



An intersectional analysis of early-career young cisgender women teachers' experiences of learner-on-teacher violence

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Background: Learner-on-teacher violence is a growing global concern, and South African schools are not exempt from this issue. However, the specific experiences of early-career young cisgender women teachers remain underexplored, despite their heightened vulnerability at the intersection of sex, gender, age, physical appearance and structural factors such as inadequate institutional support.

Objectives: This article presents an intersectional analysis of how intersecting identity markers, such as sex, gender and age, alongside physical appearance and structural vulnerabilities, shape the heightened susceptibility of early-career young cisgender women teachers to violence from male learners.

Method: The study used qualitative research, conducting eight interviews with early-career young cisgender women teachers from secondary schools in Tshwane, Gauteng.

Results: The findings show that young cisgender women teachers are especially vulnerable to male learner violence, influenced by a small age gap and patriarchal gender ideologies. This vulnerability impacts their psychological well-being, affecting their interactions with learners and the school environment.

Conclusion: The intersection of sex, gender, age, physical appearance and structural vulnerabilities produces a distinct form of learner-on-teacher violence, underscoring the specific risks faced by early-career cisgender women teachers. This vulnerability requires targeted attention and intervention to protect them from male learner violence. Collaborative efforts from the Department of Education and schools are necessary to support and safeguard these teachers, especially in schools with a history of violence.

Contribution: This study enhances our understanding of how male learner violence affects the teaching experiences and well-being of early-career young cisgender women teachers in secondary schools.

Keywords: sex; gender; age; physical appearance; female teacher; male learner; secondary schools; violence; South Africa.

Introduction

Learner-on-teacher violence is a growing phenomenon in South Africa, affecting the teachers' and learners' well-being in the school environment (Mahome, 2019; Mthanti, 2023; Ndlovu, 2023; Venketsamy, 2024). Ndlovu (2023) highlights that schools in Gauteng have been under siege for the past 5 years, with increasing incidents of gangsterism and school violence. In this period, there were 40 stabbings, 10 shootings and 16 violent crimes recorded. Among these, 26 incidents were linked to gangsterism, 45 to learner-on-learner violence, one to teacher-to-teacher violence, six to learner-on-teacher violence and four to teacher-on-learner violence (Ndlovu, 2023). These statistics demonstrate that violence in South African schools is a multifaceted crisis requiring urgent intervention. Literature has established that patriarchy contributes to violence in schools, rendering women teachers vulnerable to violence from male learners (Lehfid & Bakkali, 2025; Pietersen & Langeveldt, 2024). In terms of gender, while both women and men teachers experience violence, women teachers are often targeted more than men. This can be attributed to patriarchal values in society, where men are seen as dominant and women as vulnerable (Pietersen & Langeveldt, 2024).

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Although women have been reported as more susceptible to learner-on-teacher violence, this study acknowledges that the violence may be experienced differently by early-career young cisgender women teachers based on their age and level of experience, which may position them in differing degrees of vulnerability. While some studies have demonstrated that boy learners often perpetrate learner-on-teacher violence against their women teachers, limited South African studies have paid specific attention to the gendered aspect of learner-on-teacher violence. In addition, little attention has been given to the experiences of early-career young cisgender women who are employed in secondary schools. Learners in South African secondary schools are usually between the ages of 15 and 19 years, while early-career young cisgender women teachers are in their 20s. The small age gap between the two creates challenges for the early-career young cisgender women teachers who may be more vulnerable to violence than older and more experienced cisgender women teachers. Therefore, this study explores how different aspects of identity and broader social structures shape the experiences of early-career young cisgender women teachers who face violence from learners in secondary schools. The research question that the study seeks to address is: How do intersecting identities and structural vulnerabilities shape early-career cisgender women teachers' experiences of violence from male learners in South African secondary schools? The study's objectives were achieved through qualitative interviews with eight early-career young cisgender women teachers who are formally employed by the South African National Department of Education in secondary schools around the Tshwane municipality area in Gauteng province.

Literature review: Learner-on-teacher violence and the experiences of teachers

This section reviews literature on teachers' experiences of violence in schools, with a specific focus on the gender and age dynamics of this kind of violence. Learner-on-teacher violence is an escalating international concern, with studies showing that teachers across different countries experience various forms of aggression, ranging from verbal abuse to physical assaults and even threats with weapons. Violence in schools has long been a pressing concern, affecting the well-being and professional stability of teachers. Some teachers observed decreased aggression during coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) because of reduced student interactions, while others observed increased online aggression (De Ceballos & Carvalho, 2021). A United States (US) based meta-analysis conducted by Longobardi et al. (2019) examined 24 studies on teacher-directed violence. The findings revealed that victimisation rates ranged from 20% to 75% within 2 years, with an average prevalence of 53%. Over a teacher's career, victimisation rates stood between 32% and 40%. While physical attacks and theft were common, verbal aggression

and other less direct forms of violence were even more prevalent (Longobardi et al., 2019). Similarly, a report by the American Psychological Association confirmed that violence against teachers is on the rise across the United States of America (McMahon et al., 2022). Some teachers have suffered severe physical assaults, with incidents leading to hospitalisation. Teachers also reported frequent threats requiring police intervention, with many expressing relief at not being physically harmed during the online learning period (McMahon et al., 2022). This persistent issue invades every aspect of life, from institutions and workplaces to homes and streets (Lehfid & Bakkali, 2025). Historically, teachers commanded respect and prestige, but this status has drastically changed. Today, teachers not only face verbal abuse and harassment but also physical confrontations and threats within their classrooms (Lehfid & Bakkali, 2025). This undermines the educational process and damages the morale and effectiveness of teachers.

In Morocco, violence against teachers has become widespread, frequently surfacing on social media (Lehfid & Bakkali, 2025). This violence includes verbal, physical, psychological and even sexual aggression, affecting teachers regardless of their gender. Factors contributing to this violence include students' academic struggles, exposure to violence, media influence, peer pressure and acts of revenge. Teacher-related factors, such as perceived weak personalities or critical feedback, can exacerbate the problem. The consequences are severe, leaving teachers feeling insecure, withdrawn and in extreme cases, leading to absenteeism or resignation (Lehfid & Bakkali, 2025). Further, school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) has become a significant concern, often linked to gendered stereotypes. School-related gender-based violence includes bullying, corporal punishment and other forms of abuse, underscoring the power dynamics between genders (Lehfid & Bakkali, 2025; Mosito & Sitoyi, 2024).

Research consistently shows that violence against teachers is not only widespread but also leaves lasting physical, emotional and professional consequences (De Ceballos & Carvalho, 2021; Mthanti, 2023; Okeke & Windvoël, 2024). A study conducted by De Ceballos and Carvalho in Brazil (2021) found that young female teachers with heavy workloads and low incomes were disproportionately affected by school violence. They reported experiencing physical violence (22.9%), verbal abuse (42.9%), theft or robbery (36.4%) and threats or attacks with weapons (7.0%). These incidents significantly impacted their physical (56.0%) and emotional (40.6%) ability to work, with 42.9% fearing that continued violence could force them out of the profession. Similarly, in South African secondary schools, female teachers often face heightened vulnerability to violence in the classroom. One disturbing example of this occurred when a teacher was physically attacked and killed by a learner in the classroom. In another tragic incident, a young female teacher was stabbed to death by a learner

during a Grade 8 lesson. The teacher had spotted the learner cheating while invigilating and confronted him, which led to the fatal attack (Makhasane, 2022). Similarly, Fakude (2022) reports that a teacher recounted an incident where she was physically assaulted by an 11-year-old learner, resulting in a dislocated shoulder. These incidents highlight the critical issue of how gender and age intersect to increase the risk of violence against female teachers.

Learner-on-teacher violence has become an alarming issue in South Africa, reflecting the broader violence prevalent in communities. Masinga and Sibanda (2024) argue that the media reports on violence in schools paint a distressing picture of escalating violence, turning schools into unsafe environments for both learners and teachers (Masinga & Sibanda, 2024). South Africa is recognised as one of the most violent countries globally, with school-based violence against teachers being a common and deeply troubling phenomenon (Venketsamy, 2024). Teachers face both passive and active violence, including physical and psychological harm. Venketsamy's (2024) qualitative study found that at least two in every 10 teachers experience violence, ranging from verbal abuse to physical attacks, in South African schools. Cases have been reported where learners throw books at teachers, physically assault them, swear at them, display arrogance and even blackmail them.

Baxen (2021) and Fakude (2022) argue that violence against teachers is not limited to physical aggression but also includes non-physical forms such as verbal abuse, psychological harm and cyberbullying, all of which contribute to fear and trauma. Fakude (2022) and Thobane et al. (2023) highlight that verbal abuse is the most prevalent form of learner-on-teacher violence. This includes threats, insults, derogatory language and sexually harassing remarks, all of which contribute to a hostile school environment. Substance abuse is another major contributor to violence in schools. Zwane (2021) emphasises that alcohol consumption among learners exacerbates school violence, making classroom discipline nearly impossible. A study conducted by Thobane et al. (2023) across four schools in Alexandra and Soweto found that 65% of the 69 participating teachers identified substance abuse as the leading cause of school violence. Alcohol was the most commonly abused substance (reported by 57% of teachers), followed by marijuana (48%) and tobacco products (46%). Teachers also reported that dagga and other drugs were frequently brought to school, with some learners attending classes under the influence, severely disrupting the teaching and learning process. Alarmingly, some parents normalised their children's drinking habits and failed to recognise the dangers of such behaviour (Thobane et al., 2023).

The psychological effects of learner-on-teacher violence are profound. Verbal abuse, in particular, has both short- and long-term consequences, including depression,

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, social withdrawal, low self-esteem and even substance abuse among affected teachers (Mthanti, 2023; Thobane et al., 2023). Furthermore, Thobane et al. (2023) argue that verbal abuse often precedes physical violence and, if not addressed, escalates over time.

The existing literature overwhelmingly supports the assertion that learner-on-teacher violence is a pressing issue that significantly affects teachers and their ability to perform their duties in the workplace. However, this literature presents a gap as it hardly explores the intersectionality of identities, which informs unique and different experiences of learner-on-teacher violence perpetuated against early-career young cisgender women teachers in South African secondary schools. To address this gap, the study employs an intersectional lens, which is elaborated in the following section. Hence, the purpose of this intersectional study is to unpack these teachers' realities and document their unique point of vulnerability as informed by intersecting identity markers. The section titled 'An intersectional lens to early-career young cisgender women teachers' experience of learner-on-teacher violence' discusses the theoretical framework that informed this study.

An intersectional lens to early-career young cisgender women teachers' experience of learner-on-teacher violence

The study employed intersectionality as both a theoretical and analytical framework to unearth how intersections of identity markers, including sex, gender and age, together with physical appearance and structural vulnerabilities, create a unique point of vulnerability for early-career young black cisgender women teachers in secondary schools. Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality in her criticism of feminist theory and the anti-racist politics for using a single-axis framework in attempts to dismantle racism and sexism, arguing that the separation of these issues marginalises black women as they experience both simultaneously. As such, intersectionality highlights the interconnectedness of various identity markers, such as gender, sex, race, class, sexuality and age, and examines how these overlapping identity markers shape women's experiences of oppression, discrimination and violence. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) argues that women, particularly black women, experience forms of discrimination that cannot be fully understood by considering just one aspect of their identity, such as race or gender, separately. She holds that these interconnected identity markers collaboratively shape individual and collective experiences of marginalisation and inequality.

In line with Crenshaw (1989), May (2015) asserts that intersectionality demonstrates how lived identities,

structural systems, various forms of power, areas of marginalisation and modes of resistance intersect in dynamic and changing ways. As such, intersectionality, therefore, challenges the notion of isolated issues, such as racism, sexism or ageism. Instead, it emphasises the interconnection of these forms of discrimination and examines how their overlapping effects operate in dynamic ways to marginalise and position specific groups at various points of vulnerability and oppression. Since the introduction of the concept of intersectionality, scholars across various disciplines in the Global North and the Global South have employed it to understand the complex interplay of interlocking identities and how these intersecting factors influence experiences of identity formation, oppression, domination, discrimination and vulnerability (Collins, 2015; Donley & Johnson, 2024; Meer & Müller, 2017; Ngidi et al., 2020). These studies highlight the significance of the intersectional framework in understanding particular experiences of vulnerability, both within global contexts and specifically in South Africa.

Intersectionality is specifically relevant in exploring the experiences of early-career young cisgender women teachers who encounter unique challenges in South African secondary schools, as they navigate both gendered and sex- and age-related vulnerabilities within an environment of learner-on-teacher violence. The intersection of sex, gender and age plays a critical role in understanding the heightened vulnerability of early-career young cisgender women teachers to learner-on-teacher violence. From an intersectional perspective, young female teachers are positioned in a unique power dynamic, where their sex, gender and age intersect with physical appearance and structural vulnerabilities to create a particular point of vulnerability. The relatively small age gap between these young teachers and their male students may result in power imbalances that heighten the risk of violence. Congruent with the intersectionality theory, this intersection of sex, gender and age should not be viewed in isolation, as the combined effects of these identities interact with existing patriarchal sex and gender ideologies that normalise violence against cisgender women, particularly in South Africa where gender-based violence is continually rising (Masinga & Sibanda, 2024; Oparinde & Matsha, 2021). Patriarchy and ageism create a layered experience of marginalisation for these early-career young cisgender women teachers, because the combination of their youth and sex and gender increases the likelihood of being perceived as less authoritative or deserving of respect by male learners.

Research methods

This study was informed by the interpretivist research paradigm as it sought to gain insights into the experiences of early-career young cisgender women teachers through their narratives. In line with this paradigm, the study employed a qualitative research design to unearth the lived realities of early-career young cisgender women teachers from their social contexts.

TABLE 1: Profile of the participants (pseudonyms used).

Participant	Age (years)	Sex	Years of experience	Gender identity	Profession
Dimakatso	25	Female	2	Woman	Teacher
Rorisang	23	Female	1	Woman	Teacher
Dikeledi	28	Female	3	Woman	Teacher
Letta	25	Female	2	Woman	Teacher
Kearabetsoe	29	Female	4	Woman	Teacher
Johanna	24	Female	1	Woman	Teacher
Thabang	23	Female	1	Woman	Teacher
Anna	26	Female	3	Woman	Teacher

Sampling and selection of participants

As a result of the study's sensitive nature, the participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. In line with the purposive sampling technique, a selection criterion was developed that participants had to meet to participate in the study. Because of the sensitivity of the topic, which made access to the participants a challenge, we relied on referrals through snowball sampling to identify additional participants. We identified a few teachers who fit the criteria through personal networks, and these teachers were able to refer some of their colleagues whom they knew had experienced learner-on-teacher violence sometime in their career. The participants were young cisgender women, meaning that their gender identity corresponds with their biological sex assigned at birth. In the interviews, the participants referred to themselves as both females and women when narrating their experiences. They are all formally employed in secondary schools within the Tshwane municipality and have experienced violence from learners in their workplaces. Participants were included based on the following criteria:

- Female teachers aged between 23 and 29 years
- Have experienced learner-on-teacher violence
- Early-career stage, with 1 to 4 years of teaching experience
- Currently employed at public secondary schools in Tshwane

Participants who had never experienced learner-on-teacher violence were excluded. In addition, teachers were excluded if they did not meet the age or experience requirements and were not based in Tshwane.

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of participants, providing a detailed description of the sample. All participant names listed in Table 1 are pseudonyms assigned to protect their identities.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted on the school premises, either in private office during lunch breaks or in classrooms before or after school hours, depending on participants' availability. Given the sensitivity of the topic, all interviews were conducted individually, and responses were kept confidential. The interviews were guided by a structured interview schedule

developed before data collection, within the framework of the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to explore and understand individuals' lived experiences in their social contexts.

The design of the interview questions was informed by the theoretical lens of intersectionality and related concepts such as patriarchal gender dynamics, power relations and vulnerability within school environments. This conceptual grounding ensured that the interview schedule aligned with the study's objective to uncover how early-career young cisgender women teachers experience and interpret learner-on-teacher violence. For instance, participants were asked questions such as 'What are the characteristics that put you at risk of being victimised by learners?' and (2) 'In what ways do you think your age influences the likelihood of experiencing learner-on-teacher violence?'

These questions aimed to probe personal experiences, perceived risk factors, impacts of victimisation and the availability of support structures.

Following data collection, Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase thematic analysis was employed. A primarily deductive approach was used, with pre-established themes derived from relevant literature and theoretical foundations guiding the analysis. While the coding was data-driven, it was also conceptually informed, ensuring coherence with the intersectionality framework. Themes that emerged included factors placing early-career young cisgender women teachers at risk, with sub-themes such as age, gender and physical appearance and structural vulnerabilities.

Ensuring trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, we adopted key strategies recommended by Schurink et al. (2021), including reliability, credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. Reliability was ensured by using a clear and unambiguous interview guide and conducting face-to-face interviews, which allowed for clarification and follow-up questions. Data triangulation was employed by interviewing eight participants, enabling comparison of responses. Credibility was achieved by purposively selecting participants with relevant experience, engaging in reflexivity and triangulating data across multiple settings. Dependability was maintained through an ongoing audit process, with both authors reviewing all steps in the research process. Confirmability was supported through a detailed audit trail and the use of verbatim quotes to illustrate findings. Transferability was addressed by providing thick, contextual descriptions of the methods and setting, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of South Africa, College of Law Research

Ethics Committee (Ref: ST 27 of 2020). To protect the participants' identities, they were all allocated pseudonyms that were used in the transcripts and any reports written from the data. In addition, all information, including the transcripts and field notes, was kept in a password-protected Google Drive folder that could only be accessed by the researchers. Arrangements were made with a councillor to assist in cases where the participants could experience psychological harm; however, none of the participants experienced any harm.

Results

The intersection of gender, sex, age and physical appearance as a point of vulnerability for early-career young cisgender women teachers

This study explored the lived experiences of early-career young cisgender women teachers who have been subjected to learner-on-teacher violence in South African public secondary schools. Drawing from in-depth qualitative interviews, the research examined the complex interplay of gender, sex, age, physical appearance and structural vulnerabilities that contribute to the heightened vulnerability of this demographic group. The analysis employed a deductive method of analysis, where we developed predetermined themes based on the literature and thematically analysed the data to develop and refine the themes. Table 2 outlines the themes, emphasising how the intersection of identities with social structures, gendered power dynamics and structural inequalities shapes the participants' experiences. Key themes, such as the intersection of age, gender, sex and physical appearance, gendered power dynamics and patriarchy, psychological impact, age-related challenges and structural vulnerability were found to significantly inform the teachers' experiences of learner-on-teacher violence. What emerges is a sobering picture of how layered vulnerabilities, rooted in social constructs and power imbalances, converge to place early-career young cisgender women teachers at risk of learner-on-teacher violence within the school environment. Table 3 provides an overview of the system of reference employed in conducting the deductive analysis.

TABLE 2: Themes and sub-themes identified through thematic analysis: Deductively derived themes.

Main themes	Sub-themes
1. Intersectionality as a framework of vulnerability	1.1 Combined impact of age, gender and physical appearance on vulnerability 1.2 Structural marginalisation within the school context
2. Gendered power dynamics, sex-related stereotypes and patriarchy in the classroom	2.1 Perceptions of female teachers as less authoritative 2.2 Learners challenging cisgender women teachers' authority because of age and gender 2.3 Patriarchal attitudes and their influence on learner behaviour
3. Psychological impact of learner-on-teacher violence	3.1 Persistent fear and anxiety 3.2 Loss of confidence and self-esteem 3.3 Career reconsideration because of trauma
4. Age-related challenges in authority	4.1 Small age gap between teachers and learners blurs professional boundaries
5. Institutional inadequacies and isolation	5.1 Lack of support and mentorship 5.2 Pressure to tolerate violence 5.3 Absence of a coping mechanism seen in an experienced teacher

TABLE 3: System of reference for deductive analysis: Group and participant referenced.

Theme	Participant referenced	Group classification
1. Intersectionality as vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dimakatso • Dikeledi • Rorisang • Kearabetsoe • Letta 	Early-career young cisgender women teachers
2. Gender power dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letta • Johanna • Thabang 	Early-career young cisgender women teachers (ages 23 to 30 years)
3. Psychological impact of violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anna • Kearabetsoe • Dimakatso • Dikeledi 	Early-career young cisgender women teachers
4. Age-related challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Johanna • Letta • Kearabetsoe 	Teachers close in age to their learners
5. Institutional inadequacies and isolation	All the participants	All participants falling under the target group

Examples of participants' verbatim responses are provided in the section 'Deductively derived themes' to substantiate their perceptions and reflections.

Deductively derived themes

Theme 1: Intersectionality as a framework of vulnerability

Participants, such as Dimakatso, Dikeledi, Rorisang and Kearabetsoe, emphasised that their intersecting identities, being young, cisgender women and physically small, exacerbated their vulnerability to learner violence:

'Gender, physical appearance, and age are the characteristics that put teachers at risk of being victimised by learners.' (Dimakatso, 25-year-old, teacher)

'The characteristics that put teachers at risks of being victimised by learners are their age, being younger between the age of 25 and 40, being a woman and physical appearance, if you don't have any muscles, these learners think that they can take advantage of you, and you will not be able to defend yourself.' (Kearabetsoe, 29-year-old, teacher)

Similar to Dimakatso, Kearabetsoe noted age and sex as contributing factors to violence against the teachers, clearly explaining that learners tend to fear male and older teachers. She observes, 'the older and male ones, which are between the ages of 50 and 60, are less targeted. The learners fear them.' Her narrative highlights the role that sex and age play in marginalising young cisgender women who teach in secondary schools. Additionally, the violence related to physical attributes suggests that physical appearance can be a predisposing factor for violence:

'Not having too many muscles in your body puts one at risk of being attacked by these perpetrators.' (Rorisang, 23-years-old, teacher)

The participants' narratives in this section are a reflection of how gender, sex, age and physical appearance create an intersectional point of vulnerability for early career young cisgender women teachers in secondary schools. These findings demonstrate how the intersection of identities

shaped how authority was perceived within classrooms, with participants viewed as less threatening and therefore more easily targeted. These beliefs reflect deeply ingrained societal cisgender norms, where being a man and physically stronger is equated with authority and safety. These findings demonstrate an intersectional vulnerability and structural marginalisation within the secondary school context. The idea that being 'skinny' or not having 'muscles' correlates with vulnerability reinforces societal stereotypes about women's physical strength and perceived authority. Moreover, these findings reinforce existing literature that suggests that women, particularly young women in male-dominated environments, are at heightened risk of experiencing aggression and violence (Bhana, 2015; Cherishe & Shumba, 2011; McMahon et al., 2022).

Theme 2: Gendered power dynamics, sex-related stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies in the classroom

Participants reported that learners often questioned their authority based on assumptions about their sex and age. Letta observed:

'If you are younger and female, learners tend to think that you cannot defend yourself.' (Letta, 25-year-old, teacher)

These perceptions reinforce power imbalances informed by the learners' perceptions of the female sex as weaker and defenceless, exposing young cisgender women teachers to persistent challenges in managing the classroom. This aligns with Sibisi (2016), who noted that teachers who are perceived as inexperienced and lack confidence increase vulnerability to learner misbehaviour.

Several narratives pointed to the reinforcement of gendered power structures within the school context. The actions of violence by male learners towards their teachers were interpreted as reflections of deeper patriarchal attitudes within the school culture. Participants reported disproportionately targeting of cisgender women teachers by male learners, indicating ingrained patriarchal attitudes that position females as inferior to males:

'Other teachers are more affected or vulnerable to such attacks than others because of their gender, as in my school, the majority are female.' (Thabang, 23-year-old, teacher)

'The characteristics that put teachers at risk of being victimised by learners are gender, being a woman and physical appearance, being a bit skinny.' (Anna, 26-year-old, teacher)

Such reflections point to the presence of patriarchal attitudes among learners that facilitate gender-based targeting and stereotypes about females, reinforcing systemic inequalities within school settings. This finding is consistent with Bhana's (2012) study on gender-based violence in South African schools, which highlights that female teachers often experience aggression from male learners as a means of asserting dominance. In many cases, these incidents are reflective of the patriarchal societal attitudes that devalue cisgender women's authority, perpetuating a cycle of gender-

based victimisation in secondary school spaces. The issue of male learners violating cisgender women teachers is particularly concerning, considering that Bhana's (2012) study was conducted over 10 years ago, and our current study reports a similar trend, highlighting the urgency in addressing this issue.

Overall, the findings highlight how patriarchal gender and sex-related ideologies inform the violence that young cisgender women teachers experience in secondary schools. These ideologies not only affect how male learners view and treat young cisgender women teachers but also how these teachers might perceive their authority and role in the classroom. The intersectionality of sex, gender and age also shapes potential resistance to this violence, as early-career young cisgender women teachers might struggle to assert their authority in a context where they face both the challenges of being perceived as young and women. Understanding these dynamics through an intersectional lens encourages the development of targeted interventions.

Theme 3: Psychological impact of learner-on-teacher violence

Experience of violence had a lasting emotional toll on the participants. Most participants experienced psychological trauma not only from the incidents of violence themselves, but also from the distressing reality of having to return to work and teach in classrooms alongside the very learners who had violated them.

The participants explained:

'My self-confidence is gone; I am not even confident to stand in front of learners and teach.' (Dikeledi, 28-year-old, teacher)

'I feel fearful and threatened. I do not know what will happen next time if I reprimand these learners.' (Letta, 25-year-old, teacher)

'This incident [*violent attack*] has instilled fear in me, I am affected psychologically since I am now anxious when I must go to my class, not knowing what will happen.' (Dimakatso, 25-year-old, teacher)

These narratives highlight symptoms consistent with trauma, including fear, anxiety and diminished self-esteem. The prevalent violence in schools instils fear among the young cisgender women teachers who have to continue working in environments where they are threatened with violence daily. These findings align with previous studies that suggest that exposure to violence in the workplace can lead to long-term emotional and mental health challenges, including post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, burnout and disengagement (Mthanti, 2023; Windvoël, 2023). The emotional aftermath of these violent incidents extended beyond the immediate trauma. Teachers experienced prolonged distress and a lack of confidence, and even considered leaving the profession:

'The impact this has on me is that it has affected me psychologically, that I fear the learners, even considering career change.' (Kearabetsoe, 29-year-old, teacher)

This cumulative psychological burden threatens their professional sustainability and long-term well-being. This aligns with research indicating that exposure to violence can result in a loss of self-efficacy, making it difficult for victims to assert themselves in their professional roles (De Ceballos & Carvalho, 2021; De Wet, 2010). A lack of confidence among teachers can further exacerbate classroom management challenges, as learners may exploit perceived weaknesses, leading to a cycle of continued aggression.

From an intersectional standpoint, these findings provide insight into the psychological and emotional implications that learner-on-teacher violence has on early-career young cisgender women teachers. The study reveals how these teachers' well-being is adversely affected by the violence they encounter. The intersection of sex, gender and age positions these teachers at the intersection of multiple sources of stress related to gendered violence perpetrated by male learners, combined with the challenges of being early-career young cisgender women teachers navigating a new and potentially hostile school environment. The emotional impact of this violence should be understood, taking into consideration the intersection of sex, gender and age, as older, more experienced cisgender women teachers may have more authority or coping mechanisms to handle such violence, while younger cisgender women teachers may lack both the social capital and experience to mitigate these forms of aggression and psychological challenges.

Theme 4: Age-related challenges in authority

Minimal age gaps between young teachers and their learners often led to a breakdown in the teacher-student dynamic:

'The younger the teacher, then they tend to think that they have the same interest with their teachers, which leads to conflicts.' (Johanna, 24-year-old, teacher)

Similarly, Letta narrated her experience of physical violence from the older learners while trying to reprimand them for making a noise in the classroom:

'When entering the classroom, I found them [*learners*] making noise. I started reprimanding all of them to settle down. Two male learners stood up; they were the eldest in the classroom. They then came straight to me and started confronting me, pointing fingers at me. The other one then threw a textbook at me, while the other one shoved me around.' (Letta, 25-year-old, teacher)

Letta's experiences demonstrate how the little age difference between the teachers and older learners in the classroom can lead to violence, particularly when the teachers try to practice their authority within the classroom. It is evident from Letta's narrative that the learners undermined her authority; hence, they resorted to violence when she only requested that they reduce the noise. This blurred boundary often led to a lack of respect, weakening the teacher's authority and opening the door to

conflict and potential violence. This finding aligns with research indicating that minimal age differences between learners and teachers can blur professional boundaries, undermining the teacher's ability to assert control (Fakude, 2022; Pahad, 2010). When learners perceive their teacher as an equal, they may be more likely to engage in disruptive or aggressive behaviour, particularly in environments where respect for authority is already tenuous. Teachers like Johanna noted how age proximity led to learners viewing them as peers. This collapse of professional boundaries eroded teacher authority and increased tension within the classroom.

Theme 5: Institutional inadequacies and isolation

Participants also expressed dissatisfaction with school responses to incidents of violence. Many felt unsupported by school leadership and believed that violence against teachers was either ignored or minimised, leading to feelings of isolation:

'All learners and teachers are aware of code of conduct. There are no preventative measures covered in the school's code of conduct. Just sanctions for transgression, suspension or giving a learner a note to ask their parents to come to school for a meeting.' (Johanna, 24-year-old, teacher)

'No formal support structures. If learners suffered the same consequences as teachers, then this could improve the situation. Teachers suffer suspension from school without salary for any misconduct, whereas, in some cases, learners are simply just moved from one school to another and continue with their lives as if nothing happened.' (Anna, 26-year-old, teacher)

'There are no formal support structures for teachers who have been victimised. A learner who victimises a teacher is suspended.' (Dimakatso, 25-year-old, teacher)

Based on these narratives, it is prevalent that the participants do not feel empowered in their workplaces when it comes to addressing learner violence. While there is a code of conduct that prohibits learner-on-teacher violence, the participants demonstrate concern around the violence, arguing that the current disciplinary measures are insufficient to deal with the violence in the schools. The participants demonstrate dissatisfaction with the severity of disciplinary measures taken by the schools, arguing that they are not enough to protect them from learner-on-teacher violence in the schools. This impacts their sense of safety within the school environment.

Discussion

The intersection of gender, sex, age, physical appearance and structural vulnerabilities in learner-on-teacher violence

The findings of this study underscore how the intersection of gender, sex, age and physical appearance, together with structural vulnerabilities, contributes to early-career

young cisgender women teachers' vulnerability to learner-on-teacher violence. The data indicate that young cisgender women teachers, because of their sex, gender, age and physical appearance, are perceived as less authoritative by male learners, which places them at greater risk of verbal, emotional and physical aggression. This is consistent with existing literature on learner-on-teacher violence, which suggests that gendered power dynamics and patriarchal structures contribute to the mistreatment of women teachers in schools (Lehfid & Bakkali, 2025; Pietersen & Langeveldt, 2024).

The participants' narratives illustrate that their physical appearance further compounds their vulnerability. For instance, Dikeledi narrated that she was targeted because she is 28 years old and a bit skinny and short. The participants' narratives of how their physical appearance renders them vulnerable to violence align with the McMahon et al. (2022) study, which found that younger and physically smaller teachers often face a greater likelihood of being perceived as weak or incapable of defending themselves, thus increasing their exposure to aggression from students.

Perceived authority and power imbalance

A critical theme that emerged from the findings is the perception of young cisgender women teachers as lacking authority, which is a crucial factor contributing to violence. Letta's remark that 'If you are younger and female, learners tend to think that you cannot defend yourself' highlights how both gender, sex and age intersect to undermine the authority of early-career cisgender women teachers. This finding is supported by Fakude's (2022) study, which found that young female teachers in secondary schools often struggle to establish their authority because of the small age gap between them and their learners. For example, Johanna held that learners tend to see the younger cisgender women teachers as their peers, leading to conflicts when the teachers try to practice their authority or instil discipline in the classroom. This suggests that learners may not recognise or respect professional boundaries, further weakening the teacher's authority. Previous research by Buthelezi (2021) similarly found that younger teachers, particularly women, often experience difficulties maintaining discipline in classrooms because of a lack of perceived legitimacy in their roles.

Psychological impact of learner-on-teacher violence

The psychological toll of learner-on-teacher violence on young cisgender women teachers is another significant finding of this study. Many participants reported experiencing fear, anxiety and a loss of self-confidence as a result of their experiences with violent learners. These findings align with studies conducted in other contexts, such as the research by De Ceballos and Carvalho (2021), which found that violence against teachers has long-term emotional and psychological effects, leading to anxiety, PTSD and, in severe cases, career abandonment.

Similar trends were observed in South Africa by Venketsamy (2024), who found that many teachers who experience violence from learners consider leaving the profession because of persistent fear and stress.

The role of patriarchy in learner-on-teacher violence

The findings of this study further highlight the role of patriarchal norms in shaping the experiences of early-career young cisgender women teachers. Participants described instances where boy learners used their perceived superiority to intimidate women teachers. Thabang, for example, stated, 'Other teachers are more affected or vulnerable to such attacks than others because of their gender.' This finding resonates with the broader literature on gender-based violence in schools. Oparinde and Matsha (2021) argue that patriarchal attitudes contribute to gender-based violence in educational institutions, where boy learners feel entitled to challenge and dominate women teachers. This aligns with the observations of Bhana (2015), who found that women teachers often experience disrespect and aggression from boy learners who have internalised societal gender hierarchies.

Addressing learner-on-teacher violence: Policy and intervention

Given the severity of the violence experienced by early-career young cisgender women teachers, targeted interventions are necessary to address this issue. The findings suggest that educational institutions and policymakers must implement strategies to protect early-career young cisgender women teachers, including enhanced security measures, structured mentorship programmes and stricter disciplinary actions against learners who engage in violence. Research by Windvoël (2023) highlights the importance of school-based intervention programmes that provide psychological support for teachers and training on conflict resolution strategies. Furthermore, we recommend that policies aimed at addressing school violence should include gender-sensitive approaches that consider the unique vulnerabilities of early-career young women teachers.

Before concluding, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which may influence the interpretation of the findings.

Limitations of the study

Several limitations emerged during the interview process that influenced the study's findings. One significant limitation was related to participant withdrawals. Despite initially agreeing to participate or scheduling interviews, a total of nine teachers ultimately withdrew from the study. Of these, eight were from two schools in Tshwane West and one from a school in Tshwane South. Notably, five of the withdrawals came from a single school in Tshwane West, where the participants expressed concern about potential retaliation from the school principal because of the sensitive nature of

the research topic. While this might be viewed as a limitation in terms of sample size, these withdrawals carry deeper meaning and reflect some of the core themes identified in the study. The expressed fear of speaking out illustrates the structural vulnerabilities that exist within school environments, especially those marked by institutional inadequacies and the absence of supportive leadership structures. Teachers' reluctance to participate because of fear of reprisal underscores the lack of institutional protection, which in turn silences victims and conceals incidents of learner-on-teacher violence. Thus, the high withdrawal rate, rather than being a mere methodological limitation, is in itself an indicator of the climate of fear and disempowerment within certain school settings. It reinforces the study's findings about the intersectional vulnerabilities of young cisgender women teachers and the urgent need for safe, supportive environments that enable teachers to speak out about their experiences without fear of retaliation.

Implications of the findings

The findings of this study have several implications for various stakeholders. The study underscores the urgent need for school management teams to prioritise the safety and support of early career young cisgender women teachers, who are often subjected to learner-on-teacher violence rooted in gendered, sex- and age-based power dynamics. It is essential for schools to establish internal protocols and foster a culture where educators can report incidents without fear of retaliation. At the policy level, the Department of Basic Education should review and strengthen current frameworks on school safety, including a more robust implementation of the National School Safety Framework. Furthermore, the findings highlight the necessity for targeted professional development programmes that equip teachers with practical skills to manage classroom aggression and protect their mental and emotional well-being. For teacher training institutions, there is a pressing need to expand curricula to include modules on behavioural management, resilience-building and the psychological impact of school violence, particularly as it affects vulnerable teaching demographics. Overall, the study reveals systemic gaps in institutional support structures, which often contribute to the silencing of teachers who experience violence. Addressing these gaps requires policy interventions that are inclusive, trauma-informed and gender-sensitive to ensure safer and more equitable working environments for all teachers.

While the study is grounded in the South African public school context, the issues of learner-on-teacher violence, structural vulnerability and gendered power dynamics are not unique to South Africa. Similar patterns have been documented in other countries, particularly in low- and middle-income settings, as well as in under-resourced urban schools globally. As such, the findings of this study may offer insights for international policymakers, educators and researchers working to develop inclusive and protective school environments worldwide.

Conclusion

This study investigated the experiences of early-career young cisgender women teachers who encountered learner-on-teacher violence through an intersectional lens, taking into account the combined impact of intersecting identity markers such as sex, gender, age and physical appearance, along with structural vulnerabilities (patriarchy, gender and sex-related stereotypes and psychological well-being), to identify these teachers' specific points of vulnerability to male learner violence in secondary schools. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on learner-on-teacher violence by highlighting the unique vulnerabilities encountered by early-career young cisgender women teachers. The findings of this study, analysed through an intersectional framework, call for specific, targeted interventions to protect and support early-career young cisgender women teachers. By recognising that sex, gender, age and physical appearance intersect in ways that exacerbate the violence these teachers encounter, education policymakers and schools can develop strategies that address the particular vulnerabilities of early-career young cisgender women teachers. The study suggests that collaborative interventions should be designed to mitigate the risks associated with these intersecting factors, alongside structural vulnerabilities. This approach aims to provide support not only to the teachers themselves but also to shift harmful patriarchal and ageist attitudes within the secondary school environment.

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Authors' contributions

H.E.K. and T.B.M. were involved in conceptualising the article and contributed to the writing. H.E.K. collected the data, and both authors collaborated on the analysis. T.B.M. reviewed the final draft of the manuscript and made editorial corrections to its content and structure. Both authors worked together on all sections of the manuscript.

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Data availability

The data associated with the study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, T.B.M. Because of the sensitivity of the topic, it cannot be made publicly accessible.

Disclaimer

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