

# THE SOUTH AFRICAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF MEDIA REPORTS

C. DE WET

## ABSTRACT

This article examines how South African newspapers report on the activities of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) regarding human rights violations in South African schools over a five-year period (1 January 2005 to 31 December 2009). The overarching research question that guided this study is: Can the media play a role in cultivating and creating a particular view of human rights violations in schools and advocate policy change through their framing of the activities of the SAHRC? McManus and Dorfman's guidelines were used to analyse the structural and content frames of 161 articles that were retrieved from the SAMedia database. These news stories provide a glimpse on the wide variety of human rights violations the SAHRC investigated during the five-year period. The interrogation of the two dominant content frames, namely school violence and infringements on learners' rights to basic education, reveals newspapers' superficial and sensationalised coverage of human rights violations. The analysis exposes the media's lack of policy advocacy.

**Keywords:** Human Rights, media framing, school violence, basic education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996a) provides for a framework grounded in a discourse of human rights, equity and non-discrimination:

*[T]he state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth (Section 9[3]).*

Race, the primary ground for discrimination in the apartheid past, is now only one of a list of forms of diversity which are to be recognised (Kruss, 2001:46). Since the promulgation of the South African Constitution, several acts and policy documents relating to human rights in South African society at large and schooling in particular followed. These include the *South African Schools Act, no. 84 of 1996 (RSA, 1996b)*, *Promotion of equality and prevention of unfair discrimination Act, no. 4 of 2000 (RSA, 2000)*, *Language in education policy (DoE, 1997)* and *Special needs education: Building an inclusive education and training system (DoE, 2001)*. To assist role-players, the Department of Education (DoE) furthermore published the *Rights and responsibilities of*

*parents, learners and public schools: Public school policy guide* (DoE, 2005). This publication explains the DoE's language in education policy and provides an overview of policy and procedures to be followed to ensure learners' rights to basic education if their parents/guardians are unable or unwilling to pay school fees.

Rights do not necessarily deliver what they appear to promise (Christie, 2010:3). The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) was therefore established to support constitutional democracy. The Human Rights Commission Act 54 as provided by the Interim Constitution of South Africa, *Act no. 200 of 1993* (RSA, 1993) mandated the SAHRC to:

- promote respect for human rights and a culture of human rights;
- promote the protection, development and attainment of human rights; and
- monitor and access the observation of human rights in the Republic.

The SAHRC has the power, as regulated by national legislation, to investigate and report on the observance of human rights, take steps to secure appropriate redress mechanisms where human rights have been violated, carry out research and educate.

From the foregoing it may be argued that the SAHRC should, amongst other things, act as a watchdog over the rights of educators and learners and create sensitivity and awareness of human rights issues in schools.

The media is believed to be “the most powerful resource for public definitions of our age” (Altheide, 2009:1355). The media play, amongst other things, a significant role in focusing people's attention on a certain issue, such as human rights violations and the activities of the SAHRC. The frequency, depth and importance given by the media concerning an issue are believed to determine the level of observation, reaction or the thoughts of the targeted audience or society towards it. The influence used by the media is the same, concerning either a positive or negative image or character of an organisation, a certain race, society, country, or the individual him/herself (Tiung & Hasim, 2009:410). The media's depiction of events can have an impact on the casual reasoning employed by the public by emphasising particular attitudinal or behavioural linkages of cause and effect. Consequently, coverage and portrayals of social problems, such as the violation of educators' and learners' human rights in the media are particularly important, because they help to create sensitivity towards human rights issues in schools and a willingness to support an investment of resources, such as the SAHRC, which can investigate and/or intervene in human rights violations. If the media representation is biased, people's perceptions of the issue will be biased (cf.

Carlyle, Slater & Chakroff, 2008:171). Esmail, Phillips, Kuek, Cosio and Kohler (2010:2), as well as Kupchik and Bracy (2009:152) furthermore argue that the media have the potential to influence public perceptions of policy issues at large. According to Esmail *et al.* (2010:2), the media may be driven by elite stakeholders to construct and control the dissemination of messages that serve a particular interest. The media may also be a vehicle for less influential stakeholders to increase their power (Esmail *et al.*, 2010:2). They note that

*... the framing and extent of coverage of a stakeholder's interest may be deemed a success if their frame becomes the guiding assumptions among policy makers and influence policy decisions.*

Staples (2009:175) believes that through advocacy the media can become a powerful tool for policy change. Heed should, however, be paid to Nyika's (2010:91) observation that one should not over-emphasise the power of media effects. According to him, audiences are often "passive consumers of media products". The influence of the media on public opinion is also reduced by the passage of time and the dynamics of the issue-attention cycle, i.e. the media and public, move from one intense interest to another within a short time (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009:1410).

It may therefore be assumed that the media can cultivate or promote a particular view of human rights violations in schools and advocate policy changes through their framing of the activities of the SAHRC.

## **2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Against the background of the foregoing, the overarching research question for this study is: Can the media play a role in cultivating and creating a particular view of human rights violations in schools and advocate policy change through their framing of the activities of the SAHRC? In search of an answer, the focus of this study will be on South African newspapers' framing of stories on the SAHRC's activities with regard to human rights violations in South African schools. The following research questions (RQ) will guide the study:

RQ 1: What proportion of the stories was primarily episodic versus primarily thematic?

RQ 2: What are the dominant human rights violations frames?

RQ 3: What proportion of the stories contained frames of cause? What proportion contained frames of solutions? What proportion of frames described the nature of the human rights violation?

RQ 4: Which causal, solution and nature frames appeared in newspaper

articles on the two dominant human rights violation frames (i.e. school violence and the infringements on learners' rights to basic education)?

### 3. HUMAN RIGHTS IN EDUCATION

According to the United Nations' Office of Human Rights (n.d.), human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, whatever their nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. All humans are equally entitled to their human rights without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible. Universal human rights are often expressed and guaranteed by law in the forms of treaties, customary international law, general principles and other sources of international law. International human rights law lays down obligations for governments to act in certain ways or to refrain from certain acts, in order to promote and protect human rights and the fundamental freedoms of individuals or groups.

Since the adoption of the United Nation's Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948 it has, according to Christie (2010:3), become commonplace to talk of education as a basic human right and to regard it as self-evident that countries throughout the world are moving towards this. She points out that, since the 1990s, the discourse of rights has been supplemented by discourses of goals and targets (e.g. *Millennium development goals* and *Education for all*).

UNESCO (2007) provides the following conceptual framework for a rights-based approach to education that embodies three interlinked and interdependent dimensions. UNESCO contends that human rights related to education cannot be realised unless and until all three are addressed:

- *The right to access to education:* The right of every child to education on the basis of equal educational opportunity and without discrimination on any grounds. To achieve this goal, education must be available for, accessible to and inclusive of all children.
- *The right to quality education:* The right of every child to quality education that enables him/her to fulfil his/her potential, realise opportunities for employment and develop life skills. To achieve this goal, education needs to be child-centred, relevant and embrace a broad curriculum and be appropriately resourced and monitored.
- *The right to respect within the learning environment:* The right of every child to be respected for his/her inherent dignity and to have his/her universal human rights respected within the education system. To achieve this goal, education must be provided in a way that is consistent with human rights, including equal respect for every child, opportunities

for meaningful participation, freedom from all forms of violence and respect for language, culture and religion.

In the South African context these three dimensions are entrenched in, *inter alia*, the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act no. 108 of 1996* (RSA, 1996a), the *South African Schools Act, no. 84 of 1996* (RSA, 1996b) and the *Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, no. 4 of 2000* (RSA, 2000), as well as in numerous policy statements (Christie, 2010:8).

#### **4. FRAMING THEORY**

Framing theory is a relatively new communication theory and is closely linked to agenda-setting theory and cultivation theory, according to which, the mass media cultivate (or promote) a particular view of social reality by shaping and contextualising the view in a particular frame of reference and/or in a latent structure of meaning (Du Plooy, 2009:226; Tiung & Hasim, 2009:409). Media framing occurs when journalists or editors

*... select some aspects of a perceived reality and make [it] more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described* (Entman, 1993:52).

A frame is something that defines a problem, meaning that when a journalist frames an issue, he/she is, in turn, moving that slice of information in salience. Salience is defined as making a piece of information more noticeable and meaningful or memorable to an audience. According to framing theory, communicators, such as journalists, decide which messages to send. As a result, the messages they send are frames which are manifested by the presence or absence of key words, phrases, images or sources of information (cf. Lee & Kim, 2010:283). The framing and presentation of events in the media can systematically affect how recipients of the news come to understand these events. The importance of framing an issue, a person or an event in a particular manner is elevated through repeated coverage (Du Plooy, 2009:226). According to Dimitrova and Lee (2009:538), framing provides an appropriate theoretical basis for examining media messages.

#### **5. DATA AND RESEARCH METHOD**

##### **5.1. Sample**

In order to convey an extensive picture of the SAHRC's activities with regard to human rights violations in an educational context, articles related to the SAHRC published in South African newspapers over a five-year period (1

January 2005 to 31 December 2009) were retrieved from the SAMedia database (<http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za>). This period was chosen because it coincides with the public hearings (12-14 October 2005 and 28-29 September 2006) and subsequent publication of two important SAHRC reports, namely *The right to basic education* (2006), and *Inquiry into school-based violence in South Africa* (2008). Full-text keyword searches (the keywords were 'human rights, 'education' and 'schools') yielded 180 items related to the activities of the SAHRC in South African schools during the stated timeframe. It should be noted that syndicated articles are not replicated on SAMedia's database. An article published, for example, more than once in Media24 newspapers will appear only once on the database and is indexed under the banner of the newspaper which first carried the story. Among the 180 items, 19 were letters to the editor. As the letters to the editor reflect the interplay between the media agenda and the public agenda, the letters were excluded (Chyi & McCombs, 2004:27). The final data set contained 161 news stories and editorials.

## 5.2. Data analysis

McManus and Dorfman's (2002:11-12) guidelines were used to analyse firstly, the structural and secondly, the content frames.

*Structural frames:* According to McManus and Dorfman (2002:11-12) thematic reporting examines the big picture, scrutinising connections, looking for trends and emphasising the 'why' and 'how'. All articles based on the two above-mentioned SAHRC reports and hearings that led to these reports (cf. 5.1) were coded as thematic, because the crux of these hearings and reports focuses on specific human rights issues. Episodic reporting, in contrast, focuses on a single event. It is a snapshot of 'what' happened or of reporting at micro level. A single story may contain elements of both approaches. However, the one which dominates in terms of column space determines the classification. If both are equal, the story is considered thematic.

*Content frames:* All the articles were studied to identify the main story of each, spread over the five-year period of the study, i.e. what human rights violation issues and/or events were reported? The two dominant content frames were also divided into three general categories. They were those describing a necessary, sufficient or contributing cause of human rights violation, those describing the nature of the violation, and those describing solutions.

Two coders performed the framing analysis in accordance with McManus and Dorfman's (2002:11-12) guidelines. When a story contains multiple attributes, the coder identifies the dominant frame, based on the headline, the lead, or the central organising idea. To ensure intercessory reliability, several preliminary tests were conducted until Scott's *pi* reached 0,80 across the two key frames, namely structural and content (Neuendorf, 2002:150, 154).

## 6. FINDINGS

### 6.1. Structural frames

In the five-year sample, which recorded activities of the SAHRC, newspaper articles were predominantly structured thematically as issues during the years the commission published its reports on the public hearings on basic education (2006) and school violence (2008). During 2007 and 2009 newspaper articles on the activities of the SAHRC were mainly structured as episodes (cf. Table 1). This trend is in line with research findings by McManus and Dorfman (2002:2) namely, if there is not a single event that dominates the media agenda (e.g. the release of a SAHRC report), newspaper framing tends to be superficial and episodic. For perhaps two weeks following the publication of the two reports, newspaper articles and editorials looked at, amongst other things, the reasons for school violence, the plight of the victims and how to fight the scourge. The foregoing is *mutatis mutandis* applicable to coverage of the report on learners' rights to basic education. The analysis of the causal nature and solution frames in articles on school violence and the infringement on learners' rights to basic education will however, show that most of the thematic frames were also superficial (cf. paragraph 6.2.3).

**Table 1: Structural frames**

	2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Episodic frames (events)	20	51,3	16	27,6	6	75	8	20	16	100	66	41
Thematic frames (issues)	19	48,7	42	72,4	2	25	32	80	0	0	95	59
Total	39	100	58	100	8	100	40	100	16	100	161	100

### 6.2. Content frames

#### 6.2.1. The identification of the dominant human rights violation frames

UNESCO's conceptual framework (cf. paragraph 3) was used to identify the dominant human rights violation frames featured in each of the sampled articles (RQ 2). To identify the dominant frame (or story) of each article, the researcher was guided by the heading, sub-headings and introductory paragraph of each article. If an article addressed a multiplicity of seemingly unrelated information on a variety of human rights violations, the researcher compared the number of lines each of the sub-stories received in order to identify the dominant story. Table 2 gives an overview of stories reported on in the 161 articles under investigation.

**Table 2: The dominant human rights violation frames (2005-2009)**

Story/type of human rights violation	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Total
School violence <i>per se</i>		24	2	28	2	56
Sexual violence		7		5	1	13
The infringement of learners' right to basic education	23	22	3	5	6	59
Racism	8	1	3	1	4	17
Language rights	5	4				9
Cultural practices				1	1	2
Gender discrimination	3				2	5
Total	39	58	8	40	16	161

In the five-year sample nearly 80% of the stories centred on either school violence, including sexual violence (42,8%) or infringements on learners' rights to basic education (36,6%). The subsequent exposition is an attempt to move beyond the quantification of the different types of human rights violations reported on by the sampled newspaper articles (cf. Table 2) by giving some details of the embodiment of these types of violations at grass-roots level during the period 2005-2009.

#### 6.2.1.1. The dominant human rights violation frames during 2005

Newspaper articles reporting on the activities of the SAHRC during October 2005 focused on the public hearing on the rights to basic education. The inequalities between schooling in former Model C and township schools and the appallingly low literacy and numeracy rates in schools dominated the hearing. During the hearing, the government's proposed no-fee system was also mentioned as an issue that might infringe on learners' rights to basic education. During 2005 newspapers also reported on the SAHRC's investigation into learners' language and sexual rights, as well as racism. Five of the newspaper articles published during this period July to September 2006 focused on the Primary School Mikro's alleged unwillingness to accommodate 21 learners who wished to be taught through the medium of English. Articles on racism looked at education departments' racial profiling of learners and alleged incidences of racism in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) schools. Articles on sexual orientation centred on the rights of gay and lesbian learners to take same-sex partners to year-end functions and lesbian learners to wear trousers instead of tunics to school (cf. Table 2).

#### 6.2.1.2. The dominant human rights violation frames during 2006

During 2006 two events on the SAHRC's calendar dominated newspaper reports, namely the public hearing on school safety and the publication of the report based on the 2005 public hearing on the right to basic education. The majority of the 26 articles covering *The Right to Basic Education* report (2006)



focused on two broad issues, namely the plight of poverty-stricken township and/or rural learners and the impact of school violence on learners' rights to basic education. The 18 articles that highlighted the impact of poverty on the right to basic education refer to, amongst other things, parents' inability to pay school fees, the degradation of rural schools, poor infrastructure and a lack of resources, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, unacceptably high learner absenteeism in township schools and learners' inability to speak/understand the medium of instruction. Some newspapers reported on the negative impact of high levels of educator absenteeism, the lack of knowledgeable educators and educators' unwillingness to fulfil their professional duties pertaining to learners' rights to quality education. The stark differences between township and former Model C schools were emphasised in some of the articles. Five of the six articles on the SAHRC's findings on the impact of school violence on learners' rights to basic education focused on educators abusing their power by demanding sexual favours from learners. Newspaper articles covering the report on the right to basic education also highlighted racism (one article) and language rights (one article).

The two-day hearing on school violence (28-29 September 2006) led to a proliferation of newspaper articles on school violence. Only two of the 15 articles reporting on the hearing wrote about specific incidents of violence (a mother's testimony about her son being murdered in his school's bathroom and evidence of sexual violence against schoolgirls). The rest of the articles paint a picture of schools where gangsterism, drugs, dangerous weapons, robberies, assault and even murder are rife.

In 2006 only 15 articles on the activities of the SAHRC that cannot be linked directly to the abovementioned report and hearing were published. These articles focused on the alleged infringement on learners' language rights (three articles), unsafe school structures (a schoolgirl fell into a latrine pit at a school) (two articles), a plea to use metal detectors in schools (two articles), the right to search learners versus the potential violation of these learners' human rights (one article), corporal punishment as a violation of human rights (four articles), the infringement on learners' rights to basic education because education authorities did not fill vacancies at some schools (two articles) and the use of suspension as an encroachment on learners' rights to education (one article).

#### 6.2.1.3. The dominant human rights violation frames during 2007

In 2007 the number of reports on the activities of the SAHRC was very small (cf. Table 2). Of the three articles that focused on racism, two looked at the incidence of racism at specific schools and one reported on a statement by the SAHRC that implied that some schools use their language policy to perpetuate racial segregation. The three newspaper articles on children's rights to basic education focused on the following: The view of a SAHRC

spokesperson that the collapse of a feeding scheme in the Eastern Cape is an infringement on poor children's rights to basic education. An investigation was undertaken by the SAHRC on the plight of an East London schoolgirl who was barred from attending her maths classes because she allegedly attacked her educator. In the third article a broad overview of successes and failures of post-1994 education is given. The two articles on school violence did not refer to specific incidents of school violence, but focused on media releases by SAHRC spokespersons on how strategies to curb violence such as random searches of learners may result in the violation of the learners' human rights.

#### 6.2.1.4. The dominant human rights violation frames during 2008

During 2008 newspaper reports on the activities of the SAHRC were dominated by the release of the report on school violence (12 March). Of the 32 news articles covering the launch of the report, 27 focused on school violence *per se*, while the rest highlighted the sexual abuse of learners by their educators (e.g. "pupil sex for good marks") and the playing of crude sexual games on the school grounds by learners as young as seven ("hit me, hit me, rape me, rape me"). The following are a few of the headlines of articles focusing on the report: "Hell of a place for learning", "School violence, national crisis", "SA's classrooms are war zones", "SA pupils face a nightmare of violence" and "Shame of SA's violent schools".

In 2008 five newspaper articles reported on the SAHRC's investigation into learners' rights to basic education. The following issues formed the crux of the articles: the poor conditions of Eastern Cape schools (one article), learners who were turned away from schools due to overcrowding (two articles), the plight of poverty-stricken learners in KZN (one article) and the appalling conditions in which learners attended a farm school in the Western Cape (one article).

An analysis of the 2008 articles revealed that only two articles interrogated the SAHRC's investigations on diversity issues. One of the two articles criticises the SAHRC for not playing a more active role in combating racism in schools. In the other article attention is drawn to an anti-Islamic speech at a Cape Town school. According to this report, the SAHRC's office received several calls about the incident.

#### 6.2.1.5. The dominant human rights violation frames during 2009

The data search delivered only 16 relevant articles that were published during 2009. These articles covered a wide variety of human rights violations (cf. Table 2). All the articles that focused on racism reported on an investigation by the SAHRC of an incident in a KZN school: a learner committed suicide because of the alleged racist and abusive treatment by an educator. Articles on learners' rights to basic education looked at the SAHRC's intervention on

behalf of the 2008 matriculants. Two of the three articles on diversity issues reported on a father who laid a complaint with the SAHRC because of gender discrimination. In Bloemfontein, a father urged the SAHRC to investigate the decision of a school to bar his daughter from attending because of her Rasta hairstyle. Whilst two of the three articles on school violence reported on the SAHRC's investigation of initiation practices in schools, the other article described an enquiry into the unsafe conditions for girls attending a rural school in KZN.

The foregoing examples shed light on the embodiment of the dominant human rights violation frames in articles that reported on the investigations, public hearings and reports of the SAHRC (2005-2009). In the next section attention will be given to the prevalence of content frames (*cf.* RQ 3).

### 6.2.2. The prevalence of content frames

More than 80% (130)<sup>1</sup> of the stories on the activities of the SAHRC in the five-year long sample contained at least one frame of cause, solution (recommendations) or the nature of the human rights violation(s). Nearly half (46,9%) of the 130 articles contain only descriptions of one or more incidents of human rights violations. It was found that 40 of the 130 (30,8%) articles, whilst focusing mainly on describing the nature of (a) human rights violation(s), also presented secondary frames on the causes of and/or solutions to the problem. These secondary frames formed either part of the introduction to the story (causes/reasons for) or the conclusion (solutions/recommendations) of the articles.

Of the remaining 26 newspaper articles, 15 focused on the reasons for, and seven on the possible solutions to human rights violations. Of these 26 articles, three were written by educationalists (Bloch, 2006:17; Chisholm, 2007:11; Prozesky, 2008:13) and one by the chairperson of the SAHRC (Kollapen, 2006:6). The rest (nine) were editorials. Only the articles written by the three educationalists and Kollapen moved beyond the superficial identification of possible causes and/or solutions to human rights violations. The foregoing underlines the superficial nature of the majority of the work by journalists.

<sup>1</sup>The rest of the articles (31) focused on the procedures during the hearings and the mandate of the SAHRC.

### 6.2.3. The prevalence of the two dominant content frames

The ensuing discussion of the prevalence of specific content frames will focus on articles reporting on the two dominant content frames, namely school violence and the infringement on learners' rights to basic education (cf. Table 2 and RQ 4). Of the 130 articles on the activities of the SAHRC in the five-year long sample that contained at least one frame of cause, solution (recommendations) or the nature of the human rights violation(s), 62,2% (48 articles) focused on school violence and 35,4% (46 articles) on learners' rights to basic education. Attention will first be given to findings on the prevalence of causal, solution and nature frames as extracted from the 48 articles on school violence. Thereafter, the prevalence of these frames in the 46 articles on learners' rights to basic education will be explored.

#### 6.2.3.1. The prevalence of causal, solution and nature frames in stories on school violence

The origins of the SAHRC's activities and newspapers' subsequent coverage of stories on school violence are numerous: parents and/or learners who brought charges before the commission, the public hearing and publication of the reports on school violence and learners' rights to basic education. As noted earlier, school violence was investigated by the SAHRC as an important educational issue and as an encroachment on learners' rights to basic education. To avoid repetition, the discussion on the frames in the stories on learners' rights to basic education will only briefly refer to school violence as one of the infringements on learners' rights to basic education.

A mere 33,3% of the 48 stories which carried frames on school violence carried any causal frames. Table 3 gives a summary of the causes of school violence, which appeared in at least two of the 16 newspaper articles.

**Table 3: Causal frames appearing in stories on SAHRC's activities on school violence**

Causes of school violence	n	%
Moral decay of the society	10	62,5
Lack of discipline in schools	6	37,5
Availability and abuse of drugs	6	37,5
Gangsterism	6	37,5
Inadequate school facilities	6	37,5
Parents	4	25
Access to weapons	4	25
Educators	3	18,8

The moral decay of the society is framed as the most important cause of school violence. In articles containing this frame it is often argued that schools mirror what is happening in society at large: a total breakdown of discipline and respect. In articles in which a lack of facilities was identified as a cause of school violence, mention was made of *inter alia* overcrowding, inadequate security measures and the degradation of facilities. The lack of parental involvement and unsound parenting was also referred to as a cause of school violence. Articles that mentioned educators as a cause of school violence referred to their inability to discipline learners, as well as to educators' unbecoming conduct. With the exception of the articles by Bloch (2006:17) and Prozesky (2008:13), as well as two editorials (*Rapport*, 2006:16; *Weekend Post*, 2006:8), the analysed articles barely moved beyond the listing of the causes of school violence.

Half of the 48 stories on school violence carried at least one solution frame. Table 4 gives a summary of the solutions which appeared in at least two of the 24 newspaper articles.

**Table 4: Solution frames appearing in stories on SAHRC's activities on school violence**

Solutions to school violence	n	%
Improve school security	11	45,8
Educators	10	41,7
Instil positive values	8	33,3
Community involvement	7	29,2
Greater parental involvement	4	16,7
Search and seizure	4	16,7
Identify hot-spots	2	8,3
Remove/suspend disruptive learners	2	8,3

The most often cited solution frame was the necessity to improve school security, this included more/better fences, security gates, metal detectors and security personnel. Two other solutions listed/discussed in articles that may be linked to addressing symptoms rather than the underlying causes of school violence, were the introduction of search and seizure procedures at schools and the identification of so-called hot-spots (e.g. toilets) at schools. In 41,7% of the solution frames, attention was given to the importance of the educator in combating school violence. In these frames attention was given to the necessity of teaching educators conflict-resolution skills, supporting them in dealing with misbehaving learners and re-educating poorly qualified educators. In two of the articles it was suggested that abusive educators should be dismissed. A core cause of school violence is the moral collapse of society at large and societal ills (Table 3). It is therefore understandable that several articles focused on instilling positive values (e.g. Christian values, values of non-violence, curriculum must promote positive values) and

community involvement as ways of addressing school violence. Only two of the articles mentioned misbehaving learners and according to these articles, misbehaving learners should be removed from schools. As was the case with articles with causal frames, the vast majority of those with solution frames superficially list one or two solutions. The exception to this trend is an article by Kollapen (2006:6). In this article the chair of the SAHRC's hearing on school violence discusses six possible solutions to school violence in detail.

More than half (68,8%) of the 48 stories on school violence focused on the nature of the violence. This frame tends to be a superficial, sensationalised description of the nature of the problem. The predominant frame of the nature of the problem was a sympathetic frame: the violence is shocking and distressing. The following words and phrases are examples extracted from the newspaper articles: "shocking report", "nightmare of violence", "anguish", "children in crisis" and "national crisis."

#### 6.2.3.2. The prevalence of causal, solution and nature frames in stories on learners' rights to basic education

The origins of the SAHRC's activities and newspapers' subsequent coverage of stories on the infringement on learners' rights to basic education are parents and/or learners who brought charges before the commission because they or their children were allegedly being denied access to basic education, the public hearing (2005) and the publication (2006) of the report on learners' rights to basic education.

Nineteen of the 46 stories that carried frames on the SAHRC's activities on the violation of learners' rights to basic education carried causal frames. Table 5 gives a summary of the issues impeding learners' rights to basic education, which appeared in at least two of the 19 newspaper articles.

**Table 5: Issues impeding learners' rights to basic education**

Causal frames	n	%
Poverty	13	68,4
Language	9	47,4
School violence and abuse	8	42,1
Educators	8	42,1
Lack of/or inadequate infrastructure and/or textbooks	7	36,8
Insufficient schools for learners with disabilities	6	31,6
HIV/AIDS	5	26,3

Poverty (e.g. parents' inability to pay school fees and other expenses, such as school uniforms, transport costs, hunger due to poverty) was identified as the most dominant causal frame. Other salient frames were language (educators' inability to converse with learners in their home language), educators' lack of

professionalism, dedication and relevant qualifications, as well as school violence and abuse. Most of the articles are characterised by either uncritical listings or inadequate (one or two sentences) descriptions of one or more reasons why learners' rights to basic education are infringed.

Only six of the 46 stories that carried frames on the SAHRC's activities pertaining to learners' rights to basic education carried any recommendations (solution frames). The identification of these frames was difficult. Only one or two sentences in articles which sketched issues that hindered accessibility to basic education referred superficially to possible solutions. These solutions can be linked to what was perceived to be important obstacles:

- Financial support: Assist poor parents (two articles), extend the number of no-fee schools (two articles), travel grants for poor learners (two articles) and free primary education for all learners (one article).
- Investigate why learners do not attend school (three articles).
- The power of governing bodies should be extended (one article).
- Home language should be promoted as the language of teaching and learning (one article).

More than half (71,8%) of the 46 stories that carried frames on learners' rights to basic education contained a frame on the nature of the infringement. This frame tends to be a superficial, sensationalised description of the nature of specific infringements on learners' rights to basic education. The predominant frames on the nature of the problem were sympathetic and culpability frames. Newspaper headlines such as the following illustrate the sympathetic frame: "Pupil barred from maths for months", "Signs of a national disaster", "Schools face crisis from lack of quality education", "Sorry tale of two education systems in one country" and "SA's education is at crisis point". The following headlines illustrate the culpability frame: "Teachers are accused of disrupting classes", "Government acknowledges that education system still fails to educate many pupils" and "Education Department faces public grilling."

## 7. DISCUSSION

The present study has shown that the media can provide information that may help citizens to make sense of human rights violations in South African schools. Newspapers reported on the SAHRC's investigation into *inter alia* school violence, racism, the violation of learners' religious, cultural and human rights and the plight of poverty-stricken rural learners. The superficial and sensationalised nature of the majority of the articles may, however, prevent deep knowledge of the intricacies of human rights violations in South African schools. UNESCO's conceptual framework on a rights-based approach to

education illustrates the complex, interlinked and interdependent dimensions of human rights issues in South Africa. Past explicit (e.g. township schools) and present covert (e.g. the use of language policy to deny learners access to a specific school) forms of racial discrimination may, for example, impact on learners' rights to quality education.

Researchers (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009:145; McManus & Dorfman, 2002:11-12) found that thematic articles which focused on specific issues provided greater depth than episodic articles. This study has, however, found that most of the articles which focused on a specific issue also lacked in-depth analysis. Little effort was made to place these issues within the broader context of collective outcomes, public policy debate, or historical trends (Iyengar, 1991, in Kupchik & Bracy, 2009:145). In this study it was found that articles on school violence are often inventories of different types and/or incidents of violence. Thematic articles on learners' rights to basic education were basically a register of the appalling conditions under which poverty-stricken learners in rural areas attend school (cf. 6.1). An important similarity between this and other studies is that in thematic articles, society or other factors beyond individual control are blamed for human rights violations (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009:145). This study has revealed, for example, that important causal frames for the violation of learners' human rights is the moral decay of the society, gangsterism and poverty (cf. Tables 4 and 5).

During the years that no single SAHRC activity dominated the newspapers (2007 and 2009, cf. Table 1) news stories focused on single events (the plight of individuals who suffered racial, gender and cultural discrimination) without a broader context or frame. In these episodic frames the individual school and/or educator was blamed for the alleged human rights violation. This trend is in line with international research findings (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009:145; McManus & Dorfman, 2002:11).

The findings of this study, namely that human rights violations are a serious problem, support Esmal *et al.*'s (2010:14) contention that framing can "freeze the debate into particular perspectives". Thematic articles which address the broader issues on school violence and/or the violation of learners' rights to basic education suggest to readers that there are serious and ongoing problems of human rights violations in South African schools. The inventory nature of most of the articles on school violence and the appalling conditions in rural poverty-stricken schools suggest that the problem is out of control. This may, according to Kupchik and Bracy (2009:145), provoke fear and feelings of helplessness.

The media may have created an awareness of the activities of the SAHRC in addressing human rights violations in schools. It is, however, difficult to state emphatically that the newspapers' framing of the committee's activities has led to policy changes. The superficial nature of the frames, the short life-cycle



of the stories and the tension between the predominantly white-owned, often anti-ANC newspapers' agenda (cf. Mayher & McDonald, 2007:445-446), as well as the absence of a clear focus on policy outcome in the newspaper articles (cf. Staples, 2009:177) may have diminished the media's influence on policy changes. This view is supported by Birkland and Lawrence's (2009:1412) findings in their in-depth analysis of the influence of the media's framing of the Columbine school shooting on public opinion and policy change in the USA. They found that despite the media coverage it generated, Columbine had relatively little actual influence on public policy. According to them the attention to the problem simply spurred more rapid implementation of existing policies and tools that were already available to schools. The foregoing is also true in South Africa. None of the two SAHRC reports (2006 & 2008) that formed the core of many of the analysed articles recommended policy change as a way to enhance learners' rights to basic education and a safer school environment. Both reports pleaded for the implementation of existing policies and the finalisation of Acts and Bills under consideration at the time of their publication. After the publication of the SAHRC reports, several of these Acts and Bills were promulgated (cf. RSA, 2006-2010). No evidence could be found to link these promulgations to the work of the SAHRC. Neither the solution frames in the stories on school violence nor those on learners' rights to basic education referred to policy changes as a way to address human rights issues. On the contrary, the Director of the University of the Witwatersrand's Education Policy Unit is quoted as saying, "We need more than policy" (Blaine, 2005:4). The sampled articles thus lack media advocacy, i.e. the strategic use of the media for advancing a social or public policy initiative (Staples, 2009:175).

The media analysis of the activities of the SAHRC may have provided a glimpse into some of the human rights issues faced by learners and educators in South Africa. It should, nonetheless, be mentioned that the SAHRC is one of many organisations that address human rights issues in schools. Various structures, such as the Pan South African Language Board and the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities are, for example, tasked with the promotion of language, religious and cultural rights (Nyika, 2010:89).

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The SAHRC has the power to investigate and report on the observations of human rights. Conversely, the media is often seen a powerful tool in creating awareness on important social issues such as human rights violations and policy changes. Jointly the SAHRC and the media can thus act as powerful agencies for creating a South African education dispensation in which human rights prevails. It may hence be expected that the media can help to create knowledge and understanding of the human rights violations with which the SAHRC have to grapple. In order to ascertain whether or not newspapers

played a role in cultivating and creating a particular view of human rights violations in schools and advocate policy change through their framing of the activities of the SAHRC, the study was guided by four research questions.

An analysis of the structural frames of 161 sampled newspaper articles revealed that the majority of the articles could be classified as thematic, because they focus on specific issues rather than events. With the exception of a few articles written by scholars and the chairperson of the SAHRC, even the thematic articles failed to move beyond sensationalised reporting on human rights violations. Through the interrogation of the sampled articles, an array of human rights violations such as sexual violence, racism, the negation of learners' language rights and gender discrimination was uncovered. Nearly 80% of the human rights violation frames centred on events than can be linked directly to the 2006 and 2008 reports by the SAHRC. Analyses of the articles that focused on the two dominant themes, namely school violence and the infringement of learners' right to basic education, showed the sensationalised nature of the reporting. An examination of causal, solution and nature frames in stories on the two dominant content frames accentuated the superficial nature of reports on human rights violations. This study has illustrated that a thematic article is not necessarily, as suggested by the literature, an in-depth article. The analysis of the newspaper articles furthermore illustrated the lack of media advocacy for policy change to redress human rights violations in education.

This study has shown that the newspapers reported on the activities of the SAHRC, incidences of school violence, and the appalling conditions prevailing in some poverty-stricken schools in the country. They may thus have created, as posed in the overarching research question, "a particular view of human rights violations". The uncritical, sensationalised nature of most of the analysed newspaper articles may, however, have caused a distorted view of and even apathy towards the violation of human rights in schools. An informed public that shows insight into the manifestations of human rights violations understands the underlying causes of these violations and is knowledgeable about ways to address this scourge in our schools, will not only support the activities of the SAHRC, but also become agents of change at local, provincial and national levels. Only then will newspapers play a role in policy change. Members of the South African media fraternity should therefore re-examine their role: do they want to create sensitivity towards human rights issues and a willingness amongst their readers to intervene in human rights violations, or do they merely want to increase their respective newspapers' circulation figures? This problem is aggravated by syndication: a handful of media houses, their owners and editors, often decide what is newsworthy and how these issues should be framed.

This study has shown the transferability of MacManus and Dorfman's (2002) guidelines for media analysis on youth violence to a South African context.

Yet, this study moved beyond the mere quantification of content frames and shed light on the activities of the SAHRC, the nature, extent, causes and possible ways to address human rights violations in South African schools. The study has also shown that newspapers can cultivate or promote a view, albeit distorted, of human rights violations in schools. Moreover, the study created an awareness of the superficial nature of the majority of newspaper reports on human rights violations and the activities of the SAHRC and cautioned on the impact of syndication. Despite these contributions, the following limitations of this study should be noted. Only newspapers available from the SAMedia database covering a period of just five years were analysed. This database was chosen as representative of national reporting, though one might find different results when studying articles available in all the major newspapers' online archives. Only one media outlet was studied: newspapers. An analysis of other sources, such as television news, may produce different results.

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