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A child protection issue: Exploring the causes of school-based violence in South Africa from a bio-ecological systems perspective

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ABSTRACT

Background: School based violence in South Africa has severe consequences for learners, families, educators, and the entire community. Being aware of the complex causes of violence in schools enables social workers and other service providers to respond effectively through well targeted interventions and services.
Objectives: The article explores the causes of school-based violence in South Africa from a bio-ecological systems perspective.
Participants: and setting: The study was conducted at nine high schools in South Africa. 47 grade 9 and 10 learners and 30 educators participated in the study.
Methods: Using a qualitative case-study design, data was collected from learners and educators through focus group discussions and analysed using thematic analysis. Measures were put in place to ensure the quality of data.
Findings: The findings indicate that school-based violence is caused by several intersecting factors which include individual-factors such as learner indiscipline; family-related factors such as poverty; inter-personal factors such as peer pressure and status; provocation and revenge; gambling; community-related factors such as the prevalence of gangsterism; alcohol and drugs in communities; school-related factors such as the unprofessional behaviour of educators; and structural factors such as racism and prejudice.
Conclusions: Violence in South African schools should be declared a child protection issue caused by multiple interacting individual, family, group, community, and socio-economic historical factors. The design of a comprehensive school-based violence prevention programme guided by the bio-ecological systems perspective is recommended to address the complex causes of school-based violence as a way of safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of school-going children.

1. Introduction

Violence is prevalent in South African schools. Armstead et al. (2021) describes school-based violence as institutional violence brought about by policies and practices that are influenced by structural inequities. Thus, school violence is a form of systemic violence that occurs within social, legal, and physical parameters of the school environment. Milligan et al. (2024) view school violence as any intentional behaviour that is meant to cause physical or emotional harm to persons or property within the school environment. It may be in a form of threats with or without a weapon, fights, theft, bullying, gender-based violence, and damage to property (Masinga & Sibanda, 2024). UNESCO (2017:8) broadly defines school violence as encompassing "physical violence, including corporal punishment, psychological violence, including verbal abuse; sexual violence, including rape and harassment; and bullying, including cyberbullying". A rather more comprehensive definition that was adopted by the authors is provided by the World Health Organisation (2021) who describe school violence as behaviour such as child and teacher victimisation, child and/or teacher perpetration, physical or psychological exploitation, cyber victimisation, threats, bullying, fights, classroom disorder, cult-related activities, sexual and other boundary violations, and use of weapons in the school environment. School violence occurs within the school environment and may result in undesirable and detrimental personal, physical, and emotional outcomes

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for both learners and educators (Masinga & Sibanda, 2024).

The seriousness and extent of violence occurring in South African schools was presented in the crime statistics of the second quarter of 2022/23 which indicated that there were 19 homicides in schools and 83 rape cases reported in South African Schools (Van Zyl, 2022). Between 2016 and 2022, the South African Police Services reported that 33 teaching staff members had been violently assaulted in the Western Cape (Tshabalala, 2023). Crime statistics also reported 258 cases of assault and grievous bodily harm, 22 cases of attempted murder, and 411 gang-related incidents on educational premises in South Africa (Van Zyl, 2022). The Kagiso Secondary School shooting was a highly publicised incident, where an alleged attacker held school staff members hostage, stabbed and wounded a teacher, and was fatally shot by another teacher (Tshabalala, 2023). In November 2024, a grade 12 learner allegedly stabbed a grade 9 learner to death on the school premises (Nonjinge & Nakedi, 2025).

To address school-based violence, it is important to understand its underlying causes (Alabi & Ngidi, 2021). School based violence in South Africa is deeply rooted in societal norms such as the African culture that is accompanied by ingrained patriarchal beliefs that reinforce the idea that women and girls are subordinate to men (Pietersen, 2023). According to Grobler (2019), high levels of violence in South African schools reflects a complicated combination of history and recent stressful situations that affect individuals, schools, communities and broader society. However, in explaining school violence and the factors that contribute to its occurrence, Khumalo et al. (2025) recommend that one moves away from simplistic and one-dimensional approaches because the causes of violence are complex and multifaceted. Milligan et al. (2024) supports the view that violent and aggressive behaviour displayed by children in schools is a result of a complex interaction between the individual and multiple systems or contexts, such as the family, school, community, culture, and environment. To curb school violence, Mdaka (2021) suggests that there should be collaboration between various key stakeholders such as learners, parents, community members, teachers, local and national government, who should actively work together in ensuring that schools are safe and free of violence.

Several authors assert that many factors contribute to school-based violence (Alabi & Ngidi, 2021; Khumalo et al., 2025; Masinga & Sibanda, 2024; Qwabe et al., 2022). Lumadi (2024) confirms that the causes of violence in South African secondary schools are multifaceted and complex. As such, this article answers the following research question: What are the causes of school-based violence in South Africa? A bio-ecological systems theory was selected and utilised as the appropriate theoretical framework to explain the causes of school violence.

2. Bio-ecological systems theory

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of human development provides a holistic view about how a developing individual interacts with the various environmental settings with which he or she engages with (Crawford, 2020). In systems' thinking, everyone and everything is connected, therefore, one cannot conclusively ascribe behaviour to any one specific environmental factor. An argument can thus be made that behaviour develops because of the interplay between risk and protective factors within the various settings in which the individual finds himself or herself (Khumalo et al., 2025). Accordingly, the environment is viewed as 'nested structures' that go beyond the individual's immediate environment such as the family and incorporate other distant systems such as the school, community, society, and culture, with the individual located in the centre and surrounded by all the other systems (Crawford, 2020).

To understand why some learners, engage in violent behaviour whilst others do not, it is crucial to consider how the biological, individual, socio-economic, political, and cultural factors interact and contribute to such undesirable behaviour (Milligan et al., 2024). As such, it is imperative to conduct a holistic assessment within the context of all the interconnected and interacting systems, to be able to understand the violent and aggressive behaviour of learners. In Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory, the world of the learner consists of basic structures in which such mutual interactions and influences take place, which are called micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono systems (Dicken's et al., 2025).

2.1. Utility of the bio-ecological systems perspective in social work practice

The bio-ecological systems theory is useful for social work practice in that it reminds practitioners that social problems are not caused by single but multiple intersecting factors (Dicken's et al., 2025). Social work practitioners who use the bio-ecological systems theory should hold a dual focus and pay attention to both personal and external environmental factors that influence behaviour (Crawford, 2020). It is imperative to focus on the reciprocal interaction between the person and their environment, rather than focusing on the one at the expense of the other.

Social work practitioners who hold a narrow focus of paying exclusive attention to factors within families, run the risk of failing to challenge structural inequalities, oppression, lack of opportunities, and the impact of socio-cultural factors (Khumalo et al., 2025). Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory is credited for being open and holistic, as it provides multiple perspectives regarding the individual's situation (Crawford, 2020). Therefore, it helps to view the school violence situation from different perspectives and not from a linear cause and effect stand-point (Milligan et al., 2024). Thus, the advantage of using the bio-ecological systems approach is that practitioners avoid apportioning blame to any one part of the system and as such they can intervene at multiple levels or choose the target of intervention from these multiple systems (Milligan et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

The research question was framed as: What are the causes of violence in South African schools? Aligned with this were the objectives of the study formulated as follows: 1. To determine and contextualise the nature of violence at South African schools. 2. To identify, explore and describe the causes of school-based violence from a bio-ecological systems perspective. 3. To make recommendations for addressing school-based violence in South Africa.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, which according to Rubin and Babbie (2024) focuses on understanding and interpreting individuals' experiences and behaviours through interviews and observations. A collective case study design was used as it provided an in-depth view about the phenomenon of school-based violence.

The population in the study comprised of grade 9 and 10 learners and educators of Tshwane South District High Schools, South Africa. Obtaining information from all learners and educators was impractical, the option was to draw a sample. A sampling frame consisting of a list of all registered schools in Tshwane South District was obtained from the Gauteng Provincial Department of Education. The list consisted of 51 schools; nine schools were sampled to participate in the study. Letters for permission to conduct the study were sent to all school principals of the 51 high schools. Only nine principals responded to the request and granted the researchers permission to conduct the study. The researchers selected grades 9 and 10 learners and educators to participate in the study because they illustrated features that were of interest for this study. This is a group of learners that are in middle high school, they are not new, and they are not about to leave school. As such, the researchers believed that they possess rich information about the causes of violence in schools.

A non-probability sampling strategy, specifically, purposive sampling was used to select 30 educators and 47 learners to participate in the study. Purposive sampling allowed the researchers to make

judgements on which learners and educators could provide diverse perspectives "information rich" data (Braun & Clark, 2013). The selection criteria prescribed that an educator had to be available and willing to participate in the study, qualified professional educator; teaching at a selected school; and teaching either a grade 9 or 10 class. The inclusion criteria for learners required that learners be attending at a selected school; be either in grade 9 or 10; be conversant in English; be willing and available to participate in the study.

The main data collection tool used was the focus group interviewing. Each focus group involved a small group (six to eight members) of learners and educators, they were brought together to discuss the causes of school violence, as such, the groups were homogenous in nature. The researchers developed and used a semi-structured focus group interview schedule to ask open-ended questions that were intended to elicit views and opinions about the causes of school-based violence (Creswell, 2014). Data got saturated after five focus group sessions with learners and four focus group sessions with 30 educators, culminating into nine focus group sessions.

As the study was approached from a qualitative paradigm, thematic analysis of qualitative data was followed, specifically, the spiral process as proposed by Creswell (2014). The process entailed the following steps: 1. Organising and preparing data for analysis: The researchers applied formal and informal strategies whereby data analysis started immediately after each focus group interview session to prevent the data from becoming overwhelming. 2. Perusal and immersion in the data: As hand-written notes were made immediately following a focus group interview, the researchers perused and went over the material several times. The researchers repeatedly listened to the taped group interviews to gain an understanding of the discussions and to familiarise themselves with the content.

3. Classification: The process of classifying and categorising data led to the development of a codebook. The researchers read through the identified codes and placed them on the margins alongside the memo next to the text segments. 4. Synthesis: The researchers formed a broader opinion of what was going on with the data, they evaluated the data. The themes and related sub-themes that emerged were the findings that provided answers to the research questions.

The researchers employed several strategies to enhance the quality, trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility of qualitative data. The strategies included reflexivity; the use of audit trail; member checking; peer debriefing; and ensuring thicker descriptions. Moreover, several ethical aspects were considered. Firstly, the study received ethical clearance from an institutional review board of a University in South Africa. The researchers ensured that participants did not suffer any physical and emotional harm by informing them of their right to withdraw from the study. In case of any harm occurring, arrangements were made with resident social workers to provide debriefing and/or counselling. All participants were briefed about the purpose of the study to enable informed consent and voluntary participation. The participants were required to sign informed consent letters, while the school learners signed assent letters.

4. Findings

Findings indicate that violence in schools is caused by 1. Individual-related factors such as learners' indiscipline. 2. Family-related factors such as poverty and domestic violence. 3. Interpersonal factors experienced by learners such as peer pressure, provocation, revenge and gambling. 4. Community-related factors such as alcohol and drug abuse. 5. School-related factors such as, unprofessional behaviour of educators. 6. Structural and systemic related factors such as racism and prejudice.

4.1. Individual-related factors

The findings indicate that individual related factors such as indiscipline of learners is a contributory factor to school-based violence. Both sets of participants (learners and educators) identified lack of discipline on the part of learners as one of the causes of school-based violence. Participants referred to indiscipline as learners disrespecting, verbally attacking and insulting educators, bunking classes, and not obeying rules by smoking inside the school premises. A learner participant said:

> Yes, other children are rude to the educators. The new educators cannot really do anything because of being afraid of them.

Educators also revealed that learners attack them due to indiscipline and misbehaviour in class. An educator explained an incident as follows:

> The other day the learner had a confrontation with an educator and the other educator was trying to tell the learner not to exchange words with the educator and the learner said … 'I am not talking to you'.

To confirm this finding, an educator supported this view as follows:

> Since I am new at this school, the first thing I observed about these kids is that they have no respect, they do not know the boundaries. Sometimes they come and sit on our tables and do whatever noise and all that. When you say no don't do that, they don't stop.

In line with these findings, Khumalo et al. (2025 state that indiscipline of learners contributes to dangerous and unsafe schools, creates chaos, thus rendering the school environment not conducive to teaching and learning. Similarly, Baxen (2021) postulates that learners' indiscipline is one of the factors that contribute to violence in South African Schools.

4.2. Family-related factors

Participants stated that school-based violence is caused by family related challenges such as poverty, lack of parenting skills, and domestic violence.

4.2.1. Family-related challenges

Family related challenges such as the breakdown of family systems due to modernisation, moral degeneration, lack of discipline and domestic violence, were identified by both the learner and the educator participants as a factor that contributes to school-based violence. The study found evidence of parents' inability to discipline their children and family discord in the following remark by an educator:

> We had a case this morning of a learner who was absent from school for three weeks. I phoned the father, and his response was: Maam … you know I just don't know what to do.

Similarly, educators remarked on parents' inability to discipline their children by saying:

> Parents expect educators to discipline their children. Yesterday, the parents of a boy said: Look, I give you permission to hit this one, you must hit this one. You know in our time you used to hit us, and we were listening.

> You know many of them are from broken homes, so I mean how can we expect them to trust us and open up and see us as parent figures to them in school situations when their own parents aren't even parents for them. You see, a lot of our kids are either physically abused by their parents and some come from broken homes.

The identification of family issues as a contributing factor to school violence is confirmed in literature. Qwabe et al. (2022) report that lack of parenting skills, which manifests itself in harsh or inconsistent discipline and lack of supervision contribute to school violence. According to Milligan et al. (2024), a lack of warmth and caring attitude, lack of communication between parents and children, family violence, family drug and alcohol abuse, involvement in criminal activities, low socio-economic status, and lack of interest in children's education also

contribute to school-based violence.

4.2.2. Poverty in families

Participants stated that school-based violence is caused by poverty in families, they stated that the consequence of poverty is that it at times cause malnutrition in learners, which subsequently leads to agitation and irritation in class. One educator explained this as follows:

> Malnourishment … because many times here there are kids who only eat at night, they don't get something to eat. Some kids here go for three days without food.

When the researchers probed further, the educator linked poverty and violence as follows.

> Violence? Well, you don't eat healthy … how do you feel afterwards? If you eat unhealthily, you are easily irritated and agitated.

Participating educators also said that poverty causes depression and that most families in poor communities experience social problems and engage in such antisocial behaviours as muggings, theft, and robbery, and that such antisocial behaviours result in violent episodes. An educator explained as follows:

> As a result of the inability to meet their needs, some learners act aggressively towards other learners, or they steal from each other which ultimately cause fights.

Learners identified poverty and community-related factors as conditions that contribute to school-based violence. These findings are consistent with other studies. According to Lumadi (2024), there is a correlation between socio-economic disadvantage and increased levels of violence in schools. In addition, Khumalo et al. (2025) postulate that youth from low-income families have limited means to affirm their identities and often engage in violence to compensate for lack of access to resources and opportunities.

4.3. Inter-personal related factors

Participants stated that school-based violence is caused by interpersonal factors experiences by learners, such as peer pressure, provocation, revenge and gangsterism.

4.3.1. Peer pressure and status

Participants stated that some learners are influenced by friends to get involved in violence because they want to be seen as the cool ones and to be in the "top ten". It was revealed by participating learners that some learners harass other learners to impress their peers, get recognition, satisfy their personal egos, and boost their reputation and status. A learner remarked as follows:

> Sometimes you find I speak to you, and you walk into a group of friends who provoke you, so you as an individual you might want to ignore it, and your friends will say: Are you gonna let him say that to you?.. Are you gonna let him say that to you? Then you are forced to do something and then it turns into a big issue (violence).

Educators shared the same view as the learners. This view is reflected in the following statement by an educator:

> I think teenagers who … everybody wants to prove a point, everybody wants to create a name for themselves, as a result they fight to get the kind of recognition they want. Everybody wants to be known as that boy … so and so … who is being feared by everybody.

The above findings reinforce the view that the peer group has a direct and indirect influence on misbehaviour and causes some youth to engage in undesirable behaviour to fulfil a need to belong and avoid being rejected (Milligan et al., 2024). In line with the findings, Khumalo et al. (2025) state that school violence is caused by the individual's need to belong and the need for authority, status and power.

4.3.2. Provocation and revenge

Provocation and revenge were viewed by participants as one of the factors that cause school-based violence. Both learners and educators believe some learners engage in violence to retaliate and for revenge, especially when they are provoked. To confirm the findings in this regard, learners revealed that some learners tease each other, talk badly about others and this makes some of them angry which leads to fights. A learner revealed an incident where a learner was provoked to an extent that she retaliated. The learner said:

> Yes, it happened in our class then the bully did it to another girl and the bully thought the girl was gonna keep quiet … And one day that girl was fed up and hit the bully.

There was consistency with what the learners said. Educators agreed that some learners engage in violence when they are provoked. One educator said:

> I think sometimes children provoke each other, they really provoke each other with the name-calling and all other things that they do.

The findings of the current study link school-based violence with provocation and revenge. Masinga and Sibanda (2024) confirm that learners who experience bullying in school engage in violence because of the pressure to be seen as brave enough to retaliate when provoked.

4.3.3. Gambling

Gambling was identified by some educators and learners as one of the contributing factors to school violence. Learners in the three schools reported that there are places in the school premises where learners congregate during break to smoke cigarettes and gamble. A learner said:

> They gamble at the placed called [−].

An educator affirmed and said:

> You know of the squabbles that emanate from gambling … because of gambling, violence will always be there, and active emanates from the gambling episodes.

The findings of the present study reveal a link between gambling and school violence. The findings are compatible with a similar study on the association between gambling and conduct disorder conducted in the United States with adolescents and young adults, where it was found that 60 %–80 % of high school students that had conduct disorders reported to have been involved in gambling (National Council on Gambling Problem, 2025). In their study, Kryszajtys et al. (2018) established that gamblers are at a higher risk for engaging in problematic and antisocial behaviours such as frequent bullying, fighting, and using weapons.

4.4. Community-related factors

4.4.1. Alcohol and drug abuse

Alcohol and drug abuse was of a major concern in all the participating schools, the participants stated that it usually leads to indiscipline and fighting. Alcohol and drugs are sourced from the community where learners come from. To confirm, most learners reported that learners come to school under the influence or bring drugs and alcohol. It was also revealed by learners in two schools that drugs are also sold in schools by learners who hide the drugs in their school ties or mix it with dough into cookies and sell them at school. An educator confirmed and reported as follows:

> On Friday when the learners entered my class, I smelt dagga and when I approached the culprits to say there is dagga, they tried to be aggressive towards me. And it's not the first time that I met an incident like this.

In addition, a learner said:

> Some are selling drugs here at school, dagga, and drugs and if you come into my territory, then there is a fight because I am selling at this corner in the school.

Furthermore, both learners and educators said some people from the community who are not learners collude with learners to enter the school to sell drugs to school learners. An educator said:

> We have people coming from outside jumping into the school to cause havoc. They will be selling drugs. Where my class is situated, I'm faced with these things every day. People jump in and out, in and out and being a young woman, I will not even try to stop them.

Similarly, a learner said:

> But some of the children also allow it because they are calling their friends, people from outside and then there is people using drugs in the school and they bring the drugs and daggas. Some children are smoking and selling drugs here at school.

These findings are confirmed in literature. Milligan et al. (2024) established that the social and economic characteristics of a community where learners come from influences their likelihood to engage in school-based violence. According to Lumadi (2024), learners with access to drugs and weapons are likely to exhibit violent behaviour. Schools are microcosms of communities, certain characteristics of communities such as access to weapons and drugs increase learners' risk of violence.

4.5. School-related factors

4.5.1. Unprofessional behaviour of educators

The behaviour of some educators has been identified as a contributory factor to school violence by both the educators and learners. The participants stated that some educators befriend learners, drink, share cigarettes and smoke with learners during break or when learners bunk classes to go and smoke behind the classes. The participants further stated that some educators turn a blind eye and do nothing to discipline the learners. During the focus group discussions, a participating learner said:

> Some learners steal items like memory cards and phones from each other and sell these items to educators who are willing to buy such stolen items.

The unprofessional behaviour of educators was confirmed by educators themselves. Participating educators at one school said that some educators become friends with learners and influence them negatively, to an extent that such learners become disrespectful towards other educators. An educator explained:

> You know we are pointing out that the learners are to be blamed. There are educators who are also perpetrators who take a child and expose them to drugs and alcohol and the educator is involved with the children, they are also part of the bringing of the alcohol. They allow it even in the classroom, the educators allow the children to smoke.

It was also reported by some learners that in specific instances educators allow learners to smoke, or they ignore them and do not reprimand them, and this makes it difficult for learners to be controlled and well behaved. They become disruptive and aggressive. An educator observed:

> Some educators sell cigarettes to the children. Some children smoke in class even when you say you cannot smoke in front of us, they tell us the door is open.

Overall, school-based violence is caused by multiple factors including the unethical behaviour of professional educators. The findings are aligned to research on the inappropriate and unprofessional behaviour of educators and their contribution to violence in schools (Milligan et al., 2024). According to Nonjinge and Nakedi (2025) regular reports of incidents of school-based violence confirm that South African schools have become highly unsafe. In addition, Khumalo et al. (2025) states that educators who behave unprofessionally can make learners become rebellious.

4.6. Structural and systemic related factors

4.6.1. Racism and prejudice

Findings from participating learners in three out of the five participating schools that took part in the focus group interviews revealed that racism and prejudice is another source of physical fights among learners. At one school it was reported that mixed-race and black children discriminate against each other based on race and that this then escalates into violence. A learner confirmed this potential conflict by saying:

> Yes, it's like there is racism in the school … they think they are better than us because we are blacks, and they teased me because of my surname.

Educators were also identified by participating learners as contributing to violence by perpetuating racism and discrimination. Learner participants noted that some educators tease children about their religion and ethnic origin. A learner explained as follows:

> There is this one educator in the beginning of the year when we first went into his class it was like funny because he likes to make jokes but sometimes those jokes are just too personal. In the beginning it was quite funny but now it's irritating because he does it to the same kids based on religion, where you come from, your race and skin colour.

To add, the participating learners said that one of their educators is prejudiced and has a tendency of generalising and classifying learners according to their ethnic grouping and there are always debates and fights amongst the learners on who causes trouble in the school. One learner said:

> Our educators blame the Zulu-speaking learners as the ones causing indiscipline, fighting, and disrespecting educators.

This finding of racism and prejudice perpetrated by peers and educators against other learners as a factor that contributes to school-based violence is in line with succinct literature. In a study exploring the dynamics of school violence, Mncube and Harber (2013) found that mixed race and black parents and children held negative stereotypes about each other and that schools failed to address this phenomenon, and these practices ultimately led to misunderstandings and violence both at school and in the community.

5. Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that violence in South African schools is caused by a plethora of internal and external factors embedded in the individual, family, school, community and society at large. Khumalo et al. (2025) confirm that violence is an outcome of many factors that influence the behaviour of individuals to become aggressive. Educators, learners and community members are perpetrators of violence.

The finding that individual related factors cause school-based violence are confirmed by Milligan et al. (2024), who state that violence in schools is caused by learners' lack of respect for peers, educators and school property. Similar observations of learners' indiscipline as a contributing factor to violence in South African schools were made by Qwabe et al. (2022).

Findings indicate another micro-system cause of social based violence, namely, family related factors such as poverty, domestic violence and lack of parenting skills. This finding is aligned to Lumadi (2024), who observed that an environment where learners are socialised

contributes to their engagement in violent behaviour. From a micro-system perspective, a learner may interact with other systems such as the family, peers, the school, and the immediate neighbourhood (Dickens et al., 2025). Looking at such person and environment interaction and exchange may explain why some learners engage in violent behaviour whilst others do not (Potgieter et al., 2022). A study by Pietersen (2023) found that South African families are experiencing a crisis of family disintegration and moral decay which presents in a form of indiscipline, crime, and school violence. The outcome of such family dysfunction is that children lack proper socialisation, guidance and supervision which can lead to antisocial behaviour and a culture of violence (Khumalo et al., 2025). Family as a socialising unit, is one of the systems that contributes to school-based violence. However, it is the family in interaction with the context in which they exist that contributes to school violence.

The identification of poverty as a family and community-related factor that cause school-based violence is consistent with other studies. According to Lumadi (2024), Learners from disadvantaged communities and homes are likely to be exposed to violence and aggressive behaviours which they are likely to exhibit in schools. Khumalo et al. (2025) also confirm that poverty and income inequality contribute to high rates of violence.

The study findings indicated that inter-personal related factors such as peer pressure and provocation cause school-based violence. This is confirmed in literature by Fulbeck (2018) who postulate that leaners who associate with aggressive peers are likely to engage in school violence. Furthermore, the author states that learners who are bullied resort to violence as a way of revenge (Fulbeck, 2018). The findings reinforce the view of the mesosystem perspective that the frequency and quality of interaction the learner has with his or her family, peers, or school staff may influence his or her development (Crawford, 2020). When the linkage between two systems is strong, then the effects will also be intense. Therefore, the learners will develop violent tendencies and behaviour due to the number and quality of the interactions involving violence which they have with other systems. Milligan et al. (2024) assert that a child that associates with friends who are involved in violent activities is at risk of being a perpetrator or victim of violence.

The findings indicate that macrosystem issues such as community-related and school-related factors cause school-based violence. The prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse in communities where learners come from was flagged as one of the reasons why they engage in violent behaviour at school. This finding is confirmed by Qwabe et al. (2022) who revealed that many learners bring alcohol and drugs to school. Maphosa and Mammen (2011) found that some learners smoke and drink on the way to school and attend classes whilst under the influence of substances. It is when they are intoxicated that they become violent, aggressive, unruly, disruptive and/or disrespectful to peers and educators (Maphosa & Mammen, 2011).

From a macrosystem perspective, different social and cultural norms influence how individuals define and react to violence (Crawford, 2020), children who experience corporal punishment at school or observe domestic violence at home, are most likely to accept violence as normal (Khumalo et al., 2025). As such, those school learners are likely to perpetrate violence. Moreover, due to the pervasive nature of violent crime in South Africa, violence in schools is normalised in many communities. School is the microcosm of society, therefore, the increased rates of school-based violence in South Africa calls for interventions that consider community, socio-cultural, and historical contexts. According to Milligan et al. (2024), to address the problem of school violence, prevention efforts should focus on teaching learners social and emotional skills and competencies to be able to withstand the broader socio-environmental influences.

Another macro-system that influences the behaviour of learners is the school, specifically the behaviour of educators. The findings highlighted that educators who behaved in an unprofessional manner contributed to violence in schools. Educators were reported to be befriending learners who were ill-disciplined at school, to be drinking and smoking with them. Note only that, other educators were reported to be selling drugs and cigarettes to learners and to be buying stolen items from the learners. Others failed to act on reports of school violence, whilst other educators engaged in sexual relations with learners. Other studies indicated that the unbecoming, inappropriate and unprofessional behaviour of some educators contributes to indiscipline and school violence (Milligan et al., 2024). A study by Louw (2015:2) found that some educators referred to their sexual relations with learners as “service benefits”. According to Baxen (2021), learner to educator violence stems from aggravation, provocation, frustration, unfair conduct, and unrealistic expectations that learners perceive from educators.

The findings of the study indicated that chronosystem issues such as structural, historical and systemic related factors contribute to school-based violence. One such a factor is racism and prejudice which was reported to be perpetrated by learners and educators in schools. Racism and prejudice manifested in different forms ranging from subtle ways such as teasing and stereotyping to obvious ways such as segregation and discrimination. These findings are in line with existing studies which have revealed that issues of racial and ethnic diversity can contribute to violence when individuals of a different race feel disrespected (Qwabe et al., 2022; Nonjinge & Nakedi, 2025). Pietersen (2023) shares similar views and postulate that structural and systemic racism in some South African schools is a contributing factor to the high levels of school violence. Nonjinge and Nakedi (2025) notes that racially induced violence in schools stem from South Africa’s history of apartheid that led to segregation, discrimination, and racism which is still being felt in the present-day South Africa.

Exposure to different types of violence, irrespective of the causes has profound and long-lasting effects on learners, educators and the wider society (Masinga & Sibanda, 2024)). The impact of different causes of school violence highlighted in the study needs to be investigated from a bio-ecological systems perspective to design and develop intervention strategies and programmes aimed at addressing violence in schools.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study has demonstrated that school violence is caused by internal and external factors embedded in the individual, family, school, community, and society. Violence is an outcome of multiple complex factors that influence the behaviour of individuals to become aggressive. Moreover, educators, learners, families, and community members were found to contribute directly or indirectly while some were identified as perpetrators of violence. Some factors that were found to contribute violence in schools include: learners’ indiscipline, family-related factors, personal problems experienced by learners, poverty, peer pressure, power and status, provocation, and revenge, gambling, community-related factors, alcohol and drugs, lack of discipline, unprofessional behaviour of educators, racism and prejudice.

7. Implications for policy and practice

The bio-ecological systems theory highlights the complex relationship between learners and the different levels of their environment that shape their behaviour and likelihood to engage in school-based violence. Since the causes of school-based violence are composite, the recognition of these multiple causes paves a way for acknowledging the importance of multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral collaborations in addressing school-based violence. All stakeholders, namely, parents, teachers, social workers, government departments, and policy makers should be sensitised of their role in addressing violence in schools. As such, the multi-complex interacting factors that contribute to the high rates of violence in South African schools calls for differentiated, yet aligned policies, strategies and interventions in the following spheres of the bio-

ecological systems theory.

At an individual and family (micro) level, the lack of discipline amongst learners should be seen as a cry for help, as such, the department of social development being a custodian of child protection services and the department of education should collaborate in finding ways of employing more school-based social workers who will engage in counselling, therapy and dialogues with the children that are displaying violent behaviour to identify the root causes of such behaviour and then render individualised and customised behavioural modification sessions. Ways of rewarding and reinforcing good behaviour need to be devised by social workers in collaboration with learners, parents, and educators.

At a family level, social workers should provide parenting skills and interventions to parents so that they can build better relationships with their children, model good behaviour and address family risk factors that contribute to school violence, such as lack of effective parenting, poverty, drug abuse and family domestic violence. Social workers can implement psycho-social programmes with parents and empower them to address their psycho-social and economic needs. One such a programme could be a skills development and poverty alleviation programme. Social workers could also advocate for social protection mechanisms for families.

At a peer group (meso level), social workers and educators should initiate awareness campaigns within the school to sensitise learners on the dangers of peer-pressure, gambling, alcohol and drug abuse, violence and to provide them with practical problem solving and conflict resolution strategies, and techniques of resisting peer-pressure. Such school-based projects should be pioneered and led by learners whilst teachers and social workers only provide technical support.

At a macro level, interventions should be devised to address the community and school related causes of school-based violence. At a community level, social workers should establish community-based child protection forums that are tasked with ensuring that learners do not access drugs and alcohol in the community. Such a task force should work in collaboration with the schools, parents, social workers, and police officers.

At a school level, the school principal and the department of education should institute disciplinary measures and policies that target learners and educators who engage in acts of violence. Moreover, the government should hire more teachers to reduce the workloads of teachers to ensure that there is a low teacher-pupil ratios, this creates a suitable environment for teacher agency, which includes employing pedagogic approaches aimed at instilling a peaceful environment that disrupts violent tendencies.

At an institutional level, government departments, policy makers, universities have a role to play in addressing school-based violence. At a governmental level, the department of education should establish multi-sector forums that include all key government departments such as department of social development and department of community safety and other key stakeholders such non-governmental organisations, schools and families to identify strategies for addressing infrastructural, institutional, and human-resource loopholes that make schools vulnerable to multiple forms of violence. Government should avail funding for programmes that are aimed at preventing school-based violence. Such programmes might include social assistance and cash transfers to families in financial distress.

At a policy level, the policy makers should develop strict policies that clearly spell out the consequences for educators that perpetrate violence in schools. On the other hand, policies that incentivise schools and educators to promote safe school environments must be developed. The enacted policies must also reflect the structural and systemic causes of violence and solid multi-sector implementation plans that clearly stipulate the roles of different stakeholders in addressing school-based violence.

Universities and academic instruction should conduct research studies aimed at designing and developing a holistic and multi-sectoral school violence intervention programme that is evidence-based and that reflects the views of school learners.

At a chrono level, the department of social development should put in place counselling and psycho-social programmes that address the structural, historical and systematic issues such as racism, prejudice, injustices and inequalities of the past that fuel intergenerational trauma and ongoing violence in South African schools.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sipho Sibanda: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Poppy Masinga:** Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Ethics approval

The study received ethical clearance (Reference number: 89240728) from the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

Consent

The participants gave informed consent to participate in the study.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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