Article

Lived Experiences of Teachers with Workplace Violence and Harassment Committed by Learners from Selected High Schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract: Despite several studies on learner-to-teacher workplace violence and harassment, the problem persists in some South African schools. Learner-to-teacher violence and harassment is a form of workplace violence and harassment as schools are workplaces for teachers. Learner-to-teacher violence and harassment is therefore an important occupational health and safety issues for teachers. The employer is obliged to provide a safe working environment for the teachers to enable quality teaching and learning in the schools. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of high school teachers who have been targets of workplace violence and harassment perpetrated by learners at selected schools in Limpopo province of South Africa. Many teachers were willing to share their lived-experiences but due to data saturation, only eleven participated after being selected through purposive sampling from seven high schools under a particular circuit. Research ethics of voluntary participation, informed consent, ethical clearance and gatekeeper permission were observed. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. Interviews were audio-taped, and field notes were also taken. Voice recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis into themes and sub-themes. Findings were confirmed by an independent coder to achieve trustworthiness. Teachers experienced physical workplace violence and harassment, verbal workplace violence and harassment as well as nonverbal workplace violence and harassment from learners. Learner-to-teacher workplace violence and harassment affects teachers emotionally and in turn affects quality teaching and learning in the schools. Some teachers propose involvement of community policing forum, strengthening of School Governing Bodies as well as reducing overcrowding in the classroom as possible solutions to deal with learner-to-teacher bullying.

Keywords: bullying; enabling environment; health promoting school; occupational health and safety; safe school; teaching and learning; workplace violence; employee assistance program

1. Introduction

The International Labour Organization defines workplace violence and harassment as various forms of violent actions or threats, whether a single incidence or a repetitive one, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual, or economic harm to a worker. This refers to workers in the formal and informal economy, in the public and private sectors, and any worker irrespective of his or her contractual status [1]. Workplace violence and harassment poses threat to the health and safety of workers and can result in physical and mental harm, as such, the International Labour Organization calls for all its member countries to ensure that all employers create safe and healthy workplaces for workers [2]. The government of South Africa enacted the Occupational Health and Safety Act No. 85 of 1993 to ensure the health and safety of workers. Under this Act, employers are obliged to provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risk to the health

of workers. Furthermore, workplaces should have policies on the provision of health and safety to workers [3].

Workplace violence and harassment taking place at school settings can be in the form of learner-to-teacher violence and harassment or teacher-to-teacher violence and harassment. In a teacher-to-teacher violence and harassment, peers commit violence and harassment to each other horizontally while in a learner-to-teacher violence and harassment, the process is vertical as teachers and learners are not peers. In all these forms of violence and harassment, the action is perpetrated by the seemingly powerful people to the seemingly powerless ones who are unable to defend themselves [4,5]. Our study focuses on learner-to-teacher violence and harassment which involves the harassment of an adult by a child. In this case the child is the learner while the adult is the teacher. Workplace violence and harassment targeting teachers and committed by learners refers to various forms of aggressive behaviours that may include insults, inappropriate comments, disrespect, shouting and yelling, bullying and verbal threats, harassment through the internet, damage to or theft of personal property, physical assault and ignore teachers' instruction [6]. Furthermore, workplace violence and harassment can manifest as malicious damage to the victim's property, pestering, intimidations, verbal abuse, and physical attacks [7].

Learner-to-teacher workplace violence and harassment is a challenge in South Africa and is reported in the media regularly [8]. The Witness, for example, reports of a video shared on social media in which a learner was heard saying offensive remarks towards a male teacher and threatening him violence. In another report by The Witness, a learner punched a teacher in the face and threatened him with a knife when the teacher was enforcing classroom discipline. Another media report is that of teachers who survived stabbings by learners, one of which was by a learner who failed a grade [9-10]. Media reports further show that learner-to-teacher workplace violence and harassment is a challenge in other countries as well [11-15].

Research shows that workplace violence and harassment in the form of learner-to-teacher violence and harassment is a global problem. A literature review by Bare et al. shows that teachers in the United States experience workplace violence and harassment committed by learners. A teachers shared experiences of being attached with a pair of scissors by an aggressive learner while another was attacked and harassed through racial remarks and swearwords by a learner who also threatened to burn the classroom [16]. In Canada, teachers experienced workplace violence and harassment where learners threatened them with sharp objects, attacked them and threw objects such as school furniture, water bottles, books, pencils, and stones at them. Others received death threats to themselves or to their families [17]. In the United Kingdom, a study shows that public schools teachers experience violence and harassment by learners in the form of physical violence, verbal abuse, and aggression [18]. A study amongst teachers in Brazil shows that more than 50% experienced workplace violence and harassment committed by learners in the form of physical aggression, verbal aggression, and threat with a firearm or other dangerous weapon inside the school [19]. In Israel, teachers shared experiences of workplace violence and harassment committed by learners in the form of being shouted at, and being hit so hard that one teacher became unconscious [20].

Studies conducted in South Africa show that schools, both primary and secondary, are becoming unsafe workplaces for teachers as they experience various forms of workplace violence and harassment committed by learners. A study by Govender shows that primary school teachers experience workplace violence and harassment committed by learners in the form of verbal and physical abuse. Teachers report that learners threaten them with violence and swear at them [21]. Fakude reports that teachers at some high schools in KwaZulu-Natal Province experience physical and sexual violence and harassment by both male and female learners. A female teacher reports that a learner threw a paper at her while she was writing notes on the chalkboard which led to other learners in the class laughing. Both male and female teachers report of being sexually harassed by both male and female learners. Sexual harassment included whistling at some females teacher while walking on the school grounds, male learners asking female teachers for sex, learners uttering unwelcomed and offensive words to teachers, some female learners seducing and making sexual gestures towards male teachers. Some teachers report that some learners move in and out of the

classroom during lessons and teachers find this as form of disrespect and a display of undermining the teachers' authority [22]. De Wet conducted a qualitative study on learner-to-teacher violence and harassment as reported by South African newspapers and conclude that devoted and skilled teachers experience physical, verbal, sexual and emotional violence and harassment committed by disobedient learners across the country. These attacks occur in and outside classrooms such as on the school grounds, on social media and even at teachers' homes. Acts of workplace violence and harassment include learners throwing stones, condoms filled with urine, and faeces at the teachers. To sexually harass one female teacher, a male learner called the teacher's husband alleging that he (the learner) has a sexual relationship with the wife (teacher) [8]. A study by Motsoeneng shows that some learners insult teachers through social media (Twitter and Facebook) while others report of receiving rude cell phone messages (SMS) from learners [23]. All these types of workplace violence and harassment described above are harmful to the health and safety of teachers.

The problem of workplace violence and harassment of teachers by learners continues despite several measures and suggestions to manage it. This study was conducted to further explore this challenge and by so doing contribute to its understanding. The structure of this paper is guided by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative studies (COREQ) and the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) [24-25]. These reporting guidelines are relevant for our study as COREQ is suitable to use in studies that used focus group discussions and interviews; our study used interviews while SRQR is suitable for all types of qualitative studies [26].

1.1. Theoretical framework

Both COREQ and SRQR recommend that researchers describe the theory or theories that guide their studies so that readers can understand how the research questions and the objectives were explored [24-25]. This study is guided by the Health Promoting Schools Framework as well as the National School Safety Framework [27,28]. The two frameworks share similarities regarding the management of violence and harassment in the school. A health promoting school is a school which is continuously strengthening its capacity to becoming a healthy setting for working and learning [29]. In this definition, working refers to the actions of teachers while learning is, among others, a result of the work of a teacher. Learning is a teacher-facilitated action carried out to help learners gain knowledge and competencies as well as to develop positive attitudes [30]. A healthy setting for learning and teaching implies, among others, a school environment free from workplace violence and harassment. Prinsloo defines a safe school as a school free from acts of violence and harassment while also having plans to deal with them should they occur [31]. A safe school is also a health promoting school, as such, the Health Promoting Schools Framework and the National School Safety Framework complement each other in creating a healthy setting for teachers to work and for learners to learn. Elements of the two frameworks relevant to management of learner-to-teacher workplace violence and harassment are briefly described below.

1.1.1. The Health Promoting Schools Framework

The Health Promoting Schools Framework has four pillars which are school environment; curriculum and learning; partnerships; and policy and planning [27]. The four pillars are described below in as far as they apply to workplace violence and harassment at school.

- School environment

School environment refers to the social environment and the psychological environment. The social environment of the school is about relationships between teachers and learners as well as with management. The psychological environment is about the school code of conduct, and the supports services for both learners and teachers. Creating a healthy environment for learning and working requires learners and teachers to work together while acknowledging the power relations between them.

- Curriculum and learning

Curriculum and learning refer to addressing violence and harassment through the curriculum by inclusion of life skills, and violence and harassment in the school subjects. Violence and harassment in the school curriculum can include a school subject such as Life Orientation that teaches learners to identify forms violence and harassment and be empowered on how to respond when they are harassed. Empowered learners will not perpetrate violence and harassment on their teachers as well as on other learners at their schools.

- Partnerships

Partnerships refers to schools establishing relationships with relevant stakeholders from the community to address workplace violence and harassment in their schools. Relevant stakeholders include the community policing forum (CPF), social workers and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs).

- Policy and planning

Policy and planning refer to existence of school policies to address violence and harassment. This refers to actions to prevent violence and harassment as well as readiness to act in case they occur.

1.1.2. The National School Safety Framework

The National School Safety Framework aims to create a safe and supportive teaching and learning environment in the schools by addressing incidences of workplace violence and harassment. This framework indicates that the safety of teachers and learners is a requirement for quality teaching and learning to take place. Just like the Health Promoting Schools Framework, the National School Safety Framework also has four pillars which are willingness to prevent and manage safety-related problems; an awareness of the safety climate of the school; readiness to act; and building a caring school [28].

- Willingness to prevent and manage safety-related problems

Schools should have updated codes of conduct and safety policies and procedures for addressing violence and harassment when they arise.

- An awareness of the safety climate of the school

Every school should be aware of its level of safety as well as resources to make the school safe. There should be regular monitoring, evaluation, and control activities to ensure that violence and harassment are prevented and managed properly if detected.

- Readiness to take action

A school should be ready to respond to early warning signs of workplace violence and harassment. To be able to detect warning signs early, the school should make safety part of its cultural norm. Policies and procedures to manage violence and harassment should be available so they are implemented in response to early warning signs.

- Building a caring school

A caring school is one that promotes a safe and friendly environment so that learners and teachers act like a family whose members listen to and protect each other [32]. Building a caring school calls for the collective effort of all stakeholders such as CPF, social workers and NGOs.

2. Materials and methods

The SRQR requires qualitative researchers to specify the qualitative approach used while the COREQ calls for researchers to state the methodological orientation guiding their studies. This study is an example of interpretative qualitative research, and because it is about lived experiences, it is an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) or interpretative phenomenology [33,34]. Interpretative phenomenology is informed by philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur. It strives to openly communicate deeper understanding of hidden meanings of everyday life experiences unlike descriptive phenomenology, guided by the work of Edmund Hussel with its focus on the life world, just describes obvious meaning [34-36].

We found IPA to our study on learner-to-teacher workplace violence and harassment as it would enable us to have a deeper understanding of the meaning of workplace learner-to-teacher violence and harassment as experienced by teachers in their lives as workers as well as in their social lives. As Smith et al. indicate, the importance of interpretative phenomenological analysis is its ability to reveal deeper meanings that certain experiences or events have for participants [33]. The purpose of interpretative phenomenological analysis is to search for deeper meanings that participants attach to events in their personal and social lives. Ahmad and Sheehan also used interpretative phenomenological analysis in their research on workplace violence and harassment in Australia amongst a range of workers [4].

In interpretative phenomenological research, theory can be used in many ways. Firstly, a theory can be used to guide how a phenomenon is explored by shaping the type of questions the researcher asks to participants. Secondly, it can be used as analytical framework to extract themes deductively or to refine themes that were extracted inductively. Finally, researchers can use a theory to retrospectively make sense of data which was collected without following a theory [34]. Our study used the Health Promoting Schools Framework and the National School Safety Framework to refine themes that were extracted inductively to make sense of data that was collected without following a particular theory.

2.1. Ethical considerations

The study obtained ethical clearance from University of Limpopo (TREC/302/2020: PG) while the Limpopo Department of Basic Education gave gatekeeper permission. With the ethical clearance and the gatekeeper permission, the first author (MCM) visited the circuit manager to request permission to go to schools to plan for data collection. The researchers respected anonymity and confidentiality of teachers and the schools as names are not mentioned (see Table 2). During the interviews, the researcher (MCM) requested permission from participants to use a voice recorder and asked participants not to mention names of people and schools as they shared their experiences. After transcribing data, both researchers (MCM and SFM) looked for information that could identify participants or their schools and removed it. Research suggests that asking victims to describe their lived experiences of workplace violence and harassment might arouse negative emotions as workplace violence and harassment is a sensitive issue [4]. We arranged with local social workers to be ready to offer counselling in case some teachers became distressed when relating their lived experiences of workplace violence and harassment committed by learners, but none showed signs of distress necessitating referral to counselling during and after the interviews.

2.2. Trustworthiness

We ensured trustworthiness by implementing credibility, conformability, dependability, and transferability principles [37]. Table 2 shows participants, some illustrative quotes from the interviews as well as themes which were confirmed by an independent coder to demonstrate that the study findings represent the views of participants and that the meaning we arrived at is correct. Our description of the method followed is detailed to enable other researchers to review the way we conducted the study.

2.3. Population and sampling

As COREQ and SRQR recommend, this section describes the method and justification for selecting participants. The population was secondary school teachers who experienced workplace violence and harassment committed by learners while working at seven secondary schools under a particular circuit in Limpopo province of South Africa. The first author (MCM) became aware of this problem as some schools asked for his professional intervention to address violence and harassment in their schools. The sample was made of teachers who volunteered to participate in response to an invitation from the researchers. The first author (MCM) gave information about the study to teachers at all the seven secondary schools and invited volunteers who experienced violence and harassment to share their experiences.   Many teachers volunteered to share their experiences but only 11 were

interviewed due to saturation of data. Eleven is a reasonable sample size for interpretative qualitative research as Smith et al. recommend a small sample of between 10 and 20 participants to enable researchers to have meaningful interaction with each participant [33]. We used purposive sampling to select a heterogeneous sample to get experiences from male and female teachers of various age groups and teaching experience from all the seven secondary schools in the selected circuit. In purposive sampling, the researcher sets a sampling criterion then select participants who fulfil those criteria [36]. Teachers with more than two years of teaching experience and who had at least two meaningful experiences of being a target of violence and harassment by learners were invited to participate in the study. We regarded two years of teaching experience as sufficient for one to have experienced workplace violence and harassment perpetrated by learners and to have rich information to share. Table 1 shows the demographic data we planned to collect.

2.4. Data collection

Collecting data for interpretative phenomenological research is a dynamic process during which researchers are actively participating in an interpretative activity by trying to understand an experience from the point of view of the person who experienced it. It is a two-phase process where an outsider (the researcher) is trying to make sense of an insider (the participant) trying to make sense of his or he own experience [38].   To achieve this, researchers must acknowledge their assumptions and biases about the phenomenon being researched and then use them during data collection and analysis instead of bracketing or putting them away [33,35,36]. COREQ and SRQR recommend that researchers be open about their qualifications, experience, relationship with participants and their personal interests in the phenomenon being researched as these may influence the way data is collected and analysed. In our study, the first author (MCM) is a male social worker who is regularly invited to schools to address psychosocial issues which included violence and harassment. He received training and supervision to conduct qualitative research from the second author (SFM). The second author (SFM), also a male, is experienced in qualitative health researcher and has trained and supervised emerging qualitative researchers in the field of public health. The two researchers have an interest in school violence and harassment as a component of school health services. Provision of school health services is an important area in public health aiming at making all schools to be health promoting schools as envisioned by the World Health Organization [39].

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, using an interview guide, during which a central question *"What are your experiences of being a target of violence and harassment by learners at school*?" was asked to all participants. Some probing or follow-up questions were asked to participants depending on the depth of their answers to the central question. Table 1 is an Interview guide showing demographic data to be collected as well as the central and probing questions.   We did not conduct a pilot test as semi-structured interview allows the researcher to rephrase and modify the questions during the interviews, guided by the understanding of questions and the responses of each participant [33]. The duration of interviews was between 40 and 60 minutes at places convenient to participants as individual appointments were made with each teacher who agreed to participate. All interviews were audio recorded and field notes were taken immediately after each interview to record nonverbal observations. One interview was conducted per day to permit preliminary analysis before conducting the next one. This allowed us to identify issues to probe in the next interview, as such, there was no need to conduct repeat interviews. We conducted two rounds of interviews to ensure that we reach all seven high schools and hear experiences of males and females as well as teachers of various age groups and teaching experiences. During the first round, we interviewed one teacher from each school and in the second round, we tried to interview teachers of different gender and age group from those we interviewed during the first round. Interviews were conducted at various locations chosen by each participant. Due to saturation of data and limited availability of the various types of participants, we could not achieve the maximum variations in the sampling as we intended.

Table 1. Interview guide showing the type of data to be collected .

GENDER	Female:				Male:		
AGE	31 to 40:		41 to 50:			Older than 50:	
SCHOOL	A:	B:	C:	D:	E:	F:	G:
TEACHING EXPERIENCE		Less than 10:	11 to 20:		21 to 30:		31 to 40:
CENTRAL QUESTION: What are your experiences of being a target of violence and harassment by learners at school?							
FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS: ● What is your understanding of violence and harassment? ● Share with me how learners committed violence and harassment against you. ● In what way has violence and harassment affected your health and wellbeing? ● What do you find stressing and impeding you from doing your work as a teacher? ● What do you suggest can be solutions to this problem of learner-to-teacher violence and harassment?							

2.5. Data analysis

In qualitative research, a preliminary data analysis begins during data collection so that researchers can detect saturation of data and stop further interviews [40]. The first author (MCM) transcribed the audio recordings verbatim and added field notes to each transcript to prepare for the analysis process. We then looked for identifying particulars in the transcripts and removed them to ensure that data cannot be linked to participants or their schools. Data analysis in IPA follows steps although it is not a linear process. It involves moving forward and backward between the steps. We followed the steps described by Ahmad and Sheehan which involves familiarisation with the data, immersion in the data, categorisation, pattern recognition, interpretation, and explanation [4]. We analysed each transcript independently and then discussed our findings to arrive at the themes. We also gave a researcher experienced in qualitative research to analyse the transcripts independently and held a meeting to agree on the final themes to improve the credibility of the findings through triangulation.

3. Results

The demographic data (Table 2) shows that six female and five male teachers of different age groups and years of experience as teachers, working at seven different schools participated. This data shows that learner-to-teacher violence and harassment occurred amongst various types of teachers and that the experiences shared represent a diverse group. This suggests that learner-to-teacher violence and harassment is not a problem of a particular type of the teachers but it can happen to any teacher, thus making it difficult to give a description of a teacher likely to be a target of violence and harassment committed by learners. Three themes with five subthemes emerged from data analysis and are summarised in Table 2 with some illustrative quotes.

Table 2. Demographic profile of participants and themes with illustrative quotes.

GENDER	Female: 6				Male: 5		
AGE	31 to 40: 1		41 to 50: 7				Older than 50: 3
SCHOOL	A: 2	B: 1	C: 2	D: 1	E: 1	F: 2	G: 2
TEACHING EXPERIENCE		Less than 10: 1	11 to 20: 3		21 to 30: 5		31 to 40: 2

THEMES	SUB-THEMES	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
Forms of perceived violence and harassment	Encounters of physical violence and harassment	The learner grabbed the teacher with his tie and pulled him … he wanted to suffocate him.
	Encounters of nonverbal violence and harassment	The learners laughed … I later asked what they were laughing for. They told me the learner showed a middle finger when I was facing the chalkboard.
Impact of violence and harassment	Encounters of verbal violence and harassment	I remember there was this learner who insulted teachers … every teacher who went to that classroom complained about him.
	Mental health impact	It was painful, very painful, each time I thought of going to that class I felt discouraged, and when I was busy teaching I would be cautious of the words I say … I was anxious
	Impact on performance of duties	I felt as if I could change that class and give it to another teacher, but other learners should not suffer because of one learner. But my interaction is not the same as before. I am no longer laughing and joking, I just teach and then leave the classroom

Propositions to resolve violence and harassment in school		Call the police forum to come and assist us with those learners who are troublesome. I think the department could try to alleviate the problem of overcrowding, like what has been done with the COVID-19 classes where we were able to get cooperation from learners.

4. Discussion

Teachers related their experiences of being targets of workplace violence and harassment by learners which presented as physical violence and harassment, nonverbal violence and harassment and verbal violence and harassment. Physical violence and harassment occurred when a learner grabbed the teacher with his tie and pulled him as if wanting to suffocate him. In other studies, learners committed violence and harassment towards teachers by threatening them with violence and stealing or damaging their belongings, throwing objects at them and pinching them as well as shoving them, pulling their hair and even touching them inappropriately [6-7,16-23]. Workplace violence and harassment occurs where there are power imbalances and, supposedly, teachers have more power as compared to learners. In learner-to-teacher violence and harassment, power imbalances is reversed as the learner becomes more powerful than the teacher due to the expectation of professional behaviour of the teacher as demanded by the teaching profession [41]. It is a case of a child being more powerful than an adult. It can therefore be assumed that learners who commit violence and harassment against teachers see themselves as having more power over the teachers they are targeting. A learner can commit violence and harassment against a teacher physically if he is aware that the teacher cannot retaliate due to legal and professional expectations of teacher conduct. The Code of Professional Ethics for Teachers expects every teacher to exercise power with restraint to avoid humiliation and physical or psychological harm to the learners [42]. The expected professional behaviour somehow makes teachers defenceless to workplace violence and harassment as learners are aware that teachers will not hit back. Menesini and Salmivalli confirm that a perpetrator of violence and harassment may achieve power by being aware of someone's helplessness and then use that awareness to harm him or her [43].

Nonverbal violence and harassment refer the use of body language or gestures to send hurting messages to someone. In our study, nonverbal violence and harassment occurred when a learner showed a middle finger to the teacher causing other learners in the class to laugh. The teacher did not see the middle finger signal but heard other learners giggling who then informed the teacher that the other learner showed a middle finger signal. The learner achieved power over the teacher as other learners in the class saw the gesture and laughed at the teacher. In other studies, nonverbal violence and harassment was shown through rolling of the eyes, facial expression and other hand-signals that show some disgust and making offensive gestures and threatening facial expressions or eye contact [22-23]. Showing someone a middle finger is generally accepted as an attacking sign to show disrespect or disobedience [44]. The teacher, in our study, felt attacked and disrespected by the disrespectful learner and that lack of respect could also be displayed by other learners in the class if they realise that the teacher appears powerless to punish their disrespectful classmate. It is for this reason that the National School Safety Framework was drawn to create a safe and supportive learning environment in the schools by addressing incidences of violence and harassment between learners and teachers. To achieve this, schools should have the capacity to identify violence and harassment as early as possible and take action to stop it.

In this study, verbal violence and harassment was experienced when a learner insulted teachers. In other studies, teachers experienced violence and harassment by being teased, impersonated, and

being called with funny names and having learners making disgusting and hurtful comments about their characters or personal appearances [21-23]. In our study, a teacher was a target of workplace violence and harassment by a learner who was known at school to be insulting to teachers. This implies that this learner was perceived by other learners as having more power than the teachers.

Teachers who experienced learner-to-teacher workplace violence and harassment related its negative impact on their mental health and ultimately on their ability to perform their teaching duties. It is not amazing for teachers to be distressed when learners commit violence and harassment against them as learner-to-teacher violence and harassment is an example of a child harassing an adult. Studies reveal that workplace violence and harassment affects the mental health of workers negatively and as such leads to low productivity. In the school, workplace violence and harassment causes serious and sometimes long term emotional and professional harm to teachers. Professional harm is a result of, among others, poor performance of teaching responsibilities as teaching is a profession whose aim is to facilitate teaching and learning in the schools. Workplace violence and harassment has a negative impact on the mental health of the teachers and results in poor performance of teaching responsibilities. Some teachers who experienced workplace violence and harassment by learners feel humiliated, disempowered and not wanting to go to work anymore [21-23]. Due to the negative impact of workplace violence and harassment on the mental health of teachers, some have even left the profession as they could not continue working in a profession where their confidence and authority are undermined. Learner-to-teacher workplace violence and harassment is detrimental to the social lives of teachers who, because of mental and professional harm, may feel disgraced and lose their ability to support themselves as well as their families financially.

Teachers who experienced learner-to-teacher workplace violence and harassment shared some propositions to address it. Some proposed an involvement of the CPF, social workers, and psychologists while others proposed that reducing overcrowding in the classrooms to a manageable number of learners might be helpful. These propositions are aligned to the four pillars of the National School Safety Framework which are willingness to prevent and manage safety-related problems; an awareness of the safety climate of the school; readiness to act; and building a caring school [28]. The four pillars of the National School Safety Framework share similarities with those of the Health Promoting Schools Framework. The four pillars are school environment; curriculum and learning; partnerships; and policy and planning [27]. These propositions show that teachers are eager to prevent workplace violence and harassment in the schools; are aware of the safety environment at their schools and are ready to act by forming partnerships with the CPF as dealing with school violence and harassment and other school safety issues requires a joint determination from all stakeholders. Building a caring school calls for a curriculum that will empower learners to identify and refrain from committing violence and harassment to their teachers and anyone at school. The Department of Basic Education, as the employer of teachers in secondary schools, should ensure that schools are a safe working environment for teachers to teach and enjoy going to school as required by the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 [3]. The department should also establish Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to support teachers who are traumatised and reluctant to go to some classes where they were targets for violence and harassment. Furthermore, school governing bodies (SGB) should be empowered to prevent and manage workplace violence and harassment at schools.

5. Conclusion

This study discussed learner-to-teacher workplace violence and harassment using an interpretative phenomenological design. Teachers, who are adults, shared their experiences of being targets of verbal, nonverbal and physical workplace violence and harassment by learners who are children that teachers are meant to guide and support as they become adults. The experiences devastated teachers in many respects, socially and professionally. The study contributes to knowledge on the existence of learner-to-teacher workplace violence and harassment in secondary schools and its negative impact on the health and safety of teachers as well as on teaching and

learning. It has demonstrated the use of the Health Promoting Schools Framework and the National School Safety Framework to extract meaning from data which was collected without following a theory. There is therefore a need to prevent and manage this form of workplace violence and harassment to promote the health of teachers as well as that of learners who witness their teachers being targets of violence and harassment.

6. Limitations

Data collection took place during COVID-19 pandemic where direct social contact between researchers and participants was partial. This affected the duration, and the way interviews were conducted as well as the willingness of some teachers to participate. Conducting virtual interviews was not possible at that time due to lack of capacity.

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