

## The extent and causes of learner vandalism at schools

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School vandalism has negative economic, psychological, and educational implications for education. On the other hand, well-cared for school facilities, furniture and equipment, as well as clean toilets, are conducive to a healthy teaching and learning environment. Because learners have the right to be taught in tidy, clean school buildings, the aim of this research was to investigate the perceptions of a group of educators regarding aspects of school vandalism. It was evident from the research that vandalism is a learned phenomenon in schools and adjoining residential areas. Learners, particularly boys between the ages of 14 and 19, are the most important vandals. However, it is clear that schools are regularly vandalised by herdsmen, gangsters, drop-outs, ex-learners, and learners from neighbouring schools. The research indicated that juridical, economic, drug and alcohol, as well as learner-related, problems are considered important causes of school vandalism. On the other hand, it was found that educator and school management practices are less important causes of learner vandalism.

### Problem statement and aim

School vandalism is not new or a typically South African phenomenon. A literature study (Black, 2002:1; Stout, 2002:1-6; Shaw, 2001:1; Geason & Wilson, 2000:1; the Holland Sentinel, 2000:1-2; Wendel, 1997:1-3) revealed that vandals target schools in, amongst other countries, Australasia, Britain, The Netherlands, USA, Canada and France. Vandalism places a heavy burden on education departments and school budgets (Stout, 2002:2; Perry, 2001:1). Acts of vandalism have for instance cost the Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal education departments R40 million and R48 million in 2001, respectively (Mtshali, 2001:1). Vandalism can cause teaching and learning to collapse as school programmes must often be interrupted in order to repair vandalised structures (Zuzile, 2003:1; Perry, 2001:1). According to the former Minister of Education (Asmal, 1999:3), crimes such as vandalism cause a feeling of powerlessness, uncertainty and fear among educators and learners, and this necessarily leads to the destruction of "the basis of a learning community". On the other hand, well-cared for school facilities, furniture and equipment as well as clean toilets can lead to a healthy teaching and learning environment (Department of Education, 1998:6). Money earmarked for building new schools is regularly used to repair and/or replace vandalised buildings and equipment. The result is that the backlog in South African education cannot be eliminated (Mtshali, 2001:1-2). Because learners have the right to be taught in tidy, clean school buildings, it is important to find answers to the following questions:

- What is the nature and extent of school vandalism?
- Who are the vandals?
- What is the age group of most learner vandals?
- What are the most important causes of acts of school vandalism committed by learners?

The aim of this research was first to establish the perceptions of a group of educators regarding the nature and extent of vandalism at schools and neighbouring residential areas. Secondly, an effort was made to identify the vandals. Thirdly, the perceptions of educators regarding possible causes of learner vandalism were noted. The findings are presented against the background of a literature review.

### Literature review

#### Definition of concepts

The Vandals were a Germanic people who invaded Gallia (the present France), Italy, Spain and North Africa between 400 and 500 AD. They wreaked havoc and destroyed valuable books and works of art. In 1774, because of the vandals' destruction and damage of objects of aesthetic value, Abbe Gregoire created in Paris, France, the term "vandalism" to describe behaviour aimed at causing damage or destruction without obtaining significant profit from the behaviour (Theron, 1991:47; Welch, 1991:99).

Vandalism can be described as the purposeful damaging, violation, defacement, or destruction of public or private property by per-

sons who are not the direct owners of the property (Sanders, 1981: 138). Stahl (2000:1) defines vandalism as:

The wilful or malicious destruction, injury, disfigurement or defacement of any public or private property, real or personal, without the consent of the owner or persons having custody or control.

The criminal term for vandalism is "injury to property" (Geason & Wilson, 2000:1). According to Snyman (1999:550), the classic definition of injury to property in South African law was given by J Innes in Mashanga 1924 AD 11 12: "All that is necessary in our law to constitute the crime is an intentional wrongful injury to the property of another".

Although there is no typical learner vandal, Black (2002:2) identifies the following types of vandals:

- Vindictive children who harbour revenge against an educator or other member of staff of the school
- Malevolent children who enjoy causing problems
- Learners driven by ideologies who wish to draw attention to a specific problem or issue
- Bored children who commit vandalism in search of excitement
- Frustrated children filled with anger — they feel that the school and community are hostile to them.

School vandalism is therefore the purposeful damaging, violation, defacement, or destruction of school property by, amongst others, vindictive, bored, malevolent, frustrated or ideology-driven learners.

#### The nature and extent of school vandalism

Stout (2002:2) and Bloemhof (1990:2) mention that school vandalism is mostly committed by the schools' own learners. Furthermore, numerous researchers (Finn & Frone, 2003:46; Theron, 1991:48; Bloemhof, 1990:3) have found that boys, aged between 14 and 16, are primarily responsible for school vandalism. Sanders (1981:139) does not agree with this. According to him, girls are involved in vandalism just as often as boys. He ascribes the reason for pointing to boys as the offenders to the view that boys show more aggressive behaviour than girls. Their vandalism is therefore more readily noticed and reported.

Although Sanders (1981:139) admits that most vandals are youths, he warns that it must not be generally assumed that all youths are guilty of vandalism. According to him, only a small percentage of the youth can be considered vandals. According to Theron (1991:48), it must be borne in mind that practically all people at one or other time do something which can be described as vandalism (for instance, etching a letter on a school bench or throwing peels out of a car window). Vandalistic behaviour by adults tends to be described by means of other terms. Vandalism committed by fishermen, who leave empty beer cans and pieces of fishing rod lying around dams, is usually described as environmental pollution and not as vandalism. Double standards also exist between the behaviour of adults and that of the youth: when young persons paint a statue green, it is immediately labelled as

vandalism, whereas, when adults pull down an old building that has aesthetic value, their behaviour is justified by stating that room must be made for progress (Theron, 1991: 48).

It is practically impossible to establish the extent of vandalism at schools. The reason is that numerous offences committed against property are not reported to the police. When they are reported, they are not deemed important enough for further investigation (Theron, 1991: 48). According to Smith and Laycock (1985:11), researchers found that less than 10% of all acts of vandalism in America are reported to the police. In South Africa less than half of the crimes committed are reported to the police (Peltzer, 1999:10). Despite this unwillingness to report crimes, it would appear that many youngsters are involved in crimes, as approximately 50% of all reported crimes in South Africa are committed by youths aged between 14 and 18 (Finsterlin, 1999:1). Furthermore, the description of the nature of vandalism is often so vague that it is not clear whether it can be classified as vandalism (Theron, 1991:48). Yet school vandalism seems to be a reasonably general phenomenon. According to Theron (1991:48), vandalism is, besides shop lifting, the most reported infringement by youth. De Wet's investigation (2003:16-18) revealed that Free State educators considered vandalism, after the use of alcohol, the most common offence by learners.

Learner vandals target everything under the sun: "The targets have been limited only by the fertile imagination of the perpetrators" (Allen & Greenberger, 1978:309). In the same vein, La Grange (1999: 400) writes:

Those who are so inclined can damage almost anything, from the shrubs and trees in parks to the walls and windows of downtown buildings.

It is evident from the literature (Cummins, 2003:1-2; Perry, 2001:1-2; Bloemhoff, 1990:3) that vandals primarily break windows, draw graffiti, cause indoor damage to, amongst other things, classrooms, bathrooms, furniture and books, as well as to sports apparatus and fields. Learners sometimes deface and/or destroy their own schools to such an extent that it causes the collapse of teaching and learning, and is even a health risk to learners and educators (Matavire, 1999:1). Why?

### Causes of vandalism at schools

#### *Learner-related causes of school vandalism*

According to Cummins (2003:1), Black (2002:2), as well as Douglas & McCart (1999:3), the reasons for school vandalism are complex and varied. Adolescence is characterised by the love of adventure, a search for excitement, and the need to discover new things and one's own identity. Vandalism is consequently not always committed with the exclusive purpose of causing damage, but rather for excitement and pleasure, as well as a search for identity and acceptance.

It is obvious from the literature (Cummins, 2003:1; Black, 2002:2; Douglas & McCart, 1999:3; Allen & Greenberger, 1978:310) that there are learners who commit acts of vandalism purely for the fun of it. For this reason some investigating officers call learner vandalism "wreckreation" (Allen & Greenberger, 1978:310). According to Allen & Greenberger's (1978:313) aesthetic theory on vandalism, the pleasure of destructive acts lies in the visual, auditory and emotional-kinetic stimuli during the rapid transformation of material (destruction). Research by Teevan & Dryburgh (2000:87) indicates that vandalism merely for the fun of it is the most common cause of learner vandalism.

Along with the need for excitement, the adolescent experiences the need to discover and to understand the operation of certain things. During this process of discovery, he/she can cause severe damage. What is often considered vandalism can also be the result of the wrong use of, for instance, an apparatus or facility due to the ignorance of the user, poor user instructions, or faulty design (Theron, 1991:47).

The youth who experiences inner fragmentation and who fails in his search for identity and acceptance by the peer group can, according to Theron (1991:49), experience a negative identity. Because this youth experiences himself as someone with little significance, he can

try to create an identity in a negative manner. By means of graffiti, this youth then leaves his mark and thus displays his identity. There is also a connection between vandalism and the youth's involvement within the peer group and/or gang. Youths often find acceptance within a peer group and/or gang, and acts of vandalism bind the members of the group and/or gang. The extent to which youths participate in acts of vandalism also contributes to their reaching a certain status within the peer group and/or gang and being recognised by the members (Teevan & Dryburgh, 2000:87; Catalano *et al.*, 1999:5; Douglas & McCart, 1999:6). There is also a connection between drug and alcohol abuse and the acceptance of youths in certain gangs and peer groups. Researchers (Finn & Frone, 2003:46-48; Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998:74; Hamburg, 1998:46) and the South African Minister of Safety and Security (Tshwete, 2001:3) agree that there is a link between acts of violence, including vandalism, and drug and alcohol abuse among youths.

Attention will be paid next to the extent to which school-related issues such as school management style, educator-learner relationships, discipline, as well as learners' academic successes or failures can give rise to learner vandalism.

#### *School-related causes of vandalism*

Various educator- and management-related practices can contribute to vandalism: autocratic or *laissez-faire* management styles; poor, disorganised leadership; over-regulated, suppressive or inconsistent school control measures; educators who are disrespectful, uninterested and prejudiced; the repeated use of punishment measures; vague and/or unclear school rules and disciplinary procedures; the inconsistent application of discipline; educators who do not work as a team in applying discipline; as well as high staff turnover (Black, 2002:2; Mayer, 1999:3; Theron, 1991:51). Trevas & Deeley (1999:2) found that there is a greater incidence of vandalism at schools due to educators' negative and/or authoritarian attitudes towards learners. By committing acts of vandalism, learners often express their aversion to educators. Vandalism can also occur for ideological reasons. Learners can protest against something or hold a point of view, for instance after the dismissal of a popular educator (Cummins, 2003:2; Trevas & Deeley, 1999:3). The extent to which learners may take part in a school's decision-making process and are involved in school programmes affects the incidence of vandalism (Mayer, 1999:3; Theron, 1991:53). Vandalism is less prevalent in schools where learners feel that they are part of the school, that educators are interested in them, that they have a share in the decision-making and in general succeed academically (Black, 2002:2; Douglas & McCart, 1999:6; Theron, 1991:53). On the other hand, a negative school environment contributes to learner vandalism (Black, 2002:2). If schools place too high a priority on academic achievement, it can lead to failure, frustration and possibly vandalism (Catalano *et al.*, 1999:5; Trevas & Deeley, 1999:3). If schools ignore learners' individual intellectual abilities and differences in personality, this will, according to Mayer (1999:5), necessarily lead to learner misconduct.

It appears from the literature (Cummins, 2003:1; Black, 2002:2; Mayer, 1999:3) that the youth at schools that have poor or few recreation facilities or those who do not take part in extra-mural activities often find that vandalism gives colour to their otherwise dull life. Black (2002:2) found that learners who take part in few or no school activities often commit acts of vandalism, because they lack school pride.

Black (2002:3) and Theron (1991:53) share the view that there is a link between the size of the school and vandalism. If the school is small, it is easier to exercise control and discipline. The bigger the school, the greater the opportunity for vandalism to occur. Research in America (as quoted by Theron, 1991:51) indicates that schools damaged by vandals are situated mostly in the lower socio-economic areas, are old or over-full, and must make do with damaged equipment. Attention will now be paid to various community-related causes of learner vandalism.

### *Various community-related causes of school vandalism*

Research (Catalano, Loeber & McKinney, 1999:5; Douglas & McCart, 1999:4; Bloemhof, 1990:1) indicates that antisocial learner behaviour can be directly linked to problems affecting the community as a whole. There appears to be a link between vandalism and poverty, unemployment, substandard living conditions, single-parent families, dysfunctional family relationships, a high average number of persons per household, high mobility of the neighbourhood's residents, drug and alcohol abuse, as well as various other social problems that combine to create an environment of disillusion and personal unsettlement.

Douglas & McCart (1999:5) point out that children grow up in a milieu in which there are double standards. At large sports meetings and/or celebrations adults can overstep the mark and vandalise property, mum and dad can hold wild parties — the youth thus perceive that rules can be broken. Matula (2001:3) is of the opinion that the diminishing influence of the family, school and religious organisations on the moral development of youth, and the growing influence of the media, promote antisocial and insensitive behaviour. In addition, Grimm (1994:116-117) argues that the idealisation of illicit action by youths in the media, television programmes, films and fiction leads to the general acceptance and legitimisation of the behaviour.

The perception that a legal system that is too lenient can be considered an important cause of learner transgressions (*cf.* Elliot, Hamburg & Williams, 1998:10) is reflected in the view "a crime is a crime is a crime, regardless of the offender's age" (Butt & Harrell, 1998:1).

Harber (2001:262), and the Division for Building Technology, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and the Institute for Security Studies (1997:2) argue that the apartheid government's policy of separate communities has led to the erection of schools in townships in inaccessible, often desolated areas. These schools were exposed to high levels of crime after hours.

Vandalism can also be the result of poor architecture, poor urban planning, or poor garden landscaping (Geason & Wilson, 2000:1; Chandler, 1989:79).

Although much research has been conducted on the reasons underlying school vandalism, according to Bloemhoff (1990:1) no specific factor, has been identified as the primary motive underlying vandalism. On the one hand, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that "vandalism often starts as a prank that gets out of control" (Douglas & McCart, 1999:4). On the other hand, vandalism is an illogical, unreasonable and even pathological act, as this behaviour holds no advantage for the vandal. The vandal's behaviour can in some cases contribute to the defacement of his/her environment to such an extent that it negatively affects both his/her and other people's quality of life (Theron, 1991:47).

It appears from the literature that numerous socio-economic, social, juridical, historical, psychological and educational factors are responsible for learner vandalism. Against the background of the literature review, attention will now be paid to the perceptions of a group of educators concerning school vandalism. The decision to note educators' perceptions on the extent of school vandalism rather than crime statistics is influenced by the opinion that educators who know their learners appreciate the extent of learner misconduct, including vandalism, during and after school hours (Klonsky, 2002:67; Pillay, 2000:72).

## **Empirical research**

### **Research instrument**

Empirical research was conducted to establish the perceptions of a group of educators on school vandalism. An attempt was made to establish their perceptions on the causes of learner vandalism. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire.

### **Test sample**

The universum consisted of educators at Eastern Cape and Free State schools. A test sample of 250 educators was drawn in accordance with the principle of convenience. These 250 participants were available at

the time of their BEd Hons. studies at the Queenstown, Aliwal North, Qwaqwa, and Ladybrand campuses of the University of the Free State. Of the 250 questionnaires distributed, 218 were suitable for processing. The high percentage (87.2%) can be attributed to the fact that the questionnaires were distributed and completed while the respondents were attending class. The average age of the respondents, of which 72 (33.03%) were male and 146 (66.97%) were female, was 38 years and 10 months. Their average teaching experience was 13 years and 11 months. The educators had been attached to their present schools for an average of 8 years. Four (1.84%) of the respondents were attached to pre-primary, 86 (39.45%) to primary, 77 (35.32%) to secondary and 51 (23.39%) to combined schools.

### **Validity**

The validity of the contents of the questionnaire was determined by a literature study and the intensive interview method (Cohen & Maison, 1994:100-101; Belson, 1986:35-38). Once interviews were held with four educators, some changes were made to the content and structure of the questionnaire.

### **Data processing**

In section B of the questionnaire the respondents were asked to give their opinion on the extent of vandalism in the neighbourhood/area of their respective schools, as well as at the schools themselves (see Table 1). The respondents were also asked to indicate to what extent their respective schools were exposed to certain types of vandalism. They had to make use of a scale (see Table 2). An attempt was also made to establish who, according to the respondents, were the vandals at their respective schools (see Table 3) and the age of the vandals (see Table 4). Respondents' perceptions on related issues were also obtained. Section C of the questionnaire was aimed at establishing respondents' perceptions on the causes of learner vandalism. They had to use a Likert-type response: 5 = very important, 4 = important, 3 = uncertain (neutral), 2 = not important, and 1 = not at all important. Respondents' perceptions were then determined by means of mathematical calculations. The average gradation of each item was determined and the sequences established (Table 5).

## **Results and discussion**

### **The nature and extent of learner vandalism**

In order to establish the respondents' perceptions on the extent of vandalism, they were asked to judge the extent of vandalism at their respective schools and in neighbouring areas on a 5-point scale. Their perceptions are summarised in Table 1.

From the responses (see Table 1) it appeared that 51.84% and 44.50% of the respondents were of the opinion that vandalism occurs fairly much and very much in the neighbourhoods adjoining the schools and at their schools. To a question whether the staff at the schools, to which the respective respondents were attached, viewed vandalism as a problem, 138 (63.30%) answered yes and 44 (20.18%) answered no; 36 (16.52%) were uncertain. To a question whether the respondents' colleagues admit that vandalism occurred at their respective schools, 164 (75.23%) answered yes and 29 (13.30%) answered no; 24 (15.52%) were uncertain.

Respondents' perceptions on the extent of certain types of school vandalism are listed in Table 2.

It appears from Table 2 that vandalising learner bathrooms and/or toilets, breaking windows, and various forms of internal vandalism were the more general forms of school vandalism.

Table 3 summarises the respondents' perceptions on who must be held responsible for school vandalism.

More than half of the respondents (52.30%) were of the opinion that learners, in general, and boys, in particular, must be blamed for vandalism at their respective schools. A relatively large percentage of respondents (45.87%) were of the opinion that persons who are not directly involved in their respective schools must be held responsible for school vandalism. Fifteen of these respondents held cattle-herders,

**Table 1** Respondents' perceptions on the extent of vandalism at their schools and in surrounding neighbourhoods

	None or almost none		A little		Some		Fairly much		Very much	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
The extent of vandalism in the neighbourhood surrounding the respondents' schools	16	7.34	42	19.26	47	21.56	49	22.48	64	29.36
The extent of vandalism at the respondents' schools	21	9.63	46	21.10	54	24.77	49	22.48	48	22.02

**Table 2** Respondents' perceptions on the frequency with which certain types of vandalism occur at their respective schools

Rank order	Mean rating	Item	Types of vandalism	Very often		Often		Not sure		Seldom		Never		Does not apply*	
				N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	3.238	2	Vandalising bathrooms and/or toilets used by learners	55	25.23	42	19.27	12	5.50	44	20.18	32	14.68	33	15.14
2	3.077	1	Breaking windows	47	21.56	47	21.56	15	6.88	73	33.48	26	11.93	10	4.59
3	3.074	6	Diverse indoor vandalism (e.g. breaking doors)	49	22.48	47	21.56	11	5.04	62	28.44	34	15.60	15	6.88
4	3.064	4	Graffiti (e.g. on desks and walls)	45	20.64	51	23.39	15	6.88	56	25.69	36	16.52	15	6.88
5	2.919	7	Diverse outdoor vandalism (e.g. uprooting plants)	36	16.51	40	18.35	23	10.55	47	21.56	40	18.35	32	14.68
6	2.595	5	Vandalising sport equipment and fields	16	7.34	41	18.81	23	10.55	78	35.78	37	16.97	23	10.55
7	2.736	3	Vandalising bathrooms and/or toilets used by educators	38	17.43	22	10.09	25	11.47	34	15.60	55	25.23	44	20.18

\* Was ignored in the calculation of the mean rating

**Table 3** Perpetrators of vandalism at respondents' schools

	N *	% **
Educators	4	1.83
Boys	103	47.25
Girls	11	5.05
Non-educator staff members	27	12.39
People not directly attached to the school	100	45.87

\* Could indicate as many as applicable

\*\* Percentage of respondents (218)

**Table 4** Respondents' perceptions on the most important age range of learners who commit acts of vandalism

	N	%
8 – 10 years	9	4.13
11 – 13 years	26	11.93
14 – 16 years	81	37.16
17 – 19 years	82	36.61
Other *	20	9.17

\* According to these 20 respondents, learners aged between 20 and 25 can be held responsible for acts of vandalism committed at their respective schools

eleven held gang members, ten held dropouts, eight held ex-learners, and six held learners from neighbouring schools responsible for vandalising their respective schools. Schools are therefore vandalised by members of the community, learners and even educators and non-educator staff members.

In reaction to the question, What is the most important age group of learner vandals? (see Table 4), 81 (37.16%) of the respondents were of the opinion that learner vandals are mainly 14 and 16 years old; however, 82 thought that older learners (17-19 years) must be held

responsible for vandalism. The reality in South African education is emphasised by the fact that 20 (9.17%) of the respondents thought that learners, aged 20 and older, must be held responsible for school vandalism.

**Respondents' perceptions on the causes of learner vandalism**  
Table 5 summarises the respondents' perceptions on possible causes of learner vandalism at their respective schools. Some of the items in the table related to learner, educator and various community-related causes of learner vandalism.

It is evident from the average gradation of the various items that the respondents considered a juridical factor, namely, that the legal system does not act strongly enough against learner vandals, to be the most important cause of school vandalism. It is clear from the national Department of Education's guidelines regarding the drawing up of codes of conduct for learners that it (Department of Education, 1998: 11) considers vandalism a serious learner offence, because "harmful graffiti" and "vandalism, or destroying or defacing school property" are listed as learner offences that can result in suspension. The said guidelines mention that "serious misconduct which may include offences according to the law, must be investigated by the police and referred to the Court if necessary" (Department of Education, 1998:14). Apparently this action is not strong enough for the respondents. One should not ignore the fact that the aim of the Child Justice Bill (RSA, 2002:art.2 {a} and {b}) is "to protect the rights of children [and] promote *ubuntu* in the child justice system". However, according to this act, *ubuntu* also implies "reinforcing children's respect for human rights and the fundamental freedom of others by holding children accountable for their actions and safeguarding the interests of victims and the community" (RSA, 2002:art. 2{b}). According to this act, there must be a balance between children's rights and the interests of the community.

Respondents considered two economic factors, namely poverty

**Table 5** Respondents' perceptions on possible reasons for learner vandalism at schools

Rank order	A R	Item	Possible reasons	Very important		Important		Unsure		Not important		Not important at all	
				N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	4.018	22	The criminal justice system is too lenient on vandals	101	46.33	58	26.61	30	13.76	20	9.17	9	4.13
2	4.004	21	Poverty	109	50.00	51	23.39	19	8.72	28	12.84	11	5.05
3	3.977	14	Peer pressure	94	43.12	74	33.95	14	6.42	23	10.55	13	5.96
4	3.940	1	Drug and alcohol abuse	114	52.29	29	13.30	34	15.60	30	13.76	11	5.05
5	3.894	13	Lack of recreational facilities in the neighbourhood adjacent to the school	105	48.17	46	21.10	21	9.63	31	14.22	15	6.88
6	3.885	2	Low learner self-esteem	84	38.53	74	33.95	25	11.47	21	9.63	14	6.42
7	3.885	23	Identity crisis among the youth	86	39.45	74	33.95	21	9.63	21	9.63	16	7.34
8	3.876	20	Unemployment	97	44.50	53	24.31	30	13.76	20	9.17	18	8.26
9	3.849	28	Lack of discipline in our schools	85	38.99	67	30.73	25	11.47	30	13.76	11	5.05
10	3.839	3	Learner frustration associated with learning disabilities	80	36.70	71	32.57	31	14.22	24	11.01	12	5.50
11	3.766	5	Emotional problems of learners	83	38.07	66	30.28	24	11.01	25	11.47	20	9.17
12	3.734	18	The breakdown of family life	84	38.53	60	27.52	27	12.39	26	11.93	21	9.63
13	3.702	11	Gang influence	93	42.66	45	20.64	26	11.93	30	13.76	24	11.01
14	3.669	10	Insufficient learner participation in school rule making	72	33.03	69	31.65	31	14.22	25	11.47	21	9.63
15	3.661	12	Insufficient learner participation in extra mural activities	83	38.07	57	26.15	21	9.63	35	16.06	22	10.09
16	3.559	19	Influence of television	71	32.57	64	29.36	26	11.92	30	13.76	27	12.39
17	3.541	17	Educators' attitude towards learners	65	29.82	67	30.73	30	13.76	33	15.14	23	10.55
18	3.518	27	School design and layout	60	27.52	67	30.74	40	18.35	28	12.84	23	10.55
19	3.482	8	Negative school environment	64	29.36	64	29.36	32	14.68	29	13.30	29	13.30
20	3.440	9	Incompetent teachers	56	25.69	69	31.65	33	15.14	35	16.06	25	11.46
21	3.399	4	Autocratic management style of the school principal	61	27.98	61	27.98	38	17.43	20	9.18	38	17.43
22	3.394	7	Dilapidated school buildings	60	27.52	53	24.31	39	17.89	45	20.64	21	9.64
23	3.321	16	Ideological reasons, e.g. learners protesting or taking a stance against something	54	24.77	57	26.15	37	16.97	45	20.64	25	11.47
24	3.312	15	High staff turnover	58	26.61	58	26.61	29	13.30	40	18.35	33	15.13
25	3.298	26	Revenge against educator(s)	47	21.56	50	22.94	63	28.90	37	16.97	21	9.63
26	3.261	25	Just for the fun of it	59	27.06	46	21.10	42	19.27	35	16.06	36	16.51
27	3.032	6	School is too large	52	23.85	47	21.56	25	11.47	44	20.18	50	22.94
28	3.101	24	The legacy of apartheid	39	17.89	44	20.18	60	27.52	50	22.93	25	11.48

and unemployment, as the second and eighth most important causes of learner vandalism. It appears from newspaper reports (see Matyu, 2002:6; Bonthuys, 2001:12; Maravire, 2001:8) that learner vandals break into their own and neighbouring schools and vandalise and/or steal some of the structures, equipment and furniture. Some of these stolen goods are traced, according to Bonthuys (2001:12), to taverns, nursery schools, homes, and shops. The view that learners steal/vandalise because they are poor is rejected by the Gauteng premier, Mbhazima Shilowa (as quoted by De Lange, 2001:2): "We were also poor, but not criminals." It appears from an interview with the former Western Cape minister of education (quoted by Bonthuys, 2001:12) that learner vandals steal in order to obtain money for drugs. According to the respondents, drug and alcohol abuse are the fourth most important cause of learner vandalism. Global laws prohibit the possession, trade in, use, cultivation or manufacture of certain drugs (Glick, 1995:35). The sale of alcohol to persons under the age of eighteen, as well as the use of alcohol by a minor in a public place is illegal in South Africa (Mqadi, 1996:81). It would appear that these legal restrictions have little influence on the abuse of alcohol and drugs, as 65.59% of the respondents agreed that the abuse of drugs and alcohol caused learner vandalism.

More than half of the respondents agreed that learner-related instances, namely, influence of the peer group and gang members, a poor self-image, emotional problems, as well as frustration as a result of learning problems, and academic failure are conducive to learner vandalism. Contrary to international research findings, relatively few respondents (48.16%) were of the opinion that learners commit acts of

vandalism merely for pleasure (item 25). Relatively few respondents (44.50%) shared the view that learners commit vandalism in revenge against educators (item 26). Educator-related causes of learner vandalism (items 17, 20, 21 and 24) were relatively low in the sequence and lower than learner vandalism (3.619). Learners' perceptions on the extent to which educator and school management practices contribute to learner vandalism should therefore be investigated.

In contrast with the emphasis which some sources (see Harber, 2001:262; Division for Building Technology, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and the Institute for Security Studies, 1997:2) place on the influence of South Africa's apartheid past on vandalism, only 38.07% of the respondents were of the opinion that apartheid had an influence on learner vandalism ten years after the first democratic election.

The responses revealed that learners, in particular boys aged between 14 and 19, are blamed for vandalism for juridical, economic, drug and alcohol, and learner-related problems.

### Conclusion

School vandalism is not only a school problem but also a community problem. Factors that are often beyond the control of the school, such as poverty, unemployment, disintegration of family life, inability or unwillingness of government to clamp down on vandals, and availability of drugs and alcohol, are considered the most important causes of vandalism. The co-operation of education leaders, government, legislators and community leaders is essential in order to combat learner vandalism and to create a safe school environment that promotes

teaching and learning. The socio-economic and social upliftment of the community is also essential. Educators must play a leading role in combating learner vandalism, because they not only have access to learners during their important formative years, but are also often the only conservative factor in the lives of the youth who grow up in homes/neighbourhoods in which crime reigns supreme. The modern community often demands that schools accept responsibility for education that belongs mainly in the parental home.

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