it were to be successful, demanded maximum unity amongst black school-goers.

A third factor which influenced the decline of the Black Consciousness Movement during this period was the fact that the 1980s were marked by enormous improvements in the

relationship between students and workers. This was symbolised in the joint student/worker organisation of what became known as the "November Stay-away" in 1984. About 400,000 students from over 300 schools participated in the boycott, and anything between 300, 000 and 800,000 workers.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, international events later in the 1980s also contributed partially to the particular trajectory of the education struggles. The defeat of the South African military in Angola in 1989 and the imminent independence of Namibia consolidated the shift in focus from sectarian ideological differences. In this context the effect was to cut across ideological cleavages and place an emphasis on the need for urgent action in order to bring about change. However, the latter gave rise to what Hyslop refers to as an "outlook of immediatism." Many students came to believe that the state was collapsing and that a revolutionary victory was around the corner. This dangerously romanticised perception (which leaders of the liberation movements did little to counter) led inevitably to adventurist political actions.<sup>26</sup> This trend, although by no means exclusive, was captured in the renowned and highly controversial slogan: "Liberation Now, Education Later".

Hyslop argues that the "outlook of immediatism" led to a growing rift between students and the older generation. A related difficulty lay in the already tenuous relations between students and teachers. Students often regarded teachers as working for the system and thus subjected them to humiliating treatment or even violent attacks. Nor was the consequent alienation between the students and teachers overcome by the rapid growth of the National Education Union of South Africa (NEUSA) among teachers in 1985, as it was organised mainly among young radicalised teachers, while the majority of older and more cautious teachers continued to adhere to the conservative African Teacher Association of South Africa (ATASA).<sup>27</sup>

It is now necessary to trace some of how these trends were to affect the dynamics of conflict within the education system itself during this period. The student struggle in the 1980s was punctuated by changes in priorities and strategies. In the early part of the decade, the student demands focussed on the issues which were clearly related to the education crisis itself. For example, the issues which sparked boycotts in February 1980 in the Western Cape were students' objections to SADF national servicemen teaching in schools, the demand for free and compulsory education, and a call for the re-admission of barred pupils.

However, during the mid-80s, it became clear the student movement had shifted its focus from exclusively educational demands, to broadly political ones. Amongst the short-term demands were the withdrawal of troops from the townships and the release of political detainees. At a broad political level it became apparent that immediate educational demands were now seen by large numbers of students as mobilising issues which were just a facet of a wider struggle to overturn the existing social order.<sup>28</sup>

The late 1980s witnessed another subtle shift and was marked by a greater attempt to balance educational issues with broader political demands. The following example, although subject to various interpretations, arguably reflects the thinking at that time.

Students boycotted classes at Illinge High School in Vosloorus after two of their teachers were detained. The teachers, Joseph Vilakazi and Stephen Maboja, were subsequently convicted in the Pretoria Supreme Court for being part of an African National Congress (ANC) cell responsible for a car-bomb blast outside the Witbank Security Police and CID offices on 24 October 1988.<sup>29</sup> In interviews with several student activists from the school, the underlying reasons for the boycott became clear.<sup>30</sup> According to the students interviewed, the reason for the boycott was a combination of political and educational concerns. They argued that their school was understaffed and therefore the detention of the teachers deepened the crisis in their school. One can discern from the argument that students did not only boycott classes because their teachers (with whom they sympathised politically) were detained. Nonetheless, they were also consciously responding to the brutal harassment of perceived leaders prevalent at that time, both in the schools and in the wider community.

The first years of the 1990s once again appear to have witnessed a detectable shift in the manner and method of school-based conflict which has largely reflected the endemic political violence, frequently arbitrary and indiscriminate, which has dominated the Transvaal townships since at least July 1990. In the schools themselves, violence began to take a relatively new form. Instead of protest action directed against "gutter education" in general, teachers became the selected victims as gun-wielding students vented their frustration on specific and easily accessible targets.<sup>31</sup> This paper will argue that the unbanning of mass-based organisations and the escalating social and political violence amidst supposedly normalised political activity, has changed the course and pattern of violence in schools.

For their part, students had to adjust to a new and probably unexpected reality in which few of the basic conditions which they had fought against had in fact changed significantly. In evaluating the responses of school pupils, it is worth stating the truism that schools do not exist in isolation from political process, nor are they insulated from changes and trends current in the wider society. In fact, it has been argued that society's requirements and expectations of the school are sometimes contrary to the movement taking place within society itself. This inevitably creates conflict between two significant components of the schoolchild's life, namely, home and school.<sup>32</sup>

## Continuity and Change

Perhaps the most stark contradiction within the lives of South Africa's black schoolchildren in the post-1990 phase, has been that of the continuity within an essentially static and

inadequate educational context, placed against the backdrop of dramatic political change which was, for the school-going youth who fought as the shock-troops of the liberation movement, supposedly pregnant with the prospect of meaningful advances in their lives. The result has been heightened levels of frustration and increased aggression – grounded in residual and unchanging sources of grief, yet manifested in novel forms of violence and selection of victims within the education system itself.

Hopes and expectations were raised, perhaps unrealistically, after February 2 1990. The symbolic release of political prisoners created the perception, especially among students, that quick solutions were to be found to their problems. Instead, students found themselves in the same conditions and circumstances which prevailed before 1990, such as overcrowded classrooms and high pupil-teacher ratios. The students' need for urgent change and their understandable growing impatience, arguably caused more harm than good in schools. This impatience has occasionally manifested itself in random disruptions, the collapse of discipline and the gradual erosion of any culture of learning.

This culture of learning has, to a very large extent, been replaced by an aggressive "culture of entitlement".<sup>33</sup> As "the one-time engine of political struggle", students anticipated some form of recognition for their contribution to the struggle. In particular, they believed that their conditions in schools were going to fundamentally improve after February 1990. Instead, their "philosophical expectations" have so far been met by appalling indifference on the part of a supposedly "reformist government". To the extent that they have received greater sympathy from the liberation movements, this has generally been coupled with impotence to actually do anything. Even more tragically, the "culture of entitlement" seems to be nourished by positive developments in the political domain, such as the prospect of successful negotiations at CODESA.

It is argued here that this "culture of entitlement" coupled with the dramatic expectations of political change, is the best context through which to explain the slogan which has threatened to dominate the student psyche in the post-1990 phase: "Pass One, Pass All". A useful barometer of this crisis of expectations is contained in the matric examination results of 1991. A total of 287 950 candidates sat for matric examinations in 1991 and less than half – 107 830 – managed to pass. Of the successful candidates, only 28 051 met the requirements for the senior certificate with university entrance. This represents a slight improvement on the previous year when out of the 63 349 who passed matric, 17 397 achieved university entrances.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, the disastrous matric results are a product of this legacy of decades of a racially-based and mismanaged education system. The "annual massacre of young hearts and minds" which results, increasingly appears to be a permanent feature of our society. As a result, for the majority of school-going youth, the "new South Africa" remains a romantic utopia.

A further aspect of continuity despite traumatic political change, has been reflected by the bureaucratic lethargy of teachers, principals and particularly the DET. The bureaucratic

nature of the DET's administration and the autocratic top-down decision-making process, unpopular in the old South Africa, was no less so in a changed political context. Yet, for their part, students developed expectations that the DET would negotiate each and every issue – hence the recent scuffle caused by the DET's unilateral decision to increase the examination fee. It is not surprising that the result of DET intransigence in this context has resulted in certain leaders of COSAS threatening that if the principles do not pressurise the DET, "they will be met by the AK-47s."

## **We want you to go out there and pressurise the DET. If you stand up and be counted, the DET will listen.<sup>35</sup>**

The threat of AK-47s is very real and it will be shown below that many students have demonstrated themselves to be capable of extreme brutality. However, there is still a further aspect of change in the post-1990 period which throws some light on why teachers in particular became targets of much of the ensuing school violence.

The "Back to school campaign", which was heralded by the shift in the political climate and which was in itself a commendable and positive commitment, arguably served to ironically worsen an already ailing situation in the township schools. The campaign, in the context of failed reform of the educational system, has substantially contributed to the recent intensification of conflict within the schoolyard itself. Students' expectations have been frustrated, especially in the context of a message from those they respect politically, to return to school and to relinquish the boycott as a pressurising tactic. Yet it has been argued that the conditions experienced by these same students have not improved and have barely changed.

This reflects perhaps the most significant yet subtle development in the trajectory of educational struggles in the past couple of years which has significantly shaped the frequently violent responses of frustrated students. The "Back to school campaign", rather than offering students a real promise of a transformed educational system, merely shifted the terrain of struggle from the streets of the township community, into the schoolyard itself. Considering the frustratingly slow pace of change in this sphere, it should come as no surprise that the school itself, already a context of intensifying conflict, has now become the scene of growing violence as the education crisis intensifies. The consequent pressures on government to finally do something, are thus enormous.

However, as was stated in the introduction to this paper, it would be inadequate to simply reduce the explanation of violence directed at teachers during this period to a mere consequence of the legacy of Bantu Education. It has hopefully already been demonstrated

that this violence needs to be contextualised within the broader process of promised political change. However, there are other enduring features of the lives of black township youth which must also be factored into this equation.

### The Role of Marginalisation and Criminality in Violence in Schools

Marginalisation refers to the systematic disempowerment of people with the resultant inability to develop psychologically, economically and otherwise. It is an expression of powerlessness, not only in the context of political rights and institutions, but in a society as a whole – economic powerlessness, exclusion from a social welfare system, educational impoverishment and legal exclusion.<sup>36</sup>

It is presently estimated that two-thirds of the South African youth are under 26 years of age and have very little meaningful education and little prospect of productive employment. According to Sheena Duncan, vice-president of the South African Council of Churches, only one in 10 people entering the job market is employed – leaving hundreds of thousands of unemployed, frustrated and angry people in need.<sup>37</sup> Estimates place the unemployment rate in some townships at up to 43 percent.

Politically, the reality today is that many youngsters, who were the one time engine of the South African liberation struggle, now lie idle and disaffected. Ironically, the return of the exiles and the imposition of an exile leadership of the liberation movement within the negotiation process, has in many respects, sidelined the youth from their former position of political prominence in the heady days of a "people's war". Even more important in the context of this further political marginalisation, is the fact that this also now demands of them a diplomatic patience somewhat incompatible with the calls for action which punctuated the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> It is arguable that it is now in the township schools that this marginalised youth sector are now attempting to re-assert their power and influence.

This scenario is compounded by the legacy of under-education resulting from the continuous disruption of the education system emanating from the boycott strategy itself. The effect of this is that many of those returning to the schools to complete their studies are in fact young adults rather than schoolchildren. This creates a fundamental problem in that a combination of young teenagers and young adults in the same classes militates against proper discipline. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that many teachers are themselves extremely young and are often contemporaries of the young adults they are supposed to be teaching.

This set of factors undoubtedly contributes to the climate in which many teachers have been physically harassed in the schools. Within the educational sphere, as in the wider community, the consistent marginalisation of the youth has led to a situation whereby the energies of these youngsters are channelled into "politically anti-social behaviour" as an alternative to any disciplined political participation.

The majority of students in African schools come from a working class background. Factors such as the general disillusionment with the dominant culture and the economy (experienced through the lack of career prospects, unemployment, impoverished communities and a breakdown of supportive family or community structures) encourage sub-cultural formation as alternatives to the dominant culture from which they experience themselves as marginalised and excluded. These sub-cultural formations are by definition collective and frequently manifest themselves by way of gang or quasi-gang formation.<sup>39</sup> This may take the form of criminal gang formation or of adherence to political collectives of interest groups. However, this sub-cultural quest for alternative identity on the part of marginalised youth, particularly within the schools, manifests itself in various ways.

Firstly, it is argued that this is also rooted in a specific youth psychology. The youth are characterised by their hunger for adventure and recognition coupled with a sense of their own omnipotence. It is argued that this is a universal phenomenon consistent with specific stages of psychological development.<sup>40</sup> It is argued here that the general disillusionment with the education system and the lack of facilities, both educational and recreational, has led to a situation whereby this has manifested as a form of "negative adventurism". However, this "negative adventurism" does not have its roots exclusively within the schools or in the education system. On the contrary, although the education crisis may have been a contributing factor, the roots of this anti-social behaviour lie rather in the disintegration of community life within the townships more broadly. This, in turn, inevitably manifests itself in the schools and in the classroom, but is in many respects "imported" from the township dynamic. It is an open secret that the lives of people in the townships are all but regulated by mafia-like-gangsters who appear to have little regard for life or property. So desperate was the situation that one school principal in Naledi, Soweto, decided to publicly announce the names of gangsters and their leaders that he knew of in his school at the school assembly.<sup>41</sup>

## **All the gangs in the area, which counted to no less than ten, were operational at Naledi High School.<sup>42</sup>**

Secondly, as indicated above, political township struggles often provided a particular social leverage for the youth. The status of the young person came to be determined, amongst other things, by his involvement in these frequently violent township struggles. The wearing of political T-shirts, for example, (when you could be arrested for wearing one), helped to cultivate the "spirit of defiance" and articulated with the youthful psychology described above. It is "this spirit of defiance" and the desire for recognition which have contributed substantially to turning the schools as a traditional site of struggle, into battle zones.

Political membership or membership of a criminal gang can potentially give a young person a status which he or she is otherwise deprived of in the society. The consolidated marginalisation of the youth in the period after February 1990 resulted in many of these youngsters seeking to re-assert their power and influence, through these vehicles, within the schools. In this environment, they frequently came to regard teachers as potential rivals and competitors for power. The haphazard process of transition and negotiation and the high degree of insecurity which it entails, strongly suggests that the harassment of teachers by their frustrated pupils will remain a significant feature of the education system for at least the foreseeable future.

### A Case Study in Pupil-teacher Violence

1992 began with one of the most brutal attacks by township students on one of their white teachers. In Katlehong in the last week of January, a teacher at Kathorus College of Education, Mr Schalk Dippenaar, was attacked and petrol poured over him. He suffered more than 40% burns on his head and body and later died in the intensive care unit of the Garden City Clinic.

Attackers of Mr Dippenaar were alleged to be members of the Pan-Africanist Students Organisation's (PASO) dissident group – "The Revolutionary Watchdogs". Members of this group claimed that white teachers were "rejects of their own institutions" and that it was indefensible to employ them whilst there were thousands of black teachers who remained unemployed.

A well-placed PASO source echoed similar sentiments:

**White teachers are for us people who are not going to deliver. What we are saying is that white teachers do not know many things about our socialisation and things that affect us everyday. It is therefore a distorted approach to give us white teachers.<sup>43</sup>**

PASO general-secretary Mr Lawrence Nqandela was quoted in the Weekly Mail as saying:

**African teachers often opt for teaching as a last resort to secure employment, but they are frustrated when they cannot find jobs at the end of the road. We are not being racist, but disadvantaged African teachers should be given opportunities. They [the DET] just take some defunct teachers from the boers and put them here – but we cannot go and look for a job in Boksburg for example.<sup>44</sup>**

An equally revealing perspective on the specific incident was quoted in a *Sunday Star* interview with another PASO member, Eugene Motati. On the question of why Dippenaar had been attacked it was stated (amidst denials that he had in fact been attacked by PASO members) that:

**... it is likely that Dippenaar was carrying a gun to intimidate or shoot unarmed, innocent African children ... . He is guilty. He has benefitted from a life of privilege and now he takes a job from an innocent African teacher. He is the only one who can be guilty. We have never triggered any violence whatsoever in this country. We have only responded to the war waged against us.<sup>45</sup>**

This perspective reflects much of the culture of entitlement that has been discussed above. However, of equal significance is the re-emergence of racially-based ideology which feeds this student's perspective on the incident. Thus, Motati went on to argue that:

**We will use our slogan 'One Settler, One Bullet' which is a correct slogan if you use the correct definitions. A settler is any member of the ruling class who seeks to perpetuate oppression, or any collaborator, which means any member of the oppressed who has the characteristics of a settler ... . There are no individuals, only settlers and Africans ...46**

The DET subsequently withdrew all white teachers from Katilehong and, according to the DET Area Manager for Alberton, Mr S. T. Nkosi, white teachers were only to be employed at "special schools" such as schools for the deaf.

Attacks on teachers is not a phenomenon exclusive to the 1990s. Teachers were subjected to violent attacks even during the 1980s. The formation of democratic teacher organisations such as SADTU has not overcome this tendency because, like NEUSA, SADTU derives its support primarily from young radicalised teachers. However, the significant difference may well reside in the effects of the general social shift in an era of transition. The prospect of a negotiated settlement – rejected by both the PAC and AZAPO as a government attempt to co-opt the liberation movement which is doomed to failure, has created a rift between organisations on matters of principle and this has clearly spilled over into schools. In short, the negotiation phase heralded by the State President's speech of February 2 1990, has created a terrain for the re-emergence of political and ideological differences which, at least within the educational sphere, have lain dormant for much of the preceding decade. Teachers are anyway perceived to be immediate representatives of authority and the situation becomes even worse if these representatives of authority are also white.

These developments evidence a shift in demands and focus since the late 1980s. Even more fundamentally, the transitional phase of the 1990s seems to have potentially reshaped the trajectory and ideology of the student movement. The prospect of a negotiated political settlement has brought with it the "attendant consequences" of the articulation of previously subdued ideological standpoints. The revival of black consciousness within the schools should, it is argued, be understood within this context. PASO as an organisation might have not orchestrated the attack on Mr Dippenaar and other East Rand teachers including Isabella Geary – an Afrikaans teacher at Fumana High School in Katilehong. Nonetheless, although the organisation did not officially condone the attacks on white teachers, they (the leadership) could understand why some individuals within their ranks acted the way they did.

## Conclusion

The school year has begun in 1993 in much the same fashion as the previous year. Although there have not been any incidents of pupil-teacher violence to match the drama of the attack on Schalk Dippenaar, this year, like the preceding one, has begun with expressions of anxiety about the poor black matric results. Furthermore, in direct response to threats of violence against teachers allegedly emanating not from PASO but from COSAS, even before school started, teachers were threatening to strike in support of demands for better facilities and for greater safety.<sup>47</sup>

It should now be clear to the reader that violence in African schools cannot be attributed to a single causal factor. Furthermore, the range of issues which have been tentatively explored in this paper, should not be regarded as the only factors which shape the pattern of violence in schools. Internal dynamics, such as the sexual harassment of female students, "bully-boy" tactics of some teachers and situations such as that in Alexandra, where some teachers allegedly bribed some SRC members with money to fight their fellow teachers because of personal differences,<sup>48</sup> throw up equally important factors which can determine the trajectory of violence in schools.

The particular dilemma faced by the teachers themselves is perhaps best captured by the philosophical statements of Vusi Khanyile of the NECC, who warned in 1989 that:

**Teachers were under pressure from the DET and from the pupils who resented them for bowing to the DET and for teaching an inferior education system ... [whilst] the DET was equally determined that teachers should remain dependent, servile and anti-student.<sup>49</sup>**

This paper has tentatively attempted to explain some of the contradictions within the black education system which have fed the violent outburst against teachers. The "Back to School Campaign" has had as its unintended consequence, the relocation of conflict within the schoolyard. The changing political environment has compounded this in that it has given rise to a "culture of entitlement" which has fanned the flames in the schools. These contradictions are likely to sharpen if short or long-term solutions are not found to the education crisis. The government must start negotiating for a post-apartheid education policy. Secondly, it must stop the unilateral restructuring of the education system. Lastly, it

must recognise that the key to lasting peace in the educational arena is the establishment of a single education department which is representative of all major players in education.

As Vusi Khanyile stated:

**Ways need to be found to promote and achieve teacher-student unity. Latin American countries have a 'National Teachers' Day' one day a year, when pupils bring gifts to teachers and they [the teachers] are praised and encouraged. A national teachers' day could be a way to increase teacher support, to build links between teachers and students and acknowledge the difficult role which they face as Apartheid middle-men. It could also be a way of focussing on past hero-teachers such as Chief Luthuli and Mathew Goniwe.<sup>50</sup>**

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> *The Weekly Mail* January 31 to February 6, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> *The Star* October 24, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> *Drum Magazine*, August 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Nekhwevha F. H, "The 1985 school crisis in the Western Cape", 22nd ASSA Conference, University of Pretoria, June/July 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Vilardo P., "Contemporary Conflict in Black Teachers Politics: The role of the Africanisation of the apartheid education structure, 1940-1992", *African Studies Institute Seminar Paper*, August 1992, p.18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p.18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

8 *The Weekly Mail, Opcit.*

9 Marks M., "Youth and Political Violence: The problem of anomie and the role of youth organisations", 22nd ASSA conference, University of Pretoria, June/July, 1992.

10 *Drum magazine, Opcit.*

11 Samuel J., "The State of Education in South Africa", in Nasson B., and Samuel J., (eds.) *Education: From poverty to liberty*, David Philip, Cape Town (1990), p.17.

12 *Ibid.* p.19.

13 *Race Relations Survey, 1991/2*, South African Institute for Race Relations.

14 Quoted in Raphela, M., "Soweto Schools in Decay", *Work in Progress*, No. 78, October/November, 1991, p.23.

15 *Annual Race Relations Survey.*

16 Mokwena, S., "Living on the Wrong Side of the Law: Marginalisation, Youth and Violence in South Africa", *Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation Research Paper* (1991).

17 *The Weekly Mail, Opcit.*

18 *Weekly Mail, Opcit.*

19 Hyslop J., "Schools, Unemployment and Youth: Origins and significance of student and youth movements", in Nasson B., and Samuel J., (eds.), *Opcit*, p.79.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.* p.185.

22 *Ibid.*, p.188.

23 Lodge T., "The Origins of the United Democratic Front", in Lodge T., & Nasson B., (eds.) *All, Here and Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s*, Ford Foundation, 1991, p.37.

24 Hyslop, J., *Opcit.* p.194.

25 See Freund, W., et al., "The November Stay-Away", in *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol.10, No.6 (May 1985), pp.74-97.

26 Hyslop, J., *Opcit.* p.194.

27 *Ibid.*, p.198.

28 *Ibid*, p.195.

29 Simpson G, Extenuation Report to the Pretoria Supreme Court in the matter of S v Maboia and Vilakazi, Unpublished paper (1990).

30 These interviews were conducted mostly with COSAS members. It is alleged that there are only 5 known PASO members at Illing High School and despite all efforts I could not make contact with them. Despite this methodological limitation, I think their absence from the scene will not in any considerable way defeat the purpose of my analysis.

31 "Black Schools: Simmering Cauldrons of Discontent", in *Breaktime*, HAP: Johannesburg, January, 1990.

32 Delwyn TP., *Disruptive Pupils in Schools and Units*, John Wiley and Sons: New York, 1982, p.51.

33 This term has become popular, I am aware of its original source.

34 *The Star*, *Opcit.*

35 *The Star*.

36 Mokwena S., *Opcit.*

37 *The Star*, 24 June 1991.

38 Mokwena S., *Opcit.*

39 Slabbert M., "Culture, Sub-culture, Counter-culture and Deviance", in *Alienation and Deviance*, Centre for Extra-mural Studies: University of Cape Town, 1985, p.1.

40 Vogelmann, L., "Black Youth in South Africa: Some factors to consider", *Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation*, Research paper, (1990).

41 Raphela M., "Soweto Schools in Decay", *Work in Progress* No. 78, October/November, 1991, p.23.

42 *Ibid.* p.23.

43 An interview with a PASO official who preferred to remain anonymous.

44 *Weekly Mail*, *Opcit.*

45 *Sunday Star*, 9 February 1992.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *The Star*, 19 January 1993.

48 Teachers Report Compiled by Tshukudu, D., & Schoeman, L., on behalf of *The Sowetan* Nation Building Initiative, Alexandra (1992).

49 Vusi, K., *NECC Annual Congress*, Keynote Address, September, 1989.

50 *Ibid.*

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