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To cite this article: Poppy Masinga & Sipho Sibanda (20 Jun 2025): Measures to Address and Prevent School-Based Violence in South Africa: An Ecological Systems Perspective, Journal of Social Service Research, DOI: [10.1080/01488376.2025.2520270](https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2025.2520270)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2025.2520270>



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Published online: 20 Jun 2025.



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Measures to Address and Prevent School-Based Violence in South Africa: An Ecological Systems Perspective

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ABSTRACT

There are myriad contributory factors that have been identified as accounting for the prevalence of violence in South African schools. From an ecological systems perspective, measures to address and prevent school-based violence should reflect a response to factors that contribute to its causes at individual, family, inter-personal, school, community, and societal levels, and acknowledge that these factors interact with one another within the environmental context. Based on a qualitative study conducted at nine high schools in South Africa, data was collected from 47 learners and 30 educators using focus group discussions and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the suggested measures to address and prevent school violence include positive discipline and the reintroduction of corporal punishment; professional behavior of educators; self-disciplined learners; counseling services and special-schools; peer-support and mentorship; educational awareness campaigns; introducing demerit and merit systems; suspensions; security systems; parenting skills training; and stakeholder collaboration. The conclusion is that the measures to be put in place to address school-based violence should target the individual, family, community, and broader societal causes of violence. It is recommended that future research be conducted using an ecological systems approach to develop intervention programmes aimed at addressing and preventing school-based violence in South Africa.



KEYWORDS

Ecological systems perspective;
high-school learners;
intervention research;
school-based violence;
South Africa

Introduction

Violence in South African schools continue to raise its ugly head. The United Nations Educational and Scientific and Cultural Organization (2025) states that school violence refers to all forms of violence in or outside of the classroom, around schools, on the way to or from school, as well as in online and other digital environments. School violence is primarily experienced by learners, and it may be perpetrated by other learners, teachers or others in the school community (Masinga & Sibanda, 2024). In 2014, Diale (2014, p. 1) stated, “Violence against children has reached endemic proportions in South Africa, as 15.5 million children suffer from some form of violence.” More than 10 years later, the situation has not changed,

in 2022 there were 258 reported 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). Milligan et al. (2024), observed that in 2023 there were more than six violent incidents reported at individual schools across South Africa. In 2025, South Africa has seen a concerning rise in school-based violence, with a 35.4% increase in reported cases of abuse and sexual harassment of pupils by teachers, reaching 111 cases in 2024/2025, and over 500 bullying incidents reported in the first term (SABC News, 2025). The Sowetanlive (2025) reported that a 13-year-old female learner was allegedly raped several times since November 2024 until March 2025 by a 58-year-old teacher from Limpopo, South Africa.

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Concerted multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary measures should be put in place to curb violence in schools. To address and prevent school-based violence, it is important to understand its causes because it is difficult to address a problem without understanding its causes (Sibanda & Masinga, 2025). In explaining school violence and the factors that contribute to its occurrence, Milligan et al. (2024) states that simplistic, narrow, and one-dimensional perspectives should be rejected because the causes of school-based violence are complex and multifaceted. Lumadi (2024) supports the view that violent and aggressive behavior is a result of complex interaction between the individual and multiple systems or contexts, such as the family, school, the community, culture, and environment.

This article answers the following main research question: What are the suggested measures to address and prevent school-based violence in South Africa? The sub-questions were asked as follows: 1. What are the suggested micro system measures for addressing and preventing school-based violence? 2. What are the suggested meso system measures for addressing and preventing school-based violence? 3. What are the suggested macro system measures for addressing and preventing school-based violence? 4. What are the suggested chrono system measures for addressing and preventing school-based violence?

Causes of School-Based Violence from an Ecological Systems Perspective

The ecological systems approach is the most suitable theoretical framework for understanding the causes of school-based violence (Milligan et al., 2024). As premised by Masinga and Sibanda (2024), many contextual factors contribute to the development of violent behavior among school learners. The ecological systems theory provides a holistic view about how an individual interacts with and is influenced by the various settings with which he or she engages with. It provides multiple perspectives about the individual child's situation and can be used as a framework for holistic assessments to address the needs of school children (Sibanda & Masinga, 2025). In systems' thinking, everyone and everything is connected,

influences and is influenced by everyone, and everything. Therefore, one cannot conclusively ascribe violent behavior to any one specific environmental factor but to multiple factors (Armstead et al., 2021). The ecological systems perspective states that the world of an individual consists of basic structures (concentric circles) in which such mutual interactions and influences take place, which are called micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono systems (Crawford, 2020). The following section starts with a discussion of individual level risk factors that contribute to the development of school violence and will culminate in an illustration of the respective micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono level risk factors.

Individual-Related Factors

Potgieter et al. (2022) state that individual factors that contribute to one's engagement in violence and aggression at school include the personality and biological characteristics of the individual such as impulsiveness, hyperactivity, restlessness, and a short attention span. Other individual biological factors include high testosterone and low serotonin levels. Van der Merwe et al. (2012) identify age and gender as factors that contribute to violence. All these biological and personality-related variables in combination with other contextual factors contribute to school violence (Qwabe et al., 2022).

Other authors identified personality traits such as low frustration tolerance levels, feelings of powerlessness, lack of commitment to school, low academic ambitions, and poor academic performance as contributing to school-based violence (Pedro, 2012). In an interview conducted with South African female secondary school educators to explore their experiences of school violence, Bester et al. (2010) found that learners who experience academic pressure and tension are more likely to engage in violent behavior. In another study, Grobler (2019) found that previous experiences of childhood abuse also place some children at risk of perpetuating school violence. On the other hand, Cowie and Jennifer (2012) show that early engagement in antisocial behavior such as substance abuse and crime place many young people at risk of perpetuating violence. Learners

who use drugs and alcohol are more likely to take risks and get involved in violence (Sibanda & Masinga, 2025). Pietersen (2023) confirms that being male, with low impulse control, using substances, and performing poorly in school, are some of the characteristics of individuals who are most likely to engage in violence.

However, it should be noted that not all children and youth engage in school violence. Cowie and Jennifer (2012) observe that some learners are resilient and have protective characteristics such as a sense of self-efficacy, high intelligence, and have outgoing personalities. Furthermore, Sibanda and Masinga (2025) reveal that some children are shielded by the family environment which is depicted by a strong sense of attachment, stable, warm, and caring interpersonal relationships, accompanied by clear and consistent rules and discipline. Thus, the family has an influence on children's development and behavior (Milligan et al., 2024).

Family-Related Factors

The family and home environment wherein many children are raised contribute to children's engagement in school violence (Lumadi, 2024)). Dupper (2013) argues that children who are raised in families where physical punishment is used; where there is lack of affection and care; where sibling rivalry is high; and where the father figure is absent or uninvolved, are more likely to perpetrate violence in school. Similarly, Pietersen (2023) found that dysfunctional and unstable families, characterized by low levels of cohesion and high levels of parental conflict and disharmony, are more likely to raise violent youth.

Several authors reveal that families that lack structure, or those that have inconsistent rules, that implement harsh and/or inconsistent disciplinary practices, and those that lack proper parenting skills raise violent offspring (Singh & Steyn, 2013; Van der Merwe et al., 2012). Other identifying family characteristics include showing little interest in or being uninvolved in their children's school lives or failure to monitor and supervise their children's activities (Van der Merwe et al., 2012). Children raised in such uncaring and unsupportive families are often left

to their own devices, with little or no guidance. Such children are most likely to get attention from negative peers.

Milligan et al. (2024) point out that children who are exposed to domestic violence learn that violence is a normal and acceptable method for conflict resolution. These children are therefore more likely to use violence against their peers or other adults at school (Sibanda & Masinga, 2025). Moreover, families who use violence are withdrawn, socially isolated and enjoy little support from the community and usually experience highly stressful lives and other social problems (Qwabe et al., 2022). These factors have a negative impact on the developing child. As a result, such children are most likely to use violence at school. Other factors that influence families negatively include family disruptions due to illness, divorce, incarceration. These families are more at risk of raising violent and aggressive children than their counterparts (Sibanda & Masinga, 2025). Parental criminality, sibling criminality, and exposure to family violence as a victim or witness are also contributory factors to violent behavior amongst offsprings (Leoschut, 2013).

Peer-Related Factors

Burton and Leoschut (2013) assert that peers are a key socializing agent and play an influential role in learners' antisocial attitudes and violent behaviors. Fulbeck (2018) argue that learners who engage in gang membership and associate with antisocial peers are at an increased risk of becoming involved in violence, either as victims or perpetrators. The authors state that exposure to aggressive and violent peer role models contributes to learned violent behavior. Osadebe (2013) support the view that learners who participate in group violence are desensitized to extreme violence as compared to individuals acting alone. Cowie and Jennifer (2012) postulate that this often happens when there is poor communication between children and their parents. The developing youngsters then look up to their peers for support and acceptance (Sibanda & Masinga, 2025). The school system is an environment for peers to provide such support. Moreover, it is also where violent behavior can be influenced by peers.

School-Related Factors

Within the school context, researchers identify environmental, administrative, curriculum and educator-related risk factors that contribute to school violence. As Nonjinge and Nakedi (2025) state, schools have become highly explosive and unsafe places as evident from daily reports of violent incidences. Other scholars have identified poor classroom management, lack of boundaries, and poor leadership, poor management, and a lack of administrative structures from heads of schools and school governing bodies as factors contributing to school violence (Edwards-Kerr, 2013). Dupper (2013) indicates other causative factors to school violence is the large impersonal schools where learners are part of the faceless masses and where there are poor teacher–learner relationships. Such school environments are deficient in social capital and are perceived by learners as hostile, unsupportive, uncaring, and unwelcoming (Dupper, 2013). Edwards-Kerr (2013) state that learners in such schools lack a sense of belonging and as a result are not concerned about the consequences of their harmful and undesirable violent behaviors to self, peers, educators and other school adults.

Sibanda and Masinga (2025) regard staff-related factors to be risk factors for school-based violence. The authors argue that teachers who lack training on how to address school violence, who have low morale and lack job satisfaction, contribute to school environments that are prone to violence. Furthermore, Van der Merwe et al. (2012) mention lack of empathy on the part of some educators and the use of corporal punishment as contributory factors to school violence. Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) identified school environments that lack constructive, creative and challenging activities to engage learners as issues that contribute to bored, apathetic and unhappy learners who resort to drugs and alcohol, gang activities and other antisocial behaviors. Lumadi (2024) points out that schools with poor physical conditions such as narrow hallways, and broken-down and unhygienic buildings, could cause frustration and feelings of disrespect and may contribute to acts of violence.

Not only does the physical condition of the school matter, but also the culture within the

school environment. Dupper (2013) states that caring and supportive schools, where the staff condemn violence and are quick to respond to reported violent incidents, are most likely to experience less violence than their counterparts. Burton and Leoschut (2013) say that learners must be given a voice to express their safety concerns and needs through providing adequate reporting mechanisms and response systems.

Community-Related Factors

The occurrence of violence in schools is often compounded by community level risk factors such as access to alcohol, drugs and weapons and high crime rates (Sibanda & Masinga, 2025). Milligan et al. (2024) have established that the physical, social, and economic characteristics of neighborhoods and communities influence the likelihood of violence in schools. Van der Merwe et al. (2012) are of the opinion that disorganized communities and neighborhoods that are unable to implement effective social controls; have an influence on effective parenting; affect schools' teaching and learning processes and result in poor academic achievement and high rates of unemployment, crime, and poverty. The cycle of dysfunction continues infinitely. Although research shows that schools located in poorer, disorganized communities are more likely to experience more violence and disorder than schools located in more affluent and organized communities, school-based violence is not restricted to poor and disadvantaged schools (Jefthas & Artz, 2007). Therefore, the conclusion can be safely drawn that community disorganization could influence rates of violence in schools.

Since violence is rampant in South African schools and is caused by multiple factors, the researchers sought to explore the measures to address and prevent the causes of school-based violence in South Africa by asking the following main research question: What are the suggested measures to address and prevent school-based violence in South Africa. The objectives of the study were as follows: (1) To identify individual and family-related (micro-system level) measures that can be put in place to address school-based

violence in South Africa. (2) To determine inter-personal (meso-system level) measures for preventing and addressing violence in South African schools. (3) To establish school and community-related (macro-system level) measures for responding to school-based violence in South Africa. (4) To explore structural and systemic-related (chrono-system level) measures that can be put in place to prevent and address violence in South African schools.

Methods

The study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach, this was because the researchers knew little about the topic of school violence and wanted to generate initial insights into this complex issue (Creswell, 2014). The collective case study design was used to explore and describe the measures to address violence in South African Schools.

The population in the study comprised of all learners and educators of Tshwane South District High Schools in the Gauteng Province of 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; 9 schools were sampled to participate in the study. The researchers selected grades 9 and 10 learners and educators to be study participants.

Schools are complex and hierarchical in nature and have multiple interrelated levels that include districts, regions, schools, classrooms, grades, principals, educators, and learners. Thus, multi-level mixed methods sampling techniques were employed in this study. In this study, both probability and non-probability sampling strategies were implemented to select cases of schools, grades, educators, and learners. The multi-level sampling procedure was implemented as follows:

Level 1: A stratified purposive sampling technique was utilized to divide the population into desired homogeneous groups or strata. The researchers used stratified purposive

sampling because they were interested in drawing a random sample that would be representative of the schools. Additionally, the researchers wanted to ensure that the list was well organized, and the schools are grouped according to public and independent, township, town and suburb locations. In total a sample size of 51 diverse high schools was selected from the sampling frame of registered schools in the Tshwane South District as the strata sample.

Level 2: Systematic sampling was employed in the second stage of the multilevel concurrent sampling process whereby study units were selected from the list of 51 schools. To avoid any bias, the first school was selected randomly from a randomly generated list of schools that represented the target population. Thereafter, every 4th element in the list was systematically selected for inclusion in the study sample. This second stage of sampling continued until the desired sample size of 20 schools was reached. From this list only nine schools granted the researchers permission to conduct the study. In total, the sample consisted of seven public and two independent schools from four townships and five suburbs.

Level 3: To select the grade 9 and 10 classes, the researchers requested the help of the school principals of the nine selected schools to supply the researchers with a list of all the grade 9 and 10 classes. To ensure equal samples from each of the two grades, the researchers took every second class on the lists until a total of 18 grade 9 and 10 classes were sampled from the compiled lists of grades 9 and 10 classes.

Level 4: In this level, purposive sampling was utilized to select samples of grades 9 and 10 educators from the lists of grades 9 and 10 classes. Using the purposive sampling method, a total of 30 grade 9 and 10 educators were deliberately selected from the nine sampled schools to represent that particular group of educators in Tshwane South District. The selection criteria prescribed that those educators had to be

qualified professional educators; teaching at a selected school; and teaching either a grade 9 or 10 class.

Level 5: To select learner participants at this stage, purposive sampling was implemented to select learners from the grade 9 and 10 class registers that were supplied by the sampled school principals. The criteria for inclusion required that learners had to be attending at a selected school; either in grade 9 or 10.

Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate because it allowed the researchers to use their own judgements to choose grade 9 and 10 learners and educators that could provide the best information to achieve the goal of the study. The researchers enlisted the help of educators in recruiting the participants from the larger classes. The first 47 learners who responded were invited to attend the focus group interviews. The distribution of learner participants between the schools were as follows: School 1 (8 learners); School 2 (11 learners); School 3 (6 learners); School 4 (10 learners) School 5 (12 learners). For educators, the distribution was as follows: School 1 (6 educators); School 2 (9 educators); School 3 (9 educators) and School 4 (6 educators).

The main data collection tool used by the researchers was focus group interviewing. 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 types of school-based violence (Creswell, 2014). Data got saturated after five focus group sessions with learners and four focus group sessions with educators, culminating into nine focus group interview sessions.

Data was single-handedly analyzed by the principal investigator (PI) using thematic analysis, specifically, the spiral process as proposed by Creswell (2014). The process entailed the following steps:

1. *Organizing and preparing data for analysis:* The PI applied formal and informal strategies whereby data analysis started immediately after each focus group interview session to prevent the data from becoming

overwhelming. The preliminary analysis focused on critical thinking and reflection about the research process, whereby the PI jotted down all their observations of the day's events, experiences, feelings and thoughts, in the research journal. The PI then organized and prepared for data analysis by properly sorting out the taped recordings; saving them in separate disks; and properly labeled them using pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants and to avoid mixing data and causing confusion.

2. *Perusal and immersion in the data:* As hand-written notes were made immediately following a focus group interview, the PI perused and went over the material several times. Secondly, the PI then repeatedly listened to the taped interviews to gain an understanding of the discussions and to familiarize themselves with the content. The PI read through the transcribed data several times and examined the data for broad trends, looking for patterns, making memos on the margins and developing preliminary thoughts and understanding.
 3. *Classification:* The next step was to classify the data and categorize it accordingly. The process of classifying data led to the development of a codebook. The PI read through the identified codes and placed them on the margins alongside the memo next to the text segments. The codes that were classified into broader categories and themes were checked across the transcripts.
 4. *Synthesis:* The PI formed a broader opinion of what was going on with the data, evaluated the data by challenging the understanding and searched for negative patterns. The themes and related sub-themes that emerged were the findings that provided answers to the research questions. The PI provided the evidence by discussing the themes and sub-themes, citing specific verbatim quotes and other relevant evidence from prior studies to show multiple perspectives and divergent views regarding an item under discussion.
- The study received ethical clearance from an institutional review board of a university in

South Africa. The PI was alert to the ethical implications of the decisions made during the study. To ensure that the research participants did not suffer any harm, the following core ethical requirements as stipulated by Strydom (2011) were adhered to: 1. The PI informed the participants of their right to withdraw from the study. 2. The PI identified social workers and planned with them to be on stand-by if the need for counseling arose. Research participants were informed about this service, however, none of the participants needed any counseling. 3. All participants were aware of the purpose of the study, and they agreed to participate explicitly on a voluntary basis. 4. The PI did not deceive the participants and did not make any promises to pay them for participating in the study.

5. Research participants signed informed consent letters, whilst the learners signed informed assent letters, both letters (informed consent and informed assent) stated exactly what the study was all about, what was expected from the participants, and what potential harm existed. Since learners that participated in the study were minors, consent and permission for their participation in the study was granted by their legal guardians, who were mainly parents. In asking for consent and assent, the PI did not use deceit, pressure, or threats. 6. Confidentiality was provided by number coding transcripts and replacing all names of schools with codes without destroying the integrity and usefulness of the data. The PI used numbers instead of actual names and stored the data, safely packed in boxes, in a secure room where access was restricted.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate that the suggested measures to address and prevent school-based violence include: 1. Individual-related measures such as self-disciplined learners; 2. Family-related measures such as parenting skills training; 3. Inter-personal measures such introducing peer-support and

mentorship programmes; 4. Community-related measures such as initiating stakeholder collaborations at a community level; 5. School-related measures such as enforcing the professional behavior of educators, introducing demerit and merit systems, suspension of learners displaying behavioral problems, searching of learners and installation of security systems; 6. Structural and systemic measures such as enforcement of positive discipline and the reintroduction of corporal punishment, rolling out counseling services and promotion of referral to special schools, and initiating educational awareness campaigns.

Individual-Related Measures

Findings indicate that individual-related (micro-level) measures that seek to empower learners to be self-disciplined should be put in place as a way of addressing and preventing school-based violence.

Disciplined Behaviour of Learners

Participating learners acknowledged that violence is not only caused by the behavior of educators, but also the behavior of learners. A learner said: "It doesn't mean that we just have to say that the educators are wrong, we are also wrong." Learner participants gave several suggestions and said fellow learners should be self-disciplined, respect each other, report any violence incidences, love and care for one another, stop gambling and engaging in violence activities, learn to communicate and openly talk to each other about violence and the effects, have self-control and be able to solve problems without violence. Suggestions given during the focus group interviews entailed encouraging learners to participate in sports so that it will take away their time from the undesirable behavior like taking alcohol and drugs. A learner participant explained as follows:

If then the people that are bullying can participate in sports it will be much better because sports gonna keep them away from wrong things, such as smoking.

The current study's findings that learners' indiscipline, insubordination, lack of care and

respect for fellow human beings contribute to school violence build upon similar findings in literature. Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) caution learners to be aware that their academic success depends on their personal commitment and input. Therefore, learners need to learn to behave responsibly and be accountable for their actions (Sibanda & Masinga, 2025). Milligan et al. (2024) states that antisocial behavior can be changed by teaching positive behavior and instilling in them a sense of respect for self, their peers, parents, school authorities and property. Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) suggest that schools should introduce *Ubuntu*—a sense of belonging and respect and help establish positive relationships between individuals and groups. *Ubuntu* will help change the behavior of learners by making them understand the significance of education in their lives and in nation building (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011).

Family-Related Measures

Findings also suggest that micro-system measures for addressing and preventing school-based violence should be put in place at a family-related level. Such measures and interventions should be geared toward capacitating parents to address the causes of violence in schools. One such an intervention is providing parental skills training.

Parenting Skills Training

Participants suggested that parents should talk to their children and listen to their problems; teach them good behavior, and discipline them when they misbehave; report violent cases; educate their children about violence; teach their children about respect and self-discipline; support and care for their children; and encourage them to do their schoolwork and participate in school activities. The educators and learners at all the participating schools recommended parenting skills training or books on parenting to empower parents to be able to supervise, guide and discipline their children. An educator said:

We lack joint effort and it's not necessarily the school staff, but all stakeholders of the school, parents included. Even if we educators try to do something about the discipline, but we are not getting there, we

need help from parents to discipline the children from their side, from home.

Some learners suggested getting parents involved in the education of their children and work with schools in ensuring proper teaching and learning. They suggested that parents should be called in if learners do not listen to their educators. One learner made this suggestion:

I think we should get the parents involved. Some parents are too soft, they don't care much about what kids do whilst at school ... You don't listen to educators... maybe you will listen to your parents.

The above suggestions are in accordance with research findings from other studies (Singh & Steyn, 2013) which confirm that parents need skills to instill discipline. The authors suggest discipline will contribute to curbing violence and disruptive behavior in schools.

Inter-Personal Measures

Findings indicate that inter-personal (meso-level) measures that seek to provide positive mentors, peer-support and role-models to learners should be put in place as a way of addressing and preventing school-based violence.

Introducing Peer-Support and Mentorship Programmes

Participating learners indicated a need for peer support for learners with behavior problems. A learner at one school suggested a peer support service by senior students. Another learner recommended a mentoring system and suggested as follows:

I came into the school in grade 8, we had a strict matric (final year) group, and we had a strong leadership panel. So, they were the type that told us from the gate. They said... "listen here, if you come from a school where you used to misbehave things are gonna change here and most of us, I think we are good because you know that here we don't mess around".

These research findings are in line with previous studies regarding the provision of peer support services and mentoring. Milligan et al. (2024) states that best practice should include programmes that focus on creating environments that foster positive peer interactions and develop peer mentoring

programmes where graduates are encouraged to volunteer as mentors to work with youth who are at risk or train learners as peer mediators so they can help with problem solving and assist educators in their efforts to create safer schools.

Community-Related Measures

Findings reveal that macro-system measures for addressing and preventing school-based violence should be put in place at a family-related level. Such measures and interventions should be geared toward capacitating parents to address the causes of violence in schools. One such a measure entails initiating stakeholder collaborations at a community level.

Initiating Stakeholder Collaborations at a Community Level

Participant learners suggested that communities should work together with schools; organize community meetings to raise awareness and educate community members about violence; report cases of violence; organize community policing patrols; and engage community leaders to serve as positive role models. Furthermore, learners said the Gauteng Provincial Department of Education should work with district officials, schools, police and parents. Learners said that these persons should visit schools regularly to encourage principals and pay educators more to encourage them to do their work properly. Furthermore, the learners said the Department of Education should improve security at schools, organize awareness campaigns; and employ qualified staff with knowledge on school violence to empower educators and principals about school violence.

Educators in all the five participating schools observed and commented on the lack of support from their superiors; the lack of cooperation and coordination between the various departments; and the lack of cooperation from parents and guardians. The educators identified learners, parents, educators, communities, and the Department of Education as important stakeholders in the education system who need to work together to prevent violence in schools. Educators said:

The solution is that we should talk about the learners, parents, educators, and the community. I think these four components must work hand in glove.

We should invite other professionals, service providers or experts such as religious organisations to teach learners about values, morals, drugs and alcohol abuse or provide counselling and support to learners with emotional problems.

Mdaka (2021) show that a range of interventions have been implemented by the Department of Education. However, these interventions have been unsuccessful because they were not based on any evidence on the nature, causes and extent of the problem (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). Furthermore, the authors note that these interventions ignore the influence of the broader environmental context (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). Therefore, a lot more still needs to be done to address this problem. The findings noted the need to engage and involve the South African Police Service as an important stakeholder in the fight against violence and crime. Research confirms that involving other stakeholders such as police and the community at large in a coordinated manner is an effective strategy for addressing school violence (Jansson, 2016).

School-Related Measures

Findings also suggest that macro-system measures for addressing and preventing school-based violence should be put in place at a school-related level. Such measures and interventions should be geared toward enforcing the professional behavior of educators, introducing a demerit and merit system, suspension of learners displaying behavioral problems, searching of learners and installation of security systems.

Enforcement of the Professional Behaviour of Educators

Participating learners suggested that schools should get good educators who care about the learners, who have good relationships with learners and who take them seriously when they report incidences of violence. In the focus group interviews, a learner said:

Educators should stop laughing at us when we are reporting.... Even at the district education office they don't take us seriously.

Furthermore, learners suggested that educators should stop smoking with the learners and become positive role models. The learners said:

All the children are affected by the bad manners because no one is better than the other one in these schools. School children will never change unless they can get proper educators who are lovely, who respect and care for the children. If the manners of the educators' change, the children will also change.

Everything comes from the educators, the educators must start, they must tell us what to do and we will all change. They must change their behaviour and not smoke with the learners; they must not perpetrate violence against learners. We want educators who care about learners and take them seriously when they report incidences of violence.

In addition, learners suggested that the educators should instill discipline in class and self-discipline among learners. Other learners said educators should conduct awareness campaigns, conduct drug testing, increase security, and report violent incidents or suspend violent learners. From the participating learners' perspectives, educators are not setting the example for them by treating them with disrespect and laughing at them when they report bullying incidents and by behaving unprofessionally. These findings are consistent with literature. Sibanda and Masinga (2025) postulate that efforts need to be made to increase levels of good leadership, professionalism, and improve the quality of teaching. Moreover, Milligan et al. (2024) state that educators need to fulfill their roles effectively and realize that learners need positive adult role models. Baxen (2021) add that educators need to set a good example by behaving professionally and ethically.

Introducing a Demerit and Merit System

The participant educators from all the participating schools reported that they use a demerit system. However, educators must call in parents when the demerits are too high, but the parents do not cooperate or are not informed of the incidents by the learners concerned. In this regard, an educator said:

I feel as educators we are powerless because there is not much we can do to the learners to change them. You can beat them, but you go to jail, so you can't.

Sometimes you think of other methods of punishing them, if you detain them... 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, so you are also punished.

The participants stated that school principals should be strict and enforce the rules and discipline learners; suspend or expel learners who commit violence and conduct drug testing. A learner participant suggested a reward system not only for top achievers but also for those learners with behavior problems whose behavior would have improved. The learner said:

I think we should have some kind of a reward system. I remember last year they took the top twenty, top ten, top five boys and top five girls. They took them to this place, what's this place?" [Grahamstown] "Yes, I think they should also acknowledge the kids who make an improvement and who try so that the other kids will say I am not necessarily getting the top marks like the top ten but the fact that I have at least made a 10% improvement, and it's acknowledged and rewarded by the educators in the school.

Other participant learners had a different view and suggested that violent and aggressive learners should be exposed by publishing their marks on the schools' notice board. One of the learners said:

Ok, there is another school where their marks...their end of term marks are being put on the foyer. So, it's from the lowest to the highest so that makes them work and work. So, I think exposé is the best thing to do.

The learners' suggestions indicate conflicting views. Some learners recommended punishment by enforcing an academic performance tracking system and expose learners who perform badly, whilst others said that schools should not only implement demerit systems but provide rewards for improved behavior. The findings are in contrast with other studies' findings. For example, Akiba (2015) states that schools that create a set of academic winners and losers characterized by high academic competition, are more likely to encounter increased levels of school violence.

The students with high academic achievement scores are at a high risk of being victimized and called names such as "nerd" by peers, whilst low academic achieving students are at risk of being

labeled “failures”. Labeling and academic tracking stigmatizes low achieving students and increases the likelihood of violence and aggression toward peers and school authorities (Akiba, 2015). On the contrary, Hong and Espelage (2012, p. 16) state, “gifted students are more likely to be bullies because of their skilful and manipulative attitudes and behaviours”. The suggestions made above by the participants need to be considered with caution because of the underlying unintended consequences.

Suspension of Learners Displaying Behavioural Problems

Some participants suggested that schools should take more serious action such as suspending learners who misbehave in school. An educator commented as follows:

There should be drug testing, if a learner tests positive for any drugs he or she should be taken to a hearing and recommended for rehabilitation or is suspension.

A learner elaborated as follows:

They should take more action, suspend them... Like what our principal used to say, he better teach five kids than having 15 kids who are corrupt.

Another learner expanded on the suggestion and said:

So, I think they must be suspended. And maybe if they repeat what they have done again, maybe they should be expelled from the school. So, I think that may be the solution.

However, another learner disagreed and said:

I don't agree because if the principal suspends a learner, in a way he is promoting something bad in a learner. If the learner doesn't go to school and obviously, he or she is at home, she will be happy and even if it's not a good thing it will, he will start doing bad things so that he can keep himself or herself busy.

There were contradictions between the learners. Some learners suggested authorities should take serious steps and suspend or expel violent and undisciplined learners, whilst others thought suspensions would be counterproductive. Akiba (2015) had similar findings and caution that zero

tolerance policies like suspension and expulsion have short-term emotional appeal to parents but do not adequately address the real causes of school violence. Therefore, schools need to be pro-active and innovative and design effective measures for addressing school-based violence.

Searching of Learners and Installation of Security Systems

Learners and educators both shared a similar view that schools should improve security infrastructure at the respective schools to avoid learners and community members who bring alcohol, drugs, and dangerous weapons to school. A learner from one of the participating schools suggested as follows:

But I think that the school can change. Maybe if schools can have the proper security by the gate who searches every learner and confiscates dagga and everything that looks like drugs. Security should also do unannounced searches in the classrooms.

Several other suggestions were made by the participating learners such as the closing of access points and installation of security cameras and random searches by police for purposes for confiscating drugs and weapons.

The school should organise police to come and search all learners, but, they must not tell the children that this day the police is coming because all the children who sell these things will know, they must just come here and will catch the people who sell those things.

What I have seen is that our principal wants our school to be clean. If anything happens, he just calls the police. This year, last year... he called the police, and they searched and got a boy with a knife, they took the boy and his knife to the police station and searched the whole school.

Overall, the suggestions made by the learner participants on improving security infrastructure and conducting random searches by the police are compatible with the ones made by participating educators. An educator stated:

Last year we contacted the safety and security department, they came here...it was a combination of Metro Police, South African Police service, and a Dog Unit Squad and they were targeting these boys who are smoking drugs and dagga. One of the measures which we take is drug testing, so they took the samples, and

they discovered that more than 80 percent of the learners tested positive for dagga.

The findings are consistent with literature about the involvement of South African Police Service as an important stakeholder in the fight against violence and crime in schools. Research confirms that involving other stakeholders such as police and the community at large in a coordinated manner is an effective strategy for addressing social problems such as school violence (Sibanda & Masinga, 2025). In addition, the findings recommend safety and security measures such as access control and random search and seizure to be established and implemented in all schools to ensure that schools are safe and violence free. In support, Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) state that school buildings, grounds and fences need to be in good condition and that schools should provide monitoring and surveillance of secluded areas.

Structural and Systemic Measures

At chrono-system level, the findings reveal structural and systemic measures for preventing and addressing violence in South African schools. These relate to the enforcement of positive discipline and reintroduction of corporal punishment, rolling out counseling services and promotions of referrals to special schools, initiating of educational awareness campaigns.

Enforcement of Positive Discipline and Reintroduction of Corporal Punishment

The picture arising from the study is that educators in the participating schools were concerned that the government abolished corporal punishment but did not introduce an alternative way of disciplining children in schools. A despondent educator said:

We have had a lot of people coming here and making suggestion[s]... doing this... doing that, but nothing helps.

Another educator elaborated and explained as follows:

I feel it was wrong of the government to abolish corporal punishment and not come up with a new solution. It is better for corporal punishment to be brought back. Right now, as educators we are expected

to do things that are beyond us, and we are not being helped in any way.

The educators believe that training workshops and seminars should be provided to capacitate them with knowledge and skills to deal with school violence, to train them on how to control and react to violent incidences and to restore power and authority in the hands of the educators. One educator said:

I would appreciate a model that reinstates power in the hands of the educators because right now educators are powerless. If we suspend children, their parents run over to the district office and guess what? ... the district office is going to call the school and say you are going to take this child back... you are going to accept this child.

Educator participants expressed varying opinions on the issue of corporal punishment and positive discipline. There were educators who expressed a need to be trained on how to respond during violent episodes and there were others who called for corporal punishment to be reinstated to deal with violence because they believe it was working toward bringing order in schools. Educators in two schools with a different suggestion said corporal punishment should be reinstated because it can help restore order in schools:

Corporal punishment is the best way to deal with children who are violent in schools. It was working on a serious note. There is [a] difference between today's learners and yesterday's learners.

On the contrary, many of the learner participants wanted to see corporal punishment abolished. A participating learner said: "Corporal punishment in full... should stop." Only one learner in the same school had a different opinion and said educators should discipline learners fairly. Ward et al. (2015) are convinced that corporal punishment does not teach children to respect adults and does not instill discipline but increases internalizing and externalizing behavior. Rather, the authors suggest positive discipline could have a positive influence on the child's mental health and behavior (Ward et al., 2015). In the same vein, Qwabe et al. (2022) suggest educator training to help educators understand that corporal punishment does not improve behavior and educational achievement but has detrimental outcomes.

Rolling Out Counselling Services and Promotion of Referrals to Special Schools

The educators in this study suggested that learners with behavior problems should be referred to special schools such as a reformatory which have trained personnel, services, and structures to specifically deal with learners with behavioral problems. Educators had a somewhat similar but alternative suggestions and said:

I would be honest; I would like a school of their own or a class of their own with educators that can handle their behaviour. The experienced male educators should be the ones focusing on them.

If learners with behaviour problems were to remain in the mainstream school system, then educators, preferably a male educator or someone with the relevant skills or experience should be appointed to teach such learners who are violent and uncooperative.

A learner suggested the rolling out of a counseling programme for learners who have behavioral problems such as violence and aggression in schools. Learners suggested that school principals should invite professionals or counselors to talk to learners about violence. The views of learners can be summarized in the following suggestion: "The schools should get counsellors to talk to the children. They can be interviewed to find out why and how they bully others." There was also coherence in the suggestions made by educators and learners. Educator made similar suggestions as follows:

Maybe the school can have a psychologist coming for two days a week or once a week, have a room to sit and to teach the kids. The children should be sitting and talking to someone, explaining their situation, their problems, dealing with it and not just sitting and think about what he is gonna eat this afternoon and what is gonna do tomorrow.

Some of the schools have a referral system in place for counselling services for learners with emotional and behaviour problems.

The findings in this study are confirmed in literature by Qwabe et al. (2022), who suggested that schools should employ counselors who can provide learners with needed services. Singh and Steyn (2013) had a similar suggestion when they stated that schools need to provide guidance counselors that were previously made available to schools. The authors noted that for more than

450 schools there is only one psychologist and that the psychological services are inadequate considering the extent of the problems experienced in schools (Singh & Steyn, 2013). The need for counseling services is also noted by Nonjinge and Nakedi (2025) who identified that many learners and educators need emotional, psychological, and spiritual support. Therefore, the suggestion by the participants in this study for counseling services to be made available in all schools.

Initiating Educational Awareness Campaigns

The research findings show that Local District Officials of the Department of Education should initiate awareness campaigns to educate learners about violence; visit schools to talk to and motivate learners; provide security at schools; and work together with parents and police to prevent violence. A learner recommended educational TV programmes which teach children on various topics such as positive behavior and said:

Yes, because when I was a kid there used to be a lot of TV programmes that told you that you must be well mannered in this way and it's quite fun because you could stand up and do little activities around the house and sing the songs and we still remember the songs now.

Another learner confirmed this view and said that people who are on TV these days are involved in drugs and alcohol, the things which bring them into the limelight and that these have a negative effect on young people. The learner elaborated by saying:

If you can look at the media now, it's all about drugs and alcohol and violence and all, and now for teenagers those things attract their attention.

Findings of this study are consistent with literature and build on suggestions for strategies to address the problem of violence in schools in an effective manner (Sibanda & Masinga, 2025). Mpiana (2011) proposes education and awareness campaigns and the use of the media and TV educational programmes. Furthermore, the author suggests the use of interactive and engaging activities such as drama plays or the facilitation of open and frank discussions on the topic of violence, involving well-known personalities in the

community (Mpiana, 2011). In addition, Lumadi (2024) suggest programmes that teach about the risks of substance abuse and violence to educate learners and educators about what actions to take in the event of a violent incident as well as about available services and reporting systems and procedures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings indicate that to address school-based violence in South Africa that is caused by an interplay of multiple and complex factors, measures need to be put in place at various levels of the ecological systems theory. Namely, at an individual and family level (micro-system), at an inter-personal level (meso-system), at a community and school level (macro-system), and at a structural and systemic level (chrono-system). Putting measures at these difference systems recognizes that for school-based violence to be prevented and addressed in South Africa, there should be changes at different segments of the society. Measures should be geared toward individual learners, their families, their peer-groups, their communities, the human resources, institutional and infrastructural arrangements in the schools. Moreover, changes need to be made at a policy and governmental levels, with programmes being designed that encourages the active participation of all stakeholders, namely, learners, parents, teachers, principals, community-leaders, department of education officials, social workers, policy makers, and researchers.

The findings indicate that the voice of learners should be given due consideration in devising measures to prevent and address violence in schools since they are the most affected by it. The learners want schools to implement school-based violence programmes that will capacitate them with information, knowledge and skills in order change their pro-violence behaviors and attitudes. They want programmes that are interactive, fun, and creative. Learners want school environments and educators that are caring, supportive and respectful. They want to be treated with respect and dignity, ensuring their rights are protected. The ecological systems perspective could be used in designing holistic

intervention programmes that are geared toward addressing the causes of school-based violence from multiple viewpoints and perspectives.

Limitations of the Study

The sample was too small to produce findings that can be confidently generalized to all South African schools. In addition, the study was conducted in an urban area. As such, it does not represent wider views of learners in other school settings, such as rural areas, farming and mining towns, who could be having completely different experiences and perspectives on the phenomenon of school-based violence. Moreover, the study was qualitative in nature and did not include the hard-to-reach schools who could have been reached by a quantitative survey.

Implications and Significance of the Study

The study reminds practitioners that school-based violence is not caused by a single but many interacting factors. It has reinforced the importance of addressing the causes of school-based violence from multiple layers of the of the ecological systems perspective, from individual and family aspects to community, societal and policy factors. The study empowers practitioners to make accurate assessments of the causes of school-based violence by paying attention to the mutual interaction and exchange between the person and their environment. Furthermore, social work as a profession that understand the influence of interactions between micro, meso, macro, and chrono levels must take a leading role in designing frameworks and policies that are aimed at addressing the causes and impacts of school-based violence. For violence to be addressed and prevented in schools, multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral stakeholders should be involved in designing and implanting of school-violence prevention interventions and programmes.

Recommendations

A national study be conducted to capture a more holistic view of what measures need to be put in place to address school-based violence in South

Africa, this would give a broader scope that is geographically and socially inclusive of all the school in South Africa, including the schools in rural, mining, and farming areas. Academic and research institutions should conduct further studies aimed at developing intervention programmes using an ecological systems approach to address all the personal, family, social, cultural, community, systemic, and structural causes of school-based violence.

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.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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