

Teachers' Perspectives on the Prevalence of School Violence: Implications for School Social Work

Phiwokazi Madokhwe¹ & Asanda Boboyi^{1*}

ABSTRACT

This study explores high school teachers' perspectives on the prevalence of school violence within a selected high school in Mthatha, Eastern Cape, focusing on bullying, substance abuse, and gang-related activities. Guided by social disorganisation theory and an interpretive paradigm, the study utilised a qualitative approach and purposive sampling to select eight teachers with at least three years of teaching experience. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically to identify key patterns and insights. The findings reveal that bullying, substance abuse, and gang involvement are pervasive issues significantly impacting students' academic performance, emotional well-being, and school climate. Teachers highlighted the psychological and social consequences of school violence, including fear, anxiety, and disengagement, alongside the socioeconomic factors perpetuating these behaviours. The study underscores the urgent need for school social work interventions, including employing school social workers, implementing anti-violence initiatives, strengthening safety committees, and engaging community stakeholders. This research contributes to the growing discourse on school violence in South Africa, emphasising the critical role of school social workers in addressing psycho-social challenges faced by students in schools and nurturing safe, inclusive learning environments. The study's recommendations offer a foundation for targeted policies and practices to reduce violence and improve student outcomes.

Keywords: Teachers; school violence; social disorganisation theory; school social work; high school.

Article Information:

Submitted: 7.2.2025

Revised:8.3.2025

Accepted: 14.3.2025

¹ Department of Social Work, Walter Sisulu University, Eastern Cape, South Africa

* Corresponding author: Email: aboboyi@wsu.ac.za

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

School violence is a significant global issue that disrupts educational systems, compromises student safety, and undermines teacher well-being (Aborisade, 2024; Longmuir et al., 2024). This problem is particularly prevalent in South Africa, with schools often reflecting the socio-economic and community challenges surrounding them. An ideal school environment, aligned with SDG Goal 4 (Quality Education), should be inclusive, equitable, and safe (Notana & Boboyi, 2025). It must provide a supportive atmosphere where all students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. This environment promotes respect for diversity, encourages gender equality, and ensures no child is left behind due to socioeconomic or cultural barriers (Poed, 2020). It prioritises students' and teachers' physical and psychological safety by incorporating effective measures to prevent violence and bullying.

This vision is reinforced by the South African Schools Act (SASA), which mandates schools to create safe and conducive learning environments, and the Children's Act, which emphasises the responsibility to protect children's rights, including their right to education and safety (Maluleke, 2021; Reyneke, 2024). Despite these efforts, however, the prevalence of school violence remains high in South Africa.

In South African high schools, various forms of violence are significant issues, including bullying, vandalism, gangsterism, and physical fights (Khuzwayo et al., 2016; Mncube & Steinmann, 2014; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). A study conducted in KwaZulu-Natal found that 23.9% of students had been bullied, and 15.4% had been involved in physical fights (Khuzwayo et al., 2016). Gang-related violence contributes

to fear among students and negatively impacts the quality of education (Mncube & Steinmann, 2014). Such violence affects students' academic performance, attendance, and mental health (Khuzwayo et al., 2016; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). Authoritarian practices have been identified as a major contributor to school violence, while adopting deliberative democracy has been suggested as a potential solution (McDonald, 2014).

Unequivocally, there is an urgent need for interventions, including standardised codes of conduct, school safety policies, psychological support, and community involvement, to reduce violence in South African schools (Khuzwayo et al., 2016; Mncube & Steinmann, 2014).

The issue of school violence is especially critical in the Eastern Cape. Bullying is particularly prevalent in rural schools, affecting students' performance and psychological well-being (Ndebele & Msiza, 2014). Moreover, exposure to violence in schools has been linked to increased anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among students in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality (Hendricks, 2019). Gender-based violence is also common in universities within the Eastern Cape, where 57.8% of female students reported experiencing some form of violence (Mutinta, 2022).

While not specific to the Eastern Cape, a study in KwaZulu-Natal found high rates of bullying (23.9%), school absenteeism due to feeling unsafe (21.7%), and involvement in physical fights (15.4%) among high school students (Khuzwayo et al., 2016). These findings underscore the urgent need for interventions to address school violence and its effects on student's academic and social lives across South African provinces.

School violence has significant negative impacts on educational outcomes and the well-

being of students (Lungu & Boboyi, 2025). Exposure to violence in schools affects students' psychological development, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Hendricks, 2019). Children who experience violence are 13% more likely not to graduate from school (Fry et al., 2018). Female students are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual harassment, which creates barriers to their learning and emotional well-being (Maphalala, 2014). In Uganda, despite a ban on corporal punishment, over 90% of students reported experiencing physical violence from school staff, which has been linked to poor mental health and educational performance (Devries et al., 2014). The prevalence of school violence contributes to educational inequalities and hinders the achievement of global Sustainable Development Goals related to ending violence and improving learning outcomes (Fry et al., 2018). A collaborative approach involving communities, administrators, teachers, parents, and students is necessary to make schools safer (Maphalala, 2014).

School social workers play a crucial role in addressing school violence by providing psychosocial support to both students and teachers, implementing conflict resolution strategies, and addressing underlying issues such as trauma and family instability (Boboyi, 2024a; Reyneke, 2020). Additionally, school social workers act as a bridge between the school, families, and the community, fostering collaboration to create a safe and supportive environment (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). This study is significant as it offers insights into teachers' perspectives on school violence. The findings inform targeted interventions and highlight the need to integrate school social work services into South African schools to

combat violence and promote holistic development effectively.

Research aim and objectives

The study aims to explore high school teachers' perspectives on the prevalence of school violence in a selected high school in Mthatha, Eastern Cape. The following objectives guide this exploration:

- To explore teachers' perspectives on the prevalence of school violence in a selected high school.
- To provide recommendations and implications for school social work to prevent and manage school violence effectively.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social disorganisation theory

Social disorganisation theory suggests that a community's structural and social characteristics—such as economic instability, family disruptions, and weak social cohesion—impact the prevalence of deviant behaviours, including violence (Errol et al., 2021). Originally developed to explain crime in urban neighbourhoods, this theory highlights how disruptions in community structures diminish the collective capacity to maintain social order and regulate behaviour. It emphasises that environments lacking stability and strong social ties are more susceptible to conflict and violence (Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2017; Williams & Castellanos, 2020).

This theory is also relevant for understanding school violence within the broader societal context. Schools are microcosms of their communities and are influenced by external social and economic dynamics. Research shows that both the physical and social aspects of the school environment indirectly affect violence

through students' perceptions of the school climate (Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2017). In Honduras, for instance, youth perceive violence as arising from economic deprivation, family disruptions, and conflicting moral values (Williams & Castellanos, 2020). Similarly, studies from Brazil emphasise the importance of values education, social-emotional learning, and creating supportive school environments in addressing violence (de Lima Dias, 2023). In South Africa, the lack of family cohesion in economically disadvantaged communities significantly contributes to interpersonal violence. Conversely, community factors related to social cohesion can greatly influence violence levels in poorer areas (Lamb, 2019). Interestingly, distorted forms of social cohesion, such as shared grievances about community well-being, may provoke certain types of violence, including vigilantism and xenophobia (Lamb, 2019). These insights highlight how systemic factors contribute to violence in schools, leading to the need for interventions that extend beyond the school setting.

This study utilises social disorganisation theory to analyse school violence as a reflection of broader social and economic disruptions in the surrounding community. By examining teachers' perspectives, the study investigates how external factors such as family instability, economic hardship, and community disorganisation affect the prevalence of violence within the school (Lamb, 2019; Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2017). Additionally, the theory helps contextualise how the physical and social aspects of the school environment shape students' perceptions of safety and climate, ultimately influencing their behaviour. Moreover, this framework guides the study's recommendations by emphasising systemic intervention points, such as improving family

cohesion, addressing economic deprivation, and fostering supportive school climates through values education and social-emotional learning (de Lima Dias, 2023; Williams & Castellanos, 2020). Insights derived from this theoretical perspective will support the integration of school social work to mitigate the effects of social disorganisation and promote a cohesive, safe, and inclusive school environment.

METHODOLOGY

Paradigm

The study utilised an interpretive paradigm, emphasising understanding individuals' subjective meanings and lived experiences within their social contexts (Boboyi & Kang'ethe, 2024; Boboyi, 2024b; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This approach is particularly relevant for examining the complex and multifaceted issue of school violence, as it prioritises the perspectives and insights of the participants—in this case, high school teachers—who are directly affected by these challenges and respond to them. By focusing on context and individual perceptions, the interpretive paradigm enables the study to explore how teachers perceive the prevalence of violence and the underlying social and systemic factors that contribute to it. This research implemented the paradigm through qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews, to gain in-depth insights into teachers' experiences. The findings aim to inform recommendations for targeted interventions, including the role of school social work in addressing school violence.

Approach

The study used a qualitative approach to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups assign to social phenomena. This method is characterised by its emphasis on gathering rich, detailed data through techniques

such as interviews, observations, and focus groups (Boboyi, 2024a; Khoa et al., 2023). This approach was particularly important for this study because it allowed for an in-depth examination of teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding school violence, capturing the complexities and nuances that quantitative methods might overlook. Additionally, it facilitated the generation of context-specific recommendations, making the findings highly relevant and actionable for addressing school violence in similar contexts.

Methods of data collection

The study utilised semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. This approach was selected because it offers flexibility in exploring teachers' perspectives on school violence while consistently focusing on key themes relevant to the research. Semi-structured interviews allow for an in-depth examination of participants' experiences, perceptions, and suggestions, enabling the researcher to obtain rich and detailed insights that might not be revealed in more structured formats (Khoa et al., 2023; Lim, 2024). This method was particularly well-suited for the interpretive paradigm, as it encouraged open dialogue that respected the participants' subjective meanings and lived experiences. Additionally, it allowed the researcher to further investigate issues raised by the participants, thus ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence of school violence and the potential role of school social work in addressing this issue.

Sampling

The study employed non-probability sampling using a purposive sampling technique to select participants. This method was chosen to ensure that the sample included individuals who could provide relevant and in-depth insights into the prevalence of school violence. Specifically, the sample comprised eight high school teachers who had worked at the selected school for at least three years. This experience ensured they were familiar with the school environment and its challenges.

The purposive sampling technique was ideal for this study because it allowed the researcher to intentionally select participants based on their knowledge and experience, ensuring they could contribute valuable perspectives to the research objectives. This approach aligns with the qualitative method and interpretive paradigm by prioritising the richness and relevance of the data over generalisability.

Table 1 provides the biographical information of the participants, each assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. The pseudonyms are formatted as "P" followed by a number, indicating their study order. The participants are between 30 and 49 years old, with an equal distribution of male (50%) and female (50%) teachers, offering diverse perspectives on school violence. Each participant holds a Bachelor of Education degree, highlighting their professional qualifications. The group comprises one principal and seven teachers with experience in the education sector ranging from 5 to 12 years. Consent forms were distributed to inform participants about the nature and conditions of the study.

Table 1: *Biographical details of teachers*

| Pseudonyms | Age (years) | Gender (M/F) | Level of education | Occupation & experience |
|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| P1M49 | 49 | M | Bachelor of education | Principal, 12 years |
| P2M38 | 38 | M | Bachelor of education | Teacher, 6 years |
| P3F36 | 36 | M | Bachelor of education | Teacher, 9 years |
| P4M30 | 30 | M | Bachelor of education | Teacher, 5 years |
| P5F48 | 48 | F | Bachelor of education | Teacher, 6 years |
| P6M44 | 44 | M | Bachelor of education | Teacher, 7 years |
| P7F43 | 43 | F | Bachelor of education | Teacher, 8 years |
| P8F45 | 45 | F | Bachelor of education | Teacher, 9 years |

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in research are essential for protecting the rights and well-being of participants. Key principles include respect for participants, beneficence, and justice (Al Tajir, 2018; Farrugia, 2019). Informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity are crucial components of ethical research (Ajemba & Arene, 2022; Ghimire, 2021). Researchers must minimise potential participant harm and ensure fair recruitment practices (Al Tajir, 2018). Ethical decision-making should be continuous throughout the research, especially in qualitative studies where researchers engage closely with participants (Farrugia, 2019). Special considerations are necessary for vulnerable groups and in the context of public health research (Al Tajir, 2018).

Institutional Review Boards are vital in reviewing and approving research proposals (Al Tajir, 2018; Ghimire, 2021). Researchers must be qualified, maintain honesty, and avoid any fabrication or falsification of data (Ghimire, 2021). Ethical practices should be upheld from the study's inception to the dissemination of results (Al Tajir, 2018).

The study complied with the ethical standards of empirical research, receiving ethical clearance from the institution of higher learning and assigned the ethics number REC/11(XXXXXX)/2024. It was also granted permission from a selected school in Mthatha. The specific ethical considerations are discussed below:

Informed consent

In this study, informed consent was voluntarily obtained from all participating teachers. Before the interviews began, the participants were thoroughly briefed on the study's purpose, objectives, methods, potential risks, and benefits. They were given ample time to ask

questions and to make an informed decision about their participation. Each participant signed an informed consent form confirming their voluntary involvement in the study. This process ensured that participants were fully aware of the study's nature and rights, including the freedom to withdraw without repercussions (Ajemba & Arene, 2022; Ghimire, 2021).

Confidentiality and anonymity

The confidentiality and anonymity of the teachers were strictly maintained to protect their privacy. Pseudonyms were used in all records, and no identifying information was included in the final research report. The data was stored securely and accessible only to the researcher, ensuring that participants' identities remained confidential (Al Tajir, 2018; Farrugia, 2019). This commitment to confidentiality fostered a trusting environment, encouraging participants to share their perspectives openly during the interviews.

Respect for participants

The study honoured its participants' autonomy, dignity, and personal values. All participants were treated fairly and respectfully, and their contributions were acknowledged and valued. Efforts were made to ensure cultural and individual sensitivity, creating an environment where participants felt comfortable and empowered to share their experiences (Al Tajir, 2018; Farrugia, 2019). This approach upheld the ethical principle of inclusivity and reinforced the integrity of the research process.

Transparency and honesty

The research was conducted with complete transparency and honesty. Participants were informed about the study's progress, including how their contributions would be utilised. Feedback on the findings was shared with them, illustrating how their input influenced the

research outcomes. This transparency fostered trust and strengthened the ethical foundation of the research process.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) use

This paper has undergone editing with the assistance of an AI tool, specifically, Grammarly (version 1.0), to enhance the clarity and correctness of the language used throughout the document. We utilised this advanced software with the aim to identify and rectify any spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors, ensuring that the content is presented in a clear and professional manner.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to examine data from semi-structured interviews, identifying patterns and themes related to school violence. The process included

familiarising myself with the data, coding significant ideas, and organising these codes into broader categories aligned with the research objectives. Key themes, such as the prevalence of violence and recommendations for intervention, were developed. This method offered a structured yet flexible approach to capturing teachers' insights and connecting them to the study's theoretical framework and objectives.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section presents the study's findings, emphasising the background of participants, their perspectives on school violence, and the implications of these findings.

Theme 1: To Explore Teachers' Perspectives on the Prevalence School Violence in a Selected High School.

Table 2: *Teachers' perspectives on the prevalence of school violence*

| Question (s) | Derived themes |
|--|--|
| ❖ Can you describe your perspectives on the prevalence of school violence in the Eastern Cape? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bullying • Substance abuse • Gang-related activities |

Bullying

All eight participating teachers (100%) consistently identified bullying as a significant issue in their school. They reported that incidents of bullying are common and have a profound impact on student's well-being and academic performance. The teachers emphasised that new students, who often feel

isolated and lack social support, are frequently targeted. Here are some responses from the participants:

P2M38: *“School violence is a serious issue here in our school. It impacts students’ academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. We deal with bullying, physical fights, and verbal abuse almost every day.”*

P7F43: *“The level of bullying in our region is really alarming. Many of our students come from tough backgrounds, and that often shows up as aggressive behaviour in school. It’s not a simple problem—it needs a comprehensive approach to tackle it effectively.”*

P4M30: *“From what I’ve seen, school violence, which is bullying, has always been a problem. It creates such a hostile environment that learning and development take a back seat. We definitely need more support from social workers and counsellors to help manage and reduce these incidents.”*

P8F45: *“The violence we see in schools is really just a reflection of the broader issues in our society. Poverty, unemployment, and family problems all play a big role in the aggression we see among students. The students bully each other.”*

P1M49: *“Yoh, I’m deeply worried about how school violence affects our students. It disrupts learning and creates so much fear and anxiety. For instance, some students skip classes just to avoid being bullied, and that, of course, affects their academic performance.”*

P3F36: *“Violence in schools isn’t just a behaviour issue—it hits academic performance and attendance hard. I’ve seen brilliant students become withdrawn and disengaged simply because they’re afraid of bullies. We need programmes that involve parents and the whole community to make a real difference.”*

P6M44: *“I completely agree with what’s been said. The fear of violence is so real for students. Many of them are constantly anxious about being bullied, and that really distracts them from learning. We need training on conflict resolution and ways to create safe spaces for students to talk and engage.”*

P5F48: *“The increase in violence and bullying among students is very concerning. As a teacher, I often feel powerless to deal with it. We really need initiatives that promote empathy and teach conflict management skills—these should be part of the curriculum to help create a more supportive school environment.”*

Bullying in South African schools is a serious issue. A survey by Shiba and Mokwena (2023) in the Tshwane District found that 73.91% of students were involved in bullying as victims, perpetrators, or both. This aligns with teachers’ observations, emphasizing how ingrained bullying is in school environments. Teachers raised concerns about its psychological impact, noting that it leads to fear and anxiety, causing students to skip classes and disengage from learning (P1M49). Research supports this, linking bullying to increased anxiety, depression, and emotional distress (Shiba & Mokwena, 2023). The socio-economic context also plays a crucial role. Teachers related bullying to poverty, unemployment, and unstable family environments (P8F45). Graham (2023) reported that students in no-fee-paying schools are especially vulnerable to bullying due to a lack of psychosocial support. Winnaar et al. (2018) found that both school climate and socioeconomic status significantly affect bullying prevalence, with low-income students facing higher risks. This highlights how bullying reflects broader social inequalities.

Bullying negatively impacts academic performance, as participants noted that it impairs concentration, reduces attendance, and leads to disengagement (P3F36, P6M44). This aligns with Graham’s (2023) finding that bullying affects academic achievement, particularly in mathematics. Furthermore, Pillay (2021) found a connection between bullying prevalence and socio-economic status, suggesting that economic disadvantage

increases vulnerability to bullying. To combat these issues, targeted interventions are essential. Participants stressed the need for comprehensive anti-bullying initiatives, including school social workers, peer mediation programs, and parental involvement (P4M30, P3F36, P5F48). These measures support research advocating for school-wide interventions that address both individual behaviours and systemic contributors to bullying (Graham, 2023; Shiba & Mokwena, 2023).

Substance abuse

All eight (100%) participating teachers unanimously identified substance abuse as a significant issue within their school, contributing to incidents of violence. They reported that substance abuse is prevalent and has a profound impact on student's well-being and academic performance. The teachers emphasised that substance abuse often affects students who feel isolated and lack social support. Below are responses from the participants:

P8F45: *“The level of substance abuse among students is shocking. It not only disrupts their learning but also poses serious health risks. I remember one incident where a student collapsed in class after eating ‘muffins’ that were laced with drugs. It was frightening.”*

P5F48: *“In my experience, substance abuse is a major problem in our school. It creates such a chaotic environment, making it really hard for students to focus on their studies. One time, I had to step in to break up a fight between two students who were clearly under the influence of alcohol.”*

P6M44: *“Substance abuse is something we deal with every day. Many students turn to drugs and alcohol as a way to cope with their personal problems, but it just makes things worse. One*

student even shared with me that they use ‘nyaope’ to escape the stress they face at home. It’s heartbreaking.”

P2M38: *“I’m really worried about how substance abuse affects our students. It leads to absenteeism, poor academic performance, and all kinds of behavioral problems. For instance, one student who regularly uses ‘lin’ has missed several weeks of school and is now falling behind in their studies.”*

P3F36: *“Substance abuse is such a widespread issue in our school. It’s not just the students who are using it that are affected—their peers and the entire school environment suffer too. I’ve seen students using ‘candy’ persuade their friends to try it as well, and it creates this ripple effect that’s so hard to control.”*

P8F48: *“The issue of substance abuse among students is really serious. It’s holding them back from learning and growing. We need targeted interventions and support to address it. I remember one student who was caught selling drugs to their classmates during school hours, and it resulted in a suspension. It was a wake-up call for all of us.”*

P1M49: *“I am deeply concerned about the impact of substance abuse on our learners. It’s not just about poor academic performance; it’s about their future. These students are struggling with absenteeism and behaviour issues. For instance, one student frequently uses ‘lin’—they’ve missed so much school and are falling behind.”*

Findings reveal that substance abuse among high school students is a global concern, with prevalence rates ranging from 10% in Bengaluru, India (Smriti et al., 2018) to 52.5% in Northwest Ethiopia (Melkam et al., 2023). Teachers in this study described frequent incidents of drug-related disruptions, including students under the influence engaging in fights

and risky behaviours (P5F48). These findings align with Melkam et al. (2023), who identified peer pressure, family history, and stress as key risk factors for adolescent substance use. The early onset of substance use is particularly alarming. Research indicates that many students start experimenting before age 15, making them highly vulnerable to addiction (Smriti et al., 2018). Teachers' concerns about school disengagement and academic struggles (P1M49, P2M38) are reinforced by Nahvizadeh et al. (2014), who found that frequent drug use is linked to declining academic performance and increased dropout rates.

Given the rising trend in substance use among students, targeted interventions are essential. Participants stressed the need for school-based support programmes, stricter regulations, and awareness campaigns (P8F48). These recommendations are consistent with studies advocating for multi-level prevention strategies, including counselling, peer education, and early intervention initiatives (Melkam et al., 2023; Smriti et al., 2018). The findings highlight that substance abuse is not just a behavioural issue but a systemic challenge that requires holistic interventions involving schools, families, and communities to mitigate its effects on student well-being and academic success.

Gang-related activities

All eight participating teachers (100%) clearly identified gang-related activities as a significant issue within their school. They reported that incidents of gang involvement are prevalent and have a substantial impact on students' well-being and academic performance. The teachers emphasised that gang-related activities often target students who feel isolated and lack social support. Below are the responses from the participants:

P7F43: *“Gang-related activities are a serious problem in our school. Students get recruited into gangs, and before long, they’re involved in violent and criminal behaviour. It completely disrupts the learning environment.”*

P1M49: *“The presence of gangs has created a real climate of fear in our school. Many students are genuinely scared to come to school because of gang violence—it’s heartbreaking to see.”*

P4M30: *“Gang activities are all too common here. They often lead to fights and violent incidents, and the ripple effect impacts everyone in the school.”*

P8F45: *“We’ve seen a rise in gang-related activities lately. Gangs tend to target vulnerable students, especially those who feel isolated, and then draw them into criminal behaviour. It’s a disturbing trend.”*

P5F48: *“Yhoo, gang involvement is such a huge problem in our school. It fuels more violence, substance abuse, and all kinds of disruptive behaviours. It’s really hard for students to focus on their studies in this kind of environment.”*

P6M44: *“The influence of gangs in our school is very alarming. They recruit students and get them involved in illegal activities, which not only hurts their academic performance but also damages their future prospects.”*

P1M49: *“Gang-related activities happen almost daily in our school. They make the environment dangerous and contribute to a decline in both student behaviour and academic achievement.”*

P3F36: *“The gang activities in our school are overwhelming. They lead to more violence, fear, and a breakdown of the sense of community we’re trying to build here.”*

Gang involvement in schools is a widespread issue, with research showing that students

typically join gangs between ages 12-14, disrupting their educational trajectory (Mguzulwa & Gxubane, 2019). Participants noted that daily incidents of gang-related violence create an atmosphere of fear, making students hesitant to attend school (P1M49). This aligns with Carson and Esbensen (2019), who found that gang presence is often identified through visible signs and personal knowledge, leading to heightened incivilities and victimisation within schools. Teachers also highlighted the complex social dynamics influencing gang affiliation, including peer pressure, family instability, and school disengagement (P8F45, P6M44). These findings are supported by Lenzi et al. (2015), who identified peer deviance and perceived lack of school safety as key risk factors for gang involvement. Conversely, protective factors such as parental support and empathy can reduce the likelihood of students joining gangs.

To address gang-related issues, teachers stressed the need for interventions that promote emotional regulation, behavioural support, and school-community collaboration (P3F36). This is in line with Lenzi et al. (2018), who found that emotional competence at both individual and school levels negatively correlates with gang membership. Implementing structured support systems and fostering a sense of belonging within schools are crucial strategies for reducing gang involvement. Gang activity in schools extends beyond physical violence; it undermines learning environments and student well-being, necessitating comprehensive intervention strategies that focus on prevention, emotional development, and community engagement.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal a high prevalence of bullying, substance abuse, and

gang-related activities within a selected high school in Mthatha, Eastern Cape. These results align with broader research on school violence in South African schools. Participants reported frequent incidents of bullying, physical fights, and verbal abuse, consistent with findings by Odora and Matoti (2015), who identified bullying, including cyberbullying, as a widespread issue in South African schools. Similar to national trends, this study highlighted how bullying behaviours significantly disrupt the learning environment, creating fear and anxiety among students. Participants observed that many students avoid school to escape victimisation.

Substance abuse emerged as another major concern in this study, with teachers noting its impact on student behaviour, academic performance, and overall school climate. This finding supports Mokwena and Setshego's (2021) study, which reported a 47% prevalence rate of substance abuse among high school students in rural South Africa. Teachers indicated that many students turn to substances such as alcohol, "nyaope," and "lin" as coping mechanisms for personal or family challenges. This often results in absenteeism, poor performance, and disruptive behaviours. The study participants expressed the need for comprehensive support systems, including interventions that address the root causes of substance abuse, such as socioeconomic difficulties and family instability.

Gang-related activities were another critical issue highlighted in the study. Teachers described a school environment marked by fear, violence, and disruption due to gang involvement, with vulnerable students being targeted for recruitment. These findings align with Mncube and Steinmann's (2014) observation that gang-related violence diminishes the quality of education and fosters

an atmosphere of fear, often leading to school avoidance and a decline in students' concentration. Participants' accounts of gangs influencing school dynamics reflect broader concerns highlighted by Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya (2014), who noted that gangsterism exacerbates school violence across multiple provinces, including the Western Cape and Limpopo.

The findings also underscore the profound psychological and academic impacts of school violence, as teachers shared instances of students experiencing fear, anxiety, and disengagement. These issues illustrate the urgent need for holistic prevention and intervention programmes. Participants echoed recommendations by Mncube and Steinmann (2014) for improved school management strategies, the establishment of safety committees, and the integration of psychological support services. Teachers emphasised the importance of involving school social workers and counsellors to address the systemic issues fuelling violence and to create a safer, more supportive school environment.

Overall, the findings reflect the interconnectedness of bullying, substance abuse, and gang-related activities in perpetuating school violence. They highlight the urgent need for multifaceted interventions that address these issues at the individual, school, and community levels, emphasising a collaborative approach to ensuring a conducive learning environment for all students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address bullying, substance abuse, and gang-related activities in the school environment:

The Department of Education (DoE) should recruit qualified school social workers and

counsellors to provide psychosocial support to students affected by violence, substance abuse, and gang involvement.

The DoE should design and implement school-wide programmes targeting bullying, substance abuse, and gang-related activities. These initiatives should include awareness campaigns, peer mediation, and restorative justice practices to promote a culture of respect and accountability among students.

Schools should form safety committees to monitor and address violence and gang-related activities. These committees should include representatives from teachers, parents, students, and local authorities, fostering a collaborative approach to enhancing school safety.

The DoE must offer training to help teachers identify early warning signs of bullying, substance abuse, and gang involvement. This training should cover conflict resolution, de-escalation techniques, and strategies for creating inclusive and safe learning environments.

Schools should collaborate with parents, community leaders, and local organisations to tackle the socioeconomic challenges contributing to school violence. Community engagement can help address underlying issues and foster a supportive student environment.

Schools must improve security measures by installing surveillance cameras, employing trained security personnel, and enforcing controlled access to school premises to ensure a safer environment for learning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

The findings of this study highlight the essential role that school social work can play in addressing the widespread issues of bullying, substance abuse, and gang-related activities in

schools. The following implications emphasise the importance of integrating social work into the education system to create safer and more supportive school environments:

School social workers are uniquely positioned to provide tailored psychosocial support to students affected by violence and related issues. This includes individual and group counselling to address trauma, behavioural challenges, and emotional distress caused by bullying, substance abuse, and gang involvement.

Social workers can design and implement early intervention programmes to identify at-risk students and provide timely support. By engaging students, their families, and the broader community in preventative initiatives, they can address the root causes of behaviours such as substance abuse and gang participation.

Many contributing factors to school violence, such as poverty, family instability, and lack of parental involvement, require holistic approaches. School social workers bridge schools and families, offering resources and assistance to strengthen family dynamics and improve student outcomes.

Social workers can collaborate with safety committees to develop and enforce policies that promote a secure and inclusive learning environment. Their expertise in crisis management and restorative practices is invaluable in addressing incidents of violence and preventing their recurrence.

The presence of school social workers can alleviate some of the emotional and behavioural challenges teachers face. By providing guidance and support in managing violent or disruptive behaviours, social workers enable teachers to focus on their instructional responsibilities and maintain a positive classroom environment.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the prevalence of school violence, focusing on bullying, substance abuse, and gang-related activities within a selected high school in Mthatha, Eastern Cape, through the perspectives of high school teachers. The findings revealed that these issues are deeply entrenched, significantly affecting students' academic performance, emotional well-being, and the overall school climate. Bullying was identified as a common and disruptive behaviour, while substance abuse and gang involvement were highlighted as contributing factors to fear, absenteeism, and disengagement among students. These findings align with broader research, underscoring the interconnected nature of these challenges and their roots in socioeconomic and family instability. The study emphasises the critical role that school social workers can play in addressing these issues. Their ability to provide psychosocial support, implement early interventions, and collaborate with safety committees positions them as essential stakeholders in fostering safer school environments. Additionally, the recommendations presented—ranging from teacher training and enhanced security measures to community engagement—highlight the need for a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach to combating school violence. In conclusion, addressing school violence requires immediate and sustained efforts at individual, school, and community levels. Therefore, by integrating the services of school social workers and adopting comprehensive intervention strategies, the education system can create an environment conducive to learning and personal growth, ensuring the safety and well-being of all students. These findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on school violence in South

Africa and serve as a foundation for future research and policy development.

REFERENCES

- Aborisade, R. A. (2024). Student violence against high school teachers in Africa: the context, impacts, and interventions. In *Handbook of School Violence, Bullying and Safety* (pp. 151-166). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035301362.00021>
- Ajemba, M. N., & Arene, E. C. (2022). Ensuring ethical approach to research. *Magna Scientia Advanced Research and Reviews*, 6(1), 046-050. <https://doi.org/10.30574/msarr.2022.6.1.0065>
- Al Tajir, G. K. (2018). Ethical treatment of participants in public health research. *Journal of Public Health and Emergency*, 2(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.21037/jphe.2017>
- Boboyi, A. (2024a). A Call for the Institutionalisation of School Social Work Services in the OR Tambo Inland Secondary Schools to Counter the Psycho-Social ills Among Learners. *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v6i1.1302>
- Boboyi, A. (2024b). Exploring Ubuntu Philosophy as a Foundation for Holistic School Social Work in South Africa. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 9(1), 253-264. <https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2024.14>
- Boboyi, A., & Kang'ethe, S. M. (2024). Unpacking Challenges within South African Institutions of Higher Learning in Addressing Student Grievances: A Literature Review. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 7(2), 215-229. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2024.20>
- Carson, D. C., & Esbensen, F. A. (2019). Gangs in school: Exploring the experiences of gang-involved youth. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 17(1), 3-23.
- de Lima Dias, R. J. (2023). Confronting school violence in Brazil: insights from social psychology for safer educational environments. *CONTRIBUCIONES A LAS CIENCIAS SOCIALES*, 16(10), 22508-22523. <https://doi.org/10.55905/revconv.16n.10-225>
- Devries, K. M., Child, J. C., Allen, E., Walakira, E., Parkes, J., & Naker, D. (2014). School violence, mental health, and educational performance in Uganda. *Pediatrics*, 133(1), e129-e137. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-2007>
- Errol, Z., Madsen, J. B., & Moslehi, S. (2021). Social disorganization theory and crime in the advanced countries: Two centuries of evidence. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 191, 519-537. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2021.09.017>
- Farrugia, L. (2019). WASP (Write a Scientific Paper): The ongoing process of ethical decision-making in qualitative research: Ethical principles and their application to the research process. *Early human development*, 133, 48-51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2019.03.011>
- Fry, D., Fang, X., Elliott, S., Casey, T., Zheng, X., Li, J., ... & McCluskey, G. (2018). The relationships between violence in

- childhood and educational outcomes: A global systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child abuse & neglect*, 75, 6-28.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.06.021>
- Ghimire, N. B. (2021). Review on ethical issues in ethnographic study: Some reflections. *Contemporary Research: An Interdisciplinary Academic Journal*, 5(1), 79-94.
<https://doi.org/10.3126/craiaj.v5i1.40485>
- Graham, M. A. (2023). Bullying as a driver of low mathematics achievement: South African no-fee-paying schools in a challenged context. In *Education and New Developments 2023 - Volume 1* (pp. 20–24). IADIS Press.
<https://doi.org/10.36315/2023v1end005>
- Hendricks, E. A. (2019). The effects of the exposure to violence in schools on the psychological well-being of learners in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality, Eastern Cape. *African Journal of social work*, 9(2), 1-9.
- Khoa, B. T., Hung, B. P., & Hejsalem-Brahmi, M. (2023). Qualitative research in social sciences: data collection, data analysis and report writing. *International Journal of Public Sector Performance Management*, 12(1-2), 187-209.
<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJPSPM.2023.132247>
- Khuzwayo, N., Taylor, M., & Connolly, C. (2016). Prevalence and correlates of violence among South African high school learners in uMgungundlovu District municipality, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *South African Medical Journal*, 106(12), 1216-1221.
<https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC199036>
- Lamb, G. (2019). Social cohesion and violence in South Africa: constructing a puzzle with missing pieces. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 72(4), 365-385.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-019-09828-7>
- Lenzi, M., Sharkey, J. D., Wroblewski, A., Furlong, M. J., & Santinello, M. (2019). Protecting youth from gang membership: Individual and school-level emotional competence. *Journal of community psychology*, 47(3), 563-578.
- Lenzi, M., Sharkey, J., Vieno, A., Mayworm, A., Dougherty, D., & Nylund-Gibson, K. (2015). Adolescent gang involvement: The role of individual, family, peer, and school factors in a multilevel perspective. *Aggressive behavior*, 41(4), 386-397.
- Lim, W. M. (2024). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619>
- Lindstrom Johnson, S., Waasdorp, T. E., Cash, A. H., Debnam, K. J., Milam, A. J., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2017). Assessing the association between observed school disorganization and school violence: Implications for school climate interventions. *Psychology of violence*, 7(2), 181.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/vio000045>
- Longmuir, F., McKay, A., Gallo Cordoba, B., Allen, K. A., & Phillips, M. (2024). Australian teachers' perceptions of safety, violence and limited support in their workplaces. *Journal of School Violence*, 1-20.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2024.2385893>
- Lungu, S., & Boboyi, A. (2025). Teacher's perspectives on the factors contributing to school violence among high school students in Mthatha: A call for school social workers. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 23(1), 5611–5620. <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2025-23.1.00438>
- Maluleke, N. Y. (2021). *The role of principals in creating safe environments in secondary schools* (Doctoral dissertation, North-West University, South Africa).
- Maphalala, M. C. (2014). The consequences of school violence for female learners. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 5(1), 29-36.
- McDonald, Z. (2014). Interrupting school violence with deliberative encounters. *South African Review of Sociology*, 45(3), 20-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2014.945945>
- Melkam, M., Segon, T., Nakie, G., Nenko, G., & Demilew, D. (2023). Substance use and associated factors among high school students in Northwest Ethiopia. *Pan African Medical Journal*, 44(1).
- Mguzulwa, S., & Gxubane, T. (2019). The impact of youth gang violence on the educational attainment of male high school learners in Khayelitsha. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 55(3), 267-283.
- Mncube, V., & Madikizela-Madiya, N. (2014). Gangsterism as a cause of violence in South African schools: The case of six provinces. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 5(1), 43-50.
- Mncube, V., & Steinmann, C. (2014). Gang-related violence in South African schools. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 39(2), 203-211.
- Mokwena, K. E., & Setshego, N. J. (2021). Substance abuse among high school learners in a rural education district in the Free State province, South Africa. *South African Family Practice*, 63(3).
- Mutinta, G. (2022). Gender-based violence among female students and implications for health intervention programmes in public universities in Eastern Cape, South Africa. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1), 2079212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2079212>
- Nahvizadeh, M. M., Akhavan, S., Arti, S., Qaraat, L., Geramian, N., Farajzadegan, Z., & Heidari, K. (2014). A review study of substance abuse status in high school students, Isfahan, Iran. *International journal of preventive medicine*, 5(Suppl 2), S77.
- Ncontsa, V. N., & Shumba, A. (2013). The nature, causes and effects of school violence in South African high schools. *South African journal of education*, 33(3), 1-15. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC139291>
- Ndebele, C., & Msiza, D. (2014). An analysis of the prevalence and effects of bullying at a remote rural school in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa: Lessons for school principals. *Studies of tribes and tribals*, 12(1), 113-124.
- Notana, L. and Boboyi, A., 2025. Educators' views on bullying among high school students in the OR Tambo Inland: Implications for social work

- practice. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research*, 7(1), pp.a10-a10. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.1.10>
- Odora, R. J., & Matoti, S. N. (2015). The nature and prevalence of cyber bullying behaviors among South African high school learners. *International Journal of Educational Sciences*, 10(3), 399-409.
- Pervin, N., & Mokhtar, M. (2022). The interpretivist research paradigm: A subjective notion of a social context. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 11(2), 419-428. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v11-i2/12938>
- Pillay, J. (2021). Bullying prevalence and numeracy performance among primary school children in Johannesburg: Implications for school-based interventions. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 11(1), 1-10.
- Poed, S. (2020). Social Inclusion and Equal Access to High-Quality, Inclusive Education. In: Leal Filho, W., Azul, A.M., Brandli, L., Özuyar, P.G., Wall, T. (eds) Quality Education. Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95870-5_18
- Reyneke, R. (2020). The legal and ethical obligations of school social workers. *Social Work*, 56(2), 157-174. <https://doi.org/10.15270/52-2-818>
- Reyneke, R. P. (2024). The Role of Social Services in Realising Children's Rights in and through Education. *Education as Change*, 28(1), 1-23.
- Shiba, D., & Mokwena, K. E. (2023). The profile of bullying perpetrators and victims and associated factors among high school learners in Tshwane District, South Africa. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 20(6), 4916.
- Smriti, S., Divakar, S. V., Suryanarayana, S. P., & Puttaswamy, M. (2018). Prevalence of substance abuse among high school students in field practising area of Dr. BR Ambedkar Medical College, Bengaluru. *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health*, 5(10), 4423.
- Vergottini, M., & Weyers, M. (2020). The foundations and nature of South African school social work: an overview. *Social Work*, 56(2), 125-138.
- Williams, R. J., & Castellanos, P. (2020). Youth perceptions of violence in Western Honduras. *Third World Quarterly*, 41(3), 397-414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1672528>
- Winnaar, L., Arends, F., & Beku, U. (2018). Reducing bullying in schools by focusing on school climate and school socio-economic status. *South African Journal of Education*, 38(1).