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# Violence in South African schools: Trends, psychology and recommendations

## Abstract

*School violence is a global concern with prolific consequences as a result of its lifelong psychological impact. Violence will continue to afflict human populations due to its underlying psychology, but this can be tempered by culture and other environmental factors. Violence is part of human nature. It has an evolutionary basis rooted in our biology and is expressed psychologically through behaviour, thinking and emotional expression. There are many forms, including physical and sexual assault, bullying and cyberbullying, public shaming, sexual harassment, suicidality, verbal and emotional abuse, and property theft. Although violence is ubiquitous, it is distributed disproportionately, as is obvious when considering demographics such as age, race, ethnicity, geographic location, socioeconomic status, gender, and environmental disparities (e.g. pollution, noise, and access to essentials). A prime example of environmental disparities is the current crisis affecting South Africa's electrical grid and its effects on behaviour. These facts reveal challenges that can be addressed to reduce violence overall and in specific settings, concomitantly reducing disparities and enhancing social justice. We address these issues from the bio-psycho-sociohistorical model (BPSHM) and provide recommendations for amelioration within the context of school violence in South Africa. While school violence is an increasing problem and challenge for all stakeholders, Nelson Mandela reminds us, "We owe our children – the most vulnerable citizens in any society – a life free from violence and fear."*

**Keywords:** school violence, South Africa, psychology of violence, violence prevention

## 1. Introduction

School violence is a global issue (UNESCO, 2023) with tremendous consequences due to its lifelong psychological impact and social effects. Violence will continue to afflict human populations due to its underlying psychology, but this can be tempered by culture and other environmental factors.

This paper examines school violence using the bio-psycho-sociohistorical (biological, psychological, socio-logical, historical, BPHSM) model (Milligan *et al.*, 2014) to understand how this problem developed into the current national crisis in South African schools. Firstly, we examine

aggression and violence from its origins through the process of evolution, biological and psychological co-evolution. Secondly, we consider the problem from a historical perspective. Thirdly, we describe many of its relevant forms and note the disproportionate occurrence across populations, and fourthly, we identify challenges and provide recommendations.

School violence interferes with the goals of school systems that are meant to provide education and enculturation to the younger generations. Reducing violence should improve educational systems that will benefit everyone. In addition, success in South African schools can provide replicable models for others to apply, thereby having a positive global impact.

## 2. Biological and psychological co-evolution

Evolution refers to changes in species over long periods that occur due to natural selection dictated by successful adaptation to changing environments (Buss, 2024). Through the process of evolution, human biology and psychology have changed. However, cultures have developed much more rapidly. Therefore, people today are more understandable within the context of what was adaptive and conferred survival and reproductive advantages to our long-ago ancestors. We are the survivors thanks to our ancestors; in many ways, who we are is stuck in our primordial past. This applies to and informs our understanding of human aggression and violence.

Aggression is behaviour intended to harm others, physically or psychologically. Violence, in contrast, does not imply that intention (Lenta & Cormos, 2017), but both can have harmful outcomes. Aggression and violence are part of human nature and have an evolutionary basis rooted in our biology and are demonstrated psychologically through behaviour, thinking, and emotional expression (Zhang-James *et al.*, 2019). This includes bio-psycho co-evolution (as biology and psychology evolve together), as well as broader views such as a bio-psycho-sociohistorical explanation (also taking history and societal/sociological factors into account) (Milligan *et al.*, 2014) and a cultural evolutionary perspective (looking at factors influencing the development of culture) (Rinduru, Bushman & Van Lange, 2018). Developmental (changes over time in an individual's development) and epigenetic interactions (two-way influences of genetics, genes and environment) are informative as well (Provençal, Booij & Tremblay, 2015). Changing any of these factors changes the others in predictable ways. This knowledge helps to identify solutions to problems that violence causes.

Although people create culture, in some ways "climates create culture" as well (Rinduru *et al.*, 2018: 113), and this can account for some differences among cultures. For example, parasitic or pathogenic stress, more common in hotter climates, is correlated with violence, and resultant behaviour focuses on differentiating between in-group and out-group members as a health-protective measure. Individuals in one's trusted in-group are seen as more likely to be healthy and, therefore, less likely to be targets of violence.

Both interpersonal (between persons) and intergroup (between groups) aggression and violence appear to be affected (Thornhill & Fincher, 2011). The human immunodeficiency virus (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) (HIV/AIDS) is another parasitic threat in South Africa, primarily transmitted by older men infecting young women (Wadman, 2022). Youth and health are positively correlated, which increases the risk that young females will be targets of sexual violence because they are perceived as more likely to be healthy (Buss, 2024). These are aspects of our behavioural immune system, the psychological complement of

the biological immune system (Kramer & Bressan, 2021; Murray & Schaller, 2016). Framing violence as a communicable disease and public health threat is an associated view (Reimann, 2019). We Care is an application of this approach to reduce school violence in South Africa. It includes people from each stakeholder group (i.e. teachers, learners, community members, parents), focused on anger management and conflict resolution, and preliminary results appear promising (Ngidi & Kaye, 2022).

Geographical psychology is the study of the relationship between ecological factors (e.g. weather, terrain) and psychology; that is, “the links between people’s psychological characteristics and the features of the places in which they live” (Chen *et al.*, 2020) add to our understanding of environment-behavioural interactions and effects on personality and its expression. For example, high ambient temperatures are associated with aggressive social behaviour, partly due to more opportunities for social interaction (Hsiang, Burke & Miguel, 2013; Potgieter *et al.*, 2022), and climate change might increase this effect (Mares & Moffett, 2019). Food insecurity and malnutrition due to climate change decimating food supplies increase aggression, and malnourished children are prone to developing antisocial personality traits (Plante & Anderson, 2017).

These characteristics of people as a species help to explain school violence as a common reaction to environmental stressors. The specific forms these reactions are strongly influenced by the culture in which they occur.

The next section is a brief history of South Africa. As James Baldwin (1985: 414) writes, “The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.”

### 3. History of South Africa

The history of South Africa provides a framework for understanding school violence today. Casella (2012) argues that, although helpful, theories on violence developed from the global north do not provide a full picture of violence as a phenomenon within contexts with a totally different history. Conceptualising violence from a historical perspective and within the context of South Africa reveals some aspects that explain the prevalence of school violence as a consequence of violence prevailing in the community and broader society. To a large extent, this arose from the history of inequalities and past injustices that continue to exist both explicitly and implicitly. Violence is a form of resentment or resistance to perceived injustices (Tankebe, 2009). While some theories look at violence as engrained in the biological makeup of an individual, other theories look at external factors that can explain violence. Both are informative.

For instance, Robert Merton’s strain theory (1957) helps to explain violence in South Africa. Merton (1957) argues that social factors resulting from inadequate means to fulfil legitimate desires in individuals drive them towards acts of lawlessness, including violence. Power (2017: 297) posits that “socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment can make people feel disempowered and frustrated by their circumstances, leading them to use violence, rape and other forceful acts as a means of asserting power and being in control”.

Violence in schools in South Africa is embedded in this bigger (national) picture of violence. Attesting to this fact, the Minister of Basic Education in South Africa, in addressing a summit on school safety, referred to South Africa as being characterised by violence. She reiterated how “the violence seen in schools accentuates the dictum that schools are in fact

the microcosm of society”, and later concluded that “the high level of violence in schools reflects a complicated combination of past history and recent stresses on individuals, schools, and broader communities” (Grobler, 2019).

Historical events in South Africa contributed to the violence witnessed in schools today through exploitative tendencies that prevailed through colonialism, apartheid, and the current dispensation, which have resulted in gross inequities and the marginalisation of certain sections of the population. These previous structures contributed to dismantling social family structures intended to maintain cohesion, solidarity and order, thereby exposing society to violent behaviours. In 2020, South Africa was ranked the most unequal country in the world, with a World Bank .62 Gini index coefficient (Gini index worldwide 2020, by country | Statista), where 0 means a perfectly equal income distribution in a nation and 1.00 means maximum income equality.

Modern humans were in the region more than 100 000 years ago. The Dutch arrived in 1652 and brought enslaved people to the area shortly after that. The British invaded the country in 1795 and eventually (after 1902) established four colonies they unified in 1910 as the Union of South Africa, which became fully sovereign in 1934, though still part of the British Empire. The Republic of South Africa was formed in 1960 when South Africa made a unilateral decision to leave the Commonwealth. Slavery was abolished in 1838, but black people were excluded from power until the 1980s, and apartheid continued until 1994. The remnants of colonialism and apartheid form the foundation of racial disparity and income and socioeconomic problems that continue to affect health, education and prospects for a better life (Wadman, 2022).

Laurie and Shaw (2018) portray capitalism as a form of violence. The history of South Africa proves this assertion credible. It reveals how structural violence inflicted on South Africans has been a breeding ground for other forms of violence emanating from inequalities. Manifested forms are a response to the subtle violence that developed over time through the structures and powers that were, and continue to be, in control.

Many key political decisions promoted socioeconomic injustices, which in turn created violence among communities, including schools. The 1913 Native Land Act legitimised the dispossession of land belonging to the indigenous people, leading them towards poverty (Modise & Mtshiselwa, 2013). The demarcation of areas based on race relegated Black South Africans to the periphery of participation and benefits from being South African. According to Pandey (2012), the weakening of social resources to enhance stability and non-violent conflict resolution was exacerbated by the apartheid government through its subjection of Black people to poverty, inequality and high levels of unemployment. In resistance to the oppressive regime, violence erupted in most parts of the country, particularly in the informal settlements and townships (Minnaar, Pretorius & Wentzel, 1998). Violence is embedded in South Africa’s culture and history (Hoosen *et al.*, 2022).

The Bantu Education Act of 1953 further excluded black South Africans (SAHA, 2019). Categorising schools based on race was arguably a way of endorsing the inferior nature of the African mind while preparing them for an inferior position in society (Davenport & Saunders, 2000). This inferior education led most Black South African men towards menial jobs that were not only exploitative, but dismantled their family structures, as it caused most men, considered household heads, to leave their families to find employment. Richter, Chikovore and Makusha (2010: 361) state how “the Apartheid policy controlled the movement of people in ways that

entrenched migrant labour and disrupted family life". Father figure absence in the families left gaps in children's socialisation, including discipline. Naidoo and Sewpaul's study (2014) found a link between violence among adolescent sexual offenders and the absence of fathers during their upbringing. Many women, too, migrated away from their families and left children mostly in the care of grandparents. According to 2021 South African government statistics, 31,7% of Black children live with their biological fathers, compared to 86,1% of Indian or Asian children, 51,3% of coloured children, and 80,2% of white children. The lack of direction for children growing up resulted in the mushrooming of delinquent behaviour among young people, including gangsterism, to prove their masculinity. Gangs start at community levels and then infiltrate the school environment (Glaser, 2000).

The prevalence of domestic violence and gender-based violence (GBV), both of which have been topical in South Africa, are also factors. Children who witness domestic violence at home are more likely to become perpetrators of violence (Jewkes *et al.*, 2011). In South Africa, most of this violence occurs in townships and areas occupied by socioeconomically disadvantaged people. For instance, a study by Kaminer *et al.* (2013) in one of Cape Town's exposed areas, the Cape Flats, reveals that 76% of the school participants witnessed violence at home and within the neighbourhood. As expected, there is a distinct difference between school violence incident rates in township and inner-city or exposed schools compared to their counterparts in the former model C, suburban and private schools. Van der Westhuizen and Maree (2009) confirm that school violence is more prevalent in inner-city schools than suburban schools due to the already volatile nature of the former and higher incidents of various forms of criminality.

Historically, school violence can be explained by the oppressive nature of the exploitative and exclusionary regimes that created breeding grounds for violence that erupted in communities as a form of resistance and rebellion. Currently, similar exclusionary tendencies that create polar differences between the well-resourced suburbs and under-resourced townships continue to manifest through resentment and resisting any form of authority, including in the schools. Secondly, the creation of a dysfunctional absentee-father family structure left young men resorting to violence as a show of masculinity.

Ongoing problems from pervasive racism led to the 1999 South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC) study titled 'Racism, Racial Integration and Desegregation in South African Public Secondary Schools', which confirmed structural racism emanating from the history of South Africa and reinforced in communities (Vally, Dolombisa & Porteus 2002). In 2011, the government released the National Development Plan: Vision for 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2017), which they say "is a step toward charting a new path for South Africa in dealing with the triple challenge of poverty, unemployment and inequality" (South African Government, n.d.). Thirteen years later, the question of how effective this plan has been has yet to be answered.

Violent criminal behaviour in South Africa is increasing overall. It has significant geographical variation in rates, and South Africa has a murder rate that is six times higher than the global average, based on statistics from the South African Police Service (SAPS) (Gates *et al.*, 2019; SAPS, 2021). Vally *et al.* (2002) describe many brutal forms of violence prevalent in South African schools through the 1990s, including rape and murder perpetrated by and against students, teachers, administrators, and parents inside schools, in transit, and at school-sponsored activities. These forms persist (Qwabe, Maluleke & Olutola, 2022).

School stationery, electronic devices like cell phones, iPods, MP3 players, and tablets/iPads (Msiza, Malatji & Mphahlele, 2020), classwork, textbooks, bags, calculators, instruments, and money (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Ngidi & Kaye, 2022) are typical targets of theft. Vandalism includes graffiti, torn books, broken school windows and doors, and destroyed notes or student files (Ncosta & Shumba, 2013). During the COVID-19 lockdown, 397 schools were vandalised, straining the education budget and affecting the availability of education resources today (South African Government, 2020).

Globally, school violence is categorised as physical, psychological or sexual violence. School violence often includes multiple types.

#### 4. Physical violence

Physical violence can occur among learners, or among learners and adults (e.g. teachers, school staff members). Physical attacks in South African schools consist of rock throwing, stabbings/attempted stabbings, robbery, hitting, kicking, pushing, bullying, and school shootings (Ngidi & Kaye, 2022; Tshabalala, 2023). Physical fights are peer-to-peer, between two learners with equal strengths and power engaging in a physical altercation, or between a learner and a school staff member (UNSECO, 2019). Physical bullying is typified by repeated acts of physical aggression against a victim who is less powerful.

Physical violence, the deliberate use of force to inflict bodily harm, included as a type of discipline like corporal punishment perpetrated by teachers, is uncommon worldwide, but is a serious problem in South Africa. Corporal punishment in schools involves deliberate painful or uncomfortable physical force such as striking children with the hand or objects, shaking, pinching, throwing, kicking, pulling, pushing or scratching them (UNESCO, 2019; WHO, 2021a), and can include denying or restricting toilet breaks, meals, drinks, heat, and shelter, or requiring of the child to exercise. The Abolishing of Corporal Punishment Act 33 of 1997 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1997) and section 10 of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (RSA, 1996) prohibit the use of corporal punishment in schools, but it is still common (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Statistics South Africa, 2021; Ngidi & Kaye, 2022; Mahlangu *et al.*, 2021).

Gangsterism (gang-related violence) is widespread in South African schools (Alabi & Ngidi, 2021). Schools are marketplaces for drugs, alcohol, weapons and human trafficking (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011). Although gangsterism usually involves physical violence, psychological violence can be employed as threats.

#### 5. Psychological violence

Psychological violence involves emotional and verbal abuse, social exclusion, suicidality (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021b), and relational or social bullying (UNESCO, 2019). Psychological violence entails the routine and intentional use of various words and non-physical actions to manipulate, hurt, weaken or frighten a person mentally and emotionally (Save Lives, 2019). This can distort, confuse or influence a person's thoughts and actions in daily life, changing their sense of self and harming their well-being. Psychological violence includes verbal abuse, emotional abuse, social exclusion, and psychological bullying.

Emotional abuse is a behavioural pattern in which an individual purposefully and recurrently subjects another person to harmful acts affecting their overall mental health, ability to behave and the capacity to feel emotional (APA, n.d.). Researchers identified many types, including

verbal abuse, coercion and terror, humiliation and degradation, exploitation, harassment, rejection and withholding of affection, isolation and excessive control. Verbal abuse occurs when someone uses words to dominate, mock, manipulate and/or disparage another person while also damaging that person's psychological well-being. It is a strategy for controlling and maintaining power over another person (Karakurt & Silver, 2013).

Cyberbullying (electronic) bullying is a global culture of social aggression perpetrated by groups or individuals who employ electronic techniques such as flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion and cyberstalking (Rachoene & Oyedemi, 2015). It entails intentionally using technology such as mobile phones, chatrooms, text messages, e-mails, instant messages, website posts and social networking sites to inflict psychological harm on someone (Gladden *et al.*, 2014; UNESCO, 2019).

Suicidality refers to thoughts (ideation) and behaviours intending to end one's life (Jager-Hyman, Wenzel & Brown, 2017). The ultimate consequence of school violence worldwide is suicide (Hendricks, 2019; Turanovic & Siennick, 2022). The WHO (2021b) identifies suicide as a global health concern and the fourth leading cause of adolescent death. Suicidality is associated with aggressive behaviour, low self-worth, stress, bullying, rape, poverty, peer conflict, and racial intolerance (Shilubane *et al.*, 2015; Hendricks, 2019). In South Africa, suicide due to school violence is a critical issue that must be addressed (Hendricks, 2019).

## 6. Sexual violence

Sexual violence – physical and psychological – is non-consensual sex acts, including attempted acts, unwanted touching, sexual harassment, sexual comments and jokes, gender discrimination, and sexual bullying (UNESCO, 2019). Sexual assault is non-consensual sexual contact or behaviour that includes rape, attempted rape, fondling or unwanted sexual touching like kissing or forcing a victim to engage in sexual acts such as oral sex or penetration (UNESCO, 2019; RAINN, n.d.).

Sexual bullying includes being made fun of with sexual jokes, comments or gestures (UNESCO, 2019). Sexual harassment means continued and unwelcome sexual conduct, bullying, intimidation, or improper promise of exchanged compensation for sexual favours (SAPS, n.d.). Sexual abuse without contact includes sexual intimidation, exhibitionism, and verbal sexual harassment (UNESCO, 2019).

In South Africa, school violence often includes sexual violence (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011; UNESCO, 2019). Non-contact exhibitionism is the most prevalent form for boys (e.g. exposure to pornography). Girls more commonly report physical sexual abuse like rape, attempted rape and unwanted touching by a known adult such as a teacher (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011; Ward *et al.*, 2018).

## 7. Demographics related to violence

Violence is ubiquitous, but is distributed disproportionately, which is obvious when considering demographics such as age, race, ethnicity, geographic location, socioeconomic status (SES), gender (Björkqvist, 2018), and environmental disparities (e.g. pollution, noise, and access to essentials). A prime example of environmental disparities is the current crisis affecting South Africa's electrical grid and its effects on behaviour (Khumalo, 2023).



## 8. Aetiology of school violence

There are many contributing factors, including community crime and violence, easy access to school premises, overcrowding, ineffective disciplinary measures or indiscipline, societal norms and values, intolerance, and socioeconomic problems (Vally *et al.*, 2002; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013; De Wet, 2016; Alabi & Ngidi, 2021).

According to the 2008 and 2012 National School Violence studies, students with high levels of exposure to crime and violence were substantially more likely to be victimised by school-related violence than those with low exposure (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) found that violence in communities is widespread and associated with school vandalism and students carrying weapons and using drugs.

Easy access to educational facilities limits the school administration's ability to secure the schools and ensure safety, and increases the vulnerability of schools to gang-related violence, school staff members and students' victimisation, and drug/alcohol distribution. Deficient security puts valuable teaching equipment at risk of theft or destruction by outsiders (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013).

Classroom overcrowding and ineffective discipline render a school environment un conducive to learning and teaching but primed for crime and violence. Time spent resolving violence-related problems takes up valuable teaching time (Alabi & Ngidi, 2021; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013; Qwabe *et al.*, 2022). Antisocial and pro-aggression attitudes and beliefs are factors as students learn to engage in antisocial behaviour and deem violence as an appropriate method to resolve issues (Turanovic & Siennick, 2022). This perspective contributes to high rates of school violence because schools are microcosms of their communities (Ngidi & Kaye, 2022).

Many people in students' homes and communities live with unemployment, poverty and violence every day. Gangsterism lures dejected, poor, unemployed and out-of-school youth to social and economic survival through socially unacceptable means such as selling drugs (as cited in De Wet, 2016; Vally *et al.*, 2002).

## 9. Impact of school violence

Exposure to violence and victimisation at school is associated with many health, psychological, behavioural and social outcomes in young people, including anxiety, depression, poor mental and physical health, suicidality, loneliness, somatic complaints, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, truancy, poor academic performance, bullying, and substance abuse (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013, Hendricks, 2019; Turanovic & Siennick, 2022; Kuposov *et al.*, 2023). Each of the above has a negative impact on social functioning, learning and teaching.

School violence has developmental consequences for perpetrators, victims and bystanders who witness violence. Turanovic and Siennick (2022) found that bullying is the top-ranked consequence; suicidality had a moderate association; and being a perpetrator or victim at school may perpetuate a cycle of aggression. Indirect victimisation contributes to a school climate of fear and insecurity which hinders learning, curtails academic performance, and eventually harms students' longer-term developmental trajectories (Burton & Leoschut, 2013).



## 10. Trends in South African school violence

Escalating school violence in South Africa, including extreme brutality over the past decade, is a major concern for citizens, the media, school management, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and governmental agencies (Hendricks, 2019). The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention revealed in the National Schools Violence Study (Burton & Leoschut, 2013) that approximately 15,3% of students in South Africa between Grade 3 and Grade 12 had experienced some form of school violence; 12,8% were threatened with violence; 5,8% experienced assault; 4,6% were robbed; and 2,3% experienced sexual violence at school (as cited in Burton, 2016). In 2012, the second NSVS reported regarding 121 South African secondary schools that more than a fifth of students had experienced school-related violence; 12,2% were threatened with violence; 6,3% were assaulted; 4,7% experienced sexual assault or rape; and 4,5% experienced robbery (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). These numbers illustrate the longstanding violence to which South African students are subjected.

Gang activity and interschool rivalries make schools increasingly violent environments (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; De Wet, 2016; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). Schools should be safe havens for students, but educators who commit violence in South African schools make them unsafe since the adults responsible for providing safety are sometimes the agents of violence (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011).

The crime statistics of the second quarter of 2022/23 recorded 19 homicides in primary, secondary and high schools, daycare centres, special schools and tertiary institutions. There were 83 rapes: 6 at daycare centres, 5 at special needs schools and tertiary institutions, and 67 occurred at primary and secondary schools (Van Zyl, 2022). Between 2016 and 2022, the South African Police Services (SAPS) disclosed that 33 teaching staff members had been violently assaulted in the Western Cape (Tshabalala, 2023). Crime statistics also reported 258 cases of assault and grievous bodily harm (GBH), 22 cases of attempted murder, and 411 gang-related incidents on educational premises (Van Zyl, 2022; Rall, 2022).

Early in the 2023 academic year, at least six violent incidents were reported at schools across South Africa. The Kagiso Secondary School shooting was a highly publicised incident. An alleged attacker held school staff members hostage, stabbed and wounded a teacher, and was fatally shot by another teacher (Tshabalala, 2023). Many initiatives target reducing and preventing school violence, including the National School Safety Framework (NSSF), but violence persists.

## 11. Challenges

The preceding reveals challenges to reducing and preventing violence and disparities and enhancing social justice (Khumalo, 2019). These range from macro-level changes, such as addressing climate change (Carlton & Hsiang, 2016; Rinduru *et al.*, 2018), enacting provincial mental health policies (Mokitimi, Schneider & De Vries, 2018), and encouraging buy-in from leaders at all levels to micro-level changes that target individual schools and their students, staff and families (Ngidi & Kaye, 2019).

The culture of violence in South Africa (Du Toit & Manganyi, 2016; Power, 2018) is a serious problem that can lead to deeper despair. A United Nations (UN, 2015) report notes that inclusive and equitable quality education is obstructed by ongoing violence in schools in South Africa. The school is the duty bearer for the right to education for every child (Ferrara *et al.*, 2019). For this right to be fully realised, several conditions must be in place, including the

conduciveness of the school environment itself. In examining the level of violence that occurs at schools, especially at exposed schools (inner city and township), the volatile nature of the school environment hampers meaningful learning. Studies on school violence reveal how student learning is affected by violence in the school, as discussed previously.

## 12. Recommendations and conclusion

### 12.1 Reparative measures

For nearly four decades, South Africa's educational system had racial segregation in schools that emphasised white superiority in learning abilities due to the Bantu Education Act of 1953 (Vally *et al.*, 2002; SAHA, 2011). Thirty-two years after integrating public schools on 9 January 1991, schools still suffer from the effects of poverty, prejudice, cultural differences, gender inequalities, sexual harassment, and illiteracy, as well as the historical inequities of the Bantu Education system, which is the fundamental cause of school violence (SAHA, 2011, De Wet, 2016). De Wet (2016: 8) contends that public and education policies must address "the intersection between gender oppression, and the plight of the unprivileged and poor in a racially segregated society" as the structural origin of South African school violence. Recognising and addressing intolerance as a primary source of the school-related violence that plagues South African schools is the foremost recommendation.

Addressing the challenges of school violence requires measures to repair injustices of the past as well as the present. Measures must be tailored to redress past injustices whose remnants still exist in South Africa. Prevailing inequities fuel ongoing violence in society.

Instituting measures within schools that directly target acts of violence is a crucial first step. This includes engaging in dialogues with students (both perpetrators and victims) to help identify the root causes of such behaviour. Moulds *et al.* (2016) note that some adolescent violence results from psychological disorders and traumas. Children's exposure to violence increases their likelihood of their becoming perpetrators. These perpetrators can be considered victims themselves. Therefore, governments and school authorities should implement support structures to provide a nurturing environment to listen to them and develop ways of rescuing them. This requires investing in training diverse personnel to provide necessary support and referrals for students.

### 12.2 Teacher empowerment

Most school violence happens in the classroom (Hanaya, McDonald & Balie, 2020). This raises concerns about teachers' level of control and behavioural management skills. Some schools still practise corporal punishment, although this is illegal and is considered a form of violence. McDonald (2014) believes that equipping teachers with the proper skills and tools would be a promising way of curbing school violence.

As a result of under-resourcing, most teachers are overloaded with work and have very high teacher-pupil ratios. This creates low morale for most teachers in schools that are both underfunded and prone to violence (Shields, Nadasen & Hanneke, 2014). Hanaya *et al.* (2020) argue for teacher agency, which includes employing pedagogic approaches aimed at instilling a peaceful environment and disrupting violent tendencies. Ensuring a safe teaching-learning environment is crucial. Recommendations for the amelioration of violence in schools include using effective evidence-based conflict management training and violence prevention strategies (Alabi & Ngidi, 2021; Ngidi & Kaye, 2022), implementing a multi-tiered framework

like Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to create “safe, positive, equitable schools” (PBIS, n.d.), and ensuring the availability of a trained, school-based mental health professionals (e.g. school counsellors, school psychologists and school social workers) for every 250 students to promote mental health and provide interventions after violent incidents (ASCA, n.d.).

### 12.3 Accountability

Criminal behaviour has legal consequences. Laws should be enforced, whether the perpetrator is a student, teacher, administrator, or outsider. Oversight should ensure that regulations and policies are followed, such as the ban on capital punishment in schools and zero tolerance for sexual misconduct. Government officials must be held accountable for passing supportive legislation and appropriating enough funding to ensure a safe and equitable education for all South Africans.

**Table 1:** Recommendations to Reduce School Violence in South Africa based on the Bio-psycho-sociohistorical Model (BPSHM)

Component	Recommendation	Assigned Stakeholders	Report Date
Biological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Reduce parasite threats (e.g. HIV, tuberculosis)</li> <li>b. Healthier less stressful environments (e.g. clean water, food)</li> <li>c. Climate change measures (join global initiatives)</li> </ul>		
Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Expand in-group identification to include more people (e.g. reduce between-group conflict and prejudice)</li> <li>b. Community and School Mental Health Initiatives (e.g. access to treatment, reduce trauma, train diverse professionals)</li> <li>c. Employ one school-based mental health professional for every 250 students</li> <li>d. Require conflict management training for all staff members and conflict resolution training for learners</li> </ul>		
Social/ Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Promote authoritative parenting (e.g. parenting training, eliminating corporal punishment)</li> <li>b. Hire more teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff (e.g. social workers, counsellors, administrative, security)</li> <li>c. Reduce community crime and violence</li> <li>d. Enforce consequences for sexual and physical violence (including teachers, administrators, and staff)</li> <li>e. Add teacher training (e.g. behaviour/stress management)</li> <li>f. Fix infrastructure and distribute it equitably (e.g. electricity)</li> <li>g. Implement effective school safety measures (e.g. decrease classroom overcrowding, create effective disciplinary measures, and reduce access to school premises)</li> <li>h. Advocate governmental officials to address housing and food insecurity</li> </ul>		

Component	Recommendation	Assigned Stakeholders	Report Date
Historical	a. Achieve NDP goals (eliminate poverty, unemployment, and inequality) b. Facilitate upward mobility (e.g. equal access to quality education, jobs, and promotions) c. Address racial and gender inequality (e.g. pay inequity) d. Foster a school climate of responsibility and accountability e. Implement an evidenced-based school violence prevention programme or comprehensive multi-tiered framework (e.g. Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports [PBIS])		

### 13. Conclusion

Resolving school violence in South African schools requires an integrated, comprehensive approach such as the BPSHM. This model considers influential variables from macro-levels, such as governmental inaction and historical discrimination, to micro-levels, such as sexual assault and overcrowding in individual schools, and combines them into one coordinated plan. The piecemeal approach that has been used in the past will not drive the dramatic change that is warranted, nor will more research studies that repeat previous findings. The literature delineates the scope of the problem and provides ample research support. The next step is to implement a comprehensive plan. The BPSHM provides the framework.

Our bio-psycho-sociohistorical examination describes the biological basis, psychological counterparts, sociological contributions, and historical foundation of violence in South African schools. Construct a plan that targets elements from each category. This will involve stakeholders at all levels working as a team for a common goal and this will have the most significant impact.

Each of the Table 1 components indicates actions that can reduce school violence. Table 1 is a checklist of recommendations that can be expanded and subdivided into smaller, measurable components to help track progress and specify assignments to specific stakeholders. It includes space for a timeline for accountability, obtaining a commitment from each assigned stakeholder, and building in rewards for meeting goals on time. It is an integrated approach that includes individuals and organisations representing everyone: Students, teachers, school administrators, parents and guardians, community members, government officials, representatives from interested NGOs, diverse experts, and professionals from allied fields (e.g. mental health, medical, public health, police, business, biologists, epidemiologists, climatologists, social workers), philanthropists, and global partners (e.g. WHO, UNESCO).

The ultimate goal is fostering a school climate of responsibility and accountability to build agency and pride in the educational environment and reduce disruptive behaviours so teachers can teach and students can learn (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011; Qwabe *et al.*, 2022). This requires funding and a broad-based commitment that “We owe our children—the most vulnerable citizens in any society—a life free from violence and fear.” These words are widely attributed to Nelson Mandela. We hope our words and thoughts expressed in this article contribute to that goal.

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