Challenges faced by learners who are survivors of school violence: implications for support structures

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this study is to explore challenges faced by learners who are survivors of school violence and the implications for support structures. Many schools are branded with violence and the implications for support structures. Many schools are branded with violence, gangsterism, substance abuse and general crime. The scourge of violence in schools is cause for concern, citing daily reports that appear in the written and electronic media about high levels of violence, physical and sexual abuse, and gang-related activities in schools. Qualitative research design and phenomenology as a mode of enquiry were employed in this study. The experiences and perceptions of various school principals and teachers were elicited through focus-group interviews, document review, and observations. The population comprised principals and teachers in five schools. Purposive sampling was used as a method of sample selection. The findings revealed that support is key, and lack of support can negatively impact on learners’ access to schools and academic achievement in many ways. It was also found that most learners who leave school prematurely, through the fear of violence, do not report when they leave. The study recommended that support must be provided promptly, and parents, teachers as well as caregivers need to be capacitated to offer effective and efficient support.

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INTRODUCTION

Amplified media responsiveness to school violence and learners’ maladaptive behaviour has led to major concerns of many adults about the status of the education system in South Africa. Raising and educating learners to become just and democratic citizens is a major mission for any country (Pretorius, 2019). Education is undeniably the right to learn is presently being destabilised by the constant violence in numerous South African schools. Pretorius (2019) proclaimed that many South African schools are branded by violence, gangsterism, substance abuse and general crime. The media often report on learners being killed by co-learners, learners dying from drugs slipped into cool drinks, and learners being raped, sexually harassed, and physically and emotionally bullied. Clearly, society is answerable to the victims for the chaos and violence in our schools.

Violence in some form has always existed in schools and communities all over the world. The United States Department of Justice and the National Association of Secondary Schools Principals both reported that an astonishing three million crimes have occurred on or near school property each year since the 1980’s (Baum-Snow & Hartley, 2017). This is further strengthened by Hashima and Finkelhor (1999), who stated that learners in the United States are more likely to be exposed to violence and crime than adults. The concept was emphasised by Baum-Snow and Hartley (2017), that who reported that juveniles and young adults ages 12 to 19 years of age were twice as likely to be victims of violent crimes than the rest of the population. This translates to millions of learners and adolescents in the United States being unprotected to violence in their homes, schools, and communities as both victims and witnesses. This is a clear concern for parents and other stakeholders in education.
In South Africa, as discussed on diverse media platforms, this aberrant behaviour at times results in death, and has lately intensified and seems out of control, as highlighted by the Minister of Education, Mrs. Angie Motshekga in several news reports (African News Agency, 2016). The concern was reinforced by the Member of the Executive Council of Education in Gauteng, Mr Panyaza Lesufi, in the City Press (2017). Other newspapers such as the Daily News, the Mail and Guardian have reported that class warfare is rife at SA schools. Mncube and Harber (2012), reported that the scourge of violence in South African schools is cause for concern, citing daily reports that appear in the written and electronic media about high levels of violence, physical and sexual abuse, and gang-related activities in schools. They further stated that carrying knives, guns and other weapons has become part of daily school life. These reports seem to accentuate the extent of violence and crime as experienced by communities, which generally impacts negatively on education, and what happens in the school. This attention has resulted in an increase in public awareness and concern (Burton & Leoschut, 2012). This concern is exacerbated by reports that many of these crimes go unpunished for extensive periods of time (Mail and Guardian, 2008). These acts of violence in South African schools often start with learners who assault each other and then spread to attacks on teachers. This has led to a frenzy of finger-pointing, blame-shifting and calls for untenable, unconstitutional, and ultimately very harmful responses. None of this serves any useful purpose and will certainly not even start to allow resolution of this very real and major challenge that the education system faces.

With so many reports and broadcasts, clearly, something needs to be done to reduce the number of violent attacks at schools. What is of utmost concern, and what stands out in the dialogue, is that violence is happening in a place that is intended to be a safe environment and a place of learning; it has, therefore, become one of the most bothersome social problems in the South Africa today (Mncube & Harber, 2012). Not only does it affect those that are involved in the violent act, but it also affects and hinders social evolution and stability. In that light, it is vital to understand the characteristics of violence in schools, the type of learners who are affected by these acts and the support these learners receive, so that policy makers, School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs), District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs), school counsellors, psychologists, and the public can draft and implement effective strategies for support.

The primary research question that guides this study is as follows:

What support structures are available for learners who are survivors of violence in schools?

This paper is organized as follows: theoretical approach and literature review, research methodology, research design, the study sites, population, sample, data collection strategies, trustworthiness and credibility, ethical considerations and confidentiality, result and discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

**Literature Review**

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

The theoretical framework of this study is informed by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model. This theory looks at the development of the child within the context of the system of relationships that make up his or her environment. Multifaceted layers of the environment define each having an impact on the result of a child’s development (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). The interface between factors in the child’s maturing biology, his immediate family and community environment stimulates and drives the child’s development. Conflict or changes in any one level will ripple all the way through other levels. To study a child’s behavioural influences then, it is not only imperative to look at the child, but at her or his immediate situation, and at the interface with the larger environment as well (Paquette & Ryan, 2001).

The ecological systems theory identifies five environmental systems, namely, the micro-system, meso-system, exo-system, macro-system, and chrono-system. The micro-system encompasses the relationships and interactions a child has with her immediate surroundings. Structures in the micro-system comprise family, school, and neighbourhood. The other ecosystems describe the larger social system in which the child does not function directly. Parent workplace schedules or community-based family resources are examples. The meso-system facilitates the relationship between the structures of the child’s micro-system, for example, the link between the child’s teacher and his parents, between his church and his neighbourhood. The macro-system may be considered the outermost level in the child’s environment and is comprised of cultural values, customs, and laws. The chrono-system is about the dimension of time as it relates to a child’s environment. Elements within this system can be either external, such as the timing of a parent’s death, or internal, such as the physiological changes that occur with the ageing of a human (Berk, 2000).

The keystone of Bronfenbrenner’s model is a belief that individual human development, socialisation explicitly, comes about through interactions within and between multiple nested ecological systems impacting upon the developing young person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated that to assert that human development is a product of interaction between the emergent organism and its environment is to state what is almost commonplace in behavioural science. To clarify, this belief asserts that behaviour changes as a function of the interplay between person and environment, paying special consideration to the interaction between the two (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The ecological system theory proposes that the progression of human development occurs when mutual exchanges develop between the individual and the environment, which are mutually influential (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner (1979) claimed that learner, family, school and macrosystem factors, such as the cultural and economic fabric of...
society, including policies, legislation and judicial systems can give rise to a learner who has violent tendencies. It is, therefore, not satisfactory to scrutinise individual factors, such as family, peers, or school separately, as these overlaps.

The importance of this theory in exploring violent behaviour is the interaction between a violent learner and the environment. Here the behaviour develops through interactions with family, peers, school, and community. As the learner enters school, their behaviour is shaped by many dynamic issues, experienced daily. How they react to certain stimuli will depend on how they have learnt resolution skills at all the different levels. The support they have or do not have will play a pivotal role in determining how they react. It is on this note that learners need to be supported effectively and efficiently by all that are involved in their lives. Donald, Lazarus, and Lolwana (2004), confirmed that the interdependence and relationships between different organisms and their physical environment is imperative, as relationships are a whole. Every part is as important as another in sustaining the cycles of birth and death, regeneration and decay which together ensure the survival of the whole. The learner is constantly involved in interactive relationships with vast different levels of organisation within a particular social context. Each of the levels thus interacts within the others within the total socio-ecological system.

In considering the characteristics of violence in schools, it is important to look at the challenges and possible solutions considering all levels of the Bronfenbrenner (1997) model. The levels as explained in the Bronfenbrenner theory emphasise the need to understand and respond to acts of violence in a systematic way. These are following are some of the aspects to be considered which contribute to the problem: (i) the school environment, this includes considering how the teacher manages the class, and how teaching and learning happens in the classroom; (ii) the impact of the curriculum; (iii) the accessibility and availability of learning materials; and (iv) the interpersonal environment. For example, factors such as interpersonal conflict in an institution, mismanagement, a lack of adequate materials or equipment, or inaccessible buildings and classrooms may indirectly be acting as barriers.

Other considerations are how the home environment influences the principals and teachers. This includes consideration of family dynamics, home language, socio-economic class, cultural background, and economic conditions of the family, to answer the question of whether there are broader community and social factors that are promoting violence. This includes the number of social challenges facing schools now, including poverty and various forms of substance abuse. Bronfenbrenner’s (1997), framework will be used as a basis for developing a profile of violence, to ensure that all aspects of the systems are considered in understanding the context and characteristics of violence in schools.

Research and Methodology

In this study, a qualitative approach will be used to get a holistic understanding what characterise violence within the context of five high schools. The use of the qualitative approach ensured that I understood violence in the five high schools that I studied from an insider perspective (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as the authentic life situation [where] the researcher does not try to change phenomenon of interest (Burns & Grove, 2005). Qualitative research, broadly defined, means any type of research that produces findings that are not based on any statistical procedures or quantification (Burns & Grove, 2005), and instead, it is the kind of research that produces findings that are derived from the real-world environment where the wonder of interest is naturally shown (Patton, 2001).

Qualitative research data usually is in the form of words, images and descriptions, language, verbal non-verbal and has symbolic meaning. The results data for this study, therefore, were obtained by means of documentation, face-to-face, focus-group interviews, and observation. I used focus-group semi-structured interviews to ask questions and to gather necessary and relevant information (Burns & Grove, 2010).

Research Design

A research design is viewed as a framework representing how a researcher will conduct the study to best address the research problem or research question (Rubin & Babbie, 2012). It emphasises the logic of the research and includes the nature of evidence that is required to address the research question effectively and to guarantee the trustworthiness of the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). The research design therefore explains the phenomenon to be considered as well as the envisaged approach to be followed (Babbie, 2010). This study was aimed at gathering data on the support structure available in five schools in the Johannesburg North District. The qualitative phenomenological design was chosen to elicit the information.

According to Engelbrecht (2012), the research design is based on four central questions, specifically: what data is needed, where the data is located, how the data will be analysed, and how the data will be interpreted. To ensure the efficacy and trustworthiness of the research, the research design addressed the following: the purpose of the study, the theoretical assumptions, and the context in which the research took place as well as the research techniques to be followed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

The Study Sites

Data was drawn from five high schools, one each in Diepkloof, Pimville, Randburg, Westbury and Diepsloot. The five high schools fell under one of the 15 education districts in Gauteng, the Johannesburg North District. I chose purposive sampling to select research sites that were accessible (Petty, Thomson & Stew 2012). McMillian and Schumacher (2006) maintained that purposive sampling...
allows a researcher to select specific elements from the population and site that will be illustrative and informative about the topic of concern.

**Population**

According to Banerjee and Chaudhury (2010), the population of a study is the entirety of all the possible participants or units of observation of the study. For this study, the population comprised principals and teachers in five schools in Johannesburg North District. O’Leary (2009: 87) stated that a population is “the total membership of a defined class of people, objects, or events. Similarly, Magwa and Mugari (2017), confirmed that population is the complete group of persons or set of objects and events a researcher wants to investigate. One significant aspect of selecting a population is whether conclusions reached from a research sample can be applied to the population.

**Sample**

A sample is a small percentage of the entire set of objects, actions or individuals that collectively encompass the subject of study. It can be observed as a subdivision of units drawn from population with which a researcher is concerned (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Denscombe (2007), explained that purposive sampling is appropriate in situations where a researcher already knows roughly about specific individuals who are likely to produce most valued data. In short, purposive sampling is best used with small numbers of individuals or groups which may be necessary for understanding human perceptions, problems, needs and contexts. In this study, purposive sampling was used. In qualitative research, the researcher deliberately picks cases that can shed light on the phenomenon under study, rather than relying on statistical probability. Participants are selected for their ability to deliver rich information. The sample for this study was based on the aim of the research (Groenewald, 2004), and teachers who are part of the support group, and the principal of the selected schools will be identified. (Groenewald, 2004). One principal and six teachers were involved. The total number of participants was 35.

**Data Collection Strategies**

Lewis (2015) defined data collection as a process of interrelated activities that are intended to gather evidence which will permit a researcher to respond to emerging research questions. Antonius (2003) stated that the expression ‘data collection’ denotes an organised way of accumulating, organising, and recording data for the reader to be able to evaluate the evidence appropriately. Thus, data is not to be collected indiscriminately, but as answers in reply to research questions the study poses Rubin and Babbie (2012), maintained that a researcher must remember that the data they get is not static but is exposed to rebuilding and other ways of seeing and finding answers to questions the study wishes to answer. It is also vital during data collection to establish rapport with participants and gain informed consent from them to produce valid data and achieve a successful result. This study used individual interviews, focus-group interviews, document analysis and observation for the collection of data.

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Trustworthiness in qualitative studies is based on determining whether the findings are accurate (Maree, 2010). Polit and Beck (2012) argued that trustworthiness of qualitative research cannot be guaranteed. The use of rich and thick description will, however, transport the reader to the setting and provide a discussion of the participants’ shared experiences (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013), De Vos (2005), and Polit and Beck (2012) explained that for the research findings to be credible, a detailed description of the setting, the identification of the population, the selection of the sample, and all the steps taken should be provided. In this study, we provided a detailed description of the setting and all components of the population. The steps taken were discussed to produce a trustworthy and rigorous study (Reynolds, Kizito, Ezumah, Mangesho, Allen & Chandler, 2011) and we adhered to the quality criteria for qualitative studies that Lincoln and Guba (1985), established in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity.

Quality criteria require me to make sound decisions about the focus of study, when selecting the context, participants, and approach to gathering data to achieve credibility. For example, we chose principals of school and teachers within the SBST who had an in-depth knowledge of violent incidents at schools (Cope, 2014; Graneheim & Lundman 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To attain transferability, we gave a rich and distinguishing description of the context, selection and characteristics of participants, data collection and analysis processes followed. We also used appropriate quotations to give the reader the opportunity to explore alternative interpretations (Cope, 2014; Govender, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure dependability, we were careful to give clear procedures and descriptions of how the study was conducted so that another researcher could apply a similar process in their own study (Cope, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Cope (2014) contended that a clear audit trail helps other researchers to conduct research in a similar context with similar participants.

We ensured confirmability by demonstrating that data was an accurate representation of the participants’ responses and not my subjective viewpoint (Cope, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2012). We used verbatim quotes from the interviews to illustrate developing themes and show that findings resulted from data (Cope, 2014). Quality criteria further require that the researcher express the feelings and emotions of the participants in an honest way, to ensure authenticity of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2012). We used the participants’ quotes to assist readers to understand the participants’ experiences (Cope, 2014).
Reliability in qualitative research is associated with stability, accuracy, consistency, and repeatability of the study (White, 2005). As stated by White (2005), the researcher must ensure that the study meets the benchmarks for reliability, both internal (by limiting inaccuracies during progressions of the research) and external reliability (by being precise in recording the progression of the research) using pertinent research methods.

**Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality**

We ensured honest reporting which Walliman (2009), says is essential to engender a level of trust and credibility in the development of knowledge. Ethical considerations were observed throughout this research study. We addressed issues of plagiarism in the research report by acknowledging my sources. Permission for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of UNISA and from the research directorate of Gauteng Education Department at the provincial level. Participants were informed of all aspects of the research that might influence their willingness to participate, namely, the purpose of the study, data collection and the feedback of the results. There was no payment for participating in the study (Frankel & Wallen, 2006). Signed consent from all participants was obtained beforehand.

In this study, participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and avoidance of harm (physical, psychological, or otherwise). The participants were requested not to give their names to ensure that their identity was not revealed to anyone (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Strict ethical measures were adhered to during the research process. Informed consent was obtained from participants on forms with a clause about voluntary participation and assurance that no unforeseen risk or harm would arise from participation. The consent forms also explained the freedom to withdraw from the research at any time. Great care was taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity so that no participants would be identifiable in the reporting of the results.

**Result and Discussion**

The diverse themes that developed from this data were utilised to advance an understanding of the support structure available for learners who have experienced violence in schools. The data from the focus-group interviews was primarily analysed and pertinent themes were identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Participant description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>Principal from School A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PB</td>
<td>Principal from School B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>Principal from School C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD</td>
<td>Principal from School D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE</td>
<td>Principal from School E</td>
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<tr>
<td>TA1-6</td>
<td>Teacher 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 from School A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB7-12</td>
<td>Teacher 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 from School B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC13-18</td>
<td>Teacher 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 from School C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TD19-24</td>
<td>Teacher 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 from School D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TE25-30</td>
<td>Teacher 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 from School E</td>
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**Lack of Confidence in School Structures**

Another challenge that the five schools faced was the lack of confidence in the formal school support structures and processes in resolving conflicts among learners. The principal of one of the schools noted that, generally, learners tended to take the law into their own hands. “I find that, especially with high school learners, if there is an issue (of conflict) to be sorted out, they think of reporting the matter to the school authorities as the last resort. Most times, they have a feeling that they can resolve the problem themselves. That is a big problem. It is especially so with boys and now also quite often with girls as well. They simply have a go at each other” (Participant, PC). The above finding was also reiterated by a participant who said that “they (learners) don’t have any confidence, trust or faith in the school support structures to protect and support them and that is a serious problem. They also feel that once they leave the school premises (after school hours) they are vulnerable in the open out there. No matter what reassurance that we can give them in the school - that reassurance won’t mean much outside the school. So, the tendency is not to report the need for support to the school authorities. They feel they must sort it out themselves” (Participant, PA).

The above quotations suggest that some learners view their school support structures as not doing enough to address support for them and as such, the aggrieved learners tend not to trust school authorities to protect them and resort to taking the law into their own
hands to see that justice is done. Davies (2009) stated that support structures in schools are essential for learners to circumvent societal aggression and the acceptance of violence and no support as a solution to a problem. Similarly, in a study conducted by Bloom (2009), among more than 15 000 teenage learners in the US, it was found that most of them did not feel safe to request support because of lack of confidence in the support structures at school. They also perceived external solutions as an acceptable solution and support to their problems. Likewise, studies conducted by Moore, Astor and Benbenishty (2020), in the slums of Nairobi in Kenya and South Africa, found that there were feelings of insecurity among learners because of the schools’ failure to support them.

These two latter studies also reported that those entrusted to support learners at schools (the teachers) were not able to ensure it, or were, in some cases, the source of insecurity themselves. Schools are, however, expected to support learners and not to neglect them and if this does not happen, it is a form of dereliction of duty on the part of the school authorities. The sense of insecurity among learners promotes the kind of thinking where learners do not have trust and faith in the school structures to protect them against support after experiencing violence in schools; hence the need to take the law into their hands by fighting back instead of reporting cases to school authorities. The sense of insecurity is also prevalent in some communities in South Africa where members of the community do not trust the police and the criminal justice system to be even-handed and so resort to vigilantism to resolve problems of crime and violence. In some communities, for example, some people have formed vigilante groups such as People Against Gangsters and Drugs (PAGAD) which is very strong in the Western Cape, Mapogo-a-Mathamaga in Limpopo and Mbokodo in Mpumalanga provinces (Sekhonyane & Louw, 2011). The print and electronic media are also replete with examples of communities taking the law into their own hands all over South Africa because of lack of confidence of support in the police and the justice system of the land (Govender, 2020).

The above examples are just a few to demonstrate the lack of support in the South African society and lack of confidence in giving effective support to learners, which can have a negative effect on all. But this lack of confidence in giving effective support to learners originates from somewhere, which among others, is the frustration because of the justice system that is seen as unresponsive to the plight of the victims. This is observed at various levels of society (the school level or the societal level). If the authorities like teachers, school governors or the police do not respond appropriately and timeously, something must give; hence, the cycle of endless violence. Some learners indicated that some teachers do not listen and assist them when they report cases and request support. Consequently, they protect themselves, and find other ways to support themselves. Bloom (2009) further posited that handling minor misbehaviour appropriately can keep it from escalating into a crisis.

The findings are also corroborated by Harber (2004), who stated that “…the school may actually be harmful if it fails to support learners from violence and suffering when it could do so” (p. 45). Failure (through omission or commission) by teachers to support learners is also a violation of the in loco parentis principle which places a duty on the teachers to protect learners while in their care (Shaba, 1998, 2003). Similarly, positive behavioural support by teachers can be used to prevent and reduce disruptive behaviour among the learners. To this end, Shaked & Schechter (2020), posited that learners must feel that someone is available to listen to them, no matter the context or the situation. The learners need to be told that an open-door policy for the principal and teachers exists for them and their families. In addition, Bloom (2009), posited that teaching conflict resolution skills and non-violence strategies to learners to resolve conflict situations with their peers can go a long way to reducing violence problems at schools.

**Uncoordinated Intersectoral Collaboration**

In addition, as indicated in the research methodology chapter, I also used documents reviews in this study. All five schools allowed me access to school documents such as the Code of Conduct for Learners, Incident Books and Logbooks which gave me an insider view of what was occurring at school pertaining to stakeholder involvement in support. The records perused had a long list of support recorded in the past two years which was the focus of the study. These included support from external stakeholders such as South African Police Service (SAPS), Johannesburg Metro Police Department (JMPD), DREAMS that is funded by USAID, Learner Support Assistants (LSA), Ke Moja coaches, different Non-Governmental Organisations, and the Department of Social Development.

The principals of all the five researched schools also showed me an assortment of intervention plans and support programmes by different organisation and individuals as they supported the school. The findings from the interviews were thus corroborated by both the documents reviewed as well as observations. A principal participant told me that “we are overwhelmed by the support from all over. Sometimes my classes are disturbed by all these disturbing activities of the people from outside” (Participant, PE). One other participant indicated that “we do not have time for these social workers. Curriculum is the core, and we must conclude the syllabus” (Participant, PB12).

Another participant who was worried about too many activities as support given to learners showed that “there is this one today, tomorrow it’s that one. And when they go, we are confused which process to follow. At the same time, the kids suffer.” (Participant, TC18) another indicated that “I had confiscated a home-made gun from a boy who had intended to use it on another learner whom he accused of bullying. This shows the seriousness of violence in some of our schools” (Participant, PB).

The principal of School D indicated that in his school, there are many stakeholder involvements that come to school for intervention and support. He said that “we have Ke Moja coaches and LSA groups at the school. These Ke Moja coaches perform stage-plays against drug abuse, violence and two or three teachers and parents are also involved. These are learners that are interested in creating a drugs-free society and a violent free society. We have those Ke Moja coaches who have group talks at morning assemblies
from different NGOs coming in, talking, and motivating our learners. But then the policies that work well generally would be where, at the start of each school year, you spend at least an hour or two hours discussing and explaining the Code of Conduct to the learners; where the class teacher will discuss those rules and regulations with the learners and the learners also recommit themselves to that Code of Conduct” (Participant, PD).

The Code of Conduct for Learners booklets were also made available to me by all the school principals and dealt with all possible issues of support, violence, and other kinds of misconduct that schools could face. The presence of the code of conduct for learners, which was reviewed regularly in some schools, also suggests that the schools are aware of the legal requirements in dealing with the challenges they are facing. The code of conduct booklets of each school contained mainly procedures of how the policy worked; the various acts of misconduct documented according to different levels from very minor misdemeanours (level 1) to very serious ones (level 4) that warranted suspension or even expulsion from the school. The schools had other documents such as logbooks while others had a thick exercise book (called ‘Incidents Book’) which was used solely for recording details of learners’ acts of misdemeanours including support provided by DBST. Through these documents, one got a sense of the lack of support from different stakeholders. If support was granted, it would be more uncoordinated and would not respond to the policy of support which is the SIAS. I perused the previous two and half years’ records. What was very noticeable was the frequency of fighting among learners and the confiscation of dangerous weapons among learners, but what was more of a concern for me was that there was limited individual support for learners who experienced all this violent behaviour at school. The documents also seemed to corroborate findings from the interviews. This corroborated what the participants had to say, namely, that “there is little support from the DBST. The District Support Based Team is under resourced. Whenever we request support from them, they either are busy or will come months after the support request, and if we request support from e.g., DSD, they will come and disrupt the school and not follow the SIAS process” (Participant, TB6). One participant indicated that “in all three structures, they all of them do things/support differently” (Participant, TD25).

Further, the above quotations on the uncoordinated support of learners who experienced violence in the school community suggest the relative influence of the context both within and outside of the school and its impact on school support (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011). This community influence on the school is also corroborated by the SA Human Rights Commission Report (2006), which stated that South Africa was experiencing unacceptable high levels of violent crime which clearly need a coordinated approach by all stakeholders. If not, the report stated, we would then find violent behaviour spilling over into the schools and playgrounds. Similarly, Astor, Meyer and Behre (2006), Edwards (2008), Phillips, Linney and Pack (2008) also stated that what was happening in schools reflected what was happening in society, that is, the context in which the school is located interacts with external stakeholders and principals to influence levels of support in schools. These layered and nested contexts include the school (social climate, availability of policies of support); the learners’ families (education and family structure); cultural aspects of learner and teacher population; and the economic, social, and political makeup of the country. Similarly, viewed from a social control theory, a school is a microcosm of the larger society and is therefore affected by the contexts in which it is built. If the society in which the school is located is supportive and structured, the school will inevitably be affected by the support structures within its environment. Thus, the teachers should familiarise themselves with Departmental support policy and refer the learners to the relevant authorities for rehabilitation and counselling. The parents must monitor their child and report the child’s progress or regress to the counselling authorities.

A circle of networks in the community has been established to support learners who have experienced violence in schools One of the focus group participants acknowledged the services offered by ‘Nthabiseng Clinic’ (Psychologist) and NGOs like the ‘DREAMS Centre’ and SANCA Drug and Alcohol rehabilitation centre in Diepkoef, Hammond, (2010), asserted that a strong relationship between the external service providers and schools is important to enhance mental health and build the resilience of affected learners. Although these services have a protective value for the entire school community, according to participants in school B, some of these networks are no longer functional due to alleged misuse of funds that led to their closure.

Most of the focus-group participants from both schools indicated that various service providers are easily accessed by the school and the parents. This was different with some of the participants, particularly in school B, as they did not seem to be aware of the available external resources at their disposal. However, those that were aware of the service provided acknowledged that they existed but indicated that they had never received any support from them. It appears that the service providers are understated in all schools. One participant indicated that she used a private counselling psychologist to support his child even though he was aware that there was one at school because he was never referred to her. Even though there was an in-house school occupational therapist and a psychologist employed in a School Governing Body post, the participants indicated that more psychologists and social workers are needed considering the number of learners they are servicing (Participant, TD23).

The South African Police Service is also found to be a resource for schools although the participants were concerned about their delayed response time and disruption of contact time. One participant from school D acknowledged that “we do work with SAPS but because it is a child, they do not want to take them, they do not want to remove them and quite often the police comes at the same time the school comes out because to them it is not a serious issue and there is nothing serious about a learner being in the school premises. Our hands are tied” (Participant, TE34). However, the visibility of the police was confirmed in all schools. In addition, school B participants appeared to be content with the service’s social worker in the DSD and said that “they are easily accessible to learners, ... because if we do encounter certain challenges or the parents encounter certain challenges in their respective homes, we
do actually advise them to engage with those service providers and they usually respond to the challenges which those parents or families encountered" (Participant, TA4). They indicated that SAPS played a big role in handling some of the problematic learners in one school but in another school, it was not the case.

**Ineffectiveness in Strengthening Support Structures**

Another challenge that the five schools faced was ineffectiveness in strengthening support structures and processes in making sure that the support structures took on the core responsibilities of support within a school context. There was a sense by all five schools that the support structure was ineffective, and learners would pick that up. The ineffectiveness then suggested that learners might not be confident enough to go to their teachers for support since there was a lack of trust in effectiveness. This would then mean that learners who were aggrieved might not trust school authorities to protect them and thus resorted to taking the law into their own hands. Schools are, however, expected to support learners and not to disappoint. The lack of confidence of learners was an indication that teachers themselves were not well-equipped by the developmental workshops that they attended. The developmental workshops were not equipping teachers to be confident and carry authority in supporting learners.

It is also important to note that the school only relied on workshops to be able to equip the teachers with knowledge and skills to deal with problematic behaviour. One participant mentioned that “the workshop that we have attended was a hit-and-run kind of workshop. We are expected to attend workshops in the afternoon, and we are damn tired” (Participant, TD24). It can therefore be concluded that the workshops alone were not enough as some of the teachers did not attend these workshops. It is true that individuals often can and do modify, select, reconstruct, and even create their environments, but this capacity emerges only to the extent that the person has been enabled to engage in self-directed action as a joint function not only of his biological endowment but also of the environment in which he or she develops (Bronfenbrenner, 1989).

School D seemed to be better off because a psychologist and occupational therapist, speech therapist and few psychologist interns were based at the school. The focus group participants, however, reckoned that it was not sufficient for the school as more learners accommodated in the school were displaying behavioural challenges in such a way that “the cases that they must deal with are sometimes a lot for them because we have a few of challenging learners in this school. The teachers in the school are well trained to deal with such learners but there is a process that is followed. Even if we follow this process, the Department takes time to resolve and give feedback. It’s frustrating” (Participant, PD).

Teachers worldwide require insight into how best to facilitate the support of learners who have been survivors of violence in a school context. It is the responsibility of the SBST to provide support to learners who exhibit social, mental, emotional, or behavioural difficulties in the classroom. Bennet (2017), questions teachers’ capacity to undertake this important role, particularly given the limited time afforded to capacitate them. Focus group participants from all schools acknowledged that they did receive professional development or training in dealing with support of learners. They were also encouraged to engage in personal development activities and register with higher institutions of learning to develop themselves. Most of the focus group participants indicated that they attended development workshops and “…some of us also attended a continuous assessment programme” (Participant, TD10). However, one participant pointed out that “I just wanted to say it is not all of us teachers who have received training, and sometimes these workshops are just not enough” (Participant, TG24). Other participants felt that the process of selecting teachers who should attend such professional development or training courses was discriminatory because they had never attended such. They also indicated that only those who taught LO were selected to attend such workshops and trainings.

The participants seemed to feel powerless when it comes to supporting learners who are survivors of violence in schools. One of the participants (Participant, TA4), pointed out that they were aware of the procedure, but some thought that it needed more skills than just being an ordinary teacher to be able to interact with such learners. A problem was that the training and workshops that teachers attended seem to be focused on curriculum development and neglected the skills in implementing support structures, which was a major distractor to accessing learning.

It can be determined that there is a gap between the organisers of the workshops or the selecting committee when it comes to selecting those who should attend the workshops. According to Weist, Eber, Horner, Spllett, Putnam, Barrett, Perales, Fairchild, and Hoover (2018), teachers need to be appropriately skilled to addressing behaviour problems at school and to be comfortable in supporting learners. One focus group participant indicated that “I am powerless when it comes to handling the learners… I think it needs more skills than just an ordinary teacher who will use normal discipline only” (Participant, TA6). Greening (2019) suggested that teacher training did not adequately equip teachers to practically respond to the realities of the everyday classroom. This may be influenced by a complex interplay between teachers’ constructions of behaviour problems, the importance they place in mental health promotion in schools, issues of teacher confidence, role identity, conflict, and school culture, as well as teachers’ own sense of mental well-being (Greening, 2019). It is the responsibility of the school management to ensure that no member of staff should be denied the opportunity to develop themselves to be able to execute certain duties in line with their work. School D appeared to be proactive when the participants mentioned that “in the beginning of every year, since we sometimes get new staff. We have staff meetings where we do advocacy and train newly appointed teachers regarding the process of support”. Other capacity-building sessions included “…class management in the beginning of the year on how to manage your class workshops arranged by the district and get speakers to address the staff” (Participant, TD 22; Participant TD24). The bad timing of workshops and training was one aspect that teachers were complaining about as indicated that “the workshops are always at the end of the day. We are exhausted at that time. We are not
robots" (Participant, TC18). Besides teachers thinking of themselves as being robots, one participant indicated that “the teachers believe that the workshops are not of good standards, it’s a hit-and-run” (Participant, PA).

It can be concluded that the progressive workshops and turnaround time dimensions regarding supporting learners who had experienced violence in schools seemed to be a challenge in all schools under study. It is critical for each school to have its own psychologists and social workers based at the school in departmental posts. It is also imperative to note that lack of attendance at training programmes and the so-called ‘microwave’ workshops should be investigated so that teachers can receive thorough training that will equip them to be self-assured to support learners.

**Dysfunctional School-Based Support Team**

The EWP6 which serves as operational guidelines for the implementation of inclusive education introduced the need for holistic integrated support through inter-sectoral collaboration. It was through such collaboration that the District Based-Support Team (DBST) was introduced (Makhalemele & Tlale, 2020). The function of the DBST is to assist the School Based-Support Team (SBST) to identify and address barriers to learning and promote effective teaching and learning (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit & Van Deventer, 2016). This approach takes note of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory in that it acknowledges the importance of the influence of sub-systems within the main system of the DBST in the implementation of inclusive education in the provision of support in schools. It highlights the importance of interactions at the different levels of the system within a social context and how they impact relations which are important in the process of child development. This process is however disrupted if the SBST is constantly changed by authorities when the annual teacher allocation is done, and or the school committees are re-elected. One participant specified that “I was an SBST coordinator in 2019 and I was then removed to be in the sports committee. Now they allocated me back in the SBST and I missed out on some developmental workshops. How am I supposed to support learners let alone follow and understand the SIAS process when you are allocated from pillar to post?” (Participant, TB11). Another one said that “this SBST is just an irritation. One day this teacher comes to the SBST meeting; the other day they don’t come” (Participant, TE29). Teachers feel overwhelmed by the amount of work as they must teach and address social issues experienced by learners. “We are expected to complete the curriculum and the ATPs and be part of the SBST. We end up concentrating on the curriculum and not on this SBST. It’s just an added responsibility. On the other hand, the social problems really are a lot of work for teachers as well” (Participant, TD20).

School D also experienced the same problem even though there was a psychologist, occupational therapist, speech therapist, and intern psychologist based at the school. The participants also acknowledged lack of manpower in the DBST to support and make sure that the SBST was functional. The participant declared that “the SBST need to have consistent members. We have psychologist interns who serve in the team and when they conclude their internship new ones come in. There should be consistency” (Participant, TD23). Another participant asserted that “I’m not sure if the SBST will ever work, unless they create a post and appoint a person to coordinate and be responsible to induct members coming in and out, just like they appoint Head of Department in a post. This is just an added job” (Participant, TB9).

It can be concluded that the support received by learners from the schools to address problems seemed to be minimal. As a DBST member, I can attest to the lack of human resource capacity in the department to address and support all the SBSTS and acknowledge that it is difficult and almost impossible to have a functional DBST. These aspects are mainly because, practically speaking, there is minimal time to act as a member of a DBST and do case management as per the demands of the SIAS (DoE, 2014) process. On the other hand, the predominantly active DBST members are mainly found in the Inclusion and Special School (ISS) unit that is understaffed and overworked. It therefore means that SBST will have to find other means to be supported for it to be functional and be able to support learners as per the protocol.

A challenge that the five schools faced was unclear characterisation and understanding of support structures and processes to be followed in supporting learners. This unclear characterisation was influenced by the lack of dedicated support of teachers that are appointed to the SBST and the constant changes in SBST coordinators which seem to happen year in and out. The principal of School A noted that, generally, teachers are often confused when they must give support, where there is no clear definition or roles are blurred. This was corroborated by participants from two different schools who provided a varied characterisation of a support structure that is in place in their schools. To summarise their responses all the participants highlighted the following point “…a support structure is disciplinary committee that consists of SBST Coordinator, rep from SMT, pastor, adopted cop [South African Police Service], social worker, pastor, learner support teacher, SGB representative” (Participant, PB), whereas another participant described a support structure as “a functional SBST committee, that has a well-designed curriculum that is inclusive and caters for the needs of all the learners and has enough resources for effective teaching and learning” (Participant, PE).

Although the SIAS policy (Department of Basic Education, 2014), was introduced to address barriers to learning and facilitate support, and the training roll out has been done on different platforms, it seems that township secondary schools have not reached the full application, implementation and understanding of the policy as proper referral procedures are still not followed and most teachers seems confused. The legislative framework responds to the inclusive education system that complies with the prescripts of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, in the Bill of Rights, the SASA 84 of 1996 and the EWP6 (Department of Education, 2001) in addressing support issues. Ungar, Connelly, Liebenberg & Theron (2019) contended that if appropriate and proper support measures are not put in place, including a clear understanding and the strong characterisation of
support structure, learners who experienced violence in schools will continue to struggle and may display psychological, cognitive and social problems that require advanced services of a multi-disciplinary system, instead of the problems being resolved earlier and intervention programmes being applied promptly at school level.

Organised and coordinated support structures are essential at school for learners to actualise their optimal potential. Malindi and Theron (2010), contended that a developing child is in continuous interpersonal engagement with the structural features in their environment like the family, school, neighbourhood, and church. This is in line with Bronfenbrenner (1979), who posited that schools, supportive families, and community organisations create the environment in which support should be provided. Tugade and Fredrickson (2004), argued that support of learners is essential and is a shared responsibility that cannot possibly be carried out one-sidedly by any school system or policy.

The Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) (Department of Basic Education, 2014) is aimed at supporting teachers in identifying the level of support required in schools and in the classroom to increase academic performance and enhance their resilience. The policy clearly stipulates the roles and responsibilities of various support systems within the school. On an operational level, the school management team should plan, support, and monitor the implementation of the policy to ensure all learners are supported and given an opportunity to participate meaningfully in the learning process.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to determine the challenges faced by learners who are survivors of school violence and the implications for support structures. It is only in a non-threatening supportive environment that learners can concentrate on their lessons and make progress. The most effective programmes for developing supporting schools are those that focus on collaboration, the development of psycho-social skills and socially competent behaviour. The role of all education stakeholders is massive. Great support structures can only be promoted by providing an environment in which learners are kept consistently nurtured, and where there is a caring and visionary leadership that promotes an expectation of academic achievement in a strength-supportive environment.

This study recommends that additional research of this nature be undertaken within other schools, districts, and in the provinces. This might allow a bigger generalisation of the findings and thus be more representative of the support structures in place for learners who are survivors of school violence. More studies may counter the findings of this study thus requiring additional research into the success of support structure programmes. Equally, it is proposed that research be conducted to investigate how best the education system can ensure that learners who are survivors of violence are offered appropriate support within schools. Additional objectives, such as support from leadership, governance and family should be researched in greater detail to determine if there is a relationship between great support structure and collaboration of these stakeholders.

In addition, more studies might explore some of the fully functional School Based Support Team (SBST) as support structures that are available and effective in supporting learners who are survivors of violence in schools, district or provinces not researched. Another area of support structures programmes that need research is the effectiveness of short-term support strategic programmes as opposed to long-term programmes about successfully meeting ISP objectives. In this regard, schools may benefit from knowing which type of learners are more vulnerable based and need long term or short-term support based on the family context. This information could then be used to modify an individual support plan of a learner who is a survivor of violence within a school context and offer continuous support to build resilience.

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