

**CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF 'SCREEN'  
VIOLENCE AND THE EFFECTS ON THEIR WELL-  
BEING**

**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The emergence of information and communication technologies (ICT), as a primary agent of socialisation, has raised concerns for child practitioners and researchers alike. This influential medium carries messages and images that have both positive and negative effects and are used in relative isolation from adult influences. A particular source of consternation is recent findings which suggest that violent 'screen' content is adversely impacting on children's behaviour, socialisation and social development. Working from a child participatory perspective, this study aimed to explore children's perceptions and experiences of 'screen' violence and the subsequent impact it has on their well-being. Within this process there is an attempt to understand how children assign meaning to these violent 'screen' images at an interpersonal and broader social level. This study utilised a broad epistemological framework of social constructionism and the theoretical perspectives of social learning theory, social reinforcement theory, social script theory, cue theory and framing theory are employed as theoretical base for the research. Furthermore a qualitative methodological approach was adopted, using focus groups as the method of data collection. Two focus groups were conducted with children between the ages of 15 and 16 from middle-income schools. Thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret the findings. The findings indicate that screen violence is an overall positive experience for learners in the sense that they find it exciting and not emotionally distressing. In addition it was found that participants have specific expectations of the type of violence that will be seen based on the genre of the programme or film they experience. Furthermore, they demonstrate a child-centred view of the world. Violent images are then viewed from this perspective. Moreover, the

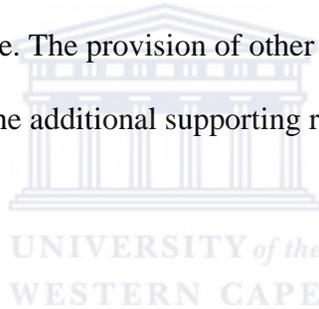
majority of the participants adopted a “third-person effect” approach to interpreting the effects of violence. However, the present findings point to the normalisation of violence as well as children’s desensitisation to violence, which substantiate the majority of previous research. With ICT thoroughly entrenched within South African societies, this study hopes to contribute to the broader child research agenda by explicating how these technologies could be perpetuating violent behaviour.



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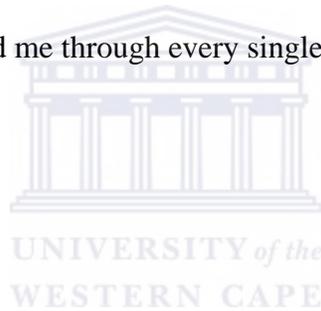
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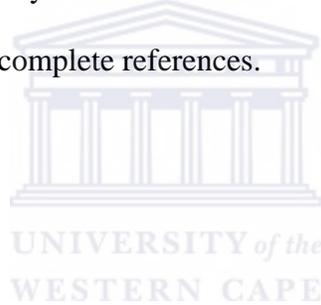
**Finally, my parents, Hassiem & Farieda:** my gratitude flows abundantly to my parents whose devotion and love carried me through every single day.



## DECLARATION

I declare that the research “Children’s perceptions of screen and the effects on their wellbeing” is my own work. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university and all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Kashiefa Kader



February 2006

Signed by: \_\_\_\_\_

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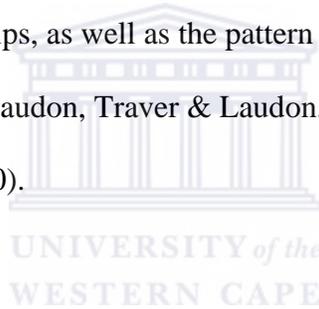


# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

As we entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there have been escalations in the use and capabilities of information and communication technologies (ICT). With this mushrooming of information and communication technologies, our society has rapidly altered by affecting our economies, cultures, social and global relations. Mweemba and Naidu (2000) believe that the impact of these technologies is affected in the economic sphere, by dictating what we produce and how we produce it. These ideals then filter through our culture, changing value systems, social relationships, as well as the pattern of traditional social systems (Carlsson, 1998; Casas, 1998; Laudon, Traver & Laudon, 1996; Savahl & September, 2005; Stewart & Williams, 2000).



Over the past quarter century, information and communication technology have evolved to an influential position in contemporary South African society (Mweemba & Naidu, 2000). It is a medium that carries messages and images that have gained some significant supporters. However, this powerful medium, offers information and entertainment that have both negative and positive influences (Berry & Mitchell- Kernan, 1982). Current research has commanded more attention to the influences media technologies has in the social lives of children<sup>1</sup> as well as, their different interpretations of its importance.

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<sup>1</sup> Children, as defined by the United Nations Children's Right's Convention (1989) and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 (section 28(3)) are individuals under the age of 18 years.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) or ‘new screen’ technologies refer to a combination and convergence of telecommunications, satellite technology and digitisation all controlled by the computer (McNair, 1998). Television and its accessories (video’s and video gaming) which are the main focus of the current study, should be included in the collective definition, as it forms part of the that is described by Casas (2001) as a “set of new audiovisual information and communication that can be assessed from home”(p. 114).

Traditionally, children’s socialisation was dependent on three major social agents’ viz. family, school, and television. Casas (2001) claims, that ‘new screens’ have replaced television as the third leg in the socialisation tripod. Moreover, ‘new screens’ is emerging as the primary source from which children gain their interpretation of the world (Barthelmes, 1991; Casas, 1998).



This project is part of a larger collaborative research initiative supported by the Child Watch International Research Network. Key partners on the project include research institutes based in South Africa, Spain, Norway, Brazil, and India. The project aims to comprehensively explore the impact that NICT has on children’s lives and to develop a broader and better understanding of children’s living conditions in a changing technological environment. There is a specific interest in exploring how children interact with various technologies.

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Note<sup>1</sup>: Specifically looking at how children interact with and form relationships with people. Broadly defined as the successful performance through life incorporating physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional functioning, fulfilling social relationships, and the ability to successfully

## 1.2 Rationale

Some of the general challenges that social research must face are related to the need in increasing knowledge about different ways children interact with different and new technologies. The neglect of violent screen content has been highlighted by Bruynse (2003) as an issue of immediate concern. With 44% of South Africa's population estimated to be under the age of nineteen (Dawes in Hunt, 2003), this research stems from a need to understand the effects of 'screen' violence on the lives of South Africa's children.

However, in order to reflect on the effects of 'screen' violence on South African children, it is necessary to contextualise the discussion by drawing attention to the conditions under which most of them live. Violence is entrenched in South African society with the latest crime figures showing, children as both victims and perpetrators of violence and other crimes (Bruynse, 2003). The Gun Control Alliance (2005) reported that in South Africa, homicide is the leading cause of death for males between 15 and 21 years of age. Dawes (in Hunt, 2003) further cites data showing that the key cause of non-natural death among 15-19 year olds is shooting and stabbing. A survey conducted on 11 to 14 year old in low income areas across South Africa reported that 90% had witnessed some form of assault, while 47% of them claimed to be victims of assault (Hunt, 2003). Studies have also shown that arrest rates for homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, peak among adolescents and young adults (Durant, Getts, Cadenhead & Woods, 1995; Hennes.1998; Thomas, Leite & Duncan.1998; Gun Control Alliance, 2005). Heide

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negotiate moderate psychosocial and environmental problems (Pollard & Rosenbeg, in Savahl, 2002).

(1999) predicts that it “might continue to increase at an unprecedented rate as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the reason being that the teen population is growing at a much higher rate than the total population” (p. 6).

South Africa’s historical past of political violence has influenced the impact of violence on children, with violence<sup>2</sup> to some degree being normalised (Dawes, 1994). This has resulted in the perception, among adults and children alike, that the use of force and violence is the only means of resolving conflict. Dawes (2002) believes that this has led to a desensitisation to violence and a loss of respect for human life, even among children. Furthermore, violence has a negative effect on the optimal development and the psychological well being of children (Duncan & Rock, 1997).

Current statistics show that 62% of households have access to television, and these statistics are steadily increasing (Bruynse, 2003). Many South African children spend several hours a day watching television or videos without restriction or adult supervision. Strasburger (2004) believes that this situation is aggravated by the emergence of a bedroom culture where children use these technologies in the privacy of their bedrooms. Coetzee (2005) cited that “by the time they’re 15 children will have seen about 100 000 murders, rapes, or violent attacks in movies or on television” (p. 10). Media expert Dr Elsabe Pepler also reported that by the time South African children leave school at the age of 18 they would have watched 15 000 hours of television (in Coetzee, 2005;

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<sup>2</sup> In this study violence include physical and non-physical occurrences of violence.  
Note: As categories of media content, violence and horror overlap. Horror shows the gruesome effects of violence or any other destructive process (Eron, 1999).

Strasburger, 2004). Bruynse, (2003) as well as Savahl and September (2003) claims that these visual images displayed on these screens have a very powerful impact on them.

Furthermore, there is a paucity of research conducted in the area of children and ICT in South Africa, especially with regard to children's discernment of the impact of 'screen' violence on their perceptions of reality, their social relationships and their rights and well-being as children (September, 2002; Savahl, 2002).

Working from the child participation<sup>3</sup> perspective this study complements the broader base of children and technology research, which views children as active citizens creating their own culture and interacting in their own right with their social and technological environment (Casas, 1998; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000).

### **1.3 Aims**

Working from a child participatory perspective, the study aims to explore children's perceptions and experiences of 'screen' violence. Within this process there is an attempt to understand how children assign meaning to these violent 'screen' images at an interpersonal and broader social level.

#### **1.3.1 Research Question**

The following research questions have been developed to guide the study:

- How do children perceive 'screen' violence?

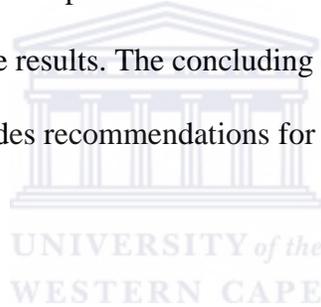
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<sup>3</sup> See Hart (1992) and Boyden and Ennew (1997) for a more comprehensive discussion on the child participation perspective.

- How do children experience ‘screen’ violence?
- To what extent does ‘screen’ violence influence children’s well-being?

## **1.4 Conclusion**

The following chapters will explore relevant literature on children and ‘screen’ violence as well as give explanation to the theoretical framework guiding this thesis. Subsequently the methodological design and framework will be discussed including details of the research technique, participants that were involved in the study as well as a description of the procedure utilised in this research. Thereafter, the key findings of the focus group will be discussed, giving a detailed description of the themes that emerged along with a comprehensive discussion of the results. The concluding chapter presents the limitations of this research study and provides recommendations for future research.

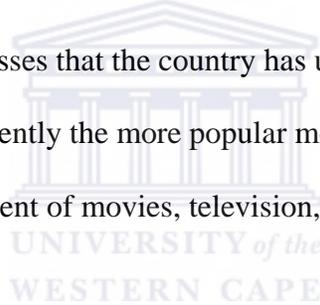


## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

Violence is ingrained in South Africa's history, with past acts of violence and the permeation of violence into daily life becoming a common and accepted reality among the majority of our youth population (Winton, 2004). Watts (2002) claimed that there are various contributing factors that have led to the increase of violence among the youth in our society. Generally, studies conducted on violence and aggression among the youth of South Africa, focused on this endemic in terms of the complex social, economic, political, and institutional processes that the country has undergone and is still undergoing. However, more recently the more popular mentioned cases are associated with the increase in violent content of movies, television, music, and videogames.



Before considering the methodology of the present study, a perusal of the most prominent national and international research findings is conducted in this chapter. This review focuses particularly on the current status of ICT among the youth as well as parents' influence on their children's emotional and social development with regard to ICT. Finally, the effects of screen violence on young people's well-being, and an account of the theoretical explanations of the influence of ICT, are also addressed.

It should be noted that much of the psychological research on ICT and children is of a quantitative, rather than a qualitative nature. However, where available, qualitative research findings of relevance to this specific study are also highlighted.

## **2.2 Background**

In recent years there has been a massive explosion in the use of ICT, with children at the frontline of this technological revolution (Stewart & William 2000; Wartella, O'Keefe & Scantlin, 2004). During the course of the 1990's patterns of children's media use progressed radically as the entire nature of the media system experienced dramatic change and their range of options kept growing. A decade that began with video games and CD-ROMs saw the explosion of the Internet, which has ushered in a new digital media culture. Montgomery (2000) reported that youth are embracing the new technologies much more rapidly than adults: "making the use of such interactive media a dominant activity of modern childhood" (Wartella, O'Keefe & Scantlin, 2004, p. 1). In the years ahead, it's apparent that digital media will have a pertinent role in the educational and social experiences of young children (Montgomery, 2000 & Wartella et al, 2004).

Montgomery (2000) claims, "as early adopters of new technologies, youth are in many ways the defining users of the digital media" (p. 2), since they are the first generation that is truly "growing up digital." Their lives are gradually more devoted to videogames, surfing the Internet and interacting in chat rooms via emails. According to research youth with leisure time spent more than three hours a day communicating in chatrooms, playing

computer games, and surfing the net (Attewell & Battle; 1998). Children are therefore spending as much time using media as they do in school, with friends and family (Wartella, et al., 2004).

This supports Greenfield's (1984) claim that the introduction of new technologies escalated media technologies to the position of 'prime socializing agent, replacing the television as the third leg of the socialization tripod as contended by Casas et al (2001), even though it has been widely recognised that children's socialisation is dependent on three agents: family, school, and television

Therefore it is believed that attention should be given to the importance of the role that media plays in contemporary society (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney, 1998), since these authors put forward the idea that technologies, or media as such, channels our interest, shapes our desires for goods as well as influences our leisure activities, particularly with regard to children. Furthermore, Rasmussen (1996) believes that the ICT has the most powerful impact on children's attitudes about the world since the media is the primary source from which they gain interpretation of the world. Research has also shown that new technologies, especially television and video games are promoting violence and increasing aggression that directly accentuates negative values, attitudes, and behaviours, such as competition and rivalry (Van Evra, 1990).

### **2.3 Children as consumers of media**

Driven by the capitalist ideals of profit and accumulation, the media corporations' prime objective is to communicate their product to the largest number of consumers (Stewart & Williams, 2000). De Beer (1998) contended that over the past decade the sector of the media market that has been perceived as particularly exploitable is the children's sector. Thus children have been actively targeted as consumers of media. Given that their (children's) demands ultimately dictate the future of technological advancement, a vicious and addictive cycle has developed between the media and this sector (Stewart & Williams, 2000).

For example, it has been widely documented that TV violence holds an attraction for most viewers, especially children. It is believed that the more violence children are exposed to on television the more they demand violence and aggression from the producers, so the producers create and supply more realistic, better-quality and thrilling images of "death and destruction" that further fuel their attraction resulting in their addiction (Stewart & Williams, 2000, p. 2). Therefore, it can be concluded that technological production revolves around "ways to keep children hooked" (Stewart & Williams, 2000, p. 5) since their addiction translates into ratings and profits for the media industry. For this reason the media industry has been reluctant to admit that media violence is anyway responsible for violence in our society (American Academy of Paediatrics [AAP], 2001).

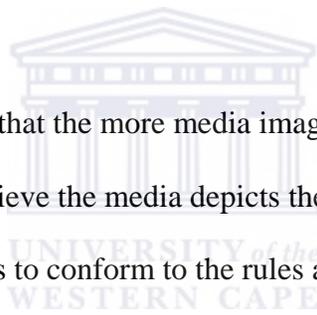
Similar to television most video games include violent content. A content analyses conducted by Children Now (2001) showed that as many as 89% of games contain some violent content, and that more or less half of these games include serious violent content towards other game characters. According to Cohen (2000) video game sales worldwide are now at 20 billion dollars. Kent (2000) claims that this figure is increased by the sales of more than a 100 million game boys and 75 million Playstations. The increase in violent content in video games has spurred much research on the possible harmful effects on the youth that purchase and play these games.

For this reason, the Government of South Africa using the guidelines of the Convention of the Rights of Children (CRC) addresses the concerns of the potential vulnerability of children with regard to media instruments. For example, the CRC considers it important that children be protected from potentially harmful information. Therefore, children should not be exposed to information that encourages violence or wrongdoing.

## **2.4 Current status of ICT among the youth**

Culture is an over used term with many meanings (Valentine, Skelton & Chamber, 1998). In this context, culture will refer to a 'shared pattern of activities', which is guided by the usage of the multimedia. Thus, media technologies as well as peer groups has played an important role in changing the dynamics of children's culture- which is often very distinct and rather independent from adults and adult's expected culture (Casas, 1998).

Mass media such as music videos, television, movies, fashion, Internet, and videogames dictate the lives of most young people in today's industrialised societies. Mastronardi (2003) believes it is fair to say, "mass media forms constitute their primary cultural resource" (p. 83). According to Suoranta (2003) the narratives and imagery in the media become key tools for identity construction among young people. Media content has been used by the youth to strengthen peer relations and create a sense of group identity. Young people from different sub-cultural groups express their group identity by similarities in media use (Casas, 1998). This is manifested in their speech, physical appearance, and movement. For example, actors and pop stars provide them with models for fashion and other style choices (Casas, 2001).

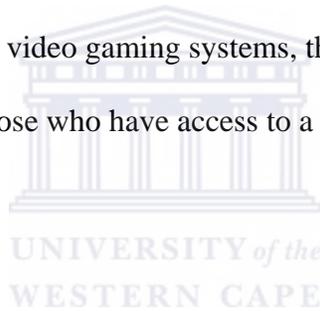


Singer & Singer (2001) believe that the more media images children and young people watch, the more they believe the media depicts the 'real world', and the more they expect their own lives to conform to the rules and behaviour they see modelled on screen. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli (1994) claimed that although teenagers are more critical in their understanding of media depictions than younger children, they are notoriously vulnerable to peer-pressure. The media may therefore, be seen as a kind of "super peer" for them as it shapes their attitudes as well as their perceptions of social behaviour, social reality and help them create their own cultural norms (Gunter, 1983 & Strasburger, 2004).

Currently, the media culture for young people could probably be termed a 'television culture'. Since television is the most widely used medium among young people

worldwide. Internationally, the explosion of television has been much greater than that of the Internet (Suoranta, 2003). This might be because of the affordability and accessibility of the domestic television.

Further researches findings also suggest that even though children have more access to home computers, social inequality may impact on the way computers are used (Attwell & Battle, 1998). For example, “video game consoles and software, which are less expensive than computer systems, are widely spread across all socio-economic levels. In fact, ownership of videogame equipment was more common in low-income households than in high-income households. Unfortunately, even though similar entertainment content is available for both computer and video gaming systems, the vast majority of educational software is available only for those who have access to a computer or a net appliance” (Wartella et al., 2004, p. 4).



Subsequently, De Beer (1998) considers it important to note that children’s television (similarly videogames) should be seen as a cultural phenomenon in its own right instead of a phenomenon in the context of a culture. What’s more it has been argued that these traditional media technologies have maintained their position as the most significant means of information and communication for many young people. Suoranta (2003) believes that it will continue to exist together with new ICT far into the future.

If this is true about television, then the impact of the full scope of ICT will be more complex and far reaching making it necessary to increase our understanding of how young people themselves think about these technologies.

## **2.5 Parent-child relationship & social development**

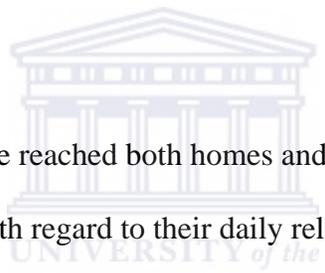
According to the social bonding theory the first and the most important relationship formed, is that between a child and its mother (Bowlby, 1973). Hence, it would be logical to conclude that the parent-child relationship is of primary importance to the social development of the young child. De Witt and Booysen (1995) define this relationship as a reciprocated communication that underlies all social interaction.

Stoppard (1992) claims that parents provide their children with love; support and attention that ultimately help them develop into social beings. This is the first and the most significant educational support children receive in their development. Later, they will interact with other models, such as the educational system and peers. Botha (1990) believes that in their quest to practice their acquired social abilities, children will imitate the conduct of those with whom they come into contact.

For instance, due to its popularity, the television is one easily accessible source for information in early childhood. Consequently, television characters have become one main source from which children derive models. According to Strasburger (2001) the television gives a great deal of information about real and imaginary worlds and about human behaviour. However, the behaviours and values portrayed on television might be in direct conflict with the values essential to parents.

Casas et al (2001) explored some of the values children and parents may regard as important. The results showed that values that were deemed to be more important are sympathy and social skills with people. Parents agreed that a value that must be promoted among children and young people are sensitivity, responsibility, and social skills.

However, current social and technological changes have raised new questions regarding children's socialisation. Mweemba & Naidu (2000) believe that technological changes in any society lead to social changes (and vice versa), which then lead to changes in the values of our society. With the increase in use and content of technologies over the last few decades, Casas (1998) believe that the 'change' has caused erosion in our basic value system.



It is believed that since ICT have reached both homes and schools, both parents and teachers face new challenges with regard to their daily relations with their children. Parents and teachers alike, feel they are losing authority, not only because they feel unskilled, but also because children have access to a larger quantity of knowledge and can access other sources of authority which differs from that which adults conventionally believed they control (Casas, 1998).

In addition, a 'bedroom culture' has developed among young people, whereby they use these technologies within the privacy of their bedrooms. Strasburger (2004) claimed that more than half (54%) of all children in the United States are estimated to having a television set in their bedroom. Hence, in modern society parental involvement has significantly decreased, no longer is the family the most important 'socialising agent'.

Television together with ICT transmits “uniform symbolic messages about language, traditions, political and economic norms and socio-cultural values (De Beer, 1998, p. 24)”, thereby escalating it to the position of ‘prime socialising agent’ (Casas, 1998; Greenfield, 1984).

In conclusion it can be stated that the lives of today’s children is a “daunting world for any parent to enter” (Leland et al., 1999, p. 5), and researchers should therefore, pay attention to the needs of both the parent and child for guidance in this era of ‘new screen’ technology.

## **2.6 The effects of ‘screen’ violence on young people’s well-being**

According to the AAP (2001) American children between the ages of 2 and 18 years of age are spending an average of six hours each day using media. Strasburger (2004) claims, that this is more time than they spend on any other activity, with the exception of sleeping. Most of this media exposure includes acts of violence that are witnessed in music videos, movies or the news or “virtually perpetrated” in the form of video games by young people. Studies show that on average one in four American boys plays an extremely violent game. It is estimated that by age 18, the typical young person would have witnessed 200 000 acts of violence and 40 000 murders on one screen or another (Huston, Donnerstein & Fairchild et al., 1992; Grossman, 1999; Coetzee, 2005).

Currently, the view from the U.S. is that television is a causal agent in the development of short term as well as long-term aggressiveness among children. In fact, more than

3500 research studies have established a link between exposure to media violence and aggressive behaviour among children and young people (Comstock & Strasburger, 1990).

Most studies on the effects of media violence, examined the association between media violence and aggressive behaviour (Gentile et al., 2004). However thirty years of scientific studies support the fact that children's viewing of violent television and interest in television violence has been linked to a number of harmful attitudes such as desensitisation to the pain and suffering experienced by victims of violence (Rabinovitch, McLean, Markham & Talbot, 1972) and an increased sense of fear and helplessness (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1994).

A small number of researchers argue that it is the physiological effects of media violence that cause aggressive behaviour. According to Anderson et al (2003), exposure to violent images is linked to an increase in heart rate, faster respiration, and higher blood pressure. For this reason it is believed that these physiological reactions to violent imagery stimulate a "fight-or-flight" response that predisposes people to act aggressively in the real world (Bjorkqvist, 1985).

While other researchers claim that ICT influence children in that they learn by observing, imitating, and making behaviour their own, research has shown that the strongest correlation with violent behaviour is previous exposure to violence (Baron & Bynre, 2000; Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 1994). In addition, Mastronardi (2003) claimed that adolescents who are heavy consumers of mass media are more likely to report that they

engage in risky behaviour. A study conducted by Klein, Brown, Childers, Oliveri, Porter and Dykers (1993) found that adolescents who have engaged in risky behaviour such as sexual intercourse, consuming alcohol, drug use and smoking, watch more music videos, movies, cartoons, and soap operas on television than adolescents who report fewer risk behaviour.

According to Bruynse (2003) children younger than eight years old cannot discriminate between fantasy and reality. This makes them vulnerable to learning and adopting as reality the circumstances, attitudes, and behaviours shown by entertainment media.

Children, who have reached the abstract formal operations, have the cognitive ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality; however, emotional harm from exposure to media violence is still possible.

In addition, a study conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] (1996) found evidence that media images reinforce the experiences of children in their real-life environments. It was estimated that (44%) of both boys and girls reported a strong overlap between what they perceive as reality and what they see on the screen. Many children experience both real and media environments in which violence appears to be natural and the most effective solution to life's problems. Where violence is not a feature of daily life, media portrayals may make it appear to be thrilling, especially when presented out of context (UNESCO, 1997).

The AAP (2001) claims, that the context in which violence is portrayed determines the difference between “learning about violence and learning to be violent” (p. 3).

Unfortunately, most violent movies are used for pleasure without portraying any consequences to human behaviour. Studies shows that the more realistically violence is depicted the more believable and appealing it will seem and the greater the likelihood that it will be tolerated and learned. Comic violence is considered particularly dangerous as it associates positive feelings with hurting others (Liebert & Sprafkin, 1998).

In addition ICT has inflated the prevalence of violence in the world, which Strasburger (2001) believe cultivates in the viewer the “mean world” (p. 3) syndrome, creating the perception that the world is a dangerous place. For some children exposure to media violence may lead to anxiety, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD], or sleep disturbances. While other children, may fear being the victim of violence, and this may motivate them to carry weapons and to be more aggressive (Strasburger, 2001).

In contrast, Goldstein (2000) proposes a more cautious approach to these findings, saying that violence displayed on videos and video games does not fit the textbook definition of violence. He argues that there is a distinction between real aggression and play/fantasy aggression. He goes on to say that correlation does not necessarily equal causality claiming that even though the media might give form to aggressive behaviour, it cannot motivate a person unless the person is already inclined to behave aggressively. In support Jenkins (1998) claims that: “ICT’s are not chemical agents that produce predictable results” (p. 2).

Jones (2002) even goes as far as defending it, claiming that violent entertainment is good for children. He believes that by “demonising” it, it can be detrimental to children’s emotional well-being. He fervently argues that “violent video games, movies, music and comics provide a safe fantasy world within which children learn to push back against a modern culture that cultivates fear and teaches dependency” (p. 9). Furthermore, Singer & Singer (2001) believe that media violence is a healthy outlet for releasing hostility in the safety of virtual reality.

Jones (2002) discredits studies linking violent media with violence in society and argues that children are able to appreciate the difference between pretend and reality. He states that caregivers need to learn to distinguish between what violent games mean to children and what they mean to adults, and to stop imposing their understanding of them on children. He believes that although adults may be horrified by the literal meaning of a video game, children are far more interested in its emotional meaning; and by identifying with a rebellious, even destructive hero/ fantasy figure help children feel more in control of these forces. However, Jones (2002) feels that to lessen the impact, adults should "model nonaggression, empathy, respect, a clear distinction between fantasy and reality, and the integration of aggression and other scary feelings" (p. 10).

## **2.7 Theoretical explanations**

Numerous theories exist to explain the impact of violence portrayed in the media. Researchers from various disciplines mainly psychology, communication, and sociology, have developed, tested, and refined numerous theoretical models accounting for the

consequences of exposure to media violence. These models focus on how people perceive, think, learn, and come to behave in particular ways as a result of interactions with their social world this include “observation of and participation in real social interactions with parents and peers, as well as fictional interactions with various forms of media” (Anderson et al, 2003, p. 94).

Some researchers argue that the connection between media violence and its effects is a psychological one, rooted in the way children learn. The earliest and most persuasive is *social learning theory*, later termed *social cognitive theory* (Bandura, 1977; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). According to this theory, children learn behaviour by observing others, both directly in real life and vividly through media images. Bandura (1977) believes that the most effective way to teach children certain behaviour is to demonstrate the behaviour and have the child model it.

In accordance, *social reinforcement theory* argues that this is precisely what television and video games do. Grossman (1996) claims that we as humans have to be taught to kill- it is not a natural instinct. He says that, “within the midbrain, there is a powerful, God-given resistance to killing your own kind. Almost every species has it. Only sociopaths lack this violence immune system” (p.144). Grossman (1999) argues that even with trained soldiers, only a fraction of them can without difficulty bring themselves to actually kill in situations other than self-defence.

Grossman (1999) states that there are four training methods used in the military to prepare soldiers to kill. This include, brutalisation- whereby soldiers are put through a programme of verbal abuse to break down one set of values and establish a new set of values that makes violence acceptable. Secondly, classical conditioning- soldiers learn to associate a stimulus with a response according to a specific reinforcement schedule (e.g. such as violence linked to pleasure. Thirdly, operant conditioning- they are exposed to another type of conditioned response that relies on a reward for an initiated action. Finally, role modelling- the drill sergeant symbolises violence and aggression (Grossman, 1999).

Grossman (2000) found that the same tactics are used in violent media programming. Children are trained from a young age to accept violence as a natural part of life. A study on television violence conducted by the American Medical Association in the early 1990s found that in every society where television was introduced, there was a 160% increase in shoving, pushing, biting and hitting on the playground. While in the control communities observed during the study, there were no such changes (Centerwall, 1992). With cartoon characters displaying aggressive and violent behaviour towards each other, Grossman (2000) wonders “how long it will take for the brutalisation of three-to- five-year-olds to reach the prime crime age” (p. 4).

Similar to the soldiers, children come to link violence to entertainment. Grossman (2000) communicated that violence has become part of a pleasing routine for children because they eat and drink while watching these violent images. Children laugh when there is

violence in comedies and frequently seek the most violent movies to watch. The stimulation associated with these violent images is erotic for them and therefore enjoyable (Grossman & Degaetano, 1999).

Similar to television images, interactive videogames also have operant conditioning elements. For example they learn to point and shoot, and their accurate violent acts are rewarded with high scores. The objects of their aggression and violence look human, but young people don't realise the consequences of actually taking a human life as it is never realised in these videogames. Grossman (2000) is therefore concerned that "our children are learning to kill and learning to like it" (p. 6).

As for role models, not only do the media make killers larger than life, even heroic, but children learn from their peers as well. For example, Barry Loukaitis, 14, who killed a teacher and two classmates in 1996, loved the movie *Natural Born Killers*, and identified with the youth "Jeremy" in the *Pearl Jam's rock video*. After this massacre, there were several copycat attempts around the country to do the same thing but on a grander scale, and a number of vulnerable youth expressed admiration for him (Grossman & Degaetano, 1999). Therefore, Grossman (2000) believes that media networks encourage attention starved children to be violent by providing them with violent role models (disguised as superheroes) and rewarding them for violent acts.

Another theory that is closely associated to social cognitive theory is ***Social Information Processing Theory*** that was developed by Huesmann's (1988).

According to social information processing theory, children learn scripts about what events are likely to happen and what are the correct responses to these actions. Huesmann's (1988) believe that these scripts are not only learnt directly from personal experience but explicitly through media images. As they watch violent images, children learn to internalise these scripts and recall as needed in social situations (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1994).

Cognitive processes such as attention as well as retention are also addressed in observational learning and can alter how a model's behaviour is stored, and recalled. Therefore, closely related to Social Information Processing Theory is Fiske and Taylor's (1984) **cue theory**. **Cue Theory** looks specifically at what facilitates or restrain certain behaviours. For instance, a major factor of media violence is whether or not the violence is displayed as being justified (Evans, 1981; Federman, 1998). According to Raney & Bryant (2002) observing justified violence is more likely to prompt aggressive imitating in the viewers.

Another common theory called **framing** is grounded in how children interpret or frame the material they encounter (Goffman, 1974). He claims that depending on a child's existing experiences, values, and the cultural environment, media content offers an orientation, a frame of reference which determines the direction of the child's own behaviour. According to Gailey (1996) and UNESCO (1997), the child does not

necessarily adopt the behaviour portrayed, but the media images provide a model, a standard for what may be considered normal and acceptable.

Although there is a growing body of well supported theories (as mentioned above) explaining the effects of media images on young people, few have addressed how children assign meaning to these violent images.

For this thesis, social constructionism will be implemented as the larger epistemological framework in which to explore the impact of 'screen' violence on children. Since the concern is not children as constructed by adults but rather the roles that children play and the meanings they themselves attach to their lives (James & Prout, 1997). Accordingly, social constructionism advocates the view of children as "actively involved in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live" (James & Prout, 1997, p. 4). Therefore, to get a better understanding of media effects, we need to acknowledge young people as active viewers who differ in cognition, perception, and behaviour, and consequently have their own ideas and meanings attached to 'screen' violence.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter has reviewed current empirical as well as theoretical literature on children and the impact of 'new' screens. However, it has to be noted that most of the research on children and 'screen' violence has been done in the USA and Europe, thus the research might not be applicable in the South African

context (Bruynse, 2003). The following chapter discusses the methodological design and framework utilised throughout the research process. In addition, it includes details of the research technique, the participants involved in the research as well as a description of the procedure employed in this research.



# CHAPTER 3

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

In the broader arena of child research most studies done on children and young peoples' media use emphasise the perspectives of adults (and to a degree rightfully so) or is dominated by research that is quantitative in nature. In contrast this research employed a child participation perspective, with social constructionism<sup>5</sup> as its key component, drawing attention to young people's own experiences by acknowledging them as *“competent social actors with valuable insight to offer on their experiences and interactions with the social world they inhabit”* (Stanley & Sieber, 1992, p.193). In accordance with the aims, objectives and philosophical and methodological orientation of the study, a qualitative methodological framework was adopted. Furthermore, the procedure, analysis, and ethical consideration are consistent with this framework.

### 3.2 Methodological Framework

In view of the research question and the aims of the study, a qualitative approach as rooted in philosophy of social constructionism would appear to be the most appropriate method, since it is concerned with explaining the process by which people come to *“describe, explain or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live”* (Gergen, 1985; Bryman, 1993). It asks one to suspend belief in conventional taken-for-granted assumptions or knowledge systems and invite inquiry into the search

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<sup>5</sup>In the study social constructionism is perceived as the broader epistemological framework.

for meaning (Burr, 1996; Gergen, 1985; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). This study's concern is therefore not children as constructed by adults but rather the roles that children play and the meanings they themselves attach to their lives (James & Prout, 1997). In addition, qualitative research is favoured during this study as it not only describes and explores domains of meaning but also looks at processes that have not been adequately identified. For example, giving voice to young people's perspectives of 'screen' violence on their well-being, specifically within a South African context, has generally been an unexplored area in child research.

“Qualitative researchers recognise that knowledge and understanding are contextually and historically grounded” (Doucet & Mauthner, 1998 in Mayring, 2000 p. 2). Therefore, qualitative research reports provide rich descriptive accounts of social interactions in a context specific setting. A combination of observation and interviewing of individuals in order to understand their perspectives usually inform these. During this process the researcher acts as a “human instrument” of data collection (Patton, 1990). Unlike quantitative research, culture, meanings, and processes are valued rather than variables, outcomes, and products. What's more, instead of testing preconceived hypothesis or demarcating the direction the research might take (Trochim, 2000), “*qualitative research aims to generate theories and hypotheses from the data that emerge*” (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997; p. 6 in Wetherell, 1996).

*“If you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it” (Stake, 1978, p. 5).*

Given that qualitative research provides insight into participants experiences of the world by describing phenomena of interest in great detail, in the original language of the research participants Stake (1978, p.5) asserts that it “*may be epistemologically in harmony with the readers experience*” thus making it methodological appropriate for this study as well as more meaningful for those who read it (Trochim, 2000).

### **3.3 Method**

#### **3.3.1 Participants**

The participants were conveniently selected from ex-model C<sup>6</sup> schools in the middle class suburbs of the Western Cape Metropole region. Due to disparities between schools in the Western Cape and South Africa in general, only middle-income integrated schools were used in the sampling frame; therefore eliminating the low and high extremes. The rationale for selecting participants from middle-income integrated schools is that the study was looking for young people that are believed to have access to information technologies in their homes.

The preference for this study was to get a homogenous group of participants in terms of age. Thus, 20 participants were conveniently selected from one sampling framework, which consisted of children between the ages of 15 and 16. There was equal gender distribution (10 girls and 10 boys participated). Since the two schools that participated typically comprised of ‘white’ children who were historically advantaged, ‘coloured’ children who were previously afforded limited access to economic and educational

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<sup>6</sup>Ex-model C schools refer to schools that were historically advantaged during the time of apartheid.

resources, and 'black' children who were grossly disadvantaged, the study, therefore did not control for ethnicity of the participants.

### **3.3.2 Instrumentation**

Focus group research is essentially a methodology that collects qualitative data to provide insight into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of the participants. According to Stewart & Shamdasani (1990) "the key to using focus groups successfully in social science research is assuring that their use is consistent with the use and the purpose of the study" (p. 76). Therefore, focus groups are a model technique for this study as it is consistent with the main aims of the research as well as consistent with the broader epistemological framework of social constructionism. The interactive nature of the focus group process provides the relational context that social constructionism promotes as the key component in the construction of meaning. Therefore, the key motivation for the use of focus groups is that it is a socially orientated research procedure and children are social creatures who are influenced by their interaction with others and do not form opinions in isolation (Krueger, 1994). Furthermore, children may feel more relaxed talking in a group, rather than responding to direct questions posed in an interview situation (Smithson, 2000).

In addition focus groups allow for direct interaction with the children, which allows the researcher to probe as well as allow the participants the opportunity to raise issues they want to discuss (Smithson, 2000). The use of focus groups for this study will allow us to draw deeper meaning into the effects of 'screen' violence on the lives of children, and

thus a richer and more in-depth understanding will be achieved as it allows the expression from the perspective of the children (September & Savahl, 2004).

Two focus groups of one and a half hours each were conducted, with children between the ages of 15 and 16. The groups were comprised of ten participants each, with equal gender distribution. The method of data collection used in this study adheres to Stewart and Shamdasani's (1990) recommended group size ranging from six to twelve participants as well as their belief that effective focus groups require homogenous participants, in this study according to age and exposure to 'screen' violence. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the process, with three core questions and a number of probing questions posed to elicit the participants' perceptions and to extrapolate their meanings of 'screen' violence as well as the effects it has on their social well-being ( see Appendix 1). The study opted for a semi- structured interview schedule so that the facilitator was free to probe and explore within predetermined inquiry areas. Due to time constraints, the semi-structured interview guide was ideal since it was in keeping with the flexible nature of qualitative research design, yet it helped to keep interaction focused (Lofland & Lofland, 1984).

### **3.3.3 Procedure**

Written permission was obtained from the Western Cape Education Department. Once permission was granted from the education department, a total of nine schools meeting the criteria of the study (being ex- Model C schools situated in middle income communities that serves all racial groups) were approached. Telephonic requests

followed by official letters were faxed to these nine schools to enquire about their participation in the research. Personal visits were also made to the principals of these schools to discuss the purpose of the study as well as logistical issues surrounding the study. The two schools that finally participated in the research were chosen due to their accessibility. Letters were handed to the pupils in order to get written consent from the participants as well as their parents prior to the focus groups. During the introduction of the focus group discussion the participants were once again informed that the letter of consent indicated that participation was completely voluntary and that at anytime during the research process they were allowed to withdraw (none of the participants withdrew). The focus groups took place on the school premises during times set by the principals of the school. Despite Lincoln and Guba's (1985) claim that recording devices are intrusive, the discussions in this study were audio recorded with the permission of the participants who were very comfortable with being recorded. The moderator also took down written notes in case of technical failure as well as documented the non-verbal interaction of the participants making it easier for facilitators to focus on the interview guide. Catering was arranged for the participants and for those who had their focus group after school transport was provided for them.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is defined by Bogdan and Biklen, as “working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesising it, search for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you are going to tell others” (1982, p.145). Furthermore, qualitative analysis is a process that can be

used to expand our understanding of multifaceted social and human factors in ways that cannot be understood with numbers (Kerlin, 1999).

According to Patton (1990) what makes a study qualitative is that it tends to use an inductive reasoning process when analysing data, which means that the major themes emerge out of the raw data rather than being predetermined. Thorne (2000) irrefutably deems data analysis as the most complex and puzzling of all of the phases of qualitative research. Moreover, Brown (1996) claims that transforming raw data into new knowledge can be an overwhelming task therefore qualitative analyses require some creativity.

Given that the major challenge is not only to place the raw data into logical, meaningful categories (see Appendix 2) but also to examine them in a holistic manner and to find a way to communicate this interpretation to its readers.

Therefore, Thorne (2000) believes that it is imperative that qualitative researchers engage in all facets of the analytic process and throughout all stages of the research. She considers being familiar with these processes an important characteristic not only of “doing qualitative research, but also of reading, understanding, and interpreting it” (p. 1). For this reason Thorne (2000) feels it is important to recognize that qualitative data analysis procedures are not exclusive from the actual data. Since every part of the analytic processes, i.e. the theoretical framework from which the researcher approaches the phenomena, the method used to collect or generate data, deciding what might count as pertinent data in answering the research question all influences the data itself.

The term qualitative research includes a wide range of philosophical stances, methodological strategies, and analytical processes. Therefore most experts of qualitative research believe that there is no single right approach for analysing qualitative data, rather that the type of analysis that is required is dependent on the purpose of the study (Morgan, 1993 & Thorne, 2000).

According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) the initial step in the analysis process is to have the focus group interviews transcribed. Using a transcription machine the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim. Since non-verbal communication was not captured in the transcripts<sup>7</sup>, it was therefore necessary to supplement the transcripts with notes made by the moderator during the focus group interviews.

After the focus group data was transcribed it was analysed using thematic content analysis. The use of this method facilitated the process of identifying dominant themes. Thematic content analysis also enables one to identify the reoccurring qualities and concerns expressed by the participants. Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996) thematic categorization and classification procedure was used in this study.

After careful deliberation it was decided that the procedure suggested by Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub's (1996) was the most appropriate for this study as it is in harmony with the aims and objectives of the research. Their approach emphasises the inductive properties of analysis, whereby the researcher attempts to make sense of the situation

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Note<sup>7</sup>: I will not be including my transcriptions, rather a breakdown of the themes will be provided in Appendix 2. The original transcript will be available on request.

without imposing pre-existing expectations on the phenomenon or setting under study. Nonetheless, stressing that the analysis be logical, practical, and verifiable (Patton, 1990). Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub's (1996) five step approach will be briefly discussed.

The first step involves identifying the 'big ideas'. Here the researcher has to consider the actual responses; ideas that have emerged in the group; intensity and the frequency of the responses; and non-verbal communication. The second step is referred to as unitising the data. This involves the process of identifying, coding, and classifying units of data that could evolve into the defining categories. Thereafter, the coded units are categorised into relevant content related categories, which will ultimately represent the organisational themes. After the themes, categories and supporting evidence have been finalised for each individual social group, themes and categories need to be identified across groups. The final step re-examines the 'big ideas' identified in the first step and highlights the categories that support these ideas. These refined themes are now considered the definite themes. The resultant patterns, categories, and emergent themes culminate into the development of the findings. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) it would be ideal that once the findings are determined, the research report will translate to those who read it as rich, tightly woven account that "closely approximates the reality it represents" (p. 57).

Although Vaughn et al's (1996) five steps of analysis were explained here in a linear manner, in practice they may occur concurrently and repetitively. These steps may also

vary according to such factors as the research question, the researcher's approach to the investigation, or the setting and context of the study (Mayring, 2000).

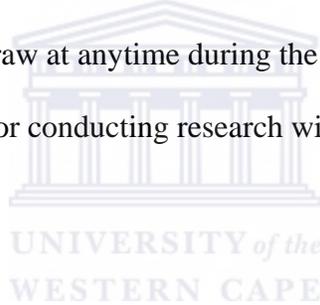
### **3.5 Reflexivity**

Giorgi (1986) claims that researchers always enter the field of research with certain opinions about what it is all about. According to Miller (1991) reflexivity starts by the researchers identifying preconceptions that he/she may have brought into the project. Therefore, to make sure reflexivity is thoroughly maintained in this thesis, it is important to note that as a researcher, my background and position may have influenced the interaction between the participants and myself, and therefore their responses.

Dependent on positions and perspectives, a different researcher might therefore access different, although equally valid, illustrations of the situation that is being studied. For this reason, Haraway (1991) believes it is important to "recognise that knowledge is partial and situated, and to account adequately for the effects of the positioned researcher" (p. 184). Therefore, during all steps of this research process, the influence of the researcher was considered and later on shared. Adequate accounts of these influences were presented in the thesis, as the frame of discussions of limitations and strengths of the study. Furthermore, as a way of improving reflexivity as recommended by Krueger (1994), the data was tape recorded and transcribed, therefore allowing others not involved in the study to review them.

### **3.6 Ethical Consideration**

The following processes were followed to make certain that this research project met the required standards of ethical research. The first step in the process was obtaining permission from the Western Cape Education Department and the respective schools, to conduct the research. Letters for informed consent were given to the pupils via the teachers in order to get written agreement from both the participants as well as their parents. Prior to the focus groups, the participants were fully briefed on the nature of the study and what it involves. Strict confidentiality was assured and maintained regarding any information acquired during the research process. For example, no references was made that could identify the participants or the schools. The participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at anytime during the research process. Furthermore, the standard ethical procedure for conducting research with children was strictly adhered to (see Appendix 3)



### **3.7 Conclusion**

This Chapter provides a systematic account of the methodological procedure utilised in this study. The first step was a description and a motivation for using a qualitative framework. The second step explains how the participants were selected for this study. Explaining the data collection method, which was used to draw deeper meaning and to gather in-depth understanding from the participant's perspective, followed this. The final step highlights the stages of analysis used to analyse the data, which provided insight into the similarities and differences of the participants' perceptions and experiences of 'screen

violence'. Ethical issues were also discussed. The following chapter presents the findings and results of the analysis of the two focus groups conducted in the study.



## CHAPTER 4

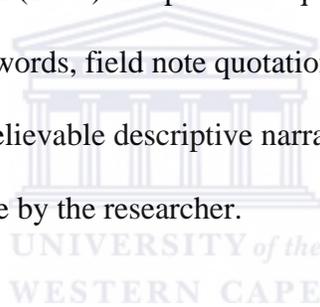
### ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Introduction

The following chapter provides an elucidation of the key findings of the focus groups.

Working from a child participatory perspective, this study aims to identify themes of children's perceptions of screen violence. To provide depth and insight into the children's experiences, the analysis is geared towards extracting these themes from the compilation of responses and then comparing them to current literature on 'screen' violence.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) this process requires the researcher to creatively merge "descriptions, speaker's words, field note quotation,<sup>8</sup> as well as their own interpretations into a rich and believable descriptive narrative" (p. 22), giving the reader access to the interpretation made by the researcher.



#### 4.2 Findings

Four major themes were identified from the data. They are as follow:

- i. Children's experience of screen violence as entertainment.
- ii. Children's perception of the various genres of screen violence.
- iii. Children's perceptions of what makes screen images violent.
- iv. Children's perceptions of how screen violence influences their well-being.

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Note<sup>8</sup>: The following abbreviations are used in the excerpts from the focus groups. FR- female respondent, MR- male respondent, A- all respondents and F- facilitator. [ ] – translation; ... - unclear text.

Under each of these four themes, a set of relating sub-themes is discussed. However, they are often not disparate and limited to a certain theme. The analysis will also reveal that the apparent sub-themes from the four categories are often reciprocally influencing.

### **4.3 Theme 1: Children’s experience of screen violence as entertainment**

The primary theme to emerge from the data was violence as entertainment. A further focus of this theme examines the needs associated with viewing violence. This draws important attention to what motives are satisfied by the act of watching violence and by implication to the potential manipulation of those needs by the media industry for profit. Recent research in Europe has looked at the way different audiences receive images through the media. According to Hargrave (2002) these studies show that there are diverse tolerances among audiences and for that reason they experience violent images differently. Therefore, to better understand the enjoyment of these images by various child audiences, variables such as gender and programme genre will be deliberated on.

The overall sentiment among the learners<sup>9</sup> in the focus groups was that the violent image that they see on screen is “*all for entertainment*”. This theme is further illustrated in the following extracts:

*FR: Jacky Chan is entertaining*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 38)*

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<sup>9</sup> “Learner” is the preferred South African term for school going children. The word “learner”, “participants”, “respondents” or “child” will be used interchangeable in this thesis.

*MR: Like okay, yes there is blood and killing people and stuff but it is not used in a bad sense, like in Jacky Chan movies, its comedy movies, you still see fighting and killing.*

*(MR, Focus Group 2; p. 26)*

F: Do any of you like these violent images?

*MR: Yes*

*FR: Yes*

*MR: It depends, sometimes its funny it makes me laugh, and it makes me happy.*

*(Focus Group 1; p. 15)*

*FR: It brings excitement to a movie and it makes it more interesting, if everyone has to fall in love with everybody in the movies then it will be boring that's why violence does contribute to the excitement of the movie.*

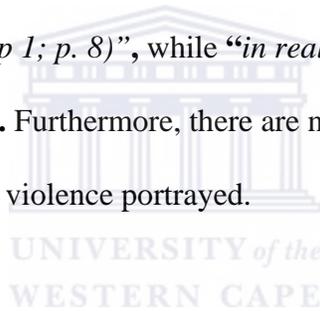
*(Focus Group 1; p. 16)*

*MR: Okay, its entertainment, its fun to watch in a way.*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 50)*

In the above extract the learners communicate the excitement that violent images bring to their viewing experience and consequently increases the entertainment value of the film for them. The repetition of phrases like “*its funny,*” “*it makes me happy,*” “*it makes me*

*laugh*” and “*it makes it more interesting*” (p. 2, 10, 15, 16 & 50) supports the idea that screen violence is an overall positive experience for the learners in the sense that they find it exciting and not distressing. Both male and female learners were equally attracted to ‘comedic violence’. However, they do differ in their experience, perception, and preferences for different types of violence. For example, a female participant considered ‘comedic violence’ to be “*funny*” and “*not violence*” (*Focus Group 1; p. 22*), while a male learner identified it as “*soft violence*” (*Focus group 2; p. 22*). Hence, it is not surprising that for these participants to classify something as “violent”; it has to be grounded in realism and authenticity. Therefore participants categorised Jacky Chan films as soft violence since it is not grounded in realism because the good guy “...*they never get hurt (MR, Focus group 1; p. 8)*”, while “*in real life not only the bad people get hurt (FR, Focus group 1; p. 8)*”. Furthermore, there are no blood, guts, and gore to speak of even though there is physical violence portrayed.



In accordance with present findings, Hargrave (2002) and Raney and Bryant (2002) reported that certain entertainment values such as action, fun and moral rights are reinforced for the participants because of the nature of the genre and the context of the violence, which is in keeping with the rules of the film and in keeping with their moral reasoning about media violence. Since violence is portrayed as an act of self-defence or revenge and so justified. This is illustrated below:

*MR: Say she kills my brother then everyone whose watching the movie thinks she deserves to die...*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 52)*

*FR: vengeance is the coolest thing man, you know*

*(Focus Group2; p. 52)*

What is more, there are clear differences, by gender, when it comes to the way in which learners respond to the violent images they see, and what they draw from it. In line 5 the respondent, is of the opinion that the violence that she watches is part of the entertainment value of a certain genre “*That also depend on what you watching (FR, Focus Group 1; p. 10)*”. While a male learner commented that “*It doesn’t matter it is all still funny (Focus Group 1; p. 10)*”. Grossman (1999), Liebert and Sprafkin (1998) and Strasburger (2004) reason that learning to associate violence with pleasure and excitement is dangerous for a civilised society, since it gradually conditions children to believe violence is natural.

The following extracts reveal what motives are satisfied by the act of watching violence.

F: What makes you enjoy these violent movies?

*MR: But if it’s not violent, its boring nobody really cares ... [Unclear] imagine a movie with no violence I switch to another channel.*

*(Focus group 1; p. 3)*

*MR: It's not the fact that people are dying that's fun to watch but the way they show it... it's basically entertainment for me.*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 50)*

*FR: I saw the shorts, that's the part of the story line that I saw was very gory. That's what made me go see it because the hype before the movie...it's also important.*

*(Focus group 2 p. 51)*

*AR: Yes it is*

*FR: What I like about violent movies is most times the good guy does win so although you experiencing intensity through the whole movie, at the end you feel good cos the good guy wins. So it's not all bad. Because at the end the person that should come out on top does*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 51)*

Once again the above extracts suggest that both male and female learners enjoyed the violent depictions they watched on screen. They both agree that violence plays an important role in their selection and enjoyment of a film. Oliver (1994) interpreted this finding as consistent with excitation transfer. This suggests that violent portrayals may increase anticipated arousal or excitement, and in the context of a certain type of film (e.g. Horror, Action) it may serve to increase anticipated enjoyment. The findings also support Oliver and Kalayanaraman (2002) unsubstantiated claim that the portrayals

contained within a film trailer is very important as it will succeed in making movies appealing to the viewer, or at least make them more appealing than other films that are also promoted. However, female learners were more interested in the motivation behind the violent images they see and therefore are attracted to “justice restoring” violence. While the male learners reflected on the violent images they have seen in terms of their special effects. Research conducted by Cantor (2002) affirms that there is no gender difference in overall preference for violent content and that male and females are equally attracted to “comedic violence.” However, contrary to the findings in the current study Cantor (2002) reported that males were more attracted to “justice restoring violence” than their female counterparts. Nevertheless, it is clear that the learners have defined expectations based on the genre of the program or film they experience. This development of comments by the learners show how these expectations, derived from genre, spill over into expectation of type of violence that will be seen.

#### **4.4 Theme 2: Children’s perceptions of the various genres of screen violence**

The second theme to emerge from the data is the types of screen violence. According to participants the overall impression of violence is dependent on the genre of the programme or film. However, there are no suggestions from the findings that participants confuse the enjoyment they occasionally derive from screen violence with real life violence. In spontaneous discussion of screen violence and how it differs from real violence, the respondents had the following to say.

*MR: Real violence is like shooting that you can see in [names place in Cape Town], like this evil stuff when people shoot... and cut people open is not real, like in China. Not here in Mitchell's Plain that's now real.*

*(Focus Group1; p. 8)*

While they recognised the following as screen violence:

*MR: But wrestling is fake it's not real.*

*(Focus Group1; p. 9)*

*MR: They just well choreographed and trained. When the time comes to do it, they just come together with their stuff.*

*(Focus Group 1; p. 9)*

Screen violence is described in graphic detail with much attention on the blood and gore of the scenes “*they squashed the eyes. It looked kwaai [coo] but yore[wow] it's violent*” (MR, Focus Group 1; p. 6). The responses are often instinctive. Respondents suggest that there is little lasting impact from such scenes; they speak about being immune to it, “*I didn't feel that the graphics and the effects were very bad. For me personally, I don't but I didn't get frightened in the horror movies and that type of stuff. I'm like immune to it sort of* (MR, Focus Group 2; p. 46)” and needing to get to the next level of violence, the next special effect. Overtime and with repeated exposure in the context of entertainment and relaxation, many viewers exhibit decreasing emotional responses to the depiction of violence Cline, Croft and Courier (1973); Mullin and Linz (1995). A number of studies

have documented that desensitisation results in reduced arousal and emotional disturbances (Goldstein, 1998). More disturbingly, Molitor and Hirsch (1994) reported that desensitisation leads to a decrease in pro-social behaviour. This is evident in the following excerpt

F: Do you guys yourself feel desensitised to the violence on screen?

FR: *No not really ... If you see someone get shot, you'll feel that scared and sad and all that emotions are coming because of compassion*

FR: *But you won't get involved...*

FR: *and help the person...*



*(Focus Group 2; p. 38)*

Furthermore, the research found that participants have been exposed to a wide variety of screen violence (many classified beyond their age range) and have developed a mental library for 'violence' and easily recall particularly graphic details of violent scenes. These scenes then become their point of reference for any future screen violence they see. More importantly, violence, especially fictional violence, requires a level of identification for any compassion or distress to be created by the events unfolding. In fact, respondents talk about being used to seeing violence, rather than worried or concerned by it. "...a movie is a movie. If they kill a person now his alive again tomorrow. You don't take anything serious" (MR, Focus Group 2; p. 11). In contrast participants describe real life

violence (e.g. News) and screen violence based on real life events (e.g. the movie Chainsaw Massacre) as disturbing and anxiety provoking, and totally distinct from typical images of screen violence “*If it is based on a real life story, say at the beginning of the movie it’s a true story then I’ll sit and wonder...I’ll picture myself in that situation*” (MR, Focus Group2; p. 13). A study conducted by Hargrave (2003) on 12-13 year old children also found no evidence of deep distress caused by fictional screen violence. However, what was found was that participants do become concerned by fears that they are unable to rationalize. Hargrave (2003) argues strongly that this can “lead to genuine anxieties and change in behaviour” (p. 35). However, his findings suggest for this to happen the on-screen violence needs to meet a number of key criteria. For instance, it needs to be real and on the news, it needs to be local or feel as though it can be local, it needs to happen to someone they can identify with (e.g. someone of their age), the aggressor must not be an obvious “baddie” and if their fears are echoed and compounded by their parents’ anxieties [e.g. case of abduction of children in the news] (Hargrave, 2003). In contrast to the findings of the current study, Hargrave (2003) revealed that if screen violence is based on real life events, but is not reality, children were able to distance themselves from the subject matter.

Furthermore, findings reveal that participants have different expectations based on the genre of programme or movie they are discussing. The following comments clearly illustrate that expectations about the type of violence that will be seen is dependent on the genre of the programme.

#### 4.4.1 Films and suspense series

Participants recognise action films, horror and suspense series as fictional representation of the real world. The findings suggest that they do not engage with fictional violence in a significant way. Because of their level of maturity the participants believe they are able to recognise what they are watching is fictitious and not real: *“If I watch a scary movie like Jason vs. Freddie, it’s totally graphic, so there’s no like compassion or anything. Seriously I feel no compassion, it’s just stupid”* (FR, Focus Group 2; p. 41). That what they are watching are actors performing a role written for them *“actors are not that people, they’re playing a role of something else. It’s acting...”* (MR, Focus Group 2; p. 39). Moreover, the violence portrayed on screen could not happen in the way it was depicted, *“Like when you watch Kill Bill when you see...the head pop off...and it rolls off...it doesn’t happen like that* (AR, Focus Group 2; p.61)”. Nonetheless, findings suggest that participants’ emotional responses to violence varied from individual to individual, depending on their level of exposure to violence (through television, video and film), their gender and their personality *“It also depends on what kind of person you are ...each person feels different...some people enjoy watching scary movies they get a kick out of it...they will find it funny and laugh...others won’t be able to sleep they’ll get nightmares and stuff”* (FR, Focus Group 1; p.12).

#### 4.4.2 Wrestling

Participants identified wrestling as completely fake and with no bearing on realism *“it is fake it’s not real”* (MR, Focus Group 1; p.9). They defined it as *“a soap opera with action in it”* (MR, Focus Group 1; p.9). However, although the respondents

acknowledged that the wrestling was faked, this knowledge did not stop them from trying out the moves themselves “*we practice it in class*” (MR, Focus Group 1; p. 12). Nevertheless, participants do not consider wrestling as violence; however they do recognise and express concern that it might influence their younger counterparts’ behaviour. A female respondent gave an account of her younger sister and cousin getting into a physical fight after having watched the wrestling (p. 3). Their concerns are supported by Dube (2000) who claims that during the past few years, there have been news reports of groups of children imitating WWF matches in the United States, with physicians having to deal with the consequences of such imitations on a regular basis.

#### **4.4.3 Music Videos**

Participants regard music videos, especially rap videos, as promoters of violence and delinquent behaviour. A male respondent stated that the glamorisation of behaviour deemed socially unacceptable has resulted in youth believing that violence is not only “normal” but also admirable. Although rap music has conflicting values to mainstream society, the rap artist practices are rewarded with fame and money. Therefore, the youth associate it with being cool, being powerful and in some misguided way being successful:” *A friend of mine. He watches too much American programmes and rap videos, he wanted to be a rapper since a small child. He watches all this violence, he would like to have a gun one day, he would like to have the cars, and the bitches and the money, smoke weed on stage and stuff like that*” ( MR, Focus Group 1; p. 17). A female participant also deemed music videos as unpleasant and violent because of the derogatory language used and how they degrade and devalue women ” *I don’t like his*

*music, the way he talks about women...everything is bitches... and ho's and like guys will come and talk to you like, hey bitch" (p. 53).* According to Grier (2001) exposure to media violence alone is not believed to cause socially unacceptable behaviour in children; however, it is believed to impose a significantly negative influence on youth. The Federal Trade Commission (2000) believes that the main reason for concern about the relationship between exposure to violence and violent activity are features of identity development and social expectations in children. These concerns are supported by Casas (1998) who believes that children shape their identities, values, and behaviour by drawing clues from imagery they watch.

On the contrary, Richardson (2002) argues that rap music is a way for youth to voice their discontent regarding social, political, and economic issues. In this context rap music is considered cathartic because many songs protested police brutality and highlighted the realities of violence commonplace in many communities (Centre for Black Music Research, 2002).

#### **4.4.4 Videogames**

The participants viewed videogames as similar to cartoons, in that they are not real. But videogames are considered distinct from television watching, whereas the latter requires passive viewing of screen violence, the former is an active aggressor of fictional violence," *you are actually shooting something, so there is a difference" (FR, Focus Group 2; p. 32).* In addition, participants agreed that videogames are more harmful than television because instead of watching killings, the player is the killer "*Computer games*

*are worse because you actually doing it” (FR, Focus Group 2; p. 32).* Grossman (2000) believes that this is a major concern because in videogames children are rewarded with more points for more killings. This conditions them to associate violence with pleasure and excitement. In addition, Grossman (1999) claims that this will increase children’s addiction to violence yet numb them to the consequences of it. In contrast, Hargrave (2003) study found that children considered videogames as less scary or violent, because, as players, they felt in control of what was happening.

#### **4.4.5 The News**

Participants identify the news as accurate and real, and if an event is on the news there is recognition that it is significant. They also consider news items to be the most violent, even though television news rarely captures actual acts of violence. The participants tended to define real violence in terms of the effects of violence rather than the act itself. This is illustrated in their comments and their reactions to the war in Iraq:

*FR: I think the news is also sometimes violent. Because when they show now the situation in Iraq they will show like how they did burn the man and the actual body*

*MR: Like when they showed the guy from Iraq running in front of the camera and shouting ‘somebody help me’.*

*(Focus Group1; p. 9)*

The latter comment provokes laughter from the rest of the group. This suggests that the events might penetrate the conscience of some (especially the female participants) but because they do not identify with the event or what they see, they tend to dissociate from the event itself. More significantly the participants need to identify with the victim and the event must have personal relevance to them for genuine concern or anxiety to be expressed. The following excerpt addresses a local news event of abduction, which is endemic in South Africa.

F: Okay news what about it?

MR: *Violent. Lee Matthews that girl that they still found her body in the field*

FR: *Did they show*

MR: *No, they showed how her parents cried*

F: *Oh yes now I know*

(Focus Group 1; p.14)

FR: *You know what I found weird about that is that people everyday in this country will be kidnapped, why you'll never hear it in the news. I think it's because she's white and that's why there is a big fuss made of it.*

*MR: It's because she's rich.*

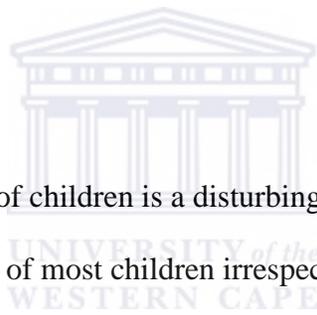
*FR: Now they make a big fuss about her and it happens to so many other people, even worse.*

*FR: What so special about her...!*

*FR: Her colour*

*FR: And money obviously*

*(Focus Group 1; p. 15)*



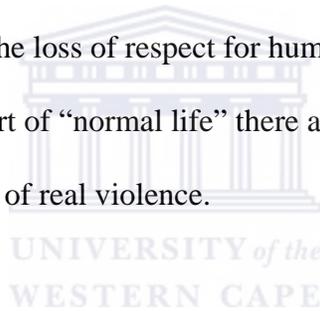
Despite the fact, that abduction of children is a disturbing reality in South Africa and threatens the safety and security of most children irrespective of their race, gender or class. The participants, especially the female participants, showed a lack of concern and empathy for the victim. These reactions contrast with the reactions to news stories, about another local victim of abduction and murder “*I think about Blanche*<sup>10</sup>” (*FR, Focus Group 2; p. 24*), which was met with emotional distress. It appears that participants require news reporting to be on their doorstep for it to feel significant. More importantly, the female participants felt vulnerable to abduction when speaking about Blanche. It can

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<sup>10</sup> : Blanche is the name of a victim that was abducted and brutally murdered in the Western Cape. Similar to the Leigh Mathews case this story also made headlines. However, Blanche was a ‘coloured’ girl from an impoverished area (Bishop Lavis) in the Western Cape, while Leigh Mathews was a ‘white’ girl from an affluent area (Sandton) in Johannesburg.

therefore be reasoned that there is a stronger identification with Blanche than Leigh Matthews because of their respective backgrounds.

The initial examination of the data shows that in order for the participants to relate to an event they need to strongly identify with it. However, a deeper analysis of the responses illustrate that to some degree violence has been normalised “*People think violence is such a bad thing and everything but first thing I don’t feel that...cos it happens such a lot and we see it everyday it like becomes normal for people to die and people to be kidnapped and people to be raped and all types of things (MR, Focus Group 2; p. 26).* More disturbingly they appear to be desensitised to even real life violence. Dawes (2002) believes that this could lead to the loss of respect for human life. Despite the fact that learners consider violence as part of “normal life” there are sometimes inconsistencies in how participants react to scenes of real violence.



In addition, findings clearly identify a “child-centred” (Hargrave, 2003; p. 3) view of the world, regardless of the images being discussed. Participants’ reactions to the images discussed was first related to their own lives and experiences and then deconstructed into various elements of violence.

#### 4.5 Theme 3: Children’s perceptions of what makes the screen images violent

The sense of violence within a programme or film is affected by a number of variables.

Therefore, the third theme to be addressed is what makes the images violent for the

participants. Initially, participants spoke about visual representation of violence such as “*blood, guts, and guns*” (AR, Focus Group 1; p. 4). Swearing was also seen as a form of violence within certain circumstances. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

MR: *Like if they say, fuck you, and all that shit and they say I’ll beat you up your “Fucking cunt and all that stuff they say on TV... I’ll smash you into a pulp.*



(Focus Group 1; p. 4)

The above quotations suggest that adding to the level of violence is often the build up of action, whereby verbal violence is accompanied by physical violence. In support of these results Hargrave’s (2003) study reported that children were more ready to accept strong language as an element of violence than was the case with adults. In addition, participants identified a number of factors that play apart in the violence loading of a scene. Foremost, the violence should be realistic. By this the participants mean that the action should be recognisable as something that could occur, rather than fictitious.

F: Is there violence in that one (Lord of the Rings)?

AR: Yes

MR: *But it's fictitious. That with, like monsters and stuff*

FR: *And you can see it's fake.*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 60)*

FR: *This movie you not scared, you laugh at it because it's stupid*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 61)*

There are other elements, in addition to realism, that adds to the violence loading of a scene. Participants in most instances considered it is necessary to see “*the way they kill people (MR, Focus Group 2; p. 23)*” for it to be considered violent. However, findings suggest that those scenes they consider most violent are the ones where they don't see the actual act of violence. What is much more of an issue for the respondents are those screen images that taps into their anxieties about themselves and the world around them, which is more frightening because it increases the fear that such an event might happen to them. “*It's everyday happenings what we hear on the news about children being shot in gang fights...its scary because you think okay it is happening to everyone else why can't it happen to us*” (FR, Focus Group 2; p. 25).

Another key element in the violence loading of a scene is dependent on the outcome of the violence. Whether or not the person died as a result of the violence, altered the degree of violence seen, “*It's just maiming people*” (FR, Focus Group2; p. 39). According to Hargrave (2002), violence was judged by children in a kind of morality play; that is, if the victim did not die then in a way it was acceptable. Morrison (1999) claims this is

different for adults, because irrespective of whether or not the individual lived or died, the degree of violence seen was not altered. Furthermore, Hargrave (2003) believes that knowing the out come of a scene or event gives certainty to the world. One of the key findings in this study relates to the participants' need for physical and emotional security. This is illustrated in the excerpt below:

F: But this is a true story you were watching

MR: *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*

F: So did it have a happy ending at least?

FR: *No, he's still in Texas somewhere*

F: What kind of feelings does it evoke knowing there's no ending?

*(Focus Group 2; p. 41)*

FR: *It's actually scarier because I'm not going to go to bed.*

MR: *If nobody actually wins I'd be frustrated,' cos I'm saying why you didn't people catch him and how could you do that?*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 42)*

In addition, participants generally felt that the duration of violence enhanced the impact of a violent scene. Participants discussed the whipping of **Jesus Christ** in the *Passion of*

*the Christ*. They felt that the reasoning of the scene was for those individuals who are desensitised to violence, “ *we waiting for you, what will happen when you come around or till you see that violence was not worth it, was not worth it then and it’s not worth it now*”(MR, Focus Group 2; p. 49). Moreover, they felt that it had a lasting impact and that their identification with **Jesus Christ** was reinforced through these images, “*it makes what Jesus went through mean more to you...you finally see okay, he went through such a lot for us, why can’t we do more?*”(FR, Focus Group 2; p .49). Although, to a lesser extent, some participants considered the long-drawn-out whipping of **Jesus Christ** unnecessary and mind-numbing, “*it was very unnecessary the way they dragged that cos it was a long scene. And I know they trying to put across and say yes this is what happened but they didn’t have to do it for such a long stretch*” (FR, Focus Group 2; p. 47). Morrison (1999) found in research with adults that those participants who experienced real violence were not disturbed or excited by dramatic techniques. In fact protracted scenes of violence allowed them to distance themselves from those violent depictions.

Lastly, participants felt that the impact of the violence is affected by clear contextual features of violence. This include whether or not the violence is seen to be unfair through the unequal relationship between central character, as well as the gratuitousness of the violence, “*Did you see that movie fight club, that movie is really violent they actually show how they put that’s women head through the floor and they knock it in...the images of that*” (MR, Focus Group 1; p. 6). It is clear that the participants felt that it was wrong to use violence without good reason, and even in using violence the participants believe

that the dispute had to be evenly balanced i.e. it was wrong for a man to hit a woman. According to the Institute of Communications ( in Hargrave, 2003) since none of the participants showed any overt signs that they considered violence as good in its own right, they have without doubt, embraced the core values of society given to them by adults.

#### **4.6 Theme 4: Children’s perceptions of how screen violence influences their well-being**

Participants’ accounts describe the effects of screen violence on young people’s well-being. They stated that violence on screen “*makes you more violent, you going to copy the people on television*” (FR, Focus Group 1; p. 18). Although a female participant offered a very positive comment, “*but I believe that you grow out of it eventually because we grew out of it and we were exactly the same way. Eventually you do grow out of it...I don’t think it really affects you long term maybe short term*” (FR, Focus Group 2; p. 31).

The rest of the group felt that because children were exposed to violence at a much younger age than in the past “*it’s going to bring up a more violent society*” (FR, Focus Group 1; p. 16). Several large scale correlational studies were conducted in the 70’s and 80’s to determine whether frequent viewers of violence were more likely to show aggressive behaviour than less frequent viewers (Anderson, Berkowitz, Donnerstein, Huesmann, Johnson, Linz, Malamuth, & Wartella ;2003). Several longitudinal studies were conducted by Huesmann and Eron to determine the long term effects of TV on children’s aggressive behaviour (Strasburger, 2004). Similar to the current findings all the studies showed a correlation between viewing violent TV content and aggressive

behaviour. It was also found that early viewers of violent media were a significant predictor of criminal activities in adulthood (Cantor, 2002; Strasburger, 2004).

However, participants felt that imitating what is seen in the media is only one means by which viewing contributes to harmful outcomes among children. Another harmful process identified by learners was desensitisation. They felt that because children consumed large doses of violent content on a repeated basis they have become immune to the consequences of violence, *“now a days you see violence everywhere so it softens the blow...so young kids think okay if they can do it I can do it. Now that’s why people are going shooting anybody and that is why more young people are using guns and shooting...”* (MR, Focus Group 2; p. 30). Faber (2002) agrees that violence on television and films does desensitise people, thus making the use of guns easier for children, especially when guns and weapons are readily available in the home and on the street.

A third harmful effect recognised by participants is that viewing violence increases anger, hostility, and hatred. Participants felt that these violent images act as a script that teaches children how to act and react to certain events, *“music videos, they also violent they, swear a lot, they give you ideas ‘kill my wife’ and ‘I’m going to burn down the house’, things you memorise and when it comes to the situation you remember its cool what they say and then you also do it”* (MR, Focus Group 1; p. 5). Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli (1994) agree that children don’t only learn directly from personal experience but also overtly through media images. Furthermore, they also believe that once the script is learnt by the child, they then commit it to memory and recall as needed in social situations. This is further demonstrated in the following quotations:

*FR: I think there is more anger in everybody, like in the film when something small will make somebody else angry and that will cause the violence (Focus Group 1; p. 17)*

*MR: Like I watched Passion of the Christ and saw what the Jews did to Jesus, now some people will build up anger and hatred for that Jews and every time they see Jews they hostile towards them.*

*FR: Wasn't there a bomb scare already at the...Jewish Synagogue.*

*(Focus Group 1; p. 18)*

*FR: Jewish people are very evil.*



*(Focus Group 2; p. 49)*

Popular studies argue that there is a well substantiated correlation between chronic hostility and violence viewing, which shows that people who are already hostile are more likely to choose violence as entertainment (Cantor, 2002). However, according to the participants' violent programmes also cause hostility. These finding discredit Jones' (2002) notion that viewing violence helps to purge children from their hostile tendencies.

On the contrary, participants believed that increased hostility after viewing violence interfered with children's identity and value construction. Like Casas (1998) they believe that imagery in the media are becoming important tools for identity construction among

children, “Some children are acting like them (50c) and dressing like a gangster” (MR, Focus Group 1; p. 5). The learners also reckon that the more media images children watch, the more they believe it is comparable to the real world and the more they obey the rules they see modelled on screen. This is shown below:

*FR: You see (television) these girls who slam the doors in their mothers face then you think you can do it and then it doesn't work and then you just in trouble*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 53)*

*MR: Small children like to watch it (dragon ball z) so when somebody bigger comes along, they keep them sterk gevreet [strong], and they say I can beat you up. They think they saw it on TV they can do it in real life also*

*(Focus Group 1; p. 16)*

*MR: My small cousin the way he talks to his mother “I'm going to be a gangster get away from me bitch*

*(Focus Group 1; p. 18)*

The above- mentioned quotes also reveal that through watching violent entertainment youth develop inadequate problem solving skills, coping strategies and conflict resolution techniques “and when there is a disagreement then they don't want to sit and talk about it they rather want to fight. And then everyone will like cheer them on and like stuff like that” (FR, Focus Group 1; p. 20).

What's more, the participants assert that increased hostility after viewing violence interfered with children's ability to interact in interpersonal settings. They believe that *"it really affects small children in a big way because they start imitating and start swearing....even at people they don't even know, like if I must walk past a small child and he will hit me for no reason, or swear at me if I must stare at him."* (FR, Focus Group 1; p. 18). They also feel that the increased hostility is the core reason why children are *"more rebellious," "disobedient" and "disrespectful"* towards parents, friends and teachers (p.18, p.20& p. 54). Another factor they identify as contributing to this culture of disrespect is the lack of discipline in the home and school *"I don't think violence is good but its discipline violence ...there it fits in perfectly because you instil discipline and they know...you'll get the hiding of your life"* (MR, Focus Group 2; p. 56).

They also mention that younger children watch a variety of violent images, including images classified outside their age range, like *"wrestling"* (p .2) without restriction or adult supervision. Rideout, Ula, Donald, and Mollyyan (1999) identified similar trends in their study. They found that parents exercised very little supervision over their children's media consumption. Nearly half (49%) of children had no rules about how much or the type of television programs they could watch. They also reported that 95 % of television time for children over seven years of age is spent without parents. Research conducted in South Africa; also found that children often watch the same programs as their parents do, often with their parent's permission (SABC School TV, 2000).

Evidently, respondents believe that the lack of parental monitoring and limiting of violent programmes is responsible for the adverse effects fictional violence has on children today. This is illustrated in the following quotations:

*FR: Yes sometimes it's the parents fault.*

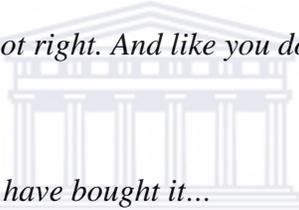
*FR: Not sometimes, most of the time its parents fault.*

*(Focus Group 1; p. 3)*

*FR: If the parents brought the child up properly they would know that the video games are not right. And like you don't do that to people."*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 37)*

*MR: Parents shouldn't have bought it...*

  
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*(Focus Group 2; p. 36)*

*FR: I'm also sure on the video games, I'm sure it says parental advisory.*

*FR ...on most, on all his CD's actually parental advisory is on the front cover, so parents can't say they didn't see it. Because when you buy a CD you look through it thoroughly to see if it's suitable...*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 37)*

What's more they felt that compared to when they were young, parental involvement has drastically decreased in young children's lives. This is illustrated in the quotation below:

*FR: Like when I was six or seven and a 2 to 16 movie came on my daddy would say go and sleep or something like that. But now the children they stay up until late at night and they watch...*

*(Focus Group1; p. 16)*

They claim that knowing what your child gets up to and what they are consuming is a mark of responsible parenting. This belief is supported by (Lin & Atkin, 1989; Dorr & Rabin, 1995) who claims that parental involvement, such as rules limiting media use and encouragement to watch 'positive media and discouragement of 'negative' messages can be very effective in influencing children's viewing, understanding, and reaction to, and imitation of violent programme content.

However, the respondents did feel that age played an important role in understanding the violent images that are portrayed. The respondents felt that because of their level of maturity they had a more reasoned understanding of these violent images and its potential consequences and therefore are less likely to be affected by it. Josephson gives reason for this by saying that "at different ages, children watch and understand television in different ways" (1995; p. 5). According to Faber (2002) adolescents have a more mature cognitive and empathetic approach to processing information they view on screen. This is supported by Josephson (1995) who argues that adolescents are much more likely than

children to distrust the reality of television content and therefore, less likely to identify with television characters. This is manifested in the subsequent excerpts:

*FR: I think us teenagers are..., can obviously use our brains, we know what's right and what's wrong.*

*(Focus Group 1; p. 1)*

*FR: I don't think it will affect us because as older children we can use our brain, because we got common sense.*

*(Focus Group 1; p. 19)*

*FR: But with teenagers they know to a certain extent what is right and wrong...they know they definitely know...*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 30)*

*FR: A seventeen year old is old enough to know the difference that the video game and real life isn't the same. You can't just go out and kill someone because you watched a videogame.*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 37)*

Conversely, the respondents feel that their younger counterpart is more at risk as they are more vulnerable to these violent images. Their concern is supported by Van Evra (1990) who proposes that the developmental level of the young viewers is a crucial variable in the media effects equation. Since young children do not fully understand what they see, and, are more likely to be affected by both obvious and subtle textual features, and unlike the sophisticated viewer will simply imitate the actions that they see. Moreover, they are more likely to observe the random violence portrayed in a fictional sense, and have

trouble differentiating the actual effects of its intent in reality. This is demonstrated in the following extracts:

*FR: They (children) watch a thing and then they go into the room and they do exactly what they see in the movie*

*(Focus Group 1; p. 3)*

*FR: We (teenagers) don't see wrestling as violence, but the small children like 5 year olds when they fight, they imitate people like John Siena and they do a five star body smash.*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 30)*

*FR: But they actually hurt each other but they don't realise because they just think they imitating the people.*

*(Focus Group2; p. 30)*

Despite the respondents' claim that *"of course it won't affect us"* (FR, Focus Group 1; p. 19), because *"by the time you get to our age you know that those are actors doing it, not real life ... you know it is just entertainment because that is actors (MR, Focus Group 2; p. 39),* and that their younger counterparts are the ones who are vulnerable to violent images they watch because *"children can take it kop toe [take it seriously]"* (FR, Focus Group1; p. 2). A deeper analysis of the responses shows that the participants are not

completely invulnerable and unaffected by these screen images as they claim to be. A more pronounced explication of their vulnerability is provided in the following quotations:

*FR: Corporal punishment would have kept them in line.*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 56)*

*FR: To a certain extent there is violence in Jackie Chan movies but it's not overly bloody...and people are not dying unnecessary...*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 22)*

*FR: It's just maiming people.*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 39)*

*MR: The movie Troy. There's a lot of killing 'cos there's like two countries fighting against each other.*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 23)*

*MR: So what, there are lots of people dying every single day?*

*(Focus Group 2; p. 24)*

The afore-mentioned quotations indicate that these respondents were of the opinion that because they do not present overt signs of aggression the violent images does not impact on them. However, their normalisation and trivialisation

of violence is of crucial concern as this process plays a role in the increase of violent thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours. Furthermore, Gailey (1996) argues that even if children do not execute the behaviour portrayed, the media images provide a model, a standard for what may be considered normal and acceptable.

To a lesser extent, learners also identified positive aspects to certain violent films. For instance *Passion of Christ*, “*they explain to you in Sunday school stuff about Christ and what he went through but when you actually watch the movie you like, how can you do that to a human being? You feel more and you understand more about your religion...we don’t care until we watch the movie, the pain he went through for us, you know what I mean*” (FR, Focus Group 2; p. 45). According to the above extract the movie is extremely powerful and spiritually emotional as they (learners) as Christians realise that it was for their sins that Jesus died such a barbaric and horrifically painful death. The participants consider the film to be very graphic and gory, but feel that it is not done for shock effect but rather reality effect.

Female participants affirm that “*some girls they especially watch scary movies if their boyfriend is with them and stuff so they can scream and have someone to hold onto*” (Focus Group1; p.11). According to Josephson (1995) horror movies take on a new importance in the context of adolescents’ concerns about romance and further definition of sex roles. A study conducted by Calvert & Huston (1987) found that young men seem to enjoy horror movies more when they with a frightened woman of the same age and

that young women enjoy horror movies more when they are with a man who is not frightened, a ritual that is meaningful and pleasing to both in a dating context.

#### **4.7 Summary of Findings**

A thematic content analysis put forward by Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996) was used to describe the shared meanings of participants' accounts. Participants made meaning of screen violence through narratives. Cobb (1994) claim that young people actually think in terms of stories and their themes, roles and plots, which works together to create a system of meaning around particular understanding of events. In the construction of meaning a collaborative conversation took place between participants. Their stories created a climate of openness to new possibilities and interpretations by other group members. These interpretations were presented as four themes namely, 'violence as entertainment', 'types of violence', 'what makes it violent', and 'effects of violence on well-being'. The findings show significant consistency in the responses of these participants. Primarily they demonstrated a child centred view of the world. Violent images were then viewed from this perspective. It was evident that children were able to distinguish between fictional violence and violence that is 'real'. Participants reported that certain entertainment values such as action, fun, and moral rights are reinforced for them because of the nature of the genre and the context of the violence.

Furthermore, it is clear that participants have been exposed to a wide variety of violent images either through film or television and have developed a mental library for violence.

These scenes then become their point of reference for any subsequent screen violence. In addition, participants have different expectations of the various programme genres and the violence expected from each genre. Their reaction to such images is also influenced by their gender and personality.

Participants also responded to the emotional consequences of hurt and violence, depending on the circumstances being portrayed. For example, of all the images of violence presented to the participants, those events that were real (i.e. on the news) were most affecting, especially if it involved people they identify with. Conversely, they identify less with news events with which they cannot identify with.

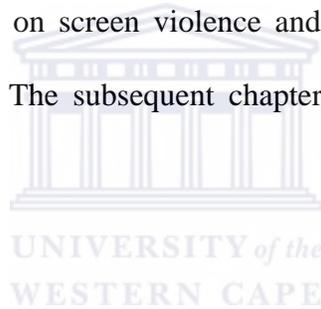
The special effects of “*blood, guts, and gore*” are often enjoyed, especially by boys and above all if they do not feel personally threatened by the images being presented. However, participants identify a number of factors that contribute to making a scene violent. Foremost, the images should be realistic and recognisable as something that could occur. The scenes are also considered more violent, if the violent action is considered either unfair or unjust.

Finally, the participants take a “third person effect” approach to understanding the influence of screen violence. Although they do not completely exclude the possibility of being affected by these images, they find it unlikely because of their level of maturity. Although the participants may not present overt signs of aggressive behaviour their

normalisation and trivialisation of these images raise great concern as their desensitisation may increase violent thoughts and attitudes.

## **4.8 Conclusion**

Considering the aim of this study the findings have been explained and presented as four themes. These themes were selected in relation to children's own media use and understanding of media violence. To provide qualitative and textured descriptions of these themes we incorporated direct quotes from participants' accounts. The themes were compared to previous research on screen violence and were found to substantiate the majority of previous research. The subsequent chapter provides recommendations for future research.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

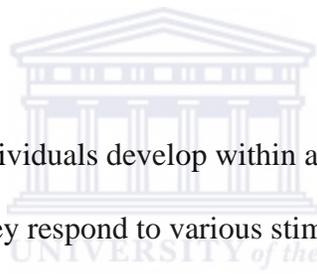
The final chapter concludes the thesis by providing a brief account of the limitations the study encountered as well as providing suggestions for future investigation. The growing emphasis on affording children their participation rights as enshrined in Article 12 of the CRC ( United Nation General Assembly, 1989) this research has foreground children's voices by exploring children's interpretation and understandings of screen violence by extrapolating the essential meaning of these experiences. However, having conducted this research we clearly recognise that important contextual details were missing, implying that critical appraisal of this study was hampered. Nonetheless we hope that future research can be guided by the limitations of this study.

#### **5.2 Limitations and Recommendations**

In academic and other child research practices, participatory approaches have gained support and credibility (Kesby, 2000). Combining qualitative research, within a wider participatory framework led to considerable understanding of children's experience and interpretation. It also resulted in recognising that our participatory approach suffered significant limitations. Although the philosophy of participation specify that participants not be passive subjects but rather take a leading role at all levels of the research process. However, in practice, logistical difficulties and a need for valid and reliable results made

it difficult to fully maintain commitment to the principles of participation while ensuring comprehensive research.

The following limitations that will be addressed relates to the scope of this study and issues that emerged from the analysis of the data. The most evident limitation of this study was that the scope of the research was too general. Although young peoples' experiences and perceptions of screen violence were addressed, this study would have benefited significantly from a narrowed focus on specific programme genres (e.g. wrestling, news, or films) and specific media equipment (e.g. television, DVD, or videogames).



Foney (2002) argues that all individuals develop within a range of environmental context, which in turn, influence how they respond to various stimuli. Therefore, the next limitation focuses on the lack of contextual information regarding the extent of young people's screen violence viewing, as well as the context in which they watch it (e.g. at home or in a cinema). Identifying which context have the most influence on their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviour is crucial in understanding their experience and interpretation of screen violence. Furthermore, the adolescents' relationships with parents, siblings, and peers are also important to contextualise as it may give insight into their vulnerability or resilience to media violence.

The findings from this study are an initial step in understanding children's perceptions of screen violence and the effects on their well-being. However, there are limitations to the

current study that should be considered with regard to interpretation of the findings. First, the present findings were based on a study employing self-report data. Although subjective responses are useful in uncovering reaction and perception patterns, objective data would also be useful.

In addition, participants spoke about their level of maturity, reporting that their younger counterparts are more vulnerable to the effects of screen violence. Within the cognitive-developmental tradition, many studies have explored the relationship between maturity and effects of screen violence. However, future research should be conducted with children from different age groups to elucidate between adolescents' perceptions of their younger counterparts' vulnerability and their younger counterparts' perception of their own vulnerability.

In the findings participants demonstrated a cognitive ability to distinguish between real and unreal violence. However, cognitive processes, such as adolescents' perceptions of real and unreal do not explain how adolescents' beliefs and cognitions relate to their behaviour. It may therefore be insightful to compare and contrast the perceptions of the youth with that of adults, thus providing an external point of reference for both groups.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the current research broadens the findings of previous research by giving voice to children's experience and understanding of screen violence, and providing a foundation for future investigation. In the face of widespread poverty, abuse and neglect,

malnutrition, HIV/AIDS and a high incidence of child labour and child headed households; it has not traditionally prioritised the research in the area of children and ICT. With these technologies thoroughly entrenched in society and impacting on our culture and value systems, social relationships and traditional social systems, it is becoming increasingly important to understand how ICT is impacting on the younger generation (Savahl & September, 2004). This study hopes to contribute to the broader child research agenda in South Africa by explicating how ICT could possibly be impacting on the well being of South Africa's children.



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# Appendix 1

## Children's Perception of Screen Violence

### PERCEPTIONS

1. **Tell me about the violent images you see on screen.** Give me examples of violent screen images you see on (probe screens that were not mentioned): TV, DVD, Videos, Videogames and Playstation etc.
2. **What are the things you regard as violent?** Close your eyes and describe the images you see?
3. **What makes it violent for you?**
4. **Does it matter if you know that the images that you see are real or make believe?**
5. **If it does matter, in which way is there a difference?**

### EXPERIENCES

1. **What do you think of these violent screen images?** Do you see it as entertaining, scary etc?
2. **How do you feel when you see violent images** (Find out how they assimilate these images)
3. **Does it ever bother you? If it does what types bother you?**
4. **How do you respond when you see these images?**
5. **Do any of you like these images? If yes, what do you like about it?**
6. **How do you think violent images affect children/young people?**
7. **In what way does it affect how you feel and how you go about doing things?** Does it provoke feelings of aggression, anger and fear or upset you in any other way?
8. **How does the exposure to violent screen images affect your relationship with your friends and family?**

### PROTOCOL

1. Remember to introduce yourself and tell them why you are there
2. Remember to thank them for participating
3. Let them know how grateful you are that they decided to participate

4. Let them know there is no right or wrong answer. That you would just like to get their opinion and perceptions about screen violence.
5. Let them know they have the right to not participate at anytime during the focus group.
6. Define children, tell them when you refer to children you include them in the definition, although they are teenagers already. According to the CRC, children refer to all persons under the age of 18.



## Appendix 2

### Themes

NR	Emerging themes	Primary Theme	Quotes Pg
1	Violence as entertaining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Age</li> <li>❑ Gender (observation)</li> <li>❑ Levels of desensitisation</li>   <li>❑ Emotions it evoke (excitement, amusement)</li> <li>❑ Violence sell</li> <li>❑ Criteria for entertainment stimulation</li> </ul>	<p>p. 2 p. 3 p.11, p. 38 &amp; p. 48</p> <p>p.46</p> <p>p.3 p. 14, p.16 &amp; P.22.</p>
2	Different types of violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Real v.s Fictional</li>   <li>❑ Realistic vs unrealistic i.e. videogames, action movies, cartoons, news etc</li> </ul>	<p>p.8, p.9 &amp; p.10</p> <p>p.11, p.27, p.25, p. 32, p.45, p.47</p>
3	What makes the images violent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Visuals/graphics</li> <li>❑ Verbal aspects (e.g. bad language)</li> <li>❑ Emotions it evoke</li>   <li>❑ Contextual features (e.g violence just or unjust; punished or unpunished)</li> <li>❑ Violent act itself</li> <li>❑ Mood or atmosphere of the scene</li> <li>❑ production technique</li> <li>❑ Duration of violence</li> <li>❑ Cinematic techniques (e.g. slow motion can either accentuate violence or make violence humorous)</li> </ul>	<p>p.4, p.22 &amp; p.25</p> <p>p.22 &amp; p.24 p.11, p.12, p.13, p. 40, p. 41 &amp; p. 42</p>
4	Psychosocial effects	<u>Long term</u>	

	of screen violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Immunity /desensitisation to violence</li> <li>❑ Same as negative effects</li> </ul> <p><b>Short term</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Aggressive behavior</li> </ul> <p><b>Negative effects (-)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Perpetuate violence</li> <li>❑ Unsympathetic</li> <li>❑ Desensitisation</li> <li>❑ Create mean world syndrome</li> <li>❑ Imitation and modeling violent behavior</li> <li>❑ Normalisation and trivialisation of violent acts</li> <li>❑ Lack of consequences</li> <li>❑ Decrease in pro-social behavior</li> <li>❑ Unable to resolve conflict positively</li> <li>❑ Relationships with parents i.e. issues of disrespect &amp; disobedience</li> <li>❑ Relationship with peers i.e. more aggressive, poor problem solving skills</li> <li>❑ Relationship between boy &amp; girl i.e. identity and sexual development</li> </ul>	<p>p.16, p. 34 &amp; p.35</p> <p>p.2 p. 29 &amp; p.60 p.17 &amp; p.25 p.3, p.5, p.7, p, 17, p.18, p.30, p.31, p.33 p. 26, p.28 &amp; p.29 p.30 p.38 p.17&amp; p.20</p> <p>p.18 &amp; p.54</p>
5	Externalizing vs. Internalizing problems	<p>(Ex)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Parents lack of discipline</li> <li>❑ Time of day violent programs are aired</li> <li>❑ Socio-economic background</li> </ul> <p>(In)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Perpetuate by the psychological state of individuals</li> </ul>	<p>p.36 &amp; 37</p> <p>p.3 &amp; p.33</p>
6	Access to violent images	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Television (less vigilant about television watching for both</li> </ul>	

		younger & older children) <input type="checkbox"/> Game shops <input type="checkbox"/> Friends houses <input type="checkbox"/> Pirate copies	
7	Children's suggestions for problem solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Restricting viewing <input type="checkbox"/> Create consequence for negative behavior <input type="checkbox"/> Discipline: important to note –solve violent behavior with violence	p.29 p.55 p.56



## Appendix 3

### Ethical Statement

This project, closely informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the South African Constitution, prioritises the application of the highest ethical standards. The project complies with the ten-point ethics guidelines as outlined by Alderson (1995) in “Children, ethics and social research” as well as UNICEF’s (2002) “Principles and guidelines for ethical research with children,” taking special cognisance of the issues of

- i) Confidentiality
- ii) Informed consent
- iii) Involving children without exploiting, intrusion or misrepresentation
- iv) Treating children with respect and as active participants and moral agents of their own well-being
- v) Dissemination of findings

Point (iii) and (iv) are enshrined within the CRC.

The following guidelines have been developed to ensure the realisation of the above:

- i) Before the commencement of the focus group, children will be clearly informed about the rationale behind the study and the nature of their participation. They will be given the choice of non-participation without discrimination. The facilitator will take due consideration that all the learners have given consent based on a clear and informed understanding before proceeding.
- ii) Confidentiality in terms of the protection of the learner’s identity will be strictly enforced. No registration requirements will be applicable. No surnames will be used during the discussion. If during the reporting of the results it becomes necessary to use individual names of the learners to distinguish between respondents, these names will be changed to ensure protection of their identity
- iii) Permission will be obtained for any recording (written or audio) from all the learners. If any (even one) objection is obtained for the audio, it will not be used. The facilitator must consider non-verbal objections as well. The facilitator will immediately terminate audio recording if even one learner exhibits feelings of being uncomfortable with the audio recording, even after giving verbal permission.
- iv) The findings of the process will be presented to the participants in the form of a verbal or written report, before dissemination (in any form). Permission will also be obtained from the learners and guardian (in this case the School and Education Department) concerning the dissemination of the outcomes.
- v) The facilitator will avoid questions, attitudes, or comments that are judgmental and insensitive to cultural values and that expose a child to humiliation.

- vi) The facilitator will ensure that there is no staging: will not ask children to tell a story or take an action that is not part of their own history.
- vii) Children will be selected randomly to participate in the programme. We endeavour not to discriminate in choosing children to interview because of sex, race, age, religion, status, educational background, or physical abilities.

