

International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
 Vol. 24, No. 10, pp. 527-543, October 2025
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.24.10.25>
 Received Jul 16, 2025; Revised Sept 21, 2025; Accepted Sept 25, 2025

“You have to go to Class; You are their Teacher”: Teacher Fears of Classrooms in South Africa

Vuyisile Msila* 

University of South Africa
 Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract. Recent research reveals that schools across the world are plagued by learner violence against teachers. Educators are subjected to physical and psychological abuse by disruptive learners who hinder the teaching and learning process. Studies show that fear among teachers is a major contributor to teacher burnout and despondency. Education stakeholders—including school governors and communities—are often overwhelmed by schools where learner violence and unruly behaviour undermine the culture of teaching and learning. This case study explores the experiences of 12 teachers from three historically Black (township) schools in South Africa. It examines how learner violence and bullying have impacted their morale and professionalism. Data was collected through observations, and individual and focus group interviews. The findings demonstrate that, in addition to fostering toxic school climates and cultures, hostile learners contribute to teacher fear and professional decline. A meticulous, deliberate response to learner aggression is a missing link in fostering effective classrooms and confident teachers, especially in underperforming schools. The study concludes that the abuse of teachers is a critical challenge that must be addressed by community structures, government institutions, and broader society. Schools are meant to be spaces of justice, thinking, and freedom—yet teaching and learning cannot occur where fear dominates.

Keywords: Learner achievement; Learner truancy; School effectiveness; Teacher fears; Teacher leadership

1. Introduction

Recent incidents of violence perpetrated by learners against teachers have negatively impacted the daily work of educators. There is increasing debate about how such violence affects learner performance, especially when teachers themselves are traumatised. De Wet (2021) argues that learner violence against teachers is humiliating, disempowering, and violates their rights. Similarly, Mosito and Sitoyi (2024) contend that the bullying of teachers erodes the core

*Corresponding author: Vuyisile Msila; msivuy@gmail.com

business of schooling. In 2024, teachers in various South African cities faced new forms of violence, including robbery on school grounds and extortion by learners and external criminal elements (eNCA, 2024; Mokonyane, Mampane & Mollo, 2024; Mosito & Sitoyi, 2024). In some cases, learners demanded protection money from both peers and teachers. The ills of society have permeated schools, placing teachers' lives in constant danger. Venketsamy, Baxen, and Hu (2023), as well as Fourie and De Klerk (2024), note that teachers suffer social, emotional, and psychological trauma – leading to poor performance, absenteeism, and emotional detachment from their work.

Even when teachers remain in violent schools, many become demotivated and disengaged from their school's vision (Mosito & Sitoyi, 2024; Mokonyane et al., 2024). Despite the growing crisis of learner-teacher violence, the issue remains under-researched in South Africa. Many disillusioned teachers leave classrooms unsupervised or take leave during working hours (Okeke & Simphiwe, 2024). According to Okeke and Simphiwe (2024, p.150):

“Teachers who have witnessed significant learner aggression and violence – particularly physical and verbal violence – are affected to the extent that their sense of well-being and professional attitude are totally eroded (Ferrara et al., 2019; WHO, 2019).”

Research also reveals that violent incidents include slapping, threats, chair-throwing, obscene language, stabbings, shootings, gang attacks on teachers, classroom assaults, and physical shoving (SACE, 2011). These problems mirror patterns in many countries. However, teacher responses to violence vary. This study asks: How can teachers overcome teacher fear in schools where learners are uncontrollable and ill-disciplined?

1.1 Aim and Objectives of the Study

1.1.1 Aim

To unpack the dynamics of learner violence against teachers and explore possible interventions to address the crisis.

1.1.2 Objectives

- To determine the extent to which teachers are affected by learner violence.
- To understand the impact of learner violence on teacher well-being.
- To investigate how professional development initiatives can help teachers overcome teacher fears in schools.

Existing studies in South Africa show teacher fears and violence but the field lacks a comprehensive understanding of the nature of historically Black schools as well as practical applications that serve indigent families.

1.2 Theoretical Background

In his study, Msila (2024) introduces two key concepts for school development: professional growth and teacher leadership. He argues that effective teacher leaders are professionally mature and capable of addressing challenges within schools. Violent school environments require teachers who are emotionally and professionally equipped to manage daunting issues (Okeke & Simphiwe, 2024).

Teacher leadership emphasises inclusivity, shared decision-making, and distributed leadership. It is especially critical in violent contexts, where emotionally intelligent teachers must address conflict with care (Sathiparsad, 2003; Sobuwa, 2025). Research highlights that effective schools are often led by teachers who demonstrate professional maturity (Msila, 2021; Memela & Ramrathan, 2022). Visionary principals who promote ongoing professional development are better able to cultivate teacher leaders who transform school culture (Msila, 2021; 2024). Effective teacher leadership is thus aligned with better-performing schools. Grant et al. (2010) argue that teacher leadership should support change initiatives and participatory governance, and they redefine the principal as a "leader of leaders", asserting that empowered teachers are more capable of addressing school violence.

Ideally, teacher leadership also fosters a supportive culture, especially in times of trauma. It is linked to professional development, which in turn leads to professional maturity. Msila (2021) identifies professional maturity as a missing link in underperforming schools. Singh (2009; 2011) uses the term *tobephobia* to describe teachers who fear the classroom due to doubts about their competence. This fear often results from bullying. Tobephobia is also linked to fear of failure – common among disempowered teachers. Teacher leadership and professional maturity are seen as antidotes to this debilitating condition. Singh (2008) stresses that teachers with tobephobia are unlikely to embrace curriculum change or facilitate learner achievement.

2. Literature Review

Worldwide, researchers have documented the rise of violence in schools, where teachers increasingly feel unsafe (Maeng, Malone & Carnell, 2019; McMahan et al., 2020). Maeng et al. (2020) observe that learner aggression against teachers causes serious consequences, including diminished efficacy, emotional strain, and mental health issues. In the U.S., McMahan et al. (2020) report that teacher-targeted violence is particularly severe in low-income, overcrowded communities. Common forms of abuse include verbal threats, object-throwing, physical attacks, and sexual harassment (McMahan et al., 2020, 2022; Maeng et al., 2020).

McMahan et al. (2022) and AITSL (2020) also highlight that aggression toward teachers can originate from parents, colleagues, or administrators, often amplified via social media. Australia has implemented protective measures to ensure school safety and respect for teachers (AITSL, 2020). Globally, teacher abuse is reported in Taiwan, Israel, New Zealand, and the United States. (Maeng et al., 2020). All these forms of violence are abuses that affect the emotional being of victims. Yusri et al. (2025) found that verbal violence is a form of emotional abuse.

These authors state that verbal violence is a phenomenon that “can include insulting, belittling, underestimating, threatening, humiliating, intimidating and other forms of aggression” (Yusri et al., 2025, p.832). Yet emotional violence and psychological violence are perceived by research to be referring to a similar concept. Shallcross and Bland (2025) refer to emotional abuse examples such as

mobbing and bullying which are factors usually disregarded although they can have destructive impacts on individual and work culture. The challenges posed by these behaviours frequently lead to mental health problems. Mental health issues arising from violence against educators is associated with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and sleep problems (McMahon et al., 2025; Longmuir et al., 2025).

Mares (2016) argues that addressing fears is essential for professional growth. Teachers worry about numerous challenges – teaching quality, classroom control, making mistakes – but increasingly, they fear learner violence. Middle (2024) identifies teacher fear as a hidden mental health epidemic undermining education policy. Kuntz (2024) adds that fear obstructs effective teaching and learner success. Teachers must first acknowledge and manage their own fears before guiding learners through theirs. Msila (2025) notes that teachers seldom talk about their fears, although many aggressive learners themselves harbour unresolved fears. Pickhardt (1978) described how learners manipulate teachers through body language, eye contact, verbal tricks – and sometimes violence.

Fear is the central weapon. South African teachers are particularly affected, often experiencing burnout and trauma. Sobuwa (2025) describes widespread stress and how many teachers are considering leaving the profession. Learner behaviour is a major cause; some teachers have even been hospitalised. Child (2017) confirms that schools have become violent, with gangs and weapons commonplace. The Headroom (2024) report adds that this issue is most prevalent in underprivileged schools, where teachers also serve as mentors, social workers, and emotional anchors. According to Mosito and Sitoyi (2024), escalating school violence continues to drive teachers away, leading to despondency and disillusionment.

3. Research Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted over one year in three historically Black schools located in an urban area of South Africa. Apple, Cherry, and Banana (not their real names) are secondary schools that serve indigent families in the Eastern Cape Province. Historically Black areas are commonly referred to as townships, which, under apartheid, were designated residential areas for Black people. The sample consisted of twelve teachers selected from the three township schools where learners were threatening teachers through various forms of violence, including physical aggression. On average, these schools also struggled with academic underperformance, with learners in Grades 8 to 12 achieving little more than 40%.

A previous study by postgraduate university researchers found that teacher fears were among the causes of learner underperformance. This study employed convenience sampling, a non-probability technique in which participants are selected due to their accessibility (Oranga & Matere, 2023; Lim, 2025). The researcher had easy access to both the participants and their schools (Struwig & Stead, 2004). Data was collected through individual unstructured interviews, followed by two focus group discussions with six participants each. The initial interviews took place in April, after the researcher observed the impacts of learner

violence and teacher fears in the three schools. The second round of individual interviews was conducted in August.

A naturalistic observation method was employed, whereby the researcher observed teacher and learner behaviour without any intervention (Struwig & Stead, 2004; Oranga & Matere, 2023; Lim, 2025). The observation tools included checklists, anecdotal records, running records, and field notes, all of which provided invaluable qualitative data and insights within natural contexts.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Participants were guaranteed anonymity, and informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study should they find it harmful to their well-being. Data analysis involved identifying patterns and themes (Maxwell, 2021; Lim, 2025). This included qualitative data from observations, interviews, and both primary and secondary sources. Below, in Table 1, the demographics of the sampled teachers are listed. All of them are Black teachers with their teaching experience spanning from three years to 33 years. Almost all the sampled teachers have experienced some form of learner violence.

Table 1: Participants' demographics

Teacher, gender and position	Age	Teaching experience in years	Violence experienced in the past year	School name
A1 Female Principal	56	33	None	Apple High
A2 Female Level 1 teacher	25	3	Verbal abuse Shoving	Apple High
A3 Male Departmental head	36	14	Verbal abuse	Apple High
A4 Male Level 1	44	14	Car tyres punctured Emotional abuse	Apple High
B1 Female Principal	45	19	Emotional abuse	Banana High
B2 Male Level 1	29	5	Physical violence Emotional abuse	Banana High
B3 Male Level 1	30	4	Harassment and threats	Banana High
B4 Female Level 1	28	4	Sexual harassment and threats	Banana High
C1 Male Principal	37	13	Verbal abuse and insubordination Cyberbullying	Cherry High

C2 Female Level 1	49	18	Sexual assault and harassment	Cherry High
C3 Female Level 1	53	22	Verbal abuse and threats	Cherry High
C4 Female Level 1	23	3	Verbal abuse and sexual harassment Cyberbullying	Cherry High

3.1 Observations

Observation was a critical component of data collection in this study. Data was gathered unobtrusively by observing phenomena in their natural settings. As this was largely a subjective process, it required conscientious researchers who remained aware of potential biases. Rich descriptions of observed phenomena were often enhanced by the interview data. The study used systematic observation, which involved coding and a strict observation schedule. The researcher recorded the frequency of incidents such as violence and truancy during observation sessions. The most important aspect of systematic observation is its structured approach, which includes a predetermined plan and specific guidelines. As a result, systematic observation helps to minimise observer bias (Williams, n.d.).

According to Williams, systematic observation is essential because it provides:

- **Objectivity** – Its structured nature reduces personal biases.
- **Reliability** – Consistent data collection allows for study replication and verification of results.
- **Validity** – Ensures that the data reflect the phenomena being studied, thus enhancing research validity.
- **Comprehensive Data Collection** – Facilitates the collection of detailed information about behaviours, interactions, and context, leading to a deeper understanding of the subject.

Systematic observation requires a plan. Research experts such as Noble (2025) highlight several essential steps, including:

1. Determining the research objective
2. Formulating research questions and creating a guide
3. Establishing data-gathering methods
4. Conducting observations
5. Preparing the data
6. Analysing behaviour reflected in the data

The researcher observed classroom interactions as well as activities on school grounds. Additionally, two School Governing Body (SGB) meetings in each of the schools were observed.

4. Findings

Participants highlighted the misery caused by learner behaviour in schools. They recounted recent incidents in which teachers were bullied and mentally abused by learners. All participants stated that the worst fear among both male and female teachers was being physically attacked by learners. Interestingly, the four school managers concurred that school principals bore the brunt of learner harassment and the deterioration of the teaching and learning culture. The principals also expressed frustration at the challenges faced by school management teams in disadvantaged areas. The three schools serve impoverished families and have developed reputations for both unrest and consistently poor learner performance over four consecutive years.

The principals emphasised their isolation as school leaders and their urgent need to collaborate with religious groups, civil society organisations, teacher unions, cultural organisations, and district officials. Many of these concerns were echoed by other participants, who stated that fear, uncertainty, and insecurity characterised their teaching experiences. Participants also described how school climate and culture negatively affected teacher performance and disrupted school programmes.

The findings are presented under the following key themes:

- Safety and Uncertainty
- Isolation of Schools
- Professional Maturity
- Learner Performance and Teacher Motivation

4.1 Safety and Uncertainty

Participants contended that schools were increasingly becoming dangerous spaces where teachers no longer felt safe in their own classrooms. The principal from Apple High School described how many of his small staff of 32 became reluctant to enter classrooms after a male teacher was assaulted with a broomstick and chased by a 20-year-old learner. He stated:

“The situation worsened when a Head of Department came running to my office. He reported that earlier in the day he had been chased by a learner with a broomstick after reprimanding him for texting in class. The teacher had repeatedly reminded learners that cell phone use is prohibited in class. The learner became angry, and an exchange of words followed. This happened shortly after another incident, where a teacher’s car was nearly vandalised because the teacher had confiscated a small plastic packet containing marijuana. Now, all teachers are cautious when disciplining learners.”

Participants shared a range of stories from less serious and even humorous to highly dangerous and disturbing. Male teachers were increasingly wary, as perpetrators—often male learners—seemed intent on asserting dominance. Teachers reported that misbehaviour ranged from individual truancy to coordinated group defiance.

Contentious issues included demands for homework, dress code enforcement, and cell phone usage in classrooms. Teachers found it particularly demeaning when other learners would cheer or mock them when defiance occurred, which often led to a sense of insecurity and reluctance in the classroom.

A female teacher from Cherry High School shared:

"I teach Natural Sciences to Grade 11s. One of my two classes is manageable, but the other is chaotic. As a young female teacher, I get scared when boys whistle as I walk in. Some wink and laugh deliriously, while others chat loudly, with only a few paying attention. I find it hard to control them – you never know how things will escalate. One boy once offered to 'protect' me for one hundred rand (about 6 US dollars) per month. That was frightening, especially considering how extortion is now prevalent in society. It has reached our schools."

Participants also agreed that disciplining learners often led to unintended, sometimes severe consequences, making their professional roles extremely precarious.

4.2 Isolation of Schools

Participants stated that many problems in schools stem from two forms of isolation: on the one hand, the isolation of schools from neighbouring schools and on the other, the isolation of teachers from one another within the same school. All forms of isolation hinder schools from improving performance and sustaining their vision. The three principals noted that some schools seem to have effective strategies, but there is a lack of a collaborative culture—such as twinning initiatives. Teachers added that discipline in schools should not, and does not, relate to race.

The principal at Apple High School referred to the prevailing culture of isolation as "secluded leadership", arguing that it forces schools to operate in silos when collective efforts could yield better results. She observed that teachers are unaccustomed to collaboration, beginning with their reluctance to share classroom practices with colleagues. This was confirmed by other participants, who acknowledged that many schools share historical and structural challenges, and that collaboration could help alleviate issues such as violence and poor academic performance.

Several participants believed that their schools could learn from others facing similar issues—especially regarding learner violence and academic underperformance. Some proposed that "good" schools should be twinned with "underperforming" ones. Participants linked truancy directly to poor performance and stressed that district and provincial officials should support such collaboration if it leads to improvements. They also suggested that isolation could be overcome through the exchange of expertise, with teachers visiting each other's schools to learn and share effective practices.

4.3 Professional Maturity

The principal at Banana High School introduced the concept of teachers' professional maturity, which she had encountered during a workshop. This concept resonated with other participants, who agreed that professional maturity could help break the isolation mentioned above and support the holistic development of the school community. They asserted that professional maturity can be nurtured through continuous professional development programmes, teacher mentoring, and engagement with professional bodies such as teacher unions and leadership organisations. Participants pointed out that fear often arises when teachers face difficult situations without professional support.

They maintained that fostering professional maturity requires intentional leadership—leaders committed to empowering each teacher. Furthermore, participants emphasised that professional maturity cannot develop in isolation; it requires working closely with learners, parents, and school management teams. There was a shared belief that teacher-learner conflicts often stem from miscommunication and misunderstanding. Teachers must work with school leaders to uphold the school's vision and mission, which also contributes to breaking down isolation.

Participants also highlighted the critical role teacher unions should play—not only in labour matters but also in supporting school effectiveness. One participant stated, "The struggle for better schools means that teacher unions should support activism that stands for teacher safety, professional development, and school development that puts learner success first." They believed unions should lead campaigns for better schools, echoing the sentiment that "all schools matter". Participants also underscored the need to respect and empower Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs), asserting that, when learners are part of policymaking, they are more likely to respect and uphold school policies.

4.4 Observations

The researcher found the school climate in the three schools highly intimidating. Teachers were aware of certain transgressions but appeared unwilling to confront issues like truancy, verbal abuse and various forms of physical abuse. At Banana and Cherry High Schools, the smell of marijuana near boys' toilets was always strong and persistent, yet teachers ignored it. At Apple High School, a corner of the grounds was known for illicit activities, including the use of alcohol and drugs. Vendors just outside the school sold cigarettes and drugs—particularly *tik* (crystal meth), so named locally for the popping sound it makes when smoked. Despite these issues, school grounds during break periods appeared typical of any other school.

During staff meetings, the researcher observed that staff often failed to address disciplinary matters properly. In all three schools, agenda items relating to learner misconduct were frequently downplayed. Teachers were generally advised to be cautious when dealing with ill-discipline and truancy. At Banana High School, a teacher was shoved by a learner after confronting him about incomplete homework. The meeting response was simply to summon the learner's parents—

without challenge or urgency. In most cases, teachers had to rely on their own discretion when addressing bullying, and often did nothing.

Classroom conditions were the worst—regardless of whether a teacher was present. In several classes, learners who wanted to focus struggled due to widespread disruptive behaviour. In Banana’s lower grade classes (Grade 9 to 10), the disruptive noise was always unbearable, and learners often laughed out loud or asked teachers inappropriate questions when present. In Apple High School, Grades 10 and 11 were especially unruly.

Female teachers were frequently intimidated by male learners, who teased them until they left the class. Only a few male teachers managed to maintain classroom order. The Apple principal (A1) pointed out that, without strategic direction from leadership, parental involvement and supportive policies, sustaining discipline is nearly impossible. The Cherry High School principal (C1) supported this stating that he missed the voice of teacher unions in the entire challenge of learner violence.

5. Discussion

5.1 School Leadership and School Cultures

Previous research has shown that weak school leadership contributes significantly to disciplinary problems (Memela & Ramrathan, 2022; Sobuwa, 2025). Poorly performing schools often have demotivated leaders (Msila, 2017; Mosito & Sitoyi, 2024). Learner success is hampered when teachers operate in fear, especially when classroom safety is in question. Participants revealed that a typical 35-minute class felt endless under such conditions. Even experienced teachers admitted that violence has become a serious obstacle to teaching.

The selected schools lacked clear discipline policies, and teachers relied on informal suggestions to manage violence. Heads of department expressed uncertainty on how to address the harmful behaviour of learners. Participants argued that district offices should provide structured disciplinary frameworks, but that meaningful change requires united action from all stakeholders (Van Wyk & Pelsler, 2004). Research has also shown that teacher leadership and maturity are critical to improving schools (Msila, 2024). School leaders who invest in their teachers’ leadership capacity often create positive school cultures.

Novice teachers in the study believed veteran teachers should handle disciplinary issues, but the veterans asserted that discipline is a shared responsibility. Apple High School’s principal proposed a model for collaborative intervention that should be revisited annually:

- **Level 1:** Teachers and Learners
- **Level 2:** Parents and Community
- **Level 3:** Cultural Groups, Religious Groups, and Businesses

However, the principal struggled to gain buy-in from all stakeholders, with some parents insisting that disciplinary matters are the sole responsibility of teachers. Participants agreed that principals cannot combat learner violence alone; they

need committed support from all sectors. As criminal activity continues to infiltrate schools – including protection rackets and extortion – it becomes critical to involve teachers, learners, RCLs, and union representatives in building visible and resilient school communities.

5.2 Parental Involvement and Learner Misbehaviour

All the participants highlighted that many problems in their schools are partly caused by the non-involvement of parents in their children's school activities. Research has shown how critical parental involvement is in minimising the challenges teachers face. The participants concurred that, although parents often blame teachers for truant children, it is the lack of parental involvement that hinders learners' progress. Furthermore, research has shown that parents should always play a role in minimising violence in children. The participants attributed learners' poor academic progress to the absence of parental involvement in their schooling (Nkosi & Adebayo, 2020). They also expressed how ineffective it is to empower teachers through workshops while learners return home to unprepared or disengaged parents.

Generally, many underperforming schools struggle with learners whose parents and caregivers are overwhelmed. Many schools require the enhancement of violence prevention programmes because violence negatively affects learners – whether as victims, perpetrators, or witnesses (Sathiparsad, 2003; Fourie & De Klerk, 2024). Sathiparsad further points out that learners often come from violent communities, although violence also manifests in complex patterns including socio-economic conditions, educational structures, and teaching methods. Schools must examine the contexts learners come from and the types of homes they live in. Children from poor townships are likely to come from conflict-ridden areas and violence-prone contexts, which may lead them to bring inappropriate behaviours to school.

Therefore, children from certain backgrounds may frustrate teachers' efforts. To show that these challenges affect all role-players, Potgieter and Zuma (2019) argue that teachers, school management teams, learners, and parents all suffer trauma due to systemic and structural challenges. They further note that poverty, inequality, and unemployment can all contribute to violence and underperformance. The participants identified these as some of the root causes of school violence and truancy. For these reasons, community-wide solutions and interventions are necessary to address the violence and harassment experienced by teachers.

Katrina (2022) identifies five common teacher fears and ways to overcome them. Unlike the participants' concerns that all teachers – whether veterans or novices – are affected negatively by fear, Katrina argues that experience and confidence can help teachers manage their fears. The five fears are:

- Losing control of the class;
- Losing learners' respect;
- Not doing enough for learners;
- Not knowing enough; and

- Dealing with parents.

Some experts suggest that teachers should develop ways of managing these fears and avoid working in isolation. Collaborating with peers can help teachers deal with workplace challenges, including fear. Teachers can support each other in building resilience. *Scolionophobia* or *didaskaleinophobia*, terms associated with the fear of school, can apply to teachers who fear learners and subsequently develop aversions to school. This anxiety disorder was evident in some participants, although they struggled to articulate it. Similarly, Singh (2011) introduces the concept of *tobephobia*, which he defines as educators' fear of failure and lack of professional competence to manage change in schools.

As this study shows, participants often experience anxiety during violent episodes and fear blame from other role-players when learners fail – regardless of the school context. *Tobephobia* becomes a challenge when teachers are uncertain about results and their competence. Its manifestation also leads to emotional dissonance caused by teachers' insecurities and their perceived inability to succeed. Singh (2011) contends that this leads to stagnation, worsened by a lack of professional training to address such insecurities.

5.3 Teacher Activism and Social Justice

While participants acknowledged the labour-related role of teacher unions, they maintained that effective unions could help uphold the South African Council for Educators' (SACE) principles by prioritising teacher safety. Together with other role-players, teacher unions can play a critical role in addressing school violence – especially by using the SACE handbook *Teachers' Safety and Security in South African Schools* as a guide (SACE, 2020; EdUpStairs, 2021). This handbook contains useful themes such as: understanding violence, defining roles and responsibilities, assessing risks, and taking preventative action. It can inform school policies and serve as a basis for workshops and train-the-trainer models for learners and teachers.

With the democratisation of schools post-1994, role-players cannot exclude learners from key plans and policies (Department of Basic Education, 2021). Learners who are engaged in democratic processes are also being prepared to become responsible citizens. Teacher union site committees can enhance their internal training using the roles and responsibilities outlined in the handbook. This supports a whole-school approach to violence prevention, as reflected in participants' perspectives.

Teacher unions should take the lead in advocating for social justice and teacher safety. Charney, Hagopian, and Peterson (2023) promote a vision of social justice teacher unionism aimed at improving schools, transforming unions, and building a more just society. They argue that effective teacher unions must bring social justice into the classroom—a powerful tool for addressing learner violence. Charney et al. (2023, p.16) write:

“In a society that often fosters alienation, passivity, and disengagement, we need to foster among our students a sense of community, vibrant

connection through shared learning, and optimism about changing the world. We need to help them think deeply about the forces that shape their lives... we need to help them understand how people have joined together in social movements to work to make things better."

Teacher unions with this kind of commitment can help schools cultivate values that discourage violence and bullying. Learners must encounter social justice themes in their learning. Their subjects should reflect the aspirations of their communities. Union members should constantly reflect on what unions should advocate for (Charney et al., 2023). As some participants emphasised collaboration to combat violence, teacher unions can facilitate such efforts. Among their mandates, unions should promote an anti-violence culture, racial justice, and economic justice – values that can empower both teachers and learners (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006).

5.4 RCLs, Teachers, and Discipline

The struggle to establish democratic learner representation has a long history in South African schools. During apartheid, the fight to free schools included efforts to create learner structures that upheld learner rights. As a result, the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) replaced the prefect system, which was seen as authoritarian. Both the prefect system and parent-teacher organisations were perceived as tools of state control over learners and parents, while also undermining teachers.

However, there is a realisation that schools must cultivate shared values among all stakeholders. A Department of Basic Education (DBE) document (2011) asserts that School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and RCLs serve as agents of social change in democratic schooling, grounded in accountability, fairness, and equity. Yet teachers in this study reported that meaningful cooperation between teachers and RCLs is often absent in schools with weak institutional cultures. Although the term 'human rights' is emphasised in the *Values for Action* document (DBE, 2011), many public schools lack the ethics and principles it advocates. Mdimore (2004) argues that RCLs have a significant role in promoting a culture of teaching and learning.

However, without adequate training, RCLs may not fulfil this potential. Empowerment should include communication skills and opportunities for learners to participate in decision-making (Mdimore, 2004). This study confirms that collaboration among role-players is vital, and RCLs must be part of school governance to effectively represent their peers. Maas-Olsen (2006) adds that policymaking should empower RCLs, given that the social purpose of schooling is to build future citizens. Violent learners undermine this objective.

6. The Limitations of the Study

Even the best of studies tends to have weaknesses or shortcomings in their design, but if research should enhance credibility, the researcher must acknowledge limitations for these also help to enhance scientific rigour. The limitations also enable the researcher to highlight limited generalizability and address researcher bias. In the present study the following were the limitations:

- A sample of 12 teachers (which is effective for a case study) is limited, hence a bigger sample will improve credibility and transferability.
- The study might be seen to have theoretical limitations as the underlying theory is limited for applicability of the findings.
- To address gaps in the study, future research can utilise mixed methods or quantitative research methodology which would yield interesting and fulfilling results.

7. Conclusion

The study shows that teachers who feel bullied by learners should not remain helpless or silent. School leaders must ensure that teacher leadership is understood and practised throughout their schools. Empowered teachers are more likely to collaborate with parents, learner representatives, and teacher organisations. Fighting violence in schools needs actionable recommendations such as meaningful, multifaceted approaches that would include various education role-players.

Among these are restorative justice practices which should involve all the role-players. Schooling is too important to be looked after by teachers alone. Enforcement of principles of peace education should be considered and these should be emphasised from the national department of education to kindergartens. When teachers are fearful, teaching and learning suffer, and society must not expect teachers to address these issues alone. Yet, as seen in this study, schools serving indigent parents may deem their parents aloof.

Without parental involvement, strong school leadership, active teacher unions, and engaged learner representatives, it will remain extremely difficult to reduce teacher fears. When societal groups fail to collaborate, schools become ineffective, and poor discipline erodes the culture of learning and teaching. Alongside collaboration, it is essential to build supportive environments that promote professional growth and teacher maturity. However, these efforts will remain limited unless learners themselves are empowered. In many cases, teachers are only as effective as their learners, and empowered teachers aim to transform learners' lives holistically. There are no universal solutions for overcoming teacher fear.

However, because teaching is a human activity, collaboration, support, and open communication are key to addressing the challenges. School-wide teacher leadership can support change initiatives and encourage participatory teaching. Teacher isolation intensifies fear, whereas leadership can help teachers overcome tobephobia and other professional anxieties.

8. References

- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). (2020). *National strategy to address the abuse of teachers, school leaders and other school staff*. Author.
- Charney, M., Hagopian, J., & Peterson, B. (2021). *Teacher unions and social justice*. Rethinking Schools.
- Child, K. (2017, June 15). Schools are so violent teachers live in fear. *Times Live*. <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2017-06-15/schools-are-so-violent-teachers-live-in-fear/>
- De Wet, N. C. (2021). South African English newspapers' depiction of learner-on- teacher violence. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 49(2). https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-comcare_v40_n2_a2
- Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2011). *Values in action*. Author. Ed Upstairs. (2021). *Teachers' safety and security in South African schools: A handbook*. <https://www.edupstairs.org/teachers-safety-and-security-in-south-african-schools-a-handbook/eNCA>. (2024, April 30). Gang violence spills into Eastern Cape schools. *eNCA*. <https://www.enca.com/news-top-stories/gang-violence-spills-ec-school-grounds>
- Fourie, A., & De Klerk, W. (2024). The psychological well-being of schoolteachers in South Africa: A critical review. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 34(1), 95-105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2024.2311989>
- Grant, C., Gardner, K., Kajee, F., Moodley, R., & Somaroo, S. (2010). Teacher leadership: A survey analysis of KwaZulu-Natal teachers' perceptions. *South African Journal of Education*, 30(3). <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v30n3a362>
- Hayes, D., Mills, M., Christie, P., & Lingard, B. (2006). *Teachers & schooling: Making a difference*. Allen & Unwin.
- Headroom. (2024). Teacher burnout in South Africa's underprivileged schools. <https://headroom.co.za/teacher-burnout-in-south-africas-underprivileged-schools/>
- Katrina. (2022). 5 common teacher fears and how to overcome them. *The Animated Teacher Blog*. <https://www.theanimatedteacherblog.com/teacher-fears/>
- Kuntz, J. (2024). Transforming our teacher fears. *Teaching Channel*. <https://www.teachingchannel.com/k12-hub/downloadable/transforming-our-teacher-fears/>
- Lim, W. M. (2024). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 33(2), 199-229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619>
- Longmuir, F., McKay, A., Gallo, C., Beatriz, A. K., & Phillips, M. (2025). Australian teachers' perceptions of safety, violence and limited support in their workplaces. *Journal of School Violence*, 24(1), xx-xx. <https://doi.org/> [insert if available]
- Maas-Olsen, M. I. (2006). *Empowering representative councils of learners through policymaking* [master's dissertation, University of Zululand].
- Maeng, J., Malone, M., & Cornell, D. (2020). Student threats of violence against teachers: Prevalence and outcomes using a threat assessment approach. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102934>
- Mares, C. (2016). Teacher fears. *iTDi Blog*. <https://itdi.pro/blog/2016/05/24/teachers-fears/>
- Maxwell, J. A. (2021). The importance of qualitative research for investigating Causation. *Qualitative Psychology*, 8(3), 378-388. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000219>
- McMahon, S. D., Anderman, E. M., Astor, R. A., Espelage, D. L., Martinez, A., Reddy, L. A., & Worrell, F. C. (2025). Violence against educators and school personnel: Crisis during COVID [Technical report]. American Psychological Association <https://www.apa.org/education-career/k12/violence-ducators.pdf>

- McMahon, S. D., Peist, E., Davis, J. O., McConnell, E., Reaves, S., Reddy, L. A., Anderman, E. M., & Espelage, D. L. (2020). Addressing violence against teachers: A social-ecological analysis of teachers' perspectives. *Psychology in Schools, 57*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22382>
- Mdimore, B. M. (2004). *The role of RCLs in the promotion of the culture of teaching and learning in secondary schools* [Master's dissertation, University of Zululand].
- Memela, G. K., & Ramrathan, L. (2022). The perspective of school leadership and management: The role of the school principal in academic learner performance. *South African Journal of Education, 42*(2). https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-educat_v42_n2_a9
- Middle, S. (2014, September 3). Teachers' fear: A hidden mental health epidemic in schools. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/education/teachers-fear-a-hidden-mental-health-epidemic-in-schools-8ae1ddc988b7>
- Mokonyane, K. B., Mampane, K. B., & Mollo, N. T. (2024). Challenges experienced by public secondary school teachers in the application of the legal framework for their safety. *Journal of Juridical Studies, 49*(3). <https://doi.org/10.38140/jjs.v49i3.7419>
- Mosito, C., & Sitoyi, Z. M. (2024). School violence and its impact on teachers' well-being. *Perspectives in Education, 41*(1). <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v42i1.7215>
- Msila, V. (2017). Leaving a sinking ship: School principals in flight. *Africa Education Review, 14*(1), 112-126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2016.1224575>
- Msila, V. (2021). Revising teacher leadership in South Africa: A study of four schools. *Africa Education Review, 17*(5), 95-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2021.1954535>
- Msila, V. (2024). Peace studies, knowledge and learner achievement. *International Journal of Educational Development in Africa, 9*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2312-3540/15069>
- Msila, V. (2025). Leading schools for peace and social justice: Learning from the Peace Education Short Training (PEST). *Open Journal of Leadership, 14*(2). <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojl.2025.142013>
- Nkosi, T. P., & Adebayo, R. O. (2020). Teachers' perceptions of parental involvement among selected secondary schools in the Pinetown District, Durban. *Eurasian Journal of Business and Management, 9*(1), 61-70. <https://doi.org/10.15604/ejbm.2021.09.01.005>
- Noble, C., Ajjawi, R., Billett, S. & Goldszmidt, M. (2025). How to approach qualitative observational research in workplace learning. *The Clinical Teacher*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tct.70005>
- Okeke, C., & Simphiwe, W. (2024). Teachers lived experiences of school violence and their coping strategies. *Perspectives in Education, 42*(1), 148-161. <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v42i1.7210>
- Oranga, J., & Matere, A. (2024). Qualitative research: Essence, types and advantages. *Open Access Library Journal, 10*, e11001. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111001>
- Pickhardt, C. E. (1978). Fear in schools: How students make teachers afraid. *Educational Leadership, 36*(3), 219-222.
- Potgieter, C., & Zuma, N. (2019). Female leadership, parental non-involvement, teenage pregnancy and poverty: Impact on the underperformance of learners in further education and training. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 75*(4), a5826. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5826>
- Sathiparsad, R. (2003). Addressing barriers to learning and participation: Violence prevention in schools. *Perspectives in Education, 21*(3), 99-111. <https://journals.co.za/doi/abs/10.10520/EJC87208>
- Shallcross, L., & Land, S. (2025). Silent wounds: Unmasking emotional abuse and psychological risks in Australian organisations. In J. Vveinhardt & M. Deikus

- (Eds.), *Breaking the cycle: Insights into violent and aggressive behaviour – From personality traits to social movements*. IntechOpen. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1006233>
- Singh, P. (2008). The effects of tobephobia on learning outcomes in the educational milieu. *The International Journal of Learning: Annual Review*, 15(4), 111–120. <https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9494/CGP/v15i04/45699>
- Singh, P. (2011). Tobephobia experienced by teachers in secondary schools: An exploratory study focusing on curriculum reform in the Nelson Mandela Metropole. *Africa Education Review*, 8(2), 372–388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2011.602821>
- Singh, P. (2012). Tobephobia: Teachers' ineptitude to manage curriculum change. *International Journal of Business, Human and Social Sciences*, 6(12), 542–548.
- Sobuwa, Y. (2025, April 29). Stressed and overwhelmed: South Africa's teachers are ready to drop out. *Health-e News*. <https://health-e.org.za/2025/04/29/stressed-and-overwhelmed-south-africas-teachers-are-ready-to-drop-out/>
- South African Council for Educators (SACE). (2011). *Code of professional ethics*. <https://www.sace.org.za/pages/the-code-of-professional-ethics>
- South African Council for Educators (SACE). (2020). *Handbook for teachers' rights, responsibilities and safety*. <https://www.sace.org.za/documents>
- South African Council for Educators (SACE). (2021). *Teachers' safety and security in South African schools: A handbook*. https://www.sace.org.za/assets/documents/uploads/sace_16935-2021-05-06-SACE_Handbook_aw2-web%20-%20ISBN.pdf
- Struwig, F. W., & Stead, G. B. (2004). *Research: Planning, designing and reporting*. Pearson.
- Van Wyk, C., & Pelsier, A. (2014). Leadership role in effective implementation of school discipline policies. *International Business and Economics Research Journal*, 13(4), 763–774. <https://doi.org/10.19030/iberv13i4.833>
- Venketsamy, R., Baxen, E., & Hu, Z. (2023). Student-on-teacher violence in South Africa's Tshwane South District of Gauteng Province: Voices of the victims. *African Journal of Teacher Education*, 12(1), 49–69. <https://doi.org/10.21083/ajote.v12i1.7077>
- Williams, B. (n.d.). What is systematic observation and how to use it in research. *Insight7*. <https://insight7.io/what-is-systematic-observation-and-how-to-use-it-in-research/>
- Yusri, R. M., Aryani, F., & Hasmawati. (2025). Verbal abuse in schools: Analyzing the features of teachers' verbal abuse from the linguistic perspective. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 40(3–4), 828–849. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605241254135>