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Violence in secondary schools: Educators' experiences in Soweto, South Africa

Abstract

The rise of violent incidents in South African schools has sparked widespread concern. Most studies on school violence focus on the experiences of learners; little attention has been paid to educators' experiences. As a result, violence against educators is both underreported and understudied. The research question prompting this study was: What are educators' experiences of educator-directed violence (EDV) at secondary schools in Soweto, Gauteng? Social learning theory and ecological systems theory serve as the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach, with data obtained from open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 100 purposively selected educators from eight secondary schools in Soweto. All the participants (principals, deputies, department heads, novice and veteran educators) had personally experienced educator-directed violence. Attacks were committed against educators of both genders and all educational ranks. The violence took a variety of forms: verbal, physical, sexual, cyber-related, relational exclusion (stigmatisation and marginalisation), and theft and property destruction, both of which caused emotional distress. Male educators were more likely to be physically attacked than female educators, and female educators were more likely to be sexually and verbally attacked. The findings show that, despite the safeguards put in place by the Department of Education, educator-directed violence is on the rise in Soweto classrooms. We recommend that the Department of Education reconsider its approach to addressing EDV in schools; that educators receive regular training to improve their capacities and violence-mitigation strategies; and counselling be considered for educators who have experienced traumatic incidents. Finally, policies should be modified to assist with reducing violent incidents, and appropriate mechanisms should be devised for dealing with repeat offenders.

Keywords: *Aggression, violence, educators, Soweto, marginalisation, victim, perpetrator, bystanders.*

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1. Introduction

Violence in South African schools is on the rise, causing widespread concern (Romero, Hall, Cluver, Meinck & Hinde, 2021). The pervasiveness of school violence is demonstrated by the fact that it takes place not only on school grounds and surroundings, but in classrooms, which

have increasingly become violence hotspots (Lowe, Picknoll, Chivers, Farringdon & Rycroft, 2020). "Violence in schools is one of the most visible forms of violence, this includes physical, psychological, sexual violence and bullying" (Ferrara, Franceschini, Villani & Corsello, 2019:2). According to newspaper and television reports in South Africa, educators are frequently the victims of these violent crimes, these also include theft and harm of individual belongings (Adewusi, 2021).

School violence affects both affluent and developing nations. No educator is completely shielded from encounters with violence (Botha & Zwane, 2020). In Europe the victimisation of educators is on the rise, and there is evidence of a comparable situation in the Far East (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011). According to Lowe *et al*. (2020), 10% of the 3.2 million educators in the USA reported experiencing teacher-directed violence (TDV) in the 2015–2016 school year, while 50% of Turkish educators reported the same experiences. In Africa, reported cases of school violence vary considerably. Bullying is perceived as rite of passage or for amusement in Ghanaian schools (Sam, Bruce, Agyemang, Amponsah & Arkorful, 2019). The Kenyan Ministry of Education has established safety standards and guidelines, but school-based violence has caused property damage, injuries and loss of lives (Nyakundi, 2012). Power and Verjava (2017) states that school-based violence in South Africa is more common in low-income communities than in high-income communities. However, the reality is that school-based violence is not restricted to poor or underdeveloped societies; it also occurs in wealthy schools and neighbourhoods.

Educators' experiences of violence in South African schools are an under researched field. This study therefore examines educators' experiences of violence in township schools in South Africa. We argue that a lack of in-depth understanding of educators' daily experiences with violence at school may be reflected in inadequate policies and mechanisms for dealing with school violence, which will ultimately affect the retention of educators in schools. This study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on violence in schools by focusing specifically on educators' experiences of it. This information will enable the Department of Education to explore alternative means of addressing EDV in schools.

First, we situate the work within the wider body of research on violence in schools and proceed to present a discussion on educator directed violence. Furthermore, we then discuss the ecosystems theory and the social learning theory to position the phenomenon of educator-targeted violence within the relevant theoretical frameworks. We describe the research context and process, present the findings, and discuss the findings considering the literature and the relevant theories. We conclude with reflections and recommendations.

2. Literature review

2.1 Defining violence, school violence and educator-directed violence

The holistic comprehension of the concept violence enables better understanding of educator directed violence encountered in schools as what happens in communities' filters into school environments. As such, it is imperative to firstly define violence within a broad perspective, then narrow it down to school-based violence and lastly to educator directed violence. This is crucial as Power and Verjava (2017) defines violence as the deliberate use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. According to Makhasane and Mthembu (2019:52) "the intentional use of physical force or power threatened or actual, against oneself,

another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation." As such, school violence refers to violence that happens within the school confines with anyone in the environment prone to it and possible victims (Makhasane & Mthembu, 2019). On the same note, Educator-directed violence refer to violence or bullying that is specifically directed to educators with intentions of causing harm or death (Adewusi, 2021). Violence and bullying are subsets of aggression. Aggression takes many forms, extending beyond physical maltreatment to include verbal and related forms of aggression that have harmful emotional, physical and psychological effects. The aggression may be direct or indirect (Venketsamy, 2024). Direct aggression occurs when the victim(s) is physically present, whereas indirect aggression occurs when the victim(s) is physically absent (Allen & Anderson, 2017). Aggression can occur on a spectrum of severity, ranging from relatively minor acts (such as name-calling or pushing) to more serious acts (such as hitting, kicking or punching) to severe acts (such as stabbing, shooting or killing) (Lowe *et al*., 2020). Many educators experience verbal bullying in addition to more overt acts of violence in the school setting. Bullying rarely occurs without witnesses, in educator-directed bullying, bystanders may perpetuate the behaviour by cheering the act and could end up becoming perpetrators to share in the limelight, according to Hochfeld, Schmid and Errington (2022), learners attack educators to gain supremacy in classrooms.

Violence against educators is South African school is prevalent, so much so, it occurs in classrooms, school confines, and outside of the school compound (Ferrara et al, 2019). It is experienced in numerous forms, these include "physical assault, verbal confrontation, emotional attack, persistent class disruption, threatening behaviour, and cyberbullying" (Adewusi, 2021:414) , in some cases these experiences led to loss of educators' lives. In addition, in some instances educators are also sexually molested by learners (Adewusi, 2021). Educators encounter violence from learners, their parents and other educators. Moreover, educator's highlight how they fear for their lives at work and at home as the learners are aware of where they reside (Venketsamy, 2024), in other cases they are threatened by learners with emphasis on that whatever conflicts within the school will be resolved outside the school confines. Furthermore, gangsterism from communities has slipped into schools as they learners have acquired their observed ways of life within their societies (Venketsamy, Baxen, & Hu, 2023). With the widespread concern of violence in schools, the researchers wanted to explore how educators are experiencing violence in these townships that are perceived as notorious for violence. According to recent literature, there is insufficient research on violence directed at educators, despite the increase in prevalence (Lowe ***et al.***, 2020). On the same note, Mottee and Kelly (2017, p.46) state that "heavy emphasis has been placed on the issue of violence in South African schools with the focus on learners as the victims, however, learners are not the only individuals within the school community who are affected by these issues." According to Mahome and Rampa (2019:101) "teachers find themselves helpless, alienated and vulnerable without a coherent policy that speaks to their safety." Mahome and Rampa (2019) further emphasis that learner's safety is a concern addressed by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) yet the well-being of educators is not prioritised. Venketsamy (2024:165) confirms that "teachers feel vulnerable and fear working in unsafe school environments without guaranteed safety." Moreover, due to the fear, trauma, psychological and emotional turmoil caused by EDV, South African educators continue to resign from the education system (Venketsamy, 2024). Since violence against educators is underreported and understudied, the situation continues to remain unchanged.

Venketsamy et al, (2023:50) states that "since school violence is a grave concern and teachers work in unsafe environments, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) recommends that teachers be paid a danger allowance similar to the police", in addition the "MEC Mr Panyaza Lesufi envisaged including undercover police to assist in curbing violent pupil behaviours and the placement of professional correctional officials in schools to assist in rehabilitating violent pupils."

The plague of violence in schools is cause for concern; educators cannot be disregarded in public discourse and policy that concerns violence in South Africa. Educational authorities and Unions require insights as to measures that may curb violence as currently as it stands the DBE is not ensuring school safety.

2.2 Key role players

As victims, educators are key role players in EDV. According to Adewusi (2021), educators in South African schools are regularly bullied in classrooms by their learners, as "learners tend to be disrespectful, insubordinate and unruly" (Adewusi, 2021:413). In South African schools, assault on educators' ranges from physical, verbal, cyber, sexual, emotional and psychological torment (Kreifels & Warton, 2019). The perpetrators may be learners, parents or guardians, fellow educators, members of the school management team (principal, deputy principal, heads of department and school governing bodies), and department or district officials.

2.3 Forms of aggression

In schools, acts of aggression take many forms. Venketsamy (2024) lists physical, verbal, relational, emotional, sexual and cyberbullying as forms of hostility or aggression. Each of these forms are discussed below.

2.3.1 Physical bullying

Physical aggression is defined as the deliberate, repeated or isolated rough handling of another person that poses a risk of bodily damage and may or may not have overt consequences (Maja, Sinisa & Vesna, 2013). This type of aggression, which includes being hit, kicked, punched, stabbed and shot at, has the potential to cause death or severe bodily impairment (Ferrara *et al*., 2019). According to Kreifels and Warton (2019), educators working in the South African educational system frequently face physical violence that injures them.

2.3.2 Verbal bullying

Verbal aggression is the intentional use of inappropriate and harsh words to harm another person (Maja, *et al.*, 2013), it involves insults, name calling, belittling, teasing, mocking and profane language directed at the victim. Verbal bullying may be direct or indirect. Educators in South African schools are frequently the target of harsh and disrespectful words, which can instil fear and affect overall sense of wellbeing (Adewusi, 2021).

2.3.3 Relational bullying

According to Maja et al (2013:6) "relational violence includes saying untruths about the victim in order to humiliate and undermine his/her dignity, it is expressed by ignoring, avoiding, gossiping, refusing collaboration, and sabotaging." This form of bullying is evident in South African schools and is not confined to the playground. According to a national poll, 1 in 5 persons have had direct or indirect experience of someone harming their relationships at work or hindering their efforts there (Martins & Weaver, 2019), as such, educators in South Africa would not be immune to this form of bullying.

2.3.4 Emotional bullying

Emotional bullying refers to psychological pressure applied to the victim by the bully, it comprises every non-physical action that form torment, which are regularly covert (Kanak & Sakarya, 2023). With this as one form of bullying in communities, educators are susceptible to it. Emotional bullying may cause problems such as feelings of loneliness, life dissatisfaction, anxiety and depression, and can cause a heightened risk of suicide (Bryson, Brady & Childs, 2021). This form of violence perpetuates displeasure in life and within the teaching profession.

2.3.5 Sexual bullying

Ferrara et al (2019:1) states sexual aggression as "non-consensual completed or attempted sexual contact and acts of a sexual nature not involving contact." It may be physical, involving inappropriate touching (caressing, spanking or kissing) or forced sexual coercion (rape), or non-physical, involving inappropriate comments with sexual content (sexual harassment). Educators in the South African education system experience sexually aggressive behaviours from both learners and authority figures (Ferrara et al, 2019).

2.3.6 Cyberbullying

According to Chun et al (2020:2) cyber bullying is "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself." The bullying may appear in social media, e-mails, phone calls or text messages that harass, abuse, or intimidate others (Chun ***et al***., 2020). Learners may take educators' pictures or record videos during lessons without educators' knowledge and consent using these to publicly mock them, or they may directly message educators on social media to taunt them.

2.4 The theoretical framework of the study

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory and Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory serve as the theoretical foundations of this research. Violence in schools is multi-dimensional and is often dependent on various environmental factors (Venketsamy et al, 2023; Hochfield *et al.*, 2022). As such to fully explore and understand complexities of EDV in school contexts one theoretical framework will not suffice. Thus, these two frameworks were selected as they enable a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of violence within school contexts. According to proponents of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory, the individual is shaped by five interacting environmental systems, ranging from the micro and meso-systems – the immediate family and school – to the meso-, macro- and chronosystems, each of which represents a wider set of influences. Moreover, proponents of Social Learning Theory highlight that imitation and observation of live models inspire behaviour (Crain, 2015). As such these two frameworks would contribute to exploring EDV by foregrounding that school-based violence is influenced by environmental systems within the communities surrounding the school context and that various individuals within the school community are likely to observe and imitate violent behaviours that they are exposed to with their environments. Thus, perpetrators learn by observations and imitations of violent behaviours in their societies which are acted on within education confines and educators often become victims of such actions. These frameworks will contribute to understanding educators' experiences of violence in their school environments. In addition, these frameworks will enable the researchers to provide a discussion of the findings in relation to the impact of environmental factors on individual actions.

3. Research methods and methodology

The research adopted a qualitative phenomenological research approach to understand, interpret and describe educators' experiences of school-based violence. According to Creswell (2012, p.76) "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon". Qualitative research seeks to create a comprehensive, largely narrative account of a social or cultural phenomenon (Aliyu *et al.*, 2015) and seeks to explore human experiences (Adams & van Manen, 2017). The qualitative design was well suited to our goal of gathering rich, descriptive data on participants' perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As such, a qualitative phenomenological research approach will allow educators to describe a first-person account (Roth, 2012) of their experiences of school-based violence.

The main research question that this research aims to address is: What are educators' experiences of educator-directed violence (EDV) at secondary schools in Soweto, Gauteng?

One hundred (100) purposively selected participants, including principals, deputy principals, department heads, and novice and veteran educators from eight secondary schools across 5 townships in Soweto participated in the study. Respondents were chosen based on being educators in these townships which are prone and notorious for violence. For the context of the study the term 'experiences' entailed educators who personally experiencing violence in the school context and or witnessed violence at school. On that basis, respondents did not only have to be victims of violence at the school but could also have witnessed violence at the school. Permission to conduct this study was granted by the University's ethics committee as well as the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE). All ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent from all stakeholders as well as confidentiality and anonymity were adhered to in this study.

Open-ended questionnaires and a semi-structured interview schedule were used to collect data. The open-ended questionaries allowed respondents to express their experiences and views on educator's experience of violence in schools by including narrative responses. Both open ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews are well suite data collection tools for qualitative research. Sixty-five (65) questionnaires were completed, and 35 educators participated in the one-on-one interviews.

We used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, as this approach gave us the best opportunity to understand the innermost deliberation (Nizza, Farr & Smith, 2021) of secondary school teachers 'lived experiences' of educator-directed violence. In addition, Love, Vetere and Davis (2020) note that IPA focuses on the subjective lived experiences of various participants who encountered comparable incidents. The data from both the open-ended questionnaires and the interviews were categorised using a priori and emergent coding techniques that enable thematic analysis. First, data from the open-ended questionnaires was analysed in relation to the research question. Second, interview recordings were transcribed then analysed, also in relation to the research question. In each data set, units of data were coded to create themes and sub-themes, which were later merged to create one set of themes and sub-themes on educators' experiences of EDV in their schools. The use of two sources of data, analysed separately, enhanced the reliability and validity of the findings.

4. Results and discussion of data

Table 1 shows that respondents were exposed to all forms of bullying in their schools, with verbal bullying the most prevalent (59 respondents), followed by physical bullying (41 participants), emotional bullying (13 respondents), cyberbullying (7 respondents), sexual bullying (6 respondents) and relational bullying (5 respondents). In addition, the findings indicate that female educators were more exposed to verbal bullying than male educators, and male educators were more exposed to physical bullying. Interestingly, male educators experienced more emotional bullying than female educators.

Table 1: Summary of findings

Forms of aggression experience d by educators	Examples of the experiences	Perpetrators of this form of aggression					Males indicating this form of aggression[1]	Females indicating this form of aggression[2]	Total number of educators indicating this form of aggression
		Learners	Peers	Parents	SMT	District officials			
Verbal bullying	Threats and intimidation, back-chatting, gossiping, insults and spreading of rumours.	X	X	X	X	X	26	33	59
Physical bullying	Pushing, slapping, headbutting, throwing stones and fist fights.	X	X	X	-	-	24	17	41
Emotional bullying	Theft and destruction of property.	X	X	X	X	X	8	5	13
Cyberbullying	Spreading of rumours.	X	-	-	-	-	4	3	7
Sexual bullying	Sexual harassment.	X	X	-	X	-	2	4	6
Relational bullying	Marginalisation/ stigmatisation.	X	X	-	-	-	2	3	5

4.1 Verbal bullying

Respondents experienced verbal bullying in the form of backchatting, gossiping, insults and spreading of rumours. According to the findings, learners, parents, peers (colleagues, school management team (SMT) and district officials) are all perpetrators of verbal bullying, with educators as victims. This form of aggression was experienced by more female respondents (33) than male respondents (26), with more than half (59) of all the respondents experiencing this form of aggression.

Verbal bullying often occurred in front of other learners. An example cited by a respondent took place when she was checking whether learners had completed their homework. When she noted that some learners had not, these learners resorted to swearing at the educator. In other cases, learners would not hesitate to backchat or threaten educators with physical attack. Some respondents noted that:

1, 2 Numbers do not tally as some overlap; many educators experienced more than one form of violence.

> *I have seen learners backchatting to both male and female teachers in a violent manner (Participant 3, School A, Interview, Male).*

> *He insulted me and the whole class was supporting that learner. I tried to calm them down, but they were not listening to me, then they started insulting me, all, looking at all sides of the classroom and learners insulting you. When others keep quiet, others start making you a fool* (*Participant 34, School H, Interview, Male).*

Female respondents reported that when they reprimanded girls about their hair or uniform, these learners would say they were jealous because they looked better than the educators. Female respondents reported feeling disrespected more often that male respondents, stating that some learners viewed them as their peers or even as inferior to them. The fact that some learners had children while some novice educators were childless seemed to contribute to some female learners' sense of superiority to the teachers.

Educators resent being verbally maligned in the classroom. There were multiple incidents in which learners verbally threatened educators' lives. In a case where a principal was reprimanding a group of learners for arriving late, a learner told the principal that she '*[would] die like that person who was killed with 16 bullets' (Participant 14, School B, Questionnaire, female).*

In addition to learners' threats, respondents endured parents' threats to assault or kill them. A respondent reported a parent entering the school grounds with a gun, saying, '*I will shoot somebody at this school, as you educators don't own this school to kick my child out, wanting me to attend disciplinary hearings (Participant 14, School B, Questionnaire, female).'* Apart from threatening educators' lives, parents do not acknowledge educators' authority. Respondents noted multiple cases of parents arriving at school demanding their child's phone that had been confiscated, saying they did not care whether their child was disturbing the class with it or not – they wanted it back.

In some instances, educators verbally abused each other, sometimes in front of learners. Respondents noted that this creates a toxic environment which is challenging for everyone. It appears that job promotions sometime spark these verbal spats or insults, with unsuccessful applicants for promotions sometimes abusing those who were successful.

4.2 Physical bullying

Physical bullying was experienced by respondents at the hands of learners, parents, and peers (colleagues). In total, 41 of the 100 respondents experienced physical aggression: 24 male educators and 17 female educators.

Incidents included being pushing against walls, slapped and headbutted, along with fist fights and having stones thrown at them. Respondents were frequently attacked for reprimanding learners for unacceptable behaviour. For example, a female respondent reprimanded a learner for swearing in class, whereupon the learners slapped her. In another incident, a participant said:

> *My colleague teaching Grade 9 was checking homework books and one learner did not write and the teacher confronted the boy learner. This learner just took out his* okapi *knife and tried to stab the educator, but fortunately the knife fell down (Participant 28, School G, Interview, male).*

Learners seem to see themselves as equals to the educators, lacking a sense of respect. It seems that in some cases they acted to provoke a reaction. A male learner removed the glasses from a male educator's forehead and threw them down hard, breaking them. Another stated:

> *The learner fought me. He headbutted me twice, first on the mouth, then he headbutted me on my eye (Participant 31, School H, Interview, male).*

Buttressing the statement that EDV affects all educators, regardless of position, an educator on the school management team (SMT) reported being slapped by a learner in class, and a deputy principal had water poured over her. A participant noted that a learner had broken an educator's hand when the educator was trying to break up a fight. Moreover, COSAS[2] members violently demanded that educators evacuate classrooms during school protests.

Cell phones seemed to be a frequent cause of violent incidents perpetrated against educators. A respondent noted that a female educator had been beaten by two girls for confiscating a cell phone that was interrupting teaching and learning. Another participant noted:

> *There was a male educator who confiscated a phone from a male child, then during lunch that boy came with his friends, and they manhandled the teacher (Participant 28, School G, Interview, male).*

4.3 Emotional bullying

In total, 13 respondents reported experiencing some form of emotional bullying – eight male educators and five female educators. It is interesting to note that more males than females experienced this form of bullying. It is possible that males are less accustomed than females to being challenged, harassed, or emotionally abused, so that the experience stands out for them as shocking or unusual. This does not detract from the fact that female educators are emotionally abused, too.

Participants reported on the emotional consequences of theft and destruction of personal property, in which, for instance, cars were deliberately damaged, or handbags were stolen. They stated that the stealing was sometimes gang related, or malicious, or an act of desperation by learners living in poverty. In one case an educator reported that a learner had stolen her colleague's car keys from the office, then opened her car to steal money. This educator felt helpless as the school management was not willing to assist her and instead insisted that she continue to teach the child as normal. Another participant referred to the gang-related component of an attempted car theft:

> *A learner took the teacher's car keys during classes, as ma'am had them on the table. He hid them somewhere on the premises … when we followed the story, we learned that he is part of a gang outside the school and this car was to be collected after school, as they had even secured a customer for the car (Participant 16, School C, Interview, male).*

2 COSAS refers Congress of South African Students. This was an anti-apartheid student organisation established in 1979 in the wake of the June 16 Soweto uprisings in South Africa. It still exists to represent learners at school.

It appeared that educators felt constantly under siege stating how learners are ill-mannered as they take their belongings if unattended. An educator stated:

> *Learners stole my lipstick, bag, water bottle and watch. Money was stolen out of my pencil case, and my signature stamp was stolen in my class (Participant 7, School B, Interview, female).*

4.4 Cyberbullying

In total, seven respondents had experienced cyberbullying: four males and three females. They spoke of being 'tormented' on social media platforms, where rumours and gossip were spread about them. They stated that accounts had been created under their names and their reputations had been tarnished, despite their posting the comment, '*What is said is false.'* One educator did not have social media, so did not know about the cyberattack until colleagues told him. He said:

> *I was once a victim of cyberbullying. … someone created a Facebook profile where they tarnished my name. They were stating how I had inappropriate sexual behaviour with a female learner (Participant 16, School C, Interview, male).*

4.5 Sexual bullying

Sexual violence was mostly experienced in the form of sexual harassment, with learners, peers (colleagues) and SMT members making inappropriate comments with sexual content. This form of aggression was experienced by six educators, two male and four female.

Learners of both genders sexually harassed educators of both genders, in person, telephonically or on social media. Learners would whistle at educators, and comment on their body parts. Moreover, they even '*proposed love'* to their educators, as one educator put it. A participant said:

> *Verbal comments make one feel uncomfortable going back to class. Appropriate dressing becomes a trigger as mostly learners sexualise female teachers and make comments (Participant 23, School E, Interview, female).*

In addition to the sexual harassment faced in classrooms, female educators were further undermined by male colleagues in senior positions, they ask for sexual favours promising promotions. A female participant holding a Level 1 position said she had confided in her HOD that the deputy principal had made sexual advances, stating that he would ensure she was shortlisted for an internal post at Level 2 if she agreed to sleep with him.

4.6 Relational bullying

Five cases of relational bullying were reported, by two males and three females. Nationality or ethnicity were the main contributing factors. Foreign nationals were stigmatised and marginalised, as were those whose ethnic or tribal origins differed from the dominant group at the school. Two participants said:

> *The learner took advantage as this teacher was a foreigner. Learners may never say they are xenophobic, but their actions and words they use to teachers of foreign national[ity] are discouraging (Participant 23, School E, Interview, female).*

> *There is some disrespect and stigmatisation from learners, as she is a foreign national (Participant 18, School C, Interview, female).*

Participants also reported on the lack of professionalism in the way some teachers related to them; instead of treating them as fellow professionals, they adopted a parent–child attitude with younger colleagues. In addition, older teachers would bully younger teachers by interfering with their teaching, even taking over their classes.

The desire for power over others was apparent in comments that revealed how educators would 'gatekeep' physical equipment and access to documents. A participant noted, "*A colleague once bullied me and refused to give me something I was supposed to get, she was expecting me to beg for a document (Participant 65, School H, questionnaire, female)".* Another said, "*A co-worker once acted like school equipment that they were in charge of was brought with their own money, they wanted us to worship them for it (Participant 36, School D, Interview, male).*

It also appeared that relational bullying could arise from the perception that some school subjects carried greater status than others. Those who taught 'higher status' subject were accorded more respect than those who taught 'lower status' subjects, by both peers and learners.

5. Discussion

The findings show that educators experience the full range of forms of violence – verbal, physical, sexual, cyber, relational (stigmatisation and marginalisation), theft, property destruction and emotional assault in one form or another. Acts of violence come from learners, peers, principals, parents and the School Management Team (SMT). These findings are in line with Romero et al (2021), who state that violence is indeed pervasive in school and educators are receiving unjust treatment from perpetrators of EDV. Moreover, Bronfenbrenner's five systems of influence, ranging from the family to the culture and nation, also sheds light on the way these interacting spheres of influence shape individuals. In this study, aggressive behaviour in one form or another was expressed by learners, educators, principals and parents, all of whom are shaped and influenced by factors such as family, neighbourhood, culture, and political and economic factors. Furthermore, aligned to Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which notes that individuals learn in a social environment, through observation and imitation. As such, if learners have observed a great deal of abusive and violent behaviour, they will tend to imitate what they have learned and this seems to have been the case for many of the learners in this study. Moreover, in the same vein the learners' parents assault educators in schools with learners witnessing such which perpetuates learners doing the same thing.

The findings indicate that male educators are more likely, than female educators, to be physically attacked. Whereas female educators are more likely to be sexually and verbally attacked. This finding contrasts with Hochfeld et al (2022) as they mention that females are more prone to violence than males. Findings bring forth that the form of violence is to some degree tailored to the gender of the educator. Verbal bullying was the most prevalent form for all, with most educators reporting unruly, aggressive and challenging behaviours from learners, parents and colleagues. Drugs were mentioned several times as possible causes of unmanageable classroom behaviour, which aligns with Lowe et al (2020) findings as they state how classrooms have converted to unsafe and grounds for violence-educator directed violence.

Common triggers of verbal bullying by learners were reprimands by educators, which often provoked threats to kill the educator, these findings are in line with Stets *et al.*, (2020) who highlights behaviours experienced in communities become part of the schemata, in this case violence is a copying mechanism as learners have learned from their communities (Ecosystems Theory) and then imitated (Social Learning Theory). Through observations and lived experiences, identity is formed, as such these learners become who they are by their environment and act according to their upbringing (Stets *et al.,* 2020). The observed happenstances become what and how learners' identity themselves as and cannot dissociate from such, violence becomes a normal activity and a conflict resolution technique. Educators themselves verbally attacked one another in front of learners, this environment may also influence learners to learn and imitated the behaviour.

Findings point out that verbal acts of aggression have emotional consequences; as Ferrara *et al.* (2019) buttresses that, verbal bullying may lead to psychological and emotional distress and mental ill-health. Physical attacks involved pushing, slapping, headbutting, having stones thrown at the educator and actual fist fights, all on the school premises. These physical acts of violence against educator's confirms that no educator is safe against EDV (Botha & Zwane, 2020). The main reason for physical attacks by both learners and parents was the confiscation of cell phones, which obviously produced extreme reactions. Both male and female educators experienced cell phone-related attacks. All members of South Africa society are exposed to high levels of violence (Romero *et al.,* 2021) and this has spilled over into the school context., this is in line with Bronfenbrenner ecosystems theory as one's community influences their way of life.

Emotional bullying was reported by more male educators than female educators. Interestingly, when asked about emotional bullying, most participants referred to theft and destruction of property, clearly indicating that these acts have emotional consequences. This is in line with Hochfeld *et al.* (2022) who highlighted EDV includes theft and damage of belongings. Furthermore, learners stole money, stationery and personal possessions, and destroyed glasses, laptops and school furnishings. Learners originate from townships that are notorious for violence and crimes as such per the ecological systems theory and the social learning theory, stealing could be viewed as a learned trait from the society and has been forged as their identity, this could be their perceived normal behaviour.

Educators experienced cyberbullying through social media. This took the form of slander and creating fake profiles. The findings are in line with Chun *et al.* (2020), who highlights how cyberbullying is on the increase and that this form of bullying is an aggressive act which dehumanises people. It was noteworthy that some teachers mentioned not being on social media; this would suggest that where rumours or insults are directed at educators online, educators may be unaware that it is taking place.

Educators' experiences of sexually bullying mostly took the form of sexual harassment from learners and colleagues, as well as requests for sexual favours from those in authority. In such cases, they were linked to promises of promotion. Interestingly, there were no reports of forced touching, kissing or rape as it is defined by Ferrara *et al.* (2019), but this does not mean that educators have not had these experiences. Recalling and speaking of such acts can evoke feelings of humiliation and distress, and it is likely that victims would not have mentioned these.

Educators also mentioned stigmatisation related to ethnicity, nationality and subject taught. These findings are in line with what Martins and Weaver (2019) mention to be relational aggression. It appeared that learners, especially, rated educators according to their subjects, with those who taught 'low status' subjects being mistreated, disrespected, undermined and discriminated against by learners.

The levels of aggression revealed by the questionnaire and interviews in this study among a sizeable sample (100 participants) reveal disturbing levels of violence against educators, not only from learners but from fellow educators and people in authority.

6. Conclusion

The study has revealed disturbing levels of violence in schools in the study site, with both genders subject to it and both genders perpetrating it. Educator-directed violence is experienced by all educators in school settings, whether they are novice teachers, experienced teachers, heads of department, deputy principles or principals. Perpetrators seem not to distinguish between genders or positions held, targeting all in similar fashion. Novice educators were subject to verbal, physical and relational bullying by educators who had been in the field longer; however, the perpetrators of EDV could be learners, educators, management (principals, deputy principals and HODs), and parents. In some cases, educators hinted that they had experienced violence so severe that they were not comfortable speaking about it. Educators face learners who do not want to be reprimanded, and learners who do not respect nor acknowledge authority. In other cases, parents instigate violence in front of their children and other learners. All of this perpetuates continued acts of aggression, setting a tone that is destructive to teaching and learning.

7. Recommendations

We recommend that the Department of Education reconsider its approach to EDV in schools, that that educators receive regular training on dealing with various forms of aggression, and that some consideration be given to trauma counselling for educators who have experienced severe, prolonged or repetitive school-based violence. In addition, better mechanisms need to be devised at departmental and school levels for dealing with repeat offenders, which should be formalised in policies. There is also a great need to educate parents and communities about the dire consequences of violence among their children, in terms of securing a better future for them. Outreach of this nature could be done in collaboration with other government structures such as the South African Police Service.

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