



# Learners' self-reports of exposure to violence in South African schools: A gendered reflection

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## ABSTRACT

*The pervasive worldwide phenomenon of gender-based violence in schools poses a threat to education as a vehicle of economic development and economic freedom. Gender violence in and around schools is a global problem with serious implications for the educational attainment, health and wellbeing of both girls and boys. This paper explores the gendered nature of violence in selected schools in six provinces in South Africa. A qualitative study following a community-centred, capacity-building approach used focus group interviews to collect data from a purposive sample of learners aged between 13 and 17 years who were perpetrators or victims of violence. The aim was to give voice to learners about their experiences of violence in schools. Findings indicated a high incidence of gender-based violence in schools. Boys mainly drew on gender-biased discourses to orchestrate demeaning gendered comments, sexualised gestures, sexual harassment and bullying. Teachers' assault of learners in the form of corporal punishment was also deeply implicated in both girls' and boys' reports of gender-based violence. Recommendations are made for gender-based awareness campaigns, which involve learners, parents and teachers, and the setting up of school-based structures for learner peer support as critical strategies for combating gender-based violence in schools.*

**Keywords:** Femininities, masculinities, power, management, gender, school violence

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## INTRODUCTION

Violence is a pervasive and worldwide phenomenon, especially among young people. Reports indicate that young people are particularly affected by violent crime both at school and in their immediate communities (Community Information and Epidemiological Technologies [CIET], 2000; Human Rights Watch, 2001) through political unrest, armed conflict, gang activity, and familial violence. South Africa manifests very high levels of sexual and other forms of violence and, as such, levels of homicide in South Africa are among the highest in the world (Saltmarsh, Robinson, & Davies, 2012). According to a report by the South African Medical Research Council (2011), violence is profoundly gendered, with young men aged between 15 and 29 years disproportionately engaged in violence as both victims and perpetrators.

The high levels of violence in South African and other communities have permeated schools. Violence is a daily reality for many students around the world, with serious implications for the educational attainment, health and wellbeing of both girls and boys (Management Systems International [MSI], 2008). According to Green, Robles and Stout (2013), between 500 million and 1,5 billion children experience violence every year, many in schools. Gender violence has been identified as a substantial public health and an intractable educational problem (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Mathews, Abrahams, Jewkes, Martin, & Lombard, 2013). The right to education and gender equality is central to development objectives described both in Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The EFA goals aim to achieve gender equality and improvement in all aspects of the quality of education and the MDGs aim to achieve universal primary education and to eliminate gender disparity in education (UNESCO, 2007). Dunne (2009) emphasises that the widespread violence in the school context is an area of concern, because it impacts on the achievement of the MDGs related to equal access to education for both boys and girls in developing countries. Gender-based violence does not only limit individual freedom, but also prevents schools from building the capacity of students.

Gender-based violence is also endemic in South Africa. A report by the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) (2008) estimated that only 23% of South African learners said they felt safe at school. Zulu, Urrbani and Van der Merwe (2004), Burton (2008) and Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) concur that the level of violence in schools is unacceptably high. Similarly, Burton and Leoschut (2013) indicate that violence in or around schools is one of the most important issues facing young people in South Africa today. Violence in schools has garnered considerable media attention in South Africa in recent years (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). Media reports often document horrific incidents involving different forms of violence that occur in South African schools, ranging from physical violence such as

beating and kicking, psychological and emotional violence and sexual violence such as unwanted sexual comments and touching (De Wet, 2005; De Wet & Jacobs, 2009). Children in South Africa are prey to daily incidents of robbery, assault, shootings, rape and murder (Burton, 2007). School violence has become part of everyday life in some schools where learners' safety cannot be guaranteed. Violence in schools deprives children of education, which is their fundamental right. In South Africa, many schools are no longer regarded as centres of knowledge; instead, they have been transformed into battlegrounds (Asbeh, 2010).

The study reported on in this paper forms part of an initiative on school violence undertaken by a South African university in six provinces in South Africa in 2013. The aims of the project were to investigate the dynamics of violence in schools and suggest strategies that could be used to combat school violence. A qualitative inquiry using focus group interviews as data collection examined learners' self-reports of violence in terms of the type of violence experienced, the victim-perpetrator relationship and how violence is managed by the school. The aim was to give voice to the learners about their perception of violence in their schools. Victims as well as perpetrators were selected to participate and were encouraged to draw on their personal experiences of violence in the school.

## **CONCEPTUALISATION OF SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) refers to acts of sexual, physical or psychological violence inflicted on children in and around schools that are due to stereotypes and roles or norms attributed to or expected of them on the basis of their sex or gendered identity (Green et al., 2013). Green et al., (2013) further point that SRGBV relate to the differences between girls' and boys' experience of and vulnerabilities to violence. Forms of gender violence are not fixed; they evolve to fit different times, circumstances and cultures (Leach, 2008). This suggests that gender roles are not static and they change according to different cultures due to the dynamic nature of culture. Gender has been enlivened by social constructionist notions of gender as fluid, multiple and complex manifestations of human abilities and potentialities. In developing countries in particular, school-related violence takes place in the context of inequality and specific cultural beliefs and attitudes about gender roles, especially concerning male and female sexuality (Wilson, 2014).

Skiba (2002) has classified gender-based violence into two categories: explicit gender violence and implicit gender violence. Explicit gender violence includes sexual harassment, assault, intimidation and rape. Implicit gender violence includes corporal punishment, bullying, verbal and psychological abuse and teachers' unofficial use of students for

labour. This violence originates in the imbalance of power between males and females, the gendered hierarchy and separation of tasks and socially accepted views of what constitutes masculine and feminine behaviour. For example, in traditional societies girls do domestic chores such as cleaning and boys do tasks such as herding cattle as this is a job associated with 'being a man'. In the African context it is believed that if a man can look after his cattle successfully, he can also look after his family.

## **SCHOOL AS A GENDERED COMMUNITY**

Violence is a means through which community practices and hierarchies of power are perpetuated and regulated within the school context. Social practices within social institutions like families, schools and communities are all relevant to shaping gender and other identities (e.g., religious, ethnic, etc.). Schools should be seen as places of knowledge production and economic advancement. However, in practice, schools breed and perpetuate the gendered inequalities from the communities they serve. Leach and Humphreys (2007) argue that the recent recognition that schools can be violent places has tended to ignore the fact that many such acts originate in unequal and antagonistic gender relations, which are tolerated and 'normalised' by everyday school structures and processes. Bhana (2013) posits that schools are key sites for the production and reproduction of gender relations and inequalities.

Green et al. (2013) maintain that no school is immune from the attitudes and beliefs of the broader society that promote harmful gender-based norms and condone acts of gender-based violence. Thus, schools tend to reproduce dominant, unequal power relations between boys and girls in society. Boys and girls learn that society expects them to behave differently and to fulfil socially constructed gender roles. Schools are part of society and reflect its traditions and values. Davids (2013) asserts that schools often become spaces where social problems are played out with serious consequences for all. For instance, if assault is a natural phenomenon in communities, the level of violence in the school will increase. Schools are one such institution where gender is learnt and where power structures can normalise explicit forms of gender-based violence (Dunne et al., 2013). In the school context girls are given roles different to those given to boys. Girls perform light tasks such as cleaning windows and boys perform demanding tasks such as cleaning the schoolyard. As Dunne (2009) mentioned, gender differences between girls and boys in the domestic sphere are often replicated in the schools. These gender roles produce a gender hierarchy, which more often than not is one where the male hierarchy dominates.

Schools are therefore seen as important agents of socialisation because they reinforce gender socialisation that occurs in the home. Dunne (2009) contends that the daily routine

of a school is structured by formal and informal rules and ways of behaviour, and a gender regime is manifested as part of this routine. As a social construction, gender is not natural, but is socially learned and continually performed in different ways as we interact with different people in different social contexts (MacNaughton, 2000). Dunne (2009) adds that ways of relating and the types of interaction among boys and girls, and between teachers and male and female students, are part of the gender regime and serve to normalise certain types of behaviour. In school, they are rooted in the formal and informal processes of schooling, which serve to establish the gendered norms of behaviour in what is commonly termed a 'gender regime' (Connell, 2002). Dunne (2007) identifies examples of gender regimes that manifest themselves as the school's daily routine. These are the following:

- (a) Physical space: The gender regime determines the physical space that boys and girls occupy. For example, in the classroom girls and boys are separated spatially.
- (b) Peer pressure: This is seen as part of the school environment, for example, teasing, exclusion and intimidation.
- (c) Implicit message of accountability: The school knows who to blame if something goes wrong in the school; for example, if the school window is broken, boys will be the suspects.

The above gender regimes are reinforced by girls and boys in the school with both groups protecting their space, often in very stereotyped manners.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study is conceptually located within social-learning theory and power-control theory. Social-learning theory is a behaviourist approach, which seeks to explain gender socialisation, the behaviour of men and women, how they learn from one another, and how the social environment makes people act in certain ways. Power-control theory holds that a violent party consciously uses the technique of violence to exercise and maintain control and power over another person (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004).

Social-learning theory studies gender socialisation and asserts that people learn through observation, imitation and modelling (Bandura, 1977). Gender roles are social constructs that are propagated by parents during childhood and there are behaviours associated with males and females (Brent & Lewis, 2014). Gender is socially constructed and it is influenced by the person's interactions with parents, teachers, and mass media and sports (Brent & Lewis, 2014). Socialisation refers to the process by which a person learns the beliefs, values and behaviour of his or her society (Brent & Lewis, 2014). Society plays the major role in determining who the person becomes. In many societies, males learn to be dominant and aggressive; females learn to be passive and submissive (MSI, 2008). Socialisation is

achieved as the influence of society, and the influence of our interactions work together to shape who we become. Schools are major contexts for gender socialisation, in part because children spend large amounts of time engaged with peers in such settings (Klein, 1985). School teaches broader social values, such as diversity and multiculturalism, through both the curriculum and the process of interacting with peers. The school does this through the hidden curriculum and through the 'corridor' curriculum. The hidden curriculum refers to values that are taught through the presentation of the standard curriculum that are not an explicit part of the curriculum and the 'corridor' curriculum refers to lessons that children teach one another at school when not in class (Brent & Lewis, 2014).

What happens in the school is usually a reflection of what is happening in society. Disorganised and disorderly communities in which learners live their lives are powerful facilitators of crime and violence. For example, some community members sell drugs to learners and some adults give learners drugs to sell at the school. In some instances, learners grow up in communities where violent and aggressive behaviour is modelled by significant individuals in their lives, such as their parents or relatives. Bandura (1977) argues that violent behaviour that is modelled is more likely to be imitated and replicated when the person modelling the behaviour has a relationship with the child or young person, than when there is no relationship between the individuals. In addition, society as a socialisation agent creates certain laws and roles that are in favour of women and men. For example, women are not supposed to display violent behaviour but it is acceptable for men to display this, concurrent with the power that men hold in society (Connell, 1995).

Power-control theory is a sociological theory that sets out to explain gender differences in delinquency based on the power play going on in the family structure, as well as the parental controls exercised on boys versus girls. Another school of thought stresses the role of power control as the cause of gender-based violence. Power may be exerted in a number of ways in forms of leadership, decision making and rule making (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). It might also be used in more negative and discriminatory ways ranging from mild to more severe forms. Examples include forms of social exclusion, denial of privileges or rights, extraction of labour or services, psychological cruelty, silencing, verbal abuse, physical force and sexual violence. Feminist scholars argue that domestic violence is rooted in gender and power, and that it represents men's active attempts to maintain dominance and control over women (Anderson, 1997). Men are seen to use violence as an instrument to perpetuate dominance over women in order to subordinate them. As Foucault (1972) pointed out, power is not a possession but it is something that is gained through certain measures. This suggests that for power to act in a particular way, it depends on the knowledge currently prevailing in society. Society socialises boys and *girls into masculine and feminine adults, because certain behaviours are accepted for boys but not for girls.*

*The abovementioned theories were used to inform the qualitative inquiry as useful analytical tool. Accordingly, the researcher viewed learners as active participants in the construction of gender roles and identities.*

## **METHOD**

This qualitative study produced descriptions and explanations of violent behaviour in schools based on the perceptions and experiences of learners. The study followed a community-centred capacity-building approach. Community-centred capacity building refers to the creation of infrastructure, programme maintenance and sustainability but also problem-solving capability among individuals, organisations and groups in the community (Phiri, Hendricks & Seedat, 2012). This approach encourages learner participation in the construction of knowledge and in decision making as members of the school community. Since learners have lived experiences of violence, both as perpetrators and as victims, their participation in theory making about the causes and impact of violence in their specific school community may enhance the effectiveness of violence intervention programmes (Crawford-Browne & Kaminer, 2012). In this study, learner involvement allowed the researcher to get to the 'truth' of violence in schools as seen by the key participants who were encouraged to share their experiences, their points of view, and their concerns regarding violence in their schools. Furthermore, the researcher located herself within an interpretive paradigm based on the theories of Neuman (2006) who argues that an interpretive researcher's goal is to develop an understanding of social life and to discover how people construct meaning in natural settings.

### **SELECTION OF SCHOOLS**

Twenty-four (24) schools were selected as follows. Four secondary schools were selected from each of the following six provinces: North West, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Two schools in each province were located in a rural area and two were located in townships. Initially, a shortlist of possible information-rich schools was compiled based on anecdotal evidence of violent incidences garnered from media reports and conversations with 'critical friends' (teachers, principals, ward managers, school governors, etc.). Thereafter, the four most conveniently located schools in each province with respect to access by the research team were selected. Rural schools were quintile one schools, lacked sanitation and running water, were under-resourced and faced challenges of poverty, HIV/Aids and unemployment. Township schools were in the middle quintile which meant they represented an average socioeconomic group and were not elitist. The inclusion of urban and rural schools ensured that learners' views were equally represented in the study, irrespective of their geographical location.

## SAMPLING OF PARTICIPANTS

Purposive sampling was used in the study to select the participants. The participants were selected based on their relevance to the topic under study (Babbie, 2007) and on anecdotal evidence of violent incidences. For homogeneity purposes, in each school the Life Orientation teacher suggested learners who had perpetrated violence or learners who had been victims of violence, based on school records. Learners were also given a chance to suggest participants as they knew each other far better than the teacher did, and in most instances this kind of violence is not reported to the teacher. Furthermore, if participants perceived each other as fundamentally similar, they would spend less time explaining themselves to each other and more time discussing the issue at hand (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011). Participants were aged between 13 and 17 years.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Focus group interviews were used to collect data from learners. An average of ten participants (five boys and five girls) participated in each focus group discussion to ensure diversity of views. De Vos et al. (2011) assert that focus groups are a powerful means of exposing reality and of investigating complex behaviour and motivation. In these groups, learners were allowed to speak freely about their thoughts and feelings about violence in their schools and to give suggestions about what can be done to make schools safe (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Two focus group meetings were conducted in each school across the six provinces selected to allow in-depth discussions with participants and to increase validity of the research findings (De Vos et al., 2011). Prior arrangements were made with the school principals to ensure that classroom disruptions were minimised. The focus group interviews were conducted in a comfortable, private venue at school and lasted one to two hours. To create a warm and friendly environment and to put participants at ease, the researcher held small talk with them prior to the commencement of the discussions (De Vos et al., 2011). The researcher ensured that the discussions between the participants were focused and not dominated by one individual. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcribers proficient in the vernacular of the participants per province or area were used to transcribe the recordings and translate them from the target language used into English. Cognisance was taken of possible problems created by translation regarding validity or reliability of the data collected. Therefore, the accuracy of the data transcribed and translated was meticulously checked by the research team.

Thereafter, data were analysed qualitatively. This involved preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper into understanding the data, and interpreting the bigger meaning of the data (Creswell, 2003). Thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was undertaken to identify themes about certain patterns of thought,



experience or behaviour, and to explain these in terms of how they address the research questions.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical requirements for research were observed in this study. The researcher obtained permission from the Department of Education in the different provinces and ethical clearance from a South African university. Information sheets were provided on research aims, processes and use of data, and consent forms were provided and completed by the school, parents and participants. The participants' dignity, privacy and confidentiality and right to withdraw or to refuse to answer particular questions without penalty were respected at all times. Researchers explained their research role and stressed that they were not police or government officials. Therefore, participants were free to share whatever information they wanted to share with the researchers. In situations where participants were likely to be traumatised through relating distressing experiences, free psychological counselling was offered by the Department of Education's district-based psychological services personnel. Prior agreement was sought from the latter that, if such an event occurred, a participant could be referred to them.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The following themes emerged from the thematic content analysis of learners' self-reports of violence in their schools: types of violence, power relations, management of violence and bullying.

### **TYPES OF VIOLENCE**

Violence is a multifaceted phenomenon and takes place in different forms. The following types of violence were reported in the study: psychological violence, sexual violence and physical violence.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE**

Most girl participants indicated that female teachers spoke in a derogatory language and they perceived this as humiliating, especially when in front of their peers. Leach and Humphreys (2007) maintain that female teachers prefer verbal chastisement to caning. Girls reported feeling demeaned and worthless. One learner said:

“There are some teachers who call us these nasty words like bitch because of our short skirts.” (North West learner)

One could argue that this kind of comment about girls' appearance could set a limit for their gender by conveying gender-based expectations for behaviour and dress. Learners spend much of their lives at school and as a result, teachers have many opportunities to influence gender socialisation. Female teachers' construction of girls' gender is often influenced by their own cultural socialisation. Society expects girls to behave in a particular manner and teachers may ridicule learners who behave in a manner inconsistent with their assigned role in society.

It is interesting to note that boys also disapproved of girls wearing short skirts. Here are some of their statements:

"I think the females, I think they also contribute to this harassment because you can find a girl with a skirt that barely covers her and they expect a guy to just walk past and not do anything. Now is it appropriate to wear a two-inch long skirt?" (North West learner)

"I'm not encouraging, just saying it's wrong to wear something that short. To answer you, some people can't handle themselves. Ja, they have feelings. Like this girl, look at her when she walks, she is sexy. When you see her skirt, her ass actually, not actually, but some, so to us, nè, some peeps we can't control ourselves. We get excited." (Gauteng learner)

The above statements indicate that boys want girls to conform to certain gender stereotypes; short skirts are seen as bad and deviant of the gender norm. Dunne, Humphreys and Leach (2006) posit that schools are institutions where feminine and masculine identities are constructed and reinforced. Gender roles are defined and protected in schools. According to Radojkovic (2007), these constructions by boys are used as a means of keeping girls under control. These constructions uphold the normative patriarchal gender order in the school and society. Culturally, girls are expected to wear longer dresses; short skirts at school are perceived as unacceptable and inappropriate. Thorne (1993) points out that while most often males are bullied about their sexuality; females are mostly bullied about their apparent 'loose morals'. A short skirt is perceived by boys as 'being loose', ideas that are informed by the patriarchal values in society.

In addition, teacher-learner interaction is important for effective teaching and learning. The results of the study also showed that teachers' interaction with learners may contribute to an increased level of gender-based violence in schools. According to Saltmarsh et al. (2012), power operates through discourse and individuals negotiate the power relations that exist through their location within a particular discourse. In most classroom contexts, teachers

are in control and expect learners to follow their instructions. The classroom context, by its nature and the discourse within it, puts the teacher in the position of power. In many cases, teachers abuse those powers. Learners said:

“It’s from teachers who swear at learners and in an inappropriate way like calling names and shouting and things.” (North West learner)

“The first thing, some teachers are being rude to you. They don’t talk to you nicely. They swear. They talk about your parents. So it’s like you do one mistake like making noise, she won’t say keep quiet. Normally she would say like wrong things, like swear at you and use big words [swearing words].” (Mpumalanga learner)

Through their behaviour, teachers model ‘appropriate’ gender roles for learners. As Ruiz (2004) mentions, teachers should be perceived as moral mediators who promote the personal growth of their students. Jacobs, Gawe and Vakalisa (2011) maintain that teachers should display a positive work ethic and appropriate values, and conduct themselves in a manner which benefits, enhances and develops the teaching profession. Leach and Humphreys (2007) argue that teachers’ psychological violence towards learners is a misuse of power. Teachers are in *loco parentis* whereby parents delegate the duty of care to the teachers. However, many teachers abuse that power. In turn, according to social-learning theory, this may translate in violent behaviour on the part of learners who model teacher behaviour.

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The study reported that sexual violence occurred among both girls and boys. Girls reported unwelcomed groping by boys in the school as illustrated by the following comments:

“That guy, he touched my behind, and then that felt really uncomfortable and I went and told my brother and he wanted to hit him with a scissor. We went to the office spoke to the teachers but they just leave him.” (Limpopo learner)

“Many boys are doing it to girls. They try to touch our bums but when you’re telling them to stop they say they are going to kill us or something.” (KZN learner).

“A girl was forced to kiss a boy. The more the girl learner refused to kiss the boy, the violence intensified.” (Mpumalanga learner)

“Boys force girls to fight without wearing their underwear.” (Gauteng learner)

Thus, the boys in this study often forced girls to carry out demeaning acts and thus violate their human dignity. As a result girls were embarrassed and ashamed with some avoiding school, resulting in a negative effect on their education. According to Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, Levin, Ratsaka and Schreiber (2001), unequal power relations in society subject women to inferior positions in which they are dominated by men. Leach (2008) concurs that violence originates in the imbalance of power between males and females, in the gendered hierarchy and separation of tasks, and in socially accepted views of what constitutes masculine and feminine behaviour.

Boys stated that some girls encouraged sexual violence, as demonstrated by the following comment:

“Some girls come to school without wearing panties. They sit on your lap. We are men. How are we supposed to feel? It’s not good, madam.” (North West learner)

The boys reported that girls’ demeanour in school influenced male reactions towards them. Boys also reported feeling vulnerable and that their rights were violated when girls put them in an awkward position.

## PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

Corporal punishment is still used as a form of discipline in some schools, regardless of its illegality in South African schools. Bower (2008) stresses that corporal punishment persists as a common disciplinary practice in many schools. The results of this study revealed that punishment in schools often manifests itself in gendered ways, as corporal punishment is mostly administered by male teachers in the school. In the morning, male teachers will wait for latecomers at the gate with canes or sticks. The use of corporal punishment by male teachers reflects deeply entrenched beliefs about acceptable forms of discipline. These male teachers do not see anything wrong in the administration of corporal punishment as a result of their own socialisation. A report of the South African Council of Educators (SACE) (2011) indicates that unless teachers have been educated about gender and power issues, they are likely to model behaviour that reflects their own experiences and those of the broader community. Men are conceived as brave and strong and therefore tasks that require physical strength are delegated to them.

The results of the study also revealed that teacher violence towards learners could be the result of teacher stress. According to one learner:

“The teacher takes out his anger on the learner. He came to him because he was laughing and he beat him with his hands on the head.” (Mpumalanga learner)

Teachers do not know how to deal with their own stress; as a result they use learners as punching bags. They lack alternative means of disciplining learners and this exacerbates their stress. Causes of teacher stress range from school violence, domestic problems or working conditions. Many teachers also come from a background where violence is the customary means of conflict resolution (SACE, 2011).

Moreover, learners indicated that when they reported corporal punishment at school to their parents, the latter told them that they too were beaten at school and thus justified the practice. Parents' responses could be associated with their socialisation; they believe that 'if you spare the rod, you spoil the child'. In this way violence among communities is 'normalised' under the guise of discipline.

Boys were often reported to be physically violent towards girls and towards their peers. This could be the result of their social orientation as normative masculinity is implicated in physical violence. Dominant gender norms dictate that boys should address disputes with peers through physical violence. Radojkovic (2007) argued that gender roles imposed on boys by society limit their ability to express their masculinity in a positive way. Boys do not want to be seen as cowards; they want to gain the attention of their peers and to be regarded as heroes and thus validate their masculinity through violent behaviour.

It is interesting to note that physical and verbal violence was also reported amongst the girls. Girls were violent towards each other and, in some instances, towards teachers. Here are some comments from girls regarding physical violence:

"She is saying that she ended up beating that person because that person was saying and harassing her and she ended up getting really angry and then she was forced to beat that person". (Limpopo learner)

"If it happens, if they are playing a game of tins and that person hit her badly with the ball, she is going to run after the person and hit her badly". (Western Cape learner)

The above quotes showed that girls also engage in fighting. Traditionally, girls are perceived as victims and the dominant understanding of femininity does not associate girls with violence (Leach & Humphreys, 2007). The gendered role of girls requires them to behave like 'ladies'. However, the engagement of girls in physical violence indicates the differences in gender roles where not all women conform to stereotyped roles. In addition, girls challenged teachers' authority; with this often constituting 'open defiance' on the part of girls who did not accept teachers' violence passively.

## POWER RELATIONS

The school, by its nature, has structured asymmetrical power relations which promote the levels of gender violence. Teachers are automatically given power through their positions and often use their power to abuse learners. One learner said:

“It means you have to be quiet. You have to obey whatever they say is right. I’m not saying we shouldn’t – we should, but they should learn to accommodate everyone and not try to accommodate themselves only.” (North West learner)

Teachers are tasked to care and protect children but they often betray their duty of care by abusing their learners. Learners reported that they do not have a say in classroom life. Teachers in many instances still dominate and dictate activities in the classroom. Bowers (1987) contends that domination of this kind limits the consciousness of individuals in a manner that causes them to adopt a passive attitude towards the conditions of their existence. One learner said:

“Last year this teacher discouraged me and said, ‘Oh, you have no future in this stream’.” (Gauteng learner)

Consequently, learners regard themselves as ‘dull or failures’ and do not add value to their situation. This further encouraged them to engage in violent activities on and outside the school premises. According to Freire (1972), one needs to develop a critical awareness of one’s own situation, which empowers one to liberate oneself from the domination. It could be argued that learners need to be taught to be active and strive to liberate themselves through participating in decisions to improve their circumstances, which would also give learners a sense of their own worth and control.

## MANAGEMENT OF VIOLENCE

The study results revealed poor management of violence in schools. Teachers themselves feared retribution and did not want to be victimised. The people who shoulder the responsibility for creating a protective school environment for children often do not know how to support gender equality or create a violence-free school culture. The following are quotes from learners regarding reporting violent activities in the school:

“Teachers cannot deal with violence at school because they are also afraid to be victimised.” (Western Cape learner)

“This could be the results that just like learners, they are members of the community so they do not want to be victims as some of the learners might attack them after school or during weekends.” (Limpopo learner)

“Last time when I was fighting with the other boys, I was just going to the class and they said, ‘What do you want?’ and I said, ‘I just want to talk to my friend’. And they slapped me and the whole class, they used to beat me and I will go to the teachers and tell them that I just wanted to give a pen to my friend because I did not have mine and they said I was wrong to go to that class and I was not being good.” (North West learner)

“Educators are unable to get through to the learners because like I’m indicating in terms of violence. They are afraid of being victimised outside the office or they get outside of the school yard. That’s where the results start because you don’t know what happened.” (Western Cape learner)

The comments illustrate that reporting violence to teachers and/or the principal is generally ineffective. Learners indicated that when they reported violence to the principal and teachers, they were ignored or dismissed and no measures were taken towards the perpetrators. The following quotes captured learners’ views:

“We asked for Madam to see the principal. She said the principal is busy with the parents and all those stuff. I then asked to see the deputy principal. They kicked us out of the office and said he doesn’t have time for us. I think that unless there is a fight, if I fight that guy, they will maybe take me serious.” (Mpumalanga learner)

This is in line with Dunne’s (2009) view that teachers do not see gender as an issue; instead they have internalised local norms and rarely question them. As a result, they do not intervene in issues of gender, harassment or abuse issues in the classroom.

## BULLYING

Bullying is the most common form of violence in schools. Banks (2014) argued that learners who engaged in bullying behaviour seem to have a need to feel powerful and in control. Bullying reflects an imbalance of power. According to Dunne (2009), bullying is frequently gendered due to the way it is expressed. In this study, it became apparent that teachers were also victims of bullying. The following are the learners’ comments regarding bullying perpetrated against teachers:

“Teachers are afraid of bully learners.” (North West learner)

“Female teachers are sometimes harassed by both boys and girls.” (Gauteng learner)

“Especially lady teachers are victims. Even girls as well, they are very rude ... making it very difficult for teachers to manage the class.” (Mpumalanga learner)

According to Saltmarsh et al. (2012), the phenomenon of violence between students and teachers is poorly understood. Violence perpetrated by learners towards teachers could be seen as retaliation, an ‘enough is enough campaign’ to say to teachers ‘we deserve better treatment’. Learners felt that they needed to protect their dignity from teacher infraction; hence they engage in violent behaviour against their teachers.

In particular, female teachers were bullied by boys. One could argue that boys’ behaviour towards their female teachers was associated with their socialisation. Constructions of masculinity seem to increase the risk of boys engaging in school-based violence. Where society regards women as ‘weak’, it is not easy for boys to take orders from the female teacher. Boys’ performances of masculinity are an attempt to subordinate female teachers according to the gender order in school and society. This challenges female teachers’ authority and position in the school hierarchy (Dunne et al., 2006). However, girls have also been found to bully teachers, particularly female teachers who as women are perceived as ‘soft’ targets. Girls thus themselves may challenge the gender roles prescribed by society. This is affirmed by Van Leeuwen (2008) who has indicated that teachers are also at risk of school violence, with constructions of teachers as perpetrators increasing the rates of violence targeted at teachers.

Enactments of power and socially constructed values and beliefs translate into serious gender-based violence in schools. MSI (2008) noted that school-related gender-based violence does take place in a context of gender inequality and specific cultural beliefs and attitudes about gender. Learners experience and perpetuate violence according to their social orientation and the dynamics of power relations that exist in their communities.

## CONCLUSION

In tackling gender violence in schools, a holistic and multifaceted school approach involving school management, teachers, learners and the curriculum is necessary to ensure that social and behavioural messages are consistent and reinforced by teachers and learners alike. Schools have a critical role to play in taking the lead in addressing gender-based violence as they can reach the at-risk learner population at an early age by teaching positive morals and values. The school curriculum can also be influential in establishing



a non-violent ethos in the school. In the South African context, Life Skills as a compulsory subject can be used to teach learners about conflict management and prepare learners for current and future challenges. Furthermore, teachers are key instruments for change. However, they have their own experiences as gendered beings. Dynamics of gender-based violence emanate from an understanding of gender as socially constructed. Practices within multiple socialisation sources have different powers and authority and thus describe roles and functions in the community. To play an effective role in addressing gender-based violence, teachers need to understand and confront their own attitudes and experiences regarding gender and violence. Given that some teachers are perpetrators of abuse, and others may be victims of abuse, it is important that strategies to address gender violence in schools acknowledge and address teachers' experiences as well as those of learners to encourage constructive and collaborative relationships. In this regard, the teacher training curriculum should prepare teachers for such a role. Using these various strategies, schools can be effectively transformed into places of safety and learning and into environments where young people feel protected, appreciated and nurtured.

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