Chapter 12
Civil Society Organisations and School Peace Clubs in South Africa: An Outcome Evaluation

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Abstract School peace clubs are a recent form of peace architecture. This chapter reports a qualitative outcome evaluation of a project involving 15 peace clubs set up by civil society organisations in the city of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa between 2017 and 2019. The evaluation examined the outcomes for learners and teachers – specifically, whether the peace clubs had resulted in them becoming peace agents and role models – and whether the schools in which the peace clubs were based had become less conflictual and violent. Learners live in violent environments and violence is the main way they use deal with conflicts. Peace clubs have educated learners to resolve their conflicts non-violently and to act as mediators at school and, at times, at home. This outcome seems to derive from both the subject matter from the peace club's curricula and the participative and experiential methods of learning which are little used elsewhere. While few teachers were willing to act as the peace clubs mentors, those who did so reported important personal benefits. Principals and teachers reported significantly lower levels of conflict and violence in their schools, which they attributed to the operation of the peace clubs. These results should encourage civil society organisations to engage in school peace club initiatives.

Keywords School violence · Peace clubs · South Africa · Outcome evaluation · Alternatives to Violence Project

12.1 Introduction

South Africa is one of the world's most violent countries with the homicide rate of 36.40 per 100k people in 2022—representing the eighth in the world, excluding accidental deaths and incidences of "self-inflicted murder" (suicide) (World Population Review 2022). South Africa ranks fourth in the world in crime index (76.06 per 100k people) in 2022 after Venezuela, Papua New Guinea and Afghanistan (Numbeo 2009–2022). A very high proportion of its violence is perpetrated by

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husbands, fathers and young men against women and girls, and against each other. The country is often referred to as the 'rape capital of the world', with 50 000 to 55 000 rapes and attempted rapes reported to police each year – and these are regarded as being just the tip of the iceberg. A respected estimate by Gender Links and the Medical Research Council (2010) is that only one in 25 victims report such crimes to the police.

South Africa's schools mirror the intense violence in wider society. A nationally representative survey carried out in 121 high schools in 2012 found that 22.2% of learners had been threatened with violence or had experienced assault, robbery and/or sexual assault in the preceding 12 months (Burton and Leoschut 2013). Another study (Mncube/Harber 2013) investigated violence in 24 schools across six provinces and found that 55% of learners had experienced violence at school, with 28% indicating that this violence was a daily occurrence. Not surprisingly, many learners regarded their schools with fear and apprehension.

School peace clubs are a relatively recent peace infrastructure, originating in Zambia around 10 years ago and now operating in a number of African countries. They are aimed at motivating learners to become peacebuilders in their schools and to equip them with the skills to do so effectively. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) – a faith based CSO – has been an important promoter and funder of peace clubs and have produced a range of curricula with a strong experiential and participatory emphasis on issues affecting learners in Zambian and South African schools, namely unwanted pregnancies, bullying, sexual acts between teachers and learners, etc. (Juma 2019). Peace clubs operate in a number of African countries and some of these are documented on NGO websites. However, there is very little by way of academic literature. A search of the *Google Scholar* and *Academic Search Complete* databases in mid-2019, using 'peace clubs' and 'Africa' as key words, produced less than a handful of relevant publications. Juma (2019) outlines the history of school peace clubs in Africa and provides an overview of their operation in a number of countries; Irene (2016) described an action research project with peace clubs in Nigerian schools; and Gulliksen (2015) examined the nature and extent to which children who had been involved in peace clubs in northern Uganda subsequently engaged in peacebuilding activities and the challenges they faced.

In 2012, the MCC began peace clubs in Pietermaritzburg, a city of some 600 000 (including adjacent townships) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province. A second CSO involved in the project was the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), a training programme devised by Quakers in the United States in the 1970s to help prison inmates handle their conflicts non-violently. AVP has since expanded outside the prison context and into many other countries (John 2016). AVP-KZN had been conducting AVP workshops in secondary schools since 2003.

In 2016, the MCC funded AVP-KZN to set up school peace clubs, beginning with four clubs inherited from the earlier MCC initiative. The plan was to build up the number of schools with peace clubs to 34, with each facilitator handling between seven and nine schools. In March 2019, when the evaluation was carried out, there were 15 functioning peace clubs, 13 operating in schools and two with NGOs. Six other clubs had begun but had stopped, most because there was no teacher willing to assist. Of the 13, five were in primary schools and eight were in secondary schools.

The project employed four part-time facilitators working 15 hours during each school operating week, each of whom was assigned to several of the 13 school peace clubs, and a full-time project coordinator.

The evaluation reported in this article covered the three years 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2019 and was based on the intended outcomes of the project, which can be summarised as follows:

- Peace club learners will become peace agents and role models.
- The teachers supporting the peace clubs will become peace agents and role models. There will be a growth of peace identity in schools and in the wider community.

12.2 Research Methods

Three primary schools (PS1, PS2 and PS3) and four secondary schools (SS1, SS2, SS3 and SS4) were selected as 'typical' by the peace club's coordinator from the 13 schools for the evaluation; a summary of their characteristics is presented in Table 12.1. The four facilitators were asked to rate the performance of the selected clubs; one was rated as strong, four as mixed and one as weak. In the event, SS4 was not included in the study because of a learner's suicide the day before planned visit.

Table 12.1 Characteristics of the sampled schools. *Source* The authors

	Grades	Meeting frequency and time	Size of peace club	Size of school
Primary school 1 (PS1)	Grades 5–7	Once per week for an hour during cleaning period	20	590
Primary school 2 (PS2)	Grades 6 and 7	Class based, each class having a lesson once a month during the reading period	400	1837
Primary school 3 (PS3)	Grade 6	Once a week after school for 30 minutes	20	300
Secondary school 1 (SS1)	Grade 11	Break times and after school	30–40	900
Secondary school 2 (SS2)	Grades 10 and 11	Twice per week during sports period	14	325
Secondary school 3 (SS3)	Grades 8–12	Twice per week after school	50	1400

Data was collected from three sources:

- The AVP facilitators' files, supplemented with data provided by the coordinator.
- Interviews and focus group discussions with learners (76, in six school groups), principals (5), and interviews with teachers associated with peace clubs (7), the peace club facilitators (4) and the peace club coordinator.
- Observation and informal discussions.

The questions asked during the interviews were designed to assist in determining the extent to which the intended outcomes were met. Given that the interviews were conducted quite early in the school year, the responses largely referred to the experiences of 2018 and previous years. Very little quantitative data was available and no school kept an 'incident book' in which instances of indiscipline were recorded.

We utilised thematic content analysis (Braun/Clarke 2006; Nowell et al. 2017) to interpret the qualitative data we collected. That is, we identified themes which kept on emerging from the various data sources and focussed on trying to understand their various nuances. We found the use of direct quotations helpful in this process; unless otherwise stated, quotations reflect common experiences and widely held opinions.

12.3 Results and Discussion

Each peace club operates in its own distinctive way. Some only comprise learners with behavioural difficulties, others have volunteers only and some are mixed. Others have representatives from each class. As shown in Table 12.1, some meet during a formal class period while others meet during breaks or after school. Some have considerable facilitator and/or teacher involvement while others have little or none.

Primary and secondary learners are different. Secondary school learners can self-organise and can run the club with little outside support, whereas primary school learners need hands on assistance. Personal sharing plays a central role in all clubs, as does experiential learning based on the peace club curriculum booklets and extensive use of role plays.

12.3.1 Outcome 1: Peace Club Learners are Pace Agents and Role Models

Theme 1. Learners have a lot of anger and frustration, reflecting the intensity of violence in their communities

Learners have experienced and do experience violence in their homes and communities on a regular basis. At each of the sampled schools, learners said that they were affected by violence. Homes and communities do not model or provide training in peaceful methods of resolving conflicts. The violent ways of handling conflicts which

are practiced teach learners that violence is normal and appropriate. Many learners bring this 'education', along with their anger and frustration, to school and vent it on others through fighting, bullying, insults and harassment.

A teacher at PS2 observed that learners come to school full of anger and aggression. At home, they are forced to do things they do not like, are spoken to harshly and feel disrespected by their parents and this is often exacerbated at school where they are teased and bullied. Learners from PS1 come from particularly disadvantaged homes and communities characterised by domestic violence, alcohol and substance abuse and child-headed households. The parents of most learners are young and are not involved at the school. A teacher from PS1 indicated that parents of most of their learners do not have the time or skills to support their children: 'There is just no parental involvement in the school. Parents don't come to the school when asked and if things get really bad [for their children], they change schools'.

Theme 2. Violence is the main way which learners use to deal with conflicts

As a result of growing up in violent communities, the majority of learners have been 'educated' to believe that conflicts can only be resolved through violence or threat of violence. A peace club learner from SS1 summed up this way: 'When it comes to handling violence, the only way most learners know is to use violence'. Another learner from PS2 summarised this understanding as follows:

> I used to be a fighter and whenever anyone at school wronged me, I would hit back. I would beat up people who irritated me with whatever my hands could get hold of, such as sticks ... [But now] I have learnt from the peace club that fighting does not help and conflicts can be resolved through dialogue.

A facilitator pointed out that before the introduction of peace clubs learners only knew that in conflict they must retaliate. However, through participation in peace clubs, learners now know that they can resolve conflicts non-violently and that there are alternatives to violence.

A learner at SS3 told how she was involved in an altercation with her friend a week back, during which her friend slapped her. Her natural response would have been to hit back but she reminded herself that she was a member of the peace club and that she should act differently. She calmed down, sent her friend a peacemaking message the following day and they later resolved their differences amicably.

It should be noted that the learner views reported here are those of 'the converted' and are their opinions about how other learners think and behave. They are most legitimate when speaking about their own experiences and (in theme 3) the differences which peace club learning has made in their own lives.

Theme 3. Peace clubs provide a safe space for learners to share their experiences, gain some healing and develop a sense of group belonging

At almost all schools, learners indicated that peace clubs provided them with a safe and confidential platform where they could share their experiences without fear of being judged or censured. They felt safe to tell their stories of anger, violence, drugs and alcohol that are rife in their homes and communities. For most learners, there

was no alternative place for such sharing. Even if they told their parents that they were bullied or harassed at school, the parents did not pay attention. In the peace club, such issues are listened to and action is taken where necessary.

A learner from SS1 testified about the safety aspect of peace clubs:

> When I joined the peace club, I had a lot of issues around my life. I had internal conflict. I have now learnt to resolve my internal conflicts. The peace club enabled me to open up in a safe space and share what was troubling me. I realised that I was not alone and that other members of the peace club actually had more problems than what I had. The peace club helped me to heal from the hurt that I had.

The Principal of PS1 observed that the facilitator was regarded as a father figure or uncle and learners felt free to open up to him and tell their stories. This is against the background that homes and families do not give their children any psychosocial support. Peace clubs, it seems, fit the 'supportive group psychotherapy' model identified by Kaminer/Eagle (2010), where people suffering the same kinds of trauma receive support from each other by sharing common experiences and reactions. As a result, they 'gain authority over traumatic material so that it no longer becomes a dominant factor in their lives' (Kaminer/Eagle 2010, p. 107).

The group identity aspect is a strong factor in peace club success. The need for identity and belonging was mentioned by teachers and learners at all schools. In the words of a SS1 learner, 'A peace club is different to a class. If you belong to a peace club, you have to behave in a certain way and uphold what the peace club stands for. So you become accountable for your behaviour'. Many learners and teachers spoke of the importance of group membership for learners and the mutual support which the peace clubs offered. Several learners expressed a wish to have T shirts and badges with the peace club logo.

Theme 4. Peace club members have learnt to resolve conflicts non-violently and practice this at school and at home

There were some components of peace club curricula which many learners identified as major insights for them. Three which stood out were the distinction between conflict and violence, managing their anger and dealing with their conflicts using nonviolent, dialogue-based methods.

Learners at five of the six peace clubs had had lessons on anger management, which encouraged them not to bottle up their anger but to address the issues that made them angry through nonviolent means. The importance of dialogue in resolving conflicts was mentioned by learners at all the schools. They stressed the fact that they had realised that violence such as fighting did not solve anything and that it bred resentment and more anger.

A strong commitment to tolerance and respect ran like a thread through group discussions with learners, as evidenced by the following stories:

> Before I joined the peace club, I did not respect other people. I looked down on the disabled, the deaf and people leaving with albinism. I used to laugh at them and did not consider them as human beings. Now I respect all people (Learner, SS2).

> Growing up, I learnt to help people if they showed weaknesses to me. [But] I ended up having a lot of enemies who saw I was helping them because they were helpless and not because I really cared. Now I know that I must respect people because they are people and not because I am somehow more able than them (Learner, SS2)

A number of secondary school learners had attended AVP workshops and praised the development of listening skills and good communication. The following story demonstrates how using the 'I messages' which are taught at AVP workshops and peace clubs helped the learner resolve a conflict at home:

> At home, people I stayed with used to take my clothes and wear them leaving them dirty. This used to make me angry and I had a very short temper. After I learned about 'I messages', I was able to express my feeling to these members of the family and talk to them. The issue was amicably resolved.

Theme 5. Peace club members are peer mediators at school and mediate in disputes at home

There is evidence that peace clubs are positively impacting both the schools and families. At SS3, during break time, six peace club members perform monitoring duties to intervene in conflict situations and prevent them from becoming physically violent. Their interventions have reduced drug taking and physical violence.

At PS2, peace club members mediate and help resolve conflicts at the playground: A key feature of peace club mediation is that the learners do listen to their peers. In emphasising this, the Principals of SS1 and SS2 noted the value of peer mediation in reducing fighting and bullying in the playgrounds.

The practice of mediation also happens in the home:

> My mother and brother always fought over the time that my brother was required to be home in the evening – the curfew. My brother was of the view that he could do as he pleased because he was now over 18. My mother, on the other hand, was of the view that the house was hers. One day a fight between my mother and brother erupted and a lot of vulgar language was used. I intervened and got my brother and mother to dialogue over the issue. At the end, both parties agreed to review the curfew and reached a compromise (SS1).

A grade five learner at PS1 told how he stopped a fight between siblings aged 20 and 16 years who were fighting over the sharing of money they had earned from a cleaning job. After separating them, he facilitated a dialogue where the parents were also involved. The resolution was that the two siblings used the money to buy one item and to share it.

Learners in all the schools spoke of the challenges they faced in getting adults to resolve conflicts non-violently. A SS1 learner illustrated this challenge as follows:

> It is difficult for us as young people to talk to older people about violence because they say. What do you know when you were born in the 2000s and I was born in the 1940s? They will tell you they fought in the liberation struggle against apartheid where violence brought 'peace'. It becomes difficult then to reach out to such elderly violent people with the message of peaceful settlement of conflict.

12.3.2 Outcome 2: The Teachers Supporting the Peace Clubs are Peace Agents and Role Models

Theme 1. Teachers have benefited personally from peace clubs. They champion peace clubs and AVP

Some teachers have been positively influenced by the content of the peace club curricula. One remarked how 'It makes you ask why you are reacting to something in a particular way' (Teacher, SS1). She explained how she used to shout at students but has stopped doing this following an experience concerning a learner who always came to school late. A peace club member came and explained to her the duties the learner had (minding cows) before he could come to school which explained why he was always late. This positive change in a teacher's behaviour resulted from communication between learners and teachers.

A teacher from PS1 explained how her peace club involvement has changed her:

> When I was asked by principal to assist with the peace club, I was sceptical of what was supposed to be my role. [But] as I met the facilitators, something in me simply changed. It must be their manner of approach or the humble manner they portrayed. I also attended the first AVP workshop they were running for peace club learners and teachers together with my school principal. Dealing with learners is a headache and one needs to be patient and tolerant. Peace club has assisted me to build a heart for young ones and AVP expanded my mind and creativity to an extent that I have stopped shouting at learners. I issue basic instruction as well as talk about things before we do them and talk about things after we have done them. I find that everyday my class is always happy.

The principal at PS1 regards the peace club matron as 'just passionate about her learners'. She deals with cases of disruptive learners, referring those with health issues and learning difficulties to a clinic or social worker. She pays for things herself and has done counselling workshops e.g. on bullying. To relieve her of pressure, she is allocated a lower teaching load. Students from the past come back to the school to visit her in appreciation of what she did for them.

The Principal and teacher at PS3 have a very positive attitude towards AVP, whose philosophy on nonviolence accords with that of the school. In 2018, the peace club facilitator came every week, which greatly impressed the principal. In his words, 'the facilitators have been wonderful'. The impression given was that AVP stimulated thinking which had led to other nonviolent initiatives, like a 'buddy bench' where learners in conflict are made to sit and dialogue and resolve their differences nonviolently.

The Principal from SS2 explained that he believed in second chances and accepted difficult learners who had been expelled from other schools. Most of the learners at his school have behavioral challenges and, working together with the peace club, he seeks to win the difficult learners. His focus was on 'building relationships' as a pathway to a better school. He believed that quiet engagement improves matters ('You can win people to behave better by talking to them'), whereas yelling at learners only makes them misbehave more. The peace club and AVP philosophy tie up with his hence his full support of the project.

12.3.3 Outcome 3: Growth of Peace Identity in Schools and the Community

Theme 1. The school is now more harmonious

The new understandings of conflict, violence and nonviolence and the changed behaviour of peace club members have, in the opinions of Principals and teachers, positively influenced the whole school environment. The Principal at PS1 saw change begin with peace club members themselves as they changed their mindsets regarding conflict and violence. Improved behaviour is most noticeable when club members were previously learners with behavioural difficulties – 'Now they are more apologetic and remorseful' (Teacher, PS1). In addition, they encourage each another to avoid negative behaviour and model better behaviour to the rest of the school. Other learners envy what they see and also keep peace club members up to the mark. The improved behaviour happens both in the playground and in the classroom. 'The peace club supports better learner behaviour; it has made a lot of difference. We see the change … (Principal, PS1). A learner expressed the link between her own behaviour and that of other learners as follows:

> I now understand what *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other people) means. By living a life free of violence my school mates and those outside school have come to realize that violence is not good… Now that I don't use vulgar language, I have realized that my friends also do not use vulgar language when they are around me (Learner, SS1).

The Principal at PS2 reported a dramatic reduction in fighting among grade seven learners because they are now aware there are alternatives. Learners are more able to say no to drugs and other temptations. A teacher at PS3 observed that there was a huge reduction in fighting in 2018 when the peace club operated and there have been no major discipline issues in 2019.

Theme 2. There is some networking between schools and with communities

AVP workshops have enabled the sharing of experiences by learners from different schools and networking. In April 2018, learners from five secondary schools were trained together as AVP facilitators, having previously undertaken basic and advanced workshops. During the three years of the project, AVP basic workshops were conducted for community members in seven communities with participating schools. No data was collected concerning the outcomes of these initiatives.

12.4 Conclusion

From our research, it is clear that these peace clubs are a significant peace infrastructure. They deal with issues which are not discussed or examined elsewhere and their use of experiential and participatory learning is very uncommon in schools,

churches and other organisations. These differences are one reason why peace clubs are so attractive to learners.

In our opinion, there is no doubt that the project has met the first two intended outcomes i.e. learners and teachers have become committed and effective peace agents. Learners with no prior understanding of handling conflicts nonviolently now do so, with confidence and effectiveness, at school and even in their own homes.

We noted that our research involved talking to the converted – to peace club members rather than non-members – and in schools where peace clubs had continued. However, had we interviewed non-members and in schools where clubs had ceased operation, we firmly believe that our conclusions would be the same. In addition, we did not interview members of the community in which the schools were located. It is possible that more peaceful school communities may be a result of influences other than peace clubs. That said, our strong impression is that the clubs have acted as a catalyst for other changes, including attitudinal changes among staff and Principals, which have also contributed to more peaceful school communities.

Regarding the growth of a wider peace community, we cannot expect observable change in the short term, unless community-based peace clubs or equivalent were established with a similar participative and experiential learning approach. In the longer term, we can reasonably expect less violent communities than otherwise as peace club members move into adulthood and become parents. However, given the strength of the inter-personal, inter-group and structural drivers of community violence, the peace club influence at community level will be modest.

In quantitative terms, the project has fallen well short of its target of having peace clubs in 34 schools, each with a committed teacher as its guide and with each facilitator looking after seven to nine schools. However, given the challenges facing schools and any NGOs which work within them, the quantitative achievements of the project to date can be regarded as acceptable.

A final point relates to the limited involvement of teachers. While they were very positive about the beneficial effects of peace clubs, few were willing to take on the responsibility of mentoring them. The number of paid facilitators therefore sets a limit to the number of clubs which can operate. Can peace club goals be achieved without adding more work to already over-burdened Principals and teachers? Is there a way of compensating teachers who volunteer for peace club work via a reduced teaching load? What training can be given to teachers who run peace clubs? One answer may be the Learner Support Agents. These are young graduates appointed by the Department of Basic Education to schools with high levels of 'social skills' to support learners with issues like teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence and child-headed households. They could provide an important supplement to CSO inputs.

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