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Teachers' experiences of human rights violations and safety challenges in selected secondary schools of Limpopo Province

Julius Theledi Nkube,[1] & Khashane Stephen Malatji[1,2]

[1] *School of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Education, University of Mpumalanga, Siyabuswa Campus, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa*
[2]*School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, University of Limpopo, Turfloop Campus, Limpopo, South Africa*

Corresponding author, email: *theledi.nkube@ump.ac.za*

Abstract

This study investigates the forms of human rights violations teachers face, how these affect their work and emotional well-being, and whether institutional and policy responses are suitable. South African teachers continue to experience human rights violations that threaten their safety, dignity, and effectiveness, yet this issue remains underexplored in learner-centred research. A qualitative case study design grounded in an interpretive paradigm was applied in this study. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving six teachers, two learners, and two school management members across three secondary schools in Limpopo. Results show teachers encounter verbal abuse, bullying, and a lack of institutional protection, leading to emotional burnout, lowered motivation, and sometimes thoughts of resignation. A clear policy-practice gap emerges, although laws protect all school community members on paper, disciplinary actions and management responses tend to prioritise learner rights, leaving teachers vulnerable and unsupported. The study concluded that inadequate school management responses and ineffective policy implementation contribute significantly to teachers' exposure to human rights violations and safety risks. The study recommends increasing awareness of teachers' rights. Moreover, the study recommended strengthening school safety mechanisms, improving communication between teachers and the Department of Basic Education, and providing professional psychological support for affected teachers.

Keywords: bullying, discipline, human rights, policy, school safety, violence

Introduction and Background

The Bill of Rights establishes democratic values of freedom and dignity for all in South Africa. Section 7 of the Constitution requires public institutions, including schools, to proactively uphold these human rights (RSA, 1996). This obligation also applies to teachers, whose rights to human dignity, safety, and fair treatment must be observed in all school settings. However, empirical evidence indicates that implementation of these principles in daily school practice remains incomplete. Reports of teacher-directed violence and intimidation continue across South African schools. A well-known incident of a learner arriving at school armed with a knife to threaten educators in Limpopo school reflects a broader trend documented in both policy reviews and academic research. Hoffman (2018) estimates that approximately 5.8% of South Africa's 3.8 million teachers have been physically assaulted; Will (2018) reports that some injured teachers have resigned as a result. Despite this evidence, Mollema (2018) contends that violations of teachers' human rights are persistent and normalised, while institutional responses remain inconsistent and insufficient. Most research has focused on learner rights and student-centred discipline, leaving teachers' experiences of rights violations less examined. The gap between constitutional protections for teachers and their actual experiences of vulnerability, which this study terms the policy-practice gap, is the central issue under investigation.

Literature review

Teacher Victimisation and Workplace Violence

Violence in South African schools is not exceptional but embedded in daily school life (Mollema, 2018). Teachers encounter a variety of violations, including verbal harassment, sexual remarks, public humiliation, physical assaults, and theft of personal property (Jordaan, 2018). Globally, research confirms that violence directed at teachers is a systemic issue. Kauppi and Pörhölä (2012) show how ongoing learner aggression influences teachers' professional identities, while McMahon et al. (2014) find strong links between exposure to school violence and teacher burnout in the United States. In South Africa, De Wet and Jacobs (2013) reveal that teachers' experiences of victimisation are often overlooked in research and policy, which contributes to normalising abuse within school cultures. Mahome, Mphahlele and Malatji (2024) add that although teacher unions recognise the issue, their responses lack sufficient sustained effort. Research consistently views disruptive learner behaviour as a classroom management problem, often overlooking the emotional effort teachers invest when facing threats and humiliation (Grazina & Brigita, 2017). This perspective marginalises teachers' feelings of insecurity and fear. Mhlongo, Maile, and Malatji (2021) advocated for a collaborative approach that provides both teachers and learners fair protection in their study.

Policy and Institutional Responses

South Africa's national policies on school violence include the National School Safety Framework (RSA, 2015), which highlights systemic issues such as drug abuse, poverty, and gang activity as roots of unsafe school settings. While professional organisations recognise that increasing disrespect and disobedience contribute to teachers feeling insecure, efforts to implement policies consistently across institutions remain weak (Jordaan, 2018; RSA, 2015). Reuben et al. (2016) also observe that gang-related networks penetrate school environments, creating a persistent sense of threat that erodes teacher authority beyond the individual classroom. When schools respond slowly or inconsistently to codes of conduct, teachers often feel isolated and vulnerable (De Wet & Jacobs, 2013). Moagi and Malatji (2025) noted that organisational arrangements frequently fail to provide fair protection for both students and teachers, thereby widening the policy-practice gap highlighted in this study. According to Johnson et al. (2021), observed in a comparative study of low-income schools, that inconsistent leadership responses to violence considerably undermined teachers' trust in formal reporting systems.

Teacher Rights and Professional Dignity

Post-apartheid South African law recognises teachers as holders of constitutional rights, including the rights to dignity, safety, and fair treatment. However, Jordan (2018) observes that teachers view disciplinary policies as favouring learner rights over their own safety and authority. This view is strengthened when complaints to school management or the Department of Basic Education are ignored or poorly addressed. Van Wyk (2000) suggests that harming teachers' professional dignity leads to emotional strain and demoralisation, which may escalate over time, affecting both individual teachers and school stability. Recent research extends these concerns beyond South Africa, with Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2020) finding that lack of support from supervisors is a key predictor of teacher burnout and intentions to leave the profession across international contexts.

School Governance and Discipline Systems

The imbalance between protections for learners and teachers partly stems from post-apartheid legislative priorities that rightly focused on learner dignity after years of abuse (RSA, 1996). However, Mahome, Mphahlele, and Malatji (2024) contend that this has led to a policy environment where teachers face structural disadvantages in disciplinary procedures. While school governing bodies and circuit managers play key roles in addressing this imbalance, Reuben et al. (2016) note that district oversight often does not extend to the classroom. Additionally, age and perceived authority gaps between younger teachers and senior students pose further difficulties in enforcing rules and ensuring disciplinary consistency (RSA, 2015).

Identification of the Research Gap

The literature review shows that violence against teachers is prevalent, insufficiently addressed by institutions, and has serious professional and personal impacts. Studies conducted internationally and within the South African context indicate that teachers frequently experience verbal abuse, intimidation, physical aggression, and psychological violence from learners, parents, and community members, often within environments characterised by social inequality and weak disciplinary systems (Espelage et al., 2013; De Wet, 2010; Joubert, 2019). Research further suggests that institutional responses to teacher victimisation are often inadequate, with many educators' perceiving school management and education authorities as inconsistent or ineffective in implementing policies designed to protect teachers' rights and safety (Maphosa & Shumba, 2010; Osman, 2021). The consequences of such violence include emotional distress, burnout, reduced professional morale, absenteeism, and intentions to leave the profession, thereby negatively affecting teaching and learning processes (Wilson, Douglas & Lyon, 2011; McMahon et al., 2014).

Most existing studies rely heavily on quantitative surveys, national reports, and policy document analyses to identify the prevalence and patterns of school violence (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Department of Basic Education, 2022). While these approaches provide valuable statistical and policy-level insights, they offer limited understanding of how teachers themselves interpret and experience rights violations within their everyday classroom interactions. Furthermore, there remains limited qualitative inquiry into how teachers negotiate authority in multilingual, culturally diverse, and socioeconomically unequal school contexts, particularly in secondary schools where learner discipline and power relations are often contested (Sayed & Badroodien, 2018). Existing literature also pays insufficient attention to the reasons teachers may hesitate to formally report incidents of violence, including fear of retaliation, lack of confidence in institutional support, and the normalisation of violence within schools (De Wet & Jacobs, 2013).

Consequently, there is a scarcity of in-depth, classroom-level qualitative research examining the gap between policy frameworks and lived realities in schools. This study therefore seeks to bridge this gap by exploring teachers' perceptions of rights violations and institutional protections in everyday secondary school settings. By foregrounding teachers lived experiences and interpretations, the study aims to provide nuanced empirical insights that extend beyond predominantly quantitative and policy-oriented research, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of teacher safety, authority, and rights within contemporary schooling contexts.

Research question

- How do teachers experience human rights violations and safety challenges in select South African secondary schools?

Research objective

- To identify the forms of these violations and their consequences for teachers' emotional well-being, professional practice, and sense of institutional support.

Theoretical framework

This study is guided primarily by Curwin and Mendler's (1999) Discipline with Dignity model, which emphasises that effective school environments require the protection of human dignity for all members of the school community, including teachers. The model advocates prevention, structured action, and resolution in addressing behavioural challenges, and positions teachers as central agents who require institutional support and moral authority to function effectively. Importantly, it connects the loss of teacher dignity to decreased motivation, emotional burnout, and disengagement from the profession, outcomes that closely align with the experiences described in this study. While the Discipline with Dignity model provides the primary analytical lens, two complementary perspectives inform the study's broader interpretive frame. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory highlights the layered institutional and social contexts of the classroom, school, district, and policy environment that shape teachers' experiences of vulnerability. Human rights-based education

frameworks (Unterhalter, 2014) further contextualise teachers as human rights-bearing professionals whose constitutional entitlements require active institutional enactment rather than mere formal recognition. Together, these perspectives enable a multi-level analysis of how organisational arrangements and policy systems shape individual experiences of human rights violations. By applying Curwin and Mendler's model, this study interprets teachers' reported powerlessness, emotional strain, and reluctance to pursue formal complaints as symptoms of systemic failures to uphold dignity within school governance structures. The framework guided both the design of data collection instruments and the thematic interpretation of findings.

Methods

A qualitative research approach, guided by an interpretive paradigm, was used to develop a detailed, contextually grounded understanding of teachers' experiences of rights violations and safety issues (Maree, 2012). A case study design was chosen because it enables an in-depth, multi-source exploration of complex social phenomena in real-world settings.

Site Selection and Sampling

The study was conducted across three public secondary schools in Limpopo Province, selected purposively on the basis of documented reports of abuse and behaviour management difficulties. Three schools were selected to enable cross-site comparison and to enhance the transferability of findings to similar Limpopo secondary school contexts characterised by high rates of learner misbehaviour and resource constraints. A total of ten participants took part: six teachers (T1–T6) from different disciplines and grade levels, two learners (L3 and L6) in Grades 10 and 11 who had witnessed or been involved in incidents affecting teachers. Teachers ranged in experience from 3 through 25 years; the two junior teachers had fewer than 5 years, and the four senior teachers had more than 10. School management representatives had served in leadership roles for more than five years.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with all ten participants in private settings within each school. This setup facilitated open and confidential discussions about sensitive experiences. The interviews examined participants' perceptions of rights violations, their experiences with institutional protection or the lack thereof, and the emotional and professional impacts of school-based violence. Additionally, 12 classroom and corridor observations were conducted across the three schools, four in each, providing supplementary insights into disciplinary practices, teacher–learner interactions, and the overall safety environment. These observations served to triangulate and contextualise the interview data rather than acting as separate sources.

Data analysis

The data were analysed thematically, with interview transcripts and observation notes concurrently coded to uncover patterns connected to rights awareness, institutional protection, emotional impact, and classroom behaviour. These codes were organised gradually into themes and sub-themes through an iterative review process.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was enhanced through member checking, in which key interpretations were shared with participants for their feedback. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a detailed audit trail of all methodological decisions. The consistency of findings was reinforced through the triangulation of interview and observation data. Transferability was achieved by providing a thorough description of the research sites, participants, and observed practices, allowing readers to determine how the findings are applicable to similar contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee. All adult participants provided written informed consent. For minors, consent from parents or guardians and assent from the children were obtained. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality

was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and identifiers. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team and will be securely destroyed in accordance with the university's data retention policy. A referral process was put in place with local clinics and social workers to assist any participants experiencing distress.

Results

Teachers' awareness of violence and human rights violations in schools

The results were obtained through questions about participants' understanding of violations of teachers' rights and the causes of violence in a school environment. Responses showed that learners and teachers have limited knowledge of the existence of human rights violations.

T2 said, *"Learner bullying has always left us in fear. The principal always reminds us about the type of profession we applied for. He says we must always be parents."* **and continued, stating,** *"Learners are always threatening us. At times, even insults us. What happened to our rights?"*

L3 indicated: "*The Department of Education is always open, and the circuit manager told us that she is always available."* Then the learner added that "*Teachers cannot be right all the time ... We have rights, they must listen to us."*

T4 declared*, "I know teachers and learners have equal rights..."* **T4 further said**, *"But sometimes it feels like we only learn about student rights. We hear about the Constitution and rules, but it is not always clear how they protect us as teachers. All the time, we think more training and guidance will help us better understand and exercise our rights."*

L6 declared: *"Teachers are our parents in schools; human rights are for everyone living in South Africa; we know that the government listens to us; teachers and the principal must make sure we are safe in our school, but we must stop fighting and intimidating our teachers."*

T3 remarked: "*Educators must ensure that the South African Constitution is observed and protected in schools. In our school, we developed policies that cover learners' rights, policies on discipline, and policies on culture, religion, and beliefs have been developed that cover the interests of learners' rights; educators should be protected by their employer."*

The responses from both groups, namely teachers and learners, have led us to believe they have a narrow understanding of human rights, including their legal status and their effects in schools. Accordingly, both learners and teachers face considerable challenges; however, the policies are biased in favour of learners, placing teachers under additional pressure to fulfil the responsibilities assigned to them.

Teachers' experience of human rights protection in a school environment

The participants' responses showed they were not fully protected. This conclusion was reached by asking questions to explore the extent of violations of teachers' human rights and the measures taken to protect both teachers and learners. The following were the responses.

T1 stated that: "*Educators and learners interact every day, we see human rights being ignored and violated daily, with no one having any interest to deal with such problems, when learners misbehave, we send them home, at times we even send them home even when they come late to school, corporal punishment still exists in our school, in turn, the learners retaliate during lessons, these challenges are not given attention, they are never addressed, as a result, they promote arrogance and a lack of respect in our school."*

P1 responded: "*We have all types of policies, solutions to individual challenges are available, and teachers are given priority."*

T2 asserted: *"Grade 11 learners once insulted me. I went to the principal to report, and I was told to learn about the type of learners we teach. In case the principal tried to make me understand, 'my hands were tied, I had no option but to listen; it was challenging."*

T3 revealed: "*The principal and circuit manager always leave us frustrated when we report this type of issue."*

The responses helped the researchers to learn that the schools' management and the Department of Education, as the employer, have reported little adequate protection for teachers. Teachers have reported that they often avoided raising human rights concerns because school management teams and the Department of Basic Education appeared reluctant to intervene. In accordance, several teachers reported considering resigning as a coping strategy. Teachers feel that nothing will be done about their problems, they are not safe, and no action is being taken. Several younger teachers reported considering alternative careers.

Teachers' experiences of how school violence affects teachers

We used the primary question, "how the violation of human rights affects teachers' safety in a school environment," which helped us uncover the fact that educators are vulnerable and often live in fear.

T2 admitted: *"I started to feel less important in that school. I then became angry and bitter. The other problem is that I could feel angry even when I am at home. My learners' academic results started to be very poor."*

T3 commented: *"It was difficult for me to attend classes these days. My learners could see this, and they started to relax in my presence; I am more affected psychologically."*

T1 divulged that: *"I always have embittered feelings"* ***and further stated that*** *"I feel like it is useless these days to go to work every day, I cannot give it my all. To be honest, I am tired; I am thinking about how my colleagues could do that to me, stab me in the back, and why should I contribute?"*

T6 revealed: *"At times, I feel completely burnt out. My friend had a wedding, and I could not go. I am very angry. I am so angry." "This issue has hijacked my marriage."*

T5 declared: *"I am very demoralised, I want to quit my job," "it is difficult for me at this school."*

Interviews revealed emotional distress among both learners and teachers. Teachers appeared to experience more severe effects and reported receiving less support from the Department of Education and school management. A total of four teachers interviewed had suffered a great deal; all had sought professional or psychological help. They indicated that both their social and family lives had suffered because of experiences involving human rights violations. They indicated that leaving their profession was considered a possible coping strategy and helped them address the struggles and difficulties they faced in the school environment. Participants reported difficulty coping with sustained school-based pressure.

Observations

Classroom Behaviour and School Climate.

Observational data confirmed interview reports. In 12 lessons observed, disruptions were noted in 8. Students often spoke out of turn, moved around, and used dismissive language toward teachers. Teachers typically responded with verbal requests rather than formal disciplinary actions, indicating reluctance to escalate issues they felt would not be supported institutionally. In one Grade 10 class, a student refused to leave after multiple warnings and stayed for the entire lesson without further intervention. Observations in corridors and the playground showed similar patterns, including verbal abuse among peers and occasional disregard for teachers' supervision. Teachers showed visible signs of emotional stress, such as long silences after disruptions, avoidance of eye contact, and nervous gestures. These signs matched participants' self-reports of burnout and fear.

Discussion

The findings confirm and expand on existing evidence that teachers in South Africa face significant human rights violations, with institutional responses regularly failing to meet constitutional standards. Three key themes emerge from the data: the structural dimensions of limited

rights awareness, the systemic inadequacy of institutional protection, and the accumulated personal and professional costs of sustained exposure to rights violations.

Limited Awareness as a Structural Vulnerability

Teachers' limited understanding of their legal rights extends beyond individual ignorance; it is a systemic vulnerability caused by inadequate rights education within the profession. As Curwin and Mendler (1999) state, mutual awareness of rights and responsibilities is essential for respectful interactions. Without this, teachers struggle to invoke institutional protections, widening the gap between policy and practice. Grazina and Brigita (2017) support this, showing that poor rights literacy leads to harmful rather than positive teacher–learner relationships. These findings indicate that this issue is systemic, impacting both experienced and new teachers across three sites. 6.

Teachers' experience of human rights protection in a school environment

Participants described dismissive management responses and frustrating interactions with circuit managers, highlighting a systemic failure to implement constitutional commitments consistently within institutions. Curwin and Mendler (1999) emphasise that when institutions fail to protect dignity, vulnerability increases. This study shows that such failures are patterned: teachers repeatedly experience a cycle of reporting and dismissal, leading to withdrawal from formal channels. De Wet and Jacobs (2013) previously noted the normalisation of teacher victimisation in school cultures, and this study confirms that inadequate management responses actively reproduce this normalisation. Moagi and Malatji (2025) observed that organisational setups fail to provide fair protection, a finding this study empirically confirms at the classroom level. Skaalvik and Skaalvik's (2020) international research, which links a lack of supervisory support to teacher burnout and attrition, aligns closely with South African data. When teachers believe that neither school management nor district officials will address their concerns, withdrawing professionally becomes a rational response rather than a personal failure.

Teachers' experiences of how school violence affects teachers

Participants reported emotional exhaustion, strained family relationships, and thoughts of quitting, highlighting the ongoing toll of rights violations. Van Wyk (2000) describes emotional exhaustion and demoralisation as common outcomes of dignity erosion among teachers, while Hoffman (2013) links frequent exposure to learner aggression with long-term effects on teachers' social and family lives. These findings align with previous research and suggest that younger, less experienced teachers are particularly at risk, as they often lack the institutional knowledge and professional networks needed to navigate rights-based reporting systems. These costs extend beyond individual well-being, leading to teacher attrition, decreased engagement, and worsening classroom environments, all of which negatively impact learner outcomes (Mhlongo, Maile & Malatji, 2021).

Conclusion

This study provides empirically based evidence of a systemic gap between policy and practice in safeguarding teachers' human rights in South African secondary schools. This gap has been largely overlooked by current learner-focused research and policy frameworks. By highlighting teachers' perspectives on dignity, institutional neglect, and professional vulnerability, the study indicates that protections for constitutional rights are inconsistently applied in schools, with significant effects on teacher well-being, motivation, and retention. Without targeted structural reforms that improve rights awareness, institutional accountability, psychological support, and fair discipline, the legal framework for school safety will continue to fail educators, who are essential to effective teaching and learning.

Recommendations

The study's recommendations are organised into four levels, each assigning specific responsibilities to relevant stakeholders.

Teacher Capacity Development

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the South African Council for

Educators (SACE) should develop and implement structured rights education programs for both in-service and pre-service teachers. These programs should cover constitutional protections, formal reporting procedures, and the application of human dignity principles in classroom management. Teacher unions should support these efforts with awareness campaigns and readily accessible guidance materials.

Institutional Accountability

School Management Teams (SMTs) and School Governing Bodies (SGBs) need to enforce clear, consistent protocols for handling teacher complaints about violence and rights violations. Responses to formal complaints must be documented, timely, and reviewable by circuit managers. Additionally, the DBE should develop a monitoring system to ensure districts comply with school safety frameworks.

Psychological and Well-being Support

The DBE, working alongside district health services and social welfare organisations, should establish accessible mental health support services for teachers impacted by rights violations and school violence. Referral processes should be formalised and widely communicated to staff, and stigma-reduction initiatives should be implemented at the school level.

Policy Reform and Implementation Monitoring

Disciplinary frameworks should be reviewed to guarantee fair protection of both learners' and teachers' rights, in line with the constitutional duty to maintain dignity for all. Regular, structured monitoring visits by circuit managers and DBE officials should evaluate implementation of the National School Safety Framework, with outcomes used to guide targeted assistance. Teacher unions should be formally involved as partners in policy review activities.

Study limitations

The study was conducted in a small number of secondary schools and involved a limited group of participants. As is typical in qualitative case study research, the intention was not to produce statistically generalisable findings but to generate in-depth, contextually grounded insights into teachers' experiences of rights violations and safety challenges. Transferability is therefore dependent on the similarity between the study sites and other South African school contexts. A thick description of the setting, participants, and observed practices has been provided to enable readers to judge the applicability of the findings to their own context. The observation component was limited in duration and therefore served as a supplementary source of data to interviews rather than a complete ethnographic account.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed substantially to the conception and design of the study, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, drafting and critical revision of the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication. All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work and have read and approved the final manuscript.

ORCID

Nkube JT: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8694-5619

Malatji KS: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4711-5679

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