EXPLORING STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATORS' SAFETY IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE NGAKA MODIRI MOLEMA DISTRICT, NORTH WEST PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

by

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for

the degree of

PhD

In the subject

Philosophy of Education

at

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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February 2026

DECLARATION

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I hereby declare that the thesis entitled ***Exploring Stakeholders' Perspectives on Educators' Safety in Selected Secondary Schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, North West Province, South Africa*** is my own original work and that all sources which I have consulted, cited or quoted have been duly acknowledged through complete and accurate referencing. I further certify that this thesis has been submitted to originality-checking software and that the resulting report meets the institution's prescribed requirements. I also affirm that this work, in whole or in part, has not been submitted previously for examination or for the purposes of obtaining any qualification at the University of South Africa (UNISA) or at any other higher education institution.

Signature: 

Date: 10 February 2026

DEDICATION

This work is first and foremost lifted up to the Almighty God and Heavenly Father, whose boundless grace provided me with the wisdom, patience, understanding and ability necessary to complete this journey. In moments of doubt and exhaustion, it was His strength, determination and willpower that carried me through, a constant source of light and fortitude throughout my studies.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my late beloved mother Mmamokete Mnini, the foundational pillar of my strength. You raised me with unwavering love and resilience, shaping the person I am today. Though you are no longer here to witness this milestone, your spirit has been my guiding compass and this achievement is a testament to the foundation you built.

I dedicate this research to the courageous educators and school leaders of the Ngaka Modiri Molema District who teach not only from textbooks, but from a place of remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. Your voices, experiences and steadfast commitment to education amidst challenging circumstances are at the very heart of this study.

My profound gratitude extends to my dedicated supervisor Prof. Doniwen Pietersen and co-supervisor Dr Dean Collin Langeveldt, whose expertise, patience and invaluable guidance steered this project from conception to completion. To the principals who opened their school gates and trusted me with their stories and to the District Manager of Ngaka Modiri Molema for granting me permission and support to conduct this work, your cooperation has been invaluable.

It is my sincere hope that this research contributes to making every school a sanctuary of safety, dignity and transformative learning for all who work and learn within its walls.

ABSTRACT

Violence against educators is a critical global issue that detrimentally affects teaching environments, educator well-being and educational outcomes. While prevalent internationally, this study focuses on the specific and severe challenges within South African high schools, particularly in the under-researched Ngaka Modiri Molema District of the North West Province. This region, characterised by socio-economic disadvantage and systemic resource constraints, has experienced high-profile violent incidents, including fatal assaults on teachers, underscoring a crisis in educator safety. This situation contributes to professional attrition, demoralisation and compromised schooling environments.

Employing a qualitative research approach, this study is underpinned by Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) as its theoretical framework, through which violent behaviour is analysed as acquired via observational learning and modelling. The study engaged 38 participants – comprising seven school leaders (principals/deputy principals), 11 heads of department and 20 classroom educators – drawn from six purposively selected secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Key findings reveal that learner-on-educator violence manifests primarily as physical assault, verbal aggression and intimidation. Contributing factors include dysfunctional home environments, peer influence, weak school climate, over-age learners, progression policies, and inadequate policy enforcement. Existing safety measures are perceived by educators as insufficient and inconsistently applied, creating a policy-reinforcement gap that inadvertently sustains rather than reduces violence.

By addressing a significant gap in localised research in communities such as the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, this investigation intends to provide actionable insights for policymakers, the Department of Basic Education and school stakeholders. The ultimate goal is to inform the development of targeted interventions and robust safety policies to protect educators' constitutional rights, foster safer school climates and aid in retaining teaching professionals within the South African educational system. This study developed an original analytical framework – the Policy-Reinforcement Gap Framework – which theorised the structural disconnect between existing school safety

policies and their implementation in under-resourced South African school districts. This framework constitutes a theoretical contribution to the scholarship on educator safety, offering analytical transferability beyond the Ngaka Modiri Molema District to similar under-resourced contexts nationally and internationally.

Keywords:

Educator safety; school violence; South Africa; Ngaka Modiri Molema District; North West Province; teacher attrition; safety policies; intervention strategies; socio-economic factors; educational outcomes

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BELA Act: Basic Education Laws Amendment Act

CJCP: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention

CPF: Community policing forum

DBE: Department of Basic Education

HOD: Head of Department

NAPTOSA: National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa

NGO: Non-governmental organisation

NSSF: National School Safety Framework

PTSD: Post-traumatic stress disorder

RSA: Republic of South Africa

SACE: South African Council of Educators

SADTU: South African Democratic Teachers' Union

SAPS: South African Police Service

SASA: South African Schools Act

SEL: Social-emotional learning

SGB: School Governing Body

SLT: Social learning theory

SMT: School management team

TA: Thematic analysis

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

UNISA: University of South Africa

YRU: Youth Research Unit

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Violence in educational institutions impacts not only learners, but also educators, as supported by Qwabe et al. (2022:127) who state that such violence harms the academic performance and work capabilities of its victims, as well as their physical and mental well-being. Incidents of aggression towards educators in schools are a global concern and are particularly worrisome for government officials and educational stakeholders in South Africa (Alabi & Ngidi, 2021:225). Violence manifests in multiple forms and across different levels of society, with school-based violence emerging as a persistent concern in many countries (Igu & Ogba, 2019:24).

In South Africa, the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (2012) reported that 52.1% of educators experience verbal abuse from learners, 12.4% faces physical violence and 3.3% experience sexual violence. More recently, the South African Council for Educators (2021) documented over 600 incidents of violence against educators between 2018 and 2021.

Shifting the focus to the African continent, Nigeria stands out as one of the most violent countries due to political fragmentation and a history of distmalihrust (Igu and Ogba, 2019:24). Furthermore, the authors suggest that the violent nature of Nigerian communities has serious repercussions for schools, as learners exhibit aggressive and violent behaviour. School violence takes various forms in different regions, but South Africa confronts specific challenges due to socio-economic disparities, historical factors and deficiencies in school safety. Mahome (2019:91) indicates that violence from learners towards educators in public schools is a serious issue that lacks adequate research in South Africa. Such violence is widespread, occurring in classrooms, on school grounds and beyond (Ferrara et al., 2019:2). It manifests in multiple ways, including physical assaults, verbal confrontations, emotional abuse, ongoing disruptions, threats and cyberbullying (Adewusi, 2021:414), with some incidents tragically resulting in the death of educators. Additionally, there are instances of sexual abuse of educators by students (Adewusi, 2021:414). Educators not only face violence from learners, but also from parents and fellow educators. Many express

a constant fear for their safety both at work and home, as some students know their addresses (Venketsamy et al., 2023:61). Moreover, learners often threaten educators, indicating that any disputes within the school will be settled outside its premises.

Within the South African context specifically, although more publicity is often given to teachers harming pupils, according to the South African Council of Educators (SACE) (2021:12), violence in schools affects educators in a similar manner as it does learners. It can manifest in various forms, such as threats, harassment, victimisation, bullying and sexual harassment.

A study conducted by the Youth Research Unit of the Bureau of Market Research revealed that nearly half of educators in Gauteng province have contemplated resigning due to violence directed towards them (SACE, 2021). The research also indicated that many educators experience fear for their safety, as well as mental health issues like depression, burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of inaction or apathy by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). It is imperative to address violence against educators as they, like all other members of the school community, are entitled to rights enshrined by the Bill of Rights in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996).

Locating this crisis within the specific context of this study, Lehari (2019) documented a violent incident in Zeerust, North West Province, in which two learners attacked five educators at a secondary school in Ntsweletsoku village, an incident that was witnessed by the researcher. The incident highlighted significant shortcomings in school safety, including the existence of safety policies and notice boards that were not implemented, as well as the absence of a functional school safety committee. These failures undermined the safety of both educators and learners, as neither group had clear guidance on acceptable behaviour or procedures for responding to safety violations. Schools that lack proper induction and training on safety matters therefore remain high-risk environments for both educators and learners.

Beyond specific violent incidents, systemic factors within schools and communities exacerbate the crisis. Ineffective school leadership has been identified as a key contributor to unsafe school environments, where weak management fails to implement or enforce safety policies (Bipath, 2017:66; Makhasane & Khanare, 2018:22). Furthermore, poor academic performance often accompanies high-violence

schools, as educators spend disproportionate time on discipline rather than teaching (see Section 2.5). Broader socio-economic factors – including poverty, unemployment and inequality – create conditions that normalise violence and undermine respect for authority (Kistnasamy, 2019:37; UNICEF, 2020:11).

According to SACE (2020:5), educators are entitled to a work environment where they are respected and valued, enabling them to actively contribute to the development and learning of pupils without fear of harm or intimidation. SACE is mandated with the task of ensuring that teachers' right to safety is implemented. Section 12 of the Constitution (1996) guarantees the right of all individuals to be free from violence and cruel treatment. Educators, like all individuals, have the right to dignity and life.

Section 23 of the Constitution ensures that everyone is entitled to fair labour practices, emphasising the importance of treating educators with respect and dignity by all members of the school community, including learners. In light of the serious and complex issue of violence against educators in South Africa, along with the significant lack of localised research in areas like Ngaka Modiri Molema, this study aims to examine the factors influencing educator safety and suggests interventions tailored to the specific context.

In summary, violence against educators is a global crisis that manifests severely in South African schools, particularly in under-resourced rural districts such as Ngaka Modiri Molema. Constitutional and policy frameworks exist to protect educators, yet incidents of physical assault, verbal abuse and even fatal stabbings continue to occur. The lack of localised research in this district leaves a gap in understanding the specific factors that maintain or hinder educator safety. The following problem statement articulates the core issues that this study addresses.

1.2 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The data presented in this rationale reflect the period of fieldwork conducted in 2025. All claims about violence prevalence, educator experiences and institutional support are based on evidence collected during that specific timeframe (see Section 4.4.5 for the data collection timeline). At the time of data collection (2025), the Ngaka Modiri Molema District was reported to be experiencing significant challenges related to educator-directed violence (see participant accounts in Chapter 5). Moreover, during the research period (2025), many educators reported working under persistent stress

and fear of violence, which led to demoralisation and attrition among participants in this study. These challenges reflect a broader national crisis in school safety (Mangena, 2022:2; Molotja, 2024:101).

The district is characterised by rural and semi-rural settings, comprising villages, farms and informal settlements. During the study period (2025), the district's economy was dependent on income from small farms and government grants. Socio-economically, the area faced high levels of poverty, unemployment and limited infrastructure, with many households reliant on government grants and small-scale farming. These conditions contributed to community instability, substance abuse and youth involvement in crime – factors that frequently spilled over into school environments. Schools in Ngaka Modiri Molema are predominantly public and under-resourced, struggling with overcrowding, inadequate teaching materials, and difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified educators.

Molotja (2024:101) found that a lack of support from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and inadequate policies are key factors contributing to educator-directed violence, a finding supported by participants in this study (see Chapter 5). Parliamentary records show that there is no specific budget allocated for school safety, as it is included in standard police operations (PMG, 2025). Furthermore, by 2018, 40.5% of public schools had not been trained on the National School Safety Framework (DA, 2018). The Department of Basic Education has recognized that financial limitations and a lack of staff have negatively impacted the execution of school safety programs (Question to the Minister of Basic Education - NW2929, 2025).Consequently, the lack of support from the DBE, combined with growing workloads and inadequate safety measures, intensifies the challenges faced by educators. Mangena (2022:2) emphasises that teaching in South African schools is seen as extremely traumatic due to resource shortages, concerns about bullying, overcrowded classrooms and increasing substance abuse among students. Additionally, Molotja (2024:101) highlights a significant deficiency in support from the DBE and ineffective policies to safeguard educators.

1.3 RESEARCH CONTEXT: NGAKA MODIRI MOLEMA DISTRICT

The safety of educators in Ngaka Modiri Molema has become a growing concern due to several high-profile violent incidents. On September 13, 2018, at Ramotshere

Secondary School in Zeerust, a 24-year-old educator, Gadimang Daniel Mokolobate, was fatally stabbed by a 17-year-old learner (Gous, 2018). This was preceded by the assault of five educators at Rearabilwe Secondary School in Ntsoeletsoku Village in March 2018 (Lehari, 2018). Further incidents include the suspension of Grade 12 learners for assaulting an educator at Motswedi Secondary School in July 2020 (Sobuwa, 2020) and reports of educators being physically assaulted by community members in Dingateng village (Genkoe, 2023). These events underscore a troubling pattern of violence that disrupts teaching and learning, and highlights systemic failures in educator protection.

The safety of educators plays a critical role in sustaining a conducive teaching and learning environment. However, current challenges include insufficient support for victimised educators and the negative repercussions on educational quality and teacher retention. This study responds to this urgent need by investigating the factors affecting educator safety in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools, with the aim of informing targeted interventions and policy improvements.

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

In South Africa, schools are facing persistent issues related to ineffective leadership and sub-standard academic performance, which are exacerbated by rising incidents of school violence. Learner-on-educator violence, in particular, frequently makes headlines, underscoring a significant social challenge that impacts all stakeholders in the education system. This climate of violence directly contributes to educator attrition. Petso (2021:10) notes that many educators are leaving the profession due to feelings of insecurity, which could have serious long-term consequences, such as increased illiteracy rates, challenges in educator recruitment and difficulties in retaining highly skilled teachers.

Approximately 50 educators face attacks or threats from learners in schools across South Africa each month (SACE, 2021). Between 2018 and 2021, more than 600 incidents of violence in schools were recorded at their offices (SACE, 2021). These figures underscore the significant link between inequality and violence in educational institutions. Addressing the interconnected issues of poverty, inequality and unemployment within communities can play a crucial role in mitigating instances of violence, especially within school settings.

The issue is a complex one and requires situating the problem statement within its broader contextual framework. NAPTOSA (2018) reported multiple incidents of violence against educators, and its president noted that such incidents have contributed to some educators leaving the profession – though no specific attrition figures were provided in the report. Furthermore, a NAPTOSA report (2018) highlighted incidents of school violence in which learners engaged in verbal abuse and assaulted both educators and fellow learners.

Several studies have emphasised the issue of ensuring the safety of educators in schools. Moreroa (2022) discovered that educators in three different schools faced violence from learners, with their experiences often being overlooked. Despite government efforts to tackle the effects of school violence on learners, Moreroa (2022) argues that educators, as victims themselves, have been neglected.

The violence against educators is not limited to South Africa, as countries like the United States, Canada, and Germany also face similar challenges. This study was prompted by the significant increase in violence against educators in South African secondary schools and the urgent need to develop intervention strategies to protect educators. Learners should respect educators, yet they often resort to attacking them, sometimes leading to fatal consequences (SACE, 2020). SACE (2020) further notes that the current situation in South African schools is alarming, with unprecedented levels of violence from learners against educators.

In the US, the rate of violent incidents against educators was nearly double that of all workers in the country in 2014, with a significant portion of educators missing work due to injuries and illnesses resulting from violent events (Anderman et al., 2018). Similar figures for South Africa are not available.

Similarly, there appears to be scarcity of research published in South Africa on the tactics or strategies used to deal with violence directed against educators. As a result, the aim of this study is to evaluate the factors that have helped to maintain or hinder educator safety in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools in the North West. The study aims to make a significant contribution to the issue and to stimulate additional research about school violence.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.5.1 Main research question

What factors influence educators' perceptions of safety in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools in the North West province?

1.5.2 Sub-research questions

- What is the nature and extent of safety incidents affecting educators in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools?
- What safety measures are currently implemented in secondary schools in Ngaka Modiri Molema district and how effective are they?
- What are the key determinants influencing educators' safety in these schools?
- What strategies do stakeholders recommend to improve educator safety in Ngaka Modiri Molema district?

1.6 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.6.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to investigate and evaluate the factors that promote or compromise educator safety in selected secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, and on the basis of these findings, to develop an original conceptual framework — the Policy-Reinforcement Gap Framework — that theorises the structural disconnect between safety policies and their implementation in under-resourced school contexts.

1.6.2 Objectives

The objectives to be achieved through this study are as follows:

- To assess the nature and extent of safety incidents affecting educators in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of existing safety measures and identify gaps in school safety protocols.
- To analyse the factors contributing to educators' safety concerns.
- To develop an original conceptual framework – the Policy-Reinforcement Gap Framework – that theorises the structural disconnect between safety policies

and their implementation in under-resourced school contexts, drawing on empirical findings and stakeholder recommendations.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In Ngaka Modiri Molema district, no study has yet been done on violence perpetrated against educators (learner-on-educator violence). Therefore, the findings of this research may assist the government and policymakers to identify factors leading to educators not feeing safe by addressing the central research question. In order to understand learners' disciplinary issues, the results of this research may also help the DBE and policymakers review existing codes of conduct and other policies related to discipline. Education policy stands to benefit from this research by assisting schools in abating learner-on-educator violence and even by crafting policy regarding the safety of educators generally. This study contributes to the body of knowledge in education policy by ensuring that awareness of educators' safety in schools is brought to the attention of the government and policymakers. The implementation of solutions in preventing learner-on-educator violence should assist in retaining educators. Based on educator reports, safety concerns may deter some prospective teachers from pursuing or continuing secondary school placements, though this study did not directly interview student teachers .Several participants in this study reported observing colleagues transfer from secondary to primary schools, citing lower perceived risk of assault as a contributing factor (see participant accounts in Chapter 5).

1.8 PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW OVERVIEW

1.8.1 School violence perpetrated against educators

Since the beginning of the 21st century, learner-on-educator violence has been widely covered in the media. Educators are often portrayed as facing various forms of violence from learners, including physical violence, sexual violence, cyberbullying and verbal abuse. In South Africa, Woudstra et al. (2018:4) assert that a significant percentage of educators have experienced insults, threats, sexual harassment and physical harm from learners. In addition, a considerable number of educators have encountered learners who carry weapons to school or are involved in gang activities (SACE, 2020). These findings highlight the widespread nature of violence in schools, affecting a broad spectrum of educators.

In a quantitative study on learner-on-teacher bullying involving 153 public secondary school teachers from the Tshwane Municipality, Woudstra, Janse van Rensburg and Visser (2018:1) found that 62.1% of the educators experienced verbal bullying from students, 34.6% faced physical bullying, 27% were subjected to indirect bullying and 66.6% reported incidents of cyberbullying.

Violence perpetrated by learners towards educators disrupts the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Nhambura (2020:4) emphasises that schools facing this issue tend to have lower learner performance, which contradicts DBE objectives. Educators do not feel secure in their work environments due to violent behaviour from learners, leading to skilled educators leaving their positions and some avoiding work altogether out of fear (SACE, 2011). Petso (2021:10) concurs that many educators are resigning due to the lack of safety in the teaching profession, with long-term consequences, such as increased illiteracy rates, challenges in educator recruitment and difficulties in retaining top educators. Furthermore, Ngidi (2018:3) observes that educators often feel isolated as they often receive inadequate support from the DBE, school management, parents and communities. Additionally, Woudstra et al. (2018:6) note that educators who are victims of school violence suffer emotional and financial distress, impacting the recruitment and retention of qualified educators in the long run.

1.8.2 School, domestic and community violence

Kistnasamy (2019:37) notes that many township communities are confronted with multiple risk factors, including high poverty rates, limited employment opportunities and a culture that condones violence, all of which are associated with higher levels of violence among school learners. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2020:11) suggests that children who lack financial support, parental care and are exposed to violence are more likely to exhibit disruptive behaviour, indicating a correlation between negative family dynamics and instances of school violence. Building on the social learning cognitive theory[1], Castro-Sánchez et al. (2019:2) argue that children who have experienced violence or trauma early in life are at greater risk of becoming perpetrators of violence. Singo (2017:41) further supports this argument

[1] Based on Bandura & Walters (1977), Social Learning/Cognitive Theory (SLT) is an exceptionally strong framework for understanding school violence because it moves beyond simplistic explanations to address how violent behavior is learned, modeled, and sustained within a student's entire social ecosystem.

by highlighting the negative impact of poor parent-child relationships, which can lead to increased household stress and a higher prevalence of violence directed towards educators by learners.

1.8.3 School violence and education administrative process

South African children and adolescents are confronted with significant levels of violence across different environments, namely schools, households and communities (Romero et al., 2018; Sherr et al., 2015; Fang et al., 2017). Studies indicate that numerous young individuals living in poverty are exposed to various forms of violence, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse within their homes, as well as direct and indirect violence within their communities (Romero et al., 2018; Meinck et al., 2013; Meinck et al., 2016).

In South Africa, domestic violence is a prevalent issue, characterised by elevated rates of intimate partner violence and child abuse (Caritus & Umejesi, 2019; Abrahams et al., 2013; Nduna & Tshona, 2021). Studies suggest that parents and intimate partners are frequently the main perpetrators of violence against women and children (Swemmer, 2022; Mshweshwe, 2020). Furthermore, violence within educational institutions is a significant concern, encompassing incidents of learner-on-educator violence, learner-on-learner violence, educator-on-learner violence, including corporal punishment, and other forms of mistreatment by educators (Venketsamy, 2023; Shields et al., 2014; Roux & Mokhele, 2011). The heightened levels of violence in schools can adversely affect learners' academic motivation and educational achievements (Romero et al., 2018; Sherr et al., 2015).

Community violence, such as gang-related crime and exposure to neighbourhood violence, poses a significant obstacle for the youth (Romero et al., 2018; Cluver et al., 2016; Falconer et al., 2020). The impact of such exposure can impact negatively on learners’ educational achievements and a result in a higher likelihood of developing psychological and behavioural issues (Romero et al., 2018; Sherr et al., 2015; Cluver et al., 2016).

Dealing with the intricate problem of violence impacting children and teenagers in South Africa necessitates a comprehensive strategy. Researchers have emphasised the importance of successful measures that address various factors, including poverty, gender stereotypes and the accessibility of social assistance services, at both the

individual and structural levels (Fang et al., 2017; Meinck et al., 2015). Augmenting the legal and institutional structures to safeguard women and children, enhancing the effectiveness of law enforcement, and executing evidence-based prevention and intervention initiatives are vital measures in tackling this problem (Caritus & Umejesi, 2019; Abrahams et al., 2013; Joyner & Mash, 2012; Catazo, 2023; Mtotywa, 2023).

1.8.4 Forms of aggression against educators

Qiao and Patterson (2021) define educator victimisation in schools as instances of being bullied or harassed by learners. Astor et al. (2024:40) elaborate on the various forms of violence educators may face from learners, including the use of offensive language or gestures, verbal threats or intimidation, and discriminatory attacks based on race, ethnicity, gender or community background. Research on educator victimisation also encompasses various incidents, such as theft or vandalism of property, objects being thrown at them and more serious acts like threats with weapons, sexual assault and physical assault (Astor et al., 2024:40).

NAPTOSA (2018) emphasises that violence against educators can manifest in different forms, including assault, bullying, cyberbullying, xenophobia, homophobia, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as gang-related violence. Despite the prevalence of studies on violence against learners, there is a scarcity of research on violence against educators. Anderman et al. (2018) note a lack of research on verbal or physical violence against educators. Le Mottee and Kelly (2017:48) highlight the limited research on educators' experiences of violence in the school environment, particularly in South Africa, and how their rights are violated. However, existing studies suggest that educators are indeed subjected to high levels of violence.

1.8.5 School violence and support for educators

According to Ntuli (2018:28), school management teams (SMTs) are guided by national policies and a code of conduct to address violent behaviour of learners in order to maintain the school's smooth operation. SMTs are responsible for ensuring the successful implementation and enforcement of these policies. Bipath (2017:66) underscores the need for SMT members to play a leading role in effectively implementing safety policies and procedures. However, Netshitangani (2019:104) warns that while SMTs are at the forefront of creating violence-free schools, the responsibility does not rest solely on them, but on all stakeholders. Nhambura

(2020:173) further suggests that in order to effectively combat learner-on-educator violence, SMTs must collaborate with relevant stakeholders to directly engage with learners and possibly conduct home visits. Despite this, Grobler (2018:3) argues that the persistence of learner-on-educator violence in schools indicates that current measures are insufficient in effectively addressing this issue.

Gregory et al. (2021) advocate for the increased utilisation of three commonly accepted strategies for school discipline: school-wide positive behavioural interventions and supports (SWPBIS), social-emotional learning (SEL) and restorative practices. Meanwhile, Schlebusch, Makola and Ndlovu (2022) endorse the implementation of the positive discipline approach, emphasising its ability to instil helpful values in learners that shape their behaviour in a manner admired by society for a lifetime. Conversely, Nigrini (2016) asserts that employing positive discipline in education is crucial for fostering lifelong skills linked to self-respect, empathy and respect for others. This approach not only promotes children's overall development, but also enhances the school environment by reducing fear, teaching self-discipline and fostering increased interest, enjoyment and engagement in learning (Nigrini, 2016). According to Rampa (2014), educators are required to embrace a proactive disciplinary culture that teaches learners to respect authority, follow school regulations, exercise self-control and show respect for others.

Schlebusch, Makolab and Ndlovu (2022) posit that it is crucial to establish a structured approach to discipline where the implementation begins at home and extends to the school environment. The authors further suggest that parents and teachers should collaborate to align their discipline strategies by instilling positive values in learners. This collaboration could be more successful if a majority of parents were willing to cooperate with educators in addressing learner misbehaviour. Unfortunately, many parents do not actively support educators in guiding their children's behaviour, leaving teachers to navigate disciplinary issues on their own. Moreover, some parents may be apprehensive about their children, hindering their ability to engage with educators in learner discipline matters. Additionally, only a limited number of parents typically attend meetings, further complicating the partnership between parents and educators.

1.9 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

According to social learning theory (SLT), violent behaviour can be acquired through observational learning. This theory is particularly justified for investigating educator-directed violence in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district as it provides a lens to understand how learners may model aggressive behaviour observed in their homes, communities, peer groups or the media. Given the district's documented socio-economic challenges, community violence and prevalent gang activity, SLT helps explain the environmental and social learning pathways through which school-based violence is reproduced. According to Bandura (1977), individuals can learn behaviours by observing others and mimicking their actions based on the outcomes they witness. This process involves modelling, where individuals learn by observing models and imitating their behaviour if it is likely to lead to favourable consequences.

According to Castro-Sánchez et al. (2019:2), children who are victims or witnesses of violence not only suffer immediately, but also internalise the experience, leading some to learn and engage in violent behaviour. Igu and Ogba (2019:30) suggest that children raised in violent environments are more likely to exhibit violent behaviour. On the other hand, Ceka and Murati (2016:61) argue that children raised in nurturing and positive environments tend to develop emotional intelligence that deters them from becoming perpetrators of violence. Although this idea lacks scientific evidence, it implies that emotionally competent individuals are less likely to engage in undesirable behaviour.

This study applied Bandura's SLT to examine how the violent interaction between children and adults (either parents or teachers) as well as their environment impacts children's behaviour. Woolfolk (2018) explains that Bandura's SLT focuses on learning that occurs in a social setting. Bandura's perspectives offer a comprehensive explanation for both appropriate and inappropriate behavioural outcomes. The researcher opted to utilise SLT in the study due to its focus on the setting in which an educator operates. Mohapi (2013) suggests that social learning takes place when a person is rewarded for imitating another person's behaviour. Bergan and Dunn (2017) and Bandura (2015) support Mohapi's (2013) argument that social learning occurs through observing and mimicking others.

Furthermore, SLT posits that learners' behaviour is influenced not only by psychological or cognitive factors, but also by environmental factors (Mushaandja,

2018). Woolfolk's (2018) research confirms that social learning is shaped by the interaction between children's cognitive development, attitudes and environment. Bandura (2018) maintains that depending solely on personal experience to direct behaviour may be both arduous and potentially hazardous. Fortunately, humans often learn by observing and modelling others. By observing others, individuals can acquire new behaviours that serve as a guide for their actions.

However, Mwamwenda (2018) advises against simply imitating observed models and encourages focusing on essential traits to develop appropriate behaviours that surpass mere replication. Many believe that educators can leverage social learning by serving as models for their learners and influencing their behaviour by using selected individuals as models for others. Learning through observation and imitation of models is a highly effective method of learning and teaching (Davis, 2018).

1.10 RESEARCH CONTEXT: NGAKA MODIRI MOLEMA DISTRICT

Ngaka Modiri Molema is located in the North West province, one of the smallest provinces in South Africa. Ngaka Modiri Molema is characterised by villages, farms and informal settlements.

Economically, Ngaka Modiri Molema depends on income from small farms and government grants. Some of its population participate in government tenders and others are employed by different governmental departments. However, it is clear that the majority of the youth are unemployed and most of these depend on criminal activities for survival. The economic gap in Ngaka Modiri district between the rich and poor[2] is wide and these inequalities further perpetuate violence and criminal activities.

Schools in Ngaka Modiri Molema district are mostly public schools which are dependent on the state for resources. As a result, the government cannot provide all the necessary requirements to match the highest standard of education which is only found in private schools or Quintile 5 schools – for example, digital textbooks, access to the internet, interactive smart boards and sporting facilities. One of the challenges faced by the education system in Ngaka Modiri Molema is that since it a remote rural

[2] “While no single study cited measures the exact income gap within Ngaka Modiri Molema, research focused on the area consistently describes it as a "low-resourced" district with communities facing systemic poverty” (Tiro, Dube & Mohlatlole, 2026).

area, it does not attract many good educators and consequently, Ngaka Modiri Molema schools do no perform very well academically.

Given the backdrop of poverty, unemployment and poor educational infrastructure in Ngaka Modiri Molema, it is therefore no surprise that schools in this district suffer from a high rate of violence, school dropouts and high staff turnover.

1.11 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

1.11.1 Research approach and design

This study adopted a multiple-case study design, which is considered suitable due to the involvement of participants from two distinct schools. According to Urbinati, Bogers, Chiesa and Frattini (2019:10), the multiple-case study approach is perceived to be stronger compared to a single case study, as it enables more in-depth explanation building and comprehension of the impacts of contextual variables through cross-case comparisons. The research employed multiple case studies, gathering data from six secondary schools, each considered as a separate case. Having at least two case studies is essential for enabling comparative analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The findings from each case study were examined independently before being compared to identify any consistent patterns (Patel & Patel, 2019).

This research adopted an interpretive paradigm, which is considered appropriate as it allows the researcher to comprehend the diverse viewpoints of participants in gaining social knowledge. The data gathered from participants in this study was analysed without the constraints of empirical and quantitative techniques (Oosthuizen et al. 2020:366). Sharan and Robin (2019:7) suggest that interpretive and descriptive qualitative research highlights all the aspects that researchers are mainly interested in understanding, particularly how participants interpret a phenomenon.

A qualitative research approach was used in this study. This study used the interpretive phenomenological research approach to highlight its focus. This is a qualitative research approach that explores how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences, focusing on their subjective perspectives (Coe, Waring, Hedges & Ashley, 2025). It combines phenomenological inquiry, which examines the essence of experiences, with interpretive analysis to uncover deeper understandings within social

and cultural contexts. This qualitative method is considered suitable for this research as it involves direct engagement with participants to uncover the underlying factors contributing to educator safety and how school leaders can address these issues. According to Pazurek and Koseoglu (2022), the phenomenological research approach is a qualitative technique that examines and interprets human experiences for research purposes. This theory emphasises subjective consciousness and lived experiences to comprehend how individuals perceive things (Pazurek & Koseoglu, 2022). By using frameworks and identifying emerging themes, phenomenology explores how individuals perceive, understand and give meaning to their experiences through comprehensive and reflexive analysis (Reeson, 2020). Researchers using this approach aim to describe and interpret the essence of these experiences, delving into the subjective and often intangible aspects that shape human understanding and consciousness (Mc Coog, 2021). Educators who have experienced safety concerns due to learner violence are in a unique position to provide insights. In this study, more attention was given to these educators to gather their perspectives on their situation and potential measures to enhance safety in the workplace.

Reflexivity was employed in this study. Burnam (2023) defines reflexivity in qualitative research as the act of recognising and acknowledging one's own biases, assumptions and values, while understanding how they can impact the research. Olmos-Vega et al. (2022:2) describe reflexivity as a series of continuous, collaborative and multifaceted practices in which researchers consciously analyse, assess and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research process (Patel & Patel, 2019). Engaging in reflexivity and examining one' s preconceptions is an ongoing and crucial process when formulating the research question, conducting interviews and analysing data (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

In order to achieve reflexivity, the researcher kept a reflective journal where he documented participants' thoughts, emotions and behaviours throughout the research process. The researcher also made note of how their others' viewpoints may have influenced the study. Additionally, the researcher jotted down participants' remarks and their own thoughts during interviews.

1.11.2 Data collection

This study focused on educators in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district in the North West Province as the target population. According to Creswell and Poth (2023:112), a population comprises individuals who share common characteristics relevant to the research problem. Educators from six secondary schools were purposefully selected for the study based on their direct experience with safety-related challenges (Babbie, 2021:189). The researcher chose these schools based on their proximity and the prevalence of learner-on-educator violence. Educators have frequently expressed concerns about such incidents (Neuman, 2021:203). These schools were selected due to their past incidents of school violence and their willingness to grant access to the researcher (Tracy, 2020:78). The researcher interviewed seven participants at each school. The study involved two types of interviews: one-on-one interviews with the principal or deputy principal, and focus-group interviews with four post-level 1 educators and two post-level 2 educators (heads of departments) from each school. The interviews are scheduled to take place at six secondary schools within the Ngaka Modiri Molema district in the North West. The participants were selected based on specific attributes, such as their accessibility, teaching background for educators, personal encounters with bullying, and other relevant characteristics that aligned with the research objectives (Silverman, 2022:51).

To ensure participants possessed the necessary characteristics and experiences, they were chosen based on criteria outlined by Brinkmann (2022:51). These participants were considered information-rich and illuminative, as well as able to provide valuable insights into the safety concerns faced by educators (Bhandari, 2023:126). Face-to-face interviews were conducted to gather information on educator safety, including reports of learner misconduct that compromised teachers' well-being.

As explained by Hennink and Kaiser (2022:218), purposive sampling involves selecting individuals for specific reasons. In this study, high-school educators from six schools were chosen, with seven participants from each school selected for semi-structured interviews. Educator participants were selected from those teaching Grades 8 to 12 to ensure a diverse representation. This approach helped the researcher understand the impact of learner-on-educator violence and the responses of school leaders and department officials to this issue.

Using a semi-structured interview guide, the researcher carefully conducted detailed personal interviews with participants, lasting approximately 45 minutes each on average. The interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the educator, typically during their free teaching slots. Prior to the interviews, participants were clearly informed of the purpose of the study and asked to sign an informed consent form. Participant responses were recorded using an audio-recorder to ensure that information was accurately captured during transcription.

Semi-structured interviews: One-on-one interviews and focus-group interviews

Semi-structured and focus-group interviews were planned to gather detailed insights on educator safety within the chosen schools. Maree (2019) suggests that semi-structured interviews are frequently employed in research studies to support data obtained from other sources. Maree (2019) notes that semi-structured interviews are typically brief and revolve around a set of questions prepared by the researcher prior to the interview. This approach involves asking open-ended questions that can be further explored and clarified during the interview process (Maree, 2019).

The use of semi-structured and focus-group interviews was deemed suitable for this study. Participants were presented with open-ended questions tailored to their individual experiences and responses. Maree (2019) advises researchers to carefully consider participants' feedback to ensure that new avenues of research are directly relevant to the subject under investigation.

Sullivan and Forrester (2019:102) state that focus groups allow for dynamic interactions between participants. For researchers interested in exploring collective thinking and publishing how people negotiate or help shape ideas, focus groups are ideal. Focus groups provide extensive data because participants generate detailed reports when discussing their perspectives and experiences. If more participants than researchers are present, the influence of researchers tends to decrease because participants can act as mediators – for instance, by asking each other questions or questioning each other's claims (Sullivan & Forrester, 2019:102).

The use of semi-structured and focus-group interviews was considered suitable for this research due to their adaptable nature and ability to elicit unforeseen and genuine responses through open-ended inquiries. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview

method was employed as it encompasses essential questions that reveal approaches to addressing violence against educators.

The research incorporated semi-structured and focus-group interviews because they allowed the interviewer to steer the discussion towards topics relevant to the study. In semi-structured interviews, follow-up questions, also known as probes, are developed based on participants' previous responses (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Conversely, Mirhosseini (2020:99) suggests that group interviews often yield a wealth of information compared to individual interviews.

To ensure a representative yet manageable sample, six secondary schools were purposefully selected from the Ngaka Modiri Molema district based on their documented safety challenges and willingness to participate. From each selected school, one principal or deputy was invited for a one-on-one in-depth interview to provide perspectives on safety issues, policies and interventions. Six educators per school were purposively chosen to participate in focus-group discussions, ensuring diverse insights from educators with direct classroom and school safety experiences. This approach allowed for rich qualitative data, while maintaining a feasible scope for in-depth analysis. The aim was to continue collecting data until data saturation was achieved, indicating that no new codes or themes arose from the interviews. It was anticipated that having 38 participants was enough to reach saturation in this study.

The researcher prepared interview questions for the participants. Participants were expected to respond honestly to the interview questions asked by the researcher. Each group interview lasted around 45 minutes, while individual interviews with principals and deputy principals lasted about the same length of time. Participants were given the study findings for member checking to verify accuracy. All interviews were recorded on a password-protected laptop after obtaining consent. Interviews were conducted at the selected schools at a convenient time for the participants. The data gathered from the interviews was recorded and transcribed for analysis. The information gathered from interviews using a recording device was saved on a disk and memory card. A printed copy of the transcribed data was also securely stored. All electronic and physical data was kept in a secure safe located in the supervisor's office. Access to this data was restricted to the supervisor and the researcher to maintain confidentiality. No unauthorised individuals were allowed to view the stored information.

In addition to interviews, this research employed document analysis as a form of data collection. According to Tracy (2020:81), document analysis encompasses all human-created objects, including physical copies of documents that offer insights into the research topic. Dalglish et al. (2020:1424) define document analysis as the examination of documents to provide context and complement other data-collection methods. To enhance the findings gathered through interviews, the researcher analysed documents related to learner-on-educator violence. Principals at the research sites were asked to provide documents, such as learner codes of conduct, classroom rules, school safety policies, reports on violent incidents, minutes of disciplinary hearings and records of learner misconduct from the disciplinary committee.

In this research, triangulation was employed to ensure the credibility of the study. Triangulation, as defined by Donkoh and Mensah (2023:7), involves examining a single phenomenon using diverse sources of data, various theories, methods and research. Through triangulation, information from multiple sources is utilised to support, expand on and shed light on a research issue, ultimately reducing methodological and personal biases, while improving the overall applicability of the study. Noble and Heale (2019:67) suggest that research triangulation is a process that enhances the credibility and validity of research, essentially working towards validating the findings of a study. The same authors suggest that using triangulation in research can enhance its quality by providing multiple sources of data to illuminate various aspects of a particular phenomenon. Triangulation also allows for the identification of inconsistencies, where one data set contradicts a hypothesis proposed by another data set. Additionally, it can validate a hypothesis by showing consistency among different sets of findings. Moreover, triangulation aids in interpreting and understanding the outcomes of a research study. The fundamental principle of triangulation is that using multiple methods that lead to the same conclusions increases the reliability and validity of the research results (Noble & Heale, 2019:67).

1.11.3 Data analysis

Mezmir (2020) defines qualitative data analysis as the process of structuring, assessing, deciphering and proposing solutions to research inquiries that arise from qualitative data, conceptual understanding and feedback (Patel & Patel, 2019). The study employed reflexive thematic analysis as a method of qualitative data analysis.

Thematic analysis, as a qualitative data analysis technique, examines data sets (such as interview transcripts or focus-group discussions) to identify patterns of significance in order to delineate themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019:8) suggest that thematic analysis is a suitable approach for investigating an individual's perspectives, opinions, knowledge, experiences or values based on various qualitative data sources, such as interview transcripts or survey responses.

Data analysis is a methodical process of examining and organising data in a manner that simplifies comprehension, as outlined by Tracy (2019:212). The collection of data through interviews and document analysis necessitates the application of thematic analysis for data interpretation. Howitt (2019:122) characterises thematic analysis as a technique involving the grouping of gathered data into descriptive themes or categories. Xu and Zammit (2020:2) describe thematic analysis as a systematic method for uncovering recurring meanings within a data set which is crucial for interpreting a particular phenomenon. Essentially, through a thematic analysis approach, data is structured into themes that highlight overarching patterns related to a common subject within the specified area of interest.

In this study, the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis were foregrounded. In Phase 1, the researcher read through the interview transcripts multiple times to gain familiarity with the data (Terry & Hayfield, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Phase 2 involves the generation of initial codes by categorising interesting data features systematically across the entire data set, followed by the compilation of relevant data (Campbell et al., 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher then proceeds to identify themes in Phase 3, grouping the codes into potential themes and gathering all pertinent data under each theme (Terry & Hayfield, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reviewing themes in Phase 4 ensures alignment with the codes and all relevant data through their sub-themes and overarching themes (Campbell et al., 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Phase 5 entails specifying each theme and formulating clear definitions and titles for the themes (Terry & Hayfield, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Subsequently, the researcher drafts the manuscript by incorporating illustrative quotes and examples, interpreting the themes in relation to the research question (Campbell et al., 2021). By utilising this approach, the researcher is able to explore various

emerging themes and patterns from the data without being constrained by predetermined categories (Terry & Hayfield, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

In this particular study, the reliability and quality of the data was enhanced through the application of thematic analysis, a recursive literature review and member checking. The outcomes outlined in this manuscript were synthesised through a systematic thematic development process. The researcher delved into the extensive interview transcripts to pinpoint recurring themes derived from the interviews. These themes were subsequently analysed to establish connections between thematic elements. Identifying common and repeated patterns in the participants' narratives aided in the formulation of discussion themes. Member checking was used to validate that participants' views were accurately captured and represented during data analysis. Transcripts were shared with participants to ensure the accurate depiction of their narratives without misinterpretation.

In the study by Haq et al. (2023:152), trustworthiness is defined as the degree to which the research findings are relevant, reliable and accurate in representing participants' experiences. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study findings, the authors underscore the importance of meeting the four main criteria, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria are essential for establishing the credibility and reliability of research outcomes.

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility is the extent to which the findings accurately depict the realities and experiences of the participants (Kyngäs et al., 2020). Triangulation was employed to guarantee the precise portrayal of participants' experiences and realities. According to Merriam and Grenier (2019), triangulation entails looking at an event from multiple viewpoints, using various data sources, methodologies, theoretical perspectives and analytical methods, while assessing their alignment with each other.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research pertains to the reliability and consistency of the results across different researchers and over time (Haq et al., 2023:157). Various techniques, such as member checking and maintaining an audit trail, are commonly used by researchers to ensure dependability and establish credibility. Member checking, for example, involves sharing research data with participants to validate its accuracy and alignment with their experiences, thus enhancing the trustworthiness of the study (Arslan, 2022).

Confirmability

Confirmability, as described by Kyngäs et al. (2020), refers to the level of impartiality and the degree to which results accurately represent the experiences of participants rather than the biases of the researchers. It guarantees that a study maintains its objectivity and credibility, with audit trails documenting the progression of the research (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:145). To uphold the confirmability of a study, the researcher provided extensive information about the research design, aiming to establish a detailed audit trail for potential future researchers looking to replicate the study in various contexts.

Transferability

Creswell (2016) defines transferability as a detailed explanation of methods and steps employed to address the main research inquiry. To improve the transferability of the results, the researcher offered a comprehensive elucidation of the phenomena under investigation, as well as the methodologies used for data collection.

1.12 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Recent research highlights the importance of considering the impacts of a study on both participants and society. Bavdekar (2021) stresses the necessity of maintaining data integrity, while ensuring the confidentiality, safety and well-being of research participants. Jena (2020) underscores the significance of obtaining informed consent, protecting participants from harm and ensuring their voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity. Accordingly, ethical standards, including approval from the scientific committee of UNISA, were strictly adhered to in this study. To uphold ethical standards, participants were provided with consent forms and fully informed about the nature of the research. Authorisation was obtained from the Ngaka Modiri

Molema District Education Office to conduct the study in specific schools. School principals and deputy principals were invited to participate through formal correspondence. Participants were assured that any collected information would remain confidential and would be used solely for research purposes. Additionally, pseudonyms were used instead of participants' real names.

Informed consent

Before enrolling any individual in the study, the researcher first obtained their informed consent to ensure that participants understood the research goals, procedures, advantages and potential risks (Millum & Bromwich, 2021). Additionally, participants were informed that their involvement was completely voluntary (Goodwin et al., 2020).

Voluntary participation

Participants were given the opportunity to voluntarily consent to join the research project without facing any force, manipulation or excessive influence. Additionally, participants were fully informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any point without fear of repercussions or punishment (Goodwin et al., 2020).

Confidentiality and anonymity

The researcher guaranteed the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. Personal details of the participants were kept confidential and any information gathered was shared without revealing their identities (Czarnota-Bojarska, 2021).

No harm

Research participants were safeguarded from harm in accordance with the principle of nonmaleficence. This principle, rooted in both ethics and social justice, guarantees that the advantages of the research do not come at the expense of the participants' well-being (Bufacchi, 2020). To support participants during the emotionally taxing study, a counsellor was made available. The researcher ensured participants were fully informed about the research's objectives, procedures, potential risks, benefits and data usage. Additionally, the researcher maintained the anonymity and confidentiality of participants' personal information throughout and after the study, particularly due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

1.13 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

This section outlines the inherent constraints (limitations) of the research process and the intentional boundaries (delimitations) set by the researcher, which together define the scope and interpretative reach of the study's findings.

1.13.1 Limitations of the study

This study is delimited to an exploration of educator-directed violence in six purposively selected secondary schools within the Ngaka Modiri Molema District of the North West Province. The findings are intended to provide in-depth qualitative insight into this specific context and are not statistically generalisable to all schools. The study does not claim to represent the experiences of educators in other districts, primary schools, or private schools.

1.14 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

1.14.1 Educator

According to SACE (2021), an educator is an individual who imparts knowledge, educates or trains others, while offering professional educational services, such as therapy and educational psychology services. This category includes educators, principals, members of SMTs and office-based educators.

1.14.2 Positive discipline

Schlebusch, Makola and Ndlovu (2022) suggest that positive discipline emphasises a proactive rather than a punitive approach, advocating for discipline to be proactive rather than reactive. This approach prioritises supportive actions, such as mutual respect, teaching, clear communication, collaborative planning, self-control, setting a good example, providing encouragement and fostering motivation (Rampa, 2014).

1.14.3 Safety

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993* describes safety as the absence of hazards and a feeling of security, free from the potential for harm. This definition encompasses both real and perceived dangers and risks, which can vary in how they are perceived by different individuals.

1.14.4 School discipline

School discipline involves the guidelines and methods implemented by educational institutions to regulate learner conduct and cater to their developmental requirements. It is considered essential in nurturing learners' ability to exercise self-regulation effectively (Li et al., 2021). According to Wilter et al. (2023), the primary goal of school discipline is to establish a secure, organised and conducive learning atmosphere that typically utilises discipline to address learners' misbehaviour by utilising the rules and strategies set by schools.

1.14.5 Secondary school

Secondary schools encompass learners in Grades 8 and 9 within the Senior Phase, while grades 10 to 12 signify the commencement of the Further Education and Training (FET) Phase. In common terminology, secondary schools are commonly known as high schools (DBE, 2017a).

1.14.6 School violence

According to the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (2016), school violence is characterised as acts of aggression that take place in the vicinity of a school or educational facility.

1.14.7 Violence

Ngobeni (2021:6) defines violence as the intentional application of force or power, through threats or actual physical harm, towards an individual, group or community, which may lead to physical injury, psychological trauma, loss of life or suffering.

1.14.8 Stakeholders

In the context of this study, the term "stakeholders" refers specifically to educators and school principals as the primary institutional actors who are directly responsible for implementing school safety measures and who are most immediately affected by educator-directed violence. This operational definition is deliberately delimited to frontline educational practitioners — those who experience safety incidents daily, who are responsible for reporting and managing such incidents, and whose perspectives are most directly relevant to understanding the factors that maintain or hinder educator safety. The study acknowledges that a broader range of stakeholders exist in the school safety ecosystem, including learners, parents, School Governing Bodies,

Department of Basic Education officials, social workers, and community police forums. However, these broader stakeholder groups were not included as participants due to the study's specific focus on the lived experiences of educators and school leaders within the school environment. The title's use of "stakeholders" should therefore be understood within this delimited, study-specific operationalisation, not as a claim to have included all possible stakeholder groups.

1.15 CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1: Overview of the study

This chapter provides an overview of the research setting, outlines the problem statement and explains the rationale behind the study. It introduces the primary and secondary research questions, along with the study's objectives and significance. Additionally, it includes a summary of the relevant literature and theoretical framework, as well as a concise description of the methodology, ethical considerations and limitations. Key concepts are defined to lay a solid foundation for the thesis as a whole.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter offers an in-depth analysis of academic literature concerning violence directed at educators. It explores the frequency, types, causes and impacts of student aggression towards teachers, both worldwide and in South Africa. The review also assesses current intervention methods, policy frameworks and areas lacking research, thereby placing the present study within the wider academic conversation and clarifying its particular focus.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework for the study: Albert Bandura's social learning theory (SLT). It elucidates the fundamental concepts of observational learning, modelling and reinforcement, while examining how this framework relates to the development of violent behaviour in learners. The significance of SLT in comprehending the social and environmental roots of school violence is also extensively discussed.

Chapter 4: Research methodology

This chapter presents the framework for the qualitative research design and outlines the methodological steps taken. It discusses the interpretive paradigm, the use of a

multiple-case study approach and the data-collection techniques, which included semi-structured interviews, focus-group interviews and document analysis. It also details the target population, the purposive sampling strategy, the process of data analysis using thematic analysis, as well as the measures implemented to ensure trustworthiness and adherence to ethical standards.

Chapter 5: Data presentation and analysis

This chapter discusses and analyses the empirical data gathered from the case-study schools. The findings from interviews and documents are categorised into major themes through reflexive thematic analysis. The results are examined in light of the study's goals, incorporating participant quotes to highlight the nature, causes and effects of violence, along with the perceived effectiveness of safety measures.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and recommendations

The final chapter summarises the overall study and discusses the main findings in relation to existing literature. It includes specific recommendations for policy, practice and future research derived from the analysis. This chapter concludes with an evaluation of the study's limitations and a reflection on its practical implications for ensuring educator safety

1.16 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter served as the foundational introduction to the research, establishing the context, necessity and direction of the inquiry into educator safety in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district. It began by framing the global and national problem of school violence, with a specific focus on the alarming trend of learner-on-educator aggression in South Africa. Citing recent incidents and reports from bodies like SACE, the introduction underscored that violence against educators is not only a violation of their constitutional rights to safety and dignity but also a critical threat to the stability and quality of the education system, leading to educator burnout, attrition and compromised learning environments.

The study's rationale is firmly rooted in the acute challenges faced within the Ngaka Modiri Molema district, North West Province, where recent high-profile violent attacks on educators point to a state of crisis. The study is furthermore motivated by the perceived lack of adequate systemic support for educators, increasing workloads and a gap in localised research on effective safety strategies. The problem statement

articulated this crisis as a complex social challenge fuelled by ineffective leadership, inequality and community issues, which has resulted in the demoralisation and exodus of skilled educators, with long-term consequences for educational outcomes.

To address this problem, the study is guided by the main research question: What factors contribute to educators not feeling safe in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools in the North West province? This was further broken down into four sub-research questions exploring the key factors affecting safety, the effectiveness of current safety measures, the determinants of safety and stakeholder-proposed improvement strategies.

The research aims to evaluate the factors that maintain or hinder educator safety in the district's secondary schools. This aim was operationalised through four specific objectives: to assess the nature and extent of safety incidents; to evaluate existing safety measures and identify gaps; to analyse contributing factors to safety concerns; and to gather stakeholder recommendations for enhancement.

The significance of the study is multifold. It seeks to fill an identified research gap on educator-targeted violence within this specific district. The findings are intended to directly inform the DBE and policymakers, aiding in the review of disciplinary codes of conduct and the development of targeted interventions. By contributing to the body of knowledge on education policy, the study aims to advocate for educators' rights, help retain teaching staff, revive educator morale and ultimately foster safer, more conducive teaching and learning environments.

The chapter also introduced the theoretical framework, Bandura's SLT, which has been used to analyse how violent behaviours are learned and replicated by pupils through observation and modelling within their environments – be it in homes, communities or schools. This framework provides a lens to understand the cyclical nature of violence affecting schools.

A concise overview of the research methodology previewed a qualitative approach situated within an interpretive paradigm. The design is a multiple-case study, focusing on six secondary schools. Data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews (one-on-one with principals and deputies, and focus groups with educators and heads of department) and supplemented by document analysis. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants. Data analysis followed

reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes, with strategies like triangulation and member checking employed to ensure trustworthiness (credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability). The chapter underscored a strong commitment to ethical research practices, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and safeguarding participants from harm.

Finally, the chapter outlined the structure of the thesis, providing a roadmap of the subsequent chapters: literature review (Chapter 2), theoretical framework (Chapter 3), research methodology (Chapter 4), data presentation and analysis (Chapter 5) and conclusion and recommendations (Chapter 6). Key concepts such as educator, violence, safety and positive discipline were defined to ensure conceptual clarity. The chapter summary thus provided a coherent synopsis that linked the pressing social problem of learner-on-educator violence to a feasible, ethically sound research plan designed to generate actionable insights for improving educators' safety in schools.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the entire research study, outlining the research questions, aims and objectives. It highlighted key components, such as the literature review, research design, methodology and ethical considerations. In contrast, this chapter discusses school violence in a broader context, specifically focusing on violence directed by learners towards educators. Relevant research conducted by scholars and other sources on this topic has been examined. This chapter is structured around the study's aims and objectives, thoroughly analysing the violence experienced by educators at the hands of learners, including the various forms of this violence, its causes, consequences and potential preventive measures.

2.2 EDUCATOR-DIRECTED VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL CONTEXTS AND LOCATING IT WITHIN NORTH WEST PROVINCE

Educator-directed violence has emerged as a significant global issue exhibiting remarkably similar patterns and consequences across diverse geographical regions and educational systems. Nielsen and Einarsen (2018:71) establish that workplace bullying and violence against professionals represents a pervasive challenge with international dimensions. In North America, the prevalence of such incidents is particularly alarming. Molefi (2022:265) documents that in Canada and the United States, approximately 80% of teachers have experienced some form of verbal, psychological or physical violence during their careers. Similarly, quantitative research in other regions reveals concerning trends. A national survey of Israeli schools found that 4% of learners in Grades 7 to 11 reported having threatened to harm a teacher, indicating that even lower percentages translate to significant absolute numbers in large populations (Maeng, Malone & Cornell, 2020). The situation in Taiwan demonstrates comparable patterns, with a representative sample of 14,022 Taiwanese youth indicating that nearly one-third had engaged in verbally or physically aggressive behaviour toward teachers (Molefi, 2022:265). Beyond statistical prevalence, psychological research reveals that teachers may feel blamed, powerless

or unsafe, particularly when there is a lack of institutional support from school administrators (Maeng et al., 2020).

To address the challenges faced by educators in various regions, Qwabe, Maluleke and Olutola (2022:117–118) report that in the United States, around 253,000 educators experience threats of injury and 127,500 are physically attacked by learners every year. This violence leads to annual costs exceeding $2 billion (approximately R30.87 billion at the time of this study) due to lost wages, absenteeism, retraining and replacement of educators, medical and psychological care, learner disciplinary processes and increased claims for workers' compensation. In South Africa, a survey conducted by the National Schools Violence Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) (2012:xii) revealed that 52.1% of educators encounter verbal abuse from learners. Additionally, Qwabe et al. (2022:118) indicate that about 12.4% of teachers face physical violence and 3.3% experience sexual violence from learners. The study also emphasises that educators often prefer not to discipline learners and thus tend to remain silent about incidents of violence.

Although schools are fundamentally intended to foster effective teaching and learning environments, safety in many South African schools has emerged as a significant and pressing concern. Ngatane (2019) argues that schools should provide secure environments for all stakeholders. However, numerous South African schools have become environments rife with violence and crime, witnessing daily occurrences of assault, drug abuse, sexual violence and gang-related activities (Riaan, 2019). Incidents where educators fall victim to such violence are frequently reported and documented by the media, reflecting both the severity and frequency of such incidents (Naidu, 2019; Seleka, 2020). Pedagogical and disciplinary approaches also factor into this violence. Waghid and Davids (2020) note that many educators have resigned themselves to losing control in their classrooms and often lack knowledge of alternative, non-violent methods to replace corporal punishment, a practice prohibited under South African law, but previously normalised in educational settings.

The relationship between educator victimisation and professional retention has become increasingly critical. Molefi (2022:265) expresses particular concern over rising educator turnover rates and increased healthcare expenses, both of which adversely affect overall school culture and educational quality. Given the alarming prevalence of both violence against educators and elevated teacher turnover, it is

crucial to investigate the causal relationship between these two phenomena. Peist, McMahon, Davis and Keys (2020:1) present evidence that educator-directed violence can significantly influence an educator's decision to leave the profession entirely. However, as these researchers note, there remains limited research explicitly exploring the connection between such violence and educator turnover and retention patterns. Multiple interconnected factors drive this phenomenon. Molefi (2022:265) identifies that poor working conditions, school violence, negative school environments and undisciplined learners are closely tied to educators' levels of job satisfaction. Moon, Saw and McCluskey (2020) find that an educator's choice to transfer to another school is closely linked to their experiences of feeling threatened or being assaulted by a learner.

Specific documented incidents exemplify the severity of educator-directed violence. The South African Principals Association (SAPA) (2020:5–6) reports disturbing incidents of violence against educators in schools, including video footage of a learner throwing an exercise book at an educator and another showing a group of learners physically assaulting an educator in front of their peers. More severe cases have been recorded. Hlatshwayo (2018:36) documents an extremely violent case involving an educator who was attacked and stabbed 14 times in the back by a learner while writing on a chalkboard. Beyond these extreme cases, SAPA (2020:5–6) notes that many educators hesitate to report incidents for fear of being perceived as incompetent or lacking authority in classroom management. Those who consider seeking counselling worry that it may be viewed as a sign of professional failure or lack of confidence in the school's disciplinary policies. Consequently, educators who do report violence or seek help must continue teaching in the same classrooms as the learners who perpetrated the violence, creating an untenable working situation (SAPA, 2020:5–6).

Sibisi (2016:47) argues that educators increasingly feel unsafe in their classrooms, leading to higher rates of job resignations, burnout, anxiety, fear, PTSD, humiliation and self-esteem problems. Similarly, Grobler (2018:2) points out that educators' personal encounters with violence result in symptoms such as depression, headaches, anxiety, low self-worth, feelings of helplessness, frustration, shame, guilt, disillusionment and professional exhaustion. These negative impacts can foster a poor attitude toward learners, reluctance to engage in classroom learning, resignation from the profession, subpar teaching, lack of enthusiasm, temper control issues, classroom

management problems, a decline in educational effectiveness and a damaged reputation among learners, peers and administrators. Nonetheless, there has been insufficient focus on how educators' experiences with violent learners affect the broader educational environment. The victimisation of educators can significantly impact learner performance and behaviour, as well as educator recruitment, well-being and retention.

NAPTOSA has highlighted the issue of underreported school violence, while FEDSAS has expressed concern over parents' lack of involvement in addressing this problem (Dlamini, 2018:96). In a statement regarding the *2018/2019 Education Budget Vote*, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) remarked:

> *It is unfortunate that the budget did not allocate any funds for school safety, which we consider vital for delivering quality public education. Our schools are affected by learner violence, attacks on educators, abuse and gangsterism. We believe the DBE should take the lead in ensuring school safety, rather than leaving it solely to the security sector* (Dlamini 2018:1).

The global prevalence of educator-directed violence establishes this as a widespread crisis rather than an isolated problem. However, the South African experience occurs within a unique socio-political landscape shaped by apartheid's legacy, systemic inequality and democratic transition. This contextual gap underscores the necessity of the present study in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district, which is characterised by rural poverty and under-resourced schools. While existing research confirms the severity globally, limited empirical evidence examines how local factors interplay to sustain or mitigate educator victimisation, which this study aims to address.

2.3 EDUCATOR SAFETY CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICA WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO THE NORTH WEST PROVINCE

Learner-on-teacher violence is a significant concern in educational environments, taking on various forms that negatively impact the well-being of educators and the overall effectiveness of schools. This discussion outlines the main types of such violence, backed by academic research and empirical data.

While educators encounter multiple forms of violence, this study concentrates on four specific types of learner-on-educator violence, as research indicates these are the

most prevalent and impactful (Terzoudi, 2020:17). Terzoudi (2020:17) categorises violence against educators into two main types: direct violence (including verbal and physical aggression) and indirect violence (such as defamation, property damage and rumour-spreading). UNESCO (2017:8) identifies that in schools, violence often appears as physical, psychological and sexual violence, as well as bullying, which reflects the multifaceted nature of educator victimisation. Netshitangani (2019:24) offers important gender-differentiated insights, noting that boys tend to exhibit more physical aggression in learner-on-educator incidents, while girls are more likely to engage in verbal aggression. Kistnasamy (2019:216) corroborates this, noting that even though educators primarily worry about the lack of protection from physical violence, they also often encounter verbal abuse, particularly from girls. Additionally, Cummings (2020:60) indicates that educators deal with various forms of violence, with physical violence being the most distressing to those affected.

2.3.1 Physical violence

Physical violence continues to be a significant issue faced by educators in educational settings. While there is ongoing scholarly debate about how to precisely define physical aggression, Ersan (2019:2) characterises physical violence as harmful actions, which may include throwing objects at educators, using weapons and harmful attacks by learners. UNESCO (2017:14) asserts that any aggressive behaviour aimed at causing harm should be deemed physical violence. In areas with high crime rates and easy access to weapons, Ngobeni (2021:11) notes that physical violence can manifest as stabbings and shootings.

The South African Police Service (SAPS) (2014:1) provides a legal definition, stating that physical assault constitutes the unlawful and intentional application of force against a person, making them believe that immediate harm is imminent, particularly with the intent to inflict serious bodily injury. Melanda et al. (2018:2) further explain that physical violence can involve using an object to harm or inflict pain, potentially resulting in death or serious injury.

This viewpoint is echoed by the Council of Europe (2022:1), which states that using objects or weapons, as well as actions like burning, biting, kicking, punching and beating, are all forms of physical assault. The availability of weapons or objects that

can be weaponised can lead to fatal outcomes or serious injuries requiring hospitalisation (Council of Europe, 2022:1).

Contextual factors significantly influence the prevalence and severity of physical violence in schools. Nhambura (2020:134) indicates that in South African schools, physical violence is primarily perpetrated by learners over the age of 18 who struggle to adhere to discipline like their peers. This situation highlights critical issues surrounding education policies that permit over-age learners in schools. Furthermore, the progression policy significantly contributes to the prevalence of over-age learners[3], as these learners know they will be promoted to the next grade despite failing to meet necessary requirements.

By contrast, in Australia, physical violence is less common in schools compared to other types of educator-directed violence (Lowe et al., 2020:189). However, Riley (2018:20) states that 35% of educators in Australia have faced both punches and assaults involving weapons, demonstrating that even in relatively safe contexts, significant proportions of educators experience physical violence.

There is ongoing debate among researchers about the underlying reasons behind physical aggression, with factors such as alcohol use and gang involvement believed to play a significant role (Ersan, 2019:6). Nunan (2018:4) introduces an important caution that educators are not always blameless in these incidents, as physical violence can sometimes be a response to provocation from educators, including the use of corporal punishment for discipline. This suggests that emotional reactions stemming from various triggers of anger link physical violence to teaching environments and educator behaviour. Windvo (2023:38) adds that apart from corporal punishment, there are few effective alternatives to maintaining order in schools, which have relied on such punitive methods for decades, viewing them as crucial for facilitating teaching and learning.

2.3.2 Verbal aggression

Verbal aggression represents one of the most prevalent forms of educator-directed violence, though it is often underestimated in severity. Beckmann (2019:1) defines verbal aggression as behaviour that threatens others through various methods,

[3] Approximately 24% of 20-year-olds in South Africa were still attending secondary school as of 2021 (Stats SA, 2021).

including ominous letters or notes, gossip and name-calling. According to Ferrara, Franceschini, Villani and Corsello (2019:1), verbal violence encompasses various actions, such as restricting movement, mockery, intimidation, threats, discrimination, rejection and other non-physical forms of aggression. Windvo (2025:39) provides concrete examples of emotional abuse, which include verbal threats, insults, belittling comments and other malicious tactics that make the victim feel inferior, ashamed or worthless. Researchers generally describe verbal violence as behaviour intended to inflict psychological harm with a deliberate message (Taylor & Smith, 2019:52).

While parents can also contribute to this issue by sometimes engaging in verbal victimisation, research indicates that most incidents of verbal violence in schools are committed by learners against educators and fellow pupils (Taylor & Smith, 2019:52). Additionally, Beckmann (2019:1) warns that children who experience verbal aggression from their parents during childhood are more likely to perpetrate verbal abuse toward educators later in school, a pattern aligning with the principles of SLT. Supporting this developmental perspective, Aloia (2017:230) emphasises the connection between childhood verbal abuse and behavioural patterns observed in adulthood, suggesting that those who faced verbal aggression as children often become aggressors themselves in adulthood.

The psychological impact of verbal aggression is substantial and often under-recognised. Poling et al. (2019:9) emphasise that while verbal aggression is more subtle than physical aggression, it can inflict harm on victims comparable to that of physical violence. This suggests that verbal aggression is often overlooked in terms of its danger, yet it is both prevalent and inhumane, as it can humiliate educators and damage their professional image among learners, peers and administrators. Consequently, there is a significant need for protective measures to ensure that educators are shielded from verbal aggression perpetrated by learners, with school leaders playing a crucial role in this effort. Although such aggression may be an attempt to assert power or control, its primary intent is to inflict harm. Examples of psychological violence include verbal and emotional abuse, such as rejection, isolation, insulting remarks, rumours, name-calling, threats, ridicule and psychological punishment. While psychological discipline does not involve physical harm, it can nonetheless demean, undermine, or intimidate the victim, affecting their psychological well-being (Ferrara et al., 2019:2).

2.3.3 Harassment

Harassment emerges as a particularly significant form of educator victimisation, often incorporating multiple dimensions beyond direct confrontation. A study by Lowe et al. (2020:193) found that harassment was the most frequently reported type of violence faced by educators in Australia, with 64.3% indicating they had experienced victimisation from learners. While Lowe et al. (2020:189) noted an increase in direct victimisation of Australian educators, they also highlighted that personal property offenses contribute substantially to the harassment educators endure. In South Africa, Majong (2023:29) describes these property offenses as theft or damage to educators' belongings, such as vehicles being damaged by learners.

While many countries grapple with learner-on-educator violence in schools, the extent and manifestation of the issue varies between nations. Furthermore, harassment of educators extends beyond victimisation to include sexual harassment, a particularly invasive form of abuse. Mabuza (2020:31) notes that sexual harassment encompasses not just physical actions which can be misinterpreted, but also includes verbal harassment (such as sexual jokes, innuendos, body-related remarks, inquiries about personal sex lives and sexual insults) and visual harassment (like the display of explicit images). While not all educators face extreme forms of sexual harassment, particularly rape, Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020:340) argue that many educators do endure various forms of sexual harassment from learners.

The experience of sexual harassment creates particular challenges for educators across gender lines. Mabuza (2020:31) highlights that the nature of sexual harassment which educators suffer is complex and extends beyond learners, as educators may also experience harassment from colleagues of the opposite sex. Despite the clear negative effects of sexual harassment on educators' well-being and professional efficacy, most research focuses largely on learners as victims, thereby neglecting the harassment educators face from learners. Importantly, research indicates that sexual harassment does not discriminate by gender, as both female and male educators can be victims (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020:340). Schools experience sexual harassment in both internal and external forms. Externally, male learners are exposed to masculine behaviours that promote sexual harassment through their families, communities and the media outside of school. If schools do not effectively address this

violence, it permeates the school environment and becomes an internal issue (Mncube & Harber, 2014:326).

2.3.4 Bullying

Bullying represents a distinct form of learner-on-educator violence, differentiating it from isolated incidents. According to Steyn and Singh (2018:2), bullying is distinct from other types of learner-on-educator violence due to its repeated and persistent nature over time. This suggests that the prevalence of bullying directed at educators is frequently overlooked, despite its capacity to systematically undermine educators' professional and personal well-being, leading to significant mental health challenges. Such bullying violations infringe upon educators' constitutional right to a safe work environment. Mncube and Harber (2014:326) explain that bullying can take various forms, including humiliation, derogatory remarks, threats, name-calling, sarcasm, spreading false information, teasing, social exclusion, psychological torture and ridicule. Bullying can be categorised as either direct, through physical or verbal abuse, or indirect, involving more subtle social tactics like exclusion and gossip.

To evaluate the occurrence of learner-on-educator bullying, a study by Billett et al. (2019) found that 70% of educators reported experiencing bullying. Because this form of bullying occurs within the school environment, it is classified as workplace bullying. Verbal harassment remains the predominant type of learner-on-educator bullying. Additionally, research by Woudstra et al. (2018:6) indicates that many educators who experience learner-on-educator bullying report that such incidents primarily occur during class time, suggesting a systemic challenge within the teaching-learning environment. This highlights that anyone can fall victim to bullying, irrespective of their social standing or position. The literature delineates distinct violence forms, yet educators' lived experiences often involve overlapping victimisation that defies neat categorisation. Physical violence can coincide with verbal abuse and psychological harassment, creating complex trauma. Much existing literature adopts a deficit lens, focusing on incidence without adequately exploring systemic factors enabling such behaviour. The forms described are symptomatic of deeper dysfunction within school systems and discipline frameworks. This study moves beyond documentation to critically examine underlying conditions that normalise violence in secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district context.

2.4 PRIMARY DETERMINANTS OF EDUCATOR SAFETY IN THE NGAKA MODIRI MOLEMA DISTRICT

While learner-on-educator violence is never acceptable, Malihah et al. (2017:402) argue that such incidents are often rooted in underlying issues. Dube and Hlalele (2018:74) emphasise that a significant yet overlooked factor contributing to school violence is the quality of the relationship between educators and learners. In supporting this viewpoint, Malihah et al. (2017:402) highlights that poor communication can lead to negative dynamics between educators and learners. This suggests that fostering positive relationships could reduce instances of learner-on-educator violence. Conversely, if the relationship is poor, it may lead to an increase in such violence. Although there are multiple factors at play, this study concentrated on four specific causes that are believed to be on the rise and are thus pertinent to the research.

2.4.1 Peer-related factors

Kaczkowski et al. (2020:1) define peer-related factors as the specific traits or influences of peers that can either heighten or lessen the chances of learners exhibiting violent behaviour. Liu et al. (2021:2) suggest that these peer influences can have both detrimental and beneficial effects on children, as these relationships involve emotional bonds. Essentially, adverse peer relationships can lead to increased violence among learners, while positive peer connections can promote non-violent conduct. Terzoudi (2020:19) adds that schools fostering a culture that accepts aggressive behaviour can enhance peer pressure that victimises educators. This study posits that negative peer-related factors significantly contribute to instances of violence directed by students towards educators.

Research examining the occurrence of learner-on-educator violence has shown that schools compromising educator safety often have learners involved with drugs, gangs and weapons. For instance, Lunneblad and Johansson (2021:2) found a direct link between acts of violence towards educators and learner substance use. Additionally, Saladino et al. (2021:5) reported that the majority of cases of violence against educators stemmed from learners' exposure to violence and drug use. Dealing with intoxicated learners poses a challenge for educators, as it tends to provoke aggression and violent behaviour among learners.

Another major contributor to school violence is the prevalence of weapons that learners bring to school. A weapon is defined as an object designed to inflict harm on individuals or damage property (Hlatshwayo, 2018:41). Children often find it easy to obtain weapons illegally, which then find their way into school settings. During altercations, these can range from guns and knives to everyday items like bottles and pencils. Hlatshwayo (2018:21) points out that dangerous items, such as pangas and knives, are frequently used in schools. Learners sometimes bring these items to threaten and harm others. A study by Windvoël (2023:45) highlights that carrying a weapon, whether on or off school grounds, signals an individual's readiness to use it, creating a serious risk to both educators and fellow learners. Banda (2022) notes that it's increasingly common for learners to carry knives, guns and other sharp objects, which pose a threat to both peers and educators, despite efforts by the national and provincial education authorities to establish schools as violence-free environments. Additionally, some learners arrive at school under the influence of drugs or alcohol (Banda, 2022).

Kistnasamy (2019:34) claims that in South Africa, learners involved with gangs are taught to be violent and often receive rewards for engaging in violent acts, which boosts their sense of power. Supporting this, Gxubane and Mguzulwa (2019:268) point out that gang members live in constant fear, believing that they are targeted for attacks or even death, as they are frequently in conflict with rival gangs and rely on their peers for protection. Consequently, all gang-affiliated learners tend to act similarly in order to uphold the gang's code, ensuring they do not appear weak to their adversaries, often resulting in educators becoming victims of their violent acts.

Beyond learner-driven aggression, educator behaviour itself can contribute to the escalation of violence. Verbal humiliation, intimidation and authoritarian teaching styles, when employed by educators, have been shown to exacerbate learner frustration and provoke retaliatory responses (Grobler, 2018:28; Malihah et al., 2017:402). This points to a reciprocal cycle of violence, where educator provocation generates learner aggression, which in turn invites harsher educator responses, creating an escalating conflict spiral. Nunan (2018:4) cautions that physical violence by learners is sometimes a direct reaction to educator provocation, suggesting that educators are not always blameless in these incidents. Corporal punishment, though legally prohibited in South African schools, remains covertly practised and has been

linked to increased learner aggression (Mahlangu et al., 2021:3; Ngubane, 2018:182). Furthermore, systemic contributors such as overcrowded classrooms, chronic shortages of psychosocial support staff, weak school leadership, and inadequate safety infrastructure create conditions that normalise violence and erode respect for authority (Windvoël, 2023:45; Bipath, 2017:66). Addressing educator-directed violence therefore requires acknowledging these institutional and behavioural complexities, rather than attributing causality solely to learner pathology or family dysfunction.

The literature also suggests that the school's location significantly impacts gang membership among learners. According to Du Plessis (2019:2), schools in suburban areas experience higher levels of disruptive behaviour compared to those in rural areas. However, Gxubane and Mguzulwa (2019:268) argue that many South African learners in rural regions, who must walk to school, are more susceptible to joining gangs. While gang violence is not exclusive to rural schools, those in rural areas tend to face a higher incidence of violence against educators[4]. This indicates that schools in communities with gang-affiliated learners are likely to encounter elevated levels of learner-on-educator violence.

Henneberger, Mushonga and Preston (2021:57) suggest that as young people mature, they tend to spend more time with their peers than with their parents. They seek mutual understanding and acceptance, leading to friendships developed through peer selection and socialisation. Levey, Garandeau, Meeus and Branje (2019:68) observe that most adolescents engage in aggressive behaviour with others and are less inclined to act violently on their own. As they transition into adolescence, these learners look for guidance from adults, but when such support is lacking, they often establish their own gang groups (Macfarlane, 2019:412).

2.4.2 School factors

While schools are intended to provide a safe environment for both learners and educators, Malihah et al. (2017:402) argue that even a minor issue, like a breakdown in relationships between learners and educators, can lead to an increase in violence from learners toward educators. Furthermore, an examination of literature on school

[4] "Educators suffer psychologically due to the stress they endure in communities and schools that are prone to gang violence, and because of this, there is a reduction in staff establishment especially in urban and semi-urban areas where the phenomenon is highly pronounced" (Khuzwayo, 2021)

climate indicates that the overall quality of the school environment plays a crucial role in either mitigating or exacerbating instances of learner-on-educator violence. According to Varela et al. (2020:4), a positive school climate can significantly help in reducing violent incidents affecting teachers, while a negative climate may result in higher occurrences of such violence. Additionally, educators can also play a role in escalating these situations. Grobler (2018:28) points out that educators who lack professionalism and ethics may contribute to learner-on-educator violence through inappropriate comments, bullying and verbal abuse of learners, prompting acts of retaliation.

Dube and Hlalele (2018:78) highlight that the rise in violence from learners toward educators is influenced by social injustices, such as unequal treatment of learners, inadequate resource allocation and discriminatory comments from educators. Despite the prohibition of corporal punishment in South African schools as per the *South African Schools Act 84 of 1996* (SASA), some educators still use it. Mahlangu et al. (2021:3) caution that corporal punishment can lead to increased violence from learners, as it may provoke negative reactions against educators. Ngubane (2018:182) argues that educators who continue to administer corporal punishment further intensify learners' aggression, portraying unprofessional behaviour.

In addition to corporal punishment, Bushman et al. (2018:333) suggest that various factors, including social exclusion, educator aggression and lack of support, can foster resentment among learners, making them more likely to engage in violent behaviour toward educators. Singo (2017:41) emphasises that a weak relationship between educators and learners contributes to a rise in such violence. A study by Malihah et al. (2017:402) identified that educators not adhering to ethical codes and maintaining a closed demeanour can worsen the situation, leading to parental distrust in the school. Consequently, ineffective communication between schools and homes emerges as a critical issue; managing learner-on-educator violence becomes difficult if parents do not actively engage. For instance, some schools continue using outdated methods of parental involvement, such as sending letters to communicate misconduct. However, these methods are often ineffective, as letters may not reach parents or they may be unwilling to take action.

2.4.3 Family and community factors

While a comprehensive theory on parenting is lacking, there is a general belief that familial love and support significantly help reduce aggressive behaviour. This suggests that children raised in homes where violence is a method of conflict resolution are more likely to mimic this behaviour and potentially engage in learner-on-educator violence. Furthermore, Kistnasamy (2019:37) highlights that many communities in South African townships contend with numerous risk factors, including high poverty levels, limited job opportunities and a culture that accepts violence, all of which are linked to higher rates of violence among school learners.

UNICEF (2020:11) posits that children who do not receive financial assistance and parental affection and are exposed to violence are more prone to misbehaviour. This suggests a correlation between negative familial influences and various incidents of school violence. In line with the SLT, which posits that learners' engagement in violence is connected to their upbringing, Castro-Sánchez et al. (2019:2) assert that children who experience any form of violence or trauma during their formative years are more likely to become perpetrators of violence later on.

Singo (2017:41) highlights that a weak parent-child relationship is a major issue, as heightened household stress can contribute to increased incidents of leaner-on-educator violence. For instance, in various communities, corporal punishment is commonplace, which can exacerbate children's aggressive behaviour and prompt them to attack educators. Thus, effective parenting, regardless of community beliefs, is crucial in shielding children from violent tendencies, while poor parenting may lead to a rise in violent behaviours among learners.

Berkowitz et al. (2021:393) assert that a lack of parental support can negatively impact children's social and emotional growth, as well as their behaviour. Many young people expect to receive similar levels of care at home and at school, and inadequate treatment may drive them to act out violently in order to seek attention. Adebiyi et al. (2022:2) support this notion by noting that some parents struggle to form meaningful connections with their children and to provide quality parenting.

Patton et al. (2017:11) further state that significant levels of domestic violence or the constant absence of parents can create feelings of insecurity and emotional instability in children, which can have repercussions on schools. Hattery (2018:17) stresses the

importance of addressing the tension between learners and schools, suggesting that SMTs should promote peace and harmony in these environments. Consequently, there is a link between family violence and the likelihood of learners from such backgrounds engaging in violent behaviour at school (Lekalakala, 2019:51).

2.4.4 Individual factors

Individual factors encompass personal characteristics related to behavioural issues in children, such as the belief that using violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflicts. According to Røysamb et al. (2018:2), these factors are shaped by both genetic and psychological traits. Those who engage in violence against educators are often dealing with their own feelings of inadequacy, irritability, a desire for dominance linked to a positive social image and a disregard for established rules. Castro-Sánchez et al. (2019:2) explain that learners with low self-confidence are more likely to either commit acts of school violence or become victims themselves.

Furthermore, Liu et al. (2021:2) note that these individual factors also relate to a learner's ability to manage their emotions, as negative emotional states lead to diminished self-control, increasing violent behaviour. Perpetrators of learner-on-educator violence tend to exhibit high impulsivity and a constant need to assert control over others, seeking recognition for their misbehaviour. Additionally, they often grapple with emotional issues stemming from past aggression. Supporting this notion, Nhambura (2020:43) highlights that individuals who perpetrate violence against educators frequently suffer from psychological disorders. The multifaceted and complex nature of learner-on-educator violence necessitates more than one kind of intervention. However, current research treats factors as separate variables rather than interconnected socio-ecological elements. A critical limitation is the insufficient attention given to how certain policy environments, particularly the *Basic Education Laws Amendment Act 32 of 2024* (BELA)[5], may inadvertently contribute to conditions enabling violence. Educators perceive a power imbalance where learner rights are emphasised at educator safety's expense. Additionally, studies largely originate from Western or urban contexts, raising transferability questions to rural districts like Ngaka

[5] The BELA Act significantly strengthens learner rights regarding protection, discipline and inclusion, leading many educators to argue it disproportionately favours students, while undermining classroom discipline and teacher authority (Koalane & Letuma, 2025).

Modiri Molema. This study addresses these gaps by foregrounding educators' voices in challenging environments.

2.5 NHANCING EDUCATOR SAFETY AS A CRITICAL ENABLER WITHIN THE NGAKA MODIRI MOLEMA DISTRICT

Educator victimisation due to learner violence is a significant concern that profoundly influences educators' decisions to either transfer to different schools or leave the teaching profession entirely (Peist et al., 2020:2). In South Korea, education statistics reveal that 10,531 educators left their positions in 2020, with 30.4% retiring, 58.5% opting for voluntary early retirement and 11.1% resigning for other reasons. Notably, those who left before reaching retirement age significantly outnumbered those who retired at the appropriate age. Moreover, the Korean Federation of Teachers' Association reported 402 cases in 2020 regarding violations of educators' rights, indicating that many educators experienced mental distress.

The violence perpetrated by learners against educators not only jeopardises educators' mental well-being, but also adversely affects their physical health and personal relationships. A study by Li et al. (2023:1) highlights that most research on learner violence has primarily focused on learner victims. While some recent studies have started to examine the experiences of educators, this area of research remains in its early stages. Understanding the psychological factors behind educator victimisation is essential in developing policies and therapeutic interventions to support affected teachers (Li et al., 2023:1).

Educators who experience violence from learners often develop PTSD (Li et al., 2023:1–2). Research by Kim and Oh (2018) indicates that these educators may find themselves reliving the traumatic events, shying away from social interactions and responding excessively to learners' problematic behaviours. Many affected educators report feelings of mistrust and fear towards learners and parents, while noting a decline in their relationships with colleagues, including school administrators. Additionally, violations of educators' rights, particularly learner violence directed against them, can physically and psychologically drain these professionals, resulting in a detached and unresponsive attitude towards learners and diminishing their sense of accomplishment, which can lead to psychological burnout (Cho, 2018).

PTSD symptoms resulting from such violence may also prompt self-destructive behaviours like binge eating and alcohol abuse (Li et al., 2023:2). These symptoms further erode educators' confidence in their roles, causing them to question their commitment to the profession and contemplate resigning (Min & Young, 2021). According to Lawton (2023:15), PTSD is a frequent outcome of traumatic experiences, including violence, with common symptoms such as night terrors, mood swings and heightened anxiety. When left untreated, these issues can result in significant negative consequences, including burnout, a diminished sense of efficacy in teaching or even exiting the profession (Lawton, 2023:15).

Espelage and Hong (2019) describe the school climate as the established boundaries of acceptable behaviour, norms and rules that influence overall safety in educational settings. Research indicates that a positive school climate can help learners foster a constructive self-identity and steer clear of negative behaviours that may lead to violence. Conversely, a negative school climate can create an environment that incites violence toward educators, causing fear, health problems and diminished job performance among teachers. Due to the multifaceted repercussions of learner-on-educator violence, burnout is a common effect of educator victimisation. Olivier et al. (2021:201) define burnout as a mental state characterised by low self-esteem and negative emotional outcomes. Maran and Begotti (2020:3) note that exhaustion and disengagement are distinct aspects of measuring burnout. Supporting this point, Olivier et al. (2021:197) argue that both direct victims and witnesses of violence face significant risks of emotional exhaustion.

A study by Cummings (2020:14) highlights that violence from learners towards educators leads to both physical and emotional issues, resulting in personal detachment among educators. Bjereld et al. (2021:259) emphasise that educator victimisation can adversely affect their identity as they may be perceived as weak. Additionally, Mabuza (2020:33) notes that the occurrence of violence against educators can have such a profound psychological impact that it diminishes their self-esteem and even leads some to consider suicide. This paints a clear picture that repeated exposure to victimisation is likely to exacerbate psychological problems, resulting in chronic exhaustion.

The cascading effects of educator victimisation extend beyond individual suffering to educational quality and system sustainability. Yet a critical gap exists in longitudinal

studies examining educators' long-term trajectories post-violence. Insufficient attention addresses ripple effects on learners and school culture. When educators operate in fear or because of burnout, the quality of their teaching suffers, perpetuating cycles fuelling further misconduct. In South Africa's strained education system facing high attrition and teacher shortages, violence-driven losses exacerbate challenges, particularly in rural districts where recruitment is problematic. Understanding these effects within Ngaka Modiri Molema is essential for advocating systemic intervention.

2.6 CHALLENGES RELATED TO ADDRESSING LEARNER-ON-TEACHER VIOLENCE

2.6.1 Policy contradictions and fragmentation

According to SACE (2020:32), school leaders implement various policies to foster discipline and uphold high ethical standards. Manamela (2021:54) emphasises that a code of conduct for learners is a key strategy to ensure discipline is maintained in schools, which in turn supports a conducive learning and teaching environment. Similarly, Mohlala (2021:48) identifies that a major challenge in policy implementation stems from limitations in authority, which hampers effective enforcement. Hanslo (2020:38) concurs, noting that the lack of proper mechanisms allows learners to escape consequences for their misbehaviour according to the code of conduct. This discrepancy between policy and execution obstructs efforts to tackle violence against educators by learners.

Conversely, Du Plessis and Mncube (2018:18) found that principals often act in an authoritarian manner during disciplinary actions, sometimes making unilateral decisions. Makhasane and Khanare (2018:22) noted that senior management, including principals and SMTs, struggle to establish and maintain an environment where educators face less violence. Similarly, Mkandla (2021:11) pointed out instances where policies are contradictory, complicating the resolution of various learner behavioural issues. For instance, while the code of conduct and safety policies include severe sanctions like expulsion, this conflicts with the *Children's Act 38 of 2005*, which aims to protect children's rights and ensure their safety from harm and exploitation.

This issue aligns with findings from Segalo and Rambuda (2018:3) who note that educators often feel uncertain about how to discipline learners due to the human rights

principles outlined in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*, SASA and the *South African Council of Educators' Act 31 of 2000.* Additionally, outdated school policies further complicate leadership's capacity to address instances of learner-on-educator violence, as Hanslo (2020:84) reported that some policies are not reviewed regularly. This body of literature collectively underscores a systemic failure: policies are not only inadequately implemented, but sometimes work at cross-purposes, leaving educators without clear, enforceable guidelines to address violence directed against them.

2.6.2 Insufficient engagement from parents

Research indicates that tackling learner-on-educator violence cannot solely be addressed within school environments; parental involvement is considered crucial in improving this issue. Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017:141) argue that parental engagement in school matters is directly related to positive learner behaviour. Similarly, Seoka (2019:52) points out that educators face challenges from learners who exhibit violent behaviour due, in part, to insufficient parental discipline at home. SASA emphasises that parents should support schools by overseeing their children's behaviour, highlighting the necessity of their role in discipline.

Despite the pressing need for parental engagement, Segalo and Rambuda (2018:5) warn that many parents are intentionally neglecting their discipline responsibilities. Zwane (2021:206) echoes this sentiment, pointing out that a lack of parental involvement is perceived as apathy, as educators often feel disrespected by affluent parents who treat them condescendingly. Josiah et al. (2018:36) noted that some parents threaten school authorities whenever disciplinary actions are taken against their children, particularly those in influential positions, complicating efforts to discipline learners who display violence against educators.

Sitoyi (2020:73) argues that parents often refrain from guiding their children and instead leave discipline entirely to educators. This reluctance to support schools is believed to exacerbate learner-on-educator violence, as knowing their parents will defend them can embolden learners to show disrespect toward educators. Nhambura (2020:141) indicates that rather than backing schools, many parents adopt a defensive stance and side with their children. Manamela (2021:55–56) shares that when disciplinary actions are enforced, parents often question the process and claim

ignorance, reflecting their failure to support school discipline and leaving educators to confront these challenges alone. Additionally, Alabi and Ngidi (2021:230) argue that child-headed and single-parent households frequently result in inadequate parental involvement, as single-headed families may prioritise earning an income over attending to their children's behavioural needs. They further emphasise that many educators feel they lack the necessary cooperation from parents to effectively instil discipline among learners. The literature paints a complex picture: while parental support is theoretically essential, in practice, schools face a range of barriers from indifference to hostility, making collaboration difficult.

2.6.3 Inadequate support from the department

The DBE aims to assist schools in fulfilling their educational objectives. However, Manamela (2021:55) notes a frequent breakdown in communication between the DBE and schools, along with insufficient preparation among principals regarding policy implementation. Additionally, Manamela (2021:55) argues that the inadequate training of school leaders in enforcing disciplinary policies contributes to this communication gap, highlighting the challenges in policy execution.

Biyela (2018:48) points out that while the DBE collaborates with the Crime and Prevention Institute and the Human Research Council to provide data on school safety and security issues, these organisations do not directly tackle the underlying problems. Mohlala (2021:48) argues that the DBE needs to supply trained security personnel to reduce the risk of educators being victimised by learners, but this is hindered by resource limitations in schools. Moreover, Zwane (2021:239) states that learning without extracurricular activities negatively affects learners' attitudes. However, schools are often lacking in sports facilities and the DBE's slow response to these issues contributes to a higher likelihood of violence against educators in these environments. Collectively, these authors suggest that the DBE's support is often fragmented, under-resourced and poorly communicated, leaving schools to manage violence without sufficient backing. This critique is particularly relevant for rural districts like Ngaka Modiri Molema, where resource constraints are acute.

2.6.4 Lack of support from other stakeholders

Manamela (2021:53) highlights that effective school leadership necessitates collaboration among educators, support staff, the school community, SMTs and school

governing bodies (SGBs) to establish relationships and networks aimed at tackling violence within schools. The author indicates that all relevant parties must be involved in addressing incidents of learner-on-educator violence.

To uphold law and order and potentially reduce such violence, active participation from all stakeholders and the school is essential. However, Obadire and Sinthumele (2021:4) warn that societal and media normalisation of violence makes it difficult to prevent learners from instigating violence against educators. Moreover, Manamela (2021:55) notes that some stakeholders express concerns about disciplinary actions through media complaints rather than discussing them directly with school leaders. Furthermore, political interference poses an additional challenge, with Josiah et al. (2018:36) pointing out that principals sometimes avoid implementing suitable disciplinary measures due to pressure and intimidation from political figures.

Furthermore, Aman, Moorad and Mukhopadhyay (2020:15) discovered that school leaders hesitate to discipline learners for fear of legal action from parents. In this context, Josiah et al. (2018:36) argue that when legal decisions favour learners and their families, it undermines the respect and authority of school principals, complicating efforts to manage learner misconduct. I believe that the challenges reveal systemic failure rather than isolated deficiencies. The disjuncture between policy intent and implementation, breakdown of home-school partnerships and inadequate support indicate a crisis of governance. Particularly concerning is educators' perception that learners' rights policies undermine their authority and safety, signalling tension between rights-based frameworks and practical discipline realities. The literature describes challenges at macro levels with insufficient attention given to specific manifestations, such as parental disengagement where parents are migrant workers or financially overwhelmed. This study grounds abstract challenges in concrete educator experiences within the district context as will be presented in the data section.

2.7 STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Lester Lawrence and Ward (2017:206) highlight that there has been limited research on violence against educators, resulting in a significant gap in the existing literature. This indicates a pressing need for more research to understand the nature, prevalence and consequences of such violence, especially if the goal is to create evidence-based

policies (Le Mottee & Kelly, 2017:61). Similarly, the same authors state that in South Africa, educators and education authorities lack a unified coping strategy. This complexity underscores the necessity for a comprehensive and ongoing approach to address violence from learners towards educators (Botha & Zwane, 2023:6). Mahome (2017:3) notes that the focus of existing programmes often centres on learners harming other learners, neglecting the challenges faced by educators, which increases their vulnerability to injury. Despite significant emphasis on training programmes for educators, there is a scarcity of guidelines specifically aimed at preventing violence against them (De Cordova et al., 2019:2–3).

In addition, Martínez et al. (2016) point out that violence directed at teachers has become a widespread issue globally, a stark contrast to its rarity four decades ago. Martínez Ramón and Morales Rodríguez (2020:1) describe coping strategies teachers employ to manage violence in educational settings. Despite these coping strategies, Von der Embse, Ryan, Gibbs and Mankin (2019:1328) assert that educators often struggle, resulting in stress and burnout.

In South African schools, educators and educational authorities use various strategies to address learner-on-educator violence (Le Mottee & Kelly, 2017:46). Research by Botha and Zwane (2021:6) revealed that educators are more effective in managing school violence when there are prevention programmes that aim to address the issue and provide emotional support. Some educators participate in workshops on conflict management, which helps them acquire crucial skills for handling such situations. Additionally, they often seek the support of colleagues and foster collaboration within the school environment.

Moon and McCluskey (2020:130) emphasise that educators in these circumstances require psychological support from healthcare professionals, including counsellors and psychologists. These specialists are essential for helping educators recover from trauma related to school violence. Similarly, Netshitangani (2018:102) found that a well-enforced school violence policy helps educators manage such incidents better and that they feel more secure when school management supervises the environment actively, ensuring they are able to prevent incidents.

Petso (2021:255) identified several methods educators employ to cope with learner-on-educator violence, such as seeking support from colleagues, consulting with local

pastors or church leaders for guidance, engaging community members and school governing bodies for assistance, devising collaborative strategies to manage violence, cooperating with local police to identify and prevent incidents, and monitoring school access. Marolen (2019:121) reports that educators experience both direct and indirect bullying.

In Sweden, educators believe that self-control, meditation and psychological support are effective coping mechanisms (Imran, 2020:28). Conversely, Turkish educators express a preference for prevention programmes to help them better deal with victimisation. A study by Windvoël (2023:58) highlights the need for school counsellors so that educators can share their concerns and alleviate managerial pressures to focus on their recovery and teaching.

Nevertheless, the literature reveals a significant gap between theoretical recommendations and practical implementation. The reason for this is that strategies assume baseline conditions may be a solution to the problem, such as functional leadership, adequate resources and engaged stakeholders. However, these conditions may not exist in impoverished settings needing the most intervention.

Most of the research also focuses largely on a reactive approach rather than preventive strategies – addressing violence after it has occurred rather than transforming the conditions producing it. This gap points to the need for research that foregrounds systemic prevention. Accordingly, this study argues that sustainable change requires preventive approaches that address the root causes of violence and foster school-wide cultural transformation. Notably absent from much of the existing literature are educator voices in the design and evaluation of strategies addressing systemic violence. By foregrounding educator perspectives, this study brings practitioner-informed insights to school safety enhancement and offers grounded approaches to addressing the pervasive violence present in many schools.

2.8 ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS LEARNER-TO-EDUCATOR VIOLENCE

Various strategies have been proposed to tackle violence perpetuated by pupils against teachers. This section discusses strategies such as the implementation of protective policies for educators, collaboration with safety and security organisations like SAPS, CPFs and NGOs, the promotion of parental involvement and

enhancements to security on school grounds. Kutywayo et al. (2022:3) argue that schools should function not only as educational institutions, but also as environments that foster the moral development of children. This suggests that existing policies must support both learners and educators.

Additionally, Segalo and Rambuda (2018:4) highlight that educators often have mixed opinions regarding the fairness and sufficiency of current policies, especially as learners are granted more power. Similarly, Mashau et al. (2015:287) note that disciplinary measures in schools can be influenced by learner rights, emphasising that in South Africa, it is common for educators to face assertive learners and their parents defending their human rights.

2.8.1 Parental involvement

Parental involvement is crucial for managing and reducing violence in educational settings. Parents play a vital role in shaping children's behaviour from a young age and influencing their integration into society. According to research by Price and Khubchandani (2019:156), a majority of 345 high-school mothers believe that both parents (99%) and schools (96%) share nearly equal responsibility in mitigating school violence. These mothers identified several key factors contributing to violence in schools: a lack of moral education at home (84%), parental endorsement of aggressive behaviour (78%) and insufficient family engagement with children (67%) (Price & Khubchandani, 2019:156).

Berkowitz et al. (2021:393) also note that inadequate parental support can negatively impact children's social and emotional development, influencing their behaviour. Young people often expect similar levels of attention at home and school; when they feel neglected at home, they may resort to violent actions at school to gain attention. Adebiyi et al. (2022:2) assert that parents may struggle to establish effective connections with their children and provide adequate parenting.

It is undeniable that parents significantly shape their children's values, attitudes and behaviours. Establishing strong, meaningful relationships between schools and families can aid in efforts to reduce violence and enhance academic success (World Health Organisation, 2019:50). If children witness violence at home, school-based violence prevention programmes may prove ineffective, as children are likely to imitate behaviours they observe in their households. The World Health Organisation

(2019:50) also highlights the importance of schools addressing domestic violence and other factors that jeopardise children's well-being. Mcobothi (2025:22) argues that parental involvement should be compulsory in schools to effectively prevent violence.

Strong relationships between parents and educators, along with other collaborative efforts, foster self-discipline in learners, while decreasing the burden on educators and the time spent on managing discipline issues (Botha & Zwane, 2021:12). When educators and parents build closer connections, it reduces the likelihood of learner misbehaviour (Le Mottee & Kelly, 2017:59). Therefore, engaging parents and promoting accountability in supporting educators' efforts is crucial for mitigating the adverse effects of harsh disciplinary actions.

Children raised in homes lacking parental guidance may be more likely to exhibit violent behaviour that can carry over into schools. Consequently, there is an urgent need for consistency and regularity in the discipline models applied both at home and in school for effective outcomes (Botha & Zwane, 2021:12). According to SACE (2020:34), corporal punishment should be clearly prohibited in both home and school settings. As such, parents and caregivers need support and guidance on implementing alternative, non-violent disciplinary techniques.

It is crucial that not only parents, but also all stakeholders involved in education, commit to preventing and addressing violence against educators in schools (Botha & Zwane, 2021:12). This underlines the importance of collaboration among learners, educators and other stakeholders to create a safe social, emotional and physical environment for everyone (Le Mottee & Kelly, 2017).

2.8.2 Educator involvement

Zhang et al. (2017:443) argue that educator participation in managing violence is a crucial strategy for achieving positive outcomes. SMTs should address incidents of violence and how to respond to them, involving educators who have a deep understanding of their learners through classroom interactions (Vollet et al., 2017:31). This involvement can aid in gathering insights on behavioural changes and the motivations behind specific violent actions. Additionally, educators' contributions are valuable as they often possess first-hand information (Alon & Tal, 2017:7).

Topping et al. (2015:1112) maintain that training educators to manage and report violent incidents can enhance the safety of the school environment. Lekalakala

(2019:55) supports the notion that such training can help identify threats or plans for violence before they occur. The training should focus on teaching conflict-resolution skills to educators and staff (Price, 2017:15).

According to Powers and Leili (2016:243), early intervention plays a crucial role in preventing school violence by equipping learners with skills in anger and impulse control, diversity appreciation and conflict resolution. Casey et al. (2017:15) echo this sentiment, emphasising that early discussions about the harmful effects of gang involvement could effectively reduce violence. Additionally, Fritz et al. (2018:12) state that it is the responsibility of SMTs to inform learners about the dangers of firearms and the potential legal repercussions of gun-related accidents.

Price (2017:15) points out the importance of providing stress-management training, especially for learners from low-income or unstable family situations, as this can help transform negative emotions into positive coping strategies. Lekalakala (2019:55) advocates for the implementation of assertiveness training to empower learners to resist peer pressure related to substance abuse. Furthermore, SMTs should ensure that schools have a dedicated safety organiser or committee to coordinate anti-violence initiatives.

It is essential for SMTs to create programmes that positively address violence prevention by offering incentives for lasting behavioural change, such as a recognition and reward system that promotes positive school citizenship. Ultimately, the aim is to foster a transformative environment in which constructive behaviour becomes the standard within the school community (Lekalakala, 2019:55–56).

2.8.3 Code of conduct for learners and school safety policy

SASA mandates that schools create and maintain a code of conduct that aligns with constitutional principles, reflecting the Bill of Rights while considering the responsibilities of the entire school community (DBE, 1996:15). Each school must establish a code of conduct that clearly communicates to learners which behaviours are unacceptable and the serious consequences that may follow, including potential police involvement, depending on the incident's severity (Le Mottee & Kelly, 2017:61).

This code of conduct is crafted by school principals, SMTs and SGBs to specify the expected behaviours from learners and the disciplinary measures for infractions (SACE, 2021:32). Essentially, it serves as a policy document designed to enhance

school safety in accordance with the Constitution. The code of conduct regulates the processes for suspending and expelling learners, particularly in severe situations (Majong, 2023:43). This aims to send a strong message to all learners that inappropriate behaviour is unacceptable.

While the ability to suspend learners is viewed as a means to tackle learner-on-educator violence, Majong (2023:43) indicates that educational authorities often pressurise school leaders to allow learners back into the classroom, prioritising the importance of learning as stated in Section 7 of the Constitution. Although schools may emphasise consequences for misconduct, such as suspensions, most schools respond to issues like learner-on-educator violence in a reactive way, meaning they only happen after violence has already occurred.

2.8.4 School-based targeted violence-intervention programmes

The SACE emphasises that the principal and SMT must spearhead efforts to safeguard educators from violence. However, Meyer and Chetty (2017:131) propose that adopting a holistic approach by transforming young individuals can significantly address the issue of learner-on-educator violence. Xaba (2014:1586) describes a holistic approach as a strategy aimed at building professional relationships with diverse networks that offer emotional support.

This involves implementing various methods to help learners realise their potential, such as guiding them through challenges, creating opportunities and providing mentorship, which may reduce or even eliminate learner-on-educator violence (Majong, 2023:44). Additionally, SACE (2011:34) recommends directing learners with aggressive behaviour to counselling services and involving faith-based organisations like churches, as well as social services. Furthermore, Jagodzinski (2019:194) argues that school leaders should cultivate a culture that promotes respect for everyone and ensures learners have access to mental health services to effectively address learner-on-educator violence.

2.8.5 Prevention programmes, training and counselling

Botha and Zwane (2021:6) argue that the government has progressively enhanced violence-prevention programmes to combat school violence in South Africa. These programmes aim to address various forms of abuse, including verbal, emotional, physical and classroom-related violence, while also considering the impact on

educators and learners, as well as the broader socio-economic context. The authors highlight three prevalent programme types: surveillance (utilising cameras, metal detectors and security personnel), deterrence measures (which involve strict regulations and zero-tolerance policies) and psychosocial support aimed at trauma recovery through activities like role-playing and cognitive behavioural therapy.

Surveillance strategies have been adapted from criminal justice and military contexts to the educational sphere (Petlak et al., 2019). The implementation of these measures has been primarily motivated by concerns over increasing school violence and the recognition that school safety is a growing public issue (Reddy et al., 2018). Petlak et al. (2019) describe surveillance as the close monitoring of individuals to prevent or identify criminal activity for effective management.

In addition to surveillance measures, Venketsamy et al. (2023:63) recommend that the DBE and provincial education authorities hire social workers, psychologists and counsellors at schools or the district level to assist educators facing violence or trauma. These professionals should be readily accessible to both educators and learners. They emphasise that many challenges which educators face with learners can exceed their capability, while having support from mental health professionals can help alleviate the pressure on them and, at the same time, reduce violent behaviour among learners (Venketsamy et al., 2023:63).

2.8.6 Engagement of safety and security services: SAPS, CPFs and NGOs

The DBE has collaborated with the South African Police Service (SAPS) and various NGOs, including community policing forums (CPFs) (DBE, 2021). These organisations aim to tackle and diminish the rising instances of violence in South African schools. In 2009, SAPS established guidelines for School-Based Crime Prevention, which outline the responsibilities of police officers. These responsibilities involve participating in initiatives like “Adopt-A-Cop” and “Top Cops”, as well as forming Safe School Committees, also known as School Safety Teams, and engaging in local safety initiatives (SAPS, 2013).

Conversely, the CPF is another safety measure designed to combat violence in schools. As stated by SAPS (2017), the Constitution (1996) under Section 221(2) and the *South African Police Services Act 68 of 1995* under Section 19(1) provide for the establishment of CPFs. The CPF and SAPS share information among schools in their

clusters regarding threats, such as gang activity or potential hot spots, which helps to mitigate crime (Mcobothi, 2025:21). Additional NGOs, including Nicro, Khulisa and SANCA, support efforts to address learner-on-educator violence and play a crucial role in rehabilitating learners struggling with drug addictions (Mcobothi, 2025:21). According to Venketsamy et al. (2023:64), schools need to maintain a strong partnership with parents, the community, NGOs and law enforcement to make learners aware that misconduct and violence against educators will have consequences. This collaboration can aid learners dealing with psychological or anger issues stemming from inadequate parenting or socio-economic challenges, which are often beyond the school's influence.

2.8.7 Implementation of policies that protect educators' rights

There are various policies in place aimed at reducing the risk of violence in schools. The *National School Safety Framework* (DBE, 2016) has investigated different policies that focus on addressing violence from learners towards educators. SACE (2020) notes that Chapter Two of the Constitution protects human rights, thereby ensuring that educators have the right to a safe and comfortable working environment. Moreover, according to Section 12 of the Constitution, everyone is entitled to freedom from violence and should not face treatment that is cruel, inhumane or degrading. Educators, like all individuals, have an inherent right to dignity and life, alongside the right to just labour practices, as outlined in Section 23 of the Constitution.

As venues for promoting human rights, schools should strive to advocate for and uphold the rights of both learners and educators, creating a healthy teaching and learning atmosphere (Collins et al., 2020). Preventative measures aimed at reducing violence should be approached from a human rights perspective, promoting awareness of these fundamental rights. In the South African context, learners are entitled to the highest feasible level of protection. However, there is often a lack of emphasis on educating them about their responsibilities alongside their rights. It is essential to recognise that all human rights come with limitations and one person's rights must not infringe upon another's (Makhasane & Khanare, 2018:19).

The Constitution contains provisions that protect the rights of both learners and educators, ensuring that pupils learn in supportive environments while educators work in safe conditions, free from any form of victimisation, including violence or intimidation

from learners. The Constitution also guarantees essential rights, such as dignity, equality, freedom of expression, security and life for both learners and educators, although these rights are frequently compromised due to the prevalence of violence in schools.

2.8.7.1 National School Safety Framework (NSSF)

The analytical framework for this paper is based on the National School Safety Framework (NSSF) established by the DBE in 2016. This framework emphasises the importance of safety within schools for all involved parties, such as learners, educators and support staff. The DBE is mandated with the task of preventing, managing and responding to safety incidents by fostering a safe and supportive atmosphere in schools. Its goal is to “create a safe, violence and threat-free, supportive learning environment for learners, educators, principals, SGBs and administration” (DBE, 2016:3).

Mubita (2021:79) notes that school safety is crucial for the physical and psychological well-being of both educators and learners. The DBE (2016) also mentions that when individuals feel secure in their environment, they can fully focus on their responsibilities. Venketsamy et al. (2023:53) explain that a safe school is one that is free from violence, allowing for teaching and learning without fear or intimidation. It should foster an environment where educators, learners and visitors can interact without any concern about threats, enabling a conducive learning atmosphere.

Reimers et al. (2020) argue that school safety should be guided by clear policies and that decisions related to school safety need to be grounded in data. The NSSF outlines that sustaining a safe school environment necessitates active participation from all stakeholders to eliminate violence and all threats against educators, learners and school staff. To fulfil this objective, the DBE (2016:4) expects both school and non-school stakeholders to comprehend the nature of violence and its impact on the school community. Additionally, the framework aims to support schools in recognising and identifying security issues and threats, providing guidance on effective responses to these challenges, establishing reporting systems, appropriately managing reported incidents and enabling schools to monitor progress over time (Venketsamy et al., 2023:53).

The NSSF also mentions the following policies:

The Child Justice Act 75 of 2008 establishes national regulations pertaining to juvenile offenders in educational settings, permitting individuals aged 10 to 18 to face sentencing and confinement in juvenile facilities (DBE, 2016:12).

The *Regulations for Safety Measures at Public Schools* mandate that all public schools maintain environments free from dangerous weapons and drugs, banning the possession of such items on school property (DBE, 2016:12). Furthermore, SAPS is authorised to enter schools and seize illegal items.

The *National Guidelines for the Management and Prevention of Drug Use and Abuse in Public Schools and Further Education and Training Institutions* support the implementation of the aforementioned policies by outlining procedures for combating substance abuse, establishing Learner Support Teams (LSTs), connecting with community resources and managing incidents (DBE, 2016:14).

The *Liquor Act 59 of 2003*, introduced by the National Liquor Policy Council, prohibits the sale and distribution of alcoholic beverages to minors and bans alcohol advertising directed at this age group (DBE, 2016:13).

The *Devices for Drug Testing and Procedure* (2008) policy governs the lawful use of drug testing equipment on learners by safety officials, indicating that learners may be searched if they test positive (DBE, 2016:14).

As drug abuse is becoming more prevalent among learners, the Policy Framework for the Management of Drug Abuse by Learners in Schools and Public Further Education and Training Institutions is a particularly important document. It focuses on providing structured support to both learners and educators in addressing drug abuse within educational settings. The policy emphasises the treatment, management and rehabilitation of learners experiencing substance dependence, with the aim of promoting learner well-being and maintaining a safe, supportive school environment. By addressing substance abuse as a contributing factor to misconduct, the framework has the potential to reduce incidents of violence against educators and to foster more conducive conditions for teaching and learning (DBE, 2016:14).

2.8.7.2 The Constitution

Section 7 of the Constitution emphasises that the active involvement of citizens is fundamental to democracy in South Africa. This section upholds the rights of all citizens by affirming democratic principles, such as human dignity, equality and

freedom. It specifically states that the state is responsible for respecting, protecting, promoting and fulfilling the rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights, which extends to educators, principals, staff members and learners in schools. Furthermore, Section 9(1) guarantees learners' equal treatment and protection under the law. With corporal punishment no longer permitted as a disciplinary measure in schools, educators frequently encounter difficulties in enforcing alternative disciplinary approaches in response to learner misconduct. According to Segalo and Rambuda (2018:2), educators are left feeling uncertain and fearful about disciplining learners due to concerns over potential violations of their constitutional rights.

Moreover, Section 10 of the Constitution asserts that everyone, including educators, has the right to have their dignity respected and protected. If an environment of insecurity exists in schools, it can undermine an educator's dignity and affect their ability to maintain authority and provide guidance to learners. Thus, harassment from learners against educators and their peers is illegal and should be addressed. A study by Hlatshwayo (2018:30) reveals that many interview participants reported a complete lack of respect from learners. The absence of mutual respect and self-regard was identified as a critical issue in various schools. One male educator shared:

> *In our school, most learners, particularly boys, seem indifferent to how they speak to and address educators. When instructed to complete tasks, they often ignore us as if we are invisible. As an educator, I feel powerless and believe there is little I can do to assist my defiant learners* (Hlatshwayo, 2018:30).

The Constitution guarantees the right to life under Section 11, affirming that every individual has the right to live. This right highlights the irresponsibility of learners who bring dangerous weapons to schools, showing a disregard for the safety of others as they intend to harm fellow learners and educators. One troubling example occurred on September 13, 2018 at Ramotshere Secondary School in Zeerust, North West, where a 24-year-old educator, Gadimang Daniel Mokolobate, was fatally stabbed by a 17-year-old learner (Gous, 2018). This incident reflects a worrying pattern of violence, as illustrated by the assault of five educators at Rearabilwe Secondary School in Ntsoeletsoku Village near Zeerust in March 2018 (Lehari, 2018). Furthermore, Sobuwa (2020) reports additional violent incidents, including the suspension of Grade 12 learners for attacking an educator at Motswedi Secondary School near Zeerust in

July 2020. Genkoe (2023) also notes that two educators in the North West are now receiving counselling after being physically assaulted by members of Dingateng village in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district.

Section 12(1) of the Constitution guarantees educators the right to personal freedom and security, including protection from all forms of violence. This right underscores the necessity for educators to work in a safe educational environment; without it, they cannot fulfil their duties effectively. Additionally, educators are entitled to protection from all types of violence, torture and inhumane treatment. Section 12(2) emphasises that everyone has the right to bodily and psychological integrity, encompassing the right to feel secure and to have control over their bodies. Thus, even as school-based violence rises, educators must have security and safeguarding measures in place (Hlatshwayo, 2018:30).

Section 24 of the Constitution emphasises the right to a safe and non-harmful environment, highlighting the need to protect the environment for current and future generations through appropriate legislative and other measures. This mandates that violent learners should not damage school property or create a threatening atmosphere that jeopardises the safety of those pursuing education and working within the school.

2.8.7.3 The South African Schools Act

SASA specifically addresses several important sections, including Section 8 on random searches and seizures, Section 9 on suspension and expulsion, and Section 10 which bans corporal punishment.

Section 8 permits random searches, seizures and drug testing at schools. Sub-section 1 stipulates that no individual is allowed to bring a dangerous item or illegal drug onto school property or possess such items during school events, unless authorised by the principal for valid educational reasons. Sub-section 2, which is subject to Sub-section 3, grants the principal or an appointed representative the authority to randomly search any group of learners or their belongings if there is reasonable suspicion of dangerous items or illegal drugs on the premises or in the possession of learners during school activities. This provision emphasises the necessity of conducting searches to ensure the safety of educators, staff members and learners themselves.

Section 9 of SASA addresses the suspension and expulsion of learners in public schools, stating that the SGB can temporarily suspend a learner suspected of serious misconduct based on reasonable grounds. However, this suspension can only take effect after the learner has been given a fair chance to present their case (Sub-section 1). Consequently, learners who engage in serious misconduct must face suspension or expulsion.

According to Section 5, any dangerous items or illegal drugs that are confiscated must be accurately labelled with details such as the learner's name, the time and date of the search, an incident reference number, the name of the person who conducted the search, the witness's name and any other relevant information to identify the item and incident. Furthermore, the incident should be recorded in the school's official record book, while all items should be immediately handed over to the police for disposal.

Furthermore, SASA asserts that disciplinary proceedings against a learner must occur within seven school days following their suspension, as outlined in Section 8. If these proceedings are not carried out within this timeframe, the SGB must seek the approval of the head of department (HOD) to extend the learner's suspension. Additionally, if a learner is found guilty of serious misconduct during the disciplinary process described in Section 8, the SGB may suspend the learner for up to seven school days or impose another disciplinary measure as outlined in the school's code of conduct or recommend to the HOD that the learner be expelled.

Section 10 prohibits corporal punishment, stating in Sub-section 1 that no one may inflict corporal punishment on a learner at school. Sub-section 2 classifies violations of this rule as an offense, which may result in conviction and penalties akin to assault. Ultimately, this act emphasises that schools must adhere to their code of conduct when disciplining learners. I believe that alternative strategies to solve violence issues at schools demonstrate that multi-stakeholder solutions exist, yet a persistent implementation gap remains. Strategies effective in theory fail in practice due to resource constraints, a lack of political will and inadequate contextual adaptation at schools.

Critical tensions emerge to summarise the aforementioned policies, centred on the schooling context in the district of Ngaka Modiri Molema. These tensions arise between rights-based frameworks and the practical demands of discipline, between

standardised policy prescriptions and context-specific school realities, and between collaborative policy ideals and fragmented stakeholder implementation. Such disconnects hinder effective responses to violence against educators and undermine efforts to create safe, conducive learning environments. This study therefore examines how these tensions manifest in schools within Ngaka Modiri Molema and identifies strategies that educators perceive as effective and implementable in their specific settings and classrooms. By grounding the investigation in educators' lived experiences, the research bridges the gap between abstract policy recommendations and practical, context-responsive solutions.

2.9 SYNTHESIS AND IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCH GAPS

This comprehensive literature review establishes that learner-on-educator violence is pervasive in South African schools and has profound consequences. Causes are complex and interconnected across individual, institutional and societal factors. While numerous interventions exist, significant implementation challenges persist. This study addresses these gaps by conducting a context-specific investigation in Ngaka Modiri Molema, listening to educator voices, examining effective practices, exploring policy navigation and adopting a systemic lens. These contributions inform contextually grounded approaches to educator safety enhancement.

Most studies examine Western approaches to discipline or focus on how school violence affects urban South African contexts, with limited attention to rural, under-resourced districts. Specific dynamics relevant to these settings remain under-explored. I have established that the literature and its related debates is dominated by and limited to perspectives that do not sufficiently allow educators' voices to be heard. Educators are treated as subjects rather than as knowledgeable agents with critical insights, but in most cases, they are the people bearing the brunt of school violence. Tension between rights-based frameworks protecting learners and discipline structures protecting educators is acknowledged, but remains inadequately examined. Therefore, I believe this study will help to show that more empirical evidence is needed as to what works in practice and what barriers prevent the effective implementation of school safety in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district.

2.10 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter examined various perspectives from different researchers on school violence and violence against educators in particular within the international and South African context. It also covered the causes, effects and current prevention strategies related to the problem. The literature review helped identify and investigate the gaps in this study. Chapter 3 focuses on the theoretical framework that supports this research.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

A theoretical framework serves as the essential perspective through which a research problem is explored, providing a basis for understanding, interpreting and explaining the phenomena being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In examining the complex issue of educator safety and violence against educators, a solid theoretical foundation is crucial for analysing how such behaviours are developed, sustained and possibly reduced. This chapter foregrounds Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) as the central theoretical framework for which to view this study. SLT, which focuses on observational learning, modelling and the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments, offers a compelling explanatory framework for understanding the origins and persistence of violent behaviours in educational settings (Bandura, 1977). This theory goes beyond simple cause-and-effect explanations to explore how

behaviour is learned within social contexts such as schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district, making it particularly suitable for investigating a problem that is deeply rooted in the social environments of schools, families and communities. The Ngaka Modiri Molema district faces unique socio-economic challenges that make SLT particularly relevant for understanding educator-directed violence.

This theory highlights how behaviour is learned through observation and imitation within social environments. In the South African context, particularly in many township communities, a culture in which violence is normalised has been linked to higher levels of violent behaviour among school learners. This dynamic is evident within the Ngaka Modiri Molema district. High levels of poverty, limited employment opportunities and frequent exposure to community violence create environments in which aggressive behaviour is routinely modelled and reinforced. Children raised in households where violence is used as a means of conflict resolution are therefore more likely to internalise and reproduce such behaviour, which may manifest as learner-on-educator violence within school settings.

Furthermore, gang involvement and substance abuse are documented as significant contributors to school violence in the region, with learners involved in gangs being taught to be violent and receiving rewards for engaging in violent acts. These contextual factors align precisely with SLT's emphasis on observational learning, modelling and environmental influences, making this theory the most appropriate framework for examining how violent behaviours are acquired, maintained and potentially modified in this specific context.

This chapter will begin by outlining the fundamental concepts of Bandura's SLT. It will then critically analyse the theory, highlighting its relevance to the study's research questions by exploring how observational learning and modelling occur in the settings of school, home and the community. This will also include exploring the themes based on thematic analysis (TA) in order to make sense of the research results. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise the importance of a robust approach to explicitly state that empirical research will be evaluated based on the adequate conceptualisation as opposed to simple description or reporting of themes. Additionally, the chapter will address how SLT can be useful for framing the analysis of stakeholders' perspectives and guiding potential intervention strategies. By combining this theory with the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and the study's methodological approach, this

framework is essential for interpreting data and offering valuable insights into the factors that affect educator safety.

3.2 Theoretical foundations and application to school violence

Essentially, SLT expands on traditional psychological or instinctive views of aggression by framing violent behaviour within a context of learned experiences, which can be understood within the interpretivist paradigm. Bandura's notion of observational learning indicates that individuals can acquire new behaviours simply by observing others, particularly strong influences, such as parents, peers or media personalities (Bandura, 1977:1). The reactions, reinforcement or punishments that these models encounter help the observer determine whether the behaviour is considered desirable or acceptable. In terms of school violence, learners who observe or endure violence as a means of resolving conflicts, earning respect or expressing anger in their homes or communities are more likely to imitate these behaviours in a school setting (Jacob, Pillay & Oyefeso, 2021:44–45). This means that learners imitate what has been done to them. Patrick and Adade (2020:262) add that the sights, methods and timing of these actions remain ingrained in a child's memory. Consequently, children are more inclined to mimic the behaviours of those in their immediate surroundings (Bandura, 1977:1).

A key concept of this theory is reciprocal determinism, which illustrates a continuous interaction between personal characteristics, behaviour patterns and environmental factors, all of which influence one another, enabling learning through modelling or observational learning. SLT, mainly developed by the Canadian-American psychologist Albert Bandura, is a behavioural theory. He asserted that reciprocal determinism indicates that people can learn new behaviours by watching and copying others (Nelson et al., 2016:23). Behaviours like gang involvement, negative peer influence, bullying and aggression may not be inherently programmed in individuals, but can develop from watching others. These observations are internalised as guiding information for future actions (Nelson *et al*., 2016:24).

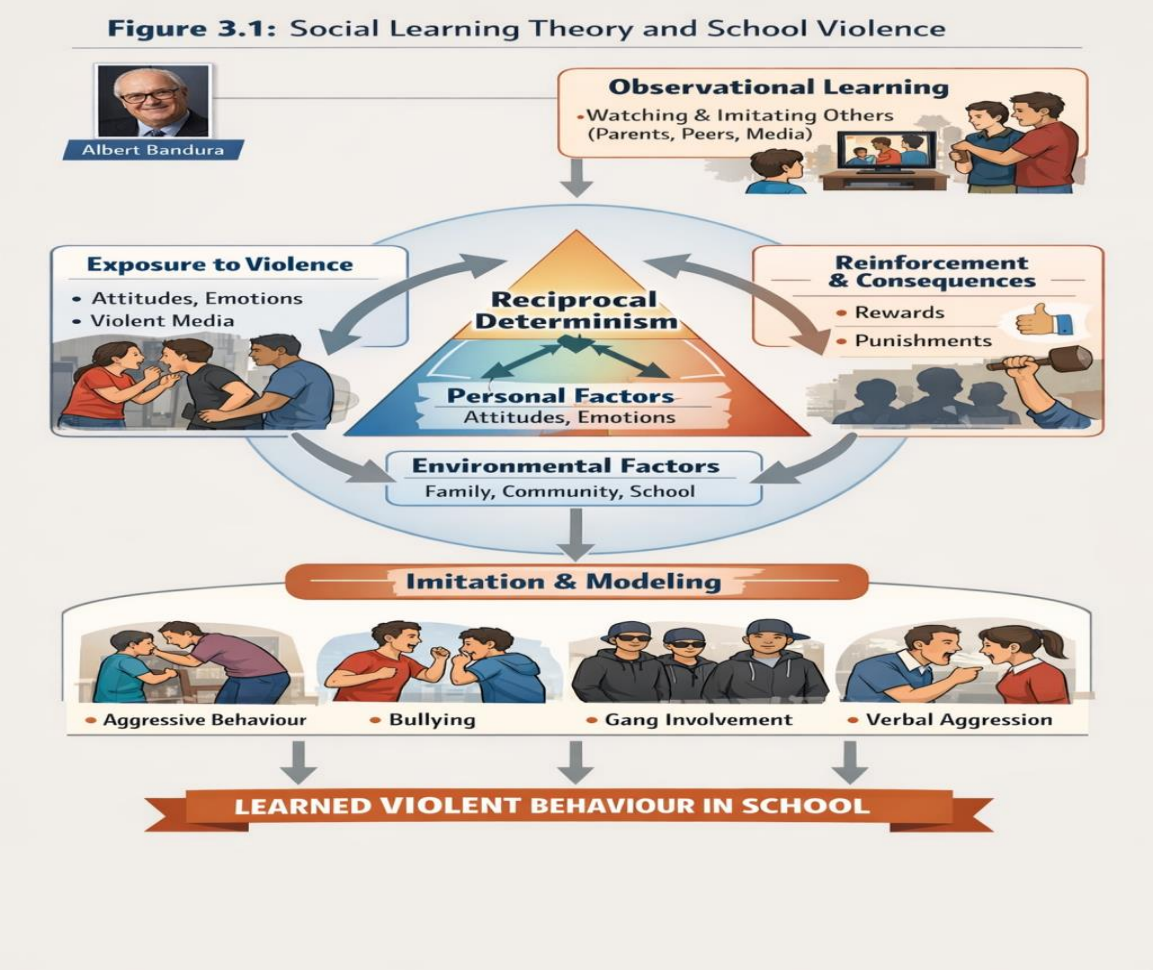


Figure 1: *This diagram outlines the foundational principles of Bandura's SLT and its application to understanding school violence. The theory posits that behaviour is learned through observational learning, where individuals imitate influential models. The cycle is driven by reciprocal determinism, a continuous interaction between personal factors, behaviour and the environment.*

Figure 1 illustrates how SLT can be applied to school violence: exposure to violent models in the family, peer group or media leads to the internalisation and subsequent reproduction of aggression in the school setting. The literature review supports this, linking childhood exposure to violence (Castro-Sánchez et al., 2019) and verbal aggression (Beckmann, 2019), as well as later perpetration, illustrating the theory's explanatory power. This chapter explicitly links childhood exposure to violence with later aggressive behaviour in school. Castro-Sánchez et al. (2019:2) assert that children who experience any form of violence or trauma during their formative years are more likely to become perpetrators of violence later on. This is a direct corollary of observational learning, where the child is both a witness and a victim, internalising violence as a normative response.

Furthermore, the theory is invoked to explain specific forms of aggression, such as verbal abuse. Beckmann (2019:1) cautions that children who experience verbal aggression from their parents during childhood are more likely to perpetrate verbal abuse toward educators later on in school, aligning with the principles of SLT. Here, the learned behaviour is not physical violence, but a specific communicative style of aggression, modelled and reinforced in the primary social unit.

Behaviours like gang involvement, negative peer influence, bullying and aggression may not be inherently programmed in individuals, but can develop from watching others. These observations are internalised as guiding information for future actions (Nelson et al., 2016:24). Allan (2017:10–11) notes that aggressive behaviour is learned through key processes, such as imitation, observation and modelling. Allan (2017:11) points out that a child might copy a parent's habitual angry responses to new situations, thereby adopting these behaviours for themselves. This example effectively demonstrates how reciprocal determinism can influence one's actions and behaviours. Additionally, Akers (2017:65) shows that peer pressure significantly impacts many young people, pushing them to try drugs, engage in sexual activities, commit delinquent acts and participate in other negative behaviours.

SLT has been described by Burdick (2014:183) and Rumjaun and Narod (2020) as a framework for acquiring new behaviours, ideas and norms. According to Rumjaun and Narod (2020), this learning occurs through the observation and mimicry of others' actions. The theory suggests that individuals are more likely to learn new behaviours by observing and imitating those they regard as important to them (Albert 2017). These influential figures can include family members, friends and community leaders, while behaviours can be learned from a variety of sources, such as family environments, communities, social media, films and schools (Mkhize & Sibisi, 2021:731).

3.3 Modelling environments: Family, community and peer groups

The home is the primary site for early observational learning. This suggests that children raised in homes where violence is a method of conflict resolution are more likely to mimic this behaviour and potentially engage in learner-on-educator violence. This mimicry is the essence of imitation. The model (parent) uses violence and the observer (child) learns that this is an appropriate way to exert control or resolve disputes. The community extends this modelling environment. Kistnasamy (2019:37)

highlights that many South African townships contend with “a culture that accepts violence”, which is linked to higher rates of violence among school learners. This cultural acceptance provides a broader social reinforcement of aggressive behaviour, signalling that it is not only tolerated, but that it may be expected or even rewarded.

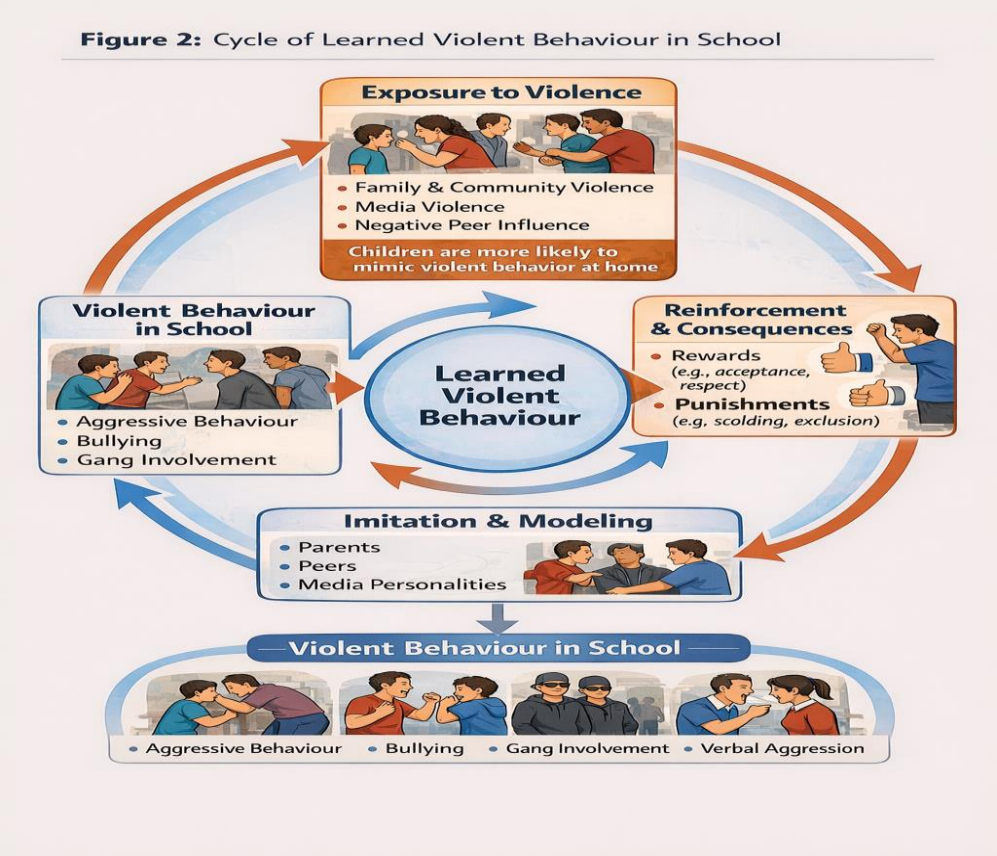


Figure 2: *This diagram illustrates the application of SLT to the cycle of violence affecting schools. It shows how behaviour is modelled across four primary environments (the family, community, peer groups and the school).*

In Figure 2, we find that through observational learning, imitation and vicarious reinforcement, these modelled behaviours are cognitively internalised into beliefs that justify violence. This leads to the manifestation of violent behaviour, such as learner-on-educator violence, which in turn feeds back into and reinforces the modelling environments, perpetuating the cycle. I believe that as children age, peer groups become increasingly influential models.

The chapter defines peer-related factors as the specific traits or influences of peers that can either heighten or reduce the chances of learners exhibiting violent behaviour (Kaczkowski et al., 2020:1:15). Negative peer modelling is evident in gang involvement; learners involved with gangs are taught to be violent and often receive

rewards for engaging in violent acts, which boosts their sense of power (Kistnasamy, 2019:34). Here, the gang provides a powerful modelling environment where violence is explicitly taught, demonstrated by senior members, and positively reinforced through enhanced status and protection. This aligns perfectly with Bandura's concept of vicarious reinforcement; seeing peers rewarded for violence increases the likelihood of the observer adopting the same behaviour. Henneberger et al. (2021:57) add that as young people mature, "they tend to spend more time with their peers than with their parents" and seek acceptance within these groups (Henneberger et al., 2021:57), making peer modelling especially potent during adolescence.

Ironically, the school environment and educators themselves can sometimes model aggressive behaviour, perpetuating the cycle. The review indicates that educators who lack professionalism and ethics may contribute to learner-on-educator violence through inappropriate comments, bullying and verbal abuse of learners (Grobler, 2018:28). When educators use verbal aggression or corporal punishment, despite it being outlawed, they model the very behaviour they seek to extinguish. Nunan (2018:4) cautions that physical violence can sometimes be a response to provocation from educators, suggesting a dynamic where both parties are caught in a cycle of learned aggressive exchanges. This underscores the bidirectional nature of social learning within the school microcosm.

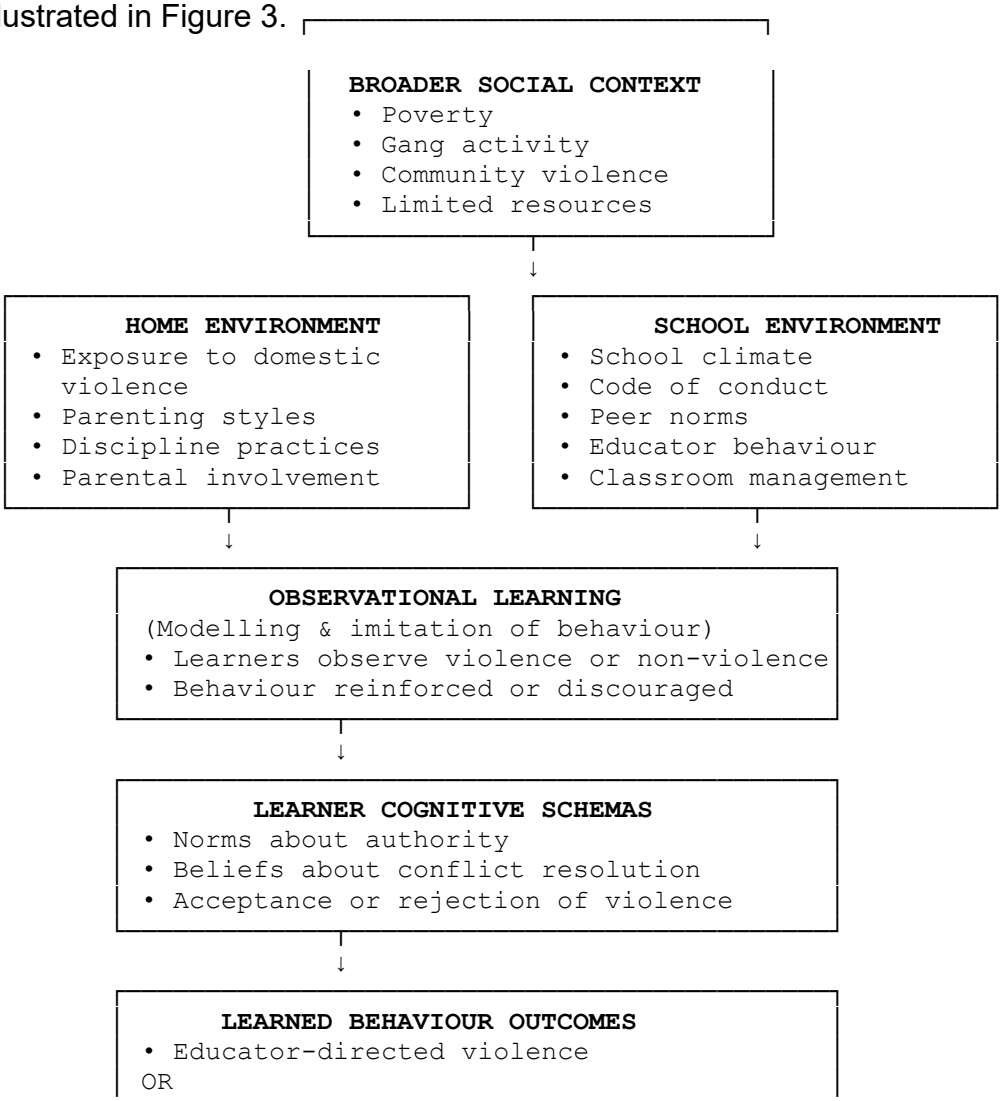
SLT is not merely about mimicry; it involves cognitive processes where individuals internalise beliefs about the acceptability and utility of violence. The chapter touches on these cognitive aspects while discussing individual factors. Røysamb et al. (2018:2) state that these factors are shaped by psychological traits and include the belief that using violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflicts. This belief is a learned cognition. Furthermore, perpetrators are described as having "a desire for dominance linked to a positive social image" (Røysamb et al., 2018:2), indicating they have learned to associate aggression with social reward – a classic outcome of observing successful aggressive models.

The significance of examining learner-on-educator violence in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district through this theoretical lens lies in its ability to reveal not only the observable behaviours, but also the underlying belief systems that sustain violent patterns across generations. This study aims to evaluate the factors that maintain or hinder educator safety in secondary schools by: (1) assessing the nature and extent

of safety incidents affecting educators; (2) exploring the root causes of learner-directed violence, including family, peer, community and individual factors; (3) examining educators' perceptions of existing safety measures and their effectiveness; and (4) identifying gaps in current policies and practices that may inadvertently reinforce rather than prevent violent behaviour. By applying SLT, this research seeks to uncover how violent behaviours are modelled, reinforced and perpetuated within the specific socio-cultural context of the district, thereby informing context-appropriate interventions that address both behavioural manifestations and cognitive schemas.

3.4 Implications for intervention and prevention

Examining educator-directed violence through the perspective of SLT has significant implications for creating effective strategies. This theory is justifiable because it indicates that interventions should focus on modifying the environments that model behaviour and changing the reinforcement patterns associated with violence, as illustrated in Figure 3.



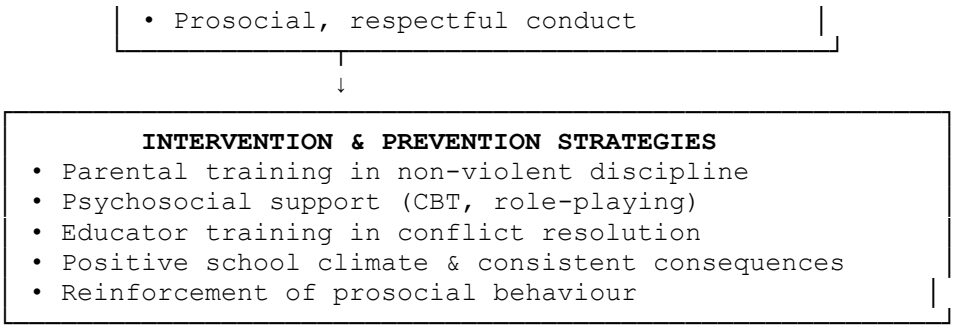


Figure 3: *Educator-directed violence can be understood through the lens of SLT, demonstrating the interaction between home, school and community environments, and highlighting key intervention points for prevention.*

If one were to take Figure 3's explanation and contrast it within the Ngaka Modiri Molema district, where many learners are exposed to violence in their homes and communities due to poverty, limited resources and prevalent gang activity, the role of parental involvement becomes even more critical. Yet, simultaneously it becomes more challenging to implement because of the inability of communities to organise themselves. With parents at home and governing bodies not available during school hours, teachers stand no chance in the classroom to combat violence perpetrated in the classroom. The chapter's recommended strategies implicitly align with this view. Parental involvement is emphasised because parents play a vital role in shaping children's behaviour from a young age. Effective interventions must therefore work with parents to model non-violent discipline and conflict resolution, breaking the intergenerational cycle of learned aggression. If children witness violence at home, school-based violence prevention programmes may prove ineffective, as children are likely to imitate behaviours they observe in their households (World Health Organisation, 2019:50). This highlights the necessity of a multi-systemic approach that addresses the primary models.

Similarly, prevention programmes and counselling aim to provide learners with alternative models and reshape their cognitive schemas. The review notes the value of psycho-social support aimed at trauma recovery through activities like role-playing and cognitive behavioural therapy (Botha & Zwane, 2021:6). Role-playing is a direct application of social learning principles, allowing for the practice and positive reinforcement of prosocial behaviours under guidance. Training educators in conflict resolution and classroom management (Topping et al., 2015:1112) is equally crucial,

as it equips them to model calm, authoritative rather than authoritarian or aggressive responses to provocation, thereby becoming positive social models.

Furthermore, creating a positive school climate is essentially about engineering a social environment where prosocial behaviour is modelled and rewarded, and violence is consistently met with negative consequences. Espelage and Hong (2019) describe school climate as the established boundaries of acceptable behaviour, norms and rules. A climate that unequivocally rejects violence is supported by a clear code of conduct (DBE, 1996:15), working to change the perceived reinforcement outcomes for learners coming from homes marred by violence. If the peer group and school authority collectively model and reward respect, the social learning process can be harnessed for positive change.

3.5 Observational learning

According to Bandura (1989:23), learning through models can manifest in different ways, such as the development of new behaviour patterns, evaluative criteria, cognitive skills and rules for generating novel behaviours. Bandura (1971:7) asserts that observational learning involves two modes of presentation: visual and verbal. When an individual is exposed to a modelling stimulus, it forms a lasting mental image, which can be drawn from the behavioural sequence being demonstrated through sensory conditioning. The four aspects of observational learning are used to illustrate how people learn behaviours and subsequently remember them for later application. Wang (2021:162) notes that observational learning consists of four primary components – attention, retention, reproduction and motivation – which are explained in more depth below.

Bandura (1977:6) describes the first stage of attention as the time when learners focus on the characteristics of observed behaviour. He later notes (1989:24) that the attentional processes shape what individuals notice amid a plethora of modelling influences and what information they gather from those observations. Essentially, during this stage, children concentrate on various forms of models that demonstrate different types of behaviour. Bandura (1977:7) cautions that media serves as a potent force that can impact children, as they readily absorb and learn from its depicted messages. Furthermore, Johnson (2019:138) states that this theory suggests that children who are exposed to violent media, like aggressive films, are more likely to

become desensitised to violence. Children also imitate the aggressive behaviours of those around them, such as family, peers and parents who display such behaviours and are rewarded with support, applause or respect from others (Molotja, 2024:39).

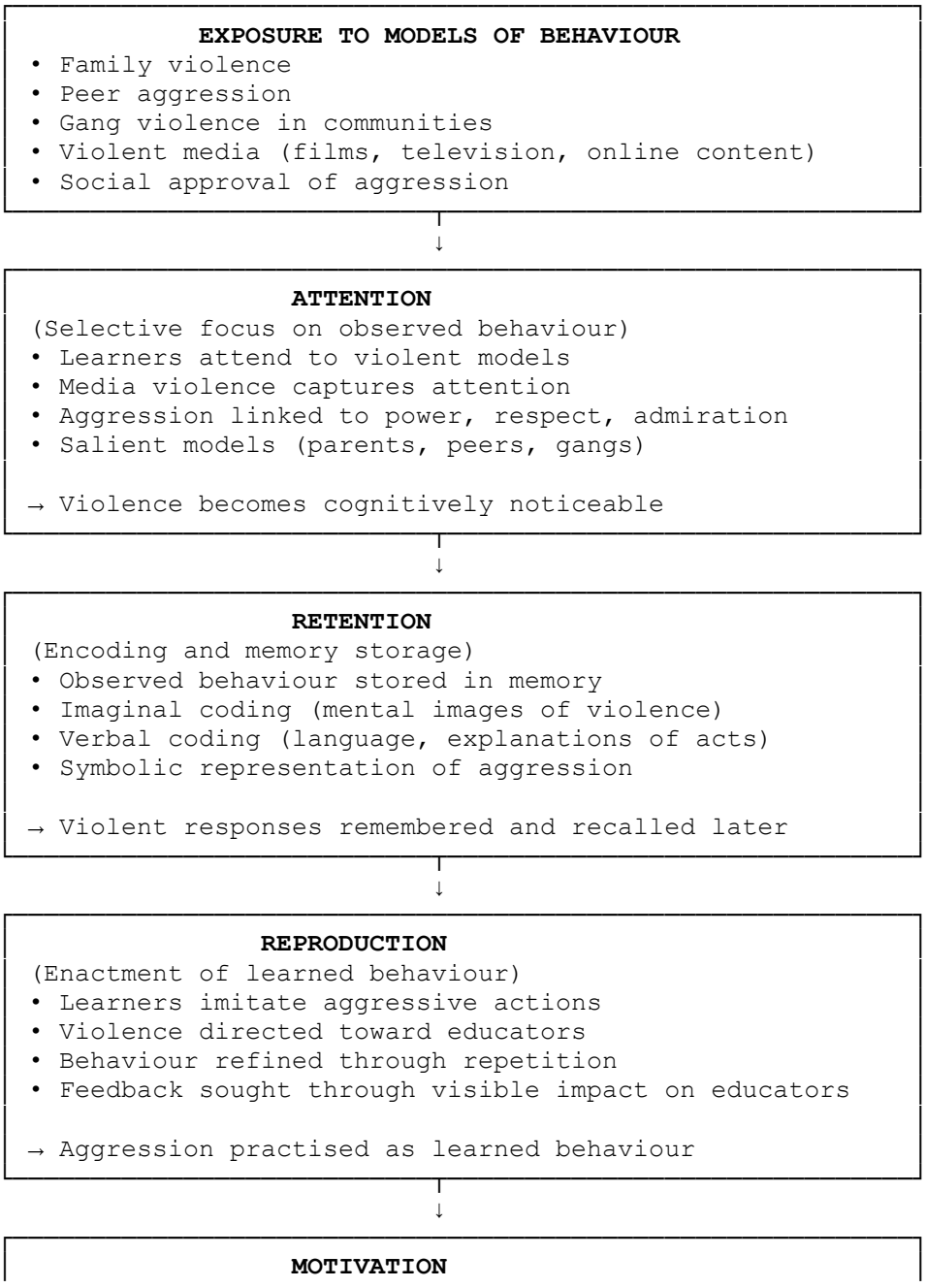
The second phase of observational learning is retention. Bandura (1977:7) emphasises that the mind is a powerful instrument, suggesting that children cannot be significantly influenced by the behaviour of role models if they do not retain a memory of what they have observed. He further describes retention (1989:24) as the process of converting what is observed or learned into memory. This indicates that learners are not influenced solely by watching their role models; they must also remember what they have seen and later represent those learned behaviours symbolically.

Harnie et al. (2017:4) notes that the retention phase involves two types of internal representation: imaginal coding and verbal coding. In imaginal coding, individuals who witness modelled behaviour experience a conditioning process that creates lasting sensory images that are readily recalled. On the other hand, in verbal coding, individuals, while observing a model, also focus on the actions of that model. For memory to effectively recall learned information, it must be transformed into both mental images and verbal symbols, especially when it comes to school violence and creating safety measures in classroom contexts.

The third phase of observational learning is reproduction. Learners who display aggressive behaviour towards their educators are imitating actions that they have remembered and learned from their role models (Molotja, 2024:39). In the Ngaka Modiri Molema district, where learners are frequently exposed to multiple violent models, including domestic violence in homes, gang violence in communities and aggressive media content accessible even in resource-limited settings, the attentional processes of observational learning become particularly salient in explaining how learners selectively focus on and internalise violent behavioural patterns that they subsequently direct toward educators.

Bandura (1977:7) suggests that learners, particularly children, must replicate a specific array of responses based on modelled behaviours. This indicates that learners are motivated to emulate the actions they have observed in their models, whether prosocial or antisocial. Harnie et al. (2017:4) argue that learners looking to improve their learned behaviours from these models may intentionally engage in violent actions

towards educators as a means to enhance their learning experience. This shows that at this point, individuals committing acts of violence seek feedback to confirm their mastery of the aggressive behaviour they learned from others. Furthermore, it suggests that those who exhibit violence towards educators can only recognise their successful imitation if they witness the negative consequences of their actions on the educators. Molotja (2024:39) further notes that a learner who sees a bully gaining admiration through aggressive behaviour is more inclined to imitate that behaviour and match their own aggression with that of the observed model. This is illustrated in more detail in Figure 4 below.



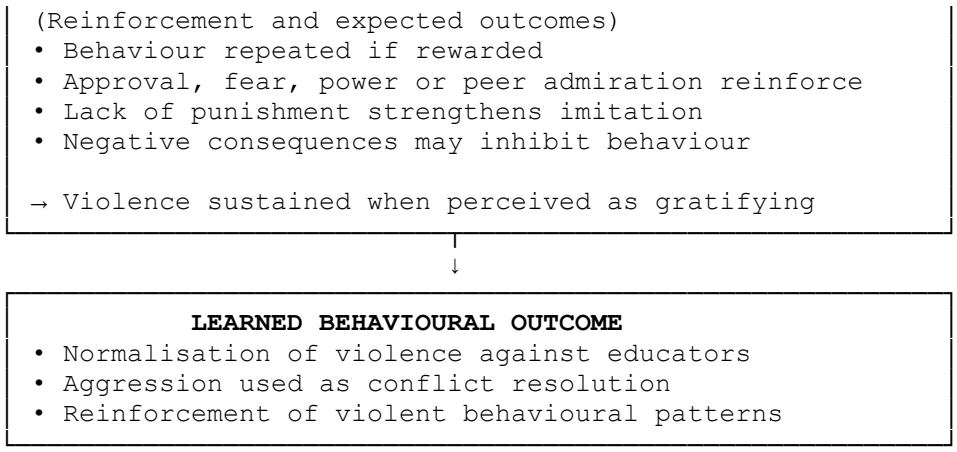


Figure 4: *Bandura's observational learning process – attention, retention, reproduction and motivation – demonstrates how repeated exposure to violent models within home, school, media and community environments contributes to the learning and reinforcement of educator-directed violence.*

The fourth phase of motivation focuses on assessing the effectiveness of behaviours learned from models. According to Bandura (1989:24), this stage highlights that individuals are more inclined to demonstrate behaviours they observe if those behaviours lead to positive results, rather than if they yield negative or unbeneficial outcomes. Bandura (1977:8) also points out that individuals, including children, can learn, retain and develop skills for performing modelled behaviours; however, this learning is seldom exhibited in actual behaviour if it is met with negative consequences or disapproval. Furthermore, Harnie et al. (2017:5) suggest that although the behaviours of models can be intriguing, without personal motivation, encouragement or incentives, it will be difficult for observers to implement what they have learned. In essence, individuals are likely to engage in actions only if they anticipate benefits from them. Bektas et al. (2010:1145) support this by stating that seeing negative outcomes from undesirable behaviours can deter learners from engaging in violent acts. Wang (2021:162) adds that if individuals see value in certain behaviours, they are more likely to enact those learned behaviours; otherwise, they will not. Ultimately, this suggests that learners are inclined to adopt behaviours that fulfil their desires, while rejecting those they do not support. In the context of violent acts against teachers, the perpetrators are motivated and choose to commit these acts because they find them gratifying.

3.5.1 Acknowledging the limits of Social Learning Theory in this study

While Social Learning Theory (SLT) provides a valuable lens for understanding how violent behaviour may be acquired through observational learning and modelling, the application of this theory in the present study carries certain limitations that must be explicitly acknowledged. First, SLT risks narrowing the analytical focus to home and community environments as primary sites of behavioural modelling, which may inadvertently position learners, parents and families as the sole or primary causes of school violence. This study does not claim that learner home environments are the exclusive or even predominant cause of educator-directed violence. The conclusions drawn in Chapter 5 regarding learner home environments are interpretive inferences derived from educator accounts, not empirically verified facts about specific learners' home lives. The study did not interview learners or parents, and therefore cannot make definitive claims about causal relationships between home environments and school behaviour.

Second, the study acknowledges that violence is multidetermined and that school-based factors — including educator-learner relationships, pedagogical approaches, school leadership practices, and institutional culture — may also contribute to or mitigate violence. These factors are discussed in Themes 2 and 4 of Chapter 5. However, the study's reliance on educator perspectives alone means that the voices of learners, parents and DBE officials are absent. This is a deliberate methodological delimitation (see Section 4.8.1), but it is also a limitation that prevents this study from offering a fully balanced account of causality. The study therefore does not position learners, parents or the DBE as "biased" or solely responsible for violence. Rather, it reports the perceptions of educators as one set of stakeholders within a complex system. Future research incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives is necessary to develop a more complete understanding of the causal dynamics of educator-directed violence.

3.5.2 Limitations of Social Learning Theory in this Study

While Social Learning Theory (SLT) provides a valuable lens for understanding how violent behaviour may be acquired through observational learning and modelling, its application in this study carries three important limitations. First, SLT’s focus on modelling environments risks narrowing the analytical lens to learners’ home and

community contexts, which may inadvertently position families as the primary cause of school violence.

Second, by concentrating on behavioural acquisition through observation, SLT does not fully account for the multi-systemic influences that Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory captures – such as the interactions between the microsystem (family, school), mesosystem (family-school relationships), exosystem (policy and community resources) and macrosystem (cultural norms). Bronfenbrenner's framework would have added a more holistic understanding of how concentric environmental layers interact to produce or mitigate violence.

Third, SLT is limited by the study's methodology: because only educators and principals were interviewed, conclusions about learners' home environments are interpretive inferences drawn from adult perspectives, not direct observations or learner self-reports. Despite these limitations, SLT was retained because it offers a coherent, parsimonious lens for understanding how observed violent behaviour among learners may be reinforced through modelling – a mechanism that aligns directly with the lived experiences reported by educators and principals in this study. All SLT-based conclusions in Chapters 5 and 6 are therefore qualified as interpretive rather than definitive.

3.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This study is firmly grounded in Bandura's SLT, which serves as its primary theoretical framework. The theory's key components of observational learning, modelling, reciprocal determinism and vicarious reinforcement provide a comprehensive perspective for exploring the intricate issue of learner-on-educator violence. It connects the main areas of focus: individual, school, family and community, thereby offering a logical framework to relate the research questions to potential explanations and solutions for schooling contexts in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district. This chapter also demonstrated that, in order to achieve well implemented safety measures for both learners and educators in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district, one has to come to an understanding of violence as a learned behaviour shaped by social contexts. This is why the SLT is an appropriate theoretical lens to investigate the viewpoints of various stakeholders, centring the study around well-informed data from educators and others to assess the shortcomings of current safety measures and potential solutions. The

next chapter will outline the research methodology which is designed to gather and analyse empirical data.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 established SLT as the theoretical framework for understanding how violent behaviours are acquired and reproduced by learners within school settings. Building on that foundation, this chapter details the research methodology employed to empirically investigate educator safety challenges in Ngaka Modiri Molema district secondary schools.

The chapter begins by outlining the research paradigm, approach and design guiding the investigation. It then describes the population and sampling strategy across six schools, followed by a detailed discussion of data-collection methods, including semi-

structured interviews, focus-group discussions and document analysis. The chapter explains the thematic data-analysis procedures employed, addresses trustworthiness measures ensuring study rigour and discusses ethical considerations throughout the research process. Finally, the study's limitations and delimitations are presented before concluding with a chapter summary.

4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Pawar (2022:52) states that research design is essential for gathering relevant data and employing techniques that streamline various research activities to maximise the information obtained. This study employed a multiple-case study design as its approach.

The rationale for utilising a multiple-case study is supported by Adams et al. (2022:16), who explain that researchers conduct a cross-case analysis to develop a more compelling theory by comparing cases. Multiple-case studies enable researchers to identify patterns and themes across different contexts, strengthening the robustness and transferability of findings (Yin, 2018). This approach was particularly appropriate for investigating educator safety across six schools within Ngaka Modiri Molema district, as it enabled identification of both common patterns and context-specific variations in school violence dynamics and safety experiences.

4.2.1 Research paradigm

This study adopted an interpretive paradigm, chosen intentionally due to its relevance in exploring the subjective experiences and meanings educators associate with safety concerns. Given that the research aimed to understand how educators perceive, experience and make sense of violence and safety within their unique school contexts, an interpretive approach was most appropriate for capturing the complexity and contextual nature of these phenomena.

Ontologically, the interpretive paradigm assumes a relativist position, recognising that realities exist as multiple and intangible mental constructions based on experience, which is both local and specific in nature (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Rather than viewing reality as singular, objective and waiting to be discovered, this study acknowledges that educator safety is socially constructed through interactions, experiences and interpretations within specific school and community contexts. The six schools in

Ngaka Modiri Molema district each represent distinct social realities shaped by unique combinations of leadership practices, community dynamics and historical experiences of violent realities that cannot be reduced to universal laws, but must be understood within their specific contexts.

Epistemologically, the interpretive paradigm adopts a subjectivist stance, positioning knowledge as co-constructed through interaction between researcher and participants rather than objectively discovered (Crotty, 1998). This study's knowledge emerged through semi-structured interviews and focus groups where educators shared their lived experiences, with the researcher acting as an engaged participant rather than detached observer. The epistemological assumption was that understanding educator safety requires accessing participants' subjective meanings, interpretations and sense-making processes that can only be generated through empathetic engagement and interpretive analysis rather than measurement or hypothesis testing.

4.2.2 Research approach

This research utilised a qualitative approach, chosen specifically for its ability to provide an in-depth exploration of educators' personal experiences and viewpoints as outlined by the research questions. Qualitative research is particularly suited to investigating complex social phenomena, where understanding context, meaning and lived experience is paramount (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The approach enabled the collection of rich, detailed narratives about violent incidents, safety perceptions and contextual factors that quantitative methods alone could not capture.

Embracing an interpretive paradigm requires a dedication to reflexivity, since the researcher plays a crucial role in making sense of participants' lived experiences. According to Dehalwar and Sharma (2022:6), reflexivity requires researchers to critically examine how their own experiences, values and perspectives influence research processes and interpretations. This self-awareness is essential for maintaining methodological rigour in interpretive research.

Building upon this foundation, the study incorporated reflexivity. Jamie and Rathbone (2022:17) explain that reflexivity requires researchers to reflect on their own roles and practices in order to bring transparency and credibility to research accounts. This involves acknowledging how the researcher's background, assumptions, and positioning may shape data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Consequently, based on the theoretical concept of reflexivity as a vital, ongoing practice of self-awareness and accountability regarding one's position, the researcher implemented these principles in this study. As an educator familiar with school violence dynamics, the researcher acknowledged potential biases and preconceptions that could influence the interpretation of participants' experiences. This awareness informed efforts to prioritise participants' voices and meanings rather than imposing predetermined interpretations.

To achieve reflexivity, the researcher kept a reflective journal during the research process. This journal was a practical tool to implement the aforementioned theories. It provided a space to critically examine assumptions, document methodological decisions, record emotional responses to participants' accounts of trauma and reflect on how personal experiences might influence interpretation. The journal enabled ongoing self-interrogation about power dynamics in researcher-participant relationships and helped maintain focus on participants' subjective realities rather than researcher projections.

4.2.3 Research methods

This study employed a multiple-case study design utilising two primary data-collection methods: semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school leaders (principals and deputy principals) to capture leadership perspectives on educator safety, policy implementation and violence-management strategies. These one-on-one interviews provided flexibility to explore the complex, multifaceted nature of educator safety while maintaining focus on research questions, enabling leaders to share sensitive institutional challenges and decision-making processes in confidential settings.

Focus-group discussions were conducted with middle managers (HODs) and post-level 1 educators to explore collective experiences and shared perceptions of violent dynamics within each school context. Focus groups enabled the collection of group perspectives, where participants could build on each other's contributions, revealing shared concerns and divergent experiences across different school contexts. The interactive nature of focus groups facilitated rich dialogue about violence patterns, institutional responses and collective safety concerns that might not have emerged in individual interviews.

These two methods aligned with the interpretive paradigm's emphasis on accessing participants' subjective meanings and experiences through dialogue and contextual understanding. The combination of individual interviews with school leaders and focus groups with educators provided both hierarchical depth and collective breadth in understanding educator-safety challenges. Detailed procedures for each data-collection method, including interview protocols, focus-group facilitation strategies, participant-selection criteria and analytical frameworks, are presented in Section 4.4. The following section describes the study population and sampling strategy employed across the six case-study schools.

4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

Muzari et al. (2022:17) explain that semi-structured interviews involve a set of open-ended questions based on specific topics the researcher wants to explore, allowing both parties to discuss various subjects in depth. These interviews are defined by the presence of an interview guide or topic checklist that outlines key areas of interest, and often includes sub-questions (Busetto et al., 2020:3).

According to Lim (2025:215), semi-structured interviews use a guiding framework to delve into proposed topics and questions, while also allowing interviewers the freedom to explore responses more deeply or to pursue emerging themes, balancing consistency with flexibility. To obtain a representative yet manageable sample, six secondary schools were intentionally chosen from the Ngaka Modiri Molema district, based on their documented safety concerns and willingness to participate. One principal from each selected school was invited for a detailed one-on-one interview to share views on safety issues, policies and interventions. Additionally, six educators from each school were deliberately selected for focus-group discussions, ensuring a variety of insights from those with first-hand classroom and school-safety experiences. This methodology facilitates the collection of rich qualitative data, while keeping the analysis within a practical scope. The data collection was continued until saturation was reached, signifying that no new codes or themes were emerging. Involving 38 participants was sufficient to achieve saturation in this particular study. Johnson et al. (2020:141) note that while data saturation is commonly used to indicate a sufficient sample size, it may not be relevant for all research designs.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide (see Appendix A) specifically developed to address all four sub-research questions. The guide contained open-ended questions organised around the study's objectives, including sections on: (1) experiences with safety incidents, (2) perceptions of existing safety measures, (3) factors contributing to safety concerns, and (4) recommendations for improvement. This structured yet flexible instrument ensured comprehensive coverage of research topics, while allowing participants to introduce relevant issues not anticipated by the researcher.

This study utilised both document analysis and interviews. Document analysis involves gathering qualitative data from original written, printed or recorded materials to address research questions in interpretive case studies (Kekaya, 2021:31). To complement the interview findings, the researcher examined documents related to violence between learners and educators. School principals at the research sites were asked to supply documents, such as codes of conduct for learners, classroom rules, school-safety policies, reports of violent incidents, minutes from disciplinary hearings, and records of learner misconduct from the disciplinary committee. Document analysis can serve as both a primary and a secondary data-collection method, as it was also

employed in both primary and secondary data collection. It is considered primary data generation when the analysed documents were not initially created as transcripts for other data-collection methods. In contrast, it is regarded as a secondary generation method when the documents were compiled from other approaches specifically aimed at generating data for a particular study (Muzari et al., 2022:18).

This study utilised triangulation to enhance its credibility by incorporating semi-structured interviews and focus groups as data-collection techniques. Kekeya (2021:33) defines triangulation of methods as employing multiple strategies to collect data on the same subject. Vivek (2023:521) notes that data triangulation involves obtaining information from various sources across different times, locations or individuals. Bans-Akutey and Tiimub (2021:4) argue that utilising diverse data sources minimises research biases – whether in sampling, procedure or from the researcher, thereby improving validity and credibility. Triangulation also includes using different data-collection methods or comparing results with existing literature (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024:11). Morgan (2024:1846) emphasises that triangulation enhances the rigour and reliability of qualitative research by enabling a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the context and participants involved.

4.3 POPULATION AND SAMPLING

According to Chivanga and Monyai (2021:13), a target population encompasses all individuals, sampling units or elements relevant to a specific research issue. The target population for this study comprised secondary school educators in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district of the North West in South Africa. This district was selected based on documented safety challenges facing educators and the prevalence of learner-directed violence toward school staff. Secondary schools were specifically targeted because adolescent learners in Grades 8 to 12 represent a developmental stage where aggressive behaviours often intensify, making educator safety concerns particularly acute in these educational settings.

Purposive sampling was employed to select both schools and individual participants who could offer in-depth, informative insights related to the research questions. Kekeya (2021:31) notes that qualitative studies typically use purposive sampling to select individuals for field-data collection, allowing access to participants with pertinent experience and knowledge. This non-probability sampling approach was ideal

because the study aimed for deep understanding from individuals with first-hand experience of the phenomenon, rather than seeking broad statistical relevance (Patton, 2015). Bekele and Ago (2022:44) emphasise that purposive sampling in qualitative research allows researchers the flexibility to choose participants based on specific research questions and objectives.

Six secondary schools were purposively selected from the Ngaka Modiri Molema district based on three key criteria: documented history of safety challenges or violent incidents, geographic diversity across rural and township settings within the district, and willingness to participate in the research. The selection of six schools aligned with multiple case-study design principles, providing sufficient cases for cross-case pattern identification, while remaining manageable for in-depth qualitative analysis (Yin, 2018). As noted by Mweshi and Sakyi (2020:190), sampling plays a crucial role in research design when intentional strategies are employed, as the more relevant the participants are to the topic, the more robust the data will be.

Participants were chosen based on particular criteria outlined by Kekeya (2021:31) to ensure they possessed the necessary characteristics and experience relevant to educator safety concerns. From the six schools, participants were purposively selected representing three distinct role categories: one school leader (principal or deputy principal) from each school, two HODs (post-level 2 educators) from each school, and varying numbers of classroom educators (post-level 1 educators teaching Grades 8 to 12), totalling 38 participants across all six schools.

This stratified purposive approach ensured representation across organisational hierarchies, capturing leadership perspectives on safety policies and institutional responses, middle-management experiences bridging administrative and classroom contexts, and frontline educator experiences of direct daily interactions with learners. Participants were specifically selected for their direct encounters with safety issues or incidents in their schools and their readiness to discuss sensitive safety matters in detail.

The final sample comprised 38 participants across six schools: seven school leaders participating in individual semi-structured interviews, 11 heads of department participating in focus-group discussions (two per school), and 20 classroom educators participating in focus-group discussions. This sample size proved sufficient for

achieving data saturation. Subedi (2021:7) notes that the number of participants in qualitative research is determined by the specific issue being investigated rather than predetermined sample-size formulas. Data saturation was achieved after conducting seven individual interviews and six focus-group discussions, as subsequent interviews consistently yielded repetitive themes with no new codes or substantive insights emerging, indicating comprehensive coverage of the research questions.

The purposive sampling strategy aligned with the interpretive paradigm's emphasis on selecting information-rich cases that illuminate the research questions in depth. Stratton (2024:121) defines purposive sampling as a method of selecting research participants from a specific population based on certain traits, experiences or relevant criteria. Participants were intentionally selected for their expert insights regarding safety factors, measures and improvements, which enhanced the significance of their contributions to the study's goals. The inclusion of multiple role perspectives (leadership, middle management, classroom educators) enabled triangulation of viewpoints and comprehensive understanding of safety dynamics across organisational levels within each school context.

4.4 DATA-COLLECTION METHODS

This study employed two complementary data-collection methods to gather rich, contextual information about educator-safety experiences across organisational hierarchies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school leaders to capture institutional perspectives and confidential leadership insights, while focus group discussions were held with middle managers and classroom educators to explore collective experiences and shared understandings. This section details the procedures, justification and implementation of each method.

4.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary method for collecting data from school leaders (principals and deputy principals). Muzari et al. (2022:17) explain that semi-structured interviews involve a set of open-ended questions based on specific topics the researcher wants to explore, while allowing flexibility to probe deeper into participants' responses. According to Lim (2025:215), semi-structured interviews use a guiding framework to delve into proposed topics and questions, while also allowing interviewers the freedom to explore responses more deeply, follow

unexpected but relevant tangents and adapt questions based on each participant's unique context. This balance between structure and flexibility made semi-structured interviews particularly appropriate for exploring school leaders' perspectives on complex, sensitive safety issues requiring confidential discussion.

Kekeya (2021:30) supports the choice of semi-structured interviews as a flexible method for collecting qualitative data, allowing participants to articulate their thoughts, feelings, experiences, perspectives and opinions about issues they have experienced. The semi-structured format was essential for this study because educator safety encompasses multifaceted dimensions, including policy implementation, resource allocation, disciplinary challenges, community relations and legal considerations that required both systematic coverage and responsive exploration. School leaders needed space to discuss institutional vulnerabilities, perceived policy failures and personal fears that might not emerge through more rigid questioning approaches.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide (see Appendix C) specifically developed to address all four sub-research questions. The guide contained open-ended questions organised thematically around manifestations of school violence, contributing factors, the impacts on educators, existing safety measures and recommendations for improvement. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was conducted at a location within the school convenient to the participant, typically in the principal's office or a private meeting room. Before each interview, participants were reminded of the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality and asked to provide written informed consent. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission to ensure accurate transcription, while allowing the researcher to focus on active listening and appropriate follow-up questions.

4.4.2 Focus-group discussions

Focus-group discussions were employed to collect data from heads of department and classroom educators. Oranga and Matere (2023:6) describe a focus-group discussion as a gathering of individuals with similar backgrounds or experiences to debate a particular topic of interest. Sullivan and Forrester (2019:102) state that focus groups allow for dynamic interactions between participants, enabling the exploration of collective perspectives and shared experiences. In this study, focus groups were

strategically used to capture how educators collectively understand and respond to safety challenges within their shared school contexts, revealing group norms, institutional cultures and peer dynamics that individual interviews might not expose.

Focus groups were particularly valuable for this research because educator safety is fundamentally a collective concern shaped by peer interactions, shared vulnerabilities and group sense-making around incidents of school violence. The interactive nature of focus groups enabled participants to build upon each other's contributions, challenge or validate perspectives, and co-construct meanings around sensitive topics. Middle managers (HODs) and classroom educators often experience safety issues differently than school leadership, and focus-group settings provided them with collective support to voice concerns they might hesitate to express individually. The group format also enabled efficient data collection from multiple participants simultaneously while maintaining depth of exploration.

Six focus group discussions were conducted, one at each participating school. Each focus group comprised six educators: two HODs (post-level 2) and four classroom educators (post-level 1). This composition ensured representation from both middle management and frontline teaching staff, while restricting groups to five participants to allow all voices to be heard. Focus groups lasted approximately 45 minutes each and were conducted in private spaces within schools, such as staff rooms or classrooms, at a time convenient for participants. The researcher served as moderator, using the same thematic interview guide employed in individual interviews (Appendix C), but adapted to encourage group interaction and dialogue. Sessions were audio-recorded with consent and conducted in a manner that encouraged equal participation, while managing potential power dynamics between HODs and classroom educators.

4.4.3 Document analysis

In addition to semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, this study employed document analysis as a supplementary data-collection method. Document analysis involves gathering qualitative data from original written, printed or recorded materials to address research questions in interpretive case studies (Kekeya, 2021:31). Tracy (2020:81) notes that document analysis encompasses all human-created objects, including physical copies of documents that offer insights into the

research topic. Dalglish et al. (2020:1424) define document analysis as the examination of documents to provide context and complement other data-collection methods. Document analysis can serve as both a primary and a secondary data-collection method; in this study, it was used as a secondary method to triangulate findings from interviews (Muzari et al., 2022:18).

The following documents were requested from principals at each of the six research sites and analysed where available: codes of conduct for learners, classroom rules, school safety policies, reports of violent incidents, minutes of disciplinary hearings, and records of learner misconduct from the disciplinary committee**.**

Document analysis was used for three primary purposes: first, to triangulate findings from interviews and focus groups, comparing institutional records with participant narratives; second, to corroborate participant accounts of safety incidents and disciplinary responses; and third, to provide institutional context regarding the formal safety policies and procedures that schools had in place, even when implementation was inconsistent (as discussed in Chapter 5, Theme 4).

4.4.4 Data recording and transcription

All interviews and focus-group discussions were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder to ensure accurate capture of participants' exact words, allowing the researcher to focus on facilitating rather than note-taking. Chivanga and Monyai (2021:13) note that recording interview responses using an audio recorder is essential for accurate transcription. Participants were informed before each session that recording would occur and were asked to provide explicit consent for this procedure. Audio files were immediately transferred to a password-protected computer and backed up on a secure external drive to prevent data loss.

Following data collection, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Verbatim transcription captured not only participants' words, but also pauses, emphases and emotional expressions that provide context for understanding meaning. Transcripts were reviewed while listening to recordings to ensure accuracy, with any unclear sections marked for clarification. Transcripts were anonymised using the coding system described in Section 4.3, replacing participants' names with codes (e.g., PS-A for Principal at School A, HS-B-1 for HOD at School B, ES-C-2 for Educator

at School C). The transcription process resulted in over 300 pages of single-spaced text, providing rich qualitative data for thematic analysis.

4.4.5 Data collection timeline and context

Data collection occurred over a six-week period during the second school term of year 2025. This timing was strategic, avoiding the pressurised periods of term opening or examination periods when educators face heightened workload stress. The researcher coordinated with each school's leadership to schedule data-collection sessions at times minimally disruptive to teaching schedules. Individual interviews with school leaders were typically conducted during their administrative periods, while focus groups with educators were scheduled during common planning periods or after school hours, with participants receiving refreshments as appreciation for their time.

Throughout data collection, the researcher maintained heightened sensitivity to the traumatic nature of the research topic. Many participants shared deeply distressing experiences of violence, fear and institutional betrayal. The researcher provided emotional support where needed, paused interviews when participants became visibly distressed and reminded participants of their right to skip questions or withdraw at any time. Participants were also provided with contact information for counselling services should they require support after the interview. This trauma-informed approach aligned with ethical commitments to do no harm and prioritise participant well-being over data-collection imperatives.

4.5 DATA ANALYSIS

This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis as the analytical framework for making sense of the qualitative data generated through interviews and focus-group discussions. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data, offering theoretical flexibility while maintaining analytical rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflective thematic analysis was particularly appropriate for this interpretive study because it prioritises researcher engagement with data, acknowledges the active role of the researcher in knowledge production and aligns with the epistemological assumptions of co-constructed meaning outlined in Section 4.2.1. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes,

searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with data

Data analysis began during data collection itself, as the researcher conducted interviews, facilitated focus groups, and took field notes capturing initial impressions and observations. Following the completion of the data collection, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, resulting in over 300 pages of single-spaced transcripts. The familiarisation phase involved reading and re-reading these transcripts multiple times to achieve immersion in the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that familiarisation requires active, repeated engagement with data rather than passive reading. During this phase, the researcher listened to audio recordings while reading transcripts to recapture participants' tone, emotion and emphasis. Initial notes were made in margins documenting striking observations, preliminary interpretations and patterns that began emerging across transcripts.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Coding is the process of identifying features of the data that appear interesting or meaningful to the research questions and organising data into meaningful groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes were generated systematically across the entire dataset, ensuring that all data received equal attention. Coding was conducted manually rather than using qualitative data analysis software, allowing for deep, reflective engagement with participants' words. Codes were descriptive labels capturing the essence of data extracts, generated inductively from participants' language and experiences rather than being imposed from pre-existing theoretical frameworks. Examples of initial codes included "learner entitlement mentality", "policy handcuffs educators", "fear paralyses teaching", "community violence spillover" and "administrative abandonment". This phase resulted in dozens of initial codes, with some data extracts receiving multiple codes, reflecting their complexity.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

In this phase, the focus shifted from codes to broader patterns of meaning or themes across the data set. Codes were analysed to identify clusters of related meaning, asking how different codes might combine to form overarching themes that address the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) maintain that themes are not simply

topics, but patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept. Visual mapping techniques were employed, using large sheets of paper to arrange and rearrange coded data extracts, identifying relationships between codes and potential theme structures. Initial candidate themes emerged, including “manifestations of violence”, “root causes beyond schools”, “educator trauma responses”, “institutional failure to protect” and “participant solutions”. At this stage, some codes were promoted to theme status, others were collapsed into existing themes and some were set aside as not fitting the emerging thematic structure.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

The next phase involved the rigorous review and refinement of candidate themes at two levels. First, coded data extracts within each theme were reviewed to ensure they formed a coherent pattern. Themes that lacked sufficient supporting data or internal coherence were either refined, collapsed with other themes or discarded. Second, the entire thematic structure was reviewed against the full data set to ensure themes accurately represented meanings evident in the data as a whole. This recursive process required returning to original transcripts to check whether themes resonated with participants’ actual words and experiences or reflected researcher-imposed interpretations. Some themes were substantially revised: for example, an initial theme “community breakdown” was refined and integrated into a broader theme addressing systemic causes of violence. This phase concluded when themes demonstrated internal homogeneity (coherence within themes) and external heterogeneity (clear distinctions between themes).

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

In this phase, each theme was clearly defined and refined to capture its essence and boundaries. For each theme, the researcher conducted detailed analysis identifying the central organising concept, determining what story the theme tells and establishing how it relates to other themes and the overall research questions. Theme names were crafted to be concise, informative and conceptually meaningful rather than being merely generic topic labels. For example, instead of naming a theme simply “violence types”, it was defined as “multidimensional manifestations of learner-directed violence” to capture both the variety and the directedness of violent acts. Each theme was accompanied by a clear definition articulating its scope, what it captures about the

data and what distinguishes it from other themes. This process involved writing detailed analytical narratives for each theme, ensuring each had sufficient complexity and depth to merit separate discussion.

Phase 6: Producing the report

The final phase involved transforming the analysis into a coherent written account presented in Chapter 5. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that analysis continues through the writing process as the researcher weaves together analytical narrative, data extracts and existing literature. During the write-up process, compelling data extracts were selected to illustrate each theme, ensuring extracts were vivid, representative and clearly demonstrated the analytical point being made. Rather than simply presenting descriptive summaries of what participants had said, the analysis interpreted meaning, identified patterns and connected findings to the theoretical framework of SLT established in Chapter 3. The presentation followed an integrated results and discussion format, contextualising findings within existing literature as each theme was presented rather than reserving interpretation for a separate discussion chapter.

Analytical orientation: Inductive and semantic

This analysis was primarily inductive, meaning themes were strongly linked to the data themselves rather than driven by pre-existing theoretical frameworks or the researcher's analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While the study was theoretically informed by SLT (Chapter 3), themes emerged from patterns in participants' accounts rather than being predetermined. The analysis operated at a semantic level, identifying themes within the explicit meanings of the data – what participants actually said about their experiences – rather than looking for latent, implicit meanings beneath the surface. This semantic approach was appropriate given the research questions' focus on understanding educators' lived experiences, perspectives and recommendations regarding safety challenges.

Reflexivity in the analytical process

Throughout the analytical process, the researcher maintained the reflexive journal described in Section 4.2.2 to document analytical decisions, acknowledge subjective positioning and critically examine how personal experiences as an educator might

influence interpretation. Reflexivity involved recognising that the researcher is the instrument of analysis in qualitative research – themes do not emerge from data, but are actively generated through interpretive engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through the act of journalling regularly, the researcher acknowledged potential bias toward interpreting violence through a social learning lens given the theoretical framework, working consciously to remain open to alternative interpretations present in participants' accounts. Regular discussions with the research supervisor provided external perspective on emerging themes, challenging interpretations that might reflect researcher preconceptions rather than participant meanings.

4.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the degree of confidence readers can have in the study's findings, processes and interpretations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) established four criteria for evaluating trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility (parallel to internal validity), transferability (parallel to external validity), dependability (parallel to reliability) and confirmability (parallel to objectivity). This study employed multiple strategies to establish trustworthiness across these four dimensions, ensuring rigorous, authentic and defensible qualitative research.

4.6.1 Credibility

Credibility concerns whether the findings accurately represent participants' realities and experiences. Several strategies were employed to establish credibility. First, prolonged engagement and persistent observation were achieved through the six-week data-collection period during which the researcher conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups at six schools, spending sufficient time to understand each school's unique context and safety dynamics. Second, triangulation was employed through multiple data sources (school leaders, HODs and classroom educators), multiple methods (individual interviews and focus groups) and theoretical triangulation, comparing findings with SLT and existing literature. Third, peer debriefing occurred through regular consultation with the research supervisor who provided critical feedback on emerging interpretations, challenged researcher assumptions and ensured analytical rigour. Finally, thick description was provided throughout the findings (Chapter 5), using rich narrative and verbatim participant quotes to convey the depth and complexity of educator'' safety experiences.

4.6.2 Transferability

Transferability concerns whether findings might be applicable to other contexts or settings. Unlike quantitative research which seeks statistical generalisation, qualitative research aims for analytical transferability, enabling readers to determine whether findings resonate with their own contexts. To facilitate transferability, this study provided comprehensive thick descriptions of multiple dimensions: the research context (Ngaka Modiri Molema district characteristics, rural and township school settings, socio-economic contexts), participant demographics and roles (school leaders, HODs, classroom educators across organisational levels), detailed methodological procedures (sampling, data collection, analysis processes) and rich descriptions of findings showing variations across the six schools. These detailed descriptions enable readers in similar educational contexts – particularly educators, school leaders, policymakers and researchers working in rural South African schools or facing learner-directed violence – to assess whether and how findings might apply to their situations.

4.6.3 Dependability

Dependability is defined as the consistency and replicability of the research process, ensuring that if the study were repeated in similar contexts with similar participants, findings would be consistent. An audit trail was maintained documenting all research decisions, methodological adaptations and analytical developments. This trail included the reflexive journal (described in Section 4.2.2) recording methodological decisions, challenges encountered and rationales for choices made during research; interview guides and protocols (Appendix C) enabling other researchers to understand data-collection procedures; transcripts and coding documents showing the analytical process from raw data to themes; and notes from supervisor consultations documenting feedback and analytical refinements. The detailed methodological description throughout Chapter 4 enables other researchers to understand precisely how the study was conducted, supporting replication in similar contexts. The systematic application of Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework (Section 4.5) further enhanced dependability by following established, transparent analytical procedures.

4.6.4 Confirmability

Confirmability concerns ensuring that findings derive from participants' experiences and data rather than researcher bias or preconceptions. Several strategies established confirmability. First, the reflexive journal maintained throughout the research process documented researcher assumptions, biases and positioning, enabling conscious acknowledgment and management of subjective influences on interpretation. Second, the audit trail linking interpretations back to raw-data extracts enabled verification that themes genuinely reflected participant accounts rather than researcher impositions. Third, peer scrutiny through supervisor consultations provided external perspective on whether interpretations were data-grounded or reflected researcher bias. Fourth, the analytical approach prioritised inductive theme generation from participants' own language and meanings rather than deductively imposing pre-existing frameworks. Finally, the use of extensive verbatim quotations in Chapter 5 allows readers to assess whether analytical interpretations are warranted by the data presented, providing transparency about the evidence base supporting each theme.

4.6.5 Reflexivity as a cross-cutting strategy

Reflexivity served as an overarching strategy enhancing trustworthiness across all four criteria. The researcher maintained ongoing critical self-awareness about how his personal experiences as an educator, his positioning within the research context and his theoretical commitments might influence his data collection, analysis and interpretation. The reflexive journal provided space to interrogate assumptions, document emotional responses to participants' trauma narratives and reflect on power dynamics in researcher-participant relationships. This reflexive stance aligned with the interpretive paradigm's epistemological commitment to co-constructed knowledge (Section 4.2.1), acknowledging that research findings emerge through interaction between researcher and participants rather than representing objective truths waiting to be discovered. By making the researcher's role and influence transparent, reflexivity enhanced the overall trustworthiness and authenticity of the research process and findings.

4.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research ethics are principles that guide responsible conduct of research, ensuring the protection of participants' rights, dignity and well-being throughout the research

process. This study adhered rigorously to ethical principles and procedures, obtaining institutional ethical clearance before data collection commenced. Given the sensitive nature of this research – exploring educators' experiences of violence, trauma and institutional vulnerability – heightened ethical vigilance was maintained throughout. This section details the ethical considerations and safeguards implemented across key dimensions: institutional approval, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, minimising harm, voluntary participation and withdrawal rights, and secure data management.

4.7.1 Institutional ethical clearance

Ethical clearance was obtained from UNISA's Research Ethics Committee prior to commencing any data-collection activities. The research proposal, including all data-collection instruments, informed consent procedures and risk-mitigation strategies, underwent rigorous ethical review to ensure compliance with institutional and national research ethics standards. Additional permission was sought and obtained from the North West Department of Education to conduct research in schools within their jurisdiction. School principals at each of the six participating schools provided written permission for the research to be conducted at their sites. This multi-level ethical approval process ensured that research activities aligned with educational sector protocols and respected institutional hierarchies.

4.7.2 Informed consent

Informed consent is the cornerstone of ethical research, ensuring participants voluntarily agree to participate after receiving comprehensive information about the study. All potential participants received detailed information sheets explaining the research purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, data-handling procedures, confidentiality measures and their rights as research participants. The information sheets were provided in clear, accessible language, avoiding technical jargon that might obscure understanding. Before any data collection occurred, participants were given ample time to read the information sheet, ask questions and make informed decisions about participation. Written consent was obtained from all participants through signed consent forms (see Appendix E). Participants were explicitly informed that consent was voluntary, that they could decline to answer specific questions

without consequence and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

4.7.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously protected throughout the research process. Confidentiality means that while the researcher knows participants' identities, all identifying information is removed from research outputs. Anonymity means participants cannot be identified by anyone, including the researcher. This study ensured confidentiality through systematic pseudonymisation: participants were assigned codes (e.g., PS-A for Principal at School A, HS-B-1 for HOD at School B) used consistently in the transcripts, analytical documents and the final thesis. Real names never appeared in any research outputs. Schools were similarly anonymised, referred to only as Schools A through F, with no geographical or demographic details that might enable identification. During data collection, interviews and focus groups were conducted in private spaces, ensuring others could not overhear discussions. Audio recordings were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher and supervisor. Participants were assured that specific attributions of sensitive statements would be avoided where such attribution might compromise their safety or professional standing.

4.7.4 Minimising risk of harm

Research involving discussions of violence and trauma carries inherent risks of psychological and emotional harm to participants. Several strategies minimised these risks. First, participants were informed in advance that interviews would explore potentially distressing topics, allowing informed decisions about participation. Second, the researcher adopted a trauma-informed approach during data collection, monitoring participants for signs of distress, offering breaks when needed and pausing or stopping interviews if participants became visibly upset. Third, participants were reminded regularly of their right to skip questions or withdraw from the study entirely. Fourth, participants were provided with contact information for counselling services should they require psychological support after the interview. Fifth, the researcher maintained appropriate emotional boundaries while showing empathy and validation for participants' experiences. The risk of social or professional harm was minimised

through strict confidentiality protocols ensuring that school administrators, colleagues, or education officials could not identify individual participants' statements.

4.7.5 Voluntary participation and right to withdraw

Participation in this research was entirely voluntary, with no coercion, undue inducement or pressure applied. Participants were explicitly informed both in information sheets and verbally before interviews that their decision to participate or decline would have no consequences for their professional standing, relationships with school leadership or relationship with the researcher. The researcher was mindful of power dynamics that might compromise voluntary participation: for example, school leaders participated before other staff to avoid any perception that leadership expected staff participation. Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing reasons and without penalty. This right extended beyond data collection – participants were informed they could contact the researcher or supervisor within two weeks following their interview to request withdrawal of their data. While no participants exercised this right, its provision demonstrated respect for participant autonomy throughout the research process.

4.7.6 Secure data management and storage

All research data was managed according to institutional data-protection protocols and applicable legislation. Audio recordings were transferred immediately after each interview from the digital recorder to a password-protected computer and backed up on an encrypted external drive. Original recordings were deleted from the recorder after secure transfer. All electronic files (audio recordings, transcripts, analytical documents) were stored on password-protected devices with access limited strictly to the researcher and research supervisor. Physical documents, including signed consent forms and printed transcripts, were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the supervisor's office. Data will be retained securely for the period required by institutional policy (typically five years following completion of the study), after which all identifiable data will be permanently destroyed. These rigorous data security measures protected participants' confidentiality and complied with data-protection regulations.

4.7.7 Researcher integrity and transparency

The researcher maintained integrity and transparency throughout the research process. There were no conflicts of interest: the researcher had no professional

relationship with participants beyond this research, no financial interest in research outcomes and no dual roles that might compromise objectivity or participant welfare. The research purpose was honestly represented to all stakeholders – no deception or misrepresentation occurred regarding study aims or procedures. Findings were reported honestly and completely, including data that contradicted researcher expectations or preferred interpretations. The researcher acknowledged funding sources and institutional affiliations transparently. This commitment to integrity ensured the research contributes responsibly and ethically to knowledge about educator safety.

4.8 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

All research studies have boundaries and constraints that affect the scope and interpretation of findings. This section distinguishes between delimitations (boundaries consciously set by the researcher to define the study's scope) and limitations (constraints or weaknesses that may affect findings, but are largely beyond the researcher's control). Acknowledging both demonstrates methodological transparency and helps readers accurately interpret findings within their appropriate context.

4.8.1 Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries intentionally established to make the research manageable, focused and aligned with the research questions. This study's primary delimitations firstly included the geographical scope, which was deliberately limited to Ngaka Modiri Molema district in the North West. While educator-directed violence occurs throughout South Africa, focusing on one district enabled in-depth, contextual understanding of how rural and township school settings specifically shape safety dynamics. Second, the study was delimited to secondary schools (Grades 8 to 12) rather than including primary schools, based on literature suggesting that learner-directed violence intensifies during adolescence. Third, only learner-directed violence toward educators was investigated, excluding educator-to-learner violence, peer violence among learners or community-to-school violence, despite acknowledging how these phenomena interconnect. Fourth, the research employed qualitative methodology exclusively, forgoing quantitative measurement of violence prevalence or statistical analysis of contributing factors. This choice prioritised a deep understanding of lived experiences over numerical generalisation. Fourth, the

theoretical framework was delimited to SLT, recognising that alternative frameworks (critical theory, *ubuntu* philosophy, ecological systems theory) could offer different analytical lenses. Fifth, the word 'selected' in the title refers to the purposive sampling strategy described in this section: the six schools were deliberately selected based on their geographic location within the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, their classification as secondary schools, documented safety challenges, and the researcher's access to these sites. This purposive selection aligns with standard qualitative research practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020). These delimitations were justified by the need for focused, in-depth investigation within practical resource and time constraints. Sixth, the study is scientifically and disciplinarily delimited to the field of Philosophy of Education. This delimitation is intentional and justified by the philosophical assumptions that underpin the research. As outlined in Section 4.2.1 (page 91), the study adopts an ontologically relativist position, recognising that educators' experiences of safety are socially constructed realities that vary across contexts rather than existing as objective facts waiting to be discovered. Epistemologically, the study embraces a subjectivist stance, where knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between researcher and participants, prioritising dialogue and interpretation over measurement. Axiologically, the research is explicitly value-laden, placing educators' voices and lived experiences at the centre of inquiry and advocating for their safety as a fundamental educational value. These philosophical commitments distinguish this study from disciplines such as Educational Psychology (which typically seeks measurable, generalisable behavioural patterns), Education Management (which focuses on administrative efficiency and policy implementation), or Curriculum Studies (which centres on content and pedagogy). Furthermore, the study engages directly with philosophical tensions between rights-based frameworks (protecting learners' constitutional rights) and safety obligations (protecting educators' right to a safe working environment) — a tension that is fundamentally philosophical in nature, requiring normative analysis rather than empirical description alone. This philosophical orientation aligns with the theoretical framework of Social Learning Theory (Chapter 3) as interpreted through an interpretive lens, and it justifies the study's location within Philosophy of Education.

Lastly, although document analysis was included as a supplementary data-collection method (see Section 4.4.3), the documents obtained from the six schools provided

only limited contextual background and did not substantively inform the thematic findings presented in Chapter 5. The researcher requested six categories of documents from each school: codes of conduct for learners, classroom rules, school safety policies, reports of violent incidents, minutes of disciplinary hearings, and records of learner misconduct from the disciplinary committee. However, only three schools provided partial access: School A supplied its code of conduct and safety policy (both outdated and not revised within the last five years); School C provided two incident reports (incomplete and heavily redacted); and School F shared minutes of one disciplinary hearing. Schools B, D, and E declined to share any documents, citing confidentiality concerns and internal policies. Consequently, the document analysis did not yield sufficient data to triangulate or corroborate the participant narratives presented in Chapter 5. This is a methodological limitation of the study, and the findings in Chapter 5 rely primarily on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, as stated in the chapter introduction.

This study is intentionally bounded by the following delimitations, which define its scope and focus:

Geographic delimitation: The study is delimited to six purposively selected secondary schools within the Ngaka Modiri Molema District of the North West Province, South Africa. This district was chosen because of documented high-profile incidents of educator-directed violence, its under-resourced rural and semi-rural character, and the lack of prior localised research on this topic. The findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable to other districts or provinces but offer analytical transferability to similar contexts.

Participant delimitation: The study is delimited to educators and school principals only. Learners, parents and Department of Basic Education (DBE) officials were not included as participants. This decision was deliberate: the study focuses on the perspectives of those institutionally responsible for implementing school safety policies, reporting incidents, and managing learner behaviour on a daily basis. The absence of other stakeholder voices is acknowledged as a limitation in Chapter 6 (Section 6.8).

Methodological delimitation: The study employs a qualitative, interpretive multiple-case-study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. By design, the study does not seek statistical generalisability to a broader population. Instead, it aims for in-depth understanding, contextual richness, and analytical transferability. The use of 'selected' in the thesis title refers to the purposive sampling strategy described here – the six schools were deliberately selected based on geographic location, secondary school status, documented safety challenges, and researcher access, which aligns with standard qualitative research practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

Theoretical delimitation: The study is theoretically delimited to Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT, 1977) as the primary analytical framework. This means the analysis focuses on behavioural acquisition through observational learning, modelling, and reinforcement within social environments. The study does not employ alternative frameworks such as Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (which would emphasise multi-systemic interactions) or critical theories (which would foreground power structures). The limitations of SLT are acknowledged in Chapter 3 (Section 3.5.2), and the choice of SLT is justified as a coherent lens for understanding how violent behavioural patterns observed by educators may be reinforced through modelling.

Disciplinary delimitation: The study is located within the discipline of Philosophy of Education. This delimitation is justified by the study's engagement with ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions. Ontologically, educator safety is treated as a socially constructed reality (relativist position). Epistemologically, knowledge is co-constructed through researcher-participant interaction (subjectivist stance). Axiologically, the research is explicitly value-laden, prioritising educators' voices and lived experiences. These philosophical commitments distinguish the study from Educational Psychology (which seeks measurement and generalisation), Education Management (focused on administrative systems), and Curriculum Studies (centred on content and pedagogy). The study also interrogates philosophical tensions between learners' rights frameworks and educators' safety obligations, a normative inquiry that falls within Philosophy of Education's purview.

4.8.2 Limitations

Limitations are constraints or potential weaknesses that may affect the study's findings and conclusions, many of which were beyond the researcher's control. Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the sample size of 38 participants across six schools, while sufficient for qualitative saturation, limits statistical generalisability of findings to other contexts. However, analytical transferability remains possible through thick description, enabling readers to assess relevance according to their own contexts. Second, purposive sampling may introduce selection bias, as participants who volunteered might differ systematically from those who declined (potentially being more comfortable discussing violence or having stronger safety concerns). Third, self-report data relied on participants' willingness and ability to accurately recall and describe experiences, introducing potential recall bias, social desirability bias or reluctance to fully disclose sensitive information despite confidentiality assurances. Fourth, the researcher's positioning as an educator may have influenced data collection and interpretation, despite reflexive practices to manage subjectivity. Participants may have tailored responses based on perceived researcher expectations or shared professional identity.

Fifth, the cross-sectional design captured experiences at one point in time, missing temporal dynamics or changes in safety conditions across school terms or years. Longitudinal research would better capture evolving violence patterns and intervention effectiveness. Sixth, language barriers may have constrained some participants' expression, as interviews were conducted in English when participants might have been more articulate in their home languages. Seventh, the absence of learner perspectives represents a significant limitation – this study captured only educator accounts of violence without balancing these with learners' perspectives on incidents or contributing factors. Also, an additional limitation in my view is that educator participants in the focus-group discussions may have felt uncomfortable sharing their experiences of school violence in front of their peers and their HOD. They may have shared their views more freely in one-on-one discussions, as with the principals and deputies. Eighth, the qualitative design precludes causal claims about relationships between contributing factors and violence outcomes. While SLT provided an interpretive framework, the study identifies associations rather than establishing

causation. These limitations do not invalidate findings, but contextualise their interpretation and suggest directions for future research.

This study is qualitative in nature and relies on self-reported data from educators and principals. While this approach enabled deep exploration of lived experiences, it limits statistical generalisability and does not include the perspectives of learners, parents or DBE officials. The cross-sectional design captures experiences at a single point in time (2025) and cannot capture seasonal or long-term changes in violence patterns. These methodological constraints are acknowledged fully in Chapter 6, which contains the comprehensive treatment of all study limitations.

4.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presents a comprehensive account of the research methodology employed to investigate educator-directed violence in Ngaka Modiri Molema district secondary schools. The chapter systematically detailed the philosophical foundations, research design, data-collection procedures, analytical processes, quality measures and ethical considerations that guided this qualitative inquiry.

The study adopted an interpretive paradigm and qualitative approach, employing a multiple case-study design across six secondary schools. This methodological orientation was justified by the research aim to understand educators' lived experiences, subjective meanings and contextual interpretations of violence and safety – phenomena that require in-depth exploration rather than numerical measurement. The interpretive paradigm's epistemological commitment to co-constructed knowledge aligned with the research's focus on accessing participants' authentic voices and experiences through dialogue.

Purposive sampling was employed to select six schools based on documented safety challenges and 38 participants representing three organisational levels: school leaders (n=7), heads of department (n=11), and classroom educators (n=20). This stratified approach ensured comprehensive representation of perspectives across hierarchical positions within schools. Data saturation was achieved, with subsequent interviews yielding no new substantive insights beyond established patterns.

Data collection employed two complementary methods: semi-structured interviews with school leaders captured institutional leadership perspectives through confidential one-on-one discussions, while focus-group discussions with middle managers and

classroom educators explored collective experiences and shared meanings. Both methods utilised a thematic interview guide (Appendix C) aligned with research questions. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim and anonymised using systematic coding to protect participants' confidentiality.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than being imposed through pre-existing frameworks. The analytical process was iterative and reflexive, with the researcher maintaining a reflexive journal documenting interpretive decisions, acknowledging subjective positioning and critically examining potential biases.

Trustworthiness was established through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility (through prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing and thick description), transferability (through comprehensive contextual description enabling reader assessment of applicability), dependability (through audit trails and systematic analytical procedures) and confirmability (through reflexive journalling, data-grounded interpretations and peer scrutiny). These quality measures ensured rigour, authenticity and the defensibility of the findings.

Ethical considerations were comprehensively addressed throughout the research process. Institutional ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection, informed consent was secured from all participants, confidentiality and anonymity were protected through pseudonymisation and secure data storage, potential psychological harm was minimised through trauma-informed approaches, voluntary participation was ensured without coercion and participant well-being was prioritised over data-collection imperatives. These ethical safeguards demonstrated respect for participants' dignity, rights and welfare.

The chapter concluded by acknowledging delimitations (intentional boundaries including geographical focus, secondary school scope and qualitative methodology) and limitations (constraints including sample size, potential biases, cross-sectional design and absence of learner perspectives). These boundary conditions contextualise the interpretation of findings presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 5 presents the thematic analysis of data collected through this methodology, organised around five major themes addressing the research questions regarding manifestations of educator-directed violence, contributing factors, impacts on educators, existing safety measures and participant recommendations for improvement.

CHAPTER 5: DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

5.1. INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 reviewed literature on educator-directed violence, examining its forms, prevalence, causes and impacts both internationally and in South Africa. Chapter 3 established SLT as the theoretical framework for understanding how violent behaviours are acquired through observational learning and modelling. Chapter 4 outlined the qualitative research methodology, detailing the interpretive paradigm and multiple case-study design employed across six secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district, involving 38 participants comprising seven school leaders, 11 heads of department and 20 educators.

This chapter presents and analyses the empirical data gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis, the findings are organised into five major themes: forms and prevalence of educator-directed violence; causes and contributing factors; impact on educators; safety measures and protocols; and recommendations for improvement. Each theme examines participant experiences, compares findings with existing literature and interprets patterns through SLT. The analysis reveals how violence emerges from interactions among individuals, families, communities, institutions and policies. The chapter concludes by synthesising key findings and previewing the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 6.

5.2 DESCRIPTION OF THE CASES AND PARTICIPANTS

This study engaged 38 participants across six secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district. The sample comprised seven school leaders (principals or deputy principals), 11 post-level 2 HODs and 20 post-level 1 educators from each of the six schools. This multi-tiered composition was strategically designed to capture perspectives from three organisational levels: institutional leadership responsible for school-wide safety policies (principals/deputy principals), middle management tasked with implementing safety protocols at departmental level (HODs) and classroom-level educators who experience learner-directed violence most directly in their daily teaching practice. This hierarchical sampling approach ensured that data reflected both policy and the lived experiences of educator safety.

Table 5.1 below presents the demographic profile of all 36 participants, including their assigned codes, roles and school affiliations. To ensure confidentiality in accordance with the ethical commitments outlined in Chapter 4, pseudonyms were assigned using a systematic coding convention: P denotes principal, H represents HOD, E indicates educator, S signifies school and the final letter identifies each specific school (Schools A through F). While detailed profiles of individual participants and comprehensive descriptions of each school's contextual characteristics are provided in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2), this demographic summary is presented here to enable readers to interpret participant voices in the thematic analysis that follows without needing to cross-reference earlier chapters.

Table 5.1: Participant distribution by school and role

School	Principal/Deputy	HODs	Educators	Total	Participant Codes
School A	1	2	3	6	AP1, AH1-AH2, AE1-AE3
School B	1	2	4	7	BP1, BH1-BH2, BE1-BE4
School C	2	1	4	7	CP1-CP2, CH1, CE1-CE4
School D	1	2	3	6	DP1, DH1-DH2, DE1-DE3
School E	1	2	3	5	EP1, EH1- EH2, EE2-EE4
School F	1	2	4	7	FP1, FH1-FH2, FE1-FE4
TOTAL	**7**	**11**	**20**	**38**	**Schools A-F**

5.3 LINKING FINDINGS TO THE STUDY'S RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This chapter presents the analysis of data collected to address the core concerns of this study. The investigation was guided by the following primary aim and specific objectives, as outlined in Chapter 1.

Main research objective

To evaluate the factors that have helped to maintain or hinder educator safety in the Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools of the North West.

Supporting study objectives

The data analysis was structured to achieve the following specific objectives:

- To assess the nature and extent of safety incidents affecting educators in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools.

- To evaluate the effectiveness of existing safety measures and identify gaps in school-safety protocols.
- To analyse the factors contributing to educators' safety concerns.
- To gather stakeholders' recommendations for enhancing educator safety in these schools.

The subsequent thematic presentation and discussion of findings in this chapter are organised to directly respond to these objectives, providing evidence-based insights into the complex issue of educator safety.

The thematic analysis presented in Section 5.6 directly addresses these objectives as follows: Theme 1 (forms and prevalence of educator-directed violence) responds to Objective 1 by documenting the nature and extent of safety incidents. Theme 2 (causes and contributing factors) addresses Objective 3 by analysing the underlying factors driving violence. Theme 3 (impact on educators) extends the analysis by examining consequences not explicitly stated in the objectives, but emerging from the data. Theme 4 (safety measures and protocols) responds to Objective 2 by evaluating existing measures and identifying implementation gaps. Finally, Theme 5 (recommendations and solutions) directly addresses Objective 4 by presenting stakeholder-generated solutions for enhancing educator safety. This alignment ensures that the study's findings provide evidence-based insights into the complex issue of educator safety in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district.

5.4 Data coding: Emergent themes and categories

The qualitative data from interviews and focus groups was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. The coding process began with familiarisation through repeated reading of interview transcripts, followed by initial line-by-line coding to identify recurring patterns, significant statements and meaningful units of analysis. These initial codes were then grouped into provisional categories based on similarity and relationship to the research objectives. Through an iterative process of reviewing, refining and collapsing categories, five overarching themes emerged from the data, each containing between two and four sub-themes.

The thematic analysis was conducted manually, with themes and codes recorded and organised using Microsoft Excel to track code frequency and relationships. This

analytical approach allowed for deep engagement with the data, while maintaining transparency in how themes were identified and developed. The coding process prioritised participants' voices and meaning-making, ensuring that themes authentically reflected educators' lived experiences rather than imposing predetermined categories onto the data.

Table 5.2 below presents the final thematic framework that emerged from the data, providing a structured overview of the five major themes and their constituent categories. Each theme is labelled numerically (1–5) and each category is coded hierarchically (e.g., 1.1, 1.2) to facilitate clear referencing throughout the analysis. This framework serves as the organisational structure for the detailed thematic analysis presented in Section 5.6, where each theme and category is explored in depth with direct participant quotations, comparative analysis across schools and connections to the theoretical framework and relevant literature.

Table 5.2: Thematic framework on educator safety

Theme	Categories
1. Forms and prevalence of violence	1.1 Physical violence 1.2 Verbal and psychological violence 1.3 Bullying and harassment
2. Causes and contributing factors	2.1 Substance abuse and gang influence 2.2 Family and community factors 2.3 Policy and legislative factors 2.4 Over-age learners and progression policies
3. Impact on educators	3.1 Psychological and emotional effects 3.2 Impact on teaching and learning
4. Safety measures and protocols	4.1 Existing safety protocols 4.2 Gaps in safety implementation
5. Recommendations and solutions	5.1 Policy and legislative reform 5.2 Stakeholder collaboration

	5.3 Support services for educators and learners

Note: *Categories were coded hierarchically for clear cross-referencing throughout the analysis.*

5.5 THEMES AND CATEGORIES

This section presents the detailed thematic analysis of data collected from 38 participants across six secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema district. The analysis is organised according to the five-theme framework presented in Table 5.2: (1) forms and prevalence of educator-directed violence, (2) causes and contributing factors, (3) impact on educators, (4) safety measures and protocols, and (5) recommendations and solutions. Each theme is explored through three integrated analytical layers: first, participant voices are presented through direct quotations to establish the empirical foundation; second, patterns and variations across the six schools are identified to reveal contextual nuances; and third, findings are connected to the theoretical framework (SLT) and relevant literature from Chapter 2 to situate the analysis within existing scholarship. This multi-layered approach ensures that the analysis remains grounded in participant experiences, while demonstrating theoretical coherence and empirical rigour.

5.5.1 Theme 1: Forms and prevalence of educator-directed violence

This theme addresses Research Question 1, which investigates the nature and extent of safety incidents affecting educators in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools.

All 38 participants across the six schools reported direct or witnessed experiences of learner-directed violence against educators, confirming that this phenomenon is pervasive rather than isolated to specific sites or individuals. However, the nature, severity and frequency of violence varied significantly across the sample. Three distinct forms of violence emerged from the data analysis: physical violence (ranging from pushing and slapping to weapon-based lethal assaults); verbal and psychological violence (including threats, insults, sexual harassment and intimidation); and bullying and harassment (characterised by repeated, targeted behaviour designed to undermine educator authority and well-being). School E experienced the most extreme manifestation – a fatal stabbing that claimed an educator's life, while other schools reported lower-intensity, but still concerning patterns of aggression. This

theme examines each form of violence through participant testimonies, identifies patterns that distinguish higher-violence from lower-violence contexts, and connects findings to SLT's explanations of how violent behaviours are acquired and perpetuated in school environments.

5.5.1.1 Physical Violence

Physical violence emerged as the most visibly damaging and immediately threatening form of aggression reported by participants. Incidents ranged from relatively minor physical contact (pushing, shoving) to severe assaults involving weapons (knives, iron rods) and, in the most extreme case, lethal force.

The fatal stabbing at School E

The most severe incident occurred at School E, where an educator was fatally stabbed by a Grade 10 learner in 2018. Participant EP1 recounted: "We once had a terrible incident in our school where one of our teachers has been stabbed by a grade 10 learner." This tragedy was corroborated by participants from other schools. Participant BP1 stated, "There's one school where a learner killed a teacher," and Participant CP1 added, "A teacher was killed because of supervision." The widespread awareness of this incident across multiple schools suggests its profound psychological impact of what violence promulgated against teachers extended beyond School E, creating a climate of fear that permeated the broader district.

This account finds direct support in the literature, where similarly extreme cases have been documented. Hlatshwayo (2018:36) describes an educator who was attacked and stabbed 14 times in the back by a learner while writing on the chalkboard. Melanda et al. (2018:2) note that physical violence can involve using an object to harm or inflict pain, potentially resulting in death. What distinguishes the School E case from isolated violent incidents reported in literature is its occurrence within a school that participants described as having chronic safety failures, suggesting that the fatal stabbing was not an aberration, but rather the most extreme manifestation of systemic violence.

Non-lethal physical violence patterns

Beyond the fatal case, participants across all six schools reported frequent non-lethal physical violence. Participant AP1 described "a case where a teacher was slapped by a learner" and instances where teachers "have been pushed, defied by learners". Participant CP2 shared a personal experience: "One learner assaulted me in the office

after misbehaving at assembly and one of the educators also, a learner banged a door on her finger, which got injured." Female educators appeared particularly vulnerable, with several reporting being *klapped* (slapped) or physically intimidated. Participant FH1 reported, "Learners attacked the principal in his office... some teachers were *klapped*. I'm one of those who were *klapped* and they pushed."

Weapon use escalated the threat level significantly. Participant CP1 noted incidents where learners brought weapons to school: "The other learner just sprayed the teacher in class [with pepper spray] ... took out a knife, threaten [sic] the lady teacher." The presence of weapons – pepper spray, knives and, in one instance, a threat involving an iron rod – has transformed routine disciplinary encounters into potentially life-threatening situations for teachers.

These experiences align with definitions in the literature. Ersan (2019:2) characterises physical violence as harmful actions, which may include throwing objects at educators, using weapons and physical attacks by learners. UNESCO (2017:14) asserts that any aggressive behaviour aimed at causing harm is deemed physical violence. However, the literature typically presents physical violence as individual incidents, whereas participant accounts reveal patterns of escalation – from pushing to slapping to weapon-based threats, suggesting a continuum rather than discrete events.

Theoretical interpretation: SLT

The physical violence reported by participants can be understood through Bandura's SLT, which posits that violent behaviour is acquired through observational learning. Bandura (1977) notes that individuals learn behaviours by observing others and mimicking their actions based on the outcomes they witness. In the Ngaka Modiri Molema district, where communities contend with multiple risk factors, including poverty, unemployment and a culture that condones violence (Kistnasamy, 2019:37), learners are exposed to models who use physical aggression as a means of conflict resolution.

The fatal stabbing incident at School E represents an extreme manifestation of learned aggressive behaviour. However, SLT's explanatory power is limited here: it explains how violence might be learned, but struggles to explain why some learners escalate to lethal force while others, exposed to similar environmental models, do not. This suggests that individual psychological factors, acute stressors or substance use

(explored in Theme 2) interact with learned behaviours in ways that SLT's focus on observational learning cannot fully capture.

Comparative analysis across schools

While all six schools reported physical violence, important variations emerged. School E, the site of the fatal stabbing, also reported the highest frequency of weapon-related incidents and the most severe injuries. Schools A and D reported physical violence, but at lower severity levels – predominantly pushing and classroom disruptions rather than weapon use. Schools B, C and F reported the lowest rates of violence. This variation suggests that school-specific factors (explored in Theme 4 on safety protocols) mediate the severity of violence, even when learners across the district are exposed to similar levels of violence.

5.5.1.2 Verbal and psychological violence

Verbal and psychological abuse was reported as a pervasive and demoralising form of violence that undermines educator authority and well-being. Unlike physical violence, which leaves visible evidence, verbal and psychological violence operates through intimidation, humiliation and dehumanisation, making it both more difficult to document and, according to several participants, more persistent in its psychological impact. This form of violence was reported across all six schools, with female educators disproportionately experiencing sexually charged verbal abuse.

Forms and manifestations

Participant testimony revealed three primary manifestations of verbal violence. First, direct verbal abuse and insults were widespread. Participant AP1 cited "verbal abuse" and learners defying educators. Participant EE3 highlighted profound disrespect: "They skin teachers... they don't see us as nothing." The term "skin" (local terminology for publicly humiliating or verbally attacking someone else) suggests a ritualised, peer-reinforced form of verbal violence where the performance of disrespect before an audience amplifies the educator's humiliation.

Second, sexual harassment through verbal remarks emerged as a disturbing pattern affecting female educators specifically. Participant BE1 shared a deeply personal violation: "One incident that I've experienced was getting sexual remarks made to me by learners." This gendered dimension of violence, where female authority figures are subjected to sexualised comments, reflects broader societal patterns of gender-based

intimidation, but is particularly damaging in educational settings where educator authority depends on professional respect. In addition, I think it's also a reflection of a patriarchal society where men command more respect than women and women are reduced to mere objects of sexual desire.

Third, implicit threats and intimidation have created climates of fear. Participant FP1 elaborated on the psychological impact: "It's a verbal attack by learners... They [teachers] are verbally attacked and they fear that these learners... can be violent physically to them." Here, verbal violence functions as a precursor to physical violence, with educators recognising that today's verbal threat may become tomorrow's physical assault. This anticipatory fear may be as debilitating as actual physical violence.

Impact and psychological consequences

The psychological toll of sustained verbal abuse was consistently emphasised by participants. Many educators described feeling "unsafe", "disrespected", and "dehumanized". As EE3 expressed, "They don't see us as nothing", a statement that captures the existential erasure of educator identity. The literature confirms the severe impact of such aggression. Taylor and Smith (2019:52) describe verbal violence as behaviour intended to inflict psychological harm with a deliberate message. Ferrara et al. (2019:1) note that it encompasses actions such as mockery, intimidation, threats, discrimination, rejection and other non-physical forms of aggression.

Significantly, Poling et al. (2019:9) underscore that while verbal aggression is more subtle than physical aggression, it can inflict harm on victims comparable to that of physical violence. This challenges the common perception that "mere words" are less damaging than physical assaults. For educators in this study, the cumulative effect of daily verbal abuse – the relentless erosion of dignity and authority – was often described as more demoralising than isolated incidents of physical violence. Sibisi (2016:47) argues that educators increasingly feel unsafe in their classrooms, leading to high rates of anxiety, depression, fear, PTSD, humiliation and self-esteem problems.

Theoretical interpretation: SLT

SLT provides a framework for understanding how verbal and psychological violence is learned and replicated. As Woolfolk (2018) explains, Bandura's theory of social learning focuses on learning that occurs in a social setting and is shaped by the

interaction between children's cognitive development, attitudes and environment. Learners who engage in verbal abuse, sexual remarks and psychological intimidation have likely observed similar behaviours being modelled in their social environments.

Beckmann (2019:1) believes that children who experience verbal aggression from their parents during childhood are more likely to perpetrate verbal abuse toward educators later in school, aligning with the principles of SLT. This represents observational learning where aggressive communication styles are internalised and reproduced. However, SLT's emphasis on imitation does not fully explain the creative elaboration of verbal violence observed in this study, such as the ritualised "skinning" of teachers or the gendered nature of sexual harassment. Learners are not simply reproducing observed behaviours, but adapting and intensifying them within peer-group dynamics, suggesting that peer reinforcement and status-seeking motivations interact with learned behaviours in ways that exceed simple modelling effects.

Comparative patterns and gender dimensions

While verbal violence was reported across all six schools, gender emerged as a significant variable. Female educators, particularly younger female educators, reported higher frequencies of sexual harassment and sexualised verbal abuse. Male educators more frequently reported challenges to their authority through defiance and public "skinning", but rarely mentioned sexual remarks. This gender differentiation in violence forms suggests that learners deploy different intimidation strategies based on the gender of the authority figure – a dimension that SLT, with its focus on behavioural imitation rather than strategic adaptation, does not adequately address.

Schools with stronger administrative support (Schools A and F, according to participant reports in Theme 4) appeared to experience lower frequencies of ritualised verbal abuse, suggesting that institutional responses can mitigate learned behaviours. However, even in these schools, sexual harassment persists, indicating that this particular form of verbal violence may be more resistant to school-level intervention and may require broader societal shifts in gender norms.

5.5.1.3 Bullying and harassment

Bullying and harassment represent a distinct form of learner-on-educator violence, characterised by repetition, persistence, and – as participant accounts revealed – often involving coordinated group action. Unlike the spontaneous physical violence or

opportunistic verbal abuse documented previously, bullying demonstrates premeditation and collective organisation, suggesting a qualitatively different phenomenon that targets not just the individual educator, but their professional standing and psychological security over sustained periods.

Coordinated and premeditated actions

What distinguishes bullying from other forms of violence in this study is its organised, collective nature. Participant AE1 described a coordinated act of intimidation: “When I entered into the class, they started throwing textbooks at me. So, one of the learners came to me and told me this was arranged by the principal.” This account reveals several disturbing elements: the planned nature of the attack (“arranged”), the collective participation (multiple learners throwing books simultaneously) and the subsequent revelation designed to amplify the teacher’s humiliation. The claim that it was “arranged by the principal” (whether true or false) adds an additional layer of psychological intimidation, suggesting institutional complicity or complete erosion of administrative authority.

Participant FE4 experienced targeted harassment with physical obstruction: “A learner... under the influence of drugs... just blocked my entrance when I wanted to come into the classroom.” While attributed to substance abuse, the strategic blocking of the doorway represents a direct challenge to educator authority before a peer audience – the classroom full of learners witnessing their teacher unable to enter. This public dimension transforms individual defiance into collective humiliation.

Participant CH1 reported acts designed specifically to humiliate: “We had another incident of throwing water from the upstairs to the teachers standing on the ground.” The verticality of this act – water thrown from above onto educators below – carries symbolic resonance of hierarchy inversion, where those who should be subordinate (learners) physically dominate from elevated positions those who should hold authority over them (educators). This is not spontaneous aggression, but choreographed degradation.

Distinguishing bullying from other forms of violence

The literature defines bullying as distinct from other types of learner-on-educator violence due to its repeated and persistent nature over time (Steyn & Singh, 2018:2). However, participant accounts suggest an additional distinguishing feature not

adequately captured in literature: the performative and collective dimensions. Bullying in these schools functions as peer-group theatre, where violence against educators becomes a spectacle that reinforces learner solidarity, while systematically dismantling educator authority.

Lowe et al. (2020:193) found that harassment was the most frequently reported type of violence faced by educators in Australia, suggesting this is not unique to South Africa. Mabuza (2020:31) notes that sexual harassment encompasses not just physical actions, but also includes verbal harassment and visual harassment. Mncube and Harber (2014:326) explain that bullying can take various forms, including humiliation, derogatory remarks, threats, name-calling, sarcasm, spreading false information, teasing, social exclusion, torture and ridicule. The participants in this study reported predominantly group-based physical and symbolic forms (throwing objects, blocking access, public humiliation) rather than the interpersonal forms like name-calling or social exclusion highlighted in literature. This suggests that bullying in high-violence schools may manifest differently than in lower-violence contexts.

Theoretical interpretation: SLT and its limits

SLT offers partial explanation for bullying behaviour. According to Bandura (2018), individuals learn behaviours by observing and modelling others, with humans often learning by observing and modelling others' actions to guide their own behaviour. Learners who engage in coordinated bullying acts, such as throwing textbooks or blocking classroom doorways, may be imitating behaviours they have observed in peer groups or gang environments where intimidation is rewarded with social status or power. Woolfolk's (2018) research confirms that social learning is shaped by the interaction between children's cognitive development, attitudes and environment.

However, SLT struggles to explain the collective, coordinated nature of bullying documented here. Observational learning theory focuses on individual behaviour acquisition through modelling, but the "arranged" textbook attack described by AE1 involves planning, role assignment and synchronised execution – collective action that exceeds individual imitation. This suggests that theories of group dynamics, peer pressure and collective identity formation need to supplement SLT to fully explain coordinated bullying. Additionally, the symbolic and performative dimensions (water being thrown at teachers from above, blocking the classroom doorway before an

audience) suggest that bullying serves social functions within peer groups – status establishment, in-group/out-group boundary marking – that SLT's focus on behaviour acquisition does not adequately address.

Moreover, the persistence of bullying despite consequence management by school principals' and school managment it then challenges SLT's reinforcement principles. If bullying behaviours were being consistently punished (negative reinforcement), SLT predicts their extinction. Yet bullying persists and, according to participants, has intensified. This suggests either that bullying is being reinforced (perhaps by peer approval) more powerfully than official sanctions can deter or that bullying has become ritualised within peer cultures to the point where it operates independently of external reinforcement, a possibility that exceeds SLT's explanatory framework.

The shift from individual violence (slapping, verbal abuse) to collective, coordinated bullying represents an escalation in both organisation and symbolic meaning. When violence becomes collective ritual rather than individual outburst, it signals a fundamental breakdown in institutional authority. The fact that Participant AE1's learner claimed the attack was "arranged by the principal" (even if false) suggests learners perceive – or want educators to perceive – that even school leadership has lost control or complicity exists.

This pattern appeared most pronounced in Schools E and C, where participants reported the highest frequency of coordinated incidents. Schools A and F reported bullying, but primarily in individual rather than collective forms. This variation suggests that school climate and peer-group culture mediate whether bullying remains individual harassment or evolves into coordinated group action, a dimension requiring further investigation beyond this study's scope.

The forms of violence documented in Theme 1 – physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and coordinated bullying – raise urgent questions about causation. What drives learners to perpetrate such violence against educators? Why does violence manifest at different severity levels across schools with similar socio-economic profiles? Theme 2 explores the underlying causes and contributing factors identified by participants, examining how substance abuse, family dysfunction, community violence, policy failures and institutional factors converge to create the patterns of violence documented above.

5.5.2 Theme 2: Causes and contributing factors

This theme addresses Research Question 3, which analyses the factors contributing to educators' safety concerns.

The pervasive violence documented in Theme 1 demands explanation. Participants identified four interconnected causal domains: substance abuse and gang culture; family and community dysfunction; educational policies (particularly the BELA Act); and institutional factors such as over-age learners and automatic progression. These factors do not operate in isolation but interact systemically – substance abuse is enabled by weak family structures, gang affiliation fills community voids and policies designed to protect learners' rights are perceived as removing accountability mechanisms. This theme explores each causal domain, while recognising their complex interrelationships.

5.5.2.1 Substance abuse and gang influence

Substance abuse and gang affiliation were identified as primary catalysts for violent and disruptive behaviour.

Participant BP1 directly linked marijuana (dagga) use to initiation schools and violence: "Concerns amongst others involve learners who are using marijuana... there are instances where sometimes learners would be hallucinating... resulting in maybe a physical harm." Participant EP1 concurred: "Learners are smoking dagga a lot... it causes a threat to educators." Participant FH2 highlighted easy access: "There's an easy access to marijuana... these learners... come to school very high then they start to fight." Participant DP1 emphasised the external influence of gangsterism: "It is gangsterism which starts at home outside the school level. So, these learners have the tendency of bringing them here at school."

The convergence of substance abuse and gang involvement creates what participants described as a "perfect storm" – learners who are chemically uninhibited, whose violent behaviour is reinforced by their peers and who are operating within sub-cultures where educator intimidation confers status.

Research supports the connection between substance abuse, gang involvement and school violence. Lunneblad and Johansson (2021:2) draw a direct link between acts of violence towards educators and learner substance use. Saladino et al. (2021:5) reported that a majority of cases of violence against educators stemmed from learners'

exposure to violence and drug use. Gxubane and Mguzulwa (2019:268) point out that gang members live in constant fear, believing that they are targeted for attacks or even death, as they are frequently in conflict with rival gangs and rely on their peers for protection. Henneberger, Mushonga and Preston (2021:57) suggest that as young people mature, they tend to spend more time with their peers than with their parents, seeking mutual understanding and acceptance through peer selection and socialisation.

Substance abuse and gang involvement represent powerful modelling environments where violent behaviours are explicitly taught and reinforced. SLT posits that violent behaviour can be acquired through observational learning, with individuals learning behaviours by observing models and imitating their behaviour if it is likely to lead to favourable consequences (Bandura, 1977). In gang contexts, as Kistnasamy (2019:34) claims, learners involved with gangs are taught to be violent and often receive rewards for engaging in violent acts, which boosts their sense of power. This behavioural pattern has a direct implication for educator safety in that when gang-affiliated learners bring these learned violent behaviours to school, educators become the targets of intimidation, physical threats, and actual assaults – often with no effective consequence system to interrupt the cycle. This represents a clear application of SLT principles: gang members serve as models, violent behaviour is demonstrated and positive reinforcement (rewards, status) increases the likelihood of imitation. The availability of weapons and drugs in school environments further creates conditions where learned violent behaviours can be enacted.

Based on educator-reported experiences, substance abuse and gang involvement appear to create a ‘perfect storm’ where learners act out learned violent behaviours – though this conclusion is drawn from teacher accounts rather than direct observation of learners.

5.5.2.2 Family and community factors

Dysfunctional home environments and a lack of community support were consistently cited by the study participants as root causes of learner aggression.

Participant AH1 pointed to a “lack of discipline backgrounds from their families”. Participant FH1 stressed the role of parents: “Parents do not support the school... They [learners] disrespect us because they don’t get a parental support from home.”

Participant FE2 observed: “Parents do not give them support. Instead, they become happy when their kids come to school because they are like a burden to them.” Participant CP1 described active community hostility: “The parent came to school, she threatened that... she’s going to close the school... So, our community also has an influence.”

Participants attributed violence not merely to absent parents, but to hostile parent-school relationships where parents actively undermine educator authority, reflecting broader community hostility toward schools perceived as failing institutions.

The literature confirms the impact of family and community factors on school violence. Kistnasamy (2019:37) notes that many South African township communities are confronted with multiple risk factors, including high poverty rates, limited employment opportunities and a culture that condones violence, all of which are associated with higher levels of violence among school learners. UNICEF (2020:11) suggests that children who lack financial support, parental care and are exposed to violence are more likely to exhibit disruptive behaviour. Singo (2017:41) further supports this by highlighting the negative impact of poor parent-child relationships, which can lead to increased household stress and a higher prevalence of violence directed by learners towards educators. Berkowitz et al. (2021:393) confirm that a lack of parental support can negatively impact children’s social and emotional growth, including their behaviour.

Family and community environments serve as primary sites for observational learning of violent behaviours. According to SLT, children who are victims or witnesses of violence not only suffer immediately, but also internalise the experience, leading some to learn and engage in violent behaviour (Castro-Sánchez et al., 2019:2). Igu and Ogba (2019:30) suggest that children raised in violent environments are more likely to exhibit violent behaviour. This aligns with Bandura’s concept of modelling, where children observe conflict-resolution methods in their homes and communities. When violence is modelled as an acceptable means of solving problems or exerting control, children learn to replicate these behaviours in school settings. For educator safety, this means that learners arriving from violent home environments may already have internalised aggression as a normative response to authority, making classroom management and personal safety more challenging for teachers who have no control over home conditions. SLT posits that learners’ behaviour is influenced not only by

psychological or cognitive factors, but also by environmental factors, including family and community contexts (Mushaandja, 2018). While not directly verified by learner or parent data, participants suggested that when violence is modelled as an acceptable means of conflict resolution at home, children may learn to replicate these behaviours in school settings.

5.5.2.3 Policy and legislative factors

Participants overwhelmingly identified educational policies, particularly the BELA Act, as disempowering educators and enabling learner misconduct.

Participant AH1 argued: “The BELA Act gives learners more power than educators... Educators are not protected.” Participant CE4 explained:

> *Learners are also aware that most of the educational policies are on their side in terms of their rights... the law is actually protecting them. That is why it is possible for them to attack educators and they know that they will always be favoured by the law.*

Participant FE4 used a potent metaphor: “The BELA Act leaves teachers’ hands folded [tied]... we bark but cannot bite.” Participant EE4 called for balance: “As the BELA Bill has the rights of learners, they should also go with the responsibilities.”

The near-universal linking of violence to the BELA Act represents either genuine policy failure or, alternatively, scapegoating of legislation for broader systemic failures – a distinction this study cannot definitively resolve, but which warrants further research.

The literature documents challenges in policy implementation that affect school discipline. Segalo and Rambuda (2018:3) note that educators often feel uncertain about how to discipline learners due to the human rights principles outlined in the Constitution, SASA and the SACE Act. Hanslo (2020:38) concurs, noting that even when schools have a code of conduct in place, the lack of proper legislative mechanisms allows learners to escape consequences for their misbehaviour. Mashau et al. (2015:287) note that disciplinary measures in schools can be influenced by learners’ rights, emphasising that in South Africa, it is common for educators to face assertive learners defending their human rights. These policy challenges create conditions where violent behaviours may not be consistently addressed.

Policy environments shape the reinforcement contingencies[6] that influence behavioural learning. SLT asserts that behaviours are maintained or extinguished based on their consequences. When policies like the BELA Act are perceived as protecting learners without ensuring accountability, they may inadvertently reinforce violent behaviours by removing meaningful consequences. As Bandura's theory suggests, individuals learn behaviours by observing others and mimicking their actions based on the outcomes they witness. If learners observe that violent behaviour towards educators does not result in significant negative consequences due to policy constraints, they learn that such behaviour is low risk. This creates a learning environment where aggression is implicitly reinforced, contrary to the principles of positive discipline (Schlebusch, Makola & Ndlovu, 2022).

5.5.2.4 Over-age learners and progression policies

The presence of learners over the age of 18 in classrooms was highlighted as a significant factor contributing to disrespect and violence.

Participant EP1 stated: "The over-age learners in most cases they are the ones who are causing the problem... they feel they are above the educators." Participant FP1 recommended stricter age limits: "Any learners above 19 should leave the school because those learners, they're the one that many times are involved in violence." Participant AE3 highlighted the generational tension: "Majority of these young educators... are more vulnerable because... some of our learners are beyond 20... These are older learners [who] do not respect the young educators."

The presence of physically mature, academically disengaged[7] over-age learners creates classroom dynamics where peer modelling shifts from age-appropriate behaviour to adult-pattern aggression, fundamentally altering the social learning environment.

Research identifies over-age learners as a factor in school violence. Nhambura (2020:134) indicates that in South African schools, physical violence is primarily perpetrated by over-age learners who struggle to adhere to discipline like their peers.

[6] This refers to the relationship between a behaviour and its consequence (the "if-then" rules of a social institution, such as a family or school).

[7] This is an important point related to the topic because I feel a lot of learners behave the way they do because they don't see the point of having an education or getting a job. It is possible they have no hope about bettering themselves or rising above their poverty, which is why they may have turned to violence and gangsterism (De Wet, 2009).

This situation highlights critical issues surrounding education policies that permit over-age learners in schools in the first place. Furthermore, the progression policy significantly contributes to the prevalence of over-age learners, as these learners know they will be promoted to the next grade despite failing to meet the necessary requirements. Molefi (2022:265) adds that the progression policy significantly contributes to the prevalence of over-age learners. These findings align with participant reports of over-age learners showing disrespect and causing disciplinary challenges.

Over-age learners in classrooms create unique social learning dynamics that can contribute to violence. According to SLT, older peers serve as influential models for younger learners. As Henneberger et al. (2021:57) suggest, as young people mature, they tend to spend more time with their peers than with their parents and seek mutual understanding and acceptance. When over-age learners display disrespect or aggression toward educators, they model these behaviours for younger peers, who may imitate them to gain acceptance or status. This peer-modelling effect is particularly potent during adolescence; Levey, Garandeau, Meeus and Branje (2019:68) observe that most adolescents engage in aggressive behaviour with others and are less inclined to act violently on their own. The presence of significantly older learners thus creates a hierarchical social structure where negative behaviours can be transmitted through observational learning. From an educator safety perspective, the presence of physically mature, over-age learners who openly defy authority creates a modelling effect that normalises disrespect and aggression, directly undermining teachers' ability to maintain a safe classroom environment.

The causal factors identified by participants – substance abuse, family dysfunction, policy failures and institutional practices – converge to create environments where violence becomes normalised. Critically, participants emphasised external causes (families, communities, policies), while rarely examining internal school factors, such as pedagogical approaches, educator-learner relationships or institutional culture. This external attribution pattern, while understandable given participants' defensive positioning[8], may overlook school-level interventions within educators' sphere of

[8] Also, because the HOD was part of the focus-group discussion, which may have limited participants blaming bad behaviour on school dynamics.

influence. Theme 3 examines the profound impact these multiple factors have on educator well-being and professional practice.

The factors influencing educator-directed violence operate as a reinforcement ecology – a multi-level system where environmental factors interact to make violence both learned and adaptive. Exposure to community violence fractures family structures, producing academic disengagement that leads to over-age status and gang vulnerability. Each factor amplifies others: drugs and alcohol lower learners' self-control, making it easier for them to act out the violent habits they've learned, while gang culture provides peer reinforcement for aggression. Over-age learners serve as influential role models to younger learners and perceived policy impunity removes meaningful consequences for learners' negative conduct. The variations observed across schools reflect ecology density rather than factor presence or absence.

The level of severity of violence at School E stems from high-density convergence, where all four domains intensify simultaneously, while School A's relative stability suggests lower-density ecology or stronger institutional buffering mechanisms. This systemic perspective extends the individual-level focus of SLT on behavioural acquisition through modelling to account for why learned behaviours persist and intensify systemically.

Understanding violence through this ecological lens explains why isolated interventions consistently fail: anti-drug programmes cannot succeed when family dysfunction and gang culture regenerate substance abuse; stricter discipline policies falter when legislative frameworks constrain enforcement; and removing over-age learners addresses symptoms, while leaving gang recruitment pathways intact. Effective intervention requires targeting multiple ecological leverage points simultaneously – a reality starkly evident in the safety protocol implementation gaps examined in Theme 4. Critically, this ecological analysis underscores participants' tendency toward external attribution, while highlighting that schools themselves operate as ecological sub-systems where institutional responses either buffer or amplify community-level risks.

From the perspective of educators, over-age learners appear to serve as influential models for younger learners, potentially transmitting negative behaviours – though no direct observation of peer dynamics was conducted.

5.6.3 Theme 3: Impact on educators

This theme extends the analysis of Research Questions 1 and 3 by examining the consequences of violence on educators' well-being and professional practice

The violence documented in Themes 1 and 2 inflicts profound and debilitating consequences on educators' mental health, professional efficacy and job retention. Participants across all six schools described a profession in crisis, where daily exposure to violence transforms teaching from a vocation into what one educator termed "slow death inside". This theme examines the psychological toll and the direct impact on teaching and learning, revealing how violence creates a cascading failure that extends beyond individual educator well-being to undermine the entire mission of education.

5.6.3.1 Psychological and emotional effects

The emotional toll on educators is severe, manifesting as depression, anxiety, burnout and a desire to leave teaching.

Participant CP1 reported: "Teachers are on long sick leave... because of depression... the teachers are anxious." Participant CE4 described collective despair:

> *Our morale is low... if we can ask teachers... who want [sic] to leave... it will be all of us. Everyone is opting rather to go for primary schools because we think maybe at the level of the primary school this violence is still not an issue like it is an issue here.*

Participant EP1 linked violence to self-destructive coping: "The teacher end [sic] up abusing alcohol... because they feel like going to school is a hell." Participant AE1 lamented the loss of vocation: "We are slowly dying inside. We are becoming cheque collectors. Education is no longer a calling." The phrase "slowly dying inside" and "cheque collectors" captures the sad reality of educators reduced from agents of transformation to wage earners enduring daily trauma for economic survival.

These testimonies align with academic research. Li et al. (2023:1–2) state that educators who experience violence from learners often develop PTSD. Grobler (2018:2) points out that encounters with violence result in various symptoms, such as depression, headaches, anxiety, low self-worth, feelings of helplessness and professional exhaustion. Peist et al. (2020:2) confirm that victimisation profoundly influences educators' decisions to either transfer to different schools or leave the

teaching profession entirely. Sibisi (2016:47) argues that educators increasingly feel unsafe in their classrooms, leading to higher rates of job resignation, burnout, anxiety, depression, fear, PTSD, humiliation and self-esteem problems. These psychological consequences are not merely individual problems; they directly compromise educator safety by reducing teachers' capacity to respond to threats and maintain authority, thereby increasing their vulnerability to further violence.

The psychological impact of violence on educators represents a disruption in the social learning environment of schools. According to SLT, educators serve as important models for prosocial behaviour and emotional regulation. When educators experience trauma, depression or burnout, they may become less effective models, inadvertently demonstrating that violence successfully undermines authority figures. This creates a reciprocal determinism where the violent behaviour of learners affects educator well-being, which in turn affects their capacity to model positive behaviours and maintain classroom management. As Woolfolk (2018) explains, social learning is shaped by the interaction between children's cognitive development, attitudes and environment. An environment where educators are visibly distressed may reinforce learners' perception that aggression is an effective strategy.

5.6.3.2 Impact on teaching and learning

Violence directly corrodes the teaching and learning process, consuming instructional time and creating a climate of fear.

Participant CE2 explained:

> *You spend most of the time reprimanding learners. We have one hour period. You would spend about 30 minutes reprimanding learners before you can even teach. By the time you start teaching, it's already time up. You cannot even give learners activities.*

Participant FH1 admitted: "We go to class unprepared... lesson plans will also not be there." Participant FE3 noted the curricular impact: "I end up being behind with the ATP [annual teaching plan]. This forces me to move at a very fast pace." Participant CE1 described the paralysing effect of the culture of school violence: "You go to class, but your mind is not 100% on teaching and learning. Fifty percent, you are worried about yourself or your safety."

These accounts reveal a vicious cycle: violence reduces instructional time, which leads to pressure to cover the curriculum on time, which prevents meaningful engagement, which creates academic frustration, which fuels further disruption. Educators unable to teach effectively and learners unable to learn create conditions for mutual disengagement.

Research confirms that violence negatively impacts teaching and learning processes. Cummings (2020:14) highlights that violence from learners towards educators leads to both physical and emotional issues, resulting in personal detachment among educators. Olivier et al. (2021:201) define burnout as a mental state characterised by low self-esteem and negative emotional outcomes that impair professional functioning. SACE (2011:31) maintains that many educators do not feel secure in their work environments due to violent behaviour from learners, leading to skilled educators leaving their positions and some avoiding work altogether out of fear.

The disruption of teaching and learning represents a breakdown in the educational social learning environment. SLT emphasises that learning occurs through observation, imitation and modelling within social contexts. When classrooms become sites of violence or constant disciplinary intervention, the primary focus shifts from academic learning and prosocial modelling to behaviour management and survival. Educators who spend a substantial amount of time reprimanding learners rather than teaching cannot effectively model academic engagement or critical thinking. Although learning through observation and imitation of models is a highly effective method of learning and teaching (Davis, 2018), in violent classroom environments, the models being observed are often aggressive peers rather than educators demonstrating academic skills or conflict resolution.

The impacts documented in this theme – psychological trauma, professional burnout, instructional time loss and curriculum erosion – represent the human cost of systemic safety failures. While Themes 1 and 2 established what violence occurs and why, Theme 3 reveals its devastating consequences. Yet participants also identified existing safety responses and gaps in implementation, examined in Theme 4, which explore both what schools are attempting and why these efforts are failing to protect educators and restore functional learning environments.

5.6.4 Theme 4: Safety measures and protocols

This theme addresses Research Question 2, which evaluates existing safety measures and identifies gaps in school safety protocols.

While safety structures nominally exist in the six schools studied, participants reported widespread failure in their consistent application and effectiveness, leaving schools vulnerable to violence. This theme reveals a critical gap between policy intention and institutional reality – where codes of conduct, safety committees and security personnel exist on paper, but fail in practice due to inadequate training, insufficient resources and inconsistent enforcement. The result is what participants termed “safety theatre”: the appearance of protection without its substance.

5.6.4.1 Existing safety protocols

Participants mentioned protocols like codes of conduct, safety committees and random searches, but their application was described as inconsistent.

Participant AP1 listed standard measures: “We mainly apply our code of conduct... We try to involve... the police... and local social workers.” Participant BP1 mentioned a committee: “We do have the school safety committee which is comprised of stakeholders from inside and outside. We do ensure that all areas are represented like the police, traditional affairs, traditional leaders, they are included.” However, Participant CE4 exposed critical gaps: “There is no fence... There’s an issue of a register for visitors which is not there... Random searches... are not successful.” Participant FH2 noted the inconsistent use of technology: “They introduced the scanning machines... but it’s not consistently enforced.”

The disparity between BP1’s description of a comprehensive safety committee and CE4’s observation of absent basic infrastructure (no fence, no visitor register) suggests significant variation across schools or, alternatively, a divergence between formal institutional claims and lived institutional reality.

The call for safety protocols is present in policy documents like the National School Safety Framework and SACE’s *Code of Professional Ethics* (2020). However, as Mohlala (2021:48) and Hanslo (2020:38) note, the challenge lies in execution, where limitations in authority hamper the effective enforcement of safety protocols and the lack of proper mechanisms allows learners to escape consequences. Manamela (2021:54) emphasises that a code of conduct for learners is a key strategy to ensure

discipline is maintained in schools, which in turn supports a conducive learning and teaching environment. Bipath (2017:66) supports this by highlighting the need for SMT members to play a leading role in effectively implementing safety policies and procedures.

Safety protocols represent institutional attempts to shape the learning environment and behavioural expectations. From a SLT perspective, consistent enforcement of safety measures creates predictable consequences that can modify behaviour through reinforcement. However, when protocols are inconsistently applied, they fail to establish clear reinforcement contingencies. As Bandura's theory suggests, individuals learn behaviours based on observed outcomes. If safety measures like random searches or visitor registration are implemented irregularly, learners learn that rules are not consistently enforced, reducing their deterrent effect. Effective safety protocols should create environments where prosocial behaviour is reinforced and antisocial behaviour receives consistent negative consequences, thereby shaping behavioural learning over time.

5.6.4.2 Gaps in safety implementation

The data reveals a chasm between policy and practice, characterised by untrained personnel and ineffective procedures.

Participant AH1 criticised security staff: "The security personnel... are not trained... They tend to do whatever that the kids are doing." Participant DE3 questioned the efficacy of police involvement: "The police, they come to school to search the learners... It's not like they are going to... stop coming with them [weapons] because they are not searched on a daily basis." Participant EE1 summarised the situation as tokenistic: "We do have security, but it's... just a formality." Participant CE1 starkly concluded:

> *There are no safety protocols. The school is an open ground to everyone. Did you sign at the gate? No. Did anybody ask you where are you going to? Who do you want to see? No. Did you sign a register? Do we actually know who you are?*

CE1's rhetorical questions expose the fundamental absence of basic security procedures. The characterisation of security as "just a formality" and the observation that security personnel "do whatever the kids are doing" reveals not merely

implementation gaps, but complete institutional failure to operationalise safety frameworks.

Research identifies multiple gaps in safety implementation. Manamela (2021:55) notes a frequent breakdown in communication between the DBE and schools, along with school principals not being sufficiently competent in policy implementation. Mohlala (2021:48) maintains that the DBE needs to supply trained security personnel to reduce the risk of educators being victimised by learners, but this is hindered by schools' resource limitations. Biyela (2018:48) points out that while the DBE collaborates with the Crime and Prevention Institute and the Human Research Council to provide data on school safety and security issues, these organisations do not directly tackle the underlying problems. Zwane (2021:239) states that learning without extracurricular activities negatively affects learners' attitudes; however, schools are often lacking in sports facilities and the DBE's slow response to these issues contributes to a higher likelihood of violence against educators.

Gaps in safety implementation represent failures to establish consistent environmental contingencies necessary for behavioural change. SLT emphasises that behaviour is shaped by environmental cues and consequences. When safety measures are tokenistic or poorly implemented, they fail to alter the reinforcement environment that sustains violent behaviours. For example, untrained security personnel or inconsistent searches create intermittent reinforcement schedules that can actually strengthen undesirable behaviours by making them resistant to extinction. According to Bandura's principles, consistent modelling of safety practices by all school personnel is necessary to establish behavioural norms. When security staff are untrained or inconsistent, they model negligence rather than vigilance, indirectly reinforcing the perception that safety is not a priority.

The safety failures documented in this theme – inconsistent protocol enforcement, untrained personnel, absent infrastructure and tokenistic measures – create the conditions enabling the violence analysed in Theme 1. Participants, confronted with these institutional failures, have suggested their own recommendations for systemic reform, examined in Theme 5, which presents stakeholder-generated solutions spanning policy reform, community collaboration and support services.

The implementation failures documented here reflect a policy-reinforcement gap – the disconnect between written rules and actual practice. This gap represents the mismatch between what the school or government says should happen (the policy) and what actually happens on the ground (the reinforcement).

Safety protocols assume institutional capacity, community support and learner responsivity to consequences. In the high-density reinforcement ecologies documented in Theme 2, these assumptions fail. The BELA Act presumes functional parent-school partnerships, whereas Theme 2 reveals hostility instead. Random searches assume consistent enforcement, whereas Theme 4 shows tokenism. Discipline codes assume consequences shape behaviour where gang culture provides stronger counter-reinforcement. School E's severity of school violence versus School A's stability reflects ecology density, not merely implementation quality or resource availability. Policies designed for contexts where violence is aberrant cannot function effectively in ecologies where violence is normalised and systematically reinforced. This gap –between policy design assumptions and implementation realities – explains why well-intended reforms persistently fail and why institutional interventions alone cannot address systemically normalised violence. Effective intervention requires either ecological transformation to match policy assumptions or policy redesign to function within existing ecological constraints.

Based on participant accounts, the DBE was perceived to have failed to provide adequate training for security personnel, leaving schools vulnerable – a claim that reflects educator perceptions rather than a documented DBE policy evaluation.

5.6.5 Theme 5: Recommendations and solutions

This theme addresses Research Question 4, which gathers stakeholders' recommendations for improving educator safety.

Having documented the forms of violence (Theme 1), their causes (Theme 2), their impacts (Theme 3) and the failures of existing safety measures (Theme 4), participants proposed solutions to the problem of educator-directed violence, spanning policy reform, collaborative governance and support-service infrastructure. These recommendations reflect practitioners' frontline wisdom, but also reveal tensions between punitive and restorative approaches, between individual responsibility and systemic change, and between pragmatic expedience and constitutional principles.

This theme presents participant-generated solutions, while critically examining their feasibility, internal contradictions and alignment with evidence-based practice.

5.6.5.1 Policy and legislative reform

A strong demand emerged for revisiting and revising policies to restore balance and protect educators.

Participant AE1 advocated a controversial, but deeply felt solution: “Policy makers must amend their policies and bring back corporal punishment because corporal punishment was working. I don’t think if there was no corporal punishment, I would be here as an educator.” Participant CE1 called for inclusion in the policy process: “They should... involve us when they make policies, so that they understand what... we are going through daily.” Participant BE4 shared the same sentiment: “I think the policymakers, when compiling or coming up with these policies, they should actively involve educators on the ground.” Participant DE1 was unequivocal: “The BELA Act has done more damage... must be abolished because it is protecting learners more than the educators.”

The call for reinstating corporal punishment represents the most controversial recommendation and requires critical examination. While participants like AE1 attribute professional survival to corporal punishment’s deterrent effect, substantial evidence contradicts this nostalgic notion. International research consistently demonstrates that corporal punishment increases rather than decreases violence, models aggression as an acceptable form of conflict resolution and violates children’s constitutional rights to dignity and freedom from violence. SACE (2020:34) explicitly recommends that corporal punishment should be clearly prohibited in both home and school settings, recognising its documented harms. The appeal of corporal punishment among participants likely reflects desperation in the face of inadequate alternatives rather than evidence-based reasoning – a conflation of correlation (corporal punishment existed when schools functioned better) with causation (corporal punishment made schools function better), ignoring intervening variables like smaller class sizes, stronger family structures and different socio-economic conditions in earlier eras.

The more constructive recommendation – educator involvement in policy-making – addresses a genuine democratic deficit. Segalo and Rambuda (2018:4) highlight that

educators often have mixed opinions regarding the fairness and sufficiency of current policies, especially as learners are granted more power. When policies are developed without meaningful input from teachers, they risk being impractical, resented or subverted. Botha and Zwane (2021:12) emphasise that there is an urgent need for consistency and regularity in the discipline models applied both at home and in school for effective outcomes. Participatory policy development could bridge the gap between policy intent and the reality of implementation, though it requires willingness from both government (to genuinely consult) and educators (to engage beyond simply demanding punitive measures).

Calls for policy reform reflect a need to re-establish balanced reinforcement contingencies in school environments. SLT suggests that effective behaviour management requires clear, consistent consequences for both positive and negative behaviours. Policies perceived as disproportionately protecting learner rights without ensuring accountability disrupt these reinforcement mechanisms. When educators feel powerless to enforce consequences, they become ineffective authority models, reducing their capacity to shape behaviour through modelling and reinforcement. Effective policy reform, from an SLT perspective, would restore educators' ability to implement consistent consequences, while providing alternative disciplinary approaches that reinforce prosocial behaviour. This aligns with Rampa's (2014) recommendation that educators embrace a proactive disciplinary culture that teaches learners to respect authority, follow school regulations, exercise self-control and show respect to others.

Educators in this study believed that learners are aware of rights-protecting policies and that this awareness may embolden some learners; however, this conclusion is based on teacher perceptions rather than interviews with learners themselves.

5.6.5.2 Stakeholder collaboration

Participants stressed that solving the crisis requires a concerted effort beyond the school gates.

Participant AE2 emphasised:

> *Parents must be brought back into schools... we need a working relationship. I think if now parents are brought on board to assist in managing these children, in moulding these kids, I think we're going to*

have an effective education system instead of just teachers being dumped on and nothing happens.

Participant BP1 suggested upskilling parents: “SGBs must be knowledgeable... Parents need quality parenting workshops.” Participant FH2 called for unity: “Stakeholders must work together... community, parents, department.”

This recommendation addresses a fundamental insight: schools cannot solve problems rooted in community dysfunction through internal interventions alone. Le Mottee and Kelly (2017:59) state that when educators and parents build closer connections, it reduces the likelihood of learner misbehaviour. Venketsamy et al. (2023:64) argue that schools need to maintain a strong partnership with parents, the community, NGOs and law enforcement to make learners aware that misconduct and violence against educators will not be tolerated. Manamela (2021:53) highlights that effective school leadership necessitates collaboration among educators, support staff, the school community, SMTs and SGBs to establish relationships and networks aimed at tackling violence within schools.

However, the call for parental involvement must confront the reality documented in Theme 2: many parents are not merely absent, but actively hostile to schools and community structures are often dysfunctional or violence-enabling. The recommendation assumes parents can be “brought back” and “upskilled”, but Theme 2 revealed parents who threaten to close schools, undermine educator authority and view their children as a burden. Effective stakeholder collaboration requires addressing why these relationships have broken down – economic precarity, historical mistrust of educational institutions, parental educational deficits, community violence normalization – rather than simply calling for collaboration as if goodwill alone will restore partnerships.

Stakeholder collaboration creates a unified modelling front essential for consistent behavioural learning. SLT emphasises that behaviour is shaped by multiple models across different environments. When parents, educators, community leaders and law enforcement present consistent expectations and consequences, learners receive coherent messages about acceptable behaviour. Conversely, when stakeholders work at cross-purposes or send mixed messages, they create confusion about behavioural norms and the expected consequences of actions. Effective collaboration ensures that

prosocial behaviours are modelled and reinforced consistently across home, school and community settings, creating the right environment for lasting behavioural change. This aligns with Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism, where environment, behaviour, and personal factors interact continuously.

5.6.5.3 Support services for educators and learners

There was a clear consensus on the need for support from psychologists and social workers within the school system.

Participant BP1 proposed: "The department should allocate to each school a social worker who will be from time to time assisting the school with general learner behaviour." Participant FP1 suggested targeted intervention: "Learners that are aggressive, that have anger issues, they should be recommended to go and see psychologists to try and mould and control their emotions." Participant FE4 envisioned state-run rehabilitation for violent learners:

> *The Department of Education can start rethinking about the rehabilitation centres which are department led... with real professionals. The department can hire real professionals where there will be psychologists, pastors and teachers so that when the learner is there, they are also taught.*

This recommendation represents the most pragmatic and evidence-aligned solution proposed by participants. Unlike corporal punishment (constitutionally prohibited and empirically ineffective) or vague calls for collaboration, dedicated mental health infrastructure can address root causes while respecting rights.

Although FE4's suggestion related to rehabilitation for learners with behavioural problems, Moon and McCluskey (2020:130) emphasise that educators who are victims of school violence also require psychological support from counsellors and psychologists. Venketsamy et al. (2023:63) recommend that the DBE and provincial education authorities hire social workers, psychologists and counsellors at schools or district levels to assist educators facing violence or trauma. Botha and Zwane (2021:6) reveal that educators are more effective in managing violence when there are prevention programmes that aim to reduce school violence and provide emotional support.

The feasibility challenge, however, is resource allocation. South Africa faces chronic shortages of publicly funded educational psychologists, social workers and counsellors, particularly in rural districts like Ngaka Modiri Molema. Participant FE4's vision of state-run rehabilitation centres with "real professionals" acknowledges current service inadequacy, but proposes infrastructure requiring substantial government investment unlikely in the current fiscal climate. A more realistic incremental approach might involve district-level mobile support teams serving multiple schools, training existing educators in basic trauma-informed practice and partnering with NGOs to extend service reach – pragmatic steps toward the ideal of dedicated school-based professionals.

Support services provide alternative models and reinforcement mechanisms essential for behavioural change. From a SLT perspective, psychologists, social workers and counsellors serve as explicit prosocial models who can teach alternative behaviours and coping strategies. For learners who have learned aggressive behaviours through observation and reinforcement in dysfunctional environments, these professionals provide opportunities for new learning – demonstrating non-violent conflict resolution, emotional regulation and communication skills. For educators, trauma support helps restore their capacity to model resilience and authoritative classroom management. These services address the learning deficits that underlie violent behaviour by providing new models and reinforcement experiences that can replace maladaptive learned behaviours.

The recommendations presented in Theme 5 reflect the complexity of addressing systemic violence. Some proposals contradict evidence and constitutional principles (corporal punishment), others require resources unlikely to materialise soon (comprehensive mental health infrastructure), while still others demand social transformation beyond education's scope (community rehabilitation). Yet collectively, they reveal practitioners' recognition that solutions must be multi-level – addressing individual behaviour, institutional capacity, policy frameworks and community contexts simultaneously. Chapter 6 will synthesise these findings with theoretical and empirical literature to propose feasible, evidence-aligned recommendations for enhancing educator safety in Ngaka Modiri Molema district.

5.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter's thematic analysis of 38 participants across six Ngaka Modiri Molema high schools developed two conceptual frameworks advancing violence scholarship. The reinforcement ecology framework (Theme 2) theorises violence as systemically produced through interactions between various factors, such as substance abuse, family dysfunction, policy constraints and institutional factors – extending SLT from individual behavioural acquisition to ecological-level analysis. The policy-reinforcement gap framework (Theme 4) explains persistent implementation failures through the mismatch between policy design assumptions and ecological realities. These frameworks reveal why isolated interventions addressing single causes fail within high-density reinforcement ecologies where violence is systemically normalised.

Theme 1 documented pervasive violence forms; Theme 2 identified four mutually reinforcing causal domains; Theme 3 established devastating educator impacts; Theme 4 exposed safety-protocol failures attributable to the policy-reinforcement gap; Theme 5 critically evaluated recommendations, distinguishing evidence-based proposals from problematic nostalgia and unrealistic assumptions. It was established that the variation between the six schools is driven by the density of overlapping social influences within the community, instead of being only the result of a lack of resources. Chapter 6 synthesises these contributions, addresses the research objectives and develops recommendations calibrated to ecological contexts rather than assumed policy environments.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 5's thematic analysis of 38 participants across six Ngaka Modiri Molema schools documented educator-directed violence across five dimensions: manifestations, causes, impacts, institutional failures and solutions. The analysis revealed violence as systemically enabled, producing two conceptual frameworks: reinforcement ecology (theorising multi-level causal interactions) and the policy-reinforcement gap (explaining implementation failures).

This final chapter synthesises these contributions by integrating findings with literature and theory, demonstrating the achievement of this study's research objectives and articulating unique scholarly contributions. It also proposes evidence-based recommendations calibrated to ecological contexts, addressing the study's limitations, identifying future research directions and concluding with reflections on the significance of the research and imperatives for action.

6.2 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

Before presenting the conclusions of this study, a clear data limitation must be acknowledged. All findings, conclusions and recommendations are based solely on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with educators and school principals. No data were collected directly from learners or parents. Consequently, conclusions about learner home environments, parental attitudes, and learner motivations are interpretive inferences drawn from educator and principal perspectives, not empirically verified facts. This limitation is particularly relevant to discussions of behavioural modelling and family factors interpreted through Social Learning Theory (see Chapter 3).

This research addressed the escalating crisis of educator-directed violence in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools, seeking to evaluate factors that maintain or hinder educator safety. The study employed a qualitative, multiple case-study design with 38 participants from six schools, collecting data through semi-structured interviews and

focus groups, analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis.

The theoretical foundation was established through SLT (Chapter 3), which explains how behaviours, both prosocial and antisocial, are acquired through observational learning and modelling in social environments. The literature review (Chapter 2) documented manifestations of violence (physical, verbal, psychological, sexual), the driving factors behind it (substance abuse, gang influence, family dysfunction, policy failures) and the impacts on educators' well-being. The methodology (Chapter 4) detailed purposive sampling strategies, interview protocols and ethical safeguards which ensure multi-level participant perspectives.

The thematic analysis (Chapter 5) of the participant interviews revealed five interconnected dimensions to educator-directed violence: forms of violence, systemic causes, educator impacts, safety-implementation failures and stakeholder recommendations. Critically, two conceptual frameworks emerged from the analysis: the reinforcement ecology framework theorising violence as a product of multi-level systemic interactions rather than isolated factors, and the policy-reinforcement gap framework explaining why well-intended policies persistently fail when ecological conditions violate policy-design assumptions.

The findings established that violence is pervasive, multifaceted and systemically enabled, with educators experiencing profound trauma, while existing safety measures remain tokenistic. These empirical and theoretical contributions provide the foundation for the integrated discussion and evidence-based recommendations that follow.

6.3 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section integrates the empirical findings from Chapter 5 with the theoretical framework established in Chapter 3 and the literature foundations presented in Chapter 2, moving beyond description to analytical synthesis. The discussion reveals convergences where findings confirm existing knowledge, divergences where findings challenge established patterns and novel insights that extend theoretical understanding. This synthesis culminates in the identification of the policy-reinforcement gap framework, a conceptual contribution that emerged from the data.

6.3.1 Convergence with literature: The pervasive nature of violence

The forms and severity of educator-directed violence documented in Theme 1 (Section 5.6.1) align with patterns identified in Chapter 2's literature review. The fatal stabbing of a teacher at School E, weapon-based assaults of educators and the range from minor physical contact to life-threatening violence mirror national trends discussed in Section 2.3.1. This confirms that Ngaka Modiri Molema schools are not anomalous, but representative of broader South African patterns. Similarly, the verbal and psychological abuse – including sexual harassment of female educators and ritualised public humiliation of teachers ("skinning") – reflects the multifaceted nature of educator-directed violence documented in Section 2.3.2.

Significantly, participants' description of "slowly dying inside" and becoming "cheque collectors" rather than vocational educators echoes the literature review in Section 2.5, in which the documented psychological impacts of violence experienced by teachers included burnout, depression, anxiety and professional demoralisation. This convergence validates both the literature's diagnostic accuracy and this study's empirical rigour, establishing that rural schools experience violence patterns similar to more extensively researched urban contexts.

However, convergence alone would offer limited scholarly contribution. The critical question is whether this study reveals patterns, mechanisms or insights that advance our understanding beyond existing literature, a question addressed in subsequent sub-sections.

6.3.2 Systemic interaction: Beyond isolated causal factors

Theme 2 (Section 5.6.2) identified four causal domains: substance abuse and gang influence; family and community dysfunction; policy failures (BELA Act); and institutional factors (over-age learners, progression policies). While Chapter 2's literature review (Sections 2.4.1–2.4.4) documented each of these factors individually, this study's contribution lies in revealing how they interact systemically rather than operating as independent variables.

The "perfect storm" metaphor that emerged from participant accounts (particularly evident in Section 5.6.2.1's substance-abuse analysis) captures multiplicative rather than additive effects: substance abuse is not merely present, but is enabled by weak family structures (Section 5.6.2.2); gang affiliation does not simply exist, but fills the

void left by poor community support; learners are arriving under the influence of drugs and alcohol, encouraged by their friends and living in a social circle where disrespecting teachers earns them respect. These problems combine to create a challenge far greater than any single issue on its own.

SLT, as articulated in Chapter 3, provides explanatory power here. Section 3.5 established that violent behaviour is learned by watching others; the resulting rewards and consequences then determine whether these actions become lasting habits. The current findings demonstrate that in high-violence contexts, multiple modelling sources converge: learners observe violence in homes (family dysfunction), communities (gang culture) and substance-influenced states (disinhibited aggression), with multiple reinforcement sources (peer approval, perceived policy protection) strengthening behavioural acquisition.

Yet SLT, as traditionally applied in educational contexts (Section 3.6), emphasises individual learning mechanisms (attention, retention, reproduction, motivation) rather than systemic interaction effects. This study suggests that the relevant unit of analysis is not individual learner behaviour, but ecological systems where multiple forces promoting violence converge, requiring theoretical extensions beyond classical SLT applications.

While home and community factors are significant, it is equally important to recognise that school-internal factors – including weak leadership, inconsistent discipline enforcement, inadequate safety protocols, and educator-learner relationship quality – co-contribute to the persistence of violence. These internal factors are within the school's sphere of influence.

6.3.3 The policy paradox: Introducing the policy-reinforcement gap

The most emotionally charged finding – the near-universal attribution of violence to the BELA Act (Theme 2, Section 5.6.2.3) – demands nuanced discussion. Participants' conviction that BELA "gives learners more power than educators", "leaves teachers' hands folded" and creates conditions where violence goes unpunished reflects genuine educator experience of disempowerment experienced across all six schools.

Documentary analysis mentioned in Section 4.7.3 (though limited due to access constraints) suggests that BELA itself does not explicitly prohibit educator authority as uniformly claimed. Rather, it codifies progressive discipline and due process

requirements. The critical insight emerging from Theme 2 is that the perception of policy constraint functions identically to actual constraint in shaping behaviour. When educators believe they lack authority, they model powerlessness; when learners observe that violent behaviour produces no meaningful consequences (Theme 4, Section 5.6.4), they learn through SLT mechanisms that aggression is met with silence by teachers and rewarded with status by peers.

This dynamic reveals what this study terms the policy-reinforcement gap – a phenomenon where educational policy, regardless of design intent, can inadvertently dismantle the behavioural reinforcement mechanisms necessary for safe schools. The gap operates through a cascading process:

Stage 1 – Policy intent: The BELA Act aims to protect learner rights and ensure fair processes.

Stage 2 – Implementation perception: Educators interpret policy as removing their authority (Section 5.6.2.3 participant quotes).

Stage 3 – Authority paralysis: Educators become reluctant to enforce discipline, feeling legally vulnerable.

Stage 4 – Reinforcement disruption: Violent behaviour goes unpunished or receives inconsistent consequences (Section 5.6.4.2).

Stage 5 – Observational learning: Through SLT mechanisms (Chapter 3, Section 3.5), learners observe that violence produces no negative consequences.

Stage 6 – Behavioural reinforcement: Absence of punishment functions as implicit reinforcement; violent behaviour increases.

Stage 7: – Violence escalation: Emboldened learners escalate aggression; successful intimidation achieves peer status, providing additional reinforcement.

Stage 8 – Educator trauma: Traumatised educators (Theme 3, Section 5.6.3) become less effective authority models.

Stage 9 – Systemic feedback loop: The cycle reinforces itself: policy perceptions undermine discipline, violence increases, educators become less effective, violence further escalates.

This policy-reinforcement gap represents a critical divergence from literature reviewed in Chapter 2, which typically treats policy failures as implementation problems (inadequate resources, poor training) rather than as theoretical puzzles about how policy environments shape behavioural reinforcement contingencies.

This policy effect is compounded by internal school dynamics such as poor implementation of codes of conduct, lack of staff training on positive discipline, and absence of consistent consequence management. Addressing the policy-reinforcement gap therefore requires both policy reform and school-level capacity building.

6.3.4 Explaining variation: Why violence severity differs across schools

A finding that complicates simplistic causal narratives is the significant variation in violence severity across the six schools, despite shared exposure to common risk factors. As documented in Section 5.6.1.1, School E experienced a fatal stabbing of a teacher alongside high weapon-incident frequencies; Schools B, C and F occupied the middle-severity ranges; Schools A and D reported predominantly lower-intensity violence. This variation demands explanation: if all schools face similar levels of community violence and identical policy constraints, why do the outcomes differ so much?

Cross-theme analysis reveals that institutional responses function as crucial mediating variables. Schools A and D, which reported lower-intensity violence in Theme 1, were also schools which documented more consistent safety-protocol implementation, functional committees and engaged leadership (Theme 4, Section 5.6.4.1). This indicates that even though these schools experienced violence, their institutional response lessened rather than eliminated violence due to the severe external risk conditions.

From a SLT perspective (Section 3.7), schools with consistent discipline enforcement create clearer reinforcement contingencies: violent behaviour → predictable negative consequences → behaviour suppression. Schools with inconsistent discipline enforcement create intermittent reinforcement schedules that paradoxically strengthen rather than weaken behaviours by making them resistant to extinction, a well-established behavioural principle discussed in Section 3.7.2.

This comparative finding validates SLT predictions, while revealing that policy environments (the policy-reinforcement gap) operate at a different analytical level than individual school responses, suggesting multi-level intervention strategies are required.

This finding underscores that internal school factors – leadership consistency, staff training, and safety protocol implementation – can mitigate external risks, even when home and community conditions are unfavourable.

6.3.5 Unexpected patterns and theoretical challenges

Several findings diverged from expected patterns or challenged theoretical assumptions articulated in Chapters 2 and 3.

First, the extent of coordinated, ritualised bullying documented in Theme 1 (Section 5.6.1.3) – exemplified by the “arranged” textbook attack, strategic classroom blocking, and water pouring from elevated positions – exceeded literature descriptions reviewed in Section 2.3.3 of bullying as repetitive individual harassment. The performative, theatrical quality of these acts (violence as spectacle before peer audiences) suggests that in high-violence contexts, bullying evolves from interpersonal intimidation to collective ritual that reinforces group identity and inverts institutional hierarchies.

SLT, with its focus on individual behaviour acquisition (Section 3.5), struggles to explain collective ritual. The theory effectively explains how individuals learn violent behaviours through observation, but does not address why groups coordinate to perform violence as synchronised public theatre. This suggests that theories of group dynamics and collective identity formation, which were not extensively discussed in Chapter 3’s SLT framework, may be necessary theoretical supplements.

Second, the near absence of participant self-reflection on educator contributions to violence dynamics (evident throughout Theme 2’s external attribution pattern) was striking. While participants extensively analysed learner pathology, family failures, community dysfunction and policy flaws (Sections 5.6.2.1–5.6.2.4), they rarely examined pedagogical approaches, educator-learner relationship quality or institutional culture as potential contributors.

This external attribution pattern may represent a missed opportunity: if educators attribute violence entirely to factors beyond their control, they may overlook school-level interventions within their sphere of influence. The literature reviewed in Section

2.6.2 documented that authoritarian teaching styles and poor relationships increase conflict, yet Theme 2 participants did not reference these internal factors. This divergence between literature emphasis and participant attribution suggests that defensive positioning – psychologically understandable for violence victims – may obscure potential leverage points for intervention.

Third, participants' advocacy for corporal punishment reinstatement (Theme 5, Section 5.6.5.1) contradicted both research evidence reviewed in Section 2.7.1 and participants' own professional training. This finding suggests that experiential knowledge (memories of when schools "worked better") trumps formal evidence when educators feel desperate – a sobering reminder that evidence-based policy requires addressing the emotional and systemic conditions that make evidence-resistant solutions appealing.

6.3.6 The policy-reinforcement gap framework: A conceptual contribution

The policy-reinforcement gap framework, introduced in Section 6.4.3, represents this study's primary conceptual contribution, warranting detailed articulation. The framework synthesises SLT (Chapter 3) with the policy-implementation challenges documented in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4.3) and empirically demonstrated in Chapters 4 and 5.

Framework components

Layer 1 – Policy intent: Educational policies designed with legitimate aims (protection of learners' rights, procedural fairness).

Layer 2 – Implementation perception: Educators' cognitive interpretation of policy meaning (documented in Theme 2, Section 5.6.2.3), shaped by official guidance, media narratives and peer discourse. Critical insight: perception functions identically to reality in shaping behaviour.

Layer 3 – Authority enactment: Educator willingness to enforce expectations and implement consequences, directly influenced by perceived policy constraints (Theme 4, Section 5.6.4.2).

Layer 4 – Reinforcement contingency: The actual pattern of consequences learners experience following their behaviour, the layer that SLT (Section 3.7) identifies as central to behaviour persistence.

Layer 5 – Observational learning: Learners observe peer-behaviour consequences (Section 3.5), note the absence of consequences, adjust behaviour accordingly.

Layer 6 – Behavioural outcome: Actual violence rates and severity (Theme 1), which feed back into educator trauma (Theme 3), further undermining authority enactment (recursive loop).

The "gap" exists between policy intent (Layer 1) and reinforcement contingency (Layer 4). Well-intentioned policies can create implementation perceptions (Layer 2) that paralyse authority enactment (Layer 3), producing reinforcement environments (Layer 4) where violence goes unpunished, inadvertently reinforcing the behaviours which government and school policies aim to prevent.

Traditional SLT applications in educational contexts (discussed in Section 3.8) focus on immediate social environments (home, peer group, community) as sites of observational learning. The policy-reinforcement gap framework extends SLT by identifying policy environments as meta-level contexts that shape whether consistent reinforcement is possible.

Official policies may seem distant, but if they are taken seriously, they dictate whether a learner gets rewarded with status or punished with a suspension for their actions. This represents a theoretical extension connecting micro-level behavioural mechanisms (SLT's individual learning processes) with macro-level institutional contexts (policy implementation dynamics), a cross-level integration that advances beyond Chapter 3's classical SLT articulation.

The framework suggests that addressing educator-directed violence requires examining whether policy environments enable or undermine the reinforcement contingencies necessary for behavioural change. Policy reform must consider not just protecting learner's rights, but how policies will be interpreted and whether they provide educators with legitimate, rights-respecting tools for establishing clear consequences. Without attention to reinforcement contingency, policies – however well-intentioned – risk contributing to problems they aim to solve.

6.3.7 Synthesis: Advancing understanding

This study simultaneously confirms existing knowledge (the forms of school violence discussed in Chapter 2), extends theoretical understanding of SLT (the policy-

reinforcement gap framework) and identifies persistent gaps (limited understanding of educator agency, under-theorisation of collective ritual violence).

Violence in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools doesn't just happen by chance. It is a predictable result of how the system is currently set up. It can be stopped using proven methods, but these interventions must focus on the immediate social rewards learners get for being violent – the very thing current policies often overlook. Section 6.5 translates these insights into stakeholder-specific recommendations which are feasible and grounded in the integrated analysis presented here.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below recognise that learners and parents are not merely the source of violence but also essential partners in creating safer schools. While this study did not directly collect data from learners or parents, the recommendations are informed by educator perspectives on what would help build constructive, collaborative relationships. Where recommendations address home and community factors, they are balanced with recommendations for school-internal actions that are fully within the control of educators and school leaders.

Based on the integrated analysis presented in Sections 6.3 and 6.4, particularly the policy-reinforcement gap framework (Section 6.4.6), this study proposes evidence-based recommendations for multiple stakeholder groups. These recommendations are organised by implementation urgency and feasibility, recognising that comprehensive solutions require coordinated action across policy, institutional and community levels. The recommendations prioritise interventions that address reinforcement contingency identified as critical in the policy-reinforcement gap framework.

Priority classification

Immediate priority (0–6 months): Actions requiring urgent implementation with existing resources.

Short-term priority (6–18 months): Actions requiring moderate resource allocation.
Long-term priority (18+ months): Actions requiring significant investment and systemic change.

6.4.1 Recommendations for the DBE

I suggest conducting a review of how the BELA Act is interpreted and implemented, addressing the widespread perception documented in Section 5.6.2.3 that the act disempowers educators. This review must include frontline educator participation to bridge the perception gap between policy intent and implementation experience.

Furthermore, I recommend establishing a mandatory, centralised database for documenting all incidents across the North West Province, enabling evidence-based resource allocation. Theme 4 (Section 5.6.4.2) identified chronic under-reporting of school violence which prevents the accurate assessment of this phenomenon.

Another recommendation is to allocate a budget for school-based or cluster-based social workers, psychologists and counsellors as recommended in Theme 5 (Section 5.6.5.3). This initiative should begin with district-level mobile teams, expanding to permanent posts at schools displaying the highest level of violence.

I also suggest providing dedicated funding for perimeter fencing, controlled access points and security training. Schools E and C, who reported the most severe violence (Section 5.6.1.1), both lacked adequate physical barriers.

Another recommendation is to review the progression policies permitting learners significantly older than their peers in classrooms. As documented in Section 5.6.2.4, over-age learners create power dynamics undermining educators' authority. I believe this can be achieved by expanding alternative pathways, such as adult education, vocational training and accelerated learning.

I also recommend developing a framework which addresses hostile or absent parental engagement (Section 5.6.2.2), including economic support, parental education programmes, culturally responsive communication and conflict-resolution mechanisms.

Equally, the DBE should mandate and resource school-based restorative justice programmes and positive behaviour intervention systems that operate independently of parental involvement. These internal mechanisms can interrupt cycles of violence even when home support is absent.

6.4.2 Recommendations for school leadership

I suggest establishing a transparent, graduated response protocol for schools, ensuring consequences of learner misbehaviour are predictable and followed through.

Section 6.4.4 revealed Schools A and F, with consistently strong leadership, experienced lower violence, demonstrating institutional responses mediate external risks.

In addition, I recommend implementing systematic documentation of all incidents of school violence. Theme 4 (Section 5.6.4.2) showed many incidents of educator-directed violence go undocumented, preventing schools from responding and intervening.

Another recommendation is to transform dysfunctional school committees (Section 5.6.4.1) into operational structures with clear authority. These committees should include educators, the SGB, learners, law enforcement and community leaders.

I also believe that the problem of educator-directed violence can be mitigated by establishing peer support and facilitating access to counselling services. Theme 3 (Section 5.6.3.1) documented the severe psychological impacts of teacher abuse, which requires an institutional response.

The study found many teachers have become passive or reactive. Instead of acting as authoritative leaders in the classroom, they have sunk to the level of disruptive learners to survive their environment (Section 5.6.4.1). To counter this loss of professional authority, I recommend implementing targeted training for teachers or terminating ineffective contracts.

Section 6.4.5 noted the absence of participant reflection on internal factors causing teacher abuse by learners. To address this lack of internal reflection, I propose a comprehensive school-climate assessment. This process should evaluate pedagogical approaches, interpersonal relationships between learners and teachers, and institutional culture to identify the root causes of educator-directed violence.

6.4.3 Recommendations for parents and communities

Because the study documented hostile, not merely absent, parents (Section 5.6.2.2), I recommend formalising expectations through signed agreements during learner enrolment, specifying the consequences of school violence, parents' obligations and how disputes will be resolved.

Schools E and C faced severe community-level dynamics (Sections 5.6.2.1, 5.6.1.1). I would therefore recommend formalising collaboration with policing forums,

councillors and community leaders to address gang recruitment and drug access near schools.

For those parents who need it, I suggest developing accessible programmes addressing educational deficits, delivered in evening sessions with practical support for transport and childcare barriers.

Within the school, establish structured mentorship and restorative practice programmes that directly address learner behaviour without waiting for parental engagement. Train educators in de-escalation, trauma-informed classroom management, and positive discipline to reduce conflict regardless of home conditions.

Within the school, create a dedicated school safety team comprising educators, support staff and learner representatives to identify internal hotspots (e.g., isolated corridors, unsupervised areas) and implement targeted supervision. Install functioning safety infrastructure (fencing, visitor control, CCTV) where feasible.

Chapter 3 demonstrated that when violence is a normalised community practice, school interventions face overwhelming counter-modelling challenges. I therefore believe supporting broad community development would help to address unemployment, substance abuse and systemic violence.

6.4.4 Recommendations for educators

Because the under-reporting of educator-directed violence enables institutional denial, I recommend that every incident be documented through official channels to make such denial impossible (Section 5.6.4.2). When faced with classroom violence, I urge educators to prioritise their immediate safety by removing themselves from danger and seeking emotional support.

However, the response of teachers must not end there. They should insist on formal reporting to both school leadership and law enforcement because, as Theme 3 demonstrated (Section 5.6.3.2), handling these incidents informally inadvertently signals to learners that their actions carry no real consequences. By demanding a formal process, educators can disrupt this cycle of silence and force the institution to confront the reality of the violence.

Similarly, teachers should seek training in de-escalation, trauma-informed management and self-regulation. While systemic factors drive violence (Theme 2), individual skills can reduce incident severity.

I also recommend calling on unions and SACE to advocate for policy reform, resources and accountability. Policy failures (Section 5.6.2.3) require organised mobilisation.

Actively participate in professional development on non-punitive classroom management and trauma-responsive teaching. Implement consistent, transparent consequences for learner misconduct within the classroom before escalation to leadership. Document every incident not only for reporting but also for internal pattern analysis.

Lastly, I suggest prioritising educators' well-being through counselling, peer support and establishing healthy personal and professional boundaries. Theme 3 (Section 5.6.3.1) documented severe burnout requires deliberate self-care.

6.4.5 Integrated implementation: Addressing the policy-reinforcement gap

When coordinated across multiple levels, these recommendations address the overarching framework relating to educator-directed violence (Section 6.4.6).

Layer 1 (Perception): Clarification from the DBE would address the perception that learners' rights policies disempower teachers.

Layer 2 (Authority): Having consistency among school leaders and documenting incidents of school violence would restore authoritative action.

Layer 3 (Reinforcement): Having clear consequences for learner misbehaviour would create behavioural contingencies which SLT identifies as essential.

Layers 4–5 (Learning/Outcomes): When violence consistently produces negative consequences, observational learning suppresses rather than reinforces bad behaviour.

The critical insight here is that effective recommendations cannot focus in isolation on policy, schools or individuals. Because the policy-reinforcement gap emerges from a disconnect between these macro, meso and micro levels, closing it requires a coordinated, multi-level intervention that operates across the entire system simultaneously.

6.5 UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study makes three significant contributions to scholarly knowledge. Conceptually, it identifies the policy-reinforcement gap framework (Section 6.4.6), extending SLT to demonstrate how policy environments function as meta-level determinants of behavioural reinforcement contingencies. This explains how well-intentioned policies can inadvertently dismantle the consequence mechanisms necessary for violence prevention, a theoretical advance beyond the literature's treatment of policy failures as mere implementation problems.

Contextually, the study provides the first in-depth qualitative analysis of educator-directed violence in the rural North West province, filling a geographic gap in literature concentrated on urban contexts and revealing rural-specific patterns requiring tailored interventions.

Methodologically, the multiple case-study design across six schools enabled differentiation between school-specific and systemic patterns, revealing that institutional responses mediate external risk factors. By comparing multiple schools, this study avoids the risk of conflating individual school problems with wider institutional patterns, ensuring that the resulting insights are relevant to other contexts.

6.7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To advance beyond the scope of this qualitative, district-specific study, several targeted avenues for future research are indicated, each addressing the limitations or extending the findings identified in this investigation.

Quantitative national assessment: A large-scale survey across multiple provinces is needed to establish national prevalence rates of educator-directed violence, primary forms of this violence and demographic correlates. While this study provides rich qualitative depth within the Ngaka Modiri Molema district, quantitative research would determine whether the patterns documented here, such as substance abuse as a primary catalyst for school violence, policy perception as a reason for teacher disempowerment and ritualised bullying as collective performance, represent broader national trends or region-specific phenomena.

Multi-perspective studies: Subsequent research should incorporate learner, parent and district-level perspectives to develop an holistic understanding of school violence dynamics. This study deliberately centred on educators' and school leaders' voices,

providing necessary but partial insight. Learners' perceptions of discipline fairness, parents' understanding of school expectations and district officials' experiences of policy implementation would triangulate understanding and potentially reveal divergent interpretations which might explain implementation gaps.

Longitudinal trajectories: Long-term research which tracks educators' career paths and their psychological well-being after exposure to violence at the hands of learners would illuminate whether the impacts documented in Theme 3 (Section 5.6.3) represent transient stress responses or enduring trauma requiring sustained intervention. Similarly, longitudinal evaluation of the efficacy of intervention programmes – particularly the support services recommended in Section 6.5 – would generate evidence for scaling or refining initiatives.

Positive deviance case studies: Investigating schools in high-risk areas that have successfully reduced educator-directed violence could yield critical implementation insights. While this study documented a variation in violence severity (Section 6.4.4), it did not deeply examine successful schools' specific practices. Positive deviance research would distil transferable models of effective leadership, community engagement and safety-protocol implementation.

Policy perception and reality studies: Research directly comparing educators' perceptions of policy constraints (particularly the BELA Act) with actual legal provisions and comparing schools where educators accurately versus inaccurately understand policy parameters could illuminate whether the policy-reinforcement gap (Section 6.4.6) stems primarily from failures in policy communication, gaps in implementation training or inherent policy-practice tensions. This would inform interventions targeted at policy clarification.

Absence of learner and parent perspectives: Future research should incorporate multi-perspective studies that include learners, parents and DBE officials to develop a holistic understanding of educator-directed violence.

Cross-sectional design: Longitudinal research tracking educator experiences over multiple school terms or years is needed to capture seasonal variations and evaluate intervention effectiveness.

Qualitative methodology only: A large-scale quantitative national survey across multiple provinces would establish prevalence rates and demographic correlates of educator-directed violence.

6.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several acknowledged limitations that constrain the generalisability of its findings and suggest interpretive caution.

Geographic and contextual scope: The findings are confined to qualitative experiences within six secondary schools in Ngaka Modiri Molema district in the North West province. While emergent themes may hold analytical value for similar rural contexts facing comparable socio-economic challenges, they cannot be statistically generalised to all South African schools, urban contexts or primary-education levels. The rural setting, while filling a literature gap, means findings may not capture the dynamics specific to urban high-density schools or well-resourced suburban environments.

Single-perspective design: The research deliberately centred on educators' and school leaders' perspectives (principals, deputy principals, HODs, post-level-1 educators), meaning learners', parents' and district officials' voices are absent. This methodological choice provided depth regarding educator-safety experiences, but offers a necessarily partial view of the school violence ecosystem. Learners' motivations, parents' discipline philosophies and district officials' constraints regarding policy implementation remain unexplored, potentially obscuring systemic dynamics visible only through multi-stakeholder analysis.

Self-report and social desirability bias: As a qualitative inquiry which relies on self-reported data, the study's findings are subject to recall limitations (participants reconstructing past events with potential memory distortion) and social desirability bias (participants presenting socially acceptable narratives, particularly regarding controversial topics like corporal punishment advocacy). The sensitive nature of the discussions around school violence may have influenced the disclosure depth, with participants potentially minimising personal vulnerabilities or institutional failures.

Temporal snapshot: Data collection occurred over a three-month period, capturing a temporal snapshot rather than longitudinal patterns. Violence experiences at schools may vary seasonally (examination periods, school holidays, community events). A

single-time-point data collection cannot capture these fluctuations or determine whether documented patterns represent stable dynamics or time-specific conditions.

Methodological constraints: While document analysis was proposed in Chapter 4 (Section 4.7.3) to triangulate interview data, access limitations prevented a comprehensive document review. Had they been systematically analysed, safety protocols, disciplinary records and documentation related to policy implementation might have provided institutional perspectives complementing participant narratives and revealing policy-practice gaps more definitively than self-reported data.

Despite these limitations, the study's rich qualitative depth, theoretical grounding in SLT and multi-case comparative design have generated insights with analytical transferability to similar contexts and theoretical applicability to broader policy-implementation dynamics in educational settings.

6.9 CONCLUSION

This research journey into educator-directed violence in Ngaka Modiri Molema district has revealed a crisis of systemic proportions. Through thematic analysis of 38 participants across six secondary schools, the study documented forms of educator-directed violence ranging from verbal intimidation to fatal assault. Furthermore, it traced causal pathways through reinforcement ecologies where substance abuse, family dysfunction, policy constraints and institutional weaknesses converge. It also exposed the devastating psychological toll on educators who increasingly describe themselves as "cheque collectors" merely surviving until retirement rather than vocational professionals shaping future generations.

The study's significance lies not merely in confirming the pervasiveness of educator-directed violence, as the literature has already established this, but in advancing the theoretical understanding of why well-intended interventions persistently fail. The policy-reinforcement gap framework demonstrates that when a school's reality doesn't match a policy's expectations, the policy can backfire. Instead of creating safety, it inadvertently dismantles the social consequences and rewards that are necessary to maintain order. This extends SLT from individual behavioural acquisition to policy-level analysis, revealing that the prevention of school violence requires attention as to whether policy environments enable or undermine the consequence contingencies through which behaviour is learned and sustained.

Two empirical insights warrant particular emphasis. First, the remarkable uniformity of educator experience across diverse schools – from remote villages to peri-urban settlements – signals that violence stems less from variable local conditions than from common systemic failures. This consistency strongly suggests that targeting isolated factors is not enough. Success depends on coordinated, multi-level interventions that address the entire web of social rewards and consequences that currently drive learner behaviour. Second, school-level variation in violence severity despite shared external risk factors demonstrates that institutional responses function as critical mediating variables. Schools with consistent disciplinary enforcement experience lower violence not because they face fewer challenges, but because they maintain clearer behavioural contingencies, a finding with immediate practical implications for school leadership.

The path forward demands courage and systemic commitment. Recommendations spanning policy clarification, institutional capacity-building and social support services cannot succeed in isolation. The policy-reinforcement gap can only be closed through synchronised action ensuring policy intent, institutional implementation and behavioural contingencies align coherently. This requires policymakers willing to recalibrate frameworks accounting for ecological contexts, school leaders willing to enforce consistent consequences despite resource constraints and communities which are able to confront violence normalisation beyond the school's gates.

Ultimately, this study asserts that educator safety is not an administrative concern peripheral to educational quality, but its foundational prerequisite. Teachers traumatised by violence, paralysed by policy uncertainty and unsupported by absent infrastructure or uncaring principals cannot deliver the education South African learners deserve. The question facing stakeholders is not whether investment in educator safety is necessary, but whether we possess the collective will to act. This research has documented the crisis, developed analytical tools for its resolution and articulated the path forward. Translating insight into action remains the urgent task ahead – a task upon which the future of education in rural South Africa depends.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

UNISA university of south africa

College of Education _ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

NHREC Registration # : (if applicable)
Ref #: 7696
Name: Mr Sibusiso Benjamin Mnini
Student #: 59402199
Staff #:

Date: 25/04/2025

Dear: Mr Sibusiso Benjamin Mnini

Decision: Ethics Approval from 25/04/2025 to 25/04/2030

Researcher: Mr Sibusiso Benjamin Mnini

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Zeerust

sibusisomnini@gmail.com 0789872580

Supervisor: Professor Christo Doniwen Pietersen epietecd@unisa.ac.za

Co-Supervisor: Dr Dean LANGEVELDT dean.langeveldt@spu.ac.za

Exploring stakeholders perspectives on educators safety in selected secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, North-West Province, South Africa

Qualification: PHD (Philosophy of Education)

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Education _ERC for the above mentioned research study Ethics approval is granted for five years.

The **low risk application** was **reviewed** by College of Education _ERC on 9 April 2025 in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.

2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College of Education _ERC.

3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.

4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.

6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.

7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (25/04/2030). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal, for Ethics Research Committee approval.

Additional Conditions

1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from Unisa.
2. De-identified data must be safely stored on password protected PCs.
3. Care should be taken by the researcher when publishing the results to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the university.
4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication practices, principle 7 referring to Social awareness, must be ensured: "Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible." Unisa will not be liable for any failure to comply with this principle.
5. Kindly note that the College of Education _ERC requires the submission of regular progress reports to be submitted annually. Inline with section 7.2 of the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2024).

Note

The reference number 7696 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,

Prof JO August
Chair of
College
of
Educatio
n _ERC
E-mail:
augusjo
@unisa.
ac.za

Prof Mpine Makoe
Executive Dean College of Education

E-mail: qakisme@unisa.ac.za

APPENDIX B: PERMISSION LETTER FROM NORTH-WEST DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

education
Department:
Education
North West Provincial Government
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

10 Nelson Mandela Drive Mafikeng
Private bag X10 Mmabatho 2735
Fax: 086 513 9881
Tel: 018 388 1964
Email: ELesetedi@nwpg.gov.za

OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT MANAGER:
NGAKA MODIRI MOLEMA DISTRICT

Enquiries: Ms S.O. Molete
Tel: 018 388 1964
Email: omolete@nwpg.gov.za

To : Circuit Coordinators
Circuit Managers

From : Ms E.M. Lesetedi
Acting District Director

Date : 13 May 2025

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE DISTRICT

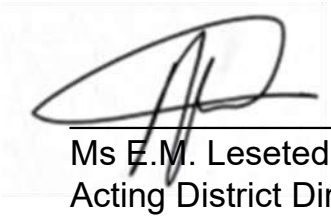
Permission is hereby granted to **S.B. Mnini,** who is PhD Student at the University of South Africa (UNISA), to conduct a research under the title: ***"Exploring stakeholders perspectives on educators safety in selected Secondary Schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, North-West Province, South Africa".***

Permission is granted on the basis that:

- Prior arrangement is made with Circuit Managers and School Managers of identified schools to avoid disruption of formal learning and teaching and that necessary safety precautions are followed.
- Participants will volunteer to participate on the research
- Data collected may not be used as bad publicity that may bring the Department into disrepute

Your cooperation and support in this regard is highly appreciated

Yours in Education,



Ms E.M. Lesetedi
Acting District Director

APPENDIX C: PERMISSION LETTERS FROM SCHOOLS/PRINCIPALS

Request for permission to conduct research at your school.

Title of the research: Exploring stakeholder's perspectives on educators safety in selected secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, North-West Province, South Africa

The school Principal

I hereby request permission to conduct research at _____ (name of school).

I, Sibusiso Benjamin Mnini, am seeking authorization to conduct research at secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District of the North-West Province. My research will be carried out under the guidance of Prof D Pietersen as my supervisor and Dr D Langeveldt as my co-supervisor. The focus of my study will be on secondary schools that have experienced incidents of violence against educators, as identified by the North-West Department of Education.

I am presently pursuing my PhD at the Faculty of Education in the University of South Africa. To complete my doctoral degree, I am required to carry out a research study titled "Exploring stakeholders' perspectives on educators' safety in selected secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, North-West Province, South Africa ". The aim of this study is to evaluate the factors that have helped to maintain or hinder educator safety in the North-West province in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools. As part of this study, I will engage with school principals and educators outside of regular teaching hours to gather data. Data collection methods will involve conducting semi-structured interviews with principals and focus group interviews with educators.

Data will be gathered following the ethical guidelines for research established by the Faculty of Education at the University of South Africa. These guidelines encompass informed consent, voluntary participation, respect, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants will not be remunerated for their involvement in this study but will have the chance to share their perspectives, opinions, and experiences related to the subject being studied. Additionally, I have sought permission from the North-West Department of Education and your School principal.
I kindly request your assistance in accommodating me and express my gratitude for your help. For further communication, please reach out to me at 0789872580 or sibusisomnini@gmail.com.

Regards

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of the research: Exploring stakeholder's perspectives on educators safety in selected secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, North-West Province, South Africa

Introduction

I, Sibusiso Benjamin Mnini, am seeking authorization to conduct research at secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District of the North-West Province. My research will be carried out under the guidance of Prof D Pietersen as my supervisor and Dr D Langeveldt as my co-supervisor. The focus of my study will be on secondary schools that have experienced incidents of violence against educators, as identified by the North-West Department of Education.

I am presently pursuing my PhD at the Faculty of Education in the University of South Africa. To complete my doctoral degree, I am required to carry out a research study titled "Exploring stakeholders' perspectives on educators' safety in selected secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, North-West Province, South Africa ". The aim of this study is to evaluate the factors that have helped to maintain or hinder educator safety in the North-West province in Ngaka Modiri Molema secondary schools. As part of this study, I will engage with school principals and educators outside of regular teaching hours to gather data. Data collection methods will involve conducting semi-structured interviews with principals and focus group interviews with educators.

What is required of you as a participant?

You are required to take part in an individual interview (scheduled after school hours) where you will be asked predetermined semi-structured or focus group interview questions, with the possibility of additional follow-up questions. These questions will focus on your firsthand experiences of violence directed against educators in secondary schools. The interview is expected to last a minimum of 45 minutes. With your consent, the interviews will be audio-recorded to aid in my research. The recordings will be used for transcription purposes, after which they will be deleted. Any personal information will excluded from the transcripts, which will be safeguarded with a password on the computer.

Risks and discomforts

In this study, there is a possibility that you may experience emotional distress or discomfort when discussing your experiences of violence at school during the interview. However, to mitigate these risks, the researcher will provide you with contact information for a qualified Psychologist (UNISA Support Services). This professional can offer support both during and after the data collection process.

Benefits and financial considerations

Participating in the study will not offer any immediate benefits to you. Nevertheless, your participation will allow you to share your personal experiences. This will assist me in gaining insight into the experiences of educators who have faced violence in secondary schools. By sharing your experiences, you can contribute to the development of recommendations aimed at addressing violence against educators in secondary schools. Ultimately, this will help in creating safe and supportive school environments that are conducive to effective teaching and learning.

Confidentiality

.The researcher will ensure confidentiality by omitting personal identifiable information and school details from audio recordings during transcription to prevent identification of participants in the study findings. Once transcribed, the audio recordings will be deleted. Each interview will be coded with a number instead of names of schools and participants. Only the researcher, supervisor, and independent coder will have access to the transcripts for data analysis. Hard copies will be kept in locked cupboards and electronic data will be password protected. Data will be stored securely for 5 years.

Voluntary participation

Participation in this research study is optional. You have the freedom to decide not to take part or to retract your consent at any point without facing any consequences. Feel free to inquire about any aspects of the research that are unclear to you, as you will be provided with clarifications.

Dissemination of findings

The results of this research will be shared through publications like articles and conference papers. Participants will receive the findings through email or phone once the data analysis is complete and the results are documented.

For any additional queries or concerns related to your involvement in this study, feel free to reach out to the researcher via phone at 0789872580 or email at sibusisomnini@gmail.com. A copy of the research details and consent form will be provided to you upon request. Alternatively, you may also contact my supervisor, Prof D Pietersen at 012 484 1627 or my co- supervisor, Dr D Langeveldt at 012 725 1393.

I, _____ the undersigned, voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

_____

Participant Signature Date

Researcher's Name and Surname (please print)

_____

Researcher’s signature Date

APPENDIX E: TRANSCRIBED SAMPLE INTERVIEWS

This appendix outlines the methodology used to transcribe the interview and focus group data collected for this study. The process was designed to ensure accuracy, confidentiality, and the preservation of participants' intended meanings.

As outlined in Sections 4.11.2 and 4.4.3 of the thesis, all one-on-one semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder. Prior verbal and written consent for recording was obtained from every participant.

- All audio files were transcribed verbatim (word-for-word) by the researcher. This included every spoken word, false starts, pauses, and meaningful non-verbal utterances (e.g., sighs, nervous laughter) that added context to the participant's emotional state.

- To uphold the ethical commitment to confidentiality (Section 4.7), all identifying information was removed during transcription. This included:

  - Replacing all personal and school names with predetermined pseudonyms (e.g., Participant PS-A for Principal of School A).

  - Omitting or generalizing any specific location details, dates, or names of third parties that could compromise anonymity.

- Transcripts were formatted clearly, with each speaker turn on a new line. The assigned participant code was placed at the beginning of each speech segment for easy reference during coding and analysis.

- Audio files and transcripts were stored on password-protected, encrypted devices.

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW GUIDE/SCHEDULE (SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS)

Title of the research: Exploring stakeholder's perspectives on educators' safety in selected secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, North-West Province, South Africa

Semi-structured interview questions for Principals/ Deputy Principals

1. Has your school encountered cases of learner-on-educator violence? If so, could you provide more details on the different types of such incidents occurred at your school?

2. Could you provide information on any cases of violence perpetrated by learners against educators at your school?

3. What are the possible reasons behind learner-on-educator violence?

4. What are the consequences for educators who experience violence from learners?

5. What guidelines does the school follow to make decisions when dealing with incidence of learner-on-educator violence?

6. How can the Department of Education and other external stakeholders assist in addressing the issues related to learner-on-educator violence?

7. Is there anything else you would want to add or say regarding learner-on-educator violence?

APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Title of the research: Exploring stakeholder's perspectives on educators' safety in selected secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, North-West Province, South Africa

Focus group interview questions for educators and HODs

1. Has your school encountered cases of learner-on-educator violence? If so, could you provide more details on the different types of such incidents occurred at your school?

2. Could you provide information on any cases of violence perpetrated by learners against educators at your school?

3. What are the possible reasons behind learner-on-educator violence?

4. What are the consequences for educators who experience violence from learners?

5. What types of systems or support initiatives does the school offer to assist educators who have experienced violence from learners?

6. How can the Department of Education and other external stakeholders assist in addressing the issues related to learner-on-educator violence?

7. Is there anything else you would want to add or say regarding learner-on-educator violence?

APPENDIX H: EDITOR'S CERTIFICATE

Word Count

Acknowledgement of language editing of PhD dissertation for Sibusiso Mnini

To Whom It May Concern 11 February 2026

I hereby acknowledge that I, Katherine Graham, a freelance editor, have provided language editing services to Sibusiso Benjamin Mnini for his dissertation for a PhD thesis in Philosophy of Education in the Department of Educational Foundations, UNISA, entitled: *Exploring Stakeholders' Perspectives on Educators' Safety in Selected Secondary Schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, North West province, South Africa.*

I have read and edited the text in terms of syntax, grammar and spelling mistakes and have not altered the meaning of the text in any way other than to gain clarity of understanding.

Signed:

Katherine Graham
Language editor
Email: katherine@wordcount.co.za
Contact number: 082 789 3981

APPENDIX I: TURNITIN CERTIFICATE

Similarity Report

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SIBUSISO BENJAMIN MNINI

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