

# THE NATURE OF TEACHER-ON-TEACHER VIOLENCE AND THE ABSENCE OF ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT: CREATING ADEQUATE AWARENESS OF THE PHENOMENON

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## **Abstract**

*Violence directed against teachers remain under-studied within the larger school violence literature. This includes the nature of teacher-on-teacher violence, and the type of support teachers attain from the administrators. Employing the phenomenological qualitative approach, the article seeks to unveil teachers' and the school administrators' lived experiences. Advancing the understanding of the nature of teacher-on-teacher victimisation, aimed at creating adequate awareness of the phenomenon. Five participants, comprising 1 principal, 1 departmental head, and 3 teachers, were purposefully selected. Utilising semi-structured interviews to a mass data and thematic data analysis approach, to categorise themes from the results. The findings of the study revealed teachers were subjected to threats, verbal abuse, physical attacks, and sexual violence from their colleagues, particularly the administrators. Most of the participants confirmed that verbal abuse was the most common occurrence, compared to other forms. The acts of lack of administrative support were established at various levels involving multiple individuals. The district officials, especially IDSO's, given their proximity to schools, should provide constant support to any form of a reported case of abuse. Class visits are essential to teacher development, and they should be properly conducted, and not used as a mechanism to settle scores.*

**Keywords:** Teacher-on-teacher violence, victimisation, bullying, administrators

## **INTRODUCTION**

Violence levelled toward teachers is a noteworthy challenge in most parts of the world (Zwane, 2021; De Wet, 2021; Woudstra, Van Rensburg, Visser & Jordaan, 2018), and South Africa is no exemption. Though, it is not peculiar to South Africa, (De Wet, 2021), it is however becoming a perennial and prevalent problem in many of South African schools. Thus, (McMahon, Martinez, Reddy, Espelage, & Anderman 2017a) asserted administrators' relations with teachers and their methods to tackling difficulties of violence must lead discussions about violence levelled toward teachers, specifically violence amongst colleagues within the teaching hierarchy. A burgeoning scholarly work from varying advanced and emerging nations on school violence has focused on teachers' experiences but primarily focused on teachers as victims of violence inflicted by learners as opposed to colleagues, (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; De Wet, 2021; Zwane, 2021).

The scholars, (McMahon, Peist, Davis, McConnell, Reaves, Reddy, Anderman & Espelage, 2020) are in accord, and caution that, the attention in and acknowledgement of violence levelled toward teachers is growing, yet teachers' involvements lingers under-studied within the greater school violence works, and this includes the nature of teacher-on-teacher violence and the type of support they attain from the administrators. Employing the phenomenological qualitative approach, the article seeks to unveil teachers' and the school administrators' lived experiences, in advancing the understanding of the nature of teacher-on-teacher victimisation, aimed at creating adequate awareness of the phenomenon.



Bullying and victimisation bears the same denotation since there is a nexus in their explanation (Van Der Westhuizen & Maree, 2010). In this article they are incorporated within the broader concept of 'violence', and in the view of Mahome (2017), bullying forms part of school violence. Teacher-on-teacher violence is not clearly defined since it is an under-studied phenomenon, hence, in this article, the working description of teacher-on-teacher violence is derived from the meaning of 'violence directed against teachers', that is characterised as workplace violence, comprising workplace harassment or workplace mistreatment, and relates to any conduct intended at hurting another worker in the form of threat, aggressive sign or corporeal bout (Wei, Gerberich., Alexander, Ryan, Nachreiner, & Mongin 2013; Gerberich, 2014). In the context of this article, the employee is the teacher and refers to any member of the teaching personnel irrespective of the managerial position they occupy. On the same feature, the principal together with the deputy principal, are also referred to as 'administrators', as both constitute the Executive Management Team (EMT), and they form an integral fragment of the School Management Team (SMT).

Violence directed against teachers, and more especially the victimisation of teachers by their colleagues has been overlooked, and as accentuated by De Wet and Jacobs (2013) and Espelage, Anderman, Brown, Jones, Lane, McMahon, Reddy, & Reynolds, (2013), scarcity of research on teachers' victimisation experiences exists. Moreover, (McMahon, Martinez, & Espelage, 2014; McMahon, et al., 2020) argued that violence levelled toward teachers is committed by learners, co-workers, and managers. Additionally, South Africa being a growing state, poses an enormous test in regard to addressing victimisation (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers 2009; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). On the other hand, the results from the sample of 237 teachers from McMahon et al. (2017a) highlighted the absence of administrative support as the supreme hurtful victimisation participation. Resonating with the findings by (McMahon et al., 2020) where teachers reported a considerable necessity for improved care from managers

Peist (2018), in his web-based anonymous survey study across the United States' primary and secondary schools, corroborated the lack of support from the administrators. A view that is sustained by Patton, Hong, Patel, & Kral (2017), argued there is a rareness of qualitative examination on teachers' lived encounters in victimisation explorations. By highlighting teachers' perspectives, the study intended to minimise the identified void in teacher victimisation enquiries, focusing on the South African context. Besides, teachers' viewpoints can boost our apprehension of the nature of teacher-on-teacher victimisation and create pioneering approaches to efficiently restrain the type of victimisation in the teaching profession (McMahon et al., 2020).

Scant literature, mainly from the international front, delved on teacher-on-teacher violence that incorporated some of the school administrators. The following examples are accorded; United States of America, (Malahy 2015; McMahon et al., 2017a; Mazzarella 2018; Kleinheksel, 2018; Kleinheksel and Geisel, 2019; Tiesman, Konda, Hendricks, Mercer, & Amandus, 2013; the United Kingdom, Fahie & Divine, 2014; Israel (Sasson and Somech, 2015; Klein and Bentolila, 2018; Turkey, (Cemaloglu, 2007a; 2007b), and locally, in South Africa, (De Wet, 2011; Binduko, 2013; De Wet, 2014; Coetzee, 2017).

To this end, various studies have further revealed that current literature is limited regarding the exploration of teacher-on-teacher school-based mistreatment, (Pahad, 2010; Pahad & Graham, 2012; Mahome, 2021), making this enquiry relevant. Aggravating the plight of the teachers, figures relating to victimisation in the South African education sector appear to be intermittent (Burton, 2008: 3; Coetzee, 2017; De Vos, 2013). In consonance with that, De Vos (2013) attributes the absence of figures to insufficient alertness and information concerning the pervasiveness and form of victimisation within the teaching fraternity. It is for this reason; the authors seek to create adequate awareness relating to the nature of teacher-on-teacher violence. Therefore, the aim of this article is two folded; the first one is to investigate how teachers are victimising each other, and secondly to ascertain the form of administrative support teachers attain when victimised. Understanding how teachers victimise each other and the role played by administrators in addressing teacher-on-teacher violence remain significant. Teachers have a momentous role to play



in advocating for everyone's protection and obtaining their inputs it's important for classifying main features and circumstances that further teacher victimisation (McMahon et al., 2020). Furthermore, (McMahon, Anderman, Astor, Espelage, Martinez, Reddy, & Worrell, 2022) argued that choices to exit the teaching career concern everyone within the school community. Hence conducting a study that is context -specific may inform future prevention and mediation plans that may be employed to alleviate the damaging effect of teacher-on-teacher violence. The brief literature that illustrates the nature of teacher victimisations is examined below.

### **The Nature of Teacher- on- Teacher Violence**

As indicated in the preceding segments, readers are reminded that for the purpose of this article, victimisation and bullying have the same meaning. Teacher-on-teacher violence encompasses a spectrum of forms, for instance, victimisation and harassment, and in the view of De Wet (2021) it expands to a range of forms with the teachers bearing the brunt.. Henceforth, in examining how teachers are victimising each other, the ensuing three factors emerged, namely, verbal attacks, power and control, and favouritism and jealousy. Trained by administrative support.

### **Verbal Attacks**

Blasé and Blasé (2001) highlighted that, teachers go through a range of spoken and non-verbal abuse. Furthermore, Sasson and Somech (2014) reported that managers used disguised controlling methods to monitor teachers, such as unpleasant remarks. De Wet (2010) also found that verbal abuse of teachers by their principals appeared to be a common occurrence, where this type of humiliation took place in front of colleagues. De Wet (2011) further confirmed that the nature of teacher-on-teacher bullying can be elusive and concealed in nature.

Such results were further substantiated by Baron and Neuman (1998) and Santos and Tin (2016) who held the belief that most aggressive acts in work settings do not involve physical assaults; rather, they are verbal and covert in nature. The reason behind the verbal nature of teacher abuse could be attributed to the fact that bullies want to ensure that their actions remain as secret as possible; moreover, physical assaults could result in exposed injuries that might prompt the bullied to seek legal recourse, consequently jeopardising the career and the livelihood of the perpetrator. Holding a similar view, Einarsen (1999); Salin (2003) and Binduko (2013) maintained that incidents of material aggression, are a rarity in teacher victimisation. According to McMahon et al. (2017a), teacher targets of principal bullying may frequently feel defenceless due to red type, as principals are able to make use of their capacity to locate "official avenues" to victimise teachers.

The survey conducted by (Fahie, 2014: 8) identified the principal as the authoritative figure responsible for teacher victimisation. The respondents further reported that the curriculum and co-curricular obligations were used as acts of bullying (23% and 14% respectively). On the other hand, qualitative data reported by Binduko (2013) confirmed SMT may be motivated to pressurise junior's habitually, by means of a overabundance of legitimate stipulations of the Act from the DBE, and in that way unconsciously exercising bullying strategies. Teachers need to familiarise themselves with the labour laws and educational policies that are aimed at assuring their safety and rights within the workplace.

### **Power and Control**

According to Coetzee (2017), management is an essential fragment of how the establishment (i.e., the school) operates with regard to influence, command, and self-sufficiency, and the implementation of guidelines that regulate learning accomplishments. It is for this reason that Cemaloglu (2011) asserted that some administrative types stir up fear between workforces. In the view of the authors, leadership should not be used as a mechanism to inflict pain consciously or subconsciously on employees in the workplace; however, this view is somewhat at odds with what literature suggests.

Coetzee (2017) further emphasised that domination is one of the familiar behaviour features located in teacher-on-teacher victimisation. De Wet's (2011) phenomenological study involving



teachers on the same level (horizontal) verified the above findings. Confirmation from her enquiry suggests that someone who is being victimised is often symbolised by a disproportion of dominance. Abusive teachers are regularly positioned as powerful figures by their administrators. Using a self-selected sample of 24 Irish primary school teachers, Fahie and Devine (2014) observed that the method of isolation, was the greatest regular harassment behaviour stated by the participants. Furthermore, exclusion could be used as a covert bullying method; for example, several participants from De Wet's study indicated that at the beginning of each year their principal predetermined the seating arrangements in their respective staffrooms (De Wet, 2010). This, according to the authors, is a demonstration of abusive power that principals often discharge that may also result in the formalisation of bullying. Exclusion is bullying behaviour that alienates certain individuals from the collective, thus perpetuating teacher-on-teacher victimisation.

### **Jealousy and Favouritism**

Given the nature of favouritism, Binduko (2013) asserts that victimisation have a tendency to impact the determination of the teacher. The authors opine that favouritism is the form of a divide-and-rule mechanism often used by the principals where ultimately teachers fight amongst themselves.

In demonstrating favouritism, qualitative data from De Wet (2010) revealed that principals often appoint less experienced teachers, with equal or fewer qualifications, as the victims' subject head. These, teachers are usually not officially appointed departmental heads, but they are given power by their principals to scrutinise and critique the work of their peers. Congruent with the above-mentioned report, Blasé and Blasé (2002) found that favoured teachers often support rude administrators in some way, which strengthens the administrator's control of the victims as well as exaggerates their perception of harassment. With such dominance from the principal, teachers may blindly or unknowingly take part in their own mistreatment.

Qualitative data on bullying in secondary schools, reported by Kruger (2011), further confirmed administrator-on-teacher bullying concerning irrational work prospects and preference. This type of treatment may be as result of personal and professional jealousy as observed by Orange (2018), where participants felt that their principals victimised and mistreated them out of individual dislike, and jealousy about strong social contacts and community relations that teachers had developed.

The review above indicates that teachers are susceptible to victimisation perpetrated by the colleagues, and they need constant support from the school administrators, who regrettably play a role in their (teachers)victimisation.

### **Administrative Support**

Galant, Lecocq and Philipport, (2007) provided evidence that more administrative support is linked to teacher wellbeing. Congruent with Galant et al.'s study, research by Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2011) revealed that subordinates' views of backing from their school overseers are solid forecasters of whether they opt to remain in their current field of service or pursue transfer in a different place. The above-mentioned findings resonate with (Tickle, Chang, and Kim, 2011) and (McMahon et al., 2020) who found that overseer's backing was a vital predictor in teachers' career gratification and intention to stay on in the occupation. Thus, the authors in addition advocate for the retention of adequately qualified teachers with a sound content knowledge which may be possible when principals themselves do not mistreat teachers and offer complete and constant support when colleagues are faced with teacher-on-teacher violence.

From a cross-sectional field survey, Cunniff and Mostert (2012) proposed that organisations need policies to control employment behaviour for the reason that managers appear to be the committers of teacher-on-teacher victimisation. This makes it problematic for teachers to challenge them if there is no clear policies existing. It is for this reason that Orange (2018) advocated for teachers to have protective avenues to deal with abusive managers without fear of retribution. In the same vein, Namie, Christensen and Phillips (2014) and Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik



(2010) suggested that teachers require supplementary means to defend themselves from harm, indicating a necessity for alteration in both complaint process and manager appointment process. Thus, Orange (2018) further suggested that managers be duty-bound to work with juniors who feel victimised to take up concerns prior to becoming worsened. Klein and Bentolila (2018) also recommended that efforts to prevent victimisation should incorporate all the teaching staff members in espousing open-minded style of dealing with differences. Teachers interact with their superiors on daily basis, therefore, a concerted effort that seeks to establish harmony and justice in their relationship should be upheld. Hence, McMahon et al. (2014) suggested the need for manager backing and rules that aid co-workers solve differences in constructive means.

### **Objectives**

The purpose of this article was to explore the perceptions and experiences of the teaching personnel regarding teacher-on-teacher victimisation and administrative support, which was directed by the succeeding research objectives:

\*To investigate how teachers are victimising each other

\*To ascertain the form of administrative support teachers, attain when victimised

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### **Methodology**

This article employed the phenomenological qualitative approach that is exploratory in nature, since very slight research has explored teacher-on-teacher violence. Based on phenomenological research approach, the lived encounters of the teachers about teacher victimisation and the lack of administrative support are described by the researchers' based on the participants' responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, located, within a paradigmatic viewpoint of interpretivism, the authors intended to yield an empathetic, detailed comprehension of teacher-on-teacher violence, as heightened by (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2019).

### **Selection of Participants**

Participants of this study were purposefully selected from two schools: one primary and one secondary, from one specific district in Johannesburg (South Africa). The two schools identified have experienced teacher-on-teacher violence. All the sub-groups within the teaching hierarchy were represented, except that of the deputy principal, due to the last-minute cancellation of the participant concerned. Majority of the participants have a continuous teaching experience of more than ten years, thus becoming information-rich participants in unpacking the scourge of teacher-on-teacher violence. As a result, the interviewed sample comprises, 3 Post Level One (PL1) teachers, 1 Departmental Head, and 1 Principal.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Data were collected through interviews. Masha & Eze (2022) highlighted dissimilar forms of conferences that is, (structured, semi-structured and unstructured) as owning trivial difference from each other. The authors of the article opted for the semi-structured interviewees since they permit a slight extra flexibility for the investigator to study the topic, Masha & Eze (2022). In the setting of this enquiry, the subject is teacher-on-teacher violence. The one-on-one interviews were conducted at the two respective schools of the participants after permission was approved by the Gauteng Department of Education and subsequently the respective district. The interviews were directed after normal school hours and lasted from 30-60 minutes reliant on the eminence of material the participants were prepared to share.

### **Data Analysis**

Silverman (2019), defines data analysis as involving, describing, and summarising data, on the other hand, (Dube & Shawe, 2022) conceptualised it as, meaning-making of information informed by the research questions. In this article, the thematic data analysis approach, proposed by (Laws, Harper,





& Marcus, 2003) was adopted. It entails the seven steps that were followed by the authors, after rich, subjective data and meanings presented by the teaching personnel were gathered. At the initial stage we read and reread all the data collected, step2) an initial list of themes was drawn ascending from the information, step3), data was reread to validate themes, utilising NVivo version 8 software program, used across different methods, to find common themes in content such as interview transcripts (Boyatzis, 1998). Step4), the themes were linked to the quotations, step5), categories of themes were perused for interpretation, step6), the emerging trends were indicated, and the 7<sup>th</sup> and last step, meaning was derived from the data collected, and it is deduced and argued that teacher-on-teacher violence is experienced in numerous forms and facets. Accordingly, the ensuing three key distinct themes arose: teachers are targets of violence and victimisation, unannounced class visits, lack of administrative support. The meaning derived from the three themes are discussed along with the emerging sub-themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Teachers are Targets of Violence and Victimisation

This theme recounts how the teachers are victimised at their workplace.

Benbenishty and Astor (2008) emphasised that school violence takes many forms, each with a varying rate of recurrence and different patterns of association with teachers' characteristics. Thematic data analysis revealed that teachers are exposed to threats, verbal abuse, physical attacks, and sexual violence from their colleagues, mostly from the administrators. The authors consider the acts of verbal violence, physical violence, sexual violence, unannounced class visits, and followed by lack of administrative support.

#### *Teachers are verbally victimised*

During the interviews, most of the participants confirmed that verbal abuse was the most common occurrence, compared to other forms, substantiating findings from various scholars. Concurring with majority of participants and reviewed literature, P2(teacher) disclosed the following: *"we experience verbal fights every day. The sad part is it even happens in front of the learners ... even district officials witness it when they visit the school."* This lends support to De Wet (2010) who also found that verbal abuse of teachers by their principals appeared to be a common occurrence, where this type of humiliation took place in front of colleagues. It appears that perpetrators of teacher victimisation are shameless, arrogant, and lacking in moral behaviour. The assertion was confirmed by P1(principal): *"they (teachers) verbally attack me in staff meetings, playing to the gallery"*; and by P3: *"mostly in staff meetings teachers attack each other verbally, they want numbers on their side, to be loved, respected and glorified."* Clarifying how teachers are victimised, P1(principal) had this to say: *"it is quite big, it's sort of subtle. It is like in hiding but it is there. It is not actually physical, and it is displayed by action, defiance and being uncooperative."* Concurring with this narrative, P3 confirmed that teacher-on-teacher violence is mostly verbal in form because people do not want to put things in writing, since they know it could be used against them.

In explaining the covert nature of teacher victimisation, P1(principal) further revealed that... *"perpetrators will normally get somebody to do the dirty work on their behalf because they do not want to be seen or known so that they are not charged to the extent of losing their jobs, 'there are usually masterminds behind the scenes',"* she emphasised. Weighing in on how teachers are victimising each other, P4(teacher) referred to an incident where the principal and the deputy principal exchanged words: *"There are many incidents involving teachers. Some time back when passing next to the office of the principal, I could hear the principal and the deputy principal exchanging heavy words, words that are not supposed to be uttered in such offices. It was more of a street fight, than a professional fight."* This finding confirms the existence of principal-on-deputy victimisation.



### ***Teachers are physically victimised***

Much of the previous literature, for example, (Binduko, 2013; De Wet, 2014; McMahon et al; 2017a,) found that acts of physical violence, such as hitting, slapping, and shoving, tend to be rare in workplace bullying. The rarity is consistent with the current study; however, more severe physical forms of violence were described by one participant.

Giving her personal account of events, P1(principal) shared her experiences on how she was physically attacked on the school premises by a disgruntled male teacher who had resigned some few months before, after she discovered and reported to the highest authority that the teacher was using fraudulent teaching qualifications. The attack was preceded by defiant and threatening letters that were forwarded to the victim. Interpretive methods yield insight and understandings of behaviour, and explain actions from the participants' perspectives, do not dominate the participants (Scotland, 2012), within interpretive studies, people's views are the main concern, hence the participant was allowed to elaborate further. *"As I was screaming, I was losing power as he was busy stabbing me. I think it is because of the stab wounds on my neck, in particular my jugular vein, the blood was oozing profusely, and I am on the floor. ... The police van was forcibly stopped but couldn't enter the school yard since this guy locked the school gate. The guy stood up ... I was weak ... I saw two guys holding spade approaching him ... when he stood up as well, took a brick and threw it on my forehead.* The principal felt let down by the DBE, police, and the courts after making several reports and submissions. She reinforced safety and security within the school for everyone, and the following narration pays testimony to that: *"I will tell the patrollers not to allow any visitors straight into the school building without verifying with the office. I secured everybody's life but my [safety] was not spared."* The authors purport that the verbal nature of teacher victimisation can escalate to physical violence if not given attention by the authorities, and to more severe incidents of TDV.

### ***Teachers are sexually victimised***

The participants in the current study revealed that many teachers are victimised sexually by their male components. This revelation matches prior finding by Nako and Muthukrishna (2018) where women were found to be most targets of teacher-originated sexual violence in South African schools, with male teachers as the main committers. This was supported by Monyepao (2017) affirmation that gender-based workplace violence is rife.

To give an example, P4(teacher) reported that *"a departmental head will tell the PL1 teacher that there is an upcoming position and for you to get it, you must sleep with me. Don't be scared, we can do it in my office. Everybody will be gone, and we will remain. If the teacher refuses, the matter is not reported.* This finding is further corroborated by the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU). In their opinion, the practice of selling of posts whether through the exchange of money or other favours such as sexual favours are widespread though under reported, Ministerial Task Team (MTT, 2016). In support, Mafora (2013) reported that female teachers complained about the principal giving undeserving women promotions in exchange for sexual favours.

Surprisingly, the study found a disturbing trend that some female teachers accede to the sexual advances made by their seniors to advance their careers. When P1(principal) was probed on the same aspect of sexual victimisation, she revealed the following: *"It exists and I know of female teachers who have acceded to that, some of them are even proud, saying that it's a once off encounter stating that 'I cannot be in one position just because I don't want to sleep with a particular individual'. Some of our lady teachers are even proud of that and they do get positions."* The authors maintain that some victims of teacher-instigated sexual violence play a role in their own victimisation, consequently exacerbating the scourge. On the other hand, the unwilling participants of sexual violence are left with emotional harm.

The study also established that principals victimised teachers by conducting unannounced class visits, which the participants view as an abuse of authority accompanied by gross intimidation.



### **Unannounced class visits**

It is the responsibility of the departmental head to conduct agreed class visits to teachers falling within his or her department, to regularly review teacher's professional practice with the aim of improving teaching, learning and management as stipulated in the Personnel Administrative Measures, PAM (DBE, 2016). That being the case, the authors argue that class visits fall under the core duties and responsibilities of the subject departmental head. The principal is the head of administration and management of the school, not management of specific subjects or assessing teachers' performance, because the responsible departmental head is appointed to carry out such functions.

Contrarily, empirical data has revealed that some school principals use unannounced class visits as a measure to target teachers who are questioning their authority. For example, teacher (2) complained about how the principal victimised teachers who were vocal: *"when we are in a staff meeting and you talk too much you will receive an unannounced class visit. The principal will just come into class and say I am here to observe how you teach."* According to the participant such conduct is unprofessional because there must be a management plan and he thus viewed this as intimidation. Reporting on the same aspect and corroborating what this teacher said, P5(departmental head), divulged that *"the principal wanted to do unannounced class visits, and I suspected that he wanted to do 'witch hunting', targeting one of the teachers."* These findings are in line with the study by De Wet (2014) where a participant indicated that her school principal often did class visitations unannounced.

### **LACK OF ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT**

The acts of lack of administrative support were established at various levels involving multiple individuals, and the findings are presented below

#### **a) School level**

At the school level, McMahon, Reaves, McConnell, Peist, Ruiz and the APA Task Force (2017b) identified principals as key stakeholders when it comes to shaping the school climate and safety that can reduce or increase the negative impact of violence against teachers. In addition, one of the core duties and the responsibility of the principal is to provide professional leadership within the school and support non-teaching staff and teachers (PAM, DBE, 2016). However, the findings of the study suggest the contrary.

Relating her experiences on how the principal ignored her outcry when attacked by a colleague, P3(teacher) revealed the following: *"I went to his office seeking for protection after my colleague threw an empty bottle towards me, instead of assisting me to take steps against the perpetrator, we were instead called into the office to reconcile, forgive each other and move on, no disciplinary action was taken against the teacher"*. Expressing a helpless environment, P4(teacher) disclosed that, *"the administrators are not supporting us, the principal and his entire SMT seem not to care about our plight, we suffer constant verbal attacks from our colleagues, it has become a way of life"*

#### **b) District level**

Mahome and Rampa (2019) suggested that teachers need support from different stakeholders to handle the daily attacks they come across at their workplace. The scholars identified the district and the Head Office as avenues of teachers' support. In this regard, Mahome (2017) found that teachers view the district as an avenue for teacher support, especially when confronted with violent behaviour from different role players. However, the findings of the study have presented some district officials (learning facilitators and Institutional Development and Support Officer, IDSOs) as playing a role in teacher victimisation.

P5(departmental head) had this to say: *"the district has not been helpful because ... in fact the district must reconcile parties. Unfortunately, in most cases, they are interested in charging and dismissing the teacher. They never reconcile, they do not use alternative dispute resolution*





*methods.*” In corroboration and expressing his displeasure, P2(teacher) conceded that “*there is no district support, we are on our own.*” In concurrence, P3(teacher) disclosed that he had never received any support from the district, regardless of whether he was traumatised because their aim was to remove the teacher from the school or silence him. Complaining about the district, he said, “*they will never ever come to a victimised teacher to provide some form of therapy or counselling. The only thing they know is to deal with teachers who are vocal. That is how they operate. They can even remove you from school and place you somewhere in an office where no one can see you because you are influencing other teachers.*” The narrative by the teacher on the lack of therapy and counselling illustrates lack of information on the free access to services provided by the DBE, such as the Employee Health and Wellness Programme (EHWP) that address, amongst other things, the wellbeing of the teachers.

### **c) Law enforcement agencies level**

McMahon et al. (2017b) reported that teachers described problems with violence that were not resolved at the school level and required additional support outside systems such as union representation, police, or legal representation. This correlates with the findings of this study.

When the helpless P1(principal) who had been tormented by a teacher for a period of seven years, was probed on how the tension was resolved, she has this to say: “*the day the case was supposed to sit the senior prosecutor phoned me to say, in his view I am in the wrong: ‘you are supposed to treat your subordinates fairly, put some systems into place’. I was dismissed indicating that I do not have a case. There is nothing they could do, this happened while he (the disgruntled teacher) was threatening me.*” The mistreatment of the participant is consistent with what was observed by Monyepao (2017), namely, that workplace bullying victims are often unprotected, accused of being weak, seeking attention and incapable: there is no empathetic ear for them.

Disclosing further details, P1(principal) said the following: “*my key witness in this case was shot and killed by unknown assailants. Even now, the treatment I am receiving from the DBE is like I deserve what happened to me. According to them, it was going to be minus one.*” “*Because God has his own plans, I survived, they (district officials) have been exposed a lot about my case, especially here in my District*” she concluded. This finding supports the postulation by De Wet (2010) that workplaces in the South African public sector may be regarded as psychologically and physically “toxic. This is also applicable to schools where teachers are at “war” with each other, making teaching a high-risk occupation as contended by Blasé et al. (2008).

The study has established that teachers at different levels are victimised by various DBE officials occupying a range of positions, as a result, the law enforcement agencies become a final course of action in curtailing the scourge of teacher-on-teacher violence. Thus, the law enforcement agencies need to earnestly and immediately respond to reports of school-related violence, particularly teacher-on-teacher violence.


## **CONCLUSION**


Evidence unveiled that teachers were subjected to threats, verbal abuse, physical attacks, and sexual violence from their colleagues, particularly the administrators. Most of the participants confirmed verbal abuse as the most common occurrence, compared to other forms. It was found that teachers lacked support from various stakeholders when confronted with the scourge of teacher victimisation. Furthermore, at the district level, findings indicated that teachers at different levels were victimised by various DBE officials occupying a range of positions. As a result, the law enforcement agencies became a final course of action in curtailing the scourge of teacher-on-teacher violence. However, evidence suggested that law enforcement agencies appear disinterested and did not investigate teacher victimisation matters or report them to relevant institutions. Given the interviews conducted, the findings indicated that the verbal nature of teacher victimisation can escalate to physical violence if not given attention by the authorities, and to more severe episodes of teacher-on-teacher violence. The participants of the current study revealed that some teachers were victimised sexually by their male counterparts. Surprisingly, the

study found a disturbing trend that some female teachers acceded to the sexual advances made by their seniors to advance their careers. Emerging from the findings is that teacher-on-teacher violence is experienced in numerous forms and facets. The district officials, especially IDSO's, given their proximity to schools, should provide constant support to any form of a reported case of abuse. Class visits are essential to teacher development, and they should be properly conducted, and not used as a mechanism to settle scores. The Education Ministry needs to ensure that proper and effective reporting channels are established at the district and provincial level where teachers can report abuse and harassment, especially where principals and other SMT members happen to be perpetrators. This will bring the adequate awareness on the nature and existence of the phenomenon.

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