Teachers' experiences of school violence: Case of three rural high schools in King Cetshwayo District

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Abstract

In South Africa, education is recognized as an inherent entitlement for every child. However, the integrity and security of educational institutions, which are intended to serve as supports of knowledge acquisition, are frequently compromised by pervasive acts of violence. This research explores the firsthand experiences of educators contending with this prevalent issue within the South African educational sphere. A qualitative method grounded in an interpretive paradigm was used to gain insights from ecological systems theory to study the multifaceted nature of school violence. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and reviewed pertinent documents to capture the perspectives of educators. Specifically, the study targeted three heads of departments and three educators from rural high schools situated in the King Cetshwayo District, selected purposively to ensure a diverse range of viewpoints. Through an inductive thematic analysis, the study uncovered a myriad of factors influencing the educational milieu, with various manifestations of violence emerging as a prominent theme. Educators recounted enduring physical assaults, verbal harassment, and derogatory remarks from both students and members of the community. Furthermore, the proliferation of dangerous weapons among students exacerbates the gravity of school violence. The findings underline the pressing necessity for community development initiatives and heightened parental involvement as indispensable interventions. By advocating for such measures, educators can be better equipped to effectively confront and mitigate the scourge of school violence. This, in turn, cultivates an environment conducive to optimal teaching and learning outcomes.

Keywords: *school violence, school discipline, corporal punishment, gangsterism, professionalism, experiences*

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1. Introduction

School violence stands as a pressing social concern, eliciting widespread discourse globally (Yang et al., 2021). Issue on violence at schools often remains sidelined by education and political leaders, leading to misconceptions and hindering progress (Bridgeforth, 2021). Manifesting in various forms, from property damage to verbal or physical aggression, school violence profoundly impacts the entire school community (Lester et al., 2017). Despite this, the repercussions on teachers have been largely overlooked (Khanyile & Mpuangnan, 2023), with scholarly and policy focus predominantly centered on student experiences (Cornell, 2017). Violence is defined by the World Health Organization (2019) as deliberate physical force resulting in harm, school violence can be perpetrated by any member of the school community, including teachers, students, or parents (Power, 2017).

Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) characterize school violence as the exertion of authority within educational settings through individual actions or societal influences. This definition resonates with real-world scenarios where power dynamics among teachers and students, often fraught with violence, shape school interactions. Furthermore, school violence extends beyond physical boundaries and operating hours, disrupting the learning environment (UNICEF, 2018), contributing to student apprehension about attending school (Ferrara et al., 2019). However, it is crucial to emphasize the necessity of creating a learning environment free from violence, as it is fundamental for promoting quality education (Human Science Research Council [HSRC], 2016). Incidents of violence occurring in schools in recent years have had a detrimental impact both teachers, students and on the broader community (Centre for Justice & Crime Prevention, 2017). This pervasive issue stems from a combination of internal and external factors, including the school's location and socio-economic circumstances (HSRC, 2016). Recognizing the pivotal role of school governance in ensuring safety and fostering conducive learning environments, the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996 mandates school governing bodies to prioritize discipline and cultivate positive school cultures (Mabusela, 2016). Consequently, the cultivation of disciplined school environments is integral to the collective efforts of parents, teachers, and governing bodies in adhering to established codes of conduct.

An Annual Report presented by SACE (2015) sheds light on the widespread issue of violence affecting public schools. Drawing upon empirical evidence from multiple studies (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Anderson, 2016), it shows the global prevalence of school violence.

This resonates deeply with the researcher's own observations within their school and neighbouring institutions, raising concerns about the adverse effects on learners and the broader socio-economic fabric of South Africa. Based on the interdependent relationship between education and the economy (HSRC, 2016), it becomes apparent that incidents of violence in schools can hinder economic progress. Learners exposed to violence often exhibit reduced motivation to attend school due to fear or intimidation, particularly in environments marked by unemployment and widespread violence (Kaur & Niwas, 2017). The prevalence of school violence is well-documented through various avenues, including media reports, government agencies, and academic research (DoE, 2018).

Previous research activities have extensively investigated school violence in South Africa, examining its various correlates, mechanisms, and perspectives of stakeholders (Pileggi, 2017; Herrero et al., 2019; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016; Mohapi, 2014). Despite governmental initiatives and research endeavours, challenges persist, as evidenced by the troubling trend of highly qualified educators resigning due to safety concerns (Nunan & Ntombela, 2021). This worsens issues of illiteracy and compromises teaching effectiveness, as educators are increasingly preoccupied with security matters (Felomena et al., 2021). Given this context, pertinent questions arise such as what are the experiences of teachers about school violence in the King Cetshwayo District? How does violence at the school impact teaching and learning? To address these inquiries, it is imperative to explore the firsthand narratives of school violence encountered by teachers in the King Cetshwayo District, located in the KwaZulu Natal Province of South Africa. Through this exploration, strategies for cultivating effective disciplinary measures and fostering active engagement among all school stakeholders can be identified, ultimately contributing to the maintenance of safe learning environments.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of teachers' experiences concerning school violence in this paper is grounded in the theoretical framework of ecological systems theory, pioneered by Bronfenbrenner (1979). This theory posits that human experiences are shaped by multiple interrelated systems: the micro-system (individual), mesosystem (family), exo-system (school or community), macro-system (societal factors), and chrono-system (historical and developmental context). Embracing the constructivist paradigm, ecological systems theory emphasizes holism, personal meaning, subjectivity, and the intricate interplay between various

influences (Pahad & Graham, 2012). By adopting Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, this study recognizes the complex web of factors contributing to school violence, rejecting the notion of singular causality. Thus, the study recognizes that teachers may face different forms of violence, including incidents involving learners targeting each other, learners targeting educators, and even situations where educators may encounter violence from their colleagues. This comprehensive approach emphasizes the interdependence of individual experiences within larger socio-environmental contexts. It further underlines the importance of gaining a thorough understanding and implementing effective intervention strategies to tackle school violence.

Figure 1

Ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)
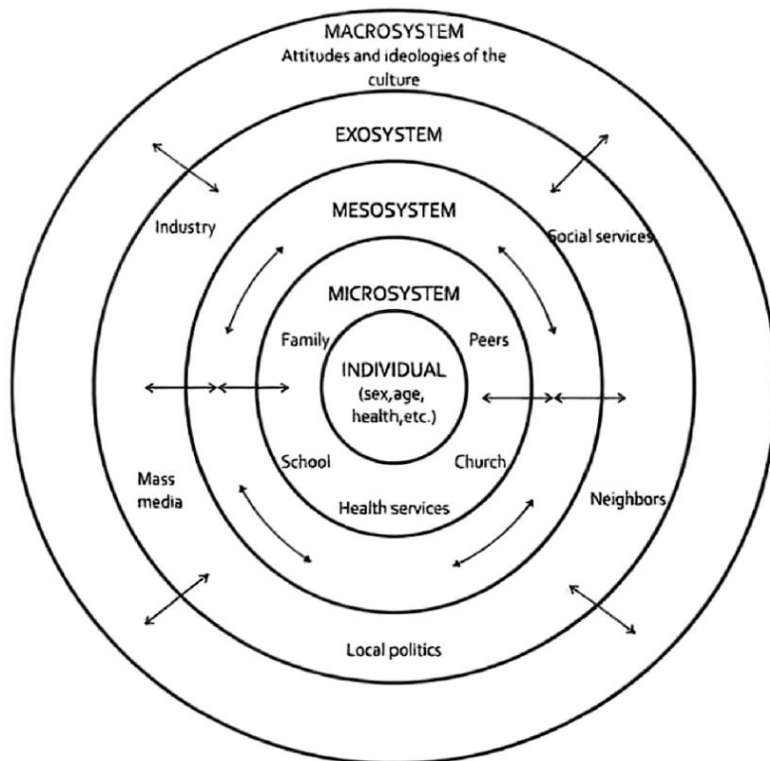
Microsystem/Individual factor. The microsystems consist of various organizations and groups that hold significant influence over a child's growth and development. Such groups include family, school, religious institutions, neighbourhood, and peers. According to Gamage et al. (2021), microsystems serves as the fundamental building blocks within the broader ecological systems theory, and capture the patterns of interaction, components, and internal dynamics present in the home, educational settings, and peer relationships during individuals'

formative years. Furthermore, Ward (2007) suggests that adolescent violent behaviour stems from social interactions that occur during the process of socialization. According to this perspective, individuals learn from various sources, including observing others' actions, receiving guidance from authority figures like parents, and receiving feedback from society, all of which contribute to shaping their understanding of behaviour, its consequences, and ethical standards. In this view, the development of ethical principles occurs through direct education, as individuals reflect on their actions and experiences considering societal norms and values.

Societies typically favour behaviours that uphold their dignity and self-worth while avoiding actions that provoke feelings of shame or inadequacy (Ward, 2007). Similarly, the concept of reciprocal determinism (Holt & Shon, 2018) suggests that children's behaviours are influenced by the responses they receive from their environment, which then shape their subsequent actions. For example, children may turn to violence if they feel excluded or seek approval from peer groups that endorse aggressive behaviour, thereby perpetuating a cycle of violence (Ward, 2007). In this context, the prevalence of violence in South African schools can be attributed to exposure to such factors, which exert pressure on children resort to violent actions against their peers and educators (Hendricks, 2019). This underscores the intricate interplay between individual experiences and broader socio-environmental influences within the microsystem, highlighting the necessity for comprehensive intervention strategies to effectively address school violence.

Mesosystem/relationship factors

The family. Recent research studies have emphasized how crucial family involvement is in shaping students' educational outcomes (Mpuangnan & Ntombela, 2023; Naite, 2021; Mahuro & Hungi, 2016). It can be learned that parents play a significant role in guiding behaviour and addressing various challenges like poverty, school absenteeism, and peer pressure, all of which contribute to the risk of violence in schools (Caridade et al., 2020). Also, Marceau et al. (2020) point out the difficulties that arise when parents exhibit aggressive or illegal behaviours, as children often imitate their parents' actions. Furthermore, children from diverse backgrounds are vulnerable to domestic violence, caregiver misconduct, and insufficient family management strategies.

Peer relationships. Turanovic and Siennick (2022) propose that the quest for status and authority within peer groups can contribute to youth violence. Similarly, peer pressure has been identified as a significant factor driving violence among youth (Poonam & Rajesh, 2017). Thandi et al. (2016) support this notion that pregnant Xhosa-speaking adolescent girls perceived sex to avoid peer rejection. Consequently, they engage in undesirable activities to gain acceptance from their peers and attain group membership.

Mexo-system/community factors. In communities where there is a lack of successful social authority development, local youths are more susceptible to negative influences from undesirable peer subcultures (Flynn et al., 2023). This leads to the adoption of anti-school attitudes and behaviours. Additionally, Ross and Broh (2000) discovered a reciprocal relationship between academic achievement and a learner's perception of personal control. In South Africa, numerous communities contend with elevated levels of violence involving weapons and drugs, posing substantial risks to the safety and welfare of schools in these regions (Burton, 2008).

Macro-system/social factors. South African society has been described as grappling with a culture of violence (Lamb, 2019). The lingering effects of the apartheid era, characterized by discriminatory policies and entrenched poverty, continue to reverberate throughout the country (Jefthas & Artz, 2007; Ward, 2007; Burton, 2008). Many young people were raised in locations where violence was pervasive, either as a tool of suppression by the apartheid government or as a means of resistance against it (School Based Violence Report, 2011). Numerous young individuals played an active role in the fight against the oppressive regime for liberation (Kipperberg, 2007). However, it appears that during this tumultuous period, there was a lack of adequate social support mechanisms to counsel and facilitate the integration of the youth involved in the resistance movement into mainstream society.

The lack of strong social networks within communities leads adolescents from these backgrounds to have limited opportunities to develop crucial social skills necessary for success in life (Mthiyane, 2013). This situation fosters social isolation and weakens the ability to deter various forms of antisocial behaviour (Edwards, 2008). For many South African citizens, life is characterized by persistent challenges such as poverty, illness, and violence, which inevitably spill over into incidents of school violence (Jolly, 2010). Aiteken and Seedat (2010)

argue that When the social and physical environment of a community is hostile, it's probable that the school environment will mirror these conditions.

Echoing this sentiment, Pillay and Ragpot (2010) argue that human behaviour is not shaped in isolation but is deeply embedded within socio-historical and cultural contexts. Environmental factors such as the proximity of bars or liquor shops to schools, the presence of drug dealers, lack of fencing around schools, and the absence of emergency reporting mechanisms via telephone may contribute to school violence (Mestry, 2015). Additionally, masculinity norms, perpetuated by societal acceptance of violent behaviour under the guise of "boys will be boys," are identified as significant contributors to school violence (Mills, 2001). Leoschut (2009) contends that the prevalence of violence in South African schools mirrors the broader societal trend of widespread violence.

3. Literature review

In South Africa, the legal framework guarantees every individual the right to attend school in a secure environment, as enshrined in the constitution, which upholds fundamental human rights such as dignity, equality, freedom, and security (Marishane, 2017; Republic of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996). However, the persistent occurrence of violence within South African schools stands in stark contrast to these principles (Sadtu, 2019). Instances of violence within schools include a student attacking a teacher with a chair and a broom, a teacher being beaten unconscious for confiscating cell phones during examinations, and a principal assaulting a teacher in front of students and colleagues in Kwazulu-Natal (Xulu, 2022). Moreover, the practice of physical discipline by a teacher in Mpumalanga resulted in a student becoming paralyzed. Contrary to common belief, students exhibiting disruptive and antisocial behavior often contribute to the perpetuation of school violence. These incidents highlight that both students and teachers can be victims and perpetrators of violence, undermining the notion of schools as safe learning environments (SACE School-based Violence Report, 2018).

Violence not only impacts the quality of education but also takes a toll on the well-being of affected teachers (Aldrup et al., 2018). However, promoting teachers' well-being can be facilitated through supportive leadership and positive relationships with colleagues, students, parents, and school administrators. Such connections foster a positive work environment, enhance enthusiasm, and increase engagement levels among teachers,

encouraging them to invest in their professional development (Buonomo et al., 2017). Research indicates that a significant percentage of teachers, ranging from 41% to 90%, have encountered violence at some point in their careers, potentially leading to fatigue or post-traumatic stress disorder (People for Education, 2018; Mahaye & Ajani, 2023). Such emotional challenges can be examined through the lens of the socio-ecological theory, particularly at the individual level, which explores how victimization impacts teachers (MacMahon et al., 2017). Additionally, Ko'iv (2015) asserts that various individuals, including students, may participate in victimizing and bullying teachers within educational contexts, highlighting the relational dynamics inherent in teacher victimization, which align with the interpersonal level of the socio-ecological model (MacMahon et al., 2017).

Violence within the school context can be understood as a dynamic interplay between teachers and students, with identity serving as a central factor in both victimization and perpetration (Bound & Jenkins, 2018). High school educators are more frequently victimized compared to their primary school counterparts (Bound & Jenkins, 2018). Moreover, teachers belonging to certain demographics, particularly white, female, homosexual, or older individuals, tend to experience greater victimization, especially in urban and rural settings compared to suburban areas (Bound & Jenkins, 2018). However, many teachers across the country hesitate to disclose incidents of violence, often attributing it to various reasons such as embarrassment, concern for their students, or fear of repercussions (Ore et al., 2019; Ramsankar et al., 2018).

Furthermore, limited resources and inadequate training for teachers and staff pose significant challenges in implementing prevention programs addressing teacher violence (Ko'iv, 2015). Bound and Jenkins (2018) advocate for enhanced teacher protection as essential for maintaining a functional education system and fostering positive teacher experiences. In South African schools, violence may have political or gang-related undertones, impacting teaching and learning environments (Petrus 2015; Trucco et al., 2011). Du Plessis (2007) distinguishes between political violence and gang violence, noting that both forms can disrupt the educational process. Political violence, prevalent in the 1980s, involved conflicts between political factions and clashes between youth and the South African Defence Force (Du Plessis, 2007). Subsequently, gang violence emerged as a significant concern, with some attributing its escalation to preceding political unrest (Drosopoulos, 2008). Watts and Erevells (2004) argue

that systemic causes of school violence stem from oppressive social structures, necessitating an understanding of broader political and societal contexts.

Burton (2008) and le Roux and Mokhele (2011) highlight that the causes of violence in society, including schools, are deeply intricate and diverse. They encompass issues like the lack of discipline in schools, societal violence, poverty, and the lasting impacts of apartheid and colonialism (Edwards, 2008; Duma, 2013; Report of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2015; Leoschut & Burton, 2013). These interconnected factors emphasize the necessity for comprehensive strategies that address various layers of influence to effectively tackle school violence in South Africa.

This review uncovers the ongoing gap between South Africa's legal duty to provide safe educational environments and the prevalent violence within its schools. From conflicts between students and teachers to broader systemic issues like gang-related incidents, a variety of factors, including historical injustices like apartheid and ongoing societal tensions, play a role in this complex problem. Although the detrimental effects on teacher well-being are acknowledged, there are still gaps in understanding the dynamics of teacher victimization and the issue of underreporting. Additionally, there is a noticeable lack of research on prevention strategies tailored to the South African context.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research population

The research population refers to the entire group of individuals or elements that possess the characteristics of interest that the study aims to investigate (Clark et al., 2008). It represents the pool from which the sample is selected, allowing researchers to draw conclusions and apply findings to a wider context. In this study, the research population comprises all teachers working in rural high schools within the King Cetshwayo District. This includes educators from various subjects, grades, and administrative roles within the chosen schools. Understanding the unique qualities and circumstances of this research population is crucial for developing appropriate data collection methods, sampling techniques, and interpreting the study's findings effectively within a relevant framework.

4.2. Research design

This study utilized a qualitative approach to collect subjective views from the participants. It serves to explore the rich insights into individuals' experiences, perspectives, and behaviours. Qualitative methodology allows researchers to explore the complexities and nuances of a given phenomenon deeply. As outlined by Clark et al. (2008), qualitative research emphasizes subjective interpretations, sensitivity to context, and the exploration of meanings attributed by participants to their experiences. Through techniques such as interviews or focus groups, researchers can gather detailed opinion from teachers about their encounters with various forms of violence in the school environment. These methods facilitate the exploration of teachers' emotions, coping strategies, and perceptions of risk and safety within the specific context of rural high schools in the King Cetshwayo District.

4.3. Sample and sampling techniques

In line with a purposive sampling technique, the authors selected a total of six participants, three Head of Departments (HoDs) and three teachers, for inclusion. Purposive sampling allows researchers intentionally chose participants with valuable insights and experiences pertinent to the research topic (Henning et al., 2004). The participants involved one HoD and one teacher from each of the three rural high schools under investigation. This ensured a diverse representation of perspectives, encompassing both leadership and teaching roles within the selected schools. The aim was to capture a holistic understanding of teachers' encounters with school violence in the unique context of rural high schools in the King Cetshwayo District.

Table 1

Biographic information

Participant	Gender	Age	Teaching experience	School
HOD1	Female	39	18	School A
HOD2	Male	40	20	School B
HOD3	Female	50	25	School C
Educator1	Female	35	10	School A
Educator2	Male	35	12	School B
Educator3	Female	33	9	School C

Table 1 presents an overview of the demographic and professional characteristics of the individuals involved in the study. To ensure an equal representation of genders, three females and three males were selected. The data obtained offers a well-rounded perspective on the experiences of school violence. The diverse age range, spanning from early thirties to fifties, brings a mix of life experiences and career stages among participants, which can potentially influence their perceptions and responses to instances of school violence. Furthermore, the broad spectrum of teaching experience, ranging from nine to twenty-five years, fosters a rich exchange of insights and strategies for addressing school violence. Additionally, the participants come from three different schools labelled as School A, School B, and School C, showcasing the varied contexts in which they operate. This diversity provides opportunities to explore how factors such as school size, location, and community dynamics shape teachers' experiences and responses to school violence.

4.4. Instruments for data collection

To gather thorough and rich data, semi-structured interviews and document reviews were conducted. These methods provided a balance between flexibility and structure (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010), allowing the inclusion of predefined questions while also giving participants the space to share their perspectives and insights in depth. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed for a deeper dive into teachers' experiences of school violence, capturing details and fostering a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon within the specific context of rural high schools in the King Cetshwayo District.

To reduce potential research bias during data collection and analysis, implementation measures like peer debriefing and member checks were employed. According to Janesick (2007), peer debriefing entails having colleagues or experts review the research process and findings, offering critical insights that can identify potential biases or gaps, thus ensuring the study's validity. Member checks involve presenting the findings to the participants to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflect their experiences and perspectives (Thomas, 2017). This feedback ensures that the researcher's conclusions are aligned with the participants' realities, thereby increasing the authenticity and trustworthiness of the study. Both methods serve as triangulation techniques, used by the researchers in this study to minimize bias and strengthening the overall rigor of this qualitative study.

4.5. Validity and reliability tests

Ensuring the reliability and accuracy of the interview guide was crucial to maintain the credibility of the qualitative research findings. To achieve this, the researchers employed a validity approach to assess whether the interview questions effectively captured the intended concepts. This involved a meticulous content validation process where expert reviewers in education and qualitative research methodology carefully examined the questions for relevance, clarity, and appropriateness. The guide was refined based on their feedback to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. Additionally, reliability was addressed to ensure consistency and repeatability of the questions and their interpretation. This was achieved through a pilot study, where the clarity and flow of the interview process were tested with a separate group of participants not involved in the main study. Adjustments were made to the interview guide based on their feedback, enhancing its effectiveness in eliciting detailed and consistent responses.

4.6. Data analysis

Prior to data collection, necessary permissions were obtained from school authorities. This paved way for conducting the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted over three sessions, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. In each session, participants' consent was obtained for audio recording. Subsequently, the recorded responses were transcribed into written notes for analysis. Qualitative data obtained were subjected to thematic analysis. This method of thematic analysis focuses on identifying recurrent themes and patterns in participants' experiences and perspectives (Mpuangnan, 2023; Rule & John, 2011). In analysing the data, unique codes were assigned to each participant (e.g., HOD1-HOD3; Educ1-Educ3). These codes aided in identifying and categorizing data according to emergent themes, ensuring systematic analysis and presentation. Through this method, the researchers the explored the various levels and diverse viewpoints of the participants.

5. Findings

The data of this study were organized into three main sections: incidents of teachers facing verbal attacks and insults, instances of physical assault, bullying, and intimidation

directed towards teachers, and the intricate relationship between drugs, violence, drug dealers, and gangsterism.

5.1. Teachers as victims of verbal attacks and insults

The highlighted theme sheds light on situations where teachers faced verbal attacks and insults. In these instances, teachers revealed being targeted by intoxicated individuals and substance abusers while on school grounds. Additionally, they shared experiences of enduring regular verbal abuse from both students and members of the community. Additionally, participants expressed feeling exploited by their students, the very individuals entrusted to receive education from them. Consequently, these encounters left teachers feeling emotionally wounded and undermined in their confidence, ultimately impeding their ability to effectively engage in teaching and learning activities. This sentiment was articulated by EDUC 1.

> *Teachers who have suffered from school violence often experience feelings of hurt, victimization, and a loss of confidence due to the pain they carry. There are various forms of violence, some of which involve students using vulgar language towards teachers and showing a lack of respect. In my personal experience, students engaged in disruptive behaviour and sang songs directed toward me, falsely claiming that I was incapable of teaching them effectively.*

Although the South African Act No. 84 of 1996 stipulates comprehensive Code of Conduct policies to address various forms of learner misconduct, including verbal attacks and the use of vulgar language, instances of verbal assaults against teachers remain widespread in many rural schools within the district under investigation. Moreover, a significant portion of crimes in South Africa involve assailants armed with dangerous weapons such as knives, screwdrivers, guns, and alcoholic beverages. For example, a study conducted by UNICEF and the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (2015) revealed that 34.5% of secondary school learners and 3.1% of primary school learners were aware of fellow students arriving at school under the influence of illegal drugs and carrying dangerous weapons.

Sharing the same sentiment **HOD 1** expressed that *"When learners are under the influence of drugs, they often become aggressive and violent. This is because drugs can elevate violent behaviour. Learners who use drugs may bring dangerous weapons like knives to school or come to school while drunk. Unfortunately, teachers may become victims of such learners."*

During the document review phase, the researcher unearthed evidence indicating that certain learners had been implicated in incidents of name-calling, targeting both teachers and fellow students. For instance, while perusing the logbook, the researcher encountered entries documenting instances of suggestive storytelling and sexual name-calling directed at specific teachers and peers. One particularly notable incident, dated 17 February 2021, involved a female learner submitting her exercise book to a male educator containing nude photographs, suggesting attempts to initiate a sexual relationship. Furthermore, when participants were prompted to elaborate on their experiences of verbal attacks and insults, they recounted instances where they felt victimized by disgruntled youth, purportedly in retaliation for perceived instances of corporal punishment. Consequently, these verbal attacks appeared to be a response to the disciplinary actions taken by teachers, with some learners refusing to accept corporal punishment and instead reporting such incidents to their parents or members of the community.

> *HOD 2 recounted an incident where they entered a classroom and witnessed a teacher trying to discipline a student through corporal punishment. However, the student resisted and started shouting at the teacher.*

In addition, community members would often visit the school premises to confront and berate teachers for their disciplinary actions. This observation underscores the persistence of corporal punishment practices in certain communities, despite its abolition 26 years ago, particularly prevalent in rural areas (Stats SA, 2021). Moreover, interviews unveiled that partisan politics played a role in perpetuating violence against teachers. Certain members of the community were noted to incite learners to verbally assault teachers simply because these educators were affiliated with political parties other than the dominant one favoured by the majority in the community. This was revealed by **EDUC 2**:

> *It's clear that I am affiliated with a particular political party, and the members of the community are well aware of this. Unfortunately, they've chosen to use this knowledge against me, engaging in conflict and even enlisting learners to further their agendas.*

The assertion aligns with Mbanyele's (2022) perspective, which suggests that certain political parties continue to employ overtly violent rhetoric, often targeting perceived adversaries. Additionally, November et al. (2010, p. 791) argue that the lingering impact of

apartheid casts a profound shadow over the current education system, characterized by its "ferocious" legacy.

5.2. Teachers as victims of physical assault, bullying, and intimidation

HOD1 indicated that conflicts between learners and even among peers occur frequently within the school premises. *'As responsible educators, we cannot simply stand by and allow these situations to escalate into full-blown skirmishes. We are compelled to intervene and prevent any harm from coming to our students. It is unfortunate that sometimes, our efforts to maintain order can result in us being unfairly implicated as victims. Nonetheless, we must persist in our duty to promote a safe and conducive learning environment for all'.* The same sentiments were shared by **HOD 2** who stated that violence disturbs teaching and learning. *'Teaching during chaotic times can be challenging. The teacher must navigate through the crowd to address the issue at hand. Unfortunately, sometimes the learners involved in the disruption may redirect their aggression towards the teacher, putting them at risk of physical assault.'* In addition, **HOD 3** had to say this, *'A teacher left the school after being slapped by a female learner in front of other students, despite the school's code of conduct clearly stating that such behaviour is misconduct. The learner remained at the school while the teacher moved to another school.'* Additionally, EDUC 3's account, supported by the Head of Departments' views, paints a grim picture of the violent challenges teachers face in their professional lives. **EDUC 3** recounted an incident where, amidst a dispute between two boys, one lifted her out of her chair and carried her to safety. This act reflects the intimidation not only from students but also from the community, as described by **EDUC 2,** who was attacked by a group of community members, leading to their decision to leave the education system altogether. This theme highlights the disturbing trend where some learners turn schools into battlegrounds, bringing with them the conflicts and disputes of their communities. It is evident that teachers bear no responsibility for these external conflicts. Their work is unduly disrupted, making them unwitting victims of conflicts not of their making. Some participants recounted feeling intimidated by community members in the vicinity of the school, leading to decisions to resign from their positions. Consequently, the exodus of highly skilled and experienced educators due to security concerns exacerbates the persistent issue of illiteracy in South Africa (Nunan & Ntombela, 2021).

Another form of violence that surfaced in the study was bullying, including incidents of cyber-bullying. During the document review, the researcher encountered a disturbing case where learners clandestinely photographed a teacher while she was engaged in teaching, and subsequently circulated the image via the WhatsApp platform. This finding resonates with Rademeyer's (2008) observation that teachers may find themselves subjected to social media exposure while attempting to enforce school regulations and address disruptive behaviour. What was particularly troubling to the researcher was that, despite teachers' dismay at the prevalence of violence in schools, some had experienced physical assaults at the hands of both learners and community members, often in the presence of other students. Consequently, the pervasive nature and impact of violence against teachers have led to the recognition of a condition termed "maltreated teacher disorder," characterized by a constellation of stress responses such as anxiety, disrupted sleep patterns, depression, headaches, hypertension, and eating disorders (Skinner, 2019).

5.3. The complex interplay of drugs, violence, drug dealers, and gangsterism

The data analysis reveals a multifaceted interplay between youth violence, gangsterism, and substance abuse, creating a complex web of challenges. It became evident that learners who were addicted to drugs often engaged in violent behaviour and were more susceptible to involvement in gang activities, which frequently entail violence. Unfortunately, teachers found themselves as the primary targets in these situations. Consequently, the narratives shared by the participants shed light on the persistence of political violence and tribal factionalism within the surveyed communities, with detrimental effects on education. **HOD 1** said that because of the fighting between tribes or towns within the same tribe (izigodi), students brought assegai, knives, and other weapons to school. The motives for doing so are supposed to protect oneself from adversaries belonging to another tribe or village.

The presence of conflicts and tension within the school environment leads to instability, fostering a sense of ungovernability among learners. In such unstable conditions, opportunistic individuals may exploit the situation for personal gain. Consequently, several participants highlighted that teachers often fall victim to the actions of youth and community members driven by jealousy, personal grudges, and hidden motives. Additionally, community troublemakers exacerbate issues by using minor grievances as a pretext, often hiding behind political affiliations.

HOD 2 expressed concerns about community dissatisfaction with the principal, citing the formation of a group called the ANC Youth League, which presented a memorandum to the district. Following this, there was a rise in violent behavior among learners.

In alignment with these sentiments, **EDUC 1** noted the involvement of certain learners in gang activities, bringing dangerous weapons like guns, knives, as well as drugs and alcohol to the school. She emphasized the challenge of dealing with these learners, who exhibit a sense of entitlement and become uncontrollable. **EDUC 2** echoed similar concerns, mentioning the use of schools as trading spots by drug dealers, with one instance involving a girl selling dagga. Although confronted, she refused to disclose the dealer's identity.

From the conversations with the participants, it is clear that a supportive environment for successful teaching and learning cannot flourish amid such unrest. This statement is consistent with Pahad's (2012) viewpoint, suggesting that socio-political changes in South Africa, alongside factors like poverty, limited resources, and the prevalence of illicit substances in communities, create societal challenges that contribute to escalating levels of school violence. Moreover, Duma (2013) argues that problems such as unemployment, overcrowding, frequent population shifts, and cultural diversity also play significant roles in fostering violence within schools.

This study is rooted in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which emphasizes that school violence does not stem from single causes but rather emerges from a complex interplay of different influences (Krug et al., 2002). Through the study, participants shared their experiences of various forms of victimization, highlighting the intricate nature of school violence. It's evident from this discussion that community factors significantly contribute to the escalation of violence, as affirmed by Burton (2008), who points out the presence of weapons and drugs in South African communities, which in turn impact schools. Leoschut and Burton (2013) further argue that school violence reflects broader societal violence. Therefore, the ecological theory offers a robust framework for comprehending the complexity and origins of school violence, considering its multifaceted nature and the interaction of different factors.

6. Discussion

The widespread presence of violence within schools across South Africa presents significant challenges for teachers, impacting their well-being and professional effectiveness.

Research by Le Mottee and Kelly (2017) and Baruth and Mokoena (2016) sheds light on the emotional toll experienced by teachers subjected to various forms of mistreatment, such as verbal abuse and disrespect from students. This mistreatment often leaves educators feeling hurt, victimized, and lacking in confidence, as both personal stories and empirical studies attest. Moreover, systemic issues like resource constraints and a lack of administrative support worsen the prevalence of school violence in educational settings, as highlighted by Pahad and Graham (2012). These structural barriers leave educators feeling ill-prepared and unsupported in effectively managing violent incidents, amplifying the difficulties they encounter in their professional roles.

Consequently, there is an urgent need for comprehensive violence prevention strategies addressing the root causes of school violence while fostering positive school cultures and community involvement. In response, investing in teacher training programs emerges as a crucial intervention to equip educators with the necessary skills and resources to tackle violence effectively. Scholars like Duma (2013) advocate for collaborative efforts between policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders to implement evidence-based strategies empowering teachers and cultivating supportive school environments. By prioritizing educators' well-being and fostering cultures of respect and tolerance within educational institutions, South Africa can strive to mitigate the adverse effects of school violence and promote positive outcomes for all students and educators alike.

Furthermore, the data provide poignant insights into the pervasive challenges of school violence faced by teachers in South Africa. Participants acknowledged frequent conflicts among learners, emphasizing the crucial role educators play in maintaining order within schools. However, they also highlighted the unfortunate reality of educators being unfairly implicated as victims despite their efforts to intervene. This complexity in managing school violence effectively is underscored by Ugur (2016). One distressing account shared by participants involved a teacher leaving following a physical assault by a student, highlighting the urgent need for effective mechanisms to address and prevent violence within educational settings. The failure to enforce disciplinary measures in line with the school's code of conduct exacerbates the prevalence of violence within schools. Additionally, participants shared experiences of being physically lifted by students during disputes, illustrating the vulnerability of educators to physical aggression.

The data about teachers as victims of physical assault, bullying, and intimidation revealed that teachers were often attacked by community members, shedding light on the broader societal challenges educators face in their professional lives. These findings align with Qwabe et al. (2022), who found that verbal abuse and bullying are prevalent forms of school violence in selected public high schools in KwaZulu-Natal, impacting both teachers and students. This incident reflects the external pressures and risks associated with being an educator, emphasizing the urgent need for community engagement and support in addressing school violence, as noted by Sambo and Govender (2023). Collectively, these narratives paint a stark picture of the violent nature of educators' professional lives in South Africa and shows the need to prioritize teachers' safety and well-being. By implementing evidence-based interventions and fostering collaborative efforts among policymakers, school administrators, educators, and community stakeholders, South Africa can work towards creating safer and more supportive learning environments for all.

Concerning the complex interplay of drugs, violence, drug dealers, and gangsterism, the data indicated that learners bring dangerous weapons like guns and knives to school, alongside the prevalent issue of drug and alcohol abuse. Similar findings were reported by researchers like Chetty (2015) and Maphalala and Mabunda (2014), highlighting the pervasive nature of school violence affecting teachers in South Africa. These results echo the seriousness of the situation and its profound impact on the safety and well-being of both students and educators. Such incidents pose direct threats to physical safety and create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, hindering teachers' ability to maintain order and discipline effectively. Additionally, participants described drug dealers exploiting schools as trading grounds, highlighting the infiltration of criminal activities into educational settings, which complicates efforts to establish safe learning environments.

Despite disciplinary measures being taken, Mohasoa and Mokoena (2017) emphasized that students' reluctance to disclose information about drug dealers reflects a pervasive culture of fear and intimidation, which undermines effective intervention strategies. These narratives collectively emphasize the urgent need for comprehensive approaches addressing the root causes of such issues and promoting collaboration among educators, law enforcement agencies, community stakeholders, and policymakers. Studies such as Reddy et al. (2019) and Ntuli et al. (2020) agree that prioritizing the safety and well-being of students and educators

and implementing evidence-based interventions, South Africa can strive to foster safer and more supportive learning environments for all.

Given the extent of challenges in school violence, it is essential for school leadership to prioritize the development of leadership capacity within the school management team as the initial step. They can offer specialized training and support programs for teachers to equip them with conflict resolution skills to managing violent incidents. It is recommended to revisit and update school policies on violence management to effectively address school violence; ensuring buy-in from all stakeholders in the formulation of the code of conduct for learners. Similarly, they need to encourage ongoing research and evaluation to assess the impact of interventions aimed at curbing school violence.

7. Conclusion

This study explores the personal encounters of teachers with school violence. It reveals that teachers face mistreatment from both students and community members. In addition, teachers emerge as frontline responders to violent incidents, often grappling with feelings of inadequacy in managing such situations effectively. In rural school settings, obstacles like limited resources and inadequate administrative support heighten the prevalence of violence. These findings stress the importance of holistic approaches to violence prevention, blending reactive interventions with proactive strategies to foster positive school environments and community involvement. The research underscores the importance of empowering teachers through comprehensive training programs designed to equip them with the skills and resources needed to effectively address violence. By collaborating, policymakers and stakeholders can promote supportive school climates and community cohesion, ultimately improving the well-being of both students and educators.

This study is centered on rural high schools within a particular district, which may limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other settings, such as urban or peri-urban environments. Similarly, the unique socio-economic, cultural, and geographical characteristics of rural areas may impact the nature and frequency of school violence in distinct ways when compared to urban contexts, emphasizing the need to avoid making sweeping generalizations.

Ethical Approval Information

Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa has granted approval for this study on 13 April 2015 (Ref. No. HSS/0314/015M).

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