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Violence in rural schools in South Africa: Perceptions and experiences of school principals and school governing bodies

Abstract

Violence, crime, and abuse against learners present a grave picture of problems in South African schools and are on the increase, as substantiated in articles, daily newspapers and news bulletins. The problem of violence is a complex one, and has been elevated to a national concern. The study was based on the perceptions and experiences of school principals and school governing bodies (SGB). Semi-structured interviews and observations were used to collect data. The study revealed that the unprofessional conduct of teachers, teacher absenteeism, a weak criminal justice system, dysfunctional family structures, absence of school leadership, and a precarious school environment all contribute to violence. The study also produced evidence of unrealistic expectations of teachers who do not take the individual needs of learners into account. Although schools craft learner codes of conduct to deal with learner discipline, it seems that at most schools, the school management is unable to implement these codes of conduct effectively. Poorly managed schools are likely to experience more violence. This qualitative study was conducted at South African rural schools to obtain insights into the prevalence of violence in schools, and the management thereof. Using purposeful sampling we explored the perceptions and experiences of principals and school governing bodies (SGBs). Semi-structured interviews and observations were used to collect data, and these were analysed using Tech's method of coding. The article recommends the enhancement of management, school effectiveness, and professional conduct of teachers in South African rural schools. School management teams should take a leading role of curbing learner violence by stringently enforcing learner codes of conduct and providing teachers with professional training so that they can manage learner discipline in schools effectively. Furthermore, learners and educators need to be empowered to manage conflict and to fulfil their education roles.

Keywords: governing bodies, leadership, principals, rural schools, violence



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1. Introduction

Globally, school violence has become an increasingly serious problem, and it is rampant in South African rural schools (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2009). One of the many functions of a school is to help learners how to live peacefully with others. The school as an organisation impacts on human relations and on the behaviour of community citizens.

Schools are places where social networks are established through cooperation and interpersonal relationships among learners, teachers, and other role players (Cheng, 2017). Violent practices do not promote unity and cooperation (Burton, 2008). It is therefore important for schools to ensure that they provide learners with educational environments that are free of violence. The school environment as an academic setting is supposed to be a safe place where teaching and learning take place. It should also be a place where learners can develop healthy relationships with other learners, irrespective of social class, sex, creed, ethnic background, and age (Amedahe & Owusu Banahene, 2007). Both learners and educators are equally at risk, as perpetrators relentlessly pounce on innocent victims (Mgigima, 2014). The negative impact of aggression and violence in schools not only makes the school environment a vulnerable place for educators and learners to do their work and perform other duties peacefully, but also diminishes the quality of education given to learners. Undoubtedly, school violence has a negative impact on the education of learners.

Schools report that violence amongst learners is on the increase, and educators complain about the violent behaviour of many learners they are tasked to work with. According to Antiri (2016), school violence is prevalent of late that it can be described as a typical feature of everyday life. Taole (2012) confirms that there are high levels of physical violence, sexual abuse, and gang-related violence in our schools.

Girmen, Kaya and Kilic (2018:703) conceptualise school violence as a “multifaceted construct that involves both criminal acts and aggression in schools, which inhibit development and learning, as well as harms the school climate”. They further state that “violence is the use of force against oneself, the other person, group, and community (Girmen *et al.*, 2018: 703). UNESCO (2017) holds the view that “school violence encompasses physical violence, including corporal punishment, psychological violence, including verbal abuse, sexual violence, including rape and harassment, bullying, including cyberbullying” (Girmen *et al.*, 2018: 7). Grobler (2018) views school violence as that which involves any verbal or physical act causing the intended victim pain while this individual is under the supervision of the school.

Extensive educational legislation has been introduced in the past few years. The Constitution of South Africa (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996a) guarantees all members of society (including learners) certain freedoms. Their freedoms are enshrined in the Bill of Rights, which confirms the fact that every person has the right to receive education (RSA, 1996a) in a conducive environment Lumadi (2019). This affirms the fact that violence has no place in schools. It is the responsibility of the principal and governing body to ensure compliance with policy and legislation, and to build solid relationships with the South African Police Services (SAPS). This makes the prevention of school violence a collective responsibility among various role players such as school governing bodies (SGBs), parents, and principals.

Schools with high rates of crime and violence are less effective in educating learners (De Wet, 2007). These schools have lower levels of learner achievement, higher rates of absenteeism, and higher dropout rates. Fear of victimisation has been found to inhibit learners' educational and psychological development, according to Cox, Bynun and Davidson (2004). Marshall (2000) averred that learners who are picked on, made fun of, harassed, and generally shamed, humiliated and targeted by fellow learners, over years may build up anger and hatred that finally explode into physical violence. Daane (2005) found that exposure to community and school violence alone is sufficient to predict aggressive behaviour in boys. With girls, only exposure to school violence was a significant predictor of aggression. Stein (2001) found that schools, through the "culture of silence, with regards to gendered violence may well be the training grounds for sexual and domestic violence".

To address the problem of school violence, this study aims to determine the perceptions of school principals and school governing bodies regarding violence in rural schools, focusing on the following research question:

- What are the perceptions and experiences of school principals and school governing bodies regarding violence in rural schools?

2. Conceptual framework

The principle of educators' duty of care towards learners will form the framework of the conceptual framework. The *in loco parentis* principle obliges educators to act within the parameters of the law to protect learners when they are in the care of educators. Prinsloo (2005) refers to two pillars of the *in loco parentis* role of educator: The duty of care (psychophysical wellbeing of learners) and the duty to maintain order at the school (to discipline learners). When educators fail in their role of duty of care for learners, they may be guilty of negligence and expose themselves to legal consequences (Oosthuizen & Rossouw, 2008). Based on the professional training and expertise of educators on children's behaviour "a high standard of care is expected of educators since they are not subjected to the ordinary reasonable person test" (Oosthuizen & Rossouw, 2008). These researchers also hold the view that all educators have a duty to protect learners from any form of psycho-physical violence in line with an educator's statutory duty of care. When at fault through negligence, the educator may be held delictually or vicariously delictually liable for any physical or other damage caused in terms of the principles of the law of delict. Educators may be charged with defamation, insult, invasion of privacy and negligence. The researcher used these comments to gather the perceptions of principals and governing bodies of schools on violence in rural schools. The implications for educators charged with delictual liability have serious legal consequences if they are found guilty of negligence.

3. Theoretical framework

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was used in this study. According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, "all individuals are part of related systems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 13). In terms of this theory, individuals cooperate with one another in various settings known as microsystems, ecosystems and macrosystems. According to Paquette and Ryan (2001: 2), a microsystem is a system closest to the child. The system involves stakeholders such as parents, educators and peers. Therefore, the system will affect the learner's relationship with close contacts, which will affect the mesosystem. In a mesosystem, the relationship between people happens in two ways: an adult influences a child's behaviour and beliefs, and the child

also influences the adult's behaviour and beliefs. The microsystem may apply where a learner comes from a violent home. Exposure to violence from parents may affect how a learner behaves at school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 13). The learner might act violently when in contact with learners and educators because of the influence from home.

Schools must be aware of the culture of the communities they serve to work on a better relationship between school and community. Therefore, this theory is appropriate for this research, as it investigates the interrelated systems of the school, educators, parents, community and peers on the behaviour of learners. Disruptive behaviour and violence are "phenomena that do not occur in isolation, they are encouraged as a consequence of the relationship between people, peer groups, schools, and culture" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 15).

4. Methodology

The aim was to investigate the perceptions of school principals and school governing bodies on violence in rural schools in South Africa. The voices of principals and SGB members provided information on their perceptions of school violence.

The study followed a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm, according to Cresswell and Potch (2006: 8), who state that "interpretive inquiry relies on naturalistic methods with an emphasis on the self-understanding of the individuals as a basis for social interpretation and transport human consciousness". Nieuwenhuis (2015: 420) also argues that "interpretation focuses on people's subjective experiences of the school world by sharing meanings and how they interact with or relate to each other". Unlike the positivist approach, which leaves little room for interpretation, the interpretive approach focuses on people's experiences. The research will then make meaning of data gathered by analysing the perceptions, attitudes, understanding of values, and experiences with reference to educators' duty of care in managing rural school violence. The interpretive paradigm also assists the researcher to recognise and interpret the nature of violence in school without predicting the reality. Since principals and SGBs have an influence in schools, they can use past experiences in explaining the problem of violence in rural schools.

Lincoln and Guba (1994: 108) indicate that the interpretative paradigm has three beliefs. The first belief is that the purpose of educational research is to comprehend meanings and understand behaviour. The second belief is that there is no one reality, but many realities, which can be local, specific, non-generable, and historical. The third belief is that findings in research do not come from a researcher, but through interpreting collected data.

In the case of this research, the participants were school principals and school governing bodies who shared their perceptions and experiences of violence in rural schools. The interpretive paradigm involves assumptions on finding meaning and understanding the viewpoints of principals and school governing bodies as participants. The interpretive paradigm supports the research on principals, and governing bodies narrated their perceptions and experiences in semi-structured interviews conducted with them.

A qualitative research approach and case-study approach were used, and data were collected from principals and school governing bodies through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. The case study also conducted a document analysis document analysis such as minutes of disciplinary hearings, letters of warnings issued to learners, and codes of conduct for learners to collect data at the chosen schools. Document analysis represents a good

source for text data in a qualitative study. Principals' voices as well as the input from school governing body members were heard as they narrated their individual perceptions of violence, and the effect violence has on the schools in rural areas.

According to Cresswell and Potch (2016: 124), "qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem". Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007: 328) agree with the notion of qualitative research as an "approach which is concerned with an in-depth, complex and detailed understanding of behaviour, meanings, phenomena and attitudes". The qualitative approach assisted the researchers to explore the perceptions of the participants, but also to address the research question (Leedy & Ormond).

The researchers worked for many years in the selected area of this research. These schools were identified as samples in the rural area outside White River in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa. The two schools were selected because of information and the perception that the two schools fall in an area where the general crime level elevates the levels of violence in the schools.

The two schools are both public non-fee-paying secondary schools. In order to facilitate the study, the two schools will be called Orange Primary and Apple Primary for ethical reasons of confidentiality and anonymity. There are also two taverns close to the respective schools. Both are secondary schools with more than 950 learners. Both schools have three HoDs, a deputy principal, and a principal, which form the school management team (SMT), as well as a relatively functional school governing body (SGB). The study began with individuals and during a data analysis set out to understand the interpretation of principals and SGBs and their understanding of violence in rural schools.

4.1 Sample

Two schools out of a sample of ten secondary schools were chosen as a sample for this research. It constitutes a qualitatively rich case, as they fall in a high crime and violent area.

4.2 Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select two suitable SGB members from each school for the case study with the two school principals.

Richard and Morse (2007: 195) indicate that "purposive sampling happens when a researcher selects a sample for its characteristics". The two SGB members at each school were selected because they had served a second term of three years as school governing body members. All four SGB members reside in the rural area. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) state that the sample size is related to the purpose of the research, the research problem, data-collection techniques, and the availability of information-rich cases. In this study, the sample size was suitable for interviews and observations, as well as document analysis. Two principals and two SGB members from each school were representatives of the two schools. All the participants stayed in the immediate vicinity of the school.

4.3 Semi-structured interviews and observations

The data-collection instruments were interviews and observations. The primary data-collection method was semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. A semi-structured interview is a formal engagement between a researcher and a respondent. The researchers made use of an interview schedule for each participant to allow the participants to speak freely about their experiences and perceptions and to state their views in their own words. The interviews collected the views of the principals and SGB members on the relevant aspects of violence in rural schools. The primary data collected during the interviews were triangulated by reviewing existing secondary data that came from document analysis. The documents are open and private information that a researcher could obtain about the site or the participants in the study. The documents analysed were the learners' codes of conduct, minutes of possible disciplinary hearings, and an incident book where all offenses were recorded.

In addition to the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, the researcher also made use of observations to collect data. According to Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2005: 203), observation is a way of recording situations, actions and activities. The observation made it easier to see what was happening on the school grounds. The researcher observed the educators and children in the surroundings of the two schools. The focus was also on the school property, fencing, cameras, taverns in the school community, school safety equipment, and the use of drugs. The school grounds were observed for two weeks. The advantages of observations are that it provides direct, accurate and reliable data on human behaviour without relying on respondents' abilities and willingness.

4.4 Data analysis

The data consisted of transcriptions and notes taken during the face-to-face interviews and observations. The study adopted a qualitative approach and the data that were obtained from the principals and SGBs were transcribed verbatim. A qualitative, analytical method of thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data that were generated during the interview phase of the study.

Thematic analysis is defined as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within the data and it allows the researcher to interpret various aspects of the topic of the research. The advantage of this method that, through its theoretical freedom, the thematic analysis provides a useful research tool providing detailed and rich data. In doing so, patterns and trends emerged from the data, were identified and themes were developed.

In this research only the data mentioned have been analysed. After the elimination of duplications, data were categorised into themes relevant to the focus of the article. A review of policies and the research literature on school violence was conducted to provide additional data. Although the size of the research was relatively small (only two schools), the interviews were analysed into themes, which will be discussed in the findings. Qualitative data were inductively analysed by the researchers through a thematic system. The data were categorised into themes. Data were coded into meaningful units. Themes were recorded separately to provide an overall picture of the two schools. The focus was not to repeat what other participants had mentioned, to avoid any duplication. The two schools were coded as School A and School B. The two principals were coded as P1 and P2. The respective governing body members (two of each school) were coded as SGB1 and SGB2 from School A, and SGB3 and SGB4 from School B.

5. Findings

After reading through the interview's transcriptions, categories from each research were grouped together, using codes. From these categories, themes were developed. The different perceptions that emerged during the interview will be discussed as follows:

1. Perceptions of School Principals
2. Perceptions of School Governing Body members

5.1 Theme 1: Perceptions of school principals

Perceptions of school violence can vary among stakeholders consisting of learners, principals, school governing bodies, parents, and community members (Diedrich, 2010). The research question dealt with the perceptions of principals and school governing bodies.

5.1.1 Home environment

Principals believed that the finger regarding school violence must point to the home environment of the learners.

The home situation of many of our learners is not good and challenging. Many of them stay with grandparents, because of the absence of a mother or a father or both. Learners in this situation feel something is missing, grandparents cannot assist them in school tasks and homework, and that creates anger which they take out on other learners (P2).

Both principals believe that a bad home environment is the main cause of school violence. At home, learners learn a certain behaviour and possibly repeat this behaviour at school.

What they learn and see at home they bring to the school environment (P1).

The way learners are raised at home spills over to the school, whether good or bad (Eke, 2018). As a result of the interviews with principals, it was discovered that they feel strongly about the fact that certain poor learner behaviours could lead to school violence. They pointed out peer pressure and the lack of communication at home as factors that they believe may have a negative impact on learners' behaviour, internally and externally. The principals both felt that a lack of communication at home was an external force that could have a negative effect on learners' behaviour when they are in the school environment.

Without the necessary communication, learners lack a sounding board for dealing with problems. As indicated earlier, some learners miss one or both parents at home and they do not get the support they need to solve problems or even to talk about the problems they experience. P1 indicated that learners miss a father figure or even a mother at home, which leaves them with no parent to discuss any of the problems they might be facing. P2 felt that

learners bring problems to school and some learners do what they want at school.

They do not respect parents and argue with teachers and their peers in class.

5.1.2 *Effect of violence in the classroom*

The principals felt that what was once only prevalent in city schools regarding violence, has now spilled over to rural schools as well. The impact of violence in the classrooms has a negative effect on educators (Dunne & Leach, 2007). Teachers need to keep a watchful eye on signs of trouble and at the same time teach the curriculum.

Teachers feel fearful in the classroom, especially in the grade eight and grade nine classes (P2).

Teachers indicated that teaching in these two grades is difficult, as the learners get to high school from primary school and have problems with discipline. It creates a hostile learning environment that weakens the teachers' position of power and prohibits them from using their authority and fulfilling their duty to monitor learners in these two grades. There are many instances of social disconnect, hate, disrespect, and lack of compassion and these grades are not immune to these outside pressures and influences. Learners that are far behind academically feel everything taught to them is not easy and get frustrated and act out. Learners will do just the opposite of what is asked in class, because the teacher is an authority in their lives, and they hate you for it. In these grades it was experienced, more than in the higher grades, that parents do not see their children's behaviour as bad, so they allow it at home and defend it when it happens at school. That makes it difficult to establish behaviour boundaries at school. Factors that influence learner behaviour also include self-identity, self-efficacy, classroom factors, and education influences, which can impact the impulsive behaviour of learners.

One of my educators commented that she tries to keep a watchful eye on learners all the time and she tries to prevent things, by assisting learners with behaviour problems to prevent violence in her class (P1).

According to P2, they

were able to intervene when acts of violence occurred in the school during the past year. One might think this is a rural school, but violence is present in our classrooms.

When we had a stabbing incident in one of our classrooms, teachers were fearful, and some locked their classrooms during teaching time.

Teachers, according to P1,

are more alert about what is happening in the classrooms but talk in the hallways and bathroom, it makes teachers wonder if the learners come to school to learn or to vent anger towards someone. One of the educators indicated that the school violence policy makes you question yourself, even if you are in the bathroom or in any car taking lunch: Is your classroom door locked, do I have all the emergency numbers in case of any trouble?

Focusing on learner violence takes the educator's mind away from the main cause of business, namely teaching and learning. If a door is locked, and someone is at the door, teaching stops, as the educator needs to attend to the person at the door. Teachers are frustrated with this rule, because they cannot complete their lessons on time. Principals believe that being a good role model to the learners will leave a lasting impression on the minds of learners. Being a role model can set the tone to show to learners that they do not have to act violently, and that any disagreement can be solved without any act of violence.

Another problem is that learners who are intimidated daily start avoiding school. This has a devastating effect on the academic performance of the learners in class. Learners, according to the two principals, are reluctant to ask questions in class, as they are afraid of being teased by classmates. This is a serious form of bullying. Teasing can turn hostile when a learner being teased is distressed by the teasing. There is a power imbalance as the learner teasing has more power among peers compared to the learner being teased. It becomes bullying when teasing occurs repeatedly.

5.1.3 Behaviours leading to school violence.

In the interviews with the principals, they indicated that peer pressure and a lack of communication with parents are factors affecting learners inside and outside of the school grounds. Principals feel that the lack of communication and discipline at home is a force outside the school that could affect learners negatively when they are away from the school environment. Learners do not have a soundboard at home to discuss problems. Another factor is that learners are missing one or even both parents. P1 indicated that learners miss a father or mother figure with whom they can sit down to discuss the problems they face. Even grandparents are taking over the role of parents and the gap between the generations makes the problem worse. Many of the learners in this situation tend to take the problem to school and this manifests in aggressive behaviour.

Both principals echoed the fact that parents do not know what their children are involved with when they are not at home. P2 said that:

Parents do not talk to their children about the values of life and do not assist their children to distinguish between right and wrong. Principals also indicated that parents experience problems at home, and the learners bring that negative feeling to school, and it always leads to violence when the frustrated learner takes his/her frustration out on other learners. P1 indicated that a maladjusted home life can determine what kind of attitude learners might bring to school.

It appears that a learner's temperament could be a factor causing a learner to commit or refrain from an act of violence while at the school.

The two principals indicated that how learners socialise, and their environment are contributing factors to violent behaviour. Learners learn violent behaviour from parents, peers, teachers, and the media and through the socialisation process. P1 argued that,

Learner socialising with violent peers, reinforces anti-social behaviour. Learner's access to the internet, violent video games, TV soaps, all make violence look good and acceptable. (All this increased during Covid-19 where learners had too much time on hand to watch more TV and play on cell phones).

Mncube and Harber (2013) assert that social and psychological connections explain the causes of violent behaviour in relation to socialisation in schools. This assertion is also shared in words. According to Ward, Van Der Merwe and Dawes (2012), socially disorganised communities are unable to realise common prosocial values among their residents and they are unable to maintain effective social controls. In fact, this means that families that encourage prosocial norms are often challenged by different standards of behaviour in the neighbourhood and the family values are less likely to be upheld by the community. Violent community cultures in which learners are raised and are exposed to inevitably normalise the use of violence as acceptable behaviour.

P1 commented,

Our communities are violent, and learners see this violence daily, and start to see it as normal behaviour in communities and will start doing the same violent actions.

Van Der Westhuizen (2007) notes that a person who lives in a particular culture for long enough is likely to be influenced by it.

The mood and circumstances of teachers must be noted. Many teachers still exercise *in loco parentis* responsibilities in the traditional way, employing discipline and even meting out corporal punishment. According to P2:

Teachers want to be in control and are feared by learners, so learners must not even try to move in class as everything is strictly controlled. Older teachers were subjected to corporal punishment and always try to mete out any alternatives to discipline learners. Teachers are also challenged to lead what new technology in class, for what they're not ready for. They are frustrated, have personal issues, are stressed, and experience work overload with a packed CAPS syllabus.

School principals complain of widespread disruption of classes, which has a negative impact on teaching and learning at their respective schools, due to school-based violence (SBV).

P1 commented that bullying behaviour was a problem in classes, which has a negative impact on the whole class, as the teachers needed to pay attention to the bully. Mncube and Harper (2013) assert that learners who are bullies seek attention to compensate for their academic shortcomings. Poor academic performers are easily assimilated into groups. P2 indicated that learners are so focused as they try to keep track of the bully's ways, tricks and intimidation, that sometimes his office is a furnace where teachers and parents spend hours with the principal interviewing the culprit.

Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) site the Human Rights Commission (2006), which who found that the environment and the necessary climate to decrease school-based violence are undermined by a culture of school-based violence and are becoming a matter of national concern.

P1 is of the opinion that:

Another effect of SBV and bullying is the total disregard of authority as a type of logo of gangsters in the school.

The antisocial behaviour of gangsters in the school environment influences learners but, most importantly, it also has a negative effect on teachers and principals. Gangsters treat staff very badly and have no respect for authority. According to Walsh and Mitchell (2006), gang membership represents an opportunity for young men to gain social status, a sense of security and community, and the potential for economic gain. They further indicate that learners are easily recruited. They even succumb to peer pressure and join gangsters because gangs offer love, acceptance, and protection. According to Bradshaw (2008), when human needs such as security, love, acceptance, and identity are denied, frustration kicks in. Learners are sometimes drawn into gangs because they feel neglected, and rejected by parents and even teachers, trying out new approaches in frustration, and gangs become a space to fill the gap.

6. Theme 2: Perceptions and experiences of school governing bodies

6.1 Professionalism of teachers

Governing bodies were full of criticism regarding the behaviour of educators. They felt that educators do not abide by the code of professional ethics. SGBs felt that “teachers lack self-discipline, integrity and self-respect. Governing bodies see teachers as role models to learners”.

According to SGB2:

Teachers are seldom on time for school but will be on time for union meetings and funerals; maybe it is a rural school thing. The code of conduct for learners and teachers states that educators and learners are expected to be at school at times stipulated in the respective codes of conduct, but the times are not stipulated in the codes. I must admit that we experience a big problem with late coming, as our catchment area is large and, in some cases, learners are more than fifteen kilometres away from our school, according to SGB2.

In this case, both transport and the vast learner catchment area have a negative impact on the management of late coming. Latecomers make holes in the fence to get access to the school grounds when they are late (P1). The fences are not fixed, and this allows for other elements to enter the school grounds, which makes it easier for learners to bunk school early or to arrive late, as they use the damaged fences to get in and out of school. The damaged fences make the school vulnerable, as they put the safety and lives of both the property and the school community at risk.

In some cases, the school becomes a footpath that crosses the school grounds, and it becomes access routes to members of the public and the wrong elements for whom we do not want close to our school (SGB 4).

This puts the safety of educators and learners at risk. Burglars find it easy to access the school, as the fences are not fixed. “It leaves the school open for school bunkers, learners coming late, gamblers, drug dealers, and even harassment of the girls in the school (P2).

Learners slipping out during breaks times, use the holes in the fences to visit taverns not far from the school, and many times they return to school drunk and become very violent and that poses a safety risk to learners and educators (SGB 1).

During observations at the two schools, it could be seen that some of the overgrown sports grounds have been turned into food gardens by community members for their own benefit, using the damaged fences as an access route into the school grounds. It leaves the school open for activities such as drug peddling, gambling, rape, use of guns, and trespassing by unwanted elements.

SGB members felt that something had to be done at rural schools so that teachers can comply with policies. Teachers must respect the schools’ codes of conduct and must protect their learners from any violence. From the discussion with SGB members, it emerged that some educators fail to act on or report incidents of violence. Failing to act leads to the escalation of violence in our schools.

Rural principals are guilty of not reporting any cases of sexual harassment of learners, or do not even initiate disciplinary hearings against either teachers or learners. Relationships between learners and teachers are common practice, and when girls fall pregnant, the teacher responsible for the pregnancy will just walk away and not take any responsibility. Girls become

traumatised and SGBs feel that such unprofessional misconduct by male teachers goes without punishment. Section 17 of the *Employment of Educators Act* (RSA, 1998) prohibits educators from being involved in sexual or any other form of harassment, which by implication prohibits them from having sexual relations with learners. According to South Africa's Constitution (RSA, 1996a), everyone has a right to be treated with dignity and respect. Sexual harassment goes against this right. Section 8 also states that individual people and companies are bound by the Bill of Rights. This means, for instance, that any person who interferes with another person's bodily integrity, dignity or rights as a child infringes that person's constitutional rights and must be held responsible for that.

Learners who are not willing to take part in the 'fantasies' of teachers are punished or are continually harassed by teachers (Malette, 2017). From the interviews, it was emphasised that learners (especially girls) are not treated with respect and dignity. Male teachers find nothing wrong having relationships with schoolgirls or even sexually molest them, while in some cases male teachers force it on the girls. It seems that they do not care about policies that are in place to protect the safety and dignity of learners. The South African Constitution (Section 9, RSA, 1996a) enshrines bodily and psychological integrity and the right to life. It also recognises the inherent dignity of all human beings and the right to have that dignity respected. Section 10 of the South African Bill of Rights states that every human being has the right to dignity, while section 12 of the Bill of Rights states that every human being has the right to freedom and security. Sexual harassment is a violation of female learners' right to a secure, safe, and free learning environment. Male learners see these actions by male teachers as the norm and later act like their teachers towards girls. Personal comments and name calling by educators hurt more than corporal punishment. Learners do not report these incidents because they fear humiliation and punishment. Victimization is very high. Corporal punishment is still administered, despite it being prohibited by the South African Schools Act (Section 10, RSA, 1996b). SGB4 indicated that:

Teachers are expected to respect the law and embrace the constitutional values and improve discipline in the rural schools.

SGB1 averred that teachers are reckless, disrespectful and are aggressive towards learners. In some cases, learners fight back when provoked.

While most teachers are trained professionals who respect the profession and the learners, some teachers intentionally or unintentionally disrespect their learners. The last thing most learners expect from a teacher is disrespect. Teachers in schools are considered role models and confidants for their learners. They can speak with learners about personal issues learners experience at school and at home. However, a learner will feel betrayed and disrespected when issues they confided in with a teacher are revealed to another learner or teacher, and the learner becomes the subject of petty gossip. Respect cuts both ways and disrespecting a learner is a sure way for that learner to lose respect for the teacher and it can affect the teacher-learner relationship. When peers make fun of learners because of teachers' disrespect, it may lead to provocation from the learner Ryan, 2001).

From the interviews, the depth of the problem and its impact on the functionality of our rural schools became clear. The government needs to capacitate schools and SGBs must take responsibility to put parents at the centre of intervention strategies. SGBs need to invest in security guards, increased surveillance, better search, and seizures, as it will be difficult for rural schools to change or prevent violence in rural schools. At poor schools, the Departments of Education need to make more money available to secure the safety of schools. School

policies need to be restorative. SGBs must make school communities much more aware of the problem so that violence can be kept in check and reduced in rural communities. SGBs must establish safety committees not only as part of the SGB, but even grade (Grades 8–12) committees must accept responsibility for certain safety actions at school. Parents can volunteer to act as safety guards and assist in fixing the fencing of the school. SGBs can encourage parents to report any problems pertaining to safety to the SGB and in doing so, become the eye of the school.

6.2 Pregnancy of female learners and violence

Although, strictly speaking, pregnancy does not fall in the category of school-based violence, especially where sex between two adults is consensual, there are reported cases of teachers having sexual relationships with learners.

Both schools reported a high rate of learner pregnancy. Pregnancy of under-aged teenagers normally does not fall under violence, as there might be consent between the parties involved. However, policies discourage learners from falling pregnant. Teenage pregnancy is often identified by children and young people as one of the critical issues in their communities (Asmamaw *et al.*, 2023). Children see pregnancy as a major impediment to the education, health and well-being of their peers. It becomes a problem when a teacher causes the pregnancy, as policies and other laws forbid any form of intimate relationships between learners and teachers.

Some teachers use violent ways of imposing themselves on a female learner. SGB3 indicated that:

at their school many girls (Grade 11 and 12) are pregnant, and the pregnancy will disrupt their exams as four of them will deliver during the Preliminary Exams.

Many of them never (at School A 12 girls and at School B 9 girls) return to school after the baby has been born and drop out of the school system. Thus, they will soon join the statistics of unemployment, which causes many other social problems. The problem seems to be a social one that will not disappear quickly. Recently, World Vision (2019) worked with children across countries in Africa and uncovered a strong connection between teenage pregnancy and sexual violence and abuse. For many girls, sexual abuse leads to unwanted pregnancies, as they have been forced to have sex (Gedana, Tseyaw & Debebe, 2016). This leaves girls more at risk, as sexual abuse by older men also leaves girls at a higher risk of HIV/AIDS.

Many girls are forced into early child marriage, and this also leads to sexual abuse and violence (Wilson, 2015). Even though sexual violence and abuse are illegal, these practices persist in schools. Not enough is done to implement existing laws, and often harmful practices are condoned by communities whose understanding of childhood and gender roles can increase girls' vulnerability. Young mothers almost always drop out of school and forgo opportunities for education to work towards a better life. In her report, *Learner Pregnancy-Policy Interplay: School Dropout of Adolescent Girls during Pregnancy* (2023), Angie Motshekga paints a stark picture of the situation, revealing that nearly two-thirds of girls who become pregnant, abandon their education, leaving them trapped in a cycle of poverty and limited opportunities. Under South African Law, girls have the right to continue their schooling during and after their pregnancies. In a parliamentary response in June 2022, the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, revealed that between April 2021 and March 2022, there were almost 90 000 pregnancies amongst girls aged 10 to 19. Current statistics on teenage

pregnancy show that there has been a significant increase in young girls falling pregnant. The latest statistics reveal that 150 000 young girls were pregnant in the 2022/2023 financial year (SABC News, 2022; CGE Report, 2022).

School governing body members from both schools were convinced that there is a relationship between poverty in the community and the social grants that the young unemployed mothers receive. The finding points out the collapse of family and social values that must bond communities.

SGB4 indicated that the ambivalent attitudes among teenagers are most common in disadvantaged rural areas and many of them have low aspirations for the future.

Our schools are aware of the policy content and guidelines from the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2022) in law to handle teenage pregnancy, but they ignore it, as they feel cumbersome to implement.

Teachers at the two respective schools (SGB3) have shown no interest in assisting pregnant learners. One teacher commented that they lead large classes of 60 and more learners, and do not have the luxury of time to cope with pregnant learners.

Measures instituted by the South African Council of Educators (SACE) to act against guilty teachers are often very slow or are thrown out because of a lack of evidence when the girls avoid reporting the matter, fearing harassment, leaving them traumatised and depressed.

Principals work together with SMTs, while SGBs and Representative Councils for Learners (RCLs) are also included. SGBs should actively participate in formulating school policies and principals have the responsibility to oversee the implementation thereof. SGB1 commented that it

is important for parents to be involved in fighting violence in our schools, but the problem is always how to bring them together. SGB3 indicated that right now parents do not get involved, to take any ownership.

A big problem at both schools is that the principals fail to mobilise all stakeholders into a coherent unit. Some of the structures are dysfunctional and not coordinated. Parents do not feel welcome at the school and do not feel comfortable to discuss any matters with teachers. SGB2 said that teachers could sometimes be hostile and that they did not trust SGB members.

A further problem is that there is no clear separation of roles between SGBs and principals, which develops into tension between the two parties (Suter, 2015). SGB3 indicated that they wanted to see a healthy working relationship between the school, SGBs, and unions to improve the functionality of the school. It is problematic if the principal is an active union member. If the principal is a SADTU member, it is not easy to talk with the school.

Communities were ineffective due to a lack of leadership. It was evident that the schools had no safety and security committees. The security committees were dysfunctional and could not draw up a school safety policy with proper action plans. District offices should appoint officials to support school safety programmes. The support of district offices is weak. The problem is that there is no sufficient funding at district level to support schools to establish effective safety plans and put them into action. No plans were in place to see if district offices support schools with campaigns to raise awareness about violence. SGB1 suggested the

establishment of a stakeholder committee to handle cases of sexual abuse and bullying of teachers.

Educators fail to comply with the Code of Professional Ethics and all offending educators are not subjected to the prescribed disciplinary processes. SGB4 said offending teachers would escape punishment because they were in the good books of the principal and even the SGB chairperson. School managements do not listen to the voices of learners. SGB3 felt that they did not have a forum where learners could talk to them. Many times, learners are marginalised. Learners cannot voice their concerns, or even report bullying and bad things happening to girls. Sociocultural norms, traditional practices, values, and beliefs are significant factors in pregnancy, childbirth, and children survival (BMC, 2023). Social norms and culture govern the behaviour of a society and are inseparable from day-to-day interactions. Several traditional malpractices during pregnancy persist despite modern developments in today's world (Gedama, Tsegaw & Debebe, 2016). This idea links up with the African philosophy, which takes pride in the idea that the benefits and burdens of the community must be shared in such a way that no-one is prejudiced, but everything is done to put a community's interests and culture of the community above those of individuals.

SGB1 again echoed the same sentiment:

Learners want a voice who can listen to them. We and the principal need to follow a more democratic leadership so that we can create a positive ethos and encourage a better decision-making process.

The perceptions of SGBs as stakeholder components regarding the school management and leadership were very negative. In these cases, it seemed that the kind of leadership provided by the principals was far below expectations. It was also noted that some of the principals were not fit to manage and lead schools, as their appointments were not based on merit but by their active involvement in union activities. SGBs felt that principals in general failed in their professional duties of duty and care to make sure that learners feel safe under the guardianship of the principal and teachers.

Participants indicated the depth of the problem in addressing violence in schools and laws affecting the functioning of schools. Schools can have all the safety measures in place to combat violence and to reduce violent behaviour but will fail to put restorative policies and strategies in place. Communities that work together to prevent violence will be able to take all the necessary actions to overcome violence.

7. Recommendations

School violence affects many schools in South Africa. Having a consistent programme for schools to use to prevent and combat school violence will address the perceptions of principals and SGBs as well as their concerns discussed in the findings. Districts, in collaboration with schools, must have a strong policy on combating and preventing any form of school violence. Such a policy can assist in having a positive school climate in which learners feel safe and comfortable. Teachers and schools will feel empowered and confident to participate in interventions that are district approved and designed to meet the needs of the learners. Having schools dedicated to fostering a warm and nurturing situation at school will encourage school skills and develop an improved learning environment. Such a policy will also allow districts to set forth a consistent programme to address school violence at all schools.

School districts must devote time to resources to gain an input from learners, teachers, SGBs and parents to develop a unified and approved policy to combat school violence. In

this regard, the Department of Education must make money available specifically for poorer schools to combat violence at their schools and to make schools safer.

School principals, educators and SGBs must cooperate to ensure that school discipline policies are adopted and implemented. The cooperation of schools across school districts to understand and implement the prevention and intervention recommendations correctly is vital to the success in combating school violence. The following recommendations to improve the problem of violence must be considered:

- Ensure zero tolerance of sexual violence against girls and boys.
- Make sure that schools are safe and accessible to learn without fear.
- Empower learners and teach them to manage risks.
- Address harmful gender norms and practices such as child marriages,
- Raise girls' awareness of the sexual abuse and violence against them and encourage them to report abuse and sexual harassment.
- Use data from existing surveys to increase understanding about where, when, how, and by whom violence happens.
- Train educators in positive discipline and classroom management.
- Train educators and parents in recognising violence and lines of reporting the violence and abuse.
- Create a culture of respect and human dignity at school.

The above recommendations must be approached as a team effort between the school, SGB and school districts. School programmes must include plans on how safety and crises will be managed. Funds must be found to support schools to ensure better safety systems at schools. Programmes must be put together for the support, modification, and influencing of learner and teacher behaviour. The aim is to work towards the achievement of violence-free schools. The above-mentioned stakeholders need to establish well-trained and experienced individuals who will be able and capable in dealing with school violence. The Education Districts' curriculum planners for Life Orientation should include topics such as responding to anger, and peaceful and positive ways to resolve conflict situations. Programmes must also focus on motivating pregnant learners to stay at school after the birth of the child and to complete their schooling.

Without the cooperation of all stakeholders to implement the respective programmes pertaining to behaviour, a decrease in school violence will remain a pipe dream.

8. Conclusion

The topic of school violence needs to be at the forefront of discussion at district and school levels, as it has a direct impact on all stakeholders. School violence has the potential to destroy and affect the communities where negatively we teach in endless ways. As educators we have a responsibility to address school violence, because the best interests of the learners are at stake. We should set forth on a path of guidance for next generations to work together to address school violence and to strive towards making our schools, communities, and the world a better place.

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