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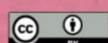
Experiências dos educadores na gestão da violência escolar relacionada com gangues em escolas públicas selecionadas na província de Mpumalanga, África do Sul

Experiencias de los docentes en la gestión de la violencia escolar relacionada con las pandillas en escuelas públicas seleccionadas de la provincia de Mpumalanga, Sudáfrica

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Experiencias de los Docentes en la Gestión de la Violencia Escolar relacionada con las Pandillas en Escuelas Públicas Seleccionadas de la Provincia de Mpumalanga, Sudáfrica

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RESUMO: This study explored the experiences of educators in managing gang-related learner violence in selected public secondary schools in Mpumalanga Province. Learner violence linked to gangsterism has become a pressing challenge in South African schools, threatening the creation of safe and conducive learning environments. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1989), the study adopted a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm and employed a phenomenological design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with four educators responsible for learner discipline across two purposively selected schools and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that gangsterism is prevalent in high-density settlements and often involves out-of-school youth who influence in-school learners. Gang-related conflicts sometimes extend across multiple schools, disrupting teaching and learning processes. The study further found that the current disciplinary frameworks are constrained by excessive bureaucracy and limited educator authority, reducing responsiveness to violent incidents. Participants emphasised the need for collaborative interventions involving parents, law enforcement, and community leaders to address the socio-environmental roots of gangsterism. The study concludes that sustainable reduction of gangster-related violence requires strengthened

policy frameworks, decentralised decision-making, and proactive engagement at family and community levels.

KEYWORDS: Gangsterism; Learner Violence; Educators' Experiences; School Safety; Bioecological Systems Theory.

ABSTRACT: Este estudo explorou as experiências dos educadores na gestão da violência associada a gangues entre os alunos em escolas públicas do ensino secundário selecionadas na província de Mpumalanga. A violência estudantil ligada ao gangsterismo tornou-se um desafio premente nas escolas sul-africanas, ameaçando a criação de ambientes de aprendizagem seguros e propícios. Orientado pela Teoria dos Sistemas Bioecológicos de Bronfenbrenner (1989), o estudo adotou uma abordagem qualitativa no âmbito do paradigma interpretativista, e utilizou um desenho fenomenológico. Os dados foram recolhidos por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com quatro educadores responsáveis pela disciplina dos alunos, em duas escolas selecionadas por conveniência, e analisados tematicamente. Os resultados revelaram que o gangsterismo é prevalente em zonas de elevada densidade populacional e frequentemente envolve jovens fora da escola que influenciam os alunos em contexto escolar. Os conflitos relacionados com gangues estendem-se, por vezes, a várias escolas, perturbando os processos de ensino e aprendizagem. O estudo constatou ainda que os atuais enquadramentos disciplinares são limitados por uma burocracia excessiva e por uma autoridade reduzida dos educadores, o que diminui a capacidade de resposta a incidentes de violência. Os participantes salientaram a necessidade de intervenções colaborativas envolvendo pais, forças de segurança e líderes comunitários para abordar as raízes socioambientais do gangsterismo. O estudo conclui que a redução sustentável da violência associada a gangues exige o reforço dos quadros políticos, a descentralização da tomada de decisões e um envolvimento proativo ao nível das famílias e das comunidades.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Gangsterismo; Violência entre os alunos; Experiências dos educadores; Segurança escolar; Teoria dos Sistemas Bioecológicos.

RESUMEN: Este estudio exploró las experiencias de los educadores en la gestión de la violencia estudiantil relacionada con las pandillas en escuelas secundarias públicas seleccionadas de la provincia de Mpumalanga. La violencia estudiantil vinculada al pandillerismo se ha convertido en un desafío urgente en las escuelas sudafricanas, amenazando la creación de entornos de aprendizaje seguros y propicios. Guiado por la Teoría de los Sistemas Bioecológicos de Bronfenbrenner, el estudio adoptó un enfoque cualitativo dentro del paradigma interpretativista y utilizó un diseño fenomenológico. Los datos se recopilaron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas con cuatro educadores responsables de la disciplina estudiantil en dos escuelas seleccionadas intencionalmente y se analizaron temáticamente. Los hallazgos revelaron que el pandillerismo es frecuente en zonas de alta densidad poblacional y a menudo involucra a jóvenes fuera de la escuela que influyen en los estudiantes dentro del entorno escolar. Los conflictos relacionados con las pandillas a veces se extienden a múltiples escuelas, interrumpiendo los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje. El estudio también encontró que los marcos disciplinarios actuales están limitados por una burocracia excesiva y una autoridad restringida de los educadores, lo que reduce la capacidad de respuesta ante incidentes de violencia. Los participantes destacaron la necesidad de intervenciones colaborativas que involucren a los padres, las fuerzas del orden y los líderes

comunitarios para abordar las raíces socioambientales del pandillerismo. El estudio concluye que la reducción sostenible de la violencia relacionada con las pandillas requiere marcos de políticas fortalecidos, una toma de decisiones descentralizada y un compromiso proactivo a nivel familiar y comunitario.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Pandillerismo; Violencia estudiantil; Experiencias de los educadores; Seguridad escolar; Teoría de los Sistemas Bioecológicos.

1. Introduction

Gangsterism and associated learner violence have become a growing concern in South African schools, undermining the creation of safe and supportive learning environments. Educators find themselves at the intersection of pedagogy and crisis management, often serving as frontline responders to incidents of violence that disrupt teaching and learning. This study explores the lived experiences of educators in managing learner violence related to gangsterism in selected public secondary schools in the Mpumalanga province. The study provides insight into the broader socio-educational dynamics influencing school safety in contemporary South Africa by examining how educators perceive, respond to, and are affected by these incidents.

School violence has become a global phenomenon affecting both developed and developing nations (Ndlovu et al., 2023). In the United States, recent studies have reported increasing incidents of school-based aggression linked to community violence and social marginalisation (Hoffmann et al., 2022). In Australia and the United Kingdom, issues of school bullying and youth delinquency have similarly been associated with broader socio-economic inequalities and weakened parental involvement (Chávez & Aguilar, 2021; Smith, 2020). Across Sub-Saharan Africa, countries such as Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa have witnessed an escalation in gang-related school violence, particularly in urban and peri-urban settlements (Khuzwayo et al., 2016).

In South Africa, school violence must be understood within the context of persistent social inequalities, unemployment, and community-level crime that spill over into school environments. Educators, often untrained in crisis intervention, are compelled to act as disciplinarians, counsellors, and mediators while maintaining their teaching responsibilities (Milligan et al., 2024). Mpumalanga Province, particularly its high-density settlements, presents a unique context for understanding school-based gangsterism. With high levels of youth unemployment, poverty, and community violence, schools have become microcosms of the broader social instability.

Despite national efforts to create safe schools through policies such as the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996) and the National School Safety Framework (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2016), gang-related learner violence continues to threaten the well-being of both learners and educators. The existing literature has predominantly focused on learner perspectives, leaving educators' lived experiences underexplored (Okeke & Simphiwe, 2024). In Mpumalanga, schools situated in high-risk communities face daily challenges in addressing violent behaviour linked to local gangs. Bureaucratic disciplinary procedures and limited authority to enforce immediate sanctions further constrain educators' capacity to maintain order. This persistent gap between policy and practice underscores the urgent need to understand educators' perspectives and coping strategies. Without a nuanced understanding of their experiences, interventions risk remaining top-down and disconnected from the lived realities of those managing violence on the ground (Zondo & Mncube, 2024). Consequently, this study seeks to examine educators' experiences of handling gang-related learner violence within the Mpumalanga province,

highlighting the systemic, institutional, and personal dimensions of this challenge. The gaps identified lead the authors to identify the following objectives:

- To ascertain educators' perceptions of the prevalence and nature of gang-related violence among learners.
- To explore the strategies educators employ to manage and respond to such incidents.
- To identify the institutional and policy-related challenges educators encounter in dealing with gangsterism within school settings.

The remainder of this paper is organised into five sections. Following the introduction, the literature review examines scholarly perspectives on learner violence, gangsterism in schools, educators' experiences of managing violence, and the institutional and community dynamics influencing school safety. The review further presents Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory as the framework underpinning the study. The methodology section outlines the interpretivist paradigm, qualitative approach, phenomenological design, sampling procedures, data collection methods, thematic analysis, and ethical considerations adopted in the study. Thereafter, the findings and discussion section presents and interprets the themes that emerged from the data in relation to existing literature and the theoretical framework. Finally, the paper concludes by summarising the key findings, highlighting the implications for policy and practice, and offering recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

The literature review for this study examines scholarly and empirical perspectives on gang-related learner violence and the experiences of educators in managing violence within school environments. The review focuses on the prevalence and causes of learner violence and gangsterism in schools, educators' coping and management strategies, and the institutional and policy challenges associated with maintaining school safety. It further explores the role of parents, communities, and broader socio-economic conditions in shaping school violence. In addition, the review is guided by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, which provides a framework for understanding how interactions between individual, family, school, community, and societal systems influence learner behaviour and educators' responses to gangsterism in schools.

2.1. Learner Violence and gansterism in schools

Learner violence encompasses any behaviour that threatens the physical or psychological well-being of learners or educators within a school environment (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). Gangsterism, a subset of this phenomenon, refers to the formation of informal youth groups engaging in acts of intimidation, assault, or coercion, often drawing influence from local criminal networks (Milligan et al., 2022). Scholars such as Ward et al. (2020) note that gang culture is sustained by identity formation, peer pressure, and social exclusion, particularly in communities marked by poverty and unemployment.

Globally, schools have been recognised as both victims and reproducing sites of social violence. According to Mpindo et al. (2025), violent behaviour among learners often mirrors structural inequalities, weak family cohesion, and exposure to neighbourhood crime. Within this framework, educators' roles extend beyond instruction to include crisis intervention, emotional regulation, and informal counselling (Clarke, 2015). In South Africa, the concept of school-based gangsterism has evolved from community-rooted criminal networks to in-school affiliations that mimic external gangs (Okeke & Simphiwe, 2024). These groups not only challenge school authority but also normalise aggressive masculinity and deviance as markers of social power (Zambezi, 2025).

Internationally, school violence has been linked to broader socio-political and economic shifts. In the United States, Carroll et al. (2023) observed that increased youth violence correlates with economic marginalisation and exposure to digital violence. Similarly, British studies highlight that violence in schools often stems from intergenerational deprivation, substance abuse, and community disintegration (Smith, 2020). Australian research echoes these patterns, with Chávez and Aguilar (2021) demonstrating that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds report higher rates of violent incidents and lower perceptions of school safety. Global research underlines the psychological burden placed on educators managing violent behaviour. Mpindo et al. (2025) argue that exposure to aggression reduces educator morale and contributes to burnout, leading to attrition in high-risk schools. Across contexts, preventive approaches emphasise restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and parental engagement as more sustainable than punitive disciplinary measures (Wang & Fredricks, 2023). Although these studies provide valuable insights, they predominantly originate from high-income contexts with robust psychosocial support systems. Their relevance to low-resource settings like South Africa remains limited, where socio-economic constraints and community-level violence exacerbate school-based challenges.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the escalation of learner violence and gangsterism has been linked to the erosion of traditional value systems, socio-economic inequality, and limited parental supervision (Khuzwayo et al., 2016). In Kenya, Opere et al. (2019) found that youth gangs often form in response to unemployment and peer pressure, spilling over into schools as learners replicate community hierarchies. Zimbabwean educators report similar experiences, describing school environments where learners emulate local criminal groups for protection or social recognition (Zambezi, 2025).

In Nigeria, Ogba and Igu (2019) revealed that educators often respond to school violence reactively rather than proactively, citing insufficient training and weak institutional support. This aligns with findings from Ghana, where Adu et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of community-based interventions, arguing that schools cannot function as islands of peace within oceans of violence. Across the region, the literature further suggests that educators often lack the authority and resources needed to respond effectively to gang-related violence. Consequently, they employ personal coping strategies, ranging from avoidance to mediation, to maintain classroom order (Baraquia, 2022). However, these strategies often lead to emotional exhaustion and professional frustration, reinforcing the need for systemic interventions.

South Africa's history of socio-economic inequality, spatial segregation, and community violence has deeply influenced school culture. A study by Hendricks (2018) examining the impact of gang violence on school violence in South Africa found that rising levels of violence have undermined efforts to create safe learning environments. Hendricks contends that some schools have effectively become spaces characterised by fear and insecurity. Similarly, Khumalo (2019) maintains that schools reflect broader society, with social dynamics within communities manifesting directly in school settings. The Department of Basic Education (2023) acknowledges that the persistence of violence reflects broader social fragmentation, where poverty, unemployment, and exposure to criminal activity converge within the schooling environment. Educators' accounts from various provinces illustrate the daily reality of fear and insecurity. In Cape Town's townships, educators describe schools as "zones of contestation" between rival gangs, while in KwaZulu-Natal, incidents of educator assault have increased (Milligan et al., 2024). This ongoing interaction between community and school spaces supports the argument of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) that individual behaviour is shaped by interconnected, continually interacting systems. Despite the introduction of National School Safety Framework (DBE, 2016), enforcement remains inconsistent. Studies by Mpindo et al. (2025) show that bureaucratic rigidity, lack of funding, and minimal psychological support undermine implementation.

2.1. Educators' experiences with school violence and gangsterism

Educators serve as both witnesses and victims in the struggle against school violence. International and South African literature converges on the recognition that educators often experience secondary trauma, anxiety, and burnout (Mosito & Sitoyi, 2024). Venter and Jeffries (2020) report that gang presence is increasingly evident in schools, where educators are often targeted by gangs, severely disrupting their ability to carry out their professional responsibilities. Communities marked by persistent social problems contribute to the growing number of children drawn into criminal and gang-related activities. These conditions not only heighten young people's exposure to crime and violence but also place educators at greater risk when working in environments characterised by high levels of criminal activity (Khuzwayo et al., 2016).

Research by Mcobothi (2025) in KwaZulu-Natal found that educators often rely on informal support networks rather than institutional mechanisms when managing violent learners. These include peer discussions, counselling circles, and spiritual coping strategies. Similarly, Costantine et al. (2025) reveal that educators develop contextual resilience, a capacity to adapt through collective problem-solving in resource-constrained environments. However, educators' agency is frequently constrained by systemic barriers. The South African Schools Act (1996) limits corporal punishment and enforces due process in disciplinary actions, which, while protecting learners' rights, can delay urgent interventions. This bureaucratic delay often demotivates educators and emboldens perpetrators, echoing findings by Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya (2014), who highlight the disconnect between policy ideals and on-the-ground realities.

The policy governing school discipline in South Africa aims to balance learner rights with safety imperatives. The National School Safety Framework (DBE, 2016) provides guidelines for preventing and responding to violence, emphasising restorative justice, parental involvement, and intersectoral collaboration. However, empirical evaluations reveal that most schools lack human and material resources to operationalise these frameworks effectively (Mpindo et al., 2025). A study by Naidoo (2022) indicates that safety committees, where established, often lack training and authority, leaving educators vulnerable. In rural and peri-urban areas, police presence is irregular, and community policing forums are underdeveloped (Malatji et al., 2023). Consequently, educators adopt improvisational strategies, such as counselling sessions, informal mentoring, or reliance on faith-based organisations, to mitigate violent behaviour.

While the reviewed studies illuminate important trends, several gaps remain evident. First, there is limited qualitative research capturing educators' lived experiences in managing gang-related learner violence, particularly in the Mpumalanga Province. Second, much of the existing literature treats school violence as a learner-centred issue, overlooking how educators navigate, interpret, and internalise these experiences. Third, policy analyses often stop short of exploring how bureaucratic constraints affect educators' agency in crisis management.

2.3. Theoretical framework

In this research, the experiences of educators in handling learner violence related to gangsterism are examined through Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory. This theory offers a holistic lens for understanding how multiple layers of environmental influence interact to shape human behaviour, development, and social interaction. The framework is particularly relevant to school-based violence, where individual, familial, institutional, and community factors converge to influence learner conduct and educators' responses. Originally developed in the 1970s and refined in 2006, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory posits that human development is influenced by a series of nested systems that interact dynamically over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) further integrated the Process Person Context Time (PPCT) model to explain how individual attributes interact with environmental contexts through ongoing processes of

engagement. Within this model, violence and gangsterism are not viewed as isolated incidents but as manifestations of the interplay between individual dispositions and contextual pressures. The Bioecological Systems Theory is particularly effective in analysing school violence because it captures both proximal and distal influences. At the microsystem level, interactions between learners, educators, and peers shape behavioural outcomes (Weiten, 2018). Exposure to violent peers or lack of positive role models often contributes to the normalisation of aggression (Mpindo et al, 2025). At the microsystem level, educators' daily interactions with learners directly influence classroom safety. Their disciplinary strategies, empathy, and resilience shape how learners perceive authority and boundaries (Weiten, 2018). At the mesosystem level, relationships between schools and families profoundly affect learner's conduct. Weak parental supervision, inconsistent discipline at home, and community acceptance of violence as a conflict-resolution tool create a feedback loop that reinforces delinquent behaviour (Baraquia, 2022). Conversely, collaborative school-community partnerships have been shown to reduce school-based violence by promoting shared accountability (Ndlovu et al., 2023).

The exosystem includes policy structures and institutional practices that indirectly shape school safety. Bureaucratic disciplinary procedures, limited educator autonomy, and under-resourced safety committees hinder effective responses to violence (Mahome et al., 2023). The exosystem positions educators within institutional hierarchies, including district offices, school governing bodies, and policy frameworks, which may either enable or limit their professional agency (Weiten, 2018). At the macrosystem level, national policies, cultural norms, and socio-economic realities influence the prevalence of school violence. South Africa's broader challenges, which revolve around high unemployment, inequality, and exposure to community crime, create environments where gang culture becomes an alternative social identity for many youth (Okeke & Simphiwe, 2024; Burton & Leoschut, 2013). Finally, the chronosystem highlights that gangsterism is not static but evolves alongside social transformations, such as digital exposure to violence, youth unemployment, and shifting community structures (Wang & Fredricks, 2023).

3. Methodology

This study was situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the subjective meaning individuals attach to their social realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' perspectives. This paradigm was appropriate for the study because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of how educators experience, interpret, and respond to learner violence within their school environments.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, which focuses on understanding phenomena from the viewpoint of participants rather than quantifying variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Through qualitative inquiry, the researcher sought to capture the nuances of educators' encounters with gangsterism, including their emotions, coping mechanisms, and institutional constraints. The qualitative approach also provided flexibility for the participants to express their lived realities in their own words, yielding rich and context-specific data.

A phenomenological design was employed to explore the phenomenon across different school contexts within the Mpumalanga province. Tanwir et al. (2021) explain that phenomenological studies rely on in-depth interviews to obtain rich and detailed accounts, which naturally limit the number of participants, usually to between six and ten. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) note that a sample of three to ten individuals is adequate for research of this kind.

The target population comprised educators responsible for learner discipline in public secondary schools located in high-risk areas of Mpumalanga province. These included educators serving as discipline coordinators, heads of department, or members of school management teams. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants who possessed direct experience

with managing incidents of learner violence related to gangsterism. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposive sampling is ideal for qualitative studies that require information-rich cases.

Two secondary schools were selected based on the prevalence of gang-related incidents, as confirmed by school management and district safety reports. From these schools, four educators (two per school) participated in the study. The selection ensured gender balance and representation of different roles within school management structures. This small, focused sample enabled an in-depth exploration of individual experiences while maintaining manageability for detailed qualitative analysis.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, supported by document analysis of school safety policies and disciplinary records. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their flexibility, allowing the researcher to probe for deeper understanding while ensuring consistency across participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2021). Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face in a quiet, private setting within the schools. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit educators' reflections on the nature of learner violence, coping mechanisms, and institutional challenges. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. Supplementary data such as disciplinary records, school codes of conduct, and minutes of safety committee meetings were reviewed to triangulate interview findings and strengthen the study's trustworthiness.

This study employed thematic analysis due to its capacity for both flexibility and in-depth exploration of qualitative data, enabling the researcher to move beyond surface-level descriptions and uncover deeper, latent patterns of meaning (Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure the robustness and trustworthiness of the findings, the research adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through sustained engagement with the data and thorough immersion in participants' narratives. Transferability was facilitated by providing detailed, context-rich descriptions, allowing readers to judge the relevance of the findings to other similar contexts. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through careful documentation of each stage of the research process and the application of reflexive strategies to reduce the influence of researcher bias.

Permission to carry out the study was obtained from the Mpumalanga Department of Education as well as the principals of the schools involved. Participants were provided with detailed information sheets outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the ability to withdraw at any point without consequence. Written informed consent was secured before each interview. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants and institutions. Sensitive topics, such as experiences of violence, were approached with care, and participants were reminded of the availability of counselling services should any distress arise. All audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researchers. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice, as set out in the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2021) guidelines for educational research.

4. Findings and discussion

These findings are discussed through themes linked to the study's objectives, data gathered from participants, existing literature, and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, which provides a framework for understanding the interplay between individual, institutional, and community factors shaping educators' experiences. Discussion of the findings and links to literature form part of this section.

Theme 1: Prevalence and patterns of gangsterism in schools

Educators unanimously recognised gangsterism as a deeply entrenched issue within their schools, describing it as a “silent epidemic” that subtly but powerfully permeates the learning environment. This phenomenon not only disrupts classroom dynamics but also shapes learners’ attitudes, behaviours, and academic engagement. One educator illustrated this impact by noting that “we are constantly dealing with fights that originate from the community”, emphasising how external violence spills into the school setting. Learners often arrive already emotionally charged, “angry or fearful because of what happened in their areas”, highlighting the influence of Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem and mesosystem levels, where family and community interactions directly affect school behaviour.

The connection between learners and gangs was frequently traced to neighbourhood networks, where gang affiliation offered more than just camaraderie; it provided a sense of identity and perceived safety. Educators observed that many learners joined gangs not out of delinquency, but as a survival strategy. One participant explained, “Some learners tell us that being part of a group gives them safety. They say, ‘if you are alone, others will beat you.’” This sentiment reflects the findings of Ward et al. (2020), who argue that in contexts marked by poverty and instability, gang culture often emerges as an alternative social structure that fills the void left by absent or ineffective formal institutions.

Importantly, gangsterism was not confined to male learners. Educators reported a noticeable rise in aggressive behaviour among female learners, some of whom acted as gang informants or supporters. This shift challenges traditional gender assumptions and underscores the evolving nature of gang dynamics within school environments.

The pervasive presence of gangsterism significantly undermined the educational process. Educators described a climate of fear and intimidation that compromised both their authority and their emotional well-being. Verbal threats, vandalism, and symbolic acts of defiance, such as gang signs etched into desks were common. One educator candidly shared, “learners sometimes write gang signs on desks or threaten us after school. You always have to watch your back.” Such experiences align with Carroll et al. (2023), who found that prolonged exposure to learner aggression contributes to chronic anxiety among educators and diminishes their classroom effectiveness.

These insights reveal a troubling pattern: gangsterism in schools is not an isolated issue but a reflection of broader societal violence. It infiltrates educational spaces, reshapes learner identities, and places immense psychological strain on educators, demanding urgent and multifaceted interventions.

Theme 2: Educators’ coping and management strategies

Faced with persistent school-based violence, educators developed a range of coping strategies that reflected both personal resilience and collective adaptation. These responses were largely informal, shaped more by lived experience than by structured policy frameworks. Despite the absence of formal guidance, educators demonstrated a remarkable capacity to navigate adversity through relational and creative means.

One commonly employed approach was empathetic engagement with learners. Educators made deliberate efforts to understand the underlying causes of learners’ behaviour, often initiating one-on-one conversations to build trust and offer support. A participant explained, “We try to talk to learners individually, to understand what drives them. Sometimes we involve the Life Orientation teacher to provide guidance”. This strategy exemplifies what Costantine et al. (2025) describes as

contextual resilience – the ability of educators to adapt through relational practices that foster emotional connection and understanding.

Teamwork and peer support also emerged as vital mechanisms for managing stress and maintaining order. Educators leaned on one another during volatile moments, forming a network of mutual assistance. One participant noted, “When there is an incident, we stand together. We call each other quickly before things get out of control.” This collective response reflects Bronfenbrenner’s mesosystem level, where interactions among school personnel contribute to a shared sense of safety and stability.

In addition to internal collaboration, educators occasionally sought help from external stakeholders such as police officers and local religious leaders. However, these interventions were often reactive and inconsistent. One participant lamented, “Police come once in a while, mostly after something serious has happened. We need regular support, not crisis response.” This sporadic engagement echoes broader national concerns about the lack of sustained intersectoral collaboration in violence prevention, as highlighted by Naidoo (2022). Despite these limitations, educators demonstrated ingenuity by channelling learners’ energy into constructive outlets. Sports and cultural clubs were used as tools to divert attention from gang-related activities and foster a sense of belonging. “We encourage learners to join soccer or debate clubs; it keeps them occupied and away from trouble,” one educator shared. This aligns with findings by Clarke (2015), who emphasize that extracurricular involvement strengthens school attachment and reduces delinquent behaviour.

Yet, the emotional toll on educators remained profound. Many described a constant state of hypervigilance, with little opportunity to relax, even during breaks. One participant captured this sentiment succinctly: “It is draining. You never relax, even during break time.” This chronic stress reinforces the theory of Mpindo et al. (2025), who assert that repeated exposure to learner aggression contributes to educator burnout and attrition, particularly in under-resourced environments. Together, these insights reveal a complex landscape of coping, marked by resilience, collaboration, and creativity, as well as fatigue and systemic gaps. The educators’ experiences underscore the urgent need for comprehensive support structures that move beyond crisis response toward sustained, preventive engagement.

The ways in which educators navigate school-based violence can be understood through Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory, which highlights the complex, interlocking layers that shape human development. Their reliance on peer support and joint problem-solving exemplifies the mesosystem, in which relationships among school staff foster a coordinated response to threats. Engagement with external entities, such as the police and community leaders, reflects the exosystem, showing how wider social structures can indirectly affect educators’ capacity to manage difficult situations, while initiatives like extracurricular activities and one-on-one learner support illustrate the microsystem, where direct interactions have a tangible impact on both educator and learner well-being.

Theme 3: Institutional and policy challenges

Participants voiced strong criticism of the rigid disciplinary frameworks that govern school responses to violent behavior. Many educators felt disempowered by bureaucratic procedures that delayed meaningful intervention. One educator illustrated this frustration, stating, “Even when we recommend suspension, we must wait for district approval. By the time they respond, the learner is back in class.” This delay reflects a breakdown at Bronfenbrenner’s exosystem level, where institutional structures, such as district offices and departmental policies, unintentionally erode educators’ authority and responsiveness. These concerns echo findings by Mncube and Madikizela-

Madiya (2014), who argue that disciplinary policies are often overly procedural and disconnected from the realities educators face on the ground.

Security infrastructure within schools was another major concern. Educators reported a lack of basic safety measures, including insufficient fencing and the absence of dedicated security personnel. This left the school premises vulnerable to intrusion during teaching hours. One participant recounted, “Sometimes outsiders come into the school yard during breaks. We call the police, but they arrive long after the situation has escalated.” Such incidents heightened feelings of vulnerability among both staff and learners, reinforcing the perception that schools are ill-equipped to prevent or respond to violence. Burton and Leoschut (2013) similarly found that underfunded safety programs and weak interdepartmental coordination perpetuate the cycle of school-based violence.

Beyond physical safety, educators highlighted the absence of psychosocial support following violent incidents. Educators were often expected to resume their duties immediately, without any emotional processing or counselling. As one participant put it, “After an incident, we are expected to continue teaching as if nothing happened. There is no counselling for us or the affected learners.” This lack of support aligns with Mosito and Sitoyi’s (2024) research, which underlines the neglect of emotional care for educators in violent school environments.

Together, these institutional shortcomings delayed disciplinary action, inadequate security, and insufficient emotional support undermine educators’ ability to create and maintain safe learning spaces. The findings point to an urgent need for decentralised, context-sensitive disciplinary systems that empower schools to respond swiftly and holistically to violence.

These institutional and policy challenges can be understood through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory, which highlights the influence of wider systemic factors on individual experiences and behaviour. Bureaucratic delays and inflexible disciplinary frameworks exemplify the exosystem, where policies and decisions at the district or departmental level indirectly limit educators’ ability to respond promptly and effectively to incidents of violence. Likewise, insufficient security provisions and the absence of psychosocial support demonstrate how weaknesses in institutional structures, spanning the exosystem and mesosystem, shape the immediate school environment, directly impacting the well-being of both educators and learners within the microsystem.

Theme 4: Community and parental involvement in addressing gangsterism

Educators unanimously stressed that managing gangsterism effectively requires active engagement from both parents and the wider community. Yet, they described parental involvement as largely superficial and reactive. One educator observed, “Parents only come when their child is in trouble. Very few attend meetings or follow up on behaviour issues.”

The consequences of this detachment are far-reaching. Educators noted that weak parent-school collaboration often results in mixed messages about discipline and responsibility, allowing cycles of violence to persist. Some parents, they explained, inadvertently reinforce gangsterism by denying their children’s involvement or defending their actions. As one participant remarked, “Some parents say, ‘my child is not in a gang,’ even when there is evidence. They think we are picking on their children.” This denial is symptomatic of broader socio-economic and cultural dynamics at the macrosystem level, where aggression may be normalized as a form of self-protection in volatile communities (Weiten, 2018).

To counter these challenges, educators advocated community-based interventions that foster shared responsibility. They proposed initiatives such as awareness campaigns, mentorship programs, and partnerships with faith-based organizations. One teacher emphasised, “If the

community remains violent, the school cannot be peaceful. We must involve churches, community leaders, and the police.” These suggestions align with Baraquia’s (2022) assertion that sustainable school safety hinges on multi-sectoral collaboration.

Thus, the educators’ perspectives reveal a strong desire for holistic engagement, one that bridges the gap between schools, families, and communities. Such collaboration is seen not merely as supportive, but as essential to rebuilding a culture of respect, discipline, and safety within educational spaces.

The educators’ insights can be understood through Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory, which highlights how interactions across different environmental layers influence individual development. The minimal and reactive participation of parents represents the microsystem, where limited home-school, engagement directly impacts learners’ behaviour and the enforcement of school discipline. Wider socio-economic and cultural influences, which can normalise aggression and shape parental attitudes, operate at the macrosystem level, while the educators’ advocacy for community-based interventions underscores the need for coordinated action across the exosystem and mesosystem to foster safer and more supportive school environments.

5. Concluding remarks

The study concludes that gangsterism-related learner violence in Mpumalanga schools is an ecological phenomenon shaped by interactions across micro, meso, exo, and macro systems. At the microsystem level, direct relationships between educators and learners influence discipline and emotional climate. At the mesosystem level, weak family–school linkages allow negative community behaviours to infiltrate the school. The exosystem represented by departmental structures and resource allocation, often constrains educators through procedural rigidity. The macrosystem reflects broader socio-economic realities, including unemployment and inequality, which normalise deviant youth cultures. These multilevel influences support Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2006) assertion that human behaviour is the product of interdependent systems.

Educators in high-risk schools are both implementers of policy and victims of systemic neglect. They navigate dual roles as educators and de facto counsellors without adequate training or institutional backing. Their resilience and moral commitment sustain the schooling process amid violence. However, their coping mechanisms are insufficient in the absence of systemic reform and psychosocial support.

Although South Africa has vigorous policy frameworks, including the South African Schools Act (1996) and the National School Safety Framework (DBE, 2016), implementation gaps persist. The bureaucratic layers designed to protect learners’ rights inadvertently constrain timely interventions. This disjunction between policy ideals and ground-level realities echoes Naidoo’s (2022) argument that effective school safety requires not only legal instruments but also functional support systems. The challenges associated with excessive bureaucracy in Mpumalanga schools may be addressed by adopting more flexible administrative approaches that take account of the realities within individual school contexts, while also strengthening decision-making at school level and improving cooperation between schools and district authorities. Principals and School-Based Support Teams could be afforded greater discretion to introduce temporary disciplinary interventions in cases of violence or serious learner misconduct, provided that such actions remain aligned with the constitutional rights of learners. Allowing schools to act more independently in urgent situations may reduce the delays often linked to district-level approval processes and support quicker responses to disciplinary matters. This aligns with Bayeni and Bhengu (2018) who indicate that policy makers often assume that they are in the best position to identify and define problems, a process referred to as prognostic framing. This assumption is based on the idea that policy

development and implementation follow a clear, organised, and predictable sequence from planning to practice. However, it can be argued that viewing policy implementation as a simple and direct process is unrealistic, as the realities within schools and other institutions often make implementation far more complex and uneven.

Furthermore, the Mpumalanga Department of Basic Education could improve the efficiency of disciplinary management by establishing clearer timeframes for district feedback, reducing unnecessary administrative procedures, and introducing more effective digital systems for reporting and monitoring disciplinary cases. Such measures may help schools manage incidents more efficiently while reducing the administrative burden on school management and educators.

Sustainable solutions to school-based gangsterism depend on whole-community participation. Schools alone cannot neutralise entrenched social problems that originate in households and neighbourhoods. Collaborative interventions involving parents, police, faith-based organisations, and local leaders are essential for transforming social norms and building shared accountability. One useful approach is the introduction of school-based restorative justice circles facilitated by trained peer leaders and teachers, rather than depending solely on formal disciplinary referrals (Van Wyk, 2023). Instead of waiting for approval from district offices, schools could establish structured dialogue sessions in which learners involved in conflict are supported in taking responsibility for their actions, making amends, and being reintegrated into the school community. The key innovation is not the concept of restorative justice itself, but rather its decentralised application through peer-supported processes that are embedded within everyday school practice.

A further viable, longer-term approach involves establishing school safety partnerships closely connected to the surrounding community. In this model, schools work in a structured way with local community forums, faith-based groups, and trained volunteers to assist with supervision, provide early alerts of potential risks, and support the reintegration of learners after disciplinary incidents. In contexts with higher safety risks, such collaboration can strengthen the school's overall capacity to manage discipline and safety without placing significant additional financial pressure on the system. This approach resonates with Baraquia's (2022) recommendation for integrated, community-driven safety models in schools.

Future research could extend to other provinces to examine regional variations and identify patterns of effective practice, while triangulating educators' perspectives with those of learners and parents to develop a comprehensive understanding of the ecosystem that perpetuates violence.

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