



The impact of school violence on teaching and learning in secondary schools in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province

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ABSTRACT

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Violence in schools has become a concern to the learners, teachers, parents and other stakeholders in Mphahlele Circuit at Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province. The learners fight amongst themselves and against their teachers. In some instances they stab one another. The teachers and the learners are not safe at their schools, whereas schools are supposed to be safe havens for teaching and learning. Given all these challenges in Mphahlele schools, the proposed study sought to investigate if really there is violence in the schools and also to explore the nature thereof. Also, the study sought to investigate the contributory factors and the preventative measures to violence. The study followed a mixed-method research strategy and used surveys and interviews. The researcher used purposive sampling to select participants for the research. Twelve (12) participants were selected for qualitative study which used interviews. The questionnaires were used to collect data from fifty (50) participants in quantitative research. Data was analyzed using the codes and themes. The study revealed that the learners bully each other, bring weapons to school, and have gangs. The learners and teachers miss contact time during disciplinary hearings and that impacts negatively on the performance of the learners and the completion of the syllabus. The social problems, economic and family instabilities, drugs and alcohol abuse seemed to be the contributing factors. The study recommended that parents, churches, government and non-governmental organizations and the schools should collaborate to minimize violence, as one strategy in isolation cannot prevent school violence.

Contribution/Originality: Violence occurs everywhere. School violence will always be there, in different forms, despite the educational policies of the Education Department. If the learners are not taught good morals from home, they will continue to display bad behavior at school because charity begins at home. Good upbringing can minimize school violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article outlines the literature review, the methodology, the purpose and objectives, the findings, and recommendations of this study. The study aims to explore the impact of violence on teaching and learning in the secondary schools of Mphahlele circuit in the Capricorn South District. The research would also explore the nature of violence on teaching and learning in schools; the factors that contribute to violence and violent behavior in secondary schools and lastly formulate strategies that could be used to prevent violence in the schools. Media headlines are dominated by reports of violence and that has raised a big concern in communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Different researchers hold different views on the construct of school violence. [Girmen, Kaya, and Kilic \(2018\)](#) see violence as the use of force against oneself, the other person, group, and community. [Mncube and Harbor \(2013\)](#) define school violence as “any behavior of learners, educators, administrators or non-school persons, attempting to inflict injury on another person or to damage school property”. Both definitions show that the victims of violence suffer the pain inflicted to them by the perpetrator, in one way or another. Reports on school violence have shown that the learners do criminal acts in the school, like bullying each other, fighting, stealing and bringing dangerous weapons to school. [Singh and Steyn \(2014\)](#) contend that “the frequent occurrence of aggressive and violent behavior displayed by learners in schools has had a devastating effect on the school system and has become a cause for great concern among the stakeholders involved in the South African school system”. The schools in Mphahlele circuit are also experiencing violence, which, if not attended to, may impact negatively on the results of the circuit itself, and ultimately on those of the province. [Lamb and Warton \(2017\)](#) postulate that some learners experience violence during school hours, in the after-school programmes, and on their way to and from school. The most disturbing part is that some violent activities that are reported, take place during school hours. Other acts of violence take place on scholar transport in the circuit of Mphahlele, when the learners are transported to and from school.

[Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya \(2014\)](#) posit that the scourge of violence in South African schools is a cause for concern and that daily reports appear in the written and electronic media about high levels of violence, physical and sexual abuse and gang related activities in our schools. [Segalo and Hlatshwayo \(2021\)](#) concur that incidents of learner violence have escalated in South Africa. Violence in schools has become a great concern to stakeholders of education at Mphahlele Circuit in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province. [Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya \(2014\)](#) further add that gangsterism is of serious concern in South African schools and is one of the external factors that exacerbate violence in schools. The learners experience violence in schools whereas schools are supposed to be safe places where teaching and learning takes place. [United Nations Educational Social and Cultural Organisations \(UNESCO\) \(2019\)](#) postulates that education is a basic human right that works to raise men and women out of poverty, level inequalities and ensure sustainable development. The right to education is enshrined in the South African Constitution. [United Nations Educational Social and Cultural Organisations \(UNESCO\) \(2019\)](#) further posits that education is one of the most powerful tools in lifting excluded children and adults out of poverty and is a stepping stone to other fundamental human rights... it is the most sustainable investment.

[Burton and Leoschut \(2013\)](#) state that it is important to address school violence for the following reasons: it violates the rights of the child and the educator; it negatively impacts on the educator's ability to teach and on the child's ability to learn; it has a negative impact on surrounding communities; it negatively impacts a country's development goals and it has extensive health and economic costs for the country.

The [Republic of South Africa \(1996\)](#) is aimed at ensuring that all learners have access to quality education without discrimination, and makes schooling compulsory for the children aged seven to fifteen. This right to learn is violated because there are ongoing cases of violence which hinder normal teaching and learning in schools. Some learners in secondary schools drop out of school and this might not only continue the cycle of poverty in future but also impact negatively on the developmental goals and economic costs of the country. This is supported by [Arkorful et al. \(2019\)](#) who posit that education is critically important in the lives of individuals all over the world and that it is a key ingredient in the socio-economic development of nations.

The [South Africa \(Republic\) \(1996\)](#) states that everyone has the right to freedom and security of the person, which includes: the right not to be deprived of freedom arbitrarily or without just cause; not to be detained without trial; to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources; not to be tortured in any way; and not to be treated or punished in a cruel, inhuman or degrading way. The rights of stakeholders in the schools are violated since school violence may affect any person within the school. The learners fight each other; they also disrespect their educators; the parents fight the educators and some educators fight each other. Learners who are not brave

enough to retaliate when they are bullied may resort to staying at home to avoid fights and absenteeism could impact negatively on their performance in class. [Khuzwayo, Taylor, and Connolly \(2016\)](#) attest that absence from school owing to fear of violence directly affects the psychological wellbeing and academic performance of learners. Section 12(1) of the Constitution explains that everyone is entitled to be free and have the right to education. However, these rights are violated in South African schools where some learners bunk school because they are afraid of the bullies. In turn such learners fail to perform well in school and their psychological wellbeing is as such, negatively affected.

[Khuzwayo et al. \(2016\)](#) posit that young people grow up in homes and communities where many are exposed to crime and antisocial behaviors. This is supported by [Burton and Leoschut \(2013\)](#) who postulate that many young people grow up in homes where they are exposed to intimate partner violence between caregivers and adult family members and abuse is perpetrated against children. Some learners bring weapons from home because they saw someone using it during a fight, or they bring dagga to school because it is sold in the community where they live. [Khuzwayo et al. \(2016\)](#) further add that young people in South Africa have been involved in political, criminal and gang-related violence. The learners have become members of gangs to satisfy their need to belong, and they terrorize everyone in the school. [Khuzwayo et al. \(2016\)](#) contemplate that there have been numerous research interventions as well as government and non-governmental efforts to prevent violence, however, the rates continue to escalate. The educators try to implement the alternative measures to corporal punishment as stipulated in the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996, but the stakeholders continue to live in fear because of violent acts in schools. The atmosphere in the schools is no longer conducive to effective teaching and learning.

[United Nations Educational Social and Cultural Organisation \(UNESCO\) \(2017\)](#) states that each year, around the world, about 246 million children are affected by school violence. From 1 April 2022 to 30 June 2022, the South African Police Service (SAPS) reported 58 rape cases and 15 murders committed on school premises.

In one incident that the researcher has witnessed as an educator in Mphahlele Circuit, a grade 10 learner was stabbed several times in the neck with a pair of scissors while the others were watching, cheering the perpetrator up and taking videos instead of reporting the matter to the educators. In another incident a grade 12 learner slapped the principal in the face after the principal reprimanded him for misbehaving. Criminal activities like these are disheartening and serious intervention is needed so that schools become safe places where all stakeholders can engage peacefully in teaching and learning.

This study used Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) to explain the violent behavior as observed in secondary schools. The GST is not popular in education but in the criminal justice system. The learners do criminal activities in schools, for example, they bring dangerous weapons to school, stab, kill and steal from their fellow learners and other stakeholders within their school. That makes Agnew's GST relevant to this study. This theory has been used to explain a variety of criminological phenomena. The GST explains that crime is caused by strain, which, according to Agnew, is caused by the difference between one's aspirations towards any goal and the means to achieve that goal ([Agnew, 2017](#)). An example of this phenomenon could be when the learners set a goal to beat their opponents in a soccer match at school, but lose. The losers might resort to violence to achieve their goal. [Merton \(1938\)](#) explains that the prior theory on which the GST built, proposed that when individuals were unable to meet their goals through legitimate means they would resort to illegitimate or illegal measures to achieve their goals. [Greco and Curci \(2017\)](#) assert that Merton did not explain why only some individuals reacted with criminal behavior when confronted with strain. Other learners may choose not to engage in any criminal activity when they are faced with a strain. [Agnew \(1992\)](#) posits that not all individuals resort to crime to cope with their negative emotional states. [Agnew \(2017\)](#) adds that an individual's coping strategy is the determining factor whether one will engage in crime. In some instances, learners who have been bullied in school prefer not to report the case and the perpetrator goes away with it. In his revision of the GST, Agnew proposed that various forms of strain caused individuals to experience negative emotional states of anger, depression and fear ([Agnew, 1992](#)). Victims of violence may develop anger and become aggressive to

anyone. Agnew contemplates that crime occurred when persons sought criminal means to cope with their negative emotions.

3. METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods (MMR) research was used to explore the impact of school violence on teaching and learning in Mphahlele secondary schools in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province, and that allowed the use of quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Mixed quantitative research was used to have a bigger picture of the problem explored in order to generalize the findings. On the other hand, mixed qualitative research was used to provide a focused, context-based and subjective account of school violence in specific schools, to understand how violence impacts on teaching and learning in schools. The researcher sampled learners, school principals; Life Orientation teachers; Disciplinary Committee-; School Governing Body-; QLTC- Quality Learning and Teaching Campaign- and School Safety Committee members from Mphahlele Circuit to collect quantitative data. The selection was done randomly to ensure that each unit in a population has an equal chance of selection for inclusion in a sample. A total number of fifty (50) respondents from 5 secondary schools, was assessed using questionnaires and the research was conducted in secondary schools in Mphahlele Circuit. The questionnaires contained questions that aimed to answer the research question and objectives under study. The respondents were not compelled to disclose who they are and that made data collection easier because the respondents were free to express themselves when sharing confidential information. For qualitative data collection, the researcher administered one-on-one interviews at participating schools. The qualitative study comprised the learners, school principals, Life Orientation teachers and the Disciplinary Committee members, all from three (3) secondary schools in Mphahlele Circuit. The qualitative data was collected from twelve (12) participants.

The researcher used semi-structured interviews which allowed more response rate in a sense that the researcher could probe and ask for more clarification when open-ended questions were asked.

4. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The researcher aims to investigate the impact of school violence on teaching and learning. The study is conducted in the secondary schools of Mphahlele Circuit, in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province. The study firstly explores the nature of violence in schools and examines whether violence has an impact on the normal teaching and learning in secondary schools based in Mphahlele Circuit. Furthermore the study establishes factors that contribute to violence in schools. Questionnaire surveys and interviews were used to gather data and the recommendations for curbing violence in secondary schools were then suggested. The study answers the following research questions:

4.1. Main Research Question

How does school violence impact on teaching and learning in secondary schools?

4.2. Sub-Research Questions

- What could be done to prevent violence in secondary schools?
- What factors contribute to violence and violent behavior in secondary schools?

5. RESULTS/FINDINGS

5.1. Mixed Qualitative- And Quantitative Findings

The findings were presented in the form of themes and sub-themes based on the objectives and research questions.

5.1.1. The Nature of Violence on Teaching and Learning

The study revealed that there is violence in the schools and it manifests itself in different forms. Violence in schools could be physical, emotional or psychological. It was found that the learners bully each other every day emotionally or verbally, fight and bring weapons to school. Cyberbullying and gang activity were also mentioned during the interviews. Again some learners indicated that other learners bring guns and knives to school. Elghossain, Bott, Akik, and Obermeyer (2019) support this and cite corporal punishment, verbal abuse, sexual violence, bullying and cyberbullying as examples, but pinpoint punching, whipping, hitting, killing, sexual molestation, biting with an object and verbal assaults as extreme forms of violence. Empirical research revealed that cyberbullying and fighting are the most common acts of violence in the schools researched.

5.1.1.1. Learners' Violent Behavior

The study revealed that the violent behavior of learners disrupts lessons. Singh and Steyn (2014) contend that the frequent occurrence of aggressive and violent behavior displayed by learners in schools has a devastating effect on the school system and has become a cause for great concern among the stakeholders involved in the South African system. One school principal mentioned that the misbehaving learners miss classes because they have to attend disciplinary hearing, and that impacts negatively on their performance in school.

5.1.1.2. Forms of Violence in Secondary Schools

The study revealed that the learners experience one form of bullying or another, the most prevalent being physical and emotional bullying. Verbal abuse was also reported to be experienced by many learners in schools. It was also reported that some learners intimidate their fellow schoolmates. A study by Gordon (2016) supports the claim that teenage victims of cyberbullying experience anxiety, fear, depression, low self-esteem, resulting in feeling overwhelmed, vulnerable, powerless, revengeful, exposed, humiliated, isolated and losing interest in schooling and life. From this argument it becomes clear that violence in school could lead to poor performance in school because it may not be easy for one to study in fear and under depression.

5.1.1.3. The Rate of Victimization by Learners on Other Learners and Learners on Teachers

The study revealed that boys are mostly victims of bullying and that boys engage more in physical fights than girls. It was also revealed that girls are mostly victims of cyberbullying. These findings are supported by the study of Guimaraes et al. (2017) that boys are more prone to be both bullies and victims of bullying especially in its physical expression, since girls are more likely to engage in situations of indirect bullying, such as teasing or gossip about peers. This explains that both boys and girls could fall victims of violence in schools. The empirical study also revealed that teachers who reprimand misbehaving learners are not safe and could also fall victims of violence. When there is violence in a school, teaching and learning could be negatively impacted.

5.2. Contribution Factors to violence in Secondary Schools

Unicef (2015) asserts that school violence is a multi-faceted social ill and may occur for diverse reasons, one of which is the intake of hard substances such as drugs and alcohol abuse.

5.2.1. Substance Abuse

The study revealed that there are learners who smoke in the schools. Some learners mentioned that the learners in their schools smoke dagga and other drugs, like crystal methamphetamine whereas in some instances others indicated that they smoke dagga only. A study by Unicef (2015) supports the claim that students, school staff or members of the society who are intoxicated tend to lose control of their inhibitions and often act in an irrational manner. Acting in an irrational manner could disrupt the normal teaching and learning in schools.

5.2.2. *Weapon Deterrence*

The study revealed that the learners bring weapons to school. Most of the participants indicated that the learners in their schools bring knives with them to schools. Another learner mentioned that a gun was also brought to school by a learner. The other school indicated that in their case the learners comply with the Code of Conduct and they have never seen the weapons in their school. Schools should be safe havens where normal teaching and learning can take place. In the researcher's view, normal teaching and learning might not be possible when other stakeholders do not feel safe in the school. The presence of weapons might threaten the safety of the stakeholders within the school and that could impact negatively on the performance and the results of the school.

5.2.3. *Gangsterism and Its Causes in Schools*

The study revealed that in some schools gangs existed before, when older boys were enrolled in their school, but since they left, the school does not have a problem of gangs any more. Another participant indicated that what they have now in their school is only members of gangs and not clear gangs. In the researcher's view it cannot be concluded safely that the status quo would last forever as Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya (2014) confirm that gangsterism in the surrounding communities play a key role in exacerbating violence within the school premises. Gangsterism in the communities might escalate to schools and if proper measures are not taken, it could disrupt teaching and learning.

5.3. *Strategies to Curb Violence in Schools*

5.3.1. *The Role of Stakeholders and Sister-Departments in Curbing Violence in Schools*

The study revealed that the SAPS do not make unannounced visits to the schools but only come on request to some schools. Furthermore, the study revealed that violence got minimized in the school were unannounced visits were made by the police. It was also mentioned that the Department of Health was also invited at some stage to address the learners about drugs. The Department of Education (2019) confirmed that there is no silver bullet to solve the scourge of school violence, and further added that collaboration and partnerships are critical and should involve the wider community.

5.3.2. *The Role of School Policies in the Prevention of Violence*

The study revealed that schools have policies in place to prevent violence in their schools, but in some instances the learners have never been given those policies, instead they were only told that the policies are available. One Disciplinary committee member indicated that they assemble the learners and read out the policy to them. A learner in another school mentioned that policies in their school are not implemented. In the researcher's view, it is clear that the learners do not feel that they own the policies and as such they fail to comply with them. As confirmed by Republic of South Africa (1996) learners need to be involved in their own education and again the policy asserts that a public school must adopt a 'Code of Conduct' for the learners after consultation with the learners, parents and educators of the school. If a 'Code of Conduct' is only read to learners, they might not own it and it may be difficult to discipline them as they were not involved in the decision-making process.

5.3.3. *Parental Involvement in the School*

The study revealed that the parents of learners who commit violent crimes in the school are involved. One school principal indicated that "there is no way you gonna have an amicable solution if you do not involve the parents. Before you can start to have any case or any sitting, it is always appropriate, it is always necessary to have the learners, the parents of the l... will also be indicating to the lack... the learner the seriousness of the case". A study by Kwatubana and Makhalemele (2015) confirms that seeing parents involved in the education of their children is a good thing because it improves academic performance and further added that the learners become more focused in their schoolwork.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made:

- Parents, churches, government and non-governmental organizations should collaborate with the school authority to fight against school-based violence and other social vices.
- Guidance and counselling units should be made compulsory and functional in all secondary schools to ensure that victims and perpetrators receive psychosocial services in the school.
- School security personnel should be equipped with metal- and drug-detectors to ensure that no learner enters the school in possession of weapons and drugs.
- The Department of Education should review the allocation of funds to schools to ensure that the disadvantaged schools in rural areas can afford surveillance cameras and videos for safeguarding unacceptable behavior in the schools.
- The school authorities should create Apps whereby the learners can freely report cases of violence within and outside schooling (in the neighbourhood) and still remain anonymous.
- Learners in various districts should create a group Whatsapp and share solutions to the problems they encounter in their schools. This could be done through District Learner Representative Councils. This technological platform (Whatsapp) could also be useful whenever there is a pandemic like COVID-19, to ensure that the learners continue to discuss the academic issues.

7. CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to investigate the impact of school violence on teaching and learning in secondary schools. It was found that school violence has a negative impact on teaching and learning. The psychological, emotional and physical impacts were identified. A number of recommendations to curb violence in schools was suggested, as one single strategy cannot prevent violence in schools.

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