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School violence and its impact on teachers' well-being

Abstract

As a signatory to the applicable United Nations declarations, South Africa is obliged to ensure that all children have access to quality education. The reality, though, is that there are many barriers that make access to education difficult if not impossible. School violence, an escalating worldwide phenomenon, is widely cited as one of the challenges that schools face. The problem, as research has shown, is most prevalent and disruptive in poor communities. Many teachers reportedly leave the profession because they fear school violence or after they have been victims of violent attacks at their schools.

In this article we explore the effect that violence in schools can have on teachers, as experienced by a case of three teachers. An interpretative phenomenological design was used to examine closely the participants' experiences of school violence. The study used the concepts of care and support as theoretical lenses to explore the relationship between sustainable development goals 3 (good health and well-being) and 4 (quality education) of the United Nations in relation to teachers' health as inclusive teaching-learning environments for all school members. Data were collected through narratives that were thematically analysed. The findings revealed that school violence has a negative impact on the general well-being of teachers and can produce what we call narratives of disillusionment.

Keywords: care and support, discourse, human rights, school violence, SDG 3 and SDG 4, teachers

1. Introduction and statement of the problem

In recent times, school-based violence (SBV) has emerged as a persistent global concern, with learners displaying aggression towards both their peers and teachers (WHO, 2019; Ngidi, 2018). Regrettably, there have also been allegations of teachers resorting to violence against the very learners they are responsible for guiding and safeguarding (Grobler, 2018; Jacobs, 2014).

South African schools, like many others worldwide, have not remained unaffected by this distressing challenge. Media reports have brought to light the alarming levels of violence occurring within South African educational institutions and its detrimental impact on the teaching and



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learning environment. One such report, authored by Tshabalala (2023) and published by IOL News on 14 February 2023, bears the title, "Alarm over increase in violent incidents at SA schools". The article sheds light on the growing apprehension regarding the safety of learners and educators in South African schools. It highlights several incidents, including the tragic shooting of a schoolteacher at a Tembisa township school in Gauteng in 2022 (Tshabalala, 2023). The same article refers to a South African Police Service report that reveals that as many as 33 teaching staff members were attacked in the Western Cape Province alone between 2016 and 2022 (Tshabalala, 2023). Furthermore, in the first two months of 2023, six cases of school violence had already been reported across various South African schools, indicating the severity of the daily violence experienced by both educators and learners (Tshabalala, 2023).

A 20-year-old student stabbed and killed a teacher in the Free State (Seleka, 2022). Notwithstanding the abovementioned facts, assault is just one of the many violent acts occurring in school, as violence also manifests as bullying, sexual and emotional abuse, which are as debilitating (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). Violent acts against teachers are defined as any hurtful experiences they suffer, which can be verbal, physical and emotional.

It is essential to acknowledge that other incidents may go unreported, as they are either resolved within schools or fail to reach the attention of the media. Those that are reported, serve as a testament to the extent of violence within South African schools and underscores the urgent need for measures to address and prevent such behaviour (Solomons, 2022; Mncube & Harber, 2013). Both educators and learners deserve a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning, free from the fear of violence. Section 12 of the Constitution of 1996 (RSA, 1996) clearly states that "everyone has the right to freedom and security of the person" and this right applies to all in school communities (Jacobs, 2014: 1; RSA, 1996: 6).

Although considerable research has gone into understanding SBV and how it affects learners (Bare *et al.*, 2022; Coetzee, 2018), the same cannot be said about research that examines how SBV affects teachers in South Africa. For example, in a preface to the World Health Organisation handbook on the prevention of SBV, there seems to be an assumption that SBV affects learners only (WHO, 2019). The bulk of publications on violence against teachers are in the form of media alerts, with little scholarly engagement that seeks to examine in depth how violence against teachers affects their lives and, by extension, those of the learners they teach.

The research that birthed this paper was driven by a need to understand how specifically SBV affects teachers in South African township schools. Intentionally, the paper examines how SBV affects teachers' health and well-being, which inevitably extends to how it affects their ability to work (Pinheiro *et al.*, 2023). According to the WHO (1948), health and well-being are more than the absence of disease or infirmity as they include the state of mental and social well-being. The idea of health and well-being further finds expression in the Sustainable Development Goal 3 through which the United Nations implores member states to "ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages" (UN, 2012). This definition of health by the WHO strengthens our description of violent acts against teachers as a multiplicity of victimisation from learners that could be physical, emotional and verbal and therefore physically and psychologically debilitating to their health.

In relation to this understanding of health, the study sought to answer the question: how does school-based violence affect teachers' health and well-being?

2. Literature and theoretical framework

Most research on SBV against teachers, including intervention programmes to mitigate its occurrence, is from outside South Africa (Bare *et al.*, 2022; Lee, 2013). It is partly the focus of this paper to examine how teachers are positioned regarding SBV. Of interest are discourses that drive research on SBV against teachers in particular directions. Bilton *et al.* (1996: 657) define discourse as “a body of ideas, concepts and beliefs which become established as knowledge or as an accepted world view”. It provides words and conceptual frameworks by which we attempt to understand ourselves and our experiences as well as the world out there (Mosito, 2023). To Foucault and Nazarro (1972), discourse is an act of power actively shaping the lives of the people as it drives individual and organisational interpretations of effects of violence (Watkins *et al.*, 2007).

The study used the concepts of care and support as theoretical lenses through which to explore the relationship between SDGs 3 and 4 of the United Nations in relation to teachers' health and inclusive teaching-learning environments for all school members. The former (SDG 3), implores UN member states to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for citizens of all ages. The SDG 4, on the other hand, agitates member countries to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The two SDGs support our argument that inclusive and equitable education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities is not realisable if teachers' health and well-being are in disarray. This is supported by Dodd, Caio and Meeks (2020) who are of the opinion that achieving SDGs 3 and 4 will make the difference between people thriving or living in misery because better investment in people is fundamental to greater equity and economic growth.

In the section that follows we examine briefly discourses that drive debates on SBV against teachers.

3. Prevailing discourses on SBV against teachers

3.1 Health and well-being discourse

Given the aim of the study, it makes sense to open this section with the discourse on health and well-being. Psychological trauma experienced by teachers who have been directly or indirectly affected by SBV has been the focus of recent research (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2022; Moreroa, 2022; Grobler, 2018; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). The studies on SBV point towards a detrimental impact on teacher job performance, connectedness to learners and decisions to leave the teaching career (Moon & McCluskey, 2020). Many of these studies are aligned with the WHO notion of health as more than the absence of disease, as it refers to “*a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*” (WHO, 2023).

Unhealthy work environments characterised by various forms of violence and a general climate that does not look after workers' health have been found to be breeding a ground for job dissatisfaction and thoughts on quitting the profession or a specific school (Sitoyi, 2020; Berlanda *et al.*, 2019; Mncube & Harber, 2013). Pinheiro *et al.* (2023) report that teachers, especially young and female educators, exposed to violence have a higher likelihood of psychological conditions such as fear, anxiety and aggression. These conditions harm their social relationships, work ability, and make them vulnerable to a poor quality of health and well-being. Fakude (2022: 130) states that “female teachers are those mostly victimised by

learners in schools” and this pattern seems to align itself with high incidences of gender-based violence reported in South Africa. Teachers live in fear for their lives, fear of infringing learners’ rights and how this could, in turn, make them vulnerable to further attacks and loss of livelihood.

The notion of health and well-being extends to how teachers themselves are positioned as carers who should perform a pastoral role (DoE, 2000) among their learners *in loco parentis* (Black, 1979) globally and locally. As clarified by Prinsloo (2005: 9), being *in loco parentis* carries a dual responsibility of (i) looking after the physical and mental well-being of learners, and (ii) the duty to maintain order at a school, which implies educators’ duty to discipline learners. After all, teaching and learning are relational by nature, as they involve several sets of relationships between teacher and colleagues, teacher and parents, and teacher and learners. SBV against teachers can be very harmful and debilitating to the *in loco parentis* role, because it compromises trust and safety on which this role is premised. Most importantly, teachers too have a right to human dignity as stated in Section 10 of the Bill of Rights that “everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected” (RSA, 1996). This highlights the criticality of supporting, respecting, protecting and assuring the rights of both teachers and learners, as highlighted by the human rights discourse which we turn to below.

3.2 Human rights discourse

Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (UN, 1948). The Council of Europe (2023) has likened human rights to armour as they protect those they are meant for with protection while they simultaneously provide rules on how to conduct oneself. This therefore implies that, in seeking to understand violence against teachers, we also need to examine how it finds expression in a human rights discourse, because teachers have rights too. Of interest is how teachers navigate the upholding of learners’ rights to education and safety while also seeking respect for their own rights.

In their guide on Learner Discipline and School Management, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) states that “educators have certain rights protected by the Constitution. The rights of the educator must, however, always be weighed against that which is in the interest of the maintaining of an effective, collaborative teaching and learning environment” (WCED, 2007). Some studies even suggest that in the world of teaching, learners’ rights seem to be more important than those of teachers (Segalo & Rambuda, 2018). The next section explores discourses on changes that might mitigate SBV.

3.3 Change discourse

An increasing number of scholars have shifted research on SVB from *what* and *why* questions to a combined focus that also examines *how* to bring about change as well as the nature of such change (Ardestani *et al.*, 2022; McMahon *et al.*, 2022; Moreroa, 2022; Ngidi, 2018; Taole, 2016). Linked to SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG4 (quality education for all), the radar is on how to promote schools that integrate value-driven education within the teaching-learning of subject specific content (Sayed, Salmon & Balie, 2020).

Through the 2030 agenda, the UN has been on the forefront of ensuring the achievement of all the SDGs. SDG 4 specifically emphasises that all member states should

ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development (UN, 2023).

In line with this call, the integration of peace education in school subjects or even teaching it as a standalone subject is regarded as one of the many ways through which schools can promote a culture of peace and non-violence.

One example is the WCED's Safe Schools Programme, which aims to "work with schools to ensure safe school environments needed for successful teaching and learning" (Saferspaces, 2023). The WCED does this in partnership with local police, neighbourhood watch groups and Community Policing Forums. The success of such programmes means holistic care and support for all members of the school community.

Others have suggested the incorporation of values education across the curriculum. These could be values like respect (Davids & Waghid, 2016) and caring in education (Noddings, 2010). In this sense, the promotion of good conduct among learners will become a shared responsibility by the school community as part of a curriculum that promotes responsible citizenship. Life Orientation, which is generally seen as the ideal subject within which teaching about peace and caring can formally be incorporated, has reportedly not been successful (Adewumi, 2017), largely because schools delegate the teaching of this subject to teachers who are not specifically trained to teach it (Rooth, 2005). As a result, such teachers lack sound teaching methodologies and do little to source relevant teaching and learning materials for the subject (Seherrie & Mawela, 2022). Contained in all discourses on SBV against teachers is the realisation that urgent change is needed to influence a narrative where all members of the school community feel safe.

4. Methodology

4.1 Interpretive paradigm

This qualitative study on how SBV affects the personal and occupational lives of teachers at a township school in Cape Town was located within the interpretive paradigm. Interpretivism allowed the researchers to locate the details and multiple realities of the participants' different insights on how SBV affects their lives (Yin, 2013). Furthermore, the paradigm allows researchers to obtain a deeper understanding of the teachers' experiences with SBV and overall well-being by giving them the opportunity to explore participants' responses further by asking questions that help them to delve deeper into the real nature of the phenomenon.

4.2 Qualitative research approach

Following the qualitative approach, data were collected from teachers through interviews. The voices of teachers were solicited to explore their personal experience with violent behaviour among learners and how they address such issues. Creswell and Poth (2016: 10) note that qualitative research means exploring and understanding the beliefs and experiences of individuals or groups that face a certain social or human challenge. The main aim of this study was to engage teachers in conversations (interviews) that allowed them to describe their experiences of SBV and how it has affected their well-being.

4.3 Site

The researchers chose a primary school located in the township of Samora Machel, situated in Philippi – an informal settlement on the Cape Flats. The decision to focus on this school was driven by reporting, which led to a perception that the area experiences a high incidence of crime and violence. Older and more recent reports indicate that Samora Machel has high rates of housebreakings, muggings and domestic violence, particularly against women and children (Tswete, 2023; Tshabalala, 2023; Mavengere, 2011). Of particular interest was whether any episodes of violence occurred within the school itself and how these might or not have an impact on teachers’ well-being and work.

4.4 Sample

For this study, a single school was selected as the site for the study. This decision was motivated by the fact that it is located within a high-crime area, which indicates a possibility of SBV. The latter was confirmed by the principal during the discussions to recruit participants at the school. Through purposive sampling, we identified three appropriate teachers for the case study. The purposive criteria we used for recruitment were for the participants to be teachers who had directly experienced violence at the school.

The school management indicated that almost every teacher had witnessed some form of violence. Our interest was in those teachers who had both witnessed violence and had been victims of such violent acts. Only three teachers satisfied the full inclusion criteria of having been victims of SBV. According to Richards and Morse (2007: 195), purposive sampling occurs when a researcher selects a sample based on specific characteristics. The criteria utilised for the selection of teachers were that they were qualified educators with a minimum of four years’ teaching experience, residing in the townships, though not necessarily in Philippi, with no gender, race, ethnicity, and other specific identity markers. Coincidentally, all the teachers who volunteered to participate in the study were African female teachers.

Table 1: Study participants

Names	Race	Gender	Age group	Work experience
Teacher 1	Black	Female	50 – 59	± 20 years
Teacher 2	Black	Female	20 – 29	5 years
Teacher 3	Black	Female	30 – 39	5 years

4.5 Data collection technique

The primary method of data collection in this study involved conducting semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with each participant. The interviews allowed the researchers to obtain direct information from the participants about how violence affects their well-being. The semi-structured interviews allowed the freedom to probe participants’ responses further to obtain more information and clarity on some points that emerged during interviews. For example, they were asked to explain in detail the types of SBV they had witnessed, and how it affected their well-being and ability to do their work.

The interview schedule consisted of the 15 questions below. The manner of interviewing was semi-structured to allow the researchers leeway to probe responses and skip some questions if the researchers felt they had already been addressed.

Table 2: Interview schedule

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Have you witnessed violence in your class or school?2. Describe an incident of violence in your class or school?3. How were you personally affected by school violence?4. How do you think school violence affects learners?5. Describe incidents of verbal violence in your class/school.6. Describe incidents of bullying in your class/school.7. How did you react to incidents of school violence?8. How safe do you feel inside the school premises?9. How do you deal with discipline in your class?10. What are your views on corporal punishment?11. How do you handle cases of bullying?12. How do you create a safe space for learners to speak out and express themselves without being ridiculed by others?13. What can the Department of Basic Education and the community do to alleviate the challenges teachers face in township schools?14. How would you describe the learners you teach currently compared with the learners you taught when you started teaching? If there is any difference, and what do you think is causing that?15. What kinds of training have you received to deal with violence at school?
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4.6 Data analysis

For this study, we conducted audio-recorded interviews with three teachers and the interviews were transcribed thereafter. To ensure accuracy, we cross-referenced all three transcriptions with the original recordings, thus familiarising ourselves with the data. Next, we used Maykut and Morehouse's (1994) constant comparative method to arrange the questions into sections we could use for reading in a coherent manner what teachers were telling us about SBV and how it influenced their well-being. We arrived at three categories, i.e. (i) teachers' encounters with violence (questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6), (ii) emotions evoked by the attacks (questions 7 and 8) and, (iii) the nature of interventions they or the school provided to prevent and curb violence (questions 4 and 9–15). The transcribed interviews were reordered in such a manner that they read like a continuous story from each participant and were divided into the three categories. These three sections are in line with thematic analysis, as it is the most widely used when analysing narratives (Riessman, 2008: 5). As described by Aronson (1994), thematic analysis involves recognising patterns in the transcribed interviews and subsequently identifying all relevant data related to the established themes.

4.7 Trustworthiness

Validity or trustworthiness is a crucial consideration in research methodology as it pertains to whether the researcher has effectively measured what was intended to be measured (Kerfoot & Winberg, 1997). In this study, triangulation was the main strategy through which

the trustworthiness of the findings was established. Triangulation is defined as “a process of combining data from different sources to study a particular social phenomenon” (UNAIDS, 2010: 13). A combination of method, participant, investigator, data source and theory triangulation can also be used to enhance trustworthiness of findings (Carter *et al.*, 2014). Participant and investigator triangulation was employed; participant triangulation involved the recruitment of three participants within the same setting (school in this instance) and asking them the same set of questions. Investigator or researcher triangulation involved the collection and analysis of data by two different researchers. As emphasised by Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2007), triangulation helps to facilitate interpretive validity.

4.8 Ethical considerations

All the necessary ethical requirements were observed. For example, we sought ethical clearance from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee of a university in the Western Cape¹ before commencing this study. Thereafter the Western Cape Education Department granted us permission to conduct research at one of their schools, which then allowed us to approach the principal and recruit teachers from the identified school. The three teachers who agreed to participate in the study were informed of their rights and they consented to the study, which included recording the interviews. To safeguard the confidentiality of the participants and the content of the responses, we allocated pseudonyms to the teachers and the school to protect their identities. Before the interviews, the participants were properly informed about the study's process and purpose, as well their rights. In addition, we assured them of confidentiality, which extended to the person transcribing the data as well.

4.9 Findings

The interview schedule consisted of 15 questions divided into three main categories/themes and a varying number of probing questions. Firstly, the interviews derived data on learner-initiated violence against any member of the school community, including the participating teachers themselves and other learners. Another set of questions revolved around how they felt about the violent acts. Specifically, we examined the data for emotions and decisions that were evoked by witnessing violence against self and even others. Related to the issue of emotions was what the teachers explicitly stated how their experiences of violence affected their health and well-being. Finally, we also scrutinised the data for interventions for quelling violence of which the participants were aware. Finally, we looked for examples of successes or failures and what contributed to the success or lack of success. The findings are organised around these three themes.

4.9.1 Teachers' encounters with violence

All three teachers recounted direct acts of violence they had suffered at the hands of learners and sometimes from the school management. These included physical, emotional and verbal abuse. In most cases, they became victims if they sought to intervene when learners were fighting with others. In other cases, they were victimised if they followed up on the work learners were expected to execute. Here follows extracts from the teachers' narratives.

The violence that I witness happens both in the classroom and outside at the playground. These learners fight with each other, assault, even rob other learners of their belongings such as taking the money of a fellow learner within the school premises (Teacher 1).

¹ The name of the university is withheld for ethical reasons.

The illustrative extract from Teacher 1 is representative of what we learned from the other two teachers. Their discomfort with violence emanates not only from them being victims but also from witnessing their learners bullying others, or them being bullied in their presence. This comes out clearly in the extracts below.

Some of the boys I teach are violent and are bullies. These boys bully other learners, they steal and show disrespect towards teachers ... In my class learners like to fight using pens to stab each other ... Some of the violent activities in my class include a learner who is bullied by others – they call her a foreigner. The learner is forced to fight with them to protect herself ... When I try to teach, some learners don't listen to me and bully others or disrupt the class. Violence makes these learners aggressive and disrespectful; it disrupts teaching and learning (Teacher 2).

The school violence not only affected me but also had dire consequences for the learners themselves. I experienced a case where two learners dropped out of school because they were being bullied by other students. One learner was even forced to use drugs by these bullies (Teacher 3).

4.9.2 *The impact of violence on teachers' health and well-being*

The main aim of the study was to explore how violence affects the teachers' well-being and health. The extracts below reveal various ways in which participants were affected by violent attacks against them and their learners.

Such things demotivate me and other teachers to report learners ... Violence in the classroom demotivates me to teach learners that cannot behave themselves and who do not even show respect to you as an adult. These learners are so violent that it even affects them in terms of academic performance ... It can be frustrating especially to the young teachers (Teacher 1).

The words: *demotivate, demotivates, do not even show respect* and *frustrating*, signal that Teacher 1 experienced some form of psychological distress because of the violence she encountered at the school. We observe almost a similar reaction from Teacher 2 in the extract below.

When they talk to the teachers these boys look as if they can beat someone, and I sometimes get a bit scared ... When I try to teach, some learners don't listen to me and bully others or disrupt the class ... it is demotivating ... It becomes difficult to teach effectively and I get frustrated to teach rude learners. I sometimes feel like I should just quit and look for another job ... When it comes to my safety, I do not feel safe as I don't know what might happen to me because of the violent learners. I feel that as teachers we are not protected. It is frustrating to deal with such behaviour ... We are just hopeless (Teacher 2).

From the above extract we can see that Teacher 2's feelings mirror what we have learned from Teacher 1. Furthermore, she added feelings of frustration and hopelessness. More extreme feelings were expressed by Teacher 3:

The violence at the school had a significant impact on me personally. It made me sick, I suffered from constant headaches, and I constantly felt stressed ... which affected my ability to focus on my work ... Due to the stress and sickness, I had to consult a doctor who advised me to take a two-week leave to rest and recuperate. The prevalence of violence in the school environment is distressing ... Feeling unsupported and overwhelmed, I ultimately made the tough decision to resign. The principal's lack of understanding about my health situation and his pressure for me to work despite being unwell led me to prioritise my well-being and choose to leave the job (Teacher 3).

Teacher 3 summed up the devastation felt by teachers who experience violence in schools. The prolonged stress manifested into a physical ailment that led to her resigning from her previous job as a teacher. These stressful teacher experiences led to further probing to understand how teachers or the school intervenes when they have been through episodes of violence.

4.9.3 Teachers' experiences with interventions

As they recalled their experiences of violence and how they felt about it, we were also interested in how they dealt with violence as individuals and at school level. The three teachers who provided the following responses mentioned a variety of ways in which either they or their school management addressed the issue.

To deal with violent behaviour in class, I try to sort it out myself as a teacher. When the violence gets out of hand, I escalate it to the principal's office to deal with it. Sending learners to the principal's office doesn't always work ... To address the issue of violent behaviour, we do call parents to school to discuss learner behaviour ... The school also doesn't have clear policies to deal with discipline, or if we have, we do not implement such policies. We don't have an up-to-date code of conduct; we made contributions to a new code of conduct, but nothing is happening to make it binding. At the school we do not get full support from education authorities (Teacher 1).

Similar to Teacher 1, all three of the teachers reported either attempting to solve the issue themselves or referring learners to the principal and/or the parents. None of these measures as demonstrated by the above extract have curbed or prevented learner violence against teachers. Teacher 2 indicated that the parents are as frustrated as the teachers. When approached by the teachers, they suggest illegal means, such as corporal punishment as a solution to the problem.

When parents are called to talk to or discipline their children, they also complain that even at home such learners do not listen. Some parents suggest that teachers must beat learners when they bully others (Teacher 2).

Our probing led to inquiring if the teachers had received any training on how to manage learner behaviour. Teacher 2's response indicated that none of the training she had was effective because as it had been too theoretical. Teacher 3 indicated that she had some training as part of the B Ed education which has also not helped her.

As a teacher, I do not have any proper training to deal with violent behaviour. When I go to workshops, I find them ineffective to deal with the challenge of violence. At workshops trainers read theories that they do not understand and are irrelevant to teacher (Teacher 2).

Regarding training to deal with violence, I received some training in Life Orientation, particularly about careers and how to handle learners. However, the school's policies on violence and safety were not effectively implemented or followed (Teacher 3).

5. Discussion of findings

A clear pattern emerges from the three teachers' narratives. Firstly, the teachers experienced rampant violence. Secondly, their health and well-being were affected negatively by incidences of violence. This was traumatic, whether experienced by them or learners inside and outside the classroom. Thirdly, no individual teacher interventions seemed to quell violent episodes.

In this section these findings are examined in relation to the literature.

5.1 Teachers' experiences of violence

The findings demonstrate that SBV is as endemic as the literature from across the world indicates (Pinheiro *et al.*, 2023; Moon & McMahon, 2020; Grobler, 2018). The teachers in this study have experienced many episodes of violence, either levelled against them, or against the learners in their care as revealed by Teacher 1's statement, "*The violence that I witness happens both in the classroom and outside on the playground.*" Violence can be in the form of physical acts where either teachers or learners are on the receiving end as disclosed by Teacher 2 that "*These boys are disruptive in class and full of anger ... In my class learners like to fight using pens to stab each other.*" At times abusive language is hurled at them while in other instances acts of disrespect leave them feeling violated. As pointed out by Prinsloo (2005), school-based violence is detrimental to teacher-learner relations and corrodes the legal expectation that teachers should be parental and caring to all learners.

5.2 Health and well-being consequences of violent attacks

One of the key findings is that teachers live under constant fear, worry and stress. As the literature has shown, whether teachers experience theft/property damage, physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and non-contact aggression, the ensuing result is extreme distress among the victims (Moon & McMahon, 2020). Considering the WHO's definition of health as a qualitative state of "*physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*" (WHO, 2023), teachers' fears and worries indicate a poor state of health and well-being. All three of the teachers disclosed ways in which school violence had a negative impact on their health and well-being. For example, Teacher 1 spoke about how frustrating violence can be especially to young teachers. Teacher 2 mentioned that she sometimes gets scared and that "*When it comes to my safety, I do not feel safe as I don't know what might happen to me because of the violent.*" Teacher 3 was more explicit about how violence affected her health. In her own words,

The violence at the school had a significant impact on me personally. It made me sick, and I constantly felt stressed ... Due to the stress and sickness, I had to consult a doctor who advised me to take a two-week leave to rest and recuperate. The prevalence of violence in the school environment is distressing.

These feelings of fear and a reduced state of health, especially among female teachers, have been reported in other studies where teachers were victims of violence (Pinheiro *et al.*, 2023; Fakude, 2022). Most importantly, the health and well-being finding also highlights the deleterious impact violence can have on the personal and occupational well-being of the teachers which other studies indicate can have far reaching negativity on learners' opportunities for learning (Split, Koomen & Thijs, 2011).

5.3 Possible interventions to prevent school violence

The main aim of the study was to explore how SBV affects teachers' health and well-being. One of the follow-up questions in all the interviews was how teachers dealt with violence as individuals and the school where they worked. Mentioned by all the participants were individual attempts, which left them as frustrated as the violence itself. It also appeared there was no whole-school formal programme guided by some policy or framework that was meant to promote a conducive environment for teaching and learning. A review of the literature has demonstrated examples of UN led frameworks such as Peace Education and emphasis on

values of caring that should be integrated across the curriculum (UN, 2023; Ngidi, 2018; Davids & Waghid, 2016; Noddings, 2010). As indicated by previous studies, Life Orientation is a subject within which most of the efforts on promoting peace are located, but there are problems of allocating untrained teachers to the subject (Rooth, 2005). Preservice teacher education and continuing professional development (CPD) programmes have been found wanting as beneficial avenues for strengthening the acquisition of new content and teaching methodologies among new and experienced teachers (Sayed *et al.*, 2020).

6. Recommendations

The study indicates that teachers, schools and parents are trapped in a vicious cycle of child-learner initiated violence where neither appears to have solutions. Instead of resorting to corporal punishment as suggested by some parents, schools and parents can work together to address contributing factors to learner-initiated violence. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Care and Support for Learning (CSTL) Framework presents violence as one of the push factors that contribute to low enrolment, high dropout, and poor performance. The CSTL positions schools as ideal environments that can promote integrated care for teachers and learners. For example, the school could advise and explore with parents, positive behavioural management strategies that do not involve corporal punishment.

Initial teacher education and continuing professional development of teachers can also play a role in developing resilient teachers who have acquired research informed strategies on how to manage learner behaviour. Training could also involve exposing schools to existing guidelines on how to promote safety. As indicated by Kreifels and Warton (2024), South Africa has a rich store of policies and frameworks for safe schools, what remains unclear is the knowledge and of application of such instruments.

7. Conclusion

As a qualitative study, the experiences of teachers in this study are not representative of what happens in all township schools. The study has demonstrated that violence against teachers is a lived reality among some teachers in South African schools. South Africa is infamously known for violence perpetrated against women and the experiences of female teachers in schools further highlight the plight of women in different contexts.

The study highlights three gaps that can be investigated further through research and interventions. These are a need for values-driven education where respect and peace are emphasised. Secondly, all the teachers pointed towards a lack of training in initial teacher training and the shallowness of CPD programmes. Since all the teachers have highlighted the negative psychological impact of SBV, this highlights a possible area of targeted programmes that capacitate teachers with resilience and coping strategies. The third is to explore the extent to which school management teams play a role in translating policies and guidelines into school safety programmes in which all members of the school community are participants.

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