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Educators' experiences and coping strategies in response to learner violence in Mopani district, Limpopo

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Violence in school settings can induce emotional and psychological distress in educators, resulting in emotional exhaustion and difficulty focusing on daily duties. This article presents the findings from educators' experiences of violence from learners and their coping mechanisms. Interview data were collected from 11 educators from various schools in the Mopani district in South Africa. The ecological system theory underpinned the study, highlighting how violence arises from an interconnected system's complex interplay of individual, relational, community, and societal factors. The findings highlight a critical gap in supportive interventions and call for a holistic approach to safeguard educators' well-being and foster a conducive learning environment. Educators were fearful, stressed, and unsettled in their work environment, which led to burnout. Educators used negative coping mechanisms and showed the need for psychosocial support. One of the study's recommendations is that the Department of Education and the South African Council of Education (SACE) should help create policies and procedures to reduce school violence.

Transdisciplinary contribution: This study contributes to the understanding of the effect of learners' violence on educators from a variety of disciplines-psychological studies, health studies, social dynamics, educational studies (i.e., school policies and interventions), and criminology studies. The findings call for the need for multidisciplinary interventions and school policy reforms to mitigate the negative consequences of learner violence on educators in educational settings.

Keywords: effects; educator; learners; violence; coping strategies; Socio-ecological Model; Mopani district.

Introduction

Violence in schools occurs in various forms, amongst or between the learners and between learners and educators, adversely affecting the sociological dynamic in terms of teaching and working environment.[1] This phenomenon leaves educators with uncertainty concerning their profession.[2]

A study on school violence in South Africa indicated that 30% of educators report that they do not feel safe at school.[3] Learner violence affects the educators' psychological health, social cohesion and their health in general. Violence in schools can stem from external (impacting the school from the society) and internal (stemming from the school) factors, which often overlap.[4] Drugs, gangsterism, and the carrying of weapons are external factors, while school governance, educator-leaner relations, and security can be classified as internal factors. Crocks defined violence from three perspectives:[5] direct violence, which aims to harm the fundamental needs of others (including nature); structural violence, which is embedded in social and global systems as forms of exploitation and repression; and cultural violence, which involves aspects of culture (such as religion and language) that justify direct and structural violence. School violence relates more to direct and structural violence given the historical context of education in South Africa.

Learner violence on educators' describes situations in which learners act aggressively or harmfully towards the educators, whether physically (i.e., hitting, punching, kicking, slapping, or any form of physical force), verbally (i.e., calling, mockery, insults), or psychologically (i.e., manipulation, threats, or intimidation).[6,7] Cornell[8] finds it concerning that learners have easy access to weapons that cause misfortunes with school shootings worldwide, resulting in at least ten victims for every attack. This study explored educators' experiences with learner-induced violence in the Mopani

District, Limpopo, and examined the coping strategies educators use in response to this violence. The aim was to understand the psychological, emotional, and social impacts of such violence on educators, reveal gaps in available support systems, and recommend holistic, multidisciplinary interventions and policy reforms to create safer, more supportive educational environments.

Background and overview of the study

Violence in schools is a growing and concerning issue in South Africa,[9] despite the Department of Basic Education's efforts to promote peace in schools through various projects and interventions.[10,11] Grobler highlights that data on school violence in South Africa surpasses that of the United States because, in South Africa, 57 out of every 1000 learners encounter some form of violence.[12] The National School Violence Study (NSVS) report for 2012 undertaken by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) revealed that the Western Cape province had the highest rate of school violence (28.7%), followed by Limpopo (25.2%) and Free State (13.2%).[1] The research conducted by Neille & Penn[13] offers a profound perspective for analysing the transdisciplinary aspects of the investigation into violence within educational environments, especially regarding the South African context. They highlighted the intricate ways in which violence interacts with a range of societal challenges, including disability and poverty, thereby deepening our comprehension of the complex dynamics present in educational settings. Through the synthesis of perspectives from psychology, sociology, education, and criminology, the study underscores the necessity for comprehensive interventions that tackle not just the immediate repercussions of violence on educators but also the wider systemic influences that foster such violence, reflecting the intricate connections elucidated in Neille and Penn's examination of violence among vulnerable populations.

Occurrences of violence targeting educators may cause serious health issues that have devastating effects on educators' well-being. A study by Shields et al.[14] in the Western Cape shows that 41% of educators have been victims of verbal and physical abuse by their learners. From a mental health discipline, these health issues include but are not limited to, stress, mental breakdown, constant sickness, and burnout.[15,16,17] Additionally, some educators have reported that violence in schools adversely affects their overall performance in achieving curriculum objectives and diminishes their morale.[18,19,20] Tapping into the educational discipline, educators play an essential role in determining learners' academic performance, their health can affect learners' performance.[9] Consequently, the dynamics related to learner performance, their health and their impact on educators affect the larger educational setting and might affect the development of personnel as well as the economy of South Africa.[21,22,23] Violence results in a decline in education and financial resources due to the need to address the resulting disruptions.[24] It is estimated that one out of five educators in South Africa is victimised by a violent act by a learner every year.[25] There is still a rise in incidents of violent threats, assault, sexual assault (including rape), and robbery of educators in schools,[26,27] as evidenced by many media reports in the recent past. News24 reported violence and killing at South African schools on 22 November 2018,[28] and the Mail and Guardian followed another story concerning violence and bullying in the Gauteng province. A recent report was written by the IOL Online news channel on 28 March 2024, entitled, 'Alarm over increase in violent incidents at SA schools', in which they reported learners inflicting injuries on both the educators and other learners within the school premises.[29] According to Venketsamy,[30] investigating violence against educators integrates insights from psychology, education, and social dynamics. Our study highlighted the emotional and psychological traumas experienced by educators, the study emphasises the need for a broader approach that encompasses psychological support, educational policy reform, and community engagement to address the pervasive issue of school violence effectively. This interconnectedness of action is crucial for developing comprehensive strategies that safeguard educators and enhance the educational environment.

This may, therefore, call for contributions from the discipline of criminology towards interventions, as emphasised by Mothibi et al.[31] Our study was driven by the concern that some educators are working in certain schools that are considered unpredictable concerning one's safety due to the violence taking place by the learners.[15,32] Therefore, unsafe working environments may affect the educator's social and mental well-being, which might affect the learning system.[32,33]

The South African Council for Educators (SACE)[34] highlights the importance of putting into practice efficient strategies to handle and minimise learner violence against educators in schools.[23,31] SACE only focuses on violence occurring in schools and the causes of the violence. However, educators' coping mechanisms have not been explored. Therefore, the current study sheds light on the effects of violence and how educators cope following victimisation. An understanding of the effects of violence, as well as the current coping mechanisms, offers a foundation for developing interventions for educators.

School violence as a multifaceted problem

The problem of school violence is multifaceted, often reflecting the society in which the school operates. As Khumalo[35] asserts, schools are an extension of society. At a macro level, families play an important role in children's development and form the basis for socialisation and moral development. For example, the learners' indiscipline, which contributes to violence inflicted on educators, has been attributed to parental and community factors.[36] Furthermore, indiscipline is a complex phenomenon, including parental factors such as parenting style, moral example/modelling behaviour, family stress and the parents' relations with

the school. Residential dwellings of parents are situated within communities.[37] The parental home serves as a crucial societal bond since it is the environment in which a child is usually born and spends their formative years under the guidance of their parents, who act as the primary educators in the child's life. It is believed that some households in South Africa do not conform to the traditional definition of nuclear families, which typically consist of a father, a mother, and their own or legally adopted children. Several circumstances have altered the situation: parents have split, run away, or passed away, resulting in the children (sometimes even a group of them) being entrusted to the care of a grandparent or an older sibling.[37]

Findings from the CJCP[38] revealed a significant correlation between the home environment and school violence. Approximately 10% of primary school learners reported that their parents use illegal drugs, a similar percentage reported that their carers or parents have been incarcerated, and 20% of secondary school learners reported having siblings who have been in correctional centres. These factors, in conjunction with learners' exposure to physical punishment in both their household and educational environment, have a substantial influence on the probability of violence occurring at school.[39,40]

The relationship between educators and learners is crucial because they share the same school community. As an institution, the school exerts influence on interpersonal relationships and the conduct of community members.[37] Sociologists view schools as formal organisations with a certain agenda in which its members collaborate to attain a particular goal.[35] The relationships in this setting encompass interactions between educators, learners, and other key stakeholders, including departmental officials and parents. The educators' professional conduct is also affected by these violent incidents. Studies suggest that educator victimisation has a dual impact, affecting both educators personally and the quality of education provided by schooling institutions.[38] It leads to the breakdown of the school-community relationship.[40] Violence in schools diverts educators' attention away from effective teaching and learning processes, as they are compelled to prioritise addressing problem behaviour and safety concerns.[39,41] As a result, schools that experience high levels of violence typically struggle to keep highly skilled educators, leading to a negative influence on the quality of education received by learners.[42] Better school management and governance can lessen the occurrence of violence. This includes organising the school to follow rules and policies and effectively implement such policies.[43] Schools that are 'well-organised, inclusive, well-run' can better deal with external factors contributing to violence than those that are dysfunctional.[1]

Theoretical framework

The Socio-Ecological Model (SEM), which Bronfenbrenner first conceptualised in the 1970s and then modified as the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) in the 1980s, served as the conceptual basis for the current study.[4] While the SEM offers a wide perspective that considers interrelated systems, the EST serves as a specific framework that emphasises the direct contextual effects on a person's development and conduct. This theory has been widely used and accepted as a valid explanation for learners' violence throughout the years.[16,44,45]

Individual level

At the individual level, factors such as personal characteristics, attitudes, and experiences can contribute to learners' tendencies to violate educators.[45,46] The study examined how the educator's direct engagement with those learners who had violated them affected or channelled their regular behaviour. At a personal level, educators are greatly impacted by their immediate surroundings, especially in terms of their safety and well-being. Suppose there are acts (such as substance misuse that led to violent behaviours and the use of weapons) of violence within their family / community that learners experience. In that case, the learner's behaviour may be affected, and such acts may be practised at school. Therefore, such acts immediately affect educators, making them more stressed, anxious, and afraid. Their emotional and psychological health may be impacted by this exposure, which could lead to burnout or a decrease in job satisfaction.[21,32]

Relational level

Interpersonal relationships play a crucial role in learners' behaviour towards educators. A strained educator-learner relationship, a lack of respect, or issues with authority figures may lead to disruptive or harmful actions.[47] The inverse also occurs where the educators' behaviour and approach towards learners may lead to learners retaliating with violence. Their behaviour towards those who are part of the mesosystem, such as neighbours, churchgoers, and so on, may change because of the effects of violence directed towards them.[16,47,48] These changes in behaviour are associated with the effects of violence and are not limited to avoiding people, sudden anger towards others, and drug or alcohol misuse.[20,33]

Community level

The broader community's values, norms, and social influences can also affect learners' behaviour towards educators. In an environment where violence or disrespect is tolerated or normalised, learners may emulate such behaviour in the classroom.[16,45] Settings where learners are aggressive towards educators or one another may have an adverse effect on educators, and they may become aggressive themselves. This behaviour may be a continuous cycle of violent behaviour.[45]

Societal level

Societal factors, including cultural beliefs, media influence, and policies, can shape learners' attitudes and actions toward educators.[25,45] In some societies, educators may be

undervalued or perceived as easy targets for harassment, affecting learners' behaviour towards them. It is important to recognise that learners' violations of educators are complex, with multiple interacting factors at play. The ecological system theory may assist educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in the educational system in addressing such issues comprehensively by considering interventions at different levels to foster a safe and respectful learning environment. The study thus emphasises the importance of collaborative efforts involving policymakers, educational institutions, mental health professionals, and law enforcement to create safe and supportive educational environments for both learners and educators.

Research methods and design

Learner violence's effect on educators was examined using an explorative qualitative design. The Mopani district office in Limpopo (Department of Education) was approached and provided written permission to conduct the research at selected schools in the district. Six secondary schools out of 244 in Mopani district were selected using non-probability purposive sampling. To ensure that the schools chosen provided in-depth and meaningful information relevant to the study's objectives, eleven educators who witnessed or experienced school violence volunteered for the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with one male and 10 female educators aged 25 years–60 years. Of the participants, there was one school principal, three Heads of Departments (HoDs), four general educators and three student educators from the Mopani district in Limpopo province. The age distribution of the participants was as follows: three were between the ages of 20 years old and 30 years old; four were between the ages of 31 years old and 40 years old; and two were in each age group (41 years to 50 years and 51 years to 60 years).

Depending on availability, interviews were held in a classroom or the principal's office at their school, ranging from 30 min to 45 min. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent. The audio recordings were transcribed to prepare for data analysis. The data were analysed following Braun and Clarke's guidelines for thematic analysis.[49] At first, six codes were found to identify meaningful units. After more examination and the search for patterns, themes, connections, and differences, themes encapsulated the effect of learner violence on their educators and how the educators' coping mechanisms were developed.

Ethical considerations

The ethical clearance was obtained from University of South Africa (Rec-240816-052). A letter of approval Mopani Basic Education District. Confidentiality and anonymity of participating educators were safeguarded throughout the process. The importance of treating participants attentively and politely was given top priority, and all acknowledged ethical standards were strictly upheld. Participation was voluntary, and educators could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were given an information sheet and later signed consent forms attesting to their right to confidentiality and anonymity, as well as their willingness to be interviewed and audiotaped.

Results

The study findings are presented under three major themes, which can be summarised as: (1) perceptions of the causes of violence in schools, (2) narratives of violence and its effects on educators, and (3) the use of positive and negative coping mechanisms.

Perceptions of the causes of violence in schools

Educators lamented the complex causes of school violence. The study identified numerous major elements in this theme: learner substance misuse, schools with overage learners and dysfunctional home backgrounds, bad of groups of peers, and risky working settings. Violence against educators was largely attributed to substance abuse. The educators noted that the use of alcohol, marijuana, and other drug use fuels learners' violent behaviour:

> 'Many learners around this place drink beer excessively, and many also smoke *matekwane* [marijuana] or what we sometimes call *zolo* [marijuana].' (P6, Female, Educator)

One of the senior educators, who had been teaching for almost 30 years, agreed with these thoughts. The comments showed the accessibility of substances within the community, which spills over into the school premises:

> '… the highest substances abused are beer and *matekwane* [marijuana] …' (P2, Female, HOD)

The issue of overaged learners in schools was identified as another significant factor contributing to violence.[50] These learners, often older than their peers in the same grade, may exhibit more aggressive behaviours and exert undue influence over younger learners. Their presence can disrupt the learning environment and pose challenges to educators' authority, potentially leading to violent confrontations. Nine of the participants mentioned that learners who were above age created problems in schools, especially their violent behaviour towards the educators:

> 'I am a Grade 10 teacher, and I had an experience of violence with one big girl [*referring to age*] …' (P5, Female, Educator)
>
> Overaged boys – or should I call them men – are the ones who influence young learners to be very stubborn and violent … (P8, Female, HOD)
>
> '… the overaged boys are our concern, especially us young women new to the profession …' (P9, Female, Student educator)

The reference to the older learners as men alluded to the power dynamics between educators and learners. A dysfunctional family background was also highlighted as a critical factor influencing learner behaviour towards violence. Learners coming from homes marked by conflict, substance

abuse, or instability may replicate these behaviours in school settings. Such environments can foster a normalisation of violence and disrespect, which learners might then direct towards educators.

The subtheme of dysfunctional families became apparent in the interviews. The paragraph that follows shows that Participant 1 was willing to answer questions about this topic:

> [T]he most disturbing cause of violence by learners is dysfunctional families. Many learners are raised by single parents in the neighbourhood, and some are raised by their grandparents. Some of these learners' parents separated at an early age, and those kids were never OK afterwards. Those who are raised by their grandparents tend to be very disrespectful because I would like to believe they are used to having things their way, so when they are here at school, they tend to struggle to obey the rules. They have shown serious disrespectful tendencies, i.e. behaviours like taunting teachers. Many of them beat teachers, as two boys and a girl did to me. (P1, Male, Principal)

The influence of negative peer groups was another key cause of violence towards educators identified in the study. Peer pressure and the desire to conform to group norms can lead to learners engaging in violent behaviours. These groups can create a culture of disrespect and aggression towards educators, challenging authority figures and disrupting the educational process. Participant 3, a school principal, said:

> You know teenagers? They form groups and just form sort of a culture of disrespecting educators. (P3, Female, Educator)

Participant 2 and 8 shared the same sentiments regarding peer pressure amongst learners:

> During break time, they smoke in groups, and once they return to the classroom, they become disruptive. (P8, Female, HOD)

> There is so much influence in the gangster-like groups of these learners … these peer groups have influenced brilliant learners who are no longer performing as before. (P2, Female, HOD)

The likening of learners' social groups to gangsterism indicated the kind of behaviours educators encountered on school premises. This could be a reflection of the endemic violence existing within the communities.

Narratives of violence and its effect on educators

Educators recounted troubling incidents of physical assaults and instances of emotional and verbal mistreatment by learners. The instances included physical assault, such as slapping and pouring water on educators, as well as verbal assaults involving the use of foul language and threats. The examples provided were highly specific and vivid, emphasising the terrible reality of the violence that educators encounter. This highlights an environment where respect and safety are undermined.

The following excerpts are participant-narrated accounts of violence:

> 'The young man pushed me to the chairs and ground, then threatened to deal with me in his way, and he walked away, leaving me lying on the ground …' (P1, Male, Principal)

> '… a learner poured a bucket full of water on me. The odour of the water, you would swear it was from the sewage …' (P2, Female, HOD)

The narratives below revealed the emotional toll these violent incidents had on educators as learners used vulgar language. Feelings of helplessness and a profound sense of vulnerability emerged as common themes.[50] Educators expressed how such encounters not only demeaned their professional stature but also deeply affected their self-esteem and confidence, as shown in the two incidents below:

> 'I tried to reprimand her in front of everyone in class, but she was very aggressive, trying to fight with me, pointing a finger at me, and she also was trying to justify her behaviour.' (P4, Female, Student educator)

> '… It is not like you are paying for my school fees *masepa a gago* [you piece of shit he used a vulgar word] and said I must go teach my disabled child. That broke my heart. I was crying deep inside.' (P5, Female, Educator)

The school environment was contaminated by the apprehension of violence and the presence of learners exhibiting disrespectful or arrogant attitudes, as evidenced by the majority of interview transcripts. The emotional distress was intensified by the fear and anxiety of possible future occurrences, creating an atmosphere of continual uneasiness and insecurity.

The educators felt ashamed and embarrassed, prompting some to avoid attending classes where the incident happened. More than six participants reported that they no longer felt secure engaging with the learners in the classroom after being cursed at. They stated that instances of profanity undermined their dignity and made them feel insecure:

> '… I could not sleep my first days after the violent experience … In some cases, I would end up waking up at midnight and trying to look for something to help me sleep, I am not OK emotionally …' (P6, Female, Educator)

> '… Sometimes, I just sit and rethink what actually happened; imagine I was holding exam papers, and the next minute, I am wet with dirty water or urine … yah ne … [*sigh*] …' (P2, Female, HOD)

A total of seven respondents stated their contentment in teaching and engaging with the learners.

Nevertheless, they also conveyed concerns about their security and anxiety about being in close contact with learners. This is evidenced by the following quotes:

> 'Leaving teaching has once or twice crossed my mind, especially now that I am old …' (P11, Female, HOD)

'… We are not safe here at school; I always tell my husband how I want to leave this school or teaching.' (P3, Female, Educator)

The findings revealed that such continuous exposure to violence could exhaust educators emotionally and lead to them considering resigning. The considerations of leaving the profession were intertwined with safety concerns.

As observed, physical aggression or threats can be harmful, resulting in injuries and physical health consequences. The study established that fear of physical threat was a significant motivator for educators to pursue new careers or retire to prioritise their safety. The cumulative stress and strain of coping with violence can deplete educators' energy and drive, increasing the chance of quitting to break the cycle of burnout, as shown by the responses below:

'We are not safe at all; anytime violence can occur, it is emotionally draining and demotivating to even wake up in the morning and prepare to go to work.' (P9, Female, Student educator)

'I sometimes call in sick because I feel like not going to work. It is draining; after all, one needs to rest.' (P8, Female, HOD)

The use of positive and negative coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms are psychological and behavioural methods used by individuals to manage stress and adapt to life's challenges.[32] Educators utilise many techniques to handle and alleviate the impact of violence encountered in the school environment. Positive coping mechanisms include collegial support involvement of the school governing body and parents, timely detection of violent incidents, and monitoring access to school premises. Negative coping mechanisms include avoidance, which involves distancing oneself from stress sources and substance misuse, providing temporary relief but hindering problem-solving and leading to unresolved issues.[44]

Participants were asked the following question: How are you coping now after the violence? And they responded as following:

'… I find drinking one or two beers after work or during weekends as my way to cope with this bad experience.' (P11, Female, HOD)

'… I could not feel well but just feared, and I only feel better when I take some special tablets.' (P6, Female, Educator)

Seeking support from friends, family, or professional counsellors can be a positive coping mechanism. Sharing feelings and concerns with trusted individuals can provide emotional comfort, perspective, and encouragement during challenging times:

'I decided to see a professional counsellor privately.' (P3, Female, Educator)

'My friends were very supportive …' (P7, Female, Student educator)

The educators in this study did not seem to have access to enough resources and assistance to deal effectively with victimisation. Although some participants received support from family and coworkers, official counselling or stress management training was lacking.

Discussion

The study identified numerous effects of violence, including the educators' inability to manage the learners and the resultant job dissatisfaction. The data also showed that several educators in Limpopo's Mopani district struggled with learner violence, which left them with a feeling of shame and burnout. This study revealed that learner-perpetrated violence negatively affects educators' safety and professional identity, supporting earlier workplace violence research.[1,27] Substance abuse can affect judgement, self-control, and impulsivity in learners, leading to contempt and violence towards educators. Therefore, it is crucial to address and try to prevent substance misuse at school premises. Educators reported various substances used by learners.

Consistent with the ecological systems, the causes of violence identified by educators indicate the intricate interaction connection of various systems in which the learners and educators exist. While exposure to violence may lead to aggression in learners,[51] other factors within the child's environment may lead to aggressive behaviour. For example, childhood adversities such as household dysfunction have been linked to deviant behaviour.[52] Our findings suggest that the socio-economic background of the learners has an influence towards violent behaviour at school. This is consistent with previous findings indicating that schools in lower socio-economic areas tend to experience higher rates of violence, which can be attributed to factors such as poverty, lack of resources, and inadequate support systems.[53] The criminological perspective thus underscores the importance of addressing socio-economic factors to mitigate violence in educational settings.

For educators, exposure to learner violence impacted their proximal processes[54,55] including interactions with learners.

The findings also suggest systemic issues in educational environments that fail to protect and support them post-victimisation. Dread, anxiety, and burnout are common psychological repercussions of violence on educators, according to an occupational health study. Hopelessness and dissatisfaction can cause burnout and harm health.[16,50] Burnout symptoms make regular duties tough, and educators may change their methods, resulting in poor performance.[32,56] This shows the complexity of the issue and the need for a diversified and continuing approach to educator violence.

Research shows a positive relationship between educators' motivation and job satisfaction. Highly motivated educators tend to experience job satisfaction and perform better in their

work compared to those who are poorly motivated.[15,16] Studies have shown that exposure to violence in educational settings results in considerable psychological discomfort among educators, including depression, anxiety, and burnout.[53,57] The psychological burden is intensified by lacking administrative support and resources, which can further heighten educators' emotions of vulnerability and fear.[58] The necessity for robust legal support networks that handle both urgent safety issues and offer psychological aid to educators impacted by violence is paramount. School violence requires multiple approaches, including legislative reform, school support, law enforcement and, most importantly, social and psychological interventions.[45 46]

At the societal level (macro and exo-system), educators argued that policies protect learners when they are guilty of victimising educators. As noted by Ngwokabuenui,[59] educator training programmes do not appear to address post-victimisation well-being. We therefore argue that effective programmes should focus on educator safety and welfare with preventive, immediate response, and long-term support to enhance the educator's well-being. Social work interventions like community and family intervention programmes to address learner violence and its effects on educators are needed. Professional development for educators may include conflict resolution, stress management, and trauma-informed teaching. To address learner violence, educational institutions, law enforcement, and mental services should collaborate on this initiative.

This study adds to the expanding body of knowledge on educator-learner violence. It examines educators' real-life experiences to demonstrate the complex personal, cultural, and systemic variables that cause this violence. The findings suggest reconsidering current techniques and developing comprehensive, all-encompassing measures to safeguard educators' security and well-being.

Transdisciplinary contribution

This study emphasises the importance of collaborative efforts involving policymakers, educational institutions, mental health professionals, and law enforcement to create safe and supportive educational environments for both learners and educators. Schneider et al.[60] provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of interpersonal violence in South Africa, emphasising its significant contribution to the overall disease burden, which aligns with the transdisciplinary nature of the study on violence in school settings. Psychological studies offer insights into the emotional and cognitive triggers that may prompt violent behaviours in learners, which informs the development of targeted mental health interventions for both learners and educators. According to Heffer and Willoughby,[58] coping mechanisms are essential for managing the psychological impacts of violence, underscoring the need for support systems that address educators' mental well-being. Health studies further highlight the physical and emotional toll of violence on

educators, revealing how exposure to violence can lead to physical injuries and stress-related health issues that require medical intervention.[3]

Sociological perspectives emphasise that the social environments of both learners and educators shape behaviours and attitudes toward violence. The ecological systems theory, proposed by Bronfenbrenner,[45] shows how the interplay of individual, relational, community, and societal factors influences behaviour in complex ways. This theory informs our understanding of how factors such as community dynamics, family structure, and peer influences contribute to violence.[45] Such environmental factors are known to exacerbate aggressive behaviours in schools, affecting both learners and educators. Educators who are victimised by learner violence can benefit from interventions that address the relational and social contexts of their experiences, including community engagement programs and counselling.[1]

From an educational perspective, the impact of violence on educators' emotional and physical well-being can negatively affect their relationships with students and hinder the overall learning environment. Research indicates that when educators experience stress and burnout due to violent incidents, it can lead to diminished classroom engagement and reduced academic outcomes among learners.[9] Thus, the Department of Education interventions, including policy reforms and psychological support systems, are essential to safeguard educators and enhance academic performance.[2]

Criminology adds an essential perspective on the legal and disciplinary aspects of learner violence. Persistent violent behaviour could result in criminal charges, reinforcing the need for preventive and punitive measures within school policies.[31] Criminology underscores the necessity for policy adjustments to address both the prevention of violence and the enforcement of consequences for perpetrators, enhancing overall safety in school environments.[31] In conclusion, this study demonstrates the value of a transdisciplinary approach that integrates psychology, health, sociology, education, and criminology. These fields collectively underscore the need for comprehensive interventions, including psychological support and policy reform, to address the multifaceted issue of learner violence and safeguard the well-being of educators within school

Study's limitations

The study faced several limitations, including a small number of participants and the need for caution in generalising the findings. The initial number of participants was twelve. However, only eleven managed to take part. One participant could not participate due to emotional issues, and a proper referral was made. The one-off interviews and the duration of the interviews also limited rapport building. Overall, the study's limitations highlight the importance of larger, in-

depth research for comprehensive data analysis. Regarding delimitation, the study specifically examined experiences of violence by learners towards educators on school premises. The study selected six public secondary schools, selected due to their reported incidences of violence and the alignment with the study's objectives.

Recommendations

This study was conducted in an attempt to explore and comprehend how educators in the Mopani district are affected by learner violence. It was shown that some educators are affected by the learner's violence towards them, and some are resorting to resigning. It was also shown that some educators make use of negative coping mechanisms like substance misuse. The study recommends that easy access to emotional support (i.e. peer support networks, counselling services, and mentoring programmes) systems might play a crucial role in assisting educators to cope with the effects of learner violence. It is recommended that educators focus on self-care to reduce the adverse effects of learner violence. Participating in activities such as physical exercise, personal interests, and mindfulness practices can effectively decrease stress levels, foster emotional wellness, and strengthen one's ability to cope with challenges. It is crucial to promote the practice of educators taking regular breaks, utilising stress management measures, and seeking professional assistance when necessary.

Support mechanisms and resources should focus on helping educators recover and create an atmosphere where learners and educators may succeed. Educators can use positive coping methods like active problem-solving, which involves assessing the stressor and taking action to fix it.[22,50] This method helps people take charge and find solutions.[37] SETAs' efforts to address school violence focus too little on educator coping techniques when they become victims, raising concerns.[35] Lack of training frameworks raises questions about how well teacher preparation programmes equip educators to handle school violence aftermath.

Conclusion

Efficient interventions should address both the manifestations of violence and the root causes, establishing secure and favourable educational settings. In addition, offering educators extensive training and professional development opportunities can equip them with the essential skills to handle the impacts of learner violence properly. Training programmes may prioritise trauma-informed instructional methods, conflict resolution, effective classroom administration, and self-care practices. The Department of Education or SACE should explore creating rules and processes that assist educators in effectively addressing the effect of learner violence. Schools require a well-defined framework encompassing transparent reporting methods for occurrences, disciplinary mechanisms for the offenders (learners), and resources for supporting the victims (educators).

Potential areas for future research

Further research should focus on interventions and protective mechanisms for educators within school settings. As incidences of violence in schools are on the rise the psychosocial impact of violence on educators should be further investigated to inform policy decisions as well as interventions.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

T.P.B. and I.M.M. both contributed equally in this research article.

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its references.

Disclaimer

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