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# Teachers' experiences of violence in South African schools: A Gauteng case study

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## Abstract

*South Africa is recognised as one of the most violent countries across the globe. School violence against teachers is a common phenomenon at most schools. This ongoing crisis has had a negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning. Schools are no longer a safe environment for teachers. Teachers are exposed to passive and active violence, causing physical and psychological harm. This paper focuses on violence against teachers and its effect on their well-being. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of teachers who experienced violence at their schools and received no support from school leaders. This study was conducted in one district in the Gauteng Province in South Africa. The author used the Invitational Learning Theory and National School Safety Framework as theoretical lenses, since these frameworks envisaged ensuring that all schools are safe, conducive learning environments. The findings revealed that at least two in every ten teachers experienced some form of violence. The acts of violence were either active or passive; for example, learners threw books at teachers, physically attacked them, swore at teachers, displayed rude behaviour, showed arrogance, and blackmailed teachers. The study recommends that the Department of Education employ rigorous and stricter measures to ensure the safety of all teachers. School leaders should engage with community forums and police services to support them in curbing violent behaviour and protect teachers. Stricter disciplinary actions should be taken against perpetrators of violence.*

**Keywords:** *active and passive violence; schools, teachers, unsafe environment, violence*

## 1. Introduction

The current crisis of violence against teachers in South African schools has become a major concern among school principals, teachers, unions and the Department of Education (DBE) (South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU, 2018). Many teachers struggle to cope in schools due to the verbal, physical, psychological and emotional violence they experience (Baxen, 2021). The World Health Organisation (2002) defines violence as an individual's intent to cause hurt or harm to another person



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through passive, active, physical action or emotional actions. This behaviour results in the likelihood of injury, psychological harm, deprivation, prevention to perform one's function, or death (Enyinnaya, 2015).

The researcher agrees that school violence can be described as any form of physical attack on teachers, which could happen on their way to school, on school premises, or at school events. According to Ncontsa and Shumba (2013), school violence is a public health problem and could be physical attacks, bullying, brawls, or even shooting. Baxen (2021) found that violence against teachers has led to them becoming disillusioned, anxious, depressed, stressed and hostile towards the profession. Research by the Human Rights Commission (2006) found that school violence is rapidly escalating each year, despite the Department of Basic Education (DBE) attempting to put measures in place to curb the violence. According to Pillay and Ragpot (2010), the DBE reported 34 cases of school violence in the province.

The National School Violence Study (NSVS) report for 2012, undertaken by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) statistics, revealed that the Western Cape Province had the highest rate of school violence (28,7%), followed by Limpopo (25,2%) and the Free State (13,2%) (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). For this reason, Mncube and Harber (2013) state that the scourge of violence in South African schools is a significant concern. They found that the media and other social platforms report a high rate of school violence. According to Burton and Leoschut (2013) the National School Violence study of 2014 indicated that most teachers experience physical, sexual, and gang-related violence, which have an impact on their quality of teaching and learning.

This study is underpinned by the Invitational Education Theory by Purkey and Novak (1984) and the National School Safety Framework as a theoretical lens (DBE, 2016). These frameworks envisage ensuring schools are safe and conducive environments for teachers, learners and non-teaching staff. According to Chetty (2018), research conducted during 2014-2018 by the Human Sciences Research Council with more than 20 000 teachers at 1 380 schools found that 20% of teachers agreed that schools have become violent environments where their safety is not guaranteed. This paper aimed to explore the lived experiences of teachers who experienced violence at their schools in a district in the Gauteng Province. The researcher asked the following questions,

- What forms of violence do teachers experience in their schools?
- What are the causes of violent behaviours?
- What are the effects of these behaviours on teachers' well-being?

## 2. Literature review

In South Africa, violence against schoolteachers is a significant crisis in all provinces. Mncube and Harber (2013) found that teachers in South African schools are subjected to severe physical and psychological violence. The National School Violence Study(NSVS), which was conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) in 2012, revealed that the Western Cape had the highest rate of school violence (28%), followed by Limpopo (25,2%) and the Free State (13,2%) (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). Nieuwenhuis (2016) states that by June 2018, there had been more than 900 incidents of violence against teachers in the Limpopo Province. Ndlovu (2023) reported that schools in Gauteng have been under siege for the last five years, with 26 incidents of gangsterism and 6 cases of learner-on-teacher

violence In 2011, a female teacher in Soweto was fatally stabbed by a learner. According to Grobler (2019), a teacher at the Albertina Sisulu Special School in Soweto was chased around the school by a learner. The learner threw stones at the teacher, who caused them to suffer minor injuries.

Gous (2018) states that in the North-West Province, on 13 September 2018, a teacher was stabbed to death after reprimanding a learner. Tshabalala (2023) reports that in January 2022, a teacher in Tembisa, Gauteng, was gunned down on the school premises by an unknown assailant. In April of the same year, he reported that 33 teachers were attacked in the Western Cape between 2016 and 2022. He further stated that at least six violent incidents had already been reported in barely two months of the 2023 academic year. The safety of teachers is becoming a serious concern in the country.

Violence against teachers is not unique to South Africa. In his report, Nieuwenhuis (2016) states that a teacher in New Jersey, USA, was attacked by a student at school and she had to be compensated. Burke (2022) states that school-based violence has spiked significantly in the USA in the 2021–2022 school year. In their research, Lokmić, Opić and Billić (2013) found that 80% of teachers reported experiencing some form of violence; 94% of the teachers reported being insulted by students; 44% experienced a combination of physical and emotional attacks; and 50% experienced theft or having their property being damaged. Similar increases were reported in Turkey, Australia, Germany, Japan, Sweden and China. A study by Mehmet (2012) in Turkey found that 24,1% of teachers experienced emotional violence; 14,7% verbal violence; and 6,3% physical violence. William (2009, in Chetty, 2021) states that in England, about 14 children aged five were caught pushing and shoving their teacher, thus resulting in their suspension. In the UK, violence against teachers, whereby teachers experienced severe physical harm and mental anguish, has risen to more than 50%. Therefore, it can be argued that violence against teachers is a global phenomenon.

Violence against teachers can take different forms, from passive to active or physical violence. Burton and Leoschut (2013) state that passive violence includes inappropriate speech, being disrespectful, displaying disrespectful behaviour, raising one's voice in frustration or anger and making a rude gesture towards an individual. Other examples of passive violence, according to Baxen (2021) and Espelage *et al.* (2013), include intimidation, malicious insults, acts of racism, racial profiling, verbal bullying, making threats, mocking, clicking tongues, rude racial expressions and foul body language. Most South African teachers have experienced at least two or more forms of violence during their teaching career (Singh & Steyn, 2014). In contrast to passive violence, active or physical violence, according to UNESCO (2017: 14), is "the manifestation of physical hostility to injure someone and it includes physical bullying". The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) defines physical violence as an intentional, repeated or once-off rough infliction of pain and/or body injuries by another person, resulting in the potential risk of physical harm and consequences that may or may not be visible.

Multiple factors cause school violence against teachers and for different reasons. Joyce (2013) states that some of the reasons why teachers are targeted at school is because learners believe that teachers mistreat them. They (the learners) felt that teachers made unrealistic demands and expectations and provoked them to become violent. Joyce also found that most violent episodes against teachers were spontaneous or emotional responses to aggravation, frustration, unfair treatment, or favouritism.

The South African Council for Educators (SACE, 2018) believes that school violence is not isolated, but is caused by socioeconomic and inherent behavioural problems. This concurs with Lokmić *et al.* (2013), who state that the main reasons for students' violent behaviour are family influence, socioeconomic conditions, and conflict. Espelage *et al.* (2013) also agree that student violence can be associated with domestic and community factors. Burton and Leoschut (2013) state that behaviour within the home and community environment influences students' behaviour in the school environment, especially concerning the morals and values of other individuals.

School violence has increased stress levels among teachers. Santos and Tin (2018) found that due to constant violence, teachers have become highly stressed, depressed, and emotionally unstable, and are frequently absent from school. This has affected teaching and learning negatively. Bester and Du Plessis (2010) state that teachers often resign from the education system due to the emotional impact learners' violent behaviour had on them. They become frustrated with the system due to a lack of support from their school leaders and parents. Teachers feel vulnerable and fear working in unsafe school environments without guaranteed safety.

Espelage *et al.* (2013) state that most teachers feel vulnerable because their personal information and domicile are known to learners. They found that learners threaten teachers by indicating they would visit teachers' homes. Traumatized teachers are frustrated, lack confidence, and experience low morale and apathy towards teaching and learning because of their stressful working conditions and little support from their education departments (Xaba, 2014). Educational environments are places of learning and development, where values and morals are instilled among learners and students to become responsible adults. These environments should be safe and inviting (Venketsamy, 2023). Prinsloo (2005: 5, in Chetty, 2021) defines a safe school as

a school that is free of danger and where possible harm is absent, a place where educators, non-educators, and learners may work, teach and learn without fear, ridicule, intimidation, harassment, humiliation or violence. Schools should be a safe environment that encourages effective teaching and learning.

However, according to Lokmić (2013), Mncube and Harber (2013) and Tshabalala (2023), most schools are unsafe environments where teachers are often threatened with passive or active physical violence, which causes undue stress, depression, anxiety, emotional strife and apathy towards the teaching profession. Since school violence is a grave concern and teachers work in unsafe environments, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) recommends that teachers be paid a danger allowance similar to the police (Chetty, 2021). Although the DBE is trying to ensure school safety for all its teachers, violence is still perpetuated in schools and teachers are receiving no support. In Gauteng, Pijoo (2020) states that MEC of Education at the time, Panyaza Lesufi, envisaged including undercover police and school professionals to assist in rehabilitating violent pupils. This came after the Gauteng Department of Education found that at least 13 learners in the province were facing criminal charges (News24, 2019).

### 3. Theoretical framework

In this study, the researcher used the Invitational Education Theory (IET) developed by Purkey and Novak (1984) and the South African National School Safety Framework (NSSF) of the Department of Basic Education [DBE] (2016). Both frameworks emphasise and promote the importance of creating a safe and conducive teaching and learning environment. Purkey and Novak identified five main domains for a safe and conducive learning environment: People, Places, Policies, Programmes and Processes. These authors agree that the five basic assumptions, also known as the 5 Powerful Ps (5Ps), are essential in understanding invitational theory in creating a safe and non-threatening environment. Purkey and Novak (1984) and Purkey and Schmidt (1990) agree that in any organisation or environment:

- people are able, valuable and responsible and should be treated accordingly, their dignity should be respected, and their safety is of paramount importance;
- education should be a collaborative, cooperative activity between the relevant stakeholders (including parents, caregivers, funders, school governing bodies, student representative council and funders); the process is the product in the making, which states that policies and guidelines are not cast in stone and, therefore, should be amended as the situation arises;
- people possess untapped potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavour; and
- this potential can be realised by places, policies, programmes and processes specifically designed to invite development and by people who intentionally invite themselves and others, personally and professionally.

Similarly, the NSSF also focuses on the school environment, ensuring all stakeholders are safe and function optimally. As a result of school violence, the DBE aims through this framework to “create a safe, violence and threat-free, supportive learning environment for learners, educators, principals, school governing bodies and administration” (DBE, 2016: 3). Mubita (2021) agrees with Purkey and Novak (1984) and the DBE (2016) that educational environments must be safe and secure spaces for teachers. He argues that managing school safety and security is crucial to avoid violence by creating an environment that promotes physical, emotional and social well-being. The researcher believes there is a need for continuous safety evaluation due to frequent violence against teachers.

The violence against teachers has a negative impact on their quality of teaching and commitment towards the profession, influencing the teacher-learner relationship structure (De Cordova *et al.*, 2019). The DBE (2016) and SADTU (in Chetty, 2021) agree that teachers are more willing to commit to their work and teach with passion and enthusiasm when they work in a safe and conducive environment. The researcher agrees that the school (place) should be an inviting environment where teachers (people) are safe and respected to perform their functions according to the curriculum (policies). Should teachers experience any form of violence, then the researcher opines that policies and procedures should be implemented against perpetrators.

The researcher concurs with Purkey and Novak (1984) that every school should have policies and procedures to manage violence against any teacher within the school environment. The DBE believes that the community is responsible for school safety and preventing violence against teachers (DBE, 2016). Children emulate their parents' behaviours and often model

their behaviours within the school environment with their peers and teachers (Lokmić *et al.*, 2013). The NSSF aims to assist schools in understanding and identifying security and threatening issues that are prevalent within their environment.

For this reason, the previous MEC of Gauteng Education, Panyaza Lesufi, has collaborated with the police departments to support them by employing undercover police officers and on-the-spot drug checks in schools. The DBE (2016) envisages curbing violence against teachers through the NSSF by encouraging teachers, school leaders and other stakeholders to report incidents of violence to the relevant authorities. To ensure school safety, both the NSSF and IET frameworks promote a school environment that is safe and conducive to teaching and learning so that all stakeholders (teachers and learners) feel non-threatened within the learning space.

#### 4. Research methodology

The researcher used a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm for this study. He explored the lived experiences of the participants who experienced violence at schools. The interpretivist paradigm allows researchers to probe for answers and insights by studying the situation of the participants (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Maree (2020) describes this research approach as research that elicits findings that are not statistically derived by any quantification.

A descriptive case study was used because it focused on participants' experiences. The researcher used the snowball sampling technique to identify participants who experienced violence. Snowball sampling allowed the researcher to reach populations (participants) that are difficult to sample. Teachers were unwilling to participate in the study due to personal reasons.

A case-study design was used because it is "an intensive study about a person, a group of people or unit" (Gustafsson, 2017: 2). The sample in this study included six participants from four primary schools in the Gauteng area. Five females and one male participant from the four schools consented to participate in this study. The researcher chose them because he envisaged that they would contribute appropriately to answering the research questions with valuable information about their experiences of violence in schools. All the participants taught intermediate (Grades 4-6) and senior phase (Grade 7) classes at the primary schools. The inclusion criteria were specific – participants had to have experienced either passive or active violence, taught at a public school and reported the incident to the school management team. Participants who did not meet the criteria were not allowed to participate in the study.

**Table 1:** Profile of participants

Participant	Gender	School	Age	Post level	Years' experience
P1	Female	A	30	1	9
P2	Female	A	32	1	10
P3	Female	B	29	1	7
P4	Female	C	28	1	7
P5	Male	D	27	1	5

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule. The researcher conducted individual face-to-face interviews with each of the participants. All participants were contacted telephonically, and the researcher and the participant agreed on the meeting time and venue. Interviews were conducted outside their school environment, ensuring participants' safety

and anonymity. Furthermore, the interview in a neutral, non-threatening environment allowed participants to discuss their experiences freely. Creswell's (2014) six steps in data analysis were used to analyse the data. The data were transcribed and analysed by organising and sectioning responses into units, synthesising them, identifying patterns, and ascertaining which data were essential and needed to be shared.

Permission for the study was granted by the University of Pretoria's Ethics Committee (EDU109/20) and the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE). Each participant received and signed the written informed consent form. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). To ensure the anonymity and protection of the participants, codes (P1 to P5) were used in the reporting phase of this study (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

## 5. Results

The data analysis is presented below. Verbatim quotes are provided in italics. The researcher asked participants to share their experiences of violence to elicit their responses.

### 5.1 Teachers' experiences of passive and active violence

The findings revealed that all participants, P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5, experienced passive and active violence. P1, P3 and P4 mentioned that the learners in their classes were often very rude, disruptive and arrogant towards them. They found that their learners enjoyed 'clicking their tongues' or 'showing no interest in what they say'. They also complained that some learners spoke in an aggressive tone.

According to P4,

*In my class, the learners are constantly throwing small paper balls or berries at me when my back is turned. When asked who threw the ball, they laugh at me.*

P5 shared a different experience:

*In my class, especially, the boys stand up and want to fight with me. They become so angry in my class that they 'slam' their books on my table and sometimes throw them at me. Their aggressive body language and cynical laughter just make me so angry, stressed, anxious and exhausted.*

All participants agreed that violence was prevalent at their schools. According to P5, what was surprising was that these are all primary school learners. One learner told him (P5) that he would video him and post the video on social media. P2 also had a similar experience:

*She mentioned that the girls in her class were more violent and arrogant towards her. She believes that they mistreat her because she is a female teacher. She reported the incident to her school principal, but there was no intervention. The participant believes the learner 'got away' with her passive violent threats.*

According to P3, a male learner in her class told his peers he knew where the teacher lived and would ask his friends to visit her. This teacher indicated that she was petrified when she heard this from the learners. P3 also mentioned that a learner threw her books at her because she asked the learner to stop 'being funny' in the class during teaching time. She reported the incident to her school management team and received little support. The head of the department spoke to the learner, and he was sent back to class.

## 5.2 Parents' violent behaviours towards teachers

Learners are not the only ones who are disrespectful towards teachers. Parents and caregivers are guilty of using passive aggression against teachers. P1 shared her nasty experience with a parent of a learner in her class:

*I was on ground duty. The parent walked towards me and she started shouting abuse, using vulgar words at me. She said I had no right to ask her child to wear her proper physical education clothes. The parent was nasty and threatened to beat me up if I ever reprimanded her daughter about the school uniform.*

All the participants, P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5, indicated that at some point in their teaching careers, they were verbally abused, physically harmed, shoved, pushed, and even threatened with gangsterism.

P1 said,

*Learners were so brave as to indicate to their peers that they knew their teachers' addresses and that they would make a visit. Learners are fully aware that teachers have no right to discipline them. They (learners) have more rights in school than teachers.*

To probe further, the researcher asked the participants what they believed were the causes of violent behaviours. According to P5, he believed that

*the cause of violent behaviours is due to the lack of discipline and respect from the home. Parents are responsible for their children's behaviour and should ensure that they behave and follow the school's code of conduct.*

P1 and P2 responded to this question by stating that various factors contribute to school violence. To these participants, the socioeconomic environment where they come from has a significant impact on learners' behaviour. These participants also mentioned that the DBE graded their school as quintile one, which indicates that learners come from impoverished and poverty-stricken communities where violence and crime are rife. The conditions in which these learners live are 'rough'. P1 also stated that she noted that there is a high rate of drug peddling and gangsterism in her community. This behaviour is perceived, and children tend to model it in school. P3 mentioned that the cause of aggressive behaviour is teachers trying to discipline learners. She said,

*When I try to discipline the learners in my class, they become very belligerent towards me. The girls do not like to be told how to dress or have their hair done. They accuse me of being unfair to them.*

P4 said that in her class she

*noticed that the learners often accused her of favouritism. She has often informed her learners that everyone is treated equally and fairly in class. Some of the girls in my class do not believe her (P4), and she often sees emotional responses from learners, for example, screaming and clicking their tongues.*

To P3,

*The home and community environment where these children grow up influences their behaviour in school. Most parents work, and some of their children live with their grandparents and relatives. Discipline and figures of authority are missing in these children's lives. I believe that this could be a reason why they behave so arrogantly towards teachers.*

All female participants, P1, P2, P3, and P4, indicated that these children exhibit aggressive behaviour because they do not want to be disciplined or follow the school's rules. Furthermore, P2 mentioned that learners misbehave because they feel that the teacher has too many "high expectations" of them. She also stated that she told her learners that she was teaching from the departmental policy documents.

### 5.3 Effects of violence on teachers' well-being

Various sources of literature highlight that school violence has a negative impact on the well-being of teachers. The researcher asked the participants, "How did these behaviours affect your well-being?" According to P3,

*I am stressed out daily. I don't like coming to school. I have all these negative feelings about teaching and learning. I thought I would enjoy working with children, but these days, the children are so badly behaved that I regret my choice of work. Every day, I feel anxious about school. This has affected my lesson planning. I have no interest because these children are not interested in learning. They want to make my life miserable, and they are delighted. I get no support from the school or the department. The school code of conduct for learners does not work anymore.*

P5 shared similar sentiments:

*Despite being a male teacher in this Grade 7 class, I fear daily. This has caused undue stress on my family and me. I feel traumatised by these young boys and girls in my class. I don't know when they are going to post some inappropriate video of me. I have lost all confidence in the teaching profession, and my confidence and morale levels are so low. Going to school each day is a 'pain' for me. Sadly, this is the only job I am qualified for, and I have commitments. Therefore, I have to go to work.*

P1 mentioned that

*[t]he school has affected me emotionally and psychologically. The fact that these children can become physically violent, I am constantly afraid in my class. I am no longer in charge of the class. It seems like the children are in control of me. This has affected me emotionally, and I now suffer from depression. I have also seen a psychologist for help due to stress. Daily I get a headache or tummy ache just thinking about going to school. It is such an unpleasant environment to be in.*

P4 mentioned that despite being stressed and frustrated about the school, she approached her head of department and the principal for support. According to her (P4), they told her that they would call a meeting with the children's parents. This has not yet happened since she (P4) still experienced physical and verbal attacks. This participant also mentioned that since she lives in the community, she does not go to the shopping centre or drive around in the afternoons. She is so afraid that she will 'bump' into the learners and they could become violent towards her. She has become a 'social recluse' in her community.

## 6. Discussion

Several authors agree that violence against teachers is a scourge in our schools. This phenomenon prevails across the global north to south, and Lokmić *et al.* (2013) agree that violence against teachers is not uncommon globally.

This study revealed that all the participants, P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5, experienced some form of violence during their teaching career. The findings show that participants experience passive and active or physical violence. This was revealed in the responses from P1, P2,

P3, P4 and P5, where they provided examples of violence against them, which included being shoved, books thrown at them, inappropriate body language (middle finger), small balls of paper thrown at them, aggressive tone of voice, using vulgar words and clicking of tongues. This phenomenon is not unique to South African schools, as Holt and Birchall (2022) cite a recent survey by NASUWT (2021), which found that 6% of UK-based teachers had experienced physical violence from students. They also highlighted that 10% had experienced threats of physical violence and 38% had experienced verbal abuse. In South Africa, the NSVS of 2012 found that the Western Cape Province had the highest rate of school violence against teachers (28,7%). The second was Limpopo (25,2%), followed by the Free State with 13,2% (Burton & Leoschut, 2013).

In this study, P5 indicated a lack of discipline at home and therefore believes that students display violent behaviours towards others. Lokmić *et al.* (2013) found that the perpetrators of violence against teachers include students, parents and colleagues, which concurs with P1's experience. Singh and Steyn (2014) found that learners who endure mistreatment and abuse at home tend to display aggressive behaviour towards others, especially people of authority (teachers). This view resonates with that of Lokmić *et al.* (2013), who state that parenting styles and attitudes about teachers influence children's behaviours. When parents are disrespectful towards a teacher, children often model this behaviour. This was evident in P1's response, which indicated that a parent screamed at her and used vulgar words in the presence of her learners on the school grounds, and the learners laughed at the teacher.

McCain (2022) also found that two Northern Cape learners and parents assaulted a teacher who was refereeing a rugby game at a high school. Spectators and players were unhappy with the way the teacher refereed the match. SADTU (2018) states that these incidents and many others place teachers at risk of verbal and physical abuse. This incident shows that parents do not set good examples for their children – they (parents) show no respect for their children's teachers. Lokmić *et al.* (2013), citing Johnson (2008), show that 57,2% of secondary school teachers experience verbal abuse and 2,5% physical violence by parents. These incidents demotivate, stress, cause anxiety and apathy, and cause psychological and emotional harm to teachers (P1, P2, P3, P4 & P5).

According to the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of 1996 (RSA, 1996), every person has the right to be free from all forms of violence. The school environment is an important teaching and learning space. Teachers spend much time at school; therefore, these spaces should be neither threatening nor risky. Arslan (2018) and the participants in this study agree that a safe school is a place where teachers are free to teach in a non-threatening and psychologically safe environment. The DBE (2016) also concurs that a healthy education environment promotes the positive well-being of teachers. A safe and conducive learning environment is the responsibility of all stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers, learners, parents and non-teaching staff. Jenson (2008, cited in Clapper, 2010) states that an unsafe learning environment places undue stress on the individual and teaching and learning are affected negatively. In an unsafe environment, teachers are constantly anxious, need to protect themselves and suffer psychologically and emotionally.

The findings in this study reveal that P1 and P4 suffered constant stress and anxiety while trying to teach. Mncube and Harber (2013) agree that most South African school environments are unsafe. Chetty (2021) and Tshabalala (2023) concur that teachers are often threatened with passive or active physical violence, which causes emotional and psychological harm.

They are unable to perform their duties optimally. It is evident from P3's response that she has a negative feeling towards teaching, and feels anxious daily, which affect her lesson planning, and she has no interest in attending school.

Purkey and Novak (1984) believe a safe and conducive invitational teaching and learning environment can be created using the Powerful 5Ps. The people in the environment (school leaders, parents and community) should become involved in ensuring that schools are non-threatening learning spaces. School leaders should ensure that their teachers are always protected. However, the findings of this study reveal that, despite P4 informing her head of the department of the violence and abuse she was experiencing, there had been no intervention.

The NSSF promotes school safety; however, little support has been offered to teachers. This is evident in P2's claim that she reported to the principal that she was being threatened by a learner in her class, and there was no intervention. The learner was not disciplined, nor were the parents called to discuss the issue. The school management team has to ensure teachers' safety (DBE, 2016). If the system is unsafe, it can affect the quality of teaching and learning. Therefore, Purkey and Novak (1984) maintain that it is the responsibility of the education system to ensure that the teaching environment is free from risk, intimidation, harm, hurt, violence or abuse, with relevant policies and procedures in place.

UNICEF (2020) views school leaders and teachers as essential to maintaining appropriate behaviours. A safe system within the school environment can easily be spoilt by unsafe behaviour of people working within it. If school leaders do not put safety measures in place, there is a risk of an unsafe environment.

Since teachers work in an unsafe environment, relevant policies and procedures must be implemented. For example, if learners break the school code of conduct, parents and learners should be responsible and accountable. Through the implementation of the NSSF, the DBE envisages creating a safe, non-violent and threat-free, supportive teaching and learning environment. Despite the DBE's intentions and policy development, apathy still exists among teachers. This is evident in P3's response that she is not protected and there are no disciplinary actions for learners to break the school's code of conduct.

All the participants indicated that violence in their district had reached a significant level. There is a need for immediate intervention to curb violence against teachers. Schools should be places of learning where it is safe to carry out their functions.

## 7. Recommendations

Irrespective of the kinds of violence teachers experience, it has a negative impact on teachers' well-being, self-confidence, and self-esteem, thus affecting their quality of teaching. To ensure school environments are safe and conducive to teaching, the researcher recommends:

- School leaders and management become consciously involved in teachers' experiences. They should be supported through appropriate interventions such as meeting with the perpetrator's parents and enforcing disciplinary measures.
- The DBE should provide support through training and development, psychological services, social workers, or counsellors who can help teachers cope with or manage school violence.
- Stricter school policies should always be maintained so that learners and parents can become responsible and accountable for their actions.

- Security measures should be in place at all schools whereby learners are screened before they enter the class. CCTV cameras should be installed in classrooms so the school management can see what is happening in classes.
- The school governing body should engage with parents to become involved in creating safe schools. Parents can volunteer to serve as 'buddies' to teachers experiencing classroom disruptions, violence, and disruptions to teaching and learning.

Through all subjects, but especially in the Life-Skills/Life Orientation, learners should be taught acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in the school and home environments. All schools should emphasise the principle of uBuntu (respect) in all their lessons.

## 8. Conclusion

Violence against teachers is a significant school problem that is not widely discussed. Most acts of violence against teachers are reported via various media platforms. The findings in this study show that all teachers interviewed experienced some form of passive or active physical violence.

The study found that students dislike being disciplined or following school rules. There are no consequences for their actions, so teachers feel apathetic toward the education system, become anxious, highly stressed, and suffer psychologically and emotionally.

This study draws attention to the stressful conditions in which teachers work and what they must endure daily. The issues teachers face should not be neglected; therefore, research on this topic should continue and the public should be made aware of the kinds of violence teachers experience.

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