

Article

# “It Leads to a Bleak Future”: Exploring the Effects of School-Based Violence on Learners and Educators in South Africa

Sipho Sibanda <sup>1,2,\*</sup> , Poppy Masinga <sup>3,4</sup> and Sabastain Gunda <sup>5,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia, Perth, WA 6009, Australia

<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, ZA 0028, South Africa

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Social Work and Community Development, South African College of Applied Psychology, Johannesburg, ZA 2031, South Africa; poppy@sacap.edu.za

<sup>4</sup> Department of Social Work and Community Development, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, ZA 2006, South Africa

<sup>5</sup> Department of Social Work, Acknowledge Education, Sydney, NSW 2010, Australia

\* Correspondence: sipho.sibanda@uwa.edu.au (S.S.); sabastain.gunda@research.uwa.edu.au (S.G.)

## Abstract

Violence in schools is an unfortunate reality that is facing not only South Africa but all countries across the globe. The prevalence, frequency and intensity of violence are comprehensively documented, and there is enough evidence to demonstrate that school-based violence is a major problem in South African schools. What is still not clear are the effects of this violence on learners and educators. As such, the study aimed to explore the effects of school-based violence on learners and educators in South Africa. It is important to fully understand the effects of this phenomenon to devise appropriate strategies for addressing it. Based on a qualitative study conducted at nine high schools in South Africa, data were collected from 47 learners and 30 educators using focus group discussions and analysed using thematic analysis. Measures were implemented to ensure the quality of the data. The study received ethical clearance and adhered to all ethical considerations. The findings indicate that violence has detrimental effects on the victim, the perpetrator, the bystander, the educators, and the teaching and learning environment. Learners who experience bullying reported heightened levels of fear, frustration, and emotional distress, which contribute to negative perceptions of schooling and diminished academic performance. Collectively, these factors shape an overall adverse school experience. The study also found that exposure to school violence undermines educators' self-confidence and erodes their sense of professional dignity. Furthermore, essential instructional time is lost as teachers are compelled to manage disruptive and violent behaviour, limiting opportunities for effective teaching and learning. The paper concludes that the short-term and long-term effects of school-based violence call for strategies and programmes to be put in place to address the problem of school-based violence.

**Keywords:** ecological systems approach; high-school learners; intervention research; school-based violence; school educators; South Africa



Received: 31 January 2026

Revised: 23 June 2026

Accepted: 23 June 2026

Published: 27 June 2026

**Copyright:** © 2026 by the authors.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

## 1. Introduction

Reports of violence in South African schools have gained increasing prominence in recent years, with media coverage reflecting a troubling escalation in both frequency and severity [1]. Although school-based violence is a global phenomenon, its forms vary across

regions. In South Africa, physical, emotional, and sexual violence are among the most pervasive [2,3]. By contrast, European contexts report higher levels of emotional and cyber violence, while parts of the Americas grapple with gang-related and gun-related incidents [4]. Despite these regional differences, the consequences for learners remain universally profound, affecting their behaviour, well-being, and educational trajectories. This study sought to explore the effects of school-based violence on learners and educators in South Africa.

The persistence of violence in South African schools is particularly alarming. School violence is defined as any form of harm occurring within or beyond the classroom, on school grounds, during travel to and from school, or within digital spaces [5]. Learners are the primary victims, although perpetrators may include peers, teachers, or other members of the school community [6]. A decade ago, Diale warned that “violence against children has reached endemic proportions in South Africa, as 15.5 million children suffer from some form of violence.” [6]. Evidence suggests that the situation has since deteriorated. National crime statistics illustrate the severity of the crisis: in the second quarter of 2022/23 alone, schools recorded 19 homicides and 83 rape cases [7]. Between 2016 and 2022, 33 teachers in the Western Cape were violently assaulted [7]. Additional reports include 258 cases of assault and grievous bodily harm, 22 attempted murders, and 411 gang-related incidents on school premises [7]. High-profile cases, such as the Kagiso Secondary School attack, where a perpetrator held staff hostage and stabbed a teacher before being fatally shot, and the fatal stabbing of a Grade 9 learner by a Grade 12 learner in 2024, underscore the gravity of the situation [8].

More recent data indicate that the problem continues to escalate. In 2023, individual schools reported more than six violent incidents each [9]. By 2025, cases of abuse and sexual harassment of learners by teachers had risen by 35.4%, reaching 111 cases in the 2024/2025 period, alongside more than 500 bullying incidents recorded in the first term. One particularly disturbing case involved the repeated rape of a 13-year-old learner by a teacher in Limpopo between November 2024 and March 2025.

These escalating incidents and effects highlight the urgent need for coordinated, multi-sectoral, and multidisciplinary interventions [1,10]. However, effective prevention requires a nuanced understanding of the underlying effects of violence. Scholars caution against simplistic explanations, emphasising that school-based violence should be understood as a phenomenon that is shaped by complex and interrelated factors [7,9] that result in compounded effects. Armstead et al. conceptualise school violence as institutional and systemic, rooted in structural inequities embedded within school policies and practices [11]. Milligan et al. describe it as intentional behaviour aimed at causing physical or emotional harm, including threats, fights, theft, bullying, gender-based violence, and vandalism [9]. Understanding the effects of school-based violence in South Africa is therefore essential, as these effects are intertwined with broader societal norms, including patriarchal cultural beliefs that cause masculine hegemonies that position women and girls as subordinate to men [10,12]. Addressing these requires collaboration among key stakeholders, including learners, parents, educators, community members, and government structures [13]. Given the multifaceted nature of the problem, scholars [14–16] consistently highlight a wide range of contributing factors and agree that the causes of violence in South African secondary schools are inherently complex.

Against this backdrop, this article investigates the following research question: What are the effects of school-based violence on learners and educators in South Africa? The paper begins with a review of the literature on the key drivers of school-based violence, followed by a description of the research methodology. The findings are then presented

and analysed, leading to a discussion of their implications. The article concludes with recommendations informed by the study's outcomes.

### *1.1. Effects of School-Based Violence*

School-based violence produces wide-ranging effects on learners, educators, and the broader school environment. A substantial body of research shows that exposure to violence in educational settings has multidimensional and long-lasting consequences for children and adolescents. Learners who encounter violence face physical, psychological, behavioural, and educational challenges that may persist into adulthood [2,17]. These harms carry high societal costs, undermining human development and reinforcing inter-generational cycles of aggression. As Masinga and Sibanda emphasise, the severity and nature of the violence strongly influence the extent of its impact [6].

School-based violence poses both immediate and long-term threats to young people's physical well-being. While some injuries are visible, others manifest through harmful behavioural outcomes such as substance misuse or suicidal behaviour [6]. In severe cases, violence results in permanent disability or death. Sexual violence carries additional health risks: studies from Ethiopia show that 10.6% of victims become pregnant and 23.5% contract sexually transmitted infections, with many avoiding treatment due to stigma [18]. These outcomes jeopardise maternal and child health and may lead to unsafe abortions or infanticide. Physical punishment further contributes to the health burden. Research from the United States documents severe bruising, muscle injury, and scarring among learners subjected to corporal punishment [19]. Similar patterns are evident in South Africa, where learners frequently sustain wounds and long-lasting scars. These physical injuries often intersect with psychological trauma, illustrating the cumulative nature of violence-related harm [19].

The psychological consequences of school-based violence are among the most extensively documented. Exposure to violence is strongly associated with emotional trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, diminished self-esteem, and feelings of powerlessness [20]. In some cases, victims develop suicidal tendencies [21]. Bullying contributes to a range of emotional and behavioural disruptions. Evidence from Brazil shows that victims often lose interest in school, fear attending classes, or withdraw socially [22]. In Nigeria, girls report persistent fear of sexual harassment from peers and teachers, eroding trust and psychological safety [23]. Unwanted sexual behaviour further undermines psychological well-being, contributing to chronic anxiety and lowered self-esteem [24]. Verbal violence is linked to delinquency and antisocial behaviour, particularly among boys, while harsh parenting practices are perceived as unjust and disempowering [6]. Sexual violence also increases the likelihood of early sexual experimentation, multiple partnerships, or transactional sex driven by coercion or survival needs [14]. Collectively, these findings highlight the enduring psychological scars that impede children's educational engagement and overall development.

School-based violence undermines global and national education commitments, including SDGs 4 and 16.2 and UNESCO's Education for All agenda [5]. Safe learning environments are essential for equitable access to education, yet violence continues to compromise these goals [6]. Gender-based violence is particularly detrimental, contributing to reduced enrolment, poor retention, and lower academic achievement among girls [25]. The long-term implications extend beyond schooling: lower educational attainment among women is associated with poorer child health outcomes and constrained social development [22].

Fear of violence disrupts the culture of teaching and learning, affecting both learners and educators [2,26]. Parents may withdraw their children from school or transfer them to safer environments. In Ethiopia, more than 40% of parents reported that school violence

discouraged them from sending their children to school, with girls disproportionately affected. Similar patterns appear in Brazil, where thousands of learners missed classes due to bullying and harassment [22]. For those who remain, the psychological burden of violence often leads to poor concentration, declining academic performance, and disengagement from learning [6]. Victims may become hypervigilant or lethargic, contributing to absenteeism, grade repetition, and dropout [20]. These disruptions have long-term economic implications, limiting future opportunities and perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

The social costs of school-based violence extend far beyond the immediate harm experienced by individual learners, and such violence threatens core societal aspirations, including peace, emotional well-being, stability, equality, and social cohesion [27]. Exposure to violence undermines learners' capacity to trust others and form healthy, pro-social relationships. At its most severe, it restricts children's ability to participate in normative childhood and school-related activities, constraining their social development [6].

Repeated exposure to violence also disrupts moral development. Learners' ability to internalise moral values and develop pro-social behaviour is compromised, weakening the foundations of caring and cohesive communities. Instead of cultivating empathy and altruism, affected children may exhibit disorderly or aggressive behaviour, increasing the likelihood of carrying violent tendencies into adulthood and potentially engaging in criminal activity [21]. The psychological toll of violence shapes learners' broader social outlook, often resulting in pessimistic or cynical views about their future, poor decision-making, and diminished life opportunities. When children feel unsafe, their ability to develop their capabilities, pursue personal goals, and participate meaningfully in socio-economic life is severely constrained [21].

The effects of school-based violence are not limited to learners. Educators also experience significant emotional and professional repercussions [28]. Exposure to violence can lead to symptoms of post-traumatic stress, impairing teaching performance and diminishing educators' sense of efficacy. Feelings of fear and disempowerment may prompt some educators to respond aggressively toward learners, further eroding the school climate. Over time, these pressures can contribute to alienation, job dissatisfaction, and personal difficulties such as alcohol dependency [1,6].

The broader implications are substantial. Violence within schools affects not only individual learners and educators but also the functioning of families, communities, and educational institutions [8]. As Ncontsa and Shumba note, violence remains a pervasive challenge in South Africa, with profound consequences for social stability and institutional effectiveness [2]. Given the extensive and multifaceted impact of school-based violence, prevention emerges as a critical priority [10]. Addressing the root causes of violence requires sustained efforts to amplify children's voices, expand access to supportive resources, and create environments in which young people can thrive socially, emotionally, and academically.

### *1.2. Analysing Causes and Effects of School-Based Violence from an Ecological Systems Approach*

The ecological systems approach provides a comprehensive and appropriate framework for understanding the causes and effects of school-based violence [9]. As Khumalo et al. observe, violent behaviour among learners is shaped not by a single determinant but by a constellation of contextual influences [15]. Ecological systems theory emphasises the dynamic interactions between individuals and the multiple environments in which they are situated, offering a holistic lens through which to examine how these settings shape behaviour. This perspective enables a multidimensional assessment of learners' circumstances and supports a more integrated understanding of their needs [3]. Central to systems

thinking is the recognition that individuals both influence and are influenced by the interconnected structures around them; violent behaviour therefore emerges from the interplay of multiple systems rather than from isolated factors [11]. These systems, conceptualised as concentric layers comprising the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems, each contribute to conditions that may either foster or mitigate violence [29].

Scholars consistently emphasise that its causes cannot be reduced to single-factor explanations. Instead, violence arises from the interaction of multiple systems that shape learners' experiences. Societal norms, particularly patriarchal beliefs that position women and girls as subordinate, normalise gender-based violence. Historical legacies of inequality, combined with contemporary stressors such as poverty, community crime, and family instability, further contribute to violent behaviour within schools [10]. At the institutional level, structural inequities embedded in school policies and practices may reinforce power imbalances and perpetuate forms of institutional violence. However, much of the South African literature remains largely descriptive, focusing on cataloguing risk factors without sufficiently examining how these ecological systems intersect as cause-and-effect within particular school contexts [6]. Consequently, limited research provides a limited understanding of how multiple ecological systems collectively shape behaviour, which ultimately affects learners, educators, and teaching and learning, particularly affecting under-resourced schools.

#### 1.2.1. Individual-Related Factors

At the individual level, a range of personal and behavioural characteristics contribute to learners' involvement in school-based violence. Factors such as indiscipline, lack of respect for peers and educators, and disregard for school property have been widely noted as precursors to aggression [9,16].

A growing body of research also points to the importance of personality and biological factors. Potgieter et al. identify impulsiveness, hyperactivity, restlessness, and short attention span as traits associated with aggression [30]. Biological influences, including high testosterone and low serotonin levels, as well as age and gender differences, have likewise been linked to violent behaviour [31]. These individual predispositions interact with broader contextual conditions, compounding the risk of engaging in school-based violence [16].

Beyond biological and personality traits, various psychological and behavioural characteristics further heighten vulnerability to violence. Low frustration tolerance, feelings of powerlessness, weak commitment to schooling, low academic aspirations, and poor academic performance have all been associated with aggressive behaviour in school settings [32]. Prior exposure to childhood abuse also increases susceptibility to violent conduct [21]. Pietersen similarly identifies being male, having low impulse control, using substances, and performing poorly academically as key predictors of violent behaviour [12]. An important note is that not all children exposed to these risk factors become violent. Some demonstrate resilience, displaying protective characteristics such as strong self-efficacy, high intelligence, and outgoing personalities, which buffer against the development of aggressive behaviour [18]. However, much of this literature adopts a deficit-oriented perspective that focuses primarily on learner pathology while paying limited attention to how broader social and institutional inequalities contribute to these anti-social behaviours [3,16]. In addition, relatively little research explores the protective factors and resilience processes that enable some learners exposed to adversity to avoid getting involved in violent behaviour. Thus, it is critical to expose the magnified effects of intersecting factors that contribute to school violence.

### 1.2.2. Family-Related Factors

The family and home environment play a pivotal role in shaping children's likelihood of engaging in school-based violence [7]. Dupper argues that children raised in households characterised by physical punishment, limited affection, high levels of sibling rivalry, or an absent or uninvolved father figure are at heightened risk of perpetrating violence at school [24]. Similarly, Pietersen found that dysfunctional and unstable families that are marked by low cohesion and high parental conflict are more likely to produce youth who display violent behaviour [12].

Exposure to domestic violence further normalises aggression as a means of resolving conflict [9]. Conversely, supportive family environments that are characterised by secure attachment, warmth, stability, and consistent discipline serve as protective factors that buffer children from engaging in violent behaviour that is detrimental to their overall well-being. As Milligan et al. emphasise, the family remains a critical socialising system that profoundly shapes children's development and behavioural outcomes [9]. However, existing literature tends to focus predominantly on dysfunctional family structures while paying less attention to the effects of broader structural systems, socioeconomic pressures and natural conditions such as diseases and ill-health, poverty, stress, incarceration, and substance abuse [16]. Consequently, family-related contributory factors are often examined in isolation rather than as components of intersecting ecological systems that affect behavioural outcomes. Greater consideration should therefore be given to factors that are beyond the family's control, alongside the effects of positive and protective factors that are often overshadowed by deficit-oriented perspectives.

### 1.2.3. Peer-Related Factors

Peer dynamics play a critical role in shaping the incidence of violence in schools. Sibanda and Masinga argue that peer pressure, provocation, and association with aggressive peers significantly contribute to violent conduct [3]. Fulbeck similarly notes that learners often mirror the behaviours of their peer groups, while those who experience bullying may resort to retaliatory violence [33]. These interpersonal influences reflect mesosystem interactions, where the quality and frequency of connections between family, peers, and school environments shape behavioural outcomes [29].

Peers function as powerful socialising agents, strongly influencing learners' social development, attitudes, and behavioural choices. Researchers emphasise that association with antisocial peer groups or gangs heightens the risk of becoming either a perpetrator or a victim of violence [17]. Exposure to aggressive peer role models reinforces learned violent behaviour, and participation in group violence can desensitise learners to increasingly severe acts of aggression [34]. The school environment becomes a key setting where these peer dynamics unfold, providing both opportunities for social support and a context in which violent behaviour can be reinforced or escalated. Existing studies show that learners often adopt violent behaviours to gain social acceptance or protection within peer groups. Moreover, current literature offers limited insights into how peer influences intersect with school climate, family dynamics and other social factors to reinforce or disrupt violent behaviour patterns.

### 1.2.4. Community-Related Factors

At the community level, inequality, unemployment, poverty, crime, and widespread substance abuse are major drivers of school-based violence. Sibanda and Masinga highlight how learners who are exposed to violence in their neighbourhoods are more likely to display aggressive behaviour in the classroom [3]. Similar sentiments regarding community influences on school-based violence are echoed by Qwabe et al., who state that broader

socio-cultural norms further affect learners' attitudes and behaviour [16]. In communities where corporal punishment, domestic violence, or criminal activity are normalised, young people may come to view violence as an acceptable strategy for resolving conflict [15]. Community-level conditions, therefore, play a significant role in amplifying the effects of school violence [35]. Milligan et al. add that the physical, social, and economic characteristics of neighbourhoods influence the extent to which violence affects the personal, emotional, and social functioning and economic outcomes [9]. These dynamics create a self-perpetuating cycle of dysfunction that reinforces violence. However, several chronological factors should not be ignored. Particularly, within the South African context, the key aspects to consider are the historical and structural systems associated with the apartheid regime that contribute to inequality, unemployment and poverty.

Although schools in impoverished and disorganised communities consistently experience higher levels of violence and disorder than those in more affluent areas, school-based violence is not limited to disadvantaged settings [36]. This indicates that while community disorganisation is a significant risk factor, it interacts with other ecological factors to shape violent behaviour in schools that affects learners, teachers and the teaching and learning project [2]. These studies highlight how violent community environments may normalise aggression among learners. However, many studies establish correlation without sufficiently examining how schools mediate or respond to these broader community pressures. Consequently, there remains a limited understanding of how schools situated within high-risk communities navigate and manage these intersecting challenges without suffering the negative consequences.

#### 1.2.5. School-Related Factors

Within the school environment, researchers identify a range of environmental, administrative, curricular, and educator-related factors that contribute to school-based violence. Nonjinge and Nakedi observed that schools have increasingly become volatile and unsafe spaces, as reflected in the growing number of reported violent incidents [34]. Poor classroom management, weak behavioural boundaries, ineffective leadership, and inadequate administrative structures, particularly within school management teams and governing bodies, are frequently cited as major contributors to school violence [37]. Dupper further argues that large, impersonal schools, where learners feel anonymous and disconnected, often struggle to cultivate strong teacher–learner relationships or build the social capital necessary for a supportive school climate [24]. In such contexts, learners experience a diminished sense of belonging and become less concerned about the consequences of harmful or violent behaviour [37]. Although existing research identifies these institutional challenges, much of the literature treats schools primarily as sites where violence occurs rather than as active systems capable of perpetuating violence or reproducing violent norms.

Educator-related factors also play a critical role. Sibanda and Masinga note that teachers who lack training in managing school violence, who experience low morale, or who are dissatisfied with their work may inadvertently create conditions in which violence flourishes [3]. Inadvertently, the same educators may be negatively affected by the violent episodes [2,28]. Van der Merwe et al. add that limited empathy among educators and the continued use of corporal punishment further heighten tensions and aggression [31]. Without educator training, the cyclical effects may not dissipate. Sibanda and Masinga highlight that unprofessional educator behaviour, including substance use with learners, selling drugs, ignoring reports of violence, and engaging in sexual misconduct, undermines school authority and contributes directly to violent incidents [3]. These views align with broader research showing that educator misconduct fuels indiscipline and escalates school-based violence [9,38]. Although existing research identifies these institutional challenges,

much of the literature treats schools primarily as sites where violence occurs rather than as active systems capable of either reducing the occurrence and negative effects thereof. More research should explore how educators themselves experience and are affected by violence within the resource-constrained educational settings.

#### 1.2.6. Structural and Systemic-Related Factors

Finally, structural and historical forces within the chronosystem, such as racism, prejudice, and the enduring legacy of apartheid, continue to shape school dynamics in profound ways [10,27]. Racial tensions often surface through stereotyping, discrimination, and informal or formal segregation, contributing to conflict both among learners and between learners and educators [16,34]. These systemic inequalities reinforce patterns of exclusion and hostility that heighten the risk of violence. Having said this, literature ignores the fact that often at times violence that occurs among the same race or ethnic groups affects learners irrespective of race. Hence, it is prudent to consider the multifaceted, intersecting and deeply embedded factors that influence learners' attitudes and consequently affect their behaviour and educational outcomes. Interpreting these factors through an ecological systems lens is therefore essential for developing effective intervention and prevention strategies to minimise the negative short-term and long-term effects.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which, according to Rubin and Babbie, is designed to understand the experiences and perspectives of research participants through the use of interviews and focus groups as a data-gathering instrument [39]. Specifically, this study employed an exploratory qualitative research approach [40], selected because limited empirical work exists on the effects of school-based violence in South Africa. A collective case study design was used to explore and describe the effects of school violence within the South African school context.

The study population comprised all learners and educators in high schools within the Tshwane South District of Gauteng Province. A list of 51 registered high schools in the district was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education, from which nine schools ultimately participated. Letters seeking permission to conduct the study were sent to all 51 schools. Only nine schools responded to the request and granted permission for the researchers to involve the schools in the study. Forty-two schools did not grant permission.

Principals of the nine participating schools provided lists of all Grade 9 and 10 classes. To ensure balanced representation, every second class on each list was selected, resulting in 18 classes. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 Grade 9 and 10 educators. Inclusion criteria required educators to be professionally qualified, employed at a selected school, and teaching Grade 9 or 10. Additionally, 47 Grade 9 and 10 learners were purposively sampled from the 18 class registers. The inclusion criteria dictated that learners had to be enrolled in one of the selected schools and in either Grade 9 or 10, be conversant in English, and be available and willing to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was appropriate because it enabled the selection of participants most likely to provide rich, relevant information aligned with the study's objectives [41,42]. Educators assisted in recruiting participants by reading and explaining the participant information sheet that was provided by the researchers to ensure that learners understood what the study was about. This enabled the recruitment process to proceed unhindered because the educators have an existing trust relationship with the learners. The researchers acknowledge the possibility of selection and social desirability bias and coercion. However, because the educators were not involved in data collection, the social desirability bias was not an issue. To minimise coercion, the researchers used informed consent and assent forms that needed

to be signed. The informed consent and assent forms were explained at the level of the learners, and the learners were afforded an opportunity to ask clarity-seeking questions before the commencement of the data collection process.

Data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed to elicit participants' views on the effects of school-based violence [43]. The interview guide included questions on the psychological, educational, social, and physical effects of school-based violence on learners and educators. Semi-structured interviews were especially appropriate for this study because they provided an effective balance between flexibility and standardisation [40]. This format enabled participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms while ensuring that the focus group interviews still addressed the central themes and guiding questions of the research [44]. It also allowed the researchers to pursue follow-up questions and explore emerging ideas in greater depth, generating richer and more nuanced insights into participants' perspectives [44]. Data saturation was reached after a total of nine focus group interviews (five with learners and four with educators). Although the researchers did not do a pre-study and post-study calculation of data saturation, the principle of data saturation indicated by Francis et al. [45] was adhered to. These entailed noticing that data was getting repetitive, as no new information was coming through, which was observed after nine focus group interviews. The researchers then stopped collecting more data. However, the authors did not conduct a proper and structured data saturation analysis, as suggested by Francis et al. [45].

Data was analysed using Cresswell's spiral model of data analysis. This model provided a clear, systematic, and flexible method for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets [43]. The process involved the following six iterative steps:

- Step 1—Organising and preparing data: Preliminary analysis began immediately after each focus group. The PI recorded reflections, sorted audio files, and labelled them with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.
- Step 2—Immersion in the data: The PI repeatedly reviewed handwritten notes, listened to recordings, and read transcripts multiple times to identify emerging patterns and develop initial memos.
- Step 3—Classification: Codes were generated and organised into a codebook. Codes were then grouped into broader categories and themes, which were cross-checked across transcripts.
- Step 4—Synthesis: Themes and sub-themes were refined, with attention to confirming and disconfirming evidence. Findings were supported with verbatim quotations and linked to existing literature.
- Step 5—Defining and naming themes: This step involved clarifying the essence of each theme and articulating the story it tells.
- Step 6—Producing the research report: This step entailed weaving themes into an analytic narrative supported by data extracts.

To establish the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, the study drew on key components of Lincoln and Guba's framework, specifically credibility, dependability, and confirmability [46]. Credibility was reinforced through data triangulation, achieved by gathering extensive and varied insights from both learners and educators [47]. Dependability was supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail, which documented each stage of data collection, analysis, and methodological decision-making [48]. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive practice, whereby the researchers acknowledged how their personal backgrounds, values, and assumptions might shape their interpretations, as highlighted by Robinson [49]. The first author's 10-year residence in the study area presented

a potential source of bias; however, this was balanced by the involvement of the second and third authors, who acted as external auditors to ensure neutrality and uphold the objectivity of the interpretations and reported findings [50].

All in all, the researchers employed several strategies to enhance the quality, trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility of qualitative data. The strategies included reflexivity, the use of an audit trail, member checking, peer debriefing, and ensuring thicker descriptions.

The study was conducted per the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. The PI adhered to core ethical principles outlined by Strydom [51]. Participation was voluntary, and no deception or incentives were used. Participating learners were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and they provided assent. Social workers were placed on standby should counselling be required; none was needed. Informed consent was obtained from educators and guardians of learner participants. Confidentiality was ensured through number-coding of transcripts and secure storage of data in restricted-access facilities.

### 3. Results

This section presents the findings of the study. It starts off with a presentation of demographic details, which are then followed by the presentation of qualitative findings of the study, which revealed that violence has detrimental effects on the victim, the perpetrator, the bystander, the educator, and on teaching and learning.

#### 3.1. Demographical Information on Participants

The demographic profile of learners involved in the survey is presented below. Learners involved in focus group discussions and educators in the focus group discussions are presented below.

##### 3.1.1. Biographical Information of Learners

The demographic profile of Learner participants is presented below in Table 1 with reference to age, sex, ethnicity, language, and grade.

As noted in Table 1, the study sample consisted of 47 learners drawn from Grades 9 and 10. Most participants were between 16 and 17 years old, who made up just over half of the sample (51.1%), while 42.5% were aged 14–15. Only a small proportion (6.4%) were 18 years or older. The sample was almost evenly split by sex, with 24 males (51.1%) and 23 females (48.9%), reflecting a balanced gender distribution.

In terms of ethnicity, the majority of learners identified as Black (70.2%), followed by Indian (19.1%) and Coloured (10.6%), while no participants identified as White. The linguistic profile of the group was diverse. Although English was the most commonly spoken home language (27.7%), a wide range of South African languages was represented, including Sepedi (23.4%), Setswana (21.3%), and IsiZulu (17.0%). Smaller proportions reported speaking Afrikaans, Xitsonga, or other languages, while no learners identified Tshivenda, Isiwati, or Isindebele as their home language.

Most participants were enrolled in Grade 10 (61.7%), with the remaining 38.3% in Grade 9. Overall, the demographic profile reflects a linguistically and culturally diverse group of learners, with a relatively even gender distribution and a concentration in the mid-adolescent age range.

**Table 1.** Biographical information: learners ( $n = 47$ ).

| Age              | Number ( $n$ ) | Percentage (%)    |
|------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| 14–15            | 20             | 42.5              |
| 16–17            | 24             | 51.1              |
| 18+              | 3              | 6.4               |
| Total            | 47             | 100               |
| <b>Sex</b>       | <b>Number</b>  | <b>Percentage</b> |
| Male             | 24             | 51.1              |
| Female           | 23             | 48.9              |
| Total            | 47             | 100               |
| <b>Ethnicity</b> | <b>Number</b>  | <b>Percentage</b> |
| White            | 0              | 0                 |
| Black            | 33             | 70.2              |
| Indian           | 9              | 19.1              |
| Coloured         | 5              | 10.6              |
| Total            | 47             | 100               |
| <b>Language</b>  | <b>Number</b>  | <b>Percentage</b> |
| English          | 13             | 27.7              |
| Afrikaans        | 1              | 2.1               |
| IsiZulu          | 8              | 17.0              |
| Sepedi           | 11             | 23.4              |
| Setswana         | 10             | 21.3              |
| Tshivenda        | 0              | 0                 |
| Xitsonga         | 1              | 2.1               |
| IsiSwati         | 0              | 0                 |
| Isindebele       | 0              | 0                 |
| Other            | 3              | 6.4               |
| Total            | 47             | 100               |
| <b>Grade</b>     | <b>Number</b>  | <b>Percentage</b> |
| 9                | 18             | 38.3              |
| 10               | 29             | 61.7              |
| Total            | 47             | 100               |

### 3.1.2. Biographical Information of Educators

The biographical information of the educators relates to their age, sex, ethnicity, language, qualification, and number of years of teaching experience, and is presented in Table 2 below.

As noted in Table 2, the educator sample consisted of 30 participants, representing a wide age range. Just over a third (37%) were between 21 and 30 years old, while 13% were aged 31–40. A further 23% fell within the 41–50 age group, and 27% were 51 years or older, indicating a mix of early-career and highly experienced teachers. The sample was predominantly female, with 21 women (70%) and 9 men (30%).

In terms of ethnicity, the group was diverse: Black educators comprised 37%, followed by White (27%), Indian (23%), and Coloured (13%) participants. Linguistic diversity was also evident. Although Afrikaans was the most commonly reported home language (37%), a substantial proportion of educators spoke English (27%), Sepedi (20%), or IsiZulu (10%), with smaller numbers reporting Setswana or Tshivenda.

Educators' qualifications reflected a generally well-trained workforce. Over half (53%) held a degree, 30% had post-graduate qualifications, and 17% held a diploma. Teaching experience varied considerably: while 23% had between 1 and 5 years of experience and another 23% had 6 to 10 years, the majority (54%) had been teaching for more than 11 years, indicating a strong presence of seasoned professionals within the sample.

Overall, the educator cohort represented a balanced mix of age, experience, and cultural backgrounds, providing a rich and varied perspective on school-based dynamics.

**Table 2.** Biographical information: Educators ( $n = 30$ ).

| <b>Age</b>                 | <b>Number (<math>n</math>)</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 21–30                      | 11                             | 37                    |
| 31–40                      | 4                              | 13                    |
| 41–50                      | 7                              | 23                    |
| 51+                        | 8                              | 27                    |
| Total                      | 30                             | 100                   |
| <b>Sex</b>                 | <b>Number</b>                  | <b>Percentage</b>     |
| Male                       | 9                              | 30                    |
| Female                     | 21                             | 70                    |
| Total                      | 30                             | 100                   |
| <b>Ethnicity</b>           | <b>Number</b>                  | <b>Percentage</b>     |
| White                      | 8                              | 27                    |
| Black                      | 11                             | 37                    |
| Indian                     | 7                              | 23                    |
| Coloured                   | 4                              | 13                    |
| Total                      | 30                             | 100                   |
| <b>Language</b>            | <b>Number</b>                  | <b>Percentage</b>     |
| English                    | 8                              | 27                    |
| Afrikaans                  | 11                             | 37                    |
| IsiZulu                    | 3                              | 10                    |
| Sepedi                     | 6                              | 20                    |
| Setswana                   | 1                              | 3                     |
| Tshivenda                  | 1                              | 3                     |
| Xitsonga                   | 0                              | 0                     |
| IsiSwati                   | 0                              | 0                     |
| Isindebele                 | 0                              | 0                     |
| Other                      | 0                              | 0                     |
| Total                      | 30                             | 100                   |
| <b>Qualification</b>       | <b>Number</b>                  | <b>Percentage</b>     |
| Diploma                    | 5                              | 17                    |
| Degree                     | 16                             | 53                    |
| Post-graduate              | 9                              | 30                    |
| Total                      | 30                             | 100                   |
| <b>Teaching Experience</b> | <b>Number</b>                  | <b>Percentage</b>     |
| 1–5                        | 7                              | 23                    |
| 6–10                       | 7                              | 23                    |
| 11+                        | 16                             | 54                    |
| Total                      | 30                             | 100                   |

### 3.2. Effects of School-Based Violence on the Learners

Findings from both learners and educators who participated in the study revealed various detrimental effects of school-based violence on learners. Some of the participants said that learners who are bullied feel bad, are frustrated and scared, feel negative about school and perform badly in class. The educators reported that because of school violence, learners end up not participating in class, not responding and not listening attentively. One educator explained as follows:

I think most in our situation, the kids provoke each other, and I think that's also bad, but some kids are—you know, that are victors, the coolies, and I think that affects them negatively emotionally in such a manner that they struggle to perform academically. It influences the academic results because if you look at some kids, they turn negative, such that they can't focus on other classes. As soon as you talk to them, they immediately feel that you are picking on them, but it's not that you are picking at them; that's how a victim feels. They say,

they are always busy with me. . . So, I think they feel being picked on every time by everyone, and I think that makes them so emotionally negative that they can't focus in class. They can't perform academically, and most of all, that also motivates bad behaviour in them as well.

Learners said that some learners become frustrated to the extent that they bunk school because they are afraid of aggressive and violent learners at school. Others said that some learners do not report incidents because they are scared that the bullying learners will continue to hit them if they do.

Some learners said that they feel frustrated and end up not wanting to talk about it because educators laugh at them when they report incidents. Learners also said they feel helpless if there are no educators to stop the learners who cause violence. Additionally, learners in two schools reported that violence affects other learners to such an extent that they commit suicide. Learners in the two schools mentioned incidents where learners killed themselves because they were bullied at school. One learner said,

Yes, they kill themselves. There was this girl, but not in our school; she told her mother, and the mother did not go to the school, so she killed herself.

Furthermore, findings revealed that some learners resort to retaliation when bullied. Other learners and educators reported that some learners are forced to retaliate when they are teased by other learners. An educator elaborated as follows:

I can think of an example where one learner was in trouble in the morning during line-up. He was speaking, so his morning started badly already. So, in the first or second period, his friends started to tease him about the incident in the line-up, and then a period further, he acted out violently against one of the educators by saying things, no. . .no, not saying things, he actually slapped a girl because she was teasing him, and he was suspended for that.

Some learners reported that they are not intimidated, and they stand up for themselves when teased. A learner said:

You stand for yourself and just want to fight. . . like for me, if you bully me, there is this side of me that no one wants to see. So, when you gonna push me, you gonna see that. . . So, when you try to push me around or tease me, I stay back. I stay back because I know what I can do. I don't wanna get into fights because I'm gonna injure someone very hard. . . My friends if they are fighting I just tell them just cool down just leave the person to talk because me I like that, when someone is insulting me I just laugh and keep quiet because I don't want myself to get angry because I know if I can get angry when I fight with that person, I will fight and then I will never stop. So that's why when you are insulting me, I just go so that I don't hear what you are saying.

Further, findings showed that some parents even remove their children from schools that have high rates of bullying. An educator said:

We had instances where parents have removed their children from the school purely because of harassment by a boy or girl. In more cases, girls who were teased and bullied at school, and the parent says, hey! I can't leave my child here, let me. . . I'd rather remove the child and take the child to another school. This is happening.

Violence not only affects victims but also bystanders. Participating learners reported that violence affects learners who are not even involved in violence. They reported that in their school, some school learners who do well, who are in the top ten, are used to help

disruptive learners catch up with work after they have missed classes due to suspension or being sent to rehabilitation for drug abuse. A learner said:

This programme, which they tried to bring to the school where they take top ten learners from each grade and all the people who went to rehab. . . when they come back, and they are weeks behind in school, and they wanna take the people from the top ten and want to help them to catch up. I want to be honest. . . I disagreed, and because it's inconvenient, I have to study myself, I have to work hard myself, but then my time is taken away because I have to help this other person. I see helping somebody who doesn't wanna be helped.

### 3.3. *Effects of School-Based Violence on the Educators*

The findings from the current study revealed that violence has detrimental effects on educators as well. Participating learners and educators revealed that violence affects the educators' self-confidence and personal dignity. It was revealed that such violent behaviour creates negative attitudes towards uncooperative and disruptive learners. As a result, some educators ignore or expel the learner from their class. One educator explained as follows:

What I have realised is that it creates attitudes in the minds of educators and how they treat certain learners. If you know that this person is violent or they have tried to show you in one way or another that they are violent or they do not respect you. . . , you end up. . . I think in my mind when I am faced with learners like that, I have two choices. I can choose to ignore you and pretend as if you don't even exist in my class and already that has negatively, that has a negative impact on the results that we are going to produce as a class.

Another educator at the same school elaborated as follows:

I feel that as educators we are powerless. . . as educators we are really powerless because there is not much we can do to the learners to change them. You can beat them, you go to jail, you can't. Sometimes you think of other methods of punishing them. If you detain children, who are you really punishing, the children or yourself? Because detention means you have to sit down with them for that hour or three hours, you are punishing them, so you are also punished. So, it's sad, but you have to ignore certain children. But I think it works for the best because you are sure that you will go home safe and unharmed, and that you know you can work with the children who want to work with you.

A discrepancy between learners' responses revealed different views about the impact of violence on educators. Some learners said violence does not affect educators as much as it does learners because educators are used to it. The following statement reflects this view: "I don't think so because they are already used to it; now they don't even care." Contrary to that, other learners said violence does affect the educators, such that it frustrates them to the extent that they become angry and beat the children who are involved in violence. In support, a learner said, "If it affects them, they don't allow it. They call those children who are fighting, and they will beat them."

Based on the educators' views, some educators feel powerless and helpless. Educators said that the less experienced educators find it more difficult to cope and deal with the situation without any support from the school or officials from the Department of Education. One educator expressed her frustrations as follows:

At the end of the day, you feel like you. . . You come here, you are new to the teaching profession, and you come to school, and you find the children are fighting like this and these dramatic things that happen, which I am talking

about, it feels like you have been thrown into the deep end of the pool, and you should swim. So, you just need to fend for yourself somehow, so that's how it is.

In addition, educators also revealed that some educators lose respect from learners when they fail to control disruptive learners or those who bully others or answer back to their educators. These findings showed educators feel disrespected and embarrassed. Not only is their self-esteem affected, but also their standard and quality of teaching. An educator explained how school violence affects her as follows:

Before a confrontation between the educator and learner of that nature, kids will respect you; you will be commanding a lot of respect. But after that kind of thing happens, so kids attempted to take advantage of that and when you lose respect and that grip you had over the learners. Also, your teaching is affected by the fact that there will be disruptions in class.

Further findings indicate that educators feel unsafe in some of the schools, fearing for their own safety as some learners threaten them with physical assault. In this regard, an educator said:

No, I do not want to put my life at risk when there is a fight. I just watched because the Department of Education will not support you if you are hurt. Rather, the children "kill" each other and not me.

In addition, it was reported that violence contributes to the use of corporal punishment. Some educators admit to using corporal punishment, as it is the only thing that works in cases when indiscipline has gone to the extreme. One educator said:

There is no other training, and it results in a lot of educators being expelled. . . those who use corporal punishment, even now, there are cases where educators are fed up. They don't know what to do anymore.

### *3.4. Impact of Violence on the Culture of Teaching and Learning*

Findings from both educators and learners demonstrate that violence disrupts teaching and learning. Participating educators reported that vital teaching and learning time is lost as educators try to control learners who are disruptive, uncooperative, and violent. Consequently, this has a negative effect on the overall pass rate of the school. An educator stated:

. . . whatever has happened in class, the confrontation or whatever. It means the whole of that period, you will not be teaching. You will be lashing out, so you will be saying whatever. . . You know. . . taking it out to the whole class. So, it means if it's a double period, the whole one hour is lost on that day as long as you are still angry. Even if the other class comes, you will be telling them and telling them (claps hands). So, really, it does affect teaching and learning.

Another educator supported this view and explained as follows:

Can I too say, I agree with . . . But at the same time it's very negative on our teaching because the experience in one day it puts off all the other time you teach because you end up judging, you end up criticising and saying what? . . . I am not gonna do anything because if I work with a bunch that wants to work, the bunch that is being the rascals and the bullies and the ones that are fighting. . . they come and mess up with these kids that you are working with, and then at the end of the day you say. . . What are you fighting for?

The learner participants said that learners who disrupt class affect the standards and quality of teaching as well as the overall performance of the school in the region and nationally. A learner said:

I think in school there is a lack of discipline because you find that others wanna learn and others are busy talking, and there are so many disruptions in class, so I think that's why we cannot be high in Gauteng or Pretoria as the best school because we lack discipline in the school.

Moreover, findings revealed that some educators stop teaching. This was confirmed by learners during the focus group interviews, who noted that school-based violence affects teaching since some educators just ignore the class and do not teach. A learner said:

Sometimes the educators refuse to teach because the majority in the class did not do the homework and things they are supposed to do, it's noisy, they are disruptive and sometimes the educators just give up and say... [The learner shrugs her shoulders].

In support, another learner added what happens if a teacher is distracted from teaching by violence, by saying:

Some educators leave the class, and when you look at subjects, it is Mathematics, and she just leaves, and you have to follow her and persuade her, and she tells you that she does not care, and at the end of the month, she gets her money. Sometimes the educators just ignore us as a class and then leave for a week or two, and they don't teach us.

Educators reported that violence not only affects teaching and learning in dysfunctional schools, but schools with proper discipline systems are also affected. For example, the findings show that in schools with well developed and implemented code of conduct system, the grade coordinator of the class where an incident of violence occurred can spend the whole day without teaching, addressing the matter. An educator explained as follows:

From my side as a grade coordinator, if there is an incident, I have to stop everything. Even if there are forty kids in front of me and an incident is reported, I have to stop, then listen to that story, and then handle the case with the forty learners in front of me, see how it is, so it's very disruptive. Luckily, the incidents don't happen that much, but when it happens, it can be extremely disruptive towards the person who actually has to handle the case. As a grade coordinator, normally, the educators will send the learner to me, perhaps with another learner, and you have to handle that situation at that moment, not forgetting that you are in the middle of a lesson, and you must listen to their story, and so you must listen to the learner's story and all the learners involved in that specific case. It's very disruptive, and then you have to get the report from each learner, and if necessary, you have to contact the parent, and at the end of the day, you haven't gone to your class at all.

#### 4. Discussion

Findings of the study revealed various detrimental effects of school-based violence on learners. Participants indicated that learners who are bullied feel bad, are frustrated and scared, feel negative about school and perform badly in class. They further reported that violence not only affects victims but also bystanders, who are not even involved in violence. The findings of this study regarding the detrimental effects of school violence on the victims and bystanders confirm the results of several studies. For example, Ncontsa and Shumba [2] and Burton and Leoschut [17] found that school violence may result in trauma that could affect cognitive development and functioning, may lead to inability to concentrate, sleep properly, or may result in depression, anxiety and suicide.

Furthermore, study findings indicated that school-based violence has detrimental effects on educators. Participants indicated that violence affects the educators' self-confidence

and personal dignity. This is aligned with the findings of a study by Mosito and Sitoyi, regarding the impact of school violence on the well-being of teachers [28]. With limited support from the Department of Education, some educators were reported to be feeling less capacitated to handle incidents of violence in their schools, which then makes them feel powerless and helpless. Findings further revealed that the consequence of failing to manage violence is that schools make educators lose respect from the learners. This is often embarrassing for the learners and affects their self-esteem, which consequently affects their quality of teaching. Not only that, but findings also further indicated that educators feel unsafe in some of the schools, fearing for their own safety as some learners threaten them with physical assault. The findings of the current study on the impact of violence on educators are consistent with other studies' findings, which revealed that violence creates unsafe schools and threatens the lives of both educators and learners [1,2,28]. It has been established that some educators change schools or leave the profession, whilst some are more likely to retire early [52]. Moreover, Le Roux and Mokhele found that school-based violence results in educators' absenteeism, or unpreparedness and lack of motivation [53]. Such behaviours have unintended but detrimental outcomes on the quality of education [28]. Additionally, incidents of violence, drug abuse, theft, bullying and the use of offensive language create a climate of distrust and fear in schools [28]. Sibanda and Masinga argue that feeling safe in school is critical for effective teaching and learning [3]. Similar sentiments are echoed by Ncontsa and Shumba [2].

In addition, the study findings revealed that school-based violence affects the culture of teaching and learning. Participants reported that violence disrupts teaching and learning, since vital teaching and learning time is lost as educators try to control learners who are disruptive, uncooperative, and violent. Similar findings regarding the loss of learning and tuition time when teachers attend to violence in the classrooms were noted by Ncontsa and Shumba [2]. Consequently, this has a negative effect on the overall pass rate of the school. The effects of violence on teaching and learning, as found in this study, are in line with previous studies. Firstly, Mosito and Sitoyi [28] and Masinga [52] document that school violence disrupts and interferes with teaching and learning by creating fear and anxiety among educators and learners. Secondly, Robinson et al. found that school violence ruins learning opportunities and makes the school environment risky, thus denying learners opportunities and access to an education [25]. Similar sentiments are echoed by several South African researchers [2,8,10] on school-based violence.

As noted above, the findings of this study demonstrate that school-based violence produces extensive and interconnected harms across the ecological systems that shape children's development. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) provides a useful lens for interpreting these effects, as it highlights how violence in one setting reverberates across multiple layers of a child's environment [54]. Exposure to violence in schools disrupts not only the immediate microsystem of learner-teacher and peer relationships but also the broader systems that influence educational and developmental outcomes.

At the microsystem level, school-based violence directly affects learners' physical and psychological well-being. Physical injuries, harmful coping behaviours, and the health risks represent immediate threats to children's safety [17]. These harms frequently intersect with emotional trauma, post-traumatic stress, depression, and diminished self-esteem [20]. Bullying, harassment, and verbal aggression further erode learners' sense of security, leading to school avoidance, social withdrawal, and behavioural difficulties [2,22]. These outcomes illustrate how violence disrupts the core developmental processes that occur within children's closest relationships and daily interactions.

Violence also destabilises the mesosystem, often referred to as the interconnections between key microsystems such as home and school [55]. Educators' diminished sense

of safety and efficacy further strains these relationships, reducing communication, trust, and collaboration between families and schools [15,28]. Viewed through an ecological lens, school-based violence is not merely an individual or interpersonal problem but a systemic one. It affects learners' immediate experiences, disrupts relationships between key developmental settings, and strains institutional functioning. This multi-layered impact underscores the need for prevention strategies that operate across ecological levels. Given the pervasive effects and multi-systemic nature of school-based violence in South Africa, prevention must be prioritised as an ecological intervention. An ecological approach recognises that meaningful change requires coordinated action across all levels of the system.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, violence exerts a negative influence and leads to undesirable outcomes for learners, educators and the teaching and learning environment. Violence disrupts education and impedes successful academic outcomes. The negative effects call for strategies and programmes to be put in place to address the problem.

The study demonstrates that school-based violence in South Africa is a multidimensional problem whose effects extend far beyond individual incidents of harm. When interpreted through Ecological Systems Theory, the findings reveal how violence disrupts development across multiple, interconnected layers of children's lives. At the microsystem level, learners experience direct physical, psychological, and educational harm. These disruptions are compounded at the mesosystem level, where violence weakens the relationships. Exosystem influences, such as educator stress, further shape children's experiences indirectly, while macrosystem forces, including the normalisation of violent discipline, sustain environments in which violence persists.

Addressing school-based violence, therefore, requires prevention strategies that strengthen supportive relationships within schools, creating safe and nurturing learning environments. An ecological approach highlights that meaningful and sustainable change will depend on coordinated, multi-level interventions that place children's safety, dignity, and well-being at the centre of educational practice and policy.

### 5.1. Limitations of the Study

The study's findings should be interpreted with caution due to several methodological limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, which restricts the extent to which the results can be generalised to all South African schools. The study was also conducted exclusively in an urban context, limiting its applicability and generalisability to learners in rural areas, farming communities, and mining towns, who may experience school-based violence in markedly different ways. Additionally, the qualitative design, while valuable for generating in-depth insights, did not allow for the inclusion of hard-to-reach schools that might have been accessed through a broader quantitative survey. As a result, the perspectives of learners in more isolated or marginalised settings may not be adequately represented. Furthermore, the study relied on self-reported data from learners and educators, which may have been affected by recall bias, fear of disclosure, or social desirability pressures. Underreporting is particularly likely in cases involving sexual violence, corporal punishment, or educator-perpetrated abuse, where stigma and power imbalances may inhibit honest reporting. These factors may have led conservative accounts on the effects and severity of violence in South African schools. Finally, while the ecological framework provides a valuable interpretive lens, its application in this study is conceptual rather than empirical. Future research would benefit from methodological designs that explicitly oper-

ationalise ecological constructs, enabling more robust analysis of the effects of school-based violence across systemic levels.

### 5.2. Significance and Implications of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of evidence demonstrating that school-based violence is a pervasive threat to learners' well-being, educational attainment, and long-term development. By foregrounding learners' lived experiences, the study highlights the complex ways in which violence shapes emotional, social, and academic trajectories. These insights are particularly significant in the South African context, where persistent inequalities and high levels of community violence intersect with school environments. The findings underscore the urgent need for systemic interventions that prioritise safety, psychosocial support, and the creation of nurturing school climates.

The findings have several important implications for policy, practice, and research. At the microsystem level, interventions must prioritise learners' immediate safety and well-being through strengthened psychosocial support, trauma-informed teaching, and the creation of nurturing classroom environments. The exosystem implications point to the need for stronger institutional capacity, including educator training. At the macrosystem level, addressing school-based violence requires confronting entrenched social acceptance of corporal punishment.

The implications of the study extend beyond individual learners. School-based violence undermines the functioning of educational institutions and erodes trust between learners and educators. When violence becomes normalised within schools, it compromises the ability of education systems to fulfil their mandate. The study therefore reinforces the need for multi-level responses that address both the symptoms and structural drivers of violence. Collectively, these implications emphasise that effective responses must be multi-level, coordinated, and sustained.

### 5.3. Recommendations

The severity of the effects of school-based violence on learners and educators calls for policy, practice and research initiatives. Addressing school-based violence requires a coordinated, multi-level strategy consistent with Ecological Systems Theory. Table 3 below provides recommendations that target interventions across the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, recognising that sustainable change depends on reinforcing protective factors at every level of a child's environment.

**Table 3.** Recommendations table.

| Ecological Level | Recommendation               | Description/Action Steps                                                                                                                 |
|------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Microsystem      | Trauma-informed practices    | The Department of Education should train educators to recognise trauma, respond sensitively, and create emotionally safe classrooms.     |
|                  | Learner psychosocial support | Schools should increase access to counsellors, social workers, and peer-support programmes to address emotional and behavioural impacts. |
|                  | Positive discipline          | Teachers should replace corporal punishment with restorative approaches that promote accountability and empathy.                         |

Table 3. Cont.

| Ecological Level | Recommendation                       | Description/Action Steps                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mesosystem       | Family–school partnerships           | Communication between parents and schools should be strengthened through workshops, regular meetings, and shared decision-making.                                                |
|                  | Community prevention networks        | NGOs, youth groups, and local leaders should establish coordinated violence-prevention and referral systems.                                                                     |
|                  | Safe-school committees               | Establish multi-stakeholder teams to monitor risks, coordinate responses, and promote a culture of safety.                                                                       |
| Exosystem        | Educator professional development    | The Department of Education should provide continued professional development training to teachers on conflict resolution, classroom management, and identifying signs of abuse. |
|                  | Reporting and accountability systems | Schools should strengthen confidential reporting mechanisms, ensure timely investigations, and enforce consequences for perpetrators.                                            |
|                  | Resource allocation                  | The South African government should prioritise funding for safety infrastructure, psychosocial services, and prevention programmes, especially in under-resourced schools.       |
| Macrosystem      | Gender-transformative programmes     | Social Workers and community-based organisations should implement initiatives that challenge harmful gender norms and reduce tolerance for gender-based violence.                |
|                  | End corporal punishment campaigns    | Reinforce legal prohibitions through national awareness campaigns and teacher-training reforms.                                                                                  |
| Chronosystem     | Longitudinal monitoring              | Establish national systems to track trends, evaluate interventions, and identify emerging risks over time.                                                                       |
|                  | Youth empowerment                    | Involve learners in peer-education, leadership roles, and decision-making processes that promote agency and resilience.                                                          |

As noted in Table 3 above, there are several recommendations for strengthening prevention and response efforts in a bid to reduce the effects of school-based violence in South Africa. They include the following:

- *Strengthen whole-school safety frameworks:* Schools should adopt comprehensive safety policies that integrate prevention, early identification, and response mechanisms. This includes clear reporting procedures, consistent enforcement of disciplinary measures, and collaboration with local child protection and policing structures.
- *Expand psychosocial support services:* Learners affected by violence require accessible counselling, trauma-informed care, and ongoing emotional support. Investing in school-based social workers, counsellors, and peer-support programmes can help mitigate the psychological and behavioural consequences of violence.
- *Promote positive school climates:* Interventions that build respectful relationships, encourage learner participation, and foster a sense of belonging can reduce the likelihood of violence. Programmes that strengthen social–emotional learning, conflict resolution, and restorative practices are particularly valuable.
- *Enhance educator training:* Educators need targeted professional development on identifying signs of violence, responding appropriately to disclosures, and managing

classrooms in ways that reduce conflict. Trauma-informed teaching approaches can also help educators support affected learners more effectively.

- *Engage families and communities:* Violence in schools often mirrors broader community dynamics. Strengthening partnerships with parents, caregivers, and community organisations can help create consistent norms around non-violence and support learners across multiple environments.
- *Improve access to reporting and accountability mechanisms:* Learners must have safe, confidential avenues to report violence without fear of retaliation. Strengthening oversight structures and ensuring accountability for perpetrators is essential for building trust.
- *Prioritise research in diverse school contexts:* Future studies should include rural, farming, and mining communities to capture a more comprehensive picture of school-based violence and to inform context-specific interventions.

Overall, a comprehensive, ecological approach is essential. Interventions must be multi-level, coordinated, and sustained, addressing both the immediate manifestations of violence and the structural conditions that enable it. Prioritising prevention, strengthening institutional capacity, and amplifying children's voices are critical steps toward creating safe, inclusive, and nurturing learning environments.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, P.M., S.S. and S.G.; methodology, P.M., S.S. and S.G.; software, P.M., S.S. and S.G.; validation, P.M. and S.S.; formal analysis, P.M., S.S. and S.G.; investigation, P.M.; resources, P.M., S.S. and S.G.; data curation, P.M. and S.S.; writing—original draft preparation, P.M., S.S. and S.G.; writing—review and editing, P.M., S.S. and S.G.; visualization, P.M., S.S. and S.G.; project administration, S.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted per the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria, South Africa (protocol code 89240728, 13 December 2010).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because of ethical restrictions.

**Acknowledgments:** This paper is based on a research project conducted by Poppy Masinga entitled, "A school-based violence prevention programme for high school learners in Tshwane South District, Gauteng Province." The study was conducted in fulfilment of the Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work Degree at the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## References

1. Masinga, P.; Sibanda, S. Measures to address and prevent school-based violence in South Africa: An ecological systems perspective. *J. Soc. Serv. Res.* **2026**, *52*, 214–229.
2. Ncontsa, V.N.; Shumba, A. The nature, causes and effects of school violence in South African high schools. *S. Afr. J. Educ.* **2013**, *33*, 1–15. [[CrossRef](#)]
3. Sibanda, S.; Masinga, P. A child protection issue: Exploring the causes of school-based violence in South Africa from a bio-ecological systems perspective. *Child Prot. Pract.* **2025**, *5*, 100186.
4. Clark, J.N. Youth violence in South Africa: The case for a restorative justice response. *Contemp. Justice Rev.* **2012**, *15*, 77–95. [[CrossRef](#)]
5. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). *School Violence and Bullying: Global Status Report*; UNESCO: Paris, France, 2025.

6. Masinga, P.; Sibanda, S. "It's a Warzone"—The Nature of School-based Violence in South Africa. *J. Soc. Policy Soc. Change Dev.* **2024**, *2*, 39–58.
7. Lumadi, R.I. Impact of school violence on learner participation in South African secondary schools: A qualitative study. *Perspect. Educ.* **2024**, *42*, 39–52. [[CrossRef](#)]
8. Du Plessis, P.; Mestry, R. Violence in rural schools in South Africa: Perceptions and experiences of school principals and school governing bodies. *Perspect. Educ.* **2024**, *42*, 198–217.
9. Milligan, M.; Doss, K.M.; Zungu, B. Violence in South African schools: Trends, psychology and recommendations. *Perspect. Educ.* **2024**, *42*, 4–22.
10. Hoosen, P.; Adams, S.; Tiliouine, H.; Savahl, S. Youth and adolescents' perceptions of violence in post-apartheid South Africa: A systematic review of the literature. *Child Indic. Res.* **2022**, *15*, 885–911. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
11. Armstead, T.L.; Wilkins, N.; Nation, M. Structural and social determinants of inequities in violence risk: A review of indicators. *J. Community Psychol.* **2021**, *49*, 878–906. [[PubMed](#)]
12. Pietersen, D. Dialogical, online teaching and learning platforms in higher education: Socially just and decolonized. *Int. J. Multidiscip. Perspect. High. Educ.* **2023**, *8*, 133–147.
13. Khumalo, G. Collaboration and Challenges in School Social Work Within South African Public Schools: A Case of the Gauteng Province. *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 446. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. Alabi, O.J.; Ngidi, T. Our Schools are No Longer Safe: The Narratives of Educators at Peri-Urban High Schools in Umlazi, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Alternation* **2021**, *37*, 224–252. [[CrossRef](#)]
15. Khumalo, G.; Makhakhe, N.F.; Lipholo, B.N. A scoping review of contextual factors contributing to school violence in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. *Youth* **2025**, *5*, 30. [[CrossRef](#)]
16. Qwabe, T.T.; Maluleke, W.; Olutola, A.A. Exploring the nature of school violence in the selected public high schools: Case study of jozini Settlement, Kwazulu-natal province, South Africa. *Int. J. Soc. Sci. Res. Rev.* **2022**, *5*, 116–137. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. Burton, P.; Leoschut, L. *School Violence in South Africa: Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study*; Monograph Series No. 12; Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention: Cape Town, South Africa, 2013.
18. Cowie, H.; Jennifer, D. *Managing Violence in Schools: A Whole-School Approach to Best Practice*; Sage Publications: Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2007.
19. Becker, J. The Betrayal of Trust: Violence against Children. In *Human Rights Watch World Report Events of 2007*; Human Rights Watch: New York, NY, USA, 2008.
20. Badri, A.Y. School-gender-based violence in Africa: Prevalence and consequences. *Glob. J. Arts Humanit. Soc. Sci.* **2014**, *2*, 1–20.
21. Gevers, A.; Flisher, A.J. School-based youth violence prevention interventions. In *Youth Violence: Sources and Solutions in South Africa*; Ward, C.L., van der Merwe, A., Dawes, A., Eds.; UCT Press: Claremont, South Africa, 2012; pp. 175–211.
22. Pereznieto, P.; Harper, C.; Clench, B.; Coarasa, J. *The Economic Impact of School Violence: A Report for Plan International*; Overseas Development Institute: London, UK, 2010.
23. Aboagye, R.G.; Seidu, A.A.; Adu, C.; Cadri, A.; Mireku, D.O.; Ahinkorah, B.O. Interpersonal violence among in-school adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa: Assessing the prevalence and predictors from the Global School-based Health Survey. *SSM-Popul. Health* **2021**, *16*, 100929. [[PubMed](#)]
24. Dupper, D.R. *School Bullying: New Perspectives on a Growing Problem*; Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2013.
25. Robinson, K.H.; Saltmarsh, S.; Davies, C. Introduction: The case for rethinking school violence. In *Rethinking School Violence: Theory, Gender, Context*; Saltmarsh, S., Robinson, K.H., Davies, C., Eds.; Palgrave Macmillan: New York, NY, USA, 2012.
26. Mncube, V.; Madikizela-Madiya, N. Gangsterism as a cause of violence in South African schools: The case of six provinces. *J. Sociol. Soc. Anthropol.* **2014**, *5*, 43–50. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. Maphosa, C.; Mammen, K.J. How chaotic and unmanageable classrooms have become: Insights into prevalent forms of learner indiscipline in South African Schools. *Anthropologist* **2011**, *13*, 185–193. [[CrossRef](#)]
28. Mosito, C.; Sitoyi, Z.M. School violence and its impact on teachers' well-being. *Perspect. Educ.* **2024**, *42*, 131–147. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Crawford, M. Ecological Systems theory: Exploring the development of the theoretical framework as conceived by Bronfenbrenner. *J. Public Health Issue Pract.* **2020**, *4*, 170. [[CrossRef](#)]
30. Potgieter, A.; Fabris-Rotelli, I.N.; Breetzke, G.; Wright, C.Y. The association between weather and crime in a township setting in South Africa. *Int. J. Biometeorol.* **2022**, *66*, 865–874. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
31. Van der Merwe, A.; Dawes, A.; Ward, C.L. The development of youth violence: An ecological understanding. In *Youth Violence: Sources and Solutions in South Africa*; Ward, C.L., van der Merwe, A., Dawes, A., Eds.; UCT Press: Cape Town, South Africa, 2012; pp. 53–91.
32. Pedro, A. School violence and violence in school: A proposal for a teacher training curriculum. *Education* **2012**, *2*, 73–83. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Fulbeck, R. Children's Expressions of Revenge Fantasies in Response to Trauma from Bullying: A Psychodynamic Perspective. Master's Thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa, 2018.

34. Nonjenge, G.; Nakedi, T. *Confronting Racial Violence in Schools*; Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation: Cape Town, South Africa, 2025.
35. Masuka, T.; Sibanda, S.; Tladi-Mapefane, O. “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child”: Asset-Based Community Development as a Pathway to Integrated Social Protection for Sustainable Child Protection in Zimbabwe. *Soc. Sci.* **2026**, *15*, 267. [[CrossRef](#)]
36. Jefthas, D.; Artz, L. Youth violence: A gendered perspective. In *Someone Stole My Smile: An Exploration into the Causes of Youth Violence in South Africa*; Burton, P., Ed.; Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention: Cape Town, South Africa, 2007; pp. 37–56.
37. Edwards-Kerr, D. *Questioning School Violence in Jamaican Schools: A Critical Perspective*; University of the West Indies: Mona, Jamaica, 2013. Available online: [https://www.mona.uwi.edu/cop/sites/default/files/consolidated\\_reply\\_files/Consolidated%20Reply%20E-Discussion%20Summary\\_%20EduExchange%2009.pdf](https://www.mona.uwi.edu/cop/sites/default/files/consolidated_reply_files/Consolidated%20Reply%20E-Discussion%20Summary_%20EduExchange%2009.pdf) (accessed on 1 June 2026).
38. Baxen, E. Strategies to Support Teachers Experiencing School Violence. Master’s Thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa, 2021.
39. Rubin, A.; Babbie, E.R. *Research Methods for Social Work*; Brooks/Cole: Belmont, CA, USA, 2009.
40. Babbie, E.R. *The Practice of Social Research*; Cengage: South Melbourne, VIC, Australia, 2020.
41. Braun, V.; Clarke, V. *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*; SAGE Publications: Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2013.
42. May, T.; Perry, B. *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*; McGraw-Hill Education: London, UK, 2022.
43. Creswell, J.W. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed.; Sage Publications: London, UK, 2014.
44. Bryman, A. *Social Research Methods*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2016.
45. Francis, J.; Johnston, M.; Robertson, C.; Glidewell, L.; Entwistle, V.; Eccles, M.P.; Grimshaw, J.M. What is an adequate sample size? Operationalising data saturation for theory-based interview studies. *Psychol. Health* **2010**, *25*, 1229–1245. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
46. Guba, E.G.; Lincoln, Y.S. Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed.; Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S., Eds.; Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 1994.
47. Yin, R.K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 5th ed.; Sage Publications: Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2014.
48. Franklin, C.; Cody, A.P.; Ballan, M. Reliability and validity in qualitative research. In *The Handbook of Social Work Research Methods*, 2nd ed.; Bruce, A.T., Ed.; Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2010.
49. Robinson, O.C. Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide. *Qual. Res. Psychol.* **2014**, *11*, 25–41.
50. Morse, J.M. Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry. *Qual. Health Res.* **2015**, *25*, 1212–1222. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
51. Strydom, H. Ethical aspects of research in social sciences and human service professions. In *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, 4th ed.; De Vos, A.S., Strydom, H., Fouché, C.B., Delpont, C.S.L., Eds.; Van Schaik Publishers: Pretoria, South Africa, 2011.
52. Masinga, P. A School-Based Violence Prevention Programme for High School learners in Tshwane South District, Gauteng Province. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa, 2016.
53. Le Roux, C.; Mokhele, P.R. The persistence of violence in South Africa’s schools: In search of solutions. *Afr. Educ. Rev.* **2011**, *8*, 318–335.
54. Bronfenbrenner, U. *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1979.
55. Lekganyane, R.; Sibanda, S. Environmental Citizenship and Social Work: Reflections on the Significance of Social Work Services in the Informal Settlements of South Africa. *Soc. Sci.* **2026**, *15*, 325. [[CrossRef](#)]

**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.