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Preventative Strategies to Curb School Violence: A Case Study of Selected Schools in Hhohho District of Eswatini, Mbabane

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Abstract: The violence occurring in schools is a concerning phenomenon with pervasive implications for learners, teachers, and communities. Its impact culminates in fear, stress, and a reduced sense of safety among learners and teachers. Its consequences extend beyond physical harm, thus affecting an individual's mental well-being. This study provides a precis of the comprehensive nature of school violence and preventative strategies meant to curb this phenomenon. This study employed a case study design located within the interpretative paradigm. A qualitative approach was used to delve into the perceptions of learners and educators on the nature of school violence and measures that could be adopted to prevent it. Thirty ($n = 30$) participants involving ten learners ($n = 10$), ten parents ($n = 10$), and ten educators ($n = 10$) were purposively sampled. Ten learners participated in focus-group discussions, with five learners representing each school located in Mbabane, Eswatini (Imbabane Central and Mater Dolorosa High Schools). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 teachers and 10 parents (5 parents and 5 teachers from each school). A lack of effective methods of disciplining learners was identified as a cause of bullying and aggressive behaviours among learners. The findings reflect that violence is deeply rooted in harmful social norms, with corporal punishment being widely advocated by the participants. The findings indicate a crucial need for adopting an integrated and collaborative approach to the development and implementation of effective preventative measures.

Keywords: school violence; curbing school violence; school safety; preventative measures; Eswatini



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1. Introduction

The scourge of violence affecting schools is a grave cause for concern. Daily reports appear in print and electronic media depicting the high levels of physical, psychological, and sexual violence in schools (Meyer and Chetty 2017). Knives, guns, and other weapons are increasingly becoming part of daily life in schools (Hendricks 2018). A similar trend is also observed in international countries such as the United States of America, Brazil, France, and Mexico (Bourion-Bedes et al. 2022; Cohen and Espelage 2020; DaViera and Roy 2020; de Los Santos 2019; Mukherjee et al. 2022; Silva et al. 2023). Formerly known as Swaziland, Eswatini is known for peace and cultural stability. However, the rate of violence in high schools has been on the rise, raising an enormous concern among parents, teachers, and other stakeholders. Consequent to the escalation of violence, the relationship between teachers and their students has significantly deteriorated to levels where the educational goals have apparently been disoriented (Goodman 2018). Cases of violence involving stabbing have been recorded in different schools, and this has caused terror among students. The school represents a critical phase in an individual's life; apart from educational gain, learners are socialised into productive citizens. Violence in the school environment has a range of negative consequences for learners and educators alike. It harms the educational fabric and limits the prospect of functional human capital. Globally, efforts

have been launched to determine, manage, and prevent the complexities characterising school-based violence.

Furthermore, it has been observed that violence in high schools mostly occurs during sporting activities, music competitions, and other extracurricular activities (Sheridan et al. 2022). These entertainment events are planned ahead of time, prompting the youths to buy huge amounts of alcohol and drugs that would ‘keep them active’ for that particular day. These unruly activities are reportedly taking place within the school premises during the above-mentioned occasions amid a lack of supervision by adults, either parents or teachers, who are usually preoccupied with the learners’ academic work. Netshitangani (2018) fears that when schools focus on violence control strategies, such as suspension, expulsion, arrests, and fines imposed on parents or guardians, more innovative, inclusive, and effective ways of dealing with the violence itself are ignored. In addition, limited knowledge exists regarding school-level practices and strategies relating to the management and prevention of school-based violence. Also, little is known about the outcomes of the current policies aimed at regulating violence in schools. This study aims to explore the existing school violence preventative strategies and to assess the effectiveness of these measures as part of the intervention remedies provided by specific high schools in Eswatini.

2. The Literature Review

Mestry (2015) explored the root causes of school violence with a focus on socio-environmental factors that contribute to violent behaviours among learners. The findings accentuated the importance of focusing on community influences when designing preventative measures against school violence. While some researchers have explored different interventions aimed at reducing and preventing school violence, others have focused on assessing the efficacy of such interventions (Cornell 2020; Cohen 2021; de Los Santos 2019). The aetiology of school-based violence is complex, involving the Ecological Systems Theory and factors interacting across a multiplicity of levels.

It impacts individuals’ well-being and society, thus affecting both the individual’s physical and psychological well-being. According to Scherman (2020), bullying, school violence, peer victimisation and harassment, and school-based violence are the terms used to describe acts of violence related to the school environment, while peer victimisation and harassment suggest potential incidents in domestic and community areas. Although bullying and school-based violence are often confused, the two differ in several aspects.

Thus, bullying has more understandably been defined as a hostile, manipulative, and abusive act or acts committed by one or more individuals against another person or persons, usually over time, and such acts are based on a power imbalance (Syaidi and Suparno 2022). Some forms of violence (such as single incidences of victimisation that are not repeated, conflict between equal parties, et cetera) are excluded due to the range of bullying behaviours. Additionally, bullying is not always restricted to the confines of educational settings. As a result, this phenomenon manifests as a type of school-based violence (De Wet 2007).

Violence that takes place within the social, legal, and physical confines of a school is referred to as “school-based violence”. It is critical to distinguish between “school” as a setting for community-based physical violence and “school” as a system that contributes to or exacerbates issues faced by educators and students (Campion 2019). When violence is referred to as “school-based violence”, the implication is that it occurs for reasons unrelated to the school and, instead, is brought on by other factors. Thus, although violence has its roots in the school, it may not actually exist there. “School-based violence” also implies that the violence takes place in the socio-legal (monitoring in school trips) and the physical (fences and buildings) domains of the school.

2.1. School-Based Violence Preventative Strategies

Partnerships among stakeholders are an essential preventive tool because no single institution has the resources to completely eradicate school-based violence (Mnisi 2021). To

maintain a positive relationship with the parenting community and to effectively reduce school-based violence, school principals should actively involve parents in educational and disciplinary issues. The African saying “it takes a village to raise a child” exemplifies how communities should share responsibilities in raising children.

Collaborative links with provincial education departments and the local police can provide support and monitoring for school safety. Regular visits and searches can deter youths from using weapons and drugs. According to [Gaffney et al. \(2021\)](#), clustering, which involves two or more schools within ten kilometres, has been proven to decrease school-based violence through collective problem-solving and community collaboration. Communal problem-solving has been found to foster cooperative relationships with the community and police, thus significantly reducing school-based violence. Ultimately, universal multi-setting initiatives that are a part of a school’s violence prevention strategy should be used to combat school-based violence.

2.2. Peer Mediation

Peer mediation involves student mediators teaching fellow students negotiation, communication, and problem-solving strategies to help resolve disagreements without resorting to confrontation or violence. Students come to mediation voluntarily, guided by mediators to devise solutions acceptable to all parties. While some peer mediation programmes mediate only in informal situations, such as the playground, others bring peer mediators into the classroom to help resolve student disputes. According to [Darling-Hammond and DePaoli \(2020\)](#), peer mediation is often part of a broader conflict resolution programme and has been found to improve school climate over time. It significantly impacts student conflict resolution, thus reducing student fights, office referrals, and the rates of students’ suspensions from school. It also increases self-esteem and academic achievement for peer mediators. Peer mediation is a complex programme that relies on planning, training, and monitoring. It involves logistical decisions like selecting students, selecting mediators, and determining the schedule ([Gross et al. 2023](#)). A facilitator or school team is essential for the planning and implementation of a mediation programme. Continuous monitoring is essential, including weekly or bi-weekly meetings. With adequate attention being paid to the details of planning, training, and follow-up activities that are implemented as part of a broader school-wide violence prevention programme, peer mediation can teach students to adopt conflict resolution methods without resorting to violence ([Jeannis 2023](#)).

2.3. Bullying Prevention

According to [Kafel \(2020\)](#), many school shooters in the last three years were persecuted or picked on by peers, emphasising the importance of addressing bullying in schools. Bullying affects nearly one-third of elementary school students and 10% of secondary school students, but school personnel often underestimate its severity, and students are also often concerned that no action will be taken even if they do report bullying. A whole-school effort may be necessary in addressing bullying, including raising awareness, enforcing policies, increasing adult supervision in areas where monitoring is low, and implementing individual interventions like assertiveness training and counselling for both perpetrators of bullying and the victims thereof. These efforts should address bullying at school, class, and individual levels, ensuring that this practice is not an acceptable behaviour. According to [Ramirez et al. \(2023\)](#), implementing effective programmes meant to deter harassment and persecution is not solely about knowledge; schools that are consistently committed to the prevention of bullying can significantly reduce incidents of the vice. Awareness and attitude are crucial determinants of success. Multi-component approaches, combined with school and community commitment, can reduce bullying and improve school climate.

2.4. Early Intervention: Mentoring and Counselling

Early warning signs and screening procedures are crucial for identifying students at risk of experiencing violence. According to [Roca et al. \(2020\)](#), mentoring and counselling

programmes can help rebuild connections, reduce violent attitudes, and raise self-esteem, academic achievement, and career aspirations for students. Mentoring involves a supportive one-to-one relationship with an adult or older peer; it involves activities like tutoring, discussions, field trips, and community service. An effective mentoring programme requires quality mentors, a long-term commitment, ongoing meetings, and the involvement of both parents and the community. Quality mentors, training, and ongoing support are crucial for mentoring to be successful. A year-long relationship is required for significant changes to occur.

Counselling is recommended for the prevention of school violence, but its effectiveness depends on the nature of the problem being addressed. Cognitive-behavioural group counselling is effective for addressing depression but unlikely to achieve the same for acting-out or antisocial behaviour, as it may worsen the problem (Kearney and Albano 2018). Schools face a challenge as they attempt to implement effective counselling programmes due to limited time for mental health professionals. School-based psychologists and counsellors may not have enough time to develop effective relationships with at-risk students. According to Lazarus et al. (2022), the prevention of school violence can be improved if additional time is allotted to the hiring of psychologists, counsellors, or social workers or the re-allocation of personnel to focus on preventive mental health programmes.

2.5. Discipline as a Violence Prevention Tool

Schools should implement strategies meant to maintain discipline and manage the violence occurring on a daily basis. In South African schools, corporal punishment is a popular disciplinary tool, but its abolishment, which was necessitated by democratic reform, has led to the criminalisation of disciplinary measures (Najoli et al. 2019). School discipline aims to ensure safety and security for all learners and staff while fostering an environment conducive to education. While reactive discipline replicates punishment and includes corporal punishment, disciplinary hearings, suspension, expulsion, criminalisation, community service, and detention, proactive discipline involves organisational management, partnerships with parents, development of classroom rules, educator expertise, values, prayer, and security measures. Proactive methods are considered to be more effective in managing discipline than reactive ones.

2.6. School Management and School-Based Violence

Effective prevention of school-based violence relies on strong management and leadership. According to Netshitangani (2018), the two groups that ensure school safety are the School Governance Group and school administrators. The School Governing Body (SGB) is responsible for external school governance and comprises parents, educators, non-teaching staff and senior learners, while the school administrators manage the school administration. Schools are legally responsible for protecting learners' interests during school hours, and educators are obliged to maintain discipline and safety. Regulations for Safety Measures at Public Schools, as stipulated in the (South African Schools Act 84 1996), declare schools to be drug and violence-free environments, with a ban on weapons and dangerous objects on those spaces. It sanctions that random searches may be conducted by principals or educators (Mahaye 2022), and if a dangerous object is found, the school should mark it with the learner's details and hand it over to the police.

In addition to the empirical review to understand school violence and existing preventative measures, this study adopted the Social Learning Theory to explore the causes of school violence in selected high schools in Eswatini. The Social Learning Theory, coined by Albert Bandura in the early to mid-20th century, is a theory that was developed from the work of B.F Skinner on behaviourism, which emphasized the role of external stimuli and reinforcement in shaping behaviour (Bandura and Walters 1963). Bandura shifted from the sole focus on behavioural perspective and incorporated cognitive processes and the role of observation learning (Bandura and Walters 1963). In sum, he proposed the role of external stimuli, reinforcement, and modelling in shaping behaviour. Bandura conducted a study in 1961 in which children observed

an aggressive adult model behaviour, and children who witnessed aggressive behaviour were more likely to imitate that behaviour (Bandura et al. 1961).

The Social Learning Theory has also been defined as the theory of learning new behaviours, conceptions and norms by Burdick (2014) and Rumjaun and Narod (2020). Rumjaun and Narod (2020) posit that the learning process occurs through observing and imitating other people's behaviours. The theory further avers that people's learning of new behaviours may be influenced by observing and imitating the behaviours of people they perceive as significant to them (Albert 2017). These people can be family members, friends, and community leaders and members. The behaviours can be observed from people deemed significant; these people hail from different platforms, including communities, family settings, social media, movies, and schools (Mkhize and Sibisi 2021).

The Social Learning Theory highlights the four prominent ways in which learners can develop and adopt violent behaviours in school settings, namely, observational learning of violent behaviours, modelling violent role models, reinforcement, and media influence (Albert 2017; Burdick 2014; Jin 2021; Rumjaun and Narod 2020). Observational learning of violent behaviours among learners remains a pervasive problem (Wang et al. 2015). Violent acts, such as bullying, have been a long-existing problem in schools, and learners have adopted such acts to dominate peers and gain power and respect from them. A study conducted by Sibisi and Sibisi (2021) found that young people may perceive and normalise violent behaviours to gain power and dominance. However, the lack of positive role models has an impact on the preponderance of school-based violence. Learners are exposed to a high rate of violence in communities and household settings. High crime rates characterise communities, while households bear the brunt of domestic-related violence, with violence being used to establish control and power. Juvonen and Graham (2014) argue that such exposure results in children and learners normalising violence and applying such behaviours in school settings. In addition, Bandura talks about vicarious reinforcement (Albert 2017). This concept is important in understanding the development and manifestation of violent behaviours among learners after observing violence. Albert (2017) indicates that through vicarious reinforcements, people may be encouraged to imitate violent behaviours if such behaviours are being rewarded. Lastly, learners may learn violent behaviours through media. Exposure to media showing movies depicting violence may lead to learners adopting and normalising violent behaviours in schools. Overall, the Social Learning Theory was used to explore how learners develop violent habits through observational learning, imitation, and reinforcement. The Social Learning Theory present a crucial need for positive role models and the role of observational learning in community, family, and school settings. This theory appropriately explains the violent behaviours exhibited by learners in school settings and the factors that may influence those behaviours among learners.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which is a descriptive research method that explores subjective meanings expressed through spoken and written words to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Alase 2017). This approach allowed the researcher to pose questions that solicited participants' verbal responses (Alase 2017). The qualitative approach was deemed an important way of answering questions, which sought to explore existing strategies meant to curb violence.

3.2. Location of This Study

This study was conducted in the Hhohho city of Mbabane, Eswatini. Boasting a highly urbanised population, Hhohho is Eswatini's most economically advanced region. Both schools are located in the City of Mbabane, the capital of Africa's last absolute monarchy. The researcher selected these schools because they exhibit an escalation in the rate of school-

based violence. Mbabane Central High School is 2.31 kilometres away from the city, whilst Mater Dolorosa High School is within the confines of the city.

3.3. Selection of Participants and Data Collection

A total of 30 participants, with ten learners ($n = 10$), ten parents ($n = 10$), and ten teachers ($n = 10$) were purposively sampled. Semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions were used as data collection instruments and were conducted in English. Ten learners participated in focus-group discussions, with five learners representing each school (Imbabane Central High School and Mater Dolorosa High School). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 teachers and 10 parents (five parents and five teachers from each school). Entry to the site was difficult as the researcher had to travel approximately 10 h to the data collection site. The interviews took place during work hours; therefore, the researcher could only meet with the learners during the lunch hour; however, the data collected are reflective of the learners' and educators' perspectives within the environment and actual settings where school violence occurs, which contributed to contextual relevance and authenticity.

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to systematically search for and arrange raw data with the purpose of generating themes and discovering patterns, as well as similarities and differences in the collected data. The researcher was immersed in the data through data transcription and through reading and listening to the collected data to be more familiar with its nuances. The data were coded, and themes were generated from the codes. The generated themes were named and described, which brought a deeper understanding of the current preventative measures and recommendations tailored to curb school violence.

3.5. Data Quality

To ensure that quality data were collected, this study adopted methods that ensured trustworthiness, namely, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Chowdhury 2015). This study ensured credibility by using multiple sources of data (primary and secondary data) and data collection methods (semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions). To ensure the applicability of the current study to other contexts (transferability), the researcher employed an extensive description of the context of the current study, the context of the location of this study, and the methods used. An audit trail was kept to ensure dependability. This included keeping records for data collection methods, coding, and analysis steps. This has increased transparency, thus allowing other researchers to verify the rigour of the process that was adopted in undertaking this study (Chowdhury 2015). To ensure confirmability, the researcher aimed to maintain objectivity; however, subjectivity is inherent in qualitative research. Therefore, during data collection, the researcher recognized their own positionality, served as a facilitator, and conducted interviews in a non-directive or leading manner to avoid bias. As a result, the findings from the focus-group discussions and semi-structured interviews were not based on the researcher's views and feelings but on responses gathered from participants while adhering to methodological guidelines and processes selected for this study.

3.6. Ethical Guidelines

A gatekeeper's letter was obtained from the Ministry of Education and Training. Ethical clearance was then obtained from the University of KwaZulu Natal Ethics Committee. The participants signed written consent forms acknowledging their consent to participate in this study. Participants used pseudonyms during focus-group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Participants were assured that the collected data would be kept confidential and would be disseminated through journal articles where no identifying information would be used.

4. Results

This section provides an analysis of the themes that emerged from the interviews and focus-group discussions. The themes that emerged include forms of school violence, namely, learner-on-learner violence and teacher-on-learner violence. Other forms of violence identified include physical fights, verbal abuse, and corporal punishment. The factors that contribute to school violence and the strategies to curb violence in schools are also discussed. The participants in this study will be referred to by the following codes: L represents comments by Learners of Imbabane Central and Mater Dolorosa High Schools in Hhohho District of Eswatini; T represents Teachers of Imbabane Central and Mater Dolorosa High Schools in Hhohho District of Eswatini; and P represents Parents of the learners in Imbabane Central and Mater Dolorosa High Schools in Hhohho District of Eswatini. This study found that the nature of school violence included violence that occurred from a learner to a learner and also from a teacher to a learner. The comments from the learners below indicate how violence is normalized as a response through observation, imitation, and reinforcement, as stipulated by Albert Bandura in the Social Learning Theory.

4.1. Learner-on-Learner Violence

The findings revealed that the commonest type of school-based violence was 'learner-to-learner' violence. In Imbabane Central High School, violence occurs frequently, and it manifests through physical fights, an exchange of words (verbal abuse), threats, and bullying. One of the learners who experienced school-based violence said,

"Yes, violence occurs within our school premises. We experience it almost daily. We are even too scared to report such cases. This terror occurs because we live in a cruel world where we fear for our lives. Girls shout at each other, often for taking each other's boyfriends" (L:3).

Another learner added,

"Yes, I experienced violence when I was still a beginner doing my Form 1. I was dating a Form 5 learner whom I suspected of being a gangster and a 'weed' smoker. With time, I realised that I could not stand him anymore. On telling him that I would not continue with the relationship anymore, he got mad, took out a knife from his school bag and threatened to stab me" (L:7).

Teacher 1 alluded to the same experiences, saying that

"This year alone, we experienced about four cases of violence. For instance, a boy hit another boy when the two were inside the classroom. In another instance, learners fought and during the fight, one of them had to thrust a knife. Another instance involved one boy chasing the other threatening to stab him with a knife. Yesterday, one learner reported that he was slapped severely by another. The attacker reportedly left his class and went to the other one's class where he beat him up" (T:1).

The comments above indicate the impact of school violence with the increased use of weapons. Analysing instances of learner-to-learner violence through the lens of social learning theory indicates that aggressive behaviours may stem from the observations and imitation of acts of violence involving weapons, which intensify the level of harm. Moreover, the learner's comments indicate that weapons are used to obtain power and assert control over other learners.

Furthermore, violence involving verbal threats was common among boys. Three out of the five respondents that were interviewed during the focus-group discussion reported having witnessed violence that either directly targeted them or vice versa, but whichever way, they were affected by the violence. Evidence suggests that on a daily basis, several learners were being threatened with knives in schools, but such incidents were unreported because of fear of retribution or further victimisation.

A learner added,

“I concur with what Respondent 1 has just said. There is violence within our premises. A friend of mine once got involved in an argument with one of the boys in Form 5. The argument resulted in threats such as: “After school, I will deal with him accordingly”. To me, that threat itself was abusive and a violation of my friend’s rights within the school premises. Every time after school, we had to ensure that the culprit would not keep trace of our whereabouts. Then one day, he managed to locate our whereabouts and upon seeing us, he demanded money to appease him, a demand which we did not have. He then threatened that if we did not give him the money, he would take our valuable assets, which he did. We could hardly report him because he threatened to stab us with the knife he had” (L:6).

Learners establish ranks among themselves. The hierarchy ranges from the strongest to the weakest learner, and, as such, the weakest learners are bullied. The findings show that female learners are involved in verbal arguments owing to their involvement in heterosexual relationships. However, physical fights are very unusual among female learners, as they are usually prevalent among boys ([United Nations Children’s Fund 2017](#)).

4.2. Teacher-on-Learner violence

Not only did the participants mention the prevalence of physical violence, but some of them mentioned that learners experienced verbal abuse from their teachers. The participants mentioned that some of their teachers did not value them as learners. They reportedly accused the teachers of behaving as they pleased.

A learner said,

“There are situations when teachers do not get along with learners. They do not treat us equally as humans. This then results in us developing hatred towards those teachers and their favourite learners, which then generates conflicts. Pupils sometimes temper with such teachers’ cars to frustrate them while on the school premises”(L:1).

Another learner had this to say:

“At some point in classrooms, we feel undermined or not taken seriously by our own teachers because they sometimes do not consider our answers or they make fun out of the answers we give, which then makes us act in an unexpected manner towards such teachers. Teachers take advantage of us because they are superior. Even if we go to the administrators to report that certain teachers are sometimes biased in class, the administrators either take our story lightly or are inclined to believe what these teachers tell them” (L:9).

The participants revealed that the violent behaviour occurring in schools includes fights that break out among the learners and unequal treatment of learners by teachers and teachers not receiving respect from learners. The findings reveal a lack of a harmonious relationship and mutual respect between teachers and learners, which undermines the curbing of violent behaviour in the selected schools.

4.3. Forms of School Violence

4.3.1. Physical Fighting, Verbal Abuse, and Bullying

Most squabbles or misunderstandings among students ultimately stir physical fights, and sometimes the outcomes are so bad that they need medical attention. Apt to note is that students who feel physically challenged in fights are forced to resort to weapons, which brings the fights to a very dangerous level.

A teacher lamented,

“Yes, we usually experience physical fighting. At some point, a learner was thrown onto the window by another learner. It was really fatal. Last year, learners were fighting almost every day. This violence was now escalating at a tremendous

rate and the insinuation was it could be more than an issue from school but at home as well; thus, learners settle their scores from home here at school" (T:7).

A teacher added that

"The violence is advancing towards a point where learners bring the weapons they use to stab other learners whilst on the school premises" (T:3).

Most of the participants mentioned that one serious incident of violence they had ever experienced involved a Form One learner who was thrown onto the window and was rushed to the hospital because he had sustained a deep cut on his forehead.

"A student was thrown out of the window after being bullied and threatened by other boys in upper grades. The student had sustained deep cuts and he was rushed to the hospital. It was a really bad situation" (T:5).

Learners are fearful of and intimidated by other, less serious forms of peer hostility, which include physical aggression such as shoving and pushing, face-to-face verbal harassment, public humiliation, and rumour-mongering.

"We are humiliated in front of other students by fellow students who feel they wield more power than others. This also happens among girls who attack how one looks or walks, and this makes one want to stay at home. They spread lies about others, making them become the talk of the school. This makes some of us feel uncomfortable" (T:3).

Learners were also reported to have been seen in possession of prohibited weapons on the school premises, a dangerous situation which could possibly affect the entire school. A teacher said:

"Another student brought a weapon into school and used it to attack others. This weapon was an industrial hammer. The weapon was taken out when a fight over desks escalated. This is dangerous, as more and more students tend to think that weapons solve quarrels. An influx of these weapons will be experienced in the school premises" (T:10).

It is apt to note that some of these fights originated from minor disputes involving learners claiming to own certain pieces of furniture in the school. However, bullying and more serious violent behaviours cannot be separated. Childhood bullying predicts person-oriented crime later in young adulthood. The nature of school violence, as reported by the participants, relates to the social learning theory in the context of aggressive, violent behaviours, which may stem from the observations and imitations of the acts of violence involving weapons, which intensify the level of harm. Additionally, the prevalence of physical and verbal violence and bullying among learners does not occur in isolation without observation and imitation. According to the social learning theory, learners acquire behaviours by observing other people and imitating what they observe (Rumjaun and Narod 2020). The incidents highlighted in the comments indicate that learners who feel physically challenged in physical fights resort to weapons, potentially influenced by the perceived power associated with such acts. Lowry et al. (2023) conducted a study on school violence and found that the use of weapons in school settings is a learned response to resolve conflicts. The possession of weapons by the learners not only promotes the use of prohibited weapons in school settings but also reinforces the idea that weapons can be instrumental in solving conflicts.

4.3.2. Corporal Punishment

While some participants insisted that corporal punishment be brought back into the school system, others were against the initiative, as the act was banned at both national and international levels. Even though the use of corporal punishment has lasting impacts on children's development, the subject remains a highly controversial one. Some responses by some participants depict the negativity of corporal punishment. These are captured in the following transcripts.

A teacher said that

“It is quite an enormous challenge merely talking to misbehaving children. When we were growing up, the Bible taught us that there was always one strand of foolish behaviour within children; so, beating up a child would not be a solution. Hence, calling the parent would be part of the solution to this matter” (T:6)

A teacher said that

“Deviant learners need to be suspended! Should a disciplinary case extend beyond our control, then the concerned learner must be expelled with immediate effect. Learners’ parents and police officials must also be involved, depending on the gravity of the matter. Any form of violence in schools must be considered a criminal offense” (T:8).

One parent added that

“Although physical discipline instantly fixes a behavioural problem, it can still cause psychological problems as it can make that particular child more aggressive in the long term. Building a testing relationship and good discipline takes time and energy but is worth it in the long run” (P:9).

In spite of these views against physical discipline, there are still teachers and parents who believe that learners should be caned in schools because if they are not, they mislead themselves into thinking that they have grown up to do whatever they deem necessary.

4.4. Causes of School Violence

4.4.1. Location of the School

Mbabane is an economic hub of Eswatini, including commercial activities, businesses, and other institutions that contribute to the trade and commerce in the country. In addition, Mbabane is also characterised by limited resources, financial and social inequalities, and social disorganization. As a result, the city faces increasing rates of crime and violence. High-density townships are usually characterised by a significant number of social ills, including crime. Children are canalised into such social ills, and as such, they model such behaviour both at school and at home. The findings have revealed that the location of the school contributes to the prevalence of school-based violence, which usually manifests among boys.

“The school is located in a township. Townships are characterised by unruly behaviour. It is highly likely that children from the surrounding areas have learnt this behaviour at home and they bring it to school. It is mostly boys who exhibit violent behaviour” (P:2).

Townships are usually built on the peripheries of towns and cities, which are characterised mainly by a lot of illegal and informal settlements. Therefore, townships are not spared in this regard. This characterisation of a township is enough reason to problematise the location of the school in connection with violence.

4.4.2. Domesticated Squabbles from Home and/or the Community

Most squabbles occurring in the school emanate from home, and as such, children choose to settle their scores at school. The participants noted that these violent boys grew up in communities where they used to witness men-to-men fights, men physically assaulting their wives or women in general, whom they accused of being disrespectful to them. The interviewees who experienced physical violence expressed these sentiments. One learner had the following to say:

“Yes, there was a time when two Form One boys got involved in a serious physical fight. This was caused by them undermining each other. One of the boys told the other boy that he came from a more powerful community or society. During the fight, one of the boys was thrown onto the window which resulted in him sustaining a deep cut on his forehead” (L:1).

Another participant said,

“Children often resort to violence due to anger. As parents, we must attend to the causes of anger. Upon our return from work, though we may be tired, we ought to even ask our children about their schoolwork. They indeed need our attention. Parents tend to prioritise their work over family issues. So, one strategy of addressing anger would be communicating more frequently with our children and spending more time with them. Parents should not leave the responsibility of bringing up their children to helpers; in fact, they should be there for their children” (P:7).

The comments from the participants highlight the nature of the community where the school is located as a cause of school violence. Participants’ comments further suggest that the overall atmosphere of the community may contribute to the prevalence of school violence. In line with the social learning theory, the comments suggest that learners who witness and internalize violent behaviours from the community may replicate them, spreading the cycle of violence in school environments. The findings further align with the previous studies on school violence, which emphasise the significance of a broader social context in understanding the causes of school violence. Researchers have consistently found that environmental (community) factors can shape the norms and values that learners bring to school settings (Bacchini and Esposito 2020; DaViera and Roy 2020; Lin et al. 2020). Seo et al. (2022) similarly found that exposure to violence in communities or homes could contribute to the likelihood of school violence.

4.5. Recommended Strategies and Their Effectiveness in Curbing Violence in Schools

With respect to the findings of this study, the participants contributed valuable strategies that could be applied to curb the escalating school-based violence. Some of the suggested strategies have been in existence in the schools’ rules or policies. The only setback is that they have not been effective since there have not been pressing issues related to school violence in Eswatini. However, some participants proffered strategies that could possibly work, though they could not estimate the effectiveness of those strategies. The concerns they voiced are captured below.

4.5.1. Anger Management Initiatives

The violence that erupts in schools results from the anger, which is either prompted by peers in school or is carried from home to school and as such, some learners find solace in abusing others; hence, such learners engage in violence while in school.

A parent said,

“Career guidance should be offered in schools in order to deal with anger management issues. This will enlighten students on the notion that being violent does not sort out issues but reporting or talking over issues will result in the issues being sorted out amicably” (P:6).

A parent said,

“I do not believe that I should use physical efforts to teach my child to deal with life situations, but I believe that the child must practise how to deal with the challenges of life all by themselves. However, guidance and motivation are equally crucial. I should discourage the wrongs” (P:3).

Another learner said,

“Apart from using teachers, I think the Government needs to hire other specialists or agencies that can deal with learners’ behaviour when in the school premises. Teachers have their own problems, which make them unable to handle learners in the same way because we are different. Even in class, teachers may not be able to treat us in the same way. On the other hand, hired agencies will not even be aware of our academic performance, which will enable them to treat us fairly” (L:10).

A teacher said,

“I think the Government should hire trained personnel or professionals like psychologists to work as full-time workers in schools. This will help in dealing with this situation. As teachers, there are some things we are unable to handle. So, such issues need to be referred to counsellors in the Royal Eswatini Offices because we are always busy with learners’ academic work. We always find ourselves postponing cases, resulting in those cases never being discussed again. Therefore, my wish is that the Government hires psychologists that will be stationed at every school in the country” (T:5).

Most of the participants suggested that the Government should hire professionals who are trained to offer psycho-social support to learners in schools. Teachers argued that they were no longer able to handle both the psycho-social problems and the academic needs of learners. They appealed to their Government for help. These professionals would be available to help both the teachers and the learners since all human beings have individual problems that need to be dealt with from a psycho-social point of view. Some learners felt that the Government should stop hiring young teachers because learners take advantage of them, thinking that they are their age mates, so they would do whatever they feel like doing in their presence.

4.5.2. Parent–Teacher and Learner Support Groups

The findings of this study indicate that existing strategies, like the use of support groups (a strategy which goes hand in hand with communication), could effectively curb the violence occurring in schools. The majority of the participants revealed that support groups could help reduce school-based violence, though the degree of success would depend on the nature and magnitude of the violence. Mingling affected and disaffected learners who are driven can foster shared goals, activities, and objectives, which can counteract the all-too-familiar, alienated “nobody cares” attitudes ([Centre for Disease Control and Prevention 2010](#)).

A parent said,

“Even at home, we need to teach our kids to appreciate that if someone or something is bothering them at school, they must report it to the relevant authorities. In schools, there must be a period when each teacher is assigned to teach several learners about how to handle life issues and on how to solve problems. Then, the teacher may form groups, maybe according to learners’ grades, to allow these learners to teach one another about things that were learnt by the respective groups. Let them have discussions in their age groups, which will allow them to cooperate amongst themselves” (P:4).

4.5.3. Reinstating Corporal Punishment in Schools

The findings of this study testify that the interviewed participants viewed the banning of corporal punishment in schools as mainly contributing to violent behaviour in schools. Although it is being condoned in schools at national and international levels, corporal punishment is seen as a controversial way of disciplining children who commit violence in schools. It is a disciplinary strategy suggested by many, although some participants reported their reluctance to condone it. The participants who advocated for the reinstatement of corporal punishment generally held the view that, provided the strategy is properly regulated, it can be an effective way of maintaining discipline in educational settings. They argue that after the banning of corporal punishment in Eswatini, disciplinary issues in schools set in at a tremendous rate. The ban is reported to have adversely impacted the country’s education system. One teacher alluded to the same sentiment, thus saying,

“We have a lot of students and so I would not say that these other strategies are effective. Coming from the old school, we were used to using corporal punishment in schools and all went well, unlike in current circumstances where

we cannot administer corporal punishment on learners. We just keep on thinking and wondering about how we are going to positively punish these learners since punishing them is not an easy task. Honestly, just talking to learners never really works. Personally, I prefer corporal punishment to positive punishment because it enables effective use of time by staff. This contrasts with other forms of punishment, such as detentions, where staff members have to waste hours supervising learners who have misbehaved" (T:9).

Another teacher said that

"Even our Government, at the highest level, has contributed, whether directly or indirectly, through the numerous laws it promulgated and the many conventions it ratified without consulting teachers or principals of schools regarding their take pertaining issues of violence in schools. Government would just present issues unilaterally. For example, Government instructed educators to stop corporal punishment forthwith and embrace positive discipline instead. Government only told people to use positive discipline without even training them on what this positive discipline entailed. The Government often acts on the assumption that we are accustomed to the new disciplinary measures, yet someone needs to unpack it for us" (T:5).

From the focus-group discussions the interviewer had with the learners, some learners admitted that corporal punishment is needed in schools to avert the violence they face.

One participant said that

"As learners, we sometimes violate our teachers' rights. We are naughty; hence, we undermine the authority of some teachers (especially female teachers) who even leave the class crying because of the things we would have said to them when they were teaching. What we do is just too much for them. We destroy our teachers' self-esteem and that results in them teaching us in an angry mood, which is not good at all. We are naughty because we know that corporal punishment is no longer permitted in schools. I think the Government needs to bring back corporal punishment. When we look at the generation that was subjected to corporal punishment, we would rarely find a headline in newspapers covering stories about school-based violence, but today's generation is something else. The older generation would respect teachers, unlike us; we are a crazy generation" (L:7).

Another learner added that

"Violence happens a lot, especially to the interns or student teachers. We take advantage of them because they are new in the school. So, we think we know everything, thereby destroying their confidence. Corporal punishment must be brought back to clean up the mess now pervading the schools" (L:5).

The findings of this study also revealed parents' mixed responses regarding violence in schools. They lamented the violence in schools and intimated that the phenomenon could be understood from two different perspectives, culturally and in terms of modernity.

A parent said,

"I would like to highlight that violence should be viewed from two different perspectives: (1) culturally, in the olden days, it was never called or named violence when our parents used to correct us through beatings. It was a normal thing for one to be beaten up to correct their wrong-doing. So, the context of violence, to some people, relates to the physical fights that people engage in even when there is no dispute. They regard violence as a phenomenon that occurs when a person has mistakenly stepped on the toe of another. Corporal punishment, which is now perceived as violence, was previously seen as an aspect that would positively shape a child's life. Honestly, I would not perceive

corporal punishment as violence, even when it is used at home; rather, it is a correctional measure which is now being referred to as violence" (P:8).

One learner had to say that

"Even if we have come here to learn and get education, that does not warrant being punished to death, because we are sometimes made to clean corridors or even dig several big pits and later made to fill them up with soil. What is the meaning of that? Why is one made to dig a pit which is not necessary? This is tantamount to killing the students" (L:2).

The above-cited comments depict corporal punishment as an effective mechanism for disciplining learners. Owing to its perceived effectiveness, it is, thus, regarded as a traditional disciplinary tool that has been at the teachers' disposal since time immemorial. It appears that there is no equivalent disciplinary measure that acts both as a form of punishment and a deterrent. The psychological and physical immediacy of a short, sharp shock is simply the most effective way of influencing positive behaviour in some circumstances (Tumwine 2014).

4.5.4. Psychological Interventions

Culturally, parents corrected the deviant behaviour perpetrated by their children using a cane. However, in modern-day Eswatini, it seems the only rightful and law-abiding corrective measure is through having a deep conversation with the child, which does not seem to yield positive results.

One participant said,

"A change in the country's laws obliges parents to discipline their children at home in order to curb the violence occurring in schools. Children should be taught the wrong and the right things at a tender age. This, however, does not dismiss the fact that deviant behaviour may develop despite having taught the children about the right things. So, as parents, once situations of violence have been reported at school, we should sit the child down and determine why they behave in a certain way. Dialoguing with a child is the starting point" (P:10).

A teacher said,

"The upbringing of a child is dependent on the parent; however, teachers act in locoparentis while children are in the school setting. This was a traditional mode of canalisation which has since been looked down on because of laws that are now barring teachers from beating up children. It is therefore important for the Ministry of Education to enforce 'periods' of counselling sessions held with students during school hours. As teachers, we need to constantly remind children to exhibit good behaviour and this is another way of counselling them" (T:8).

One parent had to say that

"I am one of the parents who do not believe in the efficacy of beating up children. I believe that talking to these children is a more reasonable way of disciplining them. Once you start beating up a child, he or she will start hating you and even develop anger, which will then affect other people particularly other learners. So, I am against the idea of applying corporal punishment on learners" (P:4).

5. Discussion

These findings indicate that school violence in schools in the Hhohho District of Eswatini manifests largely from learner to learner. Learner-on-learner violence includes different types of violent behaviours, such as physical fights. The impact of these incidents ranges from squabbles to life-threatening cases resulting in hospitalisations. Weapons, such as knives, are also commonly used to instil fear in other learners. The severity and the impact of physical violence in schools cannot be overstated. (Ferrara et al. 2019) found that school violence could lead to physical consequences, including wounds, fractures,

and fatalities, which could result from suicide or homicide. The most common form of violence of teacher-to-learner violence was emotional or verbal abuse. Devries et al. (2014) expressed that the acts of violence within school settings not only negatively impacted the learner's academic performance but could have long-term effects on learners' physical and psychological well-being.

In light of this, the root causes of such violent acts from learners in the Hhohho District of Eswatini emanated from both school settings and factors from outside the school. Violence in school settings was influenced by the location of the school and squabbles from home and communities. The literature on school violence has also found a correlation between higher levels of violence in schools located in urban areas compared to their rural counterparts (Garg 2017; Flynn et al. 2018). Moreover, other external factors, such as squabbles in the community, can also exacerbate violence and quarrels in school settings. The most reported causes of the prevailing school-based violence in the selected schools in Eswatini include high levels of poverty or unemployment in the communities and the inadequacy of recreational activities in schools. Corporal punishment is prominently known as an internal contributing factor to school violence. In the current study, the findings have revealed a conflict of interest regarding the issue of corporal punishment. Some participants still believed in it, whilst others hardly supported it. The critics of corporal punishment argue that it causes emotional and physical harm to children; it is censured for inculcating the idea that using violence is an acceptable method of getting one's way; it is difficult to oversee it; it is problematic to determine the level at which physical punishment becomes appropriate and what constitutes abuse; it creates an atmosphere of fear and animosity rather than mutual respect and harmony, and finally, it promotes the application of an outdated and ineffective disciplinary methodology (United Nations Children's Fund 2007).

Extant studies stress the need for school violence preventative strategies that are proactive in nature (Cohen 2021; Feindler and Gerber 2012; Sprague and Walker 2021). Cohen (2021) recommended the implementation of strategies that take into consideration the interplay of the factors that contribute to school violence. The current study found that anger management programmes are aimed at assisting learners and teachers in handling their emotions. Support groups with key stakeholders, such as learners, parents, and teachers, were also identified as a measure that is essential in fostering a sense of community and cooperation. Although banning corporal punishment was believed to be associated with violent behaviour among learners in schools, participants were not in agreement with the use of corporal punishment as a solution to school violence. Similarly, Gershoff et al. (2019) found that corporal punishment as a method to curb school violence was controversial, with negative ethical, psychological, and physical concerns. The participants indicated psychological interventions as a preferred method to mitigate and curb the scourge of school violence.

6. Conclusions

School violence is a global problem. A dive into the cause of school violence is essential in the development and implementation of effective preventative measures. The most common form of violence witnessed by the participants in this study was bullying, which manifested through learner-to-learner violence. This then cascaded to learner-to-teacher and teacher-to-learner violence. The findings have revealed that the effects of the violence occurring in schools manifested in emotional, physiological, and psychological behavioural traits, which resulted in the development and perpetuation of an unhealthy teaching and learning environment. In sum, this study indicates a need for strengthening policies on weapons in school settings and holistic interventions that will focus on different stakeholders, such as active participation from community members, parents, teachers, learners, and law enforcement, to curb school violence.

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