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Sexual violence against learners in South African schools: Findings from a media study

Abstract

This qualitative media study, undertaken within an interpretative research paradigm, aims to expand our knowledge of sexual violence perpetrated against learners in South African public and private schools. Due to ethical, normative and methodological barriers surrounding research on sexual violence in schools, South African English language newspapers were used as data source. The SA Media database was utilised to identify 153 relevant newspaper articles published in the period of 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2022. Themes were identified by means of qualitative content analysis. The findings shed light on the extent of sexual violence in schools, the acceptance and normalisation of teacher-on-learner sexual violence, the exploitation of learners' academic and athletic aspirations by teachers and coaches, and the imbalance of power and consequent abuse of power in a country where hegemonic masculinity prevails. Moreover, the study found teachers, coaches, caregivers, taxi drivers and fellow learners to be perpetrators of sexual violence. The study also highlights the negative effects of sexual violence on the victims' academic, mental, physical and social wellbeing. Drawing on Galtung's typology of violence, three dimensions of violence, namely personal or direct violence, indirect or structural and cultural violence were identified. This multidimensional interpretation emphasises the need to address this scourge on direct, structural and cultural levels.

Keywords: *Galtung; media study; qualitative content analysis; schools; sexual violence*

1. Introduction

Twenty years ago, the report, *Scared at School: Sexual Violence against Girls in South African Schools* (Human Rights Watch, 2001: 1), documented how girls were "raped, sexually abused, sexually harassed, and assaulted at school by their male classmates and even by their teachers". Notwithstanding recommendations by Human Rights Watch (2001) calling for the involvement of the South African government, judicial system, professional teachers' organisations and teacher training colleges in the fight against the sexual abuse of learners, a reading of South African newspapers (*Daily Dispatch*, 2022; Macupe, 2021a;

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Naidoo, 2020) and research on the topic (Centre for Applied Legal Studies, 2014; Mncube & Harber, 2013; South African Council of Educators [SACE], 2017) reveals that sexual violence against learners is still widespread in South African schools.

Doing research on sexual violence in schools is challenging. It requires of victims, their families and bystanders "to confront, admit to and discuss an issue that is extremely sensitive" (World Health Organization [WHO], 2007: 1). Furthermore, Parkes *et al*. (2022: 2) note that it is difficult for adolescents to talk to older researchers about sexual violence, especially in a formal research setting. Contrary to the difficulties surrounding research on sexual violence in schools, and the consequently rather limited research on the topic (Jones *et al*., 2008; Prinsloo, 2006), there is a great deal of information available in the media on sexual violence in schools. Crime "serves as one of the key 'selling' items for different media outlets in their competition for readers and viewers" and is often a media staple (Näsj *et al*., 2021: 575). Thus, the media become a useful source of information on sexual violence in schools (Krtalic & Hasenay, 2012: 2). The media break the code of silence that often surrounds sexual violence in schools and plays an important role as a source of information to the general public, politicians, human rights organisations and researchers; act as a trigger for education authorities to take action against perpetrators; shape people's perception on the topic; and may even become "the perceived reality for many media consumers, thus indirectly influencing … policies" (Näsj *et al*., 2021: 575). The media are, according to Salvin and Rai (2021: 7), "the reflection of our society and it depicts what and how society works. [The] media … help in making people informed [and] have today become the voice of our society."

Contrary to the huge influence the media have, Biswas and Kirchherr (2016: 1) found that "most of the world's most talented thinkers may be university professors, but sadly most of them are not shaping today's public debates or influencing policies". This is due to the limited readership of academic articles. Brereton, O'Neill and Dunne (2017: 150) found that academic research is increasingly required "to demonstrate economic and policy relevance". It is, however, difficult to measure the societal impact of research and many academics see societal impact measurements as a threat to their academic freedom. It is also important that members of the academe work hand in hand with the media to disseminate their research findings. This will ensure that the public's knowledge of sensitive topics such as sexual violence in schools is grounded in journalistic endeavours and research findings. Researchers often use newspapers as a primary or an additional source of information (Jacobs, 2014; Krtalic & Hasenay, 2012; Näsj *et al*., 2021). The aim of this article is to expand our existing academic knowledge of sexual violence against learners in South African schools by using newspaper articles as textual data.

2. Defining sexual violence

The WHO (2024: 1) defines sexual violence as follows:

> Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.

The *Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act* 32 of 2007 (*Sexual Offences Amendment Act*) (RSA, 2007) lists the following sexual acts as criminal acts: rape, sexual assault, sexual grooming, incest, child pornography and child prostitution. The first three of these forms of sexual violence form the nucleus of the acts of sexual violence referred to in this article. According to this act, *rape* occurs "when a person forces another to have sexual intercourse without their consent. … [It is also] a crime for a person to force another person to rape someone"; *sexual assault* occurs "when a person sexually violates another person without their consent … [It is] a crime for a person to force another person to witness or perform sexual acts to someone"; and *sexual grooming* occurs "when a person educates, introduces or prepares a child or a person living with mental disability to perform or witness any sexual act or become sexually ready."

In an effort to curb underage pregnancies in South African schools and protect the interests of young girls, the Department of Basic Education gazetted a policy on 18 December 2021 requiring that teachers report learner pregnancies to the police. The policy states that if the biological father "is a pupil, he should be counselled and guided to assume and sustain his rights and responsibilities [and] … if the father is a teacher or staff member, he should be suspended and subjected to disciplinary and legal procedures as per the sector's legislation" (Macupe, 2021b: 11).

3. Literature review

My review of research publications on sexual violence in schools identified three trends. The first is that researchers use data originating from big, representative, multinational surveys (e.g. Evans *et al*., 2023; Leach, 2003) or undertake extensive literature reviews (e.g. Dunne, Humphreys & Leach, 2006) to shed light on gender violence in the so-called developing world. Leach's (2003) article, which draws on data from a study funded by the United Kingdom's Department of International Development, places emphasis on the concept of the teacher as predator. Leach (2003: 392) concludes that teachers abuse their position of authority and that female learners are their "property". The study by Evans *et al*. (2023) used two nationally represented surveys, namely the *Violence against Children and Youth Survey* and the *Demographic and Health Survey* to compare rates of physical and sexual violence of girls aged 15 to 19 in sub-Saharan African countries. Using data from the *Demographic and Health Survey,* Evans *et al*. (2023) found that 20,8% of girls across 20 sub-Saharan countries experienced sexual violence.

Secondly, I identified research articles that discuss or refer to sexual violence as one of several forms of school violence. Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) list 13 different forms of school violence, one of which is sexual harassment. In their study, 21,3% of the participants indicated that they had been subjected to sexual harassment.

The article by Benbenishty *et al*. (2002: 763) reports on a large-scale study (n = 10 410) of Israeli learners' exposure to sexual, physical and emotional maltreatment by their teachers. They found that 8,2% of the participants were subjected to sexual maltreatment by teachers. Another research article, grounded in the same data as those of Benbenishty *et al*. (2002), was published in 2008 under the authorship of Khoury-Kassabri, Astor and Benbenishty (2008). In this article, the subscale "sexual violence" comprises three items that can be associated with

verbal and physical sexual abuse. The participants were asked if a member of staff had made sexual comments to them, touched them, tried to touch them in a sexual manner or made unwanted sexual advantages towards them (Khoury-Kassabri *et al*., 2008: 4).

Longobardi *et al*. (2019) examined the physical, psychological and sexual victimisation of Italian adolescents by their peers and teachers. Ten items were listed under the heading "sexual abuse". The participants indicated that they were sexually abused by their teachers (2,3%), their peers (86,3%), or by both their peers and teachers (1,4%) (Longobardi *et al*., 2019: 49).

In Taiwan, Chen and Wei (2011: 386) studied physical, emotional and sexual teacher-on-learner victimisation among 1 376 Grade 7 to 9 learners. The participants acknowledged that they were the targets of sexual comments or jokes (4,8%) made by teachers and that teachers touched, kissed or tried to touch or kiss (1,1%) them.

Lastly, my literature review identified publications that focus on sexual violence in a specific country. The following six examples will suffice. Shumba (2001) used perpetrator files that were made available to him by the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture in his study on learner abuse at secondary schools in Zimbabwe. He identified 212 cases of sexual abuse in six randomly selected provinces in Zimbabwe. Parkes *et al*. (2022: 4) followed a mixed-method approach in their research on sexual violence against learners in Uganda. Their survey revealed that 23,8% (201 of 844) of the girls who took part in their study experienced sexual violence, while 4,2% (35 out of 844) of the girls were victims of teacher-on-learner violence. Among the boys, 14,3% (87 out of 681) were sexually violated, while 1,8% (12 out of 681) indicated that they were victims of teacher-on-learner sexual violence. However, Parkes *et al*. (2022: 4) note that their qualitative data suggest that sexual exploitation of girls by teachers is both "more commonplace and took more varying forms than reported in the qualitative data". A qualitative case study that utilised the narratives of teachers from a secondary school in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) found that sexual violence persisted in secondary schools and other social contexts in Ethiopia (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018: 661) and that the perpetrators of sexual violence are generally male learners, teachers and adults. Female learners, on the other hand, were identified as passive victims (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018: 653). Steiner *et al*. (2021: 21-40) surveyed sexual violence in Liberian primary schools (n = 811). They found that girls (n = 298) were sexually abused by, among others, their teachers (24,66%), school staff (31,32%) and classmates (54,75%). A qualitative interview-based study by Moosa and Bhana (2020) explored how primary school teachers in South African construct the need for more male teachers in Foundation Phase teaching. Moosa and Bhana's (2020: 69) study focused on a dominant discourse used by the participants, namely that men are "violent sexual predators", as well as the notion that "children are vulnerable and in need of protection from men". Mention should also be made of a large, interview-based project by Bhana (2012) on sexual violence. This project aimed to investigate the diverse ways in which young people in Durban, South Africa, gave meaning to gender and sexuality in the context of AIDS. Bhana (2012: 354) found, among other things, "rich testimony of the widespread abuse of girls by male teachers".

4. Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by Johan Galtung's violence triangle. *Direct violence* is what we see and experience (Dutta, 2020: 2); it may be physical or psychological violence, or behaviour that causes anxiety, stress or trauma. *Structural violence,* often termed "social injustice", is implanted into a society's structure. Institutions such as schools, some religious institutions and the military are structurally violent, because "it is organised so to privilege a group over others" (Guilherme, 2017: 215). Teachers at schools with their "pyramidal organisational structure" (Guilherme, 2017: 216), for example, are privileged over learners and (within a South African context) poverty-stricken parents. *Cultural violence* denotes the main beliefs or attitudes used to justify direct or structural violence (Dutta, 2020: 2), which include the prejudices or stereotypes existing in society that have been internalised by individuals. Institutions such as schools are culturally violent when they encourage or fail to deal with cultural aspects that either privilege or are demeaning towards particular groups (Guilherme, 2017: 215), such as girls or members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer or questioning and asexual (LGBTQ+) society. Galtung's violence triangle helps us to look at sexual violence beyond rape, sexual abuse and grooming within a school setting, as well as issues such as the imbalance of power between a teacher and his or her learners, or the sport coach and his or her athletes – within the classroom or on the sport field – as well as homophobic attitudes. Galtung's violence triangle forces us not only to act reactively when sexual violence happens but also to deal with violence at its very roots (Guilherme, 2017: 217).

5. Research methodology

This qualitative media study was undertaken within an interpretive research paradigm. Researchers who work within an interpretive research paradigm are of the opinion that "there is neither universal truth nor worldview" (Kankam, 2019: 86). As a qualitative social researcher, I tried to understand and interpret from my own orientation reference and subjective experiences information obtainable from newspaper articles, as well as journalists' framing and interpretation of happenings (see Jacobs, 2014).

Due to ethical, normative and methodological barriers surrounding research on sexual violence (see Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018; Parkes *et al*., 2022; WHO, 2007), I decided to use South African English newspapers as textual data for this study. The print media industry in South Africa is immense. About 10 million publications registered with the Audit Bureau of Circulations (South Africa) were distributed in the third quarter of 2022 (Ledwaba, 2022). The sheer volume of newspapers available motivated my decision to limit my media search to newspaper clippings available on the SA Media database. Using "teacher violence [or] teacher abuse" and "sexual violence [and] school" as keywords, I identified 847 newspaper articles published in the period of 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2022. I scanned through the newspaper articles and downloaded 153 articles that I perceived to be relevant to my topic. Nearly half of the downloaded articles, namely 76 (49,67%), were published in 2022, while 45 (29,41%) were published in 2021 and 32 (20,91%) in 2020 – the year schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lebuso, 2022).

I used qualitative content analysis (QCA) to work through the downloaded newspaper articles. This type of analysis reduces data and is flexible and systematic (Schreier, 2013). I followed the phases provided by Nowell *et al*. (2017) to guide my data analysis. First, I familiarised myself with the data sources (newspaper articles). Next, I used a coding framework to generate initial codes. Thereafter, I searched for themes, reviewed them and then defined and named them. In the last phase, I produced the report.

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of my study, I used the following strategies: I kept an audit trail of the methodological and theoretical decisions that I made and provided sufficient thick descriptions to enable transferability (see Nowell *et al*., 2017). I chose quotations with caution, and when needed, I contextualised these quotations (see Nieuwenhuis, 2007). I also used an appropriate, well-established research method and studied previous research on the topic to frame my findings (see Shenton, 2004). Lastly, I avoided the oversimplification of findings and generalities (see Patton, 2002).

6. Findings and discussion

The aim of this article is to expand the existing academic knowledge of sexual violence against learners in South African schools by utilising newspaper articles as data sources. By means of QCA, I identified seven themes. The findings will, when possible, be placed within the existing body of knowledge on the topic. Findings from this study should be read against the background of altruistic versus materialistic reasons for publishing newspapers. Newspapers inform their readers, are "a reflection of society … depict what and how society works [and] become the voice of our society" (Salvin & Rai, 2021: 7). Yet, in a materialistic world, altruistic reasons for publishing a newspaper are often overshadowed by "market-driven journalism" (Udeze & Uzuegbunam, 2013: 69). Market-driven journalism can often be linked to sensationalism. Sensationalism includes "reporting about generally insignificant or trivial matters and topics in a sensationalistic, trivial or tabloid manner" (Udeze & Uzuegbunam, 2013: 71). The following examples, which will be referred to during my discussion of the seven themes, are illustrative of the presence of sensationalism in my data sources: teacher-learner sexual relations are consensual (see 6.2 and 6.3), learners gain financially by entering into sexual relations with their teachers (see 6.2 and 6.3), female learners are guilty of prostitution (see 6.2), and the detailed descriptions of teachers and other adults inappropriate sexual conduct (see 6.7.1). The presence of sensationalism in my textual data does not mean that newspaper articles are unreliable and not fit to be used to gain insight into sexual violence against learners in South African schools. This, however, asks of the researcher, as is the case with all qualitative researchers, to be cognisant of the subjective nature of qualitative data.

6.1 Extent of sexual violence against learners

A reading of the newspaper articles gives insight into the seriousness of sexual violence in South African schools. Newspapers make official statistics on, for example, crime and violence (SAPS, 2022) and teachers' misbehaviour (SACE, 2017) easily accessible to the public. In July 2020, during a media briefing at the release of the annual crime statistics, the Minister of Police, Beheki Cele, said that educational facilities, including schools, were becoming "hotbeds of sexual violence" (Naidoo, 2020: 5). During the first quarter of 2022/2023, the following national rape statistics were published: of the 67 cases of rape at educational premises, 53 were committed at public schools (Thebus, 2022). The *Daily Dispatch* (2022: 14) gives the following information regarding teenage pregnancies in 2021:

> South Africa registered more than a million births. Of those, more than 45 000 births were to mothers 17 or younger … 42 of these births were to girls aged 11 and 12.[1]

1 Not all these pregnancies are the result of sexual abuse involving teachers or fellow learners. Girls often have sexual relations with so-called sugar daddies, i.e. older men who support these girls and their parents financially (Nkonki, 2022).

Notwithstanding findings from this study highlighting the plight of learners in schools where teacher-on-learner violence is rampant (see 6.3, 6.4 and 6.6), newspaper articles on sexual violence during the closure of schools in 2020/21, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggest that schools seem to be relatively safe places that offer protection to young people. According to newspaper reports by Phandle (2020a) and Nini (2022), teenage pregnancies in South Africa spiked during the COVID-19 crisis and the lockdown of schools. According to the acting director of Childline KwaZulu-Natal, while the lockdown was effective in curbing the virus, "it created a pandemic of another type – domestic violence and sexual abuse against children" (Ngema, 2020: 3). Geach (2020: 4) reports that there was an increase in cyberbullying, online threats, blackmail, harassment and sexual exploitation during the lockdown. Nini (2022: 1) is of the opinion that the school rotation system followed during the COVID-19 lockdown may be blamed for the high number of sexual assaults, because children were left unattended at their homes. The 2020 school closures exposed learner victims of sexual violence to new types of sexual abuse and new perpetrators. From newspaper articles, it seems that the end of the lockdown and the return of teachers and learners to schools anew gave rise to teacher-on-learner sexual abuse (*Daily Dispatch*, 2022). This finding is supported by Evans *et al*. (2023: 740) when they say that "abuse is not unique to schools". According to them, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the risk that girls face in their homes and communities.

6.2 Acceptance and normalisation of teacher-on-learner sexual violence

The view of a spokesperson from the Eastern Cape Provincial Department of Education that society has "sexualised young girls" (Phandle & Ndaliso, 2021: 8) is supported by the ensuing discussion on the acceptance and normalisation of sexual relations between schoolgirls and their teachers. The manager of legal affairs within SACE told Tlhabye and Ndlazi (2020: 1) that SACE had difficulties in getting information to protect and assist children who were victims of sexual exploitation. According to SACE (in Tlhabye & Ndlazi, 2020: 1), the biggest obstacle is parents who refuse to provide names or do not want their children to be interviewed by the police once a matter of sexual exploitation has been reported. Several journalists (Govender, 2021a; Macupe, 2020; Phandle, 2021) write that it is not uncommon for parents to approve of sexual relationships between their children and their teachers, because the teachers provide money or groceries to these impoverished households. In poverty-stricken societies, it is not only the parents but also the victims whose silence or acceptance of teacher–learner sexual relations can be bought: According to a spokesperson of the Teddy Bear Clinic for Abused Children, five Cs usually come into play, namely "cars, clothes, cash, cellphones and cosmetics" (Govender, 2021a: 2). Govender (2021a: 2) reports that at 16 schools visited by a member of the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme, 30% of the learners confirmed that they were in love with teachers or had been proposed to by them. The acceptance, justification and even advancement of sexual liaisons between teachers and their learners in poverty-stricken South African communities and the tendency to see school girls in sexual terms are common practices in Zimbabwe too (see Shumba, 2009).

6.3 Exploitation of learners' academic and athletic aspirations

This study found that teacher–learner relationships are often a power relation in which the teachers have the power to enhance or ruin learners' academic future. Journalists (Govender, 2021a; Macupe, 2020; Patrick, 2022) refer to teachers demanding sexual favours from girls in exchange for good marks or promotion to the next grade. Boys are also enticed into providing sexual favours to better their academic future. According to Phandle (2020b: 1), teachers lure

boys into their homes under the pretext that they will help them with their schoolwork and then give them alcohol and have sex with them. Studies by Leach (2003: 393), Altinyelken and Le Mat (2018: 654) and Steiner *et al*. (2021: 28) on sexual violence in Zimbabwe, Uganda and Liberia, respectively, also found that "transactional sex", where learners enter into a relationship with teachers or older men to finance their education, is a common occurrence. Steiner *et al*. (2021) found that 48,46% of the female participants in their study were victims of transactional sex. Leach (2003: 393) points out that this practice is neither new nor confined to the African continent and gives the example of girls in Thailand who prefer entering into a relationship with a "sugar daddy", rather than taking out a student loan.

Apart from academic aspirations, many learners also aspire to become top athletes. According to Maqhina (2021), there is a growing trend of male teachers and coaches abusing boys. One of the tasks of Operation Nemo – established by the family violence, child protection and sexual offences unit of the police – was to look at the coaches at seven elite schools targeting top athletes (Carlisle, 2022). Marais (2022) and Wicks's (2022) newspaper articles focus on the abusive actions of a water polo coach who sexually groomed boys. According to Marais (2022: 4), the aspirations of athletes looking for any means to further their aspirations, combined with a predatory coach, create "the perfect storm".

6.4 Power imbalance and the consequent abuse of power

It is not surprising that this study found that, in a country where hegemonic masculinity prevails and that is characterised by a hierarchical work and management structure, there is an imbalance of power in schools between heterosexual teachers "that represents the most honoured way of being a man in a given social context, distinguished from less-respected masculinities and providing legitimacy for the overall subordination of women" (Wedgwood, Connell & Wood, 2023: 83). Phandle (2020b: 1) writes about male teachers who use their dominance to manipulate learners, mostly girls, to perform sexual favours. For example, a learner who rejected her teacher's advances was victimised in the teacher's classes (Phandle, 2020b). It is often difficult for parents or learners to report incidents of teacher-on-learner sexual violence. "Currently learners hide these incidents in fear. It is a danger to report a teacher to another teacher … Teachers are unionised in factions. Most of the time they protect each other" (Phandle (2020b: 1). Parents seem to fear non-teaching staff members as well. After the abuse of two sisters by a school's caretaker came to light, the caretaker, who continued to work at the school, intimidated and terrorised the learner and her family (Venter, 2021: 2). There is also the possibility of the accused (teachers) filing or threatening to file counterclaims against their victims (Venter, 2022).

Tlhabye (2021) reports on learners from a special-needs school in Gauteng who shut down their school, burnt tyres and blocked roads. They complained that the school principal and the Department of Education did not take their complaints regarding teacher-on-learner sexual abuse seriously. Two of their placards read "Sexual abuse has become a habit in our school" and "Why should teachers take advantage of our background" (Tlhabye, 2021: 4). One of the learners told the media:

> We want everyone to know that they should not minimise our capabilities because we are disabled. If we cry about something, just help us as you would help anyone else who is not disabled (Tlhabye, 2021: 4; also see Maqhina, 2021).

My finding that special-needs learners are especially vulnerable is supported by Phasha and Nyokangi's (2012) research.

Not only the disabled and the poor are victimised by their teachers. An investigative journalist told Carlisle (2022: 1) that athletes from elite schools – "what we think of as the coolest kids in school" – are extremely vulnerable to being groomed and abused. Several newspaper articles mention the sexual abuse of learners who attend prestige schools (Govender, 2022; Ndaliso, 2022; Pillay, 2022). Carlisle (2022: 1) writes, "Many of the schools were bastions of tradition and education … We have to realise that even in the hallow halls of tradition, children are vulnerable." A mother told Carlisle (2022: 1) that a culture of secrecy and silence prevailed where the school's reputation is more important than the children. Wicks (2022: 2) found that many cases of abuse were either swept under the rug or went unreported. The head of advocacy for Women and Men Against Child Abuse told Wicks (2022: 2):

> The biggest issue we face with abuse at the hands of teachers or coaches is the disincentive to disclose … sexual grooming often involve[s] a "transactional element", where children were coerced into doing something wrong themselves, which could be used as leverage to dissuade them from disclosing abuse.

Furthermore, my study found that LGBTQ+ learners are vulnerable and marginalised. Mlamla (2020) reports on a 16-year-old boy being stabbed 13 times and murdered about his sexual orientation. In Somerset West, a group of parents gathered to oppose a primary school's decision to allow a transgender child to attend school in a girls' uniform and be treated as a girl (Gillford, 2021). The governing body of another school refused to grant a 16-year-old transgender boy permission to wear a boy's school uniform or trackpants[2] (Govender, 2021b). Mvana (2021: 1) reports on incidents of homophobia in Western Cape schools. She writes about a group of learners who celebrated Pride Month in front of a school in Bellville. The group was surrounded, threatened and intimidated by learners and received no support from their teachers; in fact, the teachers used vulgar and abusive language to insult the demonstrating learners (Mvana, 2021: 1). The head of Women and Men Against Child Abuse told Wicks (2022: 2) that homophobia was rampant at many schools, which made learners hesitant to report same-sex abuse. My finding that LGBTQ+ learners are ostracised and discriminated against by teachers, peers and the community is supported by findings by Dunne *et al*. (2006). Moreover, Dunne *et al*. (2006: 89) have found that LGBTQ+ learners often live in fear of being raped because of the myth that sex with a man will make them "straight". Consequently, many of these learners leave school.

6.5 Perpetrators of sexual violence

Teachers have an *in loco parentis* relationship with learners. However, according to Mkhwanazi (2022: 1), they have abandoned their *in loco parentis* role, as they, instead of looking after the learners who are in their care, see them as girlfriends, and even rape them. Macupe (2020) argues that because of the *in loco parentis role* of teachers, their having sex or an intimate relationship with their learners boils down to sleeping with one's own child. In the preceding discussion of the findings, mention was made of school principals (see 6.4), sport coaches (see 6.3) and caretakers (see 6.4) who sexually abused learners. In addition, the data analysis identified other abusers in the school context. The driver of an official scholar transport taxi raped a 15-year-old girl on her way home (Maclennan, 2021: 1), and a 24-year-old assistant teacher and his friends gang raped a 17-year-old learner in the school's toilet (Mkentane, 2022). A girl from the Alfred Nzo school district was gang raped by unidentified men who had somehow accessed the school (Nini, 2022: 1). Learners were also sexually abused by their

2 The school agreed to call the boy by his new name and allow him to use the girls' bathroom (Govender, 2021).

peers (Phandle & Ndaliso, 2021). A clinical psychologist from Pretoria told Steyn (2022) that in more than 40% of sexual abuse cases, including rape, the perpetrators are fellow learners. My study furthermore found that sexual perpetrators are often repeat offenders with multiple victims (Govender, 2021c; Mkhwanazi, 2022; Venter, 2022).

6.6 Impact of sexual violence on victims

Several newspaper articles emphasise the negative effects of sexual violence on the victims' academic, mental, physical and social wellbeing. The *Daily Dispatch* (2022: 14) and Macupe (2021a) highlight the extent of teenage pregnancies involving girls of school-going age. Newspapers place emphasis on the negative impact of pregnancy on a young girl's future. Mention is made of the fact that most of these girls do not return to school after giving birth (Feni, 2022; Petla, 2022). Sometimes they enter into forced marriages (Nini, 2022), or choose to have an abortion (Nini, 2022). Children who have been raped or abused are often afraid to return to school, especially if no action is taken against the perpetrator after the incident has been reported (Phandle, 2020b; Velaphi, 2022; Venter, 2021; Zweni, 2022). It seems as if victims of sexual abuse will go to any lengths to escape from their abusers. For example, Maromo (2022) writes about a 12-year-old boy who stole money from his mother to buy his teacher a PlayStation, hoping that this gift would stop the teacher from sexually abusing him. Newspaper reports also mention that some victims of sexual abuse either commit suicide (Kimberley, 2022; Marais, 2022; Wicks, 2022) or try to commit suicide (Pillay, 2022). A mother of a rape victim told Pillay (2022: 11) that her daughter, who had been a bubbly, outspoken and talkative child, was withdrawn and did not want to eat or go out. According to the mother, the hardest part was that the girl was on antiretroviral medicine, which made her sick.

My finding from the current study that sexual violence within a school context can have a severely negative influence on victims' academic future is supported by other research (see Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018; Jewkes *et al*., 2002; Smiley *et al.*, 2021). Altinyelken and Le Mat's (2018) study also emphasises the negative effects of sexual violence on the mental, physical and social wellbeing of the victims of sexual violence.

6.7 Sexual violence perpetrated against learners

Drawing on Galtung's typology of violence, I identified three dimensions of violence, namely personal or direct violence, indirect, structural violence and cultural violence.

6.7.1 Direct violence

Using the WHO's (2024) definition of sexual violence and the *Sexual Offences Amendment Act* of 2007 as a point of departure (see 2) in my quest to identify acts of direct, personal sexual violence, it became obvious that learners were subjected to a multitude of criminal acts. Teacher perpetrators of sexual violence are accused of unacceptable behaviour (Ndaliso, 2022: 1) or acting in an improper, disgraceful or unacceptable manner (Govender, 2021c: 8). This type of behaviour includes a teacher commenting on the length of a girl's gym slip or her weight and inviting her to meet him after school (Phandle, 2020b). During a South African Human Rights Commission hearing in Limpopo, a learner told one of the facilitators that girls were being "chalk boarded". When the facilitator asked for an explanation, the learner said: "because we cannot reach the chalkboard the teachers lift us up to be able to write on the chalkboard, but in the process put their finger in our panties" (Sadike, 2021: 2). Newspapers report on teachers (Nini, 2022; Velaphi, 2022) and caretakers (Venter, 2021) who touch

learners inappropriately. For example, Velaphi (2022) reports on a teacher who persuaded male learners to massage him, and Ntseku (2021: 3) writes that schoolgirls "experienced being catcalled and sexually harassed in school and in front of their school".

Moreover, the QCA identified instances of learners being violently assaulted and raped. For example, Zweni (2022: 2) mentions a Grade 12 girl who was raped at gunpoint by her principal and a 13-year-old girl who was found unconscious in a toilet with her hands tied with a girdle. Perpetrators of sexual violence use devious ways to groom potential victims (Carlisle, 2022; see also 6.2 and 6.3) and to pull learners into their web. In one case, a teacher seized learners' cell phones at school and told them to collect these from his home. They had to come alone (Mkhwanazi, 2022). A teacher who communicated with girls via WhatsApp claimed to be their spiritual leader and that he would connect them with their ancestors (Govender, 2021c). The consulted newspapers avoided sensationalistic, crude and detailed reporting on the criminal acts committed in these cases. This decorum should be seen as a sign of respect and empathy of journalists in a society where girls are often sexualised.

Even though it is problematic to compare findings from a QCA with results from surveys, the acts of sexual violence listed in surveys are comparable with the acts mentioned in the previous paragraph. Shumba (2001: 81) identified the following types of teacher-on-learner sexual abuse in schools in Zimbabwe: sexual intercourse, love letters, fondling, kissing and hugging, rape or attempted rape and being shown pornographic material. Longobardi *et al*. (2019: 56) perceive ten acts to constitute sexual violence in Italian schools. These acts range from inappropriate touching to rape, being shown pornographic material, and being given money or things to perform sexual acts. The subscale on sexual violence of the survey conducted by Khoury-Kassabri *et al*. (2008: 4) includes three items. The respondents were asked whether a member of staff had made sexual comments to them, touched or tried to touch them inappropriately or made unwanted sexual advantages towards them.

6.7.2 Structural violence

Using Cremin and Guilherme's (2016: 1125) explanation of structural violence as "the kind of violence that is present in societies, rendering them socially unjust", I identified examples of unfairness and the marginalisation of girls and women and the impoverished. After a 15-year-old girl had been raped by the driver of an official school taxi, the Department of Education spokesperson passed the responsibility to the Department of Transport (Maclennan, 2021). In accordance with this, a children's rights activist told Phandle (2020b: 1) that teachers accused of sexual harassment or assault "were simply redeployed or given salary restrictions for what is a dismissible offence". The Centre of Applied Legal Studies (2014: 4) attributes the escalation of sexual violence in South African schools to gaps in accountability, which exist, in part, "because of a lack of implementation of important national laws and procedures for disciplining abusive educators". According to them, this is a result of contradictions in legislation and a lack of coordination among the institutions to which disciplinary proceedings are delegated. The Centre of Applied Legal Studies (2014: 4) found that multiple and duplicative disciplinary processes "may lead to greater learner victimisation and the eventual withdrawal of cases". Educators and school managements who are reluctant to report abusive educators, in effect, silence the abused and fail them.

6.7.3 Cultural violence

In agreement with Guilherme's (2017: 215) findings, this study found that schools are culturally violent because they encourage or, at least, fail to deal with cultural aspects that either privilege or are demeaning towards particular groups. In a country where hegemonic masculinity prevails, girls are sexualised and demeaned (see 6.7.1 for the crude comments, sexual advances and inappropriate behaviour of teachers). Members of the LGBTQ+ community are ridiculed and marginalised by teachers and the public (see 6.4). The stereotyping of girls as sex objects and the normalisation and acceptance of sexual relations between teachers and learners result in learners not reaching their full potential and the prolongation of poverty and oppression (see 6.2).

7. Conclusion

By using newspaper articles as textual data, this study found that sexual violence is a serious problem in South African schools. The study also found that teacher-on-learner sexual relations are often an accepted and normalised practice in impoverished communities. Moreover, it was found that learners' resolve to succeed academically and excel in sport make them easy targets for unscrupulous teachers and coaches in hierarchically organised structures characterised by an imbalance of power. School principals, teachers, assistant teachers, caretakers, taxi drivers and fellow learners were identified as perpetrators of sexual violence in the school context. The study highlights the negative impact of sexual violence on the victims' academic, mental, physical and social wellbeing. This study paints a grim picture of parents consenting to sexual relationships between their daughters and their teachers, girls using sex to escape poverty, sexual relationships between boys and their sport coaches, and covert prostitution. The impact of poverty on sexual violence in South Africa should not be underestimated.

Drawing on Galtung's typology of violence, three dimensions of sexual violence were identified. This multidimensional view emphasises the need to address this scourge on direct, structural and cultural levels. A lack of timely, forceful proactive action involving all sectors of society against sexual violence in schools and the normalisation thereof make, in the words of Phasha and Nyokangi (2012: 171), "a mockery of children's rights to education and the protection from any form of ill-treatment which may interfere with their educational, psychological and social wellbeing".

This study's use of news media and reports as sources of data is a creative way of researching sexual violence in South African schools. It emphasises the immediacy and the seriousness of the problem. Researchers' data gathering is typically directed by unambiguous ethical guidelines, while journalists' data gathering is often market driven. Yet, both data sources can be used to shed light on a serious problem that needs the attention of academics, the general public as well as policy makers.

The aim of this study was not to identify universal truths concerning sexual violence in schools. Working within an interpretive paradigm, the use of QCA to make sense of the data and the utilisation of newspaper articles – whose primary purpose is not to be used as research data – have limitations. A case in point is the emphasis newspapers place on sexual violence committed by teachers and coaches. Yet, according to statistics, most of the acts of sexual violence against learners were perpetrated by their peers (see 6.5). This limitation does not nullify the value of newspaper articles as sources of data to investigate sexual violence in schools.

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