THE EFFECTS OF THE EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF LEARNERS IN THE SARAH BAARTMAN DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY, EASTERN CAPE

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ABSTRACT

Violation of learners in schools, has gained substantial media attention across South Africa in the 20th century. The attitudes of learners have changed and the value attached to education diminished. "There is increasing concerns within South Africa that primary and high schools are sites of widespread violence". The aim of this paper is to explore the effects of school violence on the psychological well-being of learners. A qualitative approach and an exploratory research design were used in conducting this study. A purposive sample was employed to select participants for the study. Forty participants were selected for the study as follows: 25 learners; 5 social Workers; 5 educators; and 5 community members from schools mostly affected by school-based violence. Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews; focus group discussions with learners. Data was analysed thematically and supported by the relevant literature. The findings revealed that exposure to violence within the school environment affects negatively both the development and well-being of learners. Exposure to violence impairs learners' emotions and cognition and it ultimately leads to increased levels of anxiety and depression. Finally, low self-esteem, thoughts of self-destruction and severe behavioural conditions are what victims face log-term in Sarah Baartman District Municipality due to the frequency of exposure to violence in schools.

KEY TERMS: violence, schools, exposure, mental well-being, learners, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

School violence has a negative impact on learners as it causes them not to focus on their school/ academic work, increases the rates of dropouts and suicides in schools. The pestilence of school-based violence schools across the country is a major factor of distress to all citizens of South Africa. Broadcasts on instances of gang-related violence and the presence of weapons in schools appear daily via printed and electronic media (UNICEF; 2001). Sarah Baartman District is highly affected by violence with 2 in 10 learners having reported to be victimised in their respective schools. It is reported that the number of cases of suicide among learners rose by 9% in 2015 (Sarah Baartman District Municipality Annual Report, 2016). There are multiple victims of psychological abuse in schools; such victims are psychologically abused through exposure to trauma, anxiety, rejection, distortion and many more factors thus, resulting to depression or post-traumatic stress disorder". According to the study, victims are learners smaller in physical being, violated by their bigger built peers in various ways, physically and psychologically (Small; 2015). Violence in South African schools is not a new phenomenon it has been occurring since the nineties the brutality has however, increased in the last ten years. The fact that there are schools that offer formal education is an indication that violence takes place within the premises of such schools in one form or another (The World Bank, 2011). Schools, which should be a safe haven for young people, and where children of school-going age (ages 6 to 18) spend three-quarters of their waking hours, have instead become sites where young people are at-risk of becoming victims to violence. Learner violence affects not only those who are directly victimised but also those who witness the occurrence of such violence in schools. The research question that assisted in achieving the goal of this study was: How does school violence affect learners in the selected schools?

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

Burton (2008:17) delimits that "schools are generally seen as mechanisms to develop and reinforce positive citizens with pro-social attitudes and as sites where individuals are prepared for the role they are to play in society at large". Though, research and broadcasts portray that regardless of widespread discourse, schools appear to be establishments of violence (Jefthas and Artz, 2010). It is quite apparent to South African inhabitants that violence is a major apprehension in primary and secondary schools across the country. Another factor that became evident throughout readings was that learners are faced with different types of violence and emotional victimisation occurs more frequently than physical victimisation. The main types of emotional victimisation prevalent in schools are: isolation; degrading; rejection; and public humiliation. Emotional victimisation causes psychological distress in victims as there are no bruises visible for them to show as evidence of violation thus impairing the mental well-being of learners (Jacobs, 2013).

   Psychological victimisation is an authoritative term used in schools that contains spheres of harassment, provocation, victimisation, obnoxious terrorizations and extortion. Violation can occur inequitable in a number of scholastic situations, both amongst educators and learners and between learners and their peers. While a single episode of violation could occur, psychological violence often involves multiple undesirable, unreciprocated and imposed action that may have a distressing result on the victim. Psychological oppression of learners transpires when a learner feels isolated, helpless or anxious by an educator in class. This kind of oppression can have enduring effects on the performance and willingness of a learner to keenly partake in the classroom. Subsequently it could result in a learner demonstrating confrontational and disruptive behaviour in the classroom.

   Physical and psychological school-based violence may overlap. While the acts and effects of physical violation are often easily recognised, psychological violence leaves no physical wounds or indication of violation. Yet, it can have a devastating and enduring effect on a learner. It is contended that while the existence of physical violence in schools has always been known, the presence of psychological violence is underestimated and therefore, receives less attention than it should (Burton and Leoschut, 2012). According to Aluede (2004), in instances of psychological abuse, the consequence of being subjected to such abuse becomes the fundamental representative of character in the life of the victim. As a result, victims of psychological abuse do not develop into proficient adults as, the abuse hampers them from reaching their complete potential.

   Subsequently, Aluede (2004) advises that learners should not be psychologically abused because it demeans and dehumanizes them; it destroys their sense of self; causes learners to not progress academically; demotivates them from learning; distorts their personality; causes isolation from peers; confuses learners; disgraces them; and terrifies learners. Learners who have been psychologically victimised display the following symptoms: "excessive anxiety about academic performance; change from positive to negative self-perception; dread that educators could hurt them; excessive crying about scholastic activities; migraines; abdominal pains; decreased functioning in social situations outside class; nightmares or insomnia; school avoidance; and isolation or depression" (Aluede, 2004:268). Victims of psychological abuse may contravene themselves, this is revealed clearly in some persons with dissociative identity disorder, within whom one person denies the existence of others. This disorder often manifests in destructive behaviour directed against one's own body (including self-mutilation, burning, pain-inducing masturbation, eating disorders like bulimia and anorexia). Furthermore, thrill-seeking behaviour

including driving while heavily intoxicated or engaging in high-risk sexual behaviour such as unprotected sexual intercourse or sexual activity with strangers (Aluede, 2004).

The outcome of psychological violation of children in schools could lead to serious emotional and behavioural problems, including depression, absence of affection to a parent or guardian, low cognition resulting in poor academic achievement and lack of social skills. In a study that examined psychologically abused children in their infancy and later throughout pre-school, discovered children were constantly irritated, disobliging and unattached to their principal provider. Children involved in the study furthermore, fell short of inventiveness, determination and eagerness to perform (Tackman, 2008). Majority of rejected children turn to suicide (Jacobs, 2013). In an article published in the Sunday Times in 2015 on emotional vitimisation, Naarse (2015: 4) stated that as follows: "A nineteen-year-old learner humiliated in public, shunned by friends and hounded by the media, the girl at the centre of the so-called Jules High sex video took her life last year". The learner was involved in a sex scandal two years prior to her suicide due to psychological victimisation and humiliation and decided to take an overdose of her mother's medication for high blood pressure (Naarse, 2015). Psychological victimisation is more dangerous than physical violation as there are no scars to prove violation hence, victims suffer in silence which not only affects their well-being and progress but their health as well. Therefore, some schools have sought help from social workers (Social Development and Child Welfare) who are helpful in assisting learners who are overwhelmed by their circumstances at school.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Using a gender sensitive frame of reference derived from the conflict theory, gender violence is clustered into two overlapping categories. The first category is explicit gender (sexual) violence, which includes sexual harassment, intimidation, abuse, assault and rape, and implicit gender violence, which includes corporal punishment, bullying, verbal and psychological abuse, educators unofficial use of students for free labour and other forms of aggressive or unauthorised behaviour that is violent (Akiba et al., 2002). The second is implicit abuse is gender specificity in cases of verbal abuse that is overly sexual or psychological in nature. Students on other students and by educators on students can perpetrate this abuse. These forms of violence are understood and reported within a framework of heterosexual gender relations. Both explicit and implicit forms of abuse will be explored in this analysis. First, we need to understand the contextual and cultural issues that dictate the social arena in sub-Saharan African schools. Aluede (2004) explains that any institutional practice or process that adversely affects individuals or groups by weighing them down psychologically, intellectually, ethnically, spiritually, financially, or physically, can lead to systemic violence.

When applied to educational practice, it means practices and procedures that avert learners from learning, thus impairing learners in over competitive learning environments, toleration of mistreatment, lack of school disciplinary strategies and expulsion procedures. Gale, Furlong, D'Incau and Morrison (2010) state that the conflict depicts a battle for authority between opposing social groups (economic class groupings, genders, ethnic groups and religious conviction). When conflict theorists analyse society, they comprehend the existence social deprivation of subordinate groups due to influence, authority and coercion of supreme groups mostly relating to the financial affluence of dominant groups (Ward, 2011). With conflict interpretation, the most influential affiliates of a leading group are allied as guidelines for victory and prospect in society, frequently denying inferior groups from obtaining power and success; thus ensuring that the dominant continue to monopolise authority and privileges. The principal reason for social problems, as explained by conflict theorists, is the exploitation and subjugation of inferior/ less affluent groups/ individuals by ruling parties. Within a school context the popular learners are often the ones who victimise their more reserved peers. In the past it was more threats and physical violation however, with the recent trends of social media the violation is more emotional through cyber-bullying/ public humiliation which is more harmful that physical violation (Majied, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

This section of the paper briefly describes the research design; study area; population, sample and sampling strategy; instruments of data collection and method of data analysis and the ethical issues that were considered in conducting the study.

Research design

Constructed on the phenomenon that was explored, the research design adopted was exploratory hence, the study adopted qualitative method of data collection. When a qualitative approach is used, participants share their experiences and understanding without any judgement from the researcher. Researchers do not embrace any information that could change the meaning of anything expressed by a participant. A qualitative approach permits the researcher an opportunity to learn and understand diverse social and cultural contexts. Qualitative data takes the form of comprehensive explanations of situations, individuals, interactions, observed behaviours, procedures,

attitudes, thoughts, beliefs and direct quotations from persons who have experienced or are experiencing the phenomenon under investigation. It is vital to understand that qualitative data is typically presented in the form of texts, which could include interview transcripts or organisational documentation; though, it may also contain non-textual information/ data in the form of tables, images, audio and audiovisual recordings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2012).

Study area

The study was conducted in Sarah Baartman District Municipality, Eastern Cape Province. There are nine local municipalities and approximately 40 high schools within Sarah Baartman District Municipality. The schools are multi-racial and most of the Coloured and Black learners come from poor socio-economic backgrounds. All schools in the Municipality are affected by violence, either directly or indirectly (Sarah Baartman District Municipality, 2016). This municipality is one of the largest municipalities within the Eastern Cape. The economic stance of the municipality deteriorated over the past 5 years due to both school and community violence. Health care facilities have been destroyed in public protests and schools have been burnt down, the cost of reconstruction has caused a major financial crisis for the municipality from which they are still attempting to recover.

Population, sample and sampling strategy

The population for this study consisted of learners from Grades 8 to 12, secondary school educators in Sarah Baartman District Municipality and representative council of learners (RCLs) from all secondary schools in Sarah Baartman District Municipality. Community members (including all social workers from Child Welfare Eastern Cape within Sarah Baartman District Municipality) who could play an active role in curbing violence in schools were also considered in the study. The purpose of a sample is to permit researchers to conduct a study using individuals from the population, gather authentic results and ultimately reach conclusions that will relate to the population as a whole. It is very similar to the process of give-and-take. The population "gives" the sample, and then it "takes" conclusions from the outcomes obtained from the sample (Strydom, 2011). Purposive sampling was used in selection of learners to participate. "Purposive sampling is choosing participants who reflect most of the characteristics of the general population" (Punch, 2013:28). Educators, who handle disciplinary issues in their respective schools, thus implying that knowledgeable and informed learners were selected, selected the learners who participated in the study. Educators who mostly handle disciplinary issues at the five schools mostly affected by school violence participated in the study, also social workers form Child Welfare are mostly contacted to assist victims of school violence and assist in rehabilitating learners with severe behavioural problems. Hence, the sample of this study consisted of 25 learners drawn from Sarah Baartman District Municipality.

Instruments of data collection and method of data analysis

Data collection is an important aspect of research. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, researcher observations and focus group discussions. The methods used to collect data need to comply with ethical principles of research. The thematic method as termed by Rubin and Rubin (2012) was followed in analysing the interviews. The procedure included reading the interview transcriptions after transcribing the recordings and coding the descriptive notions that arose from the focus group discussions that were conducted. The researcher organized individual notions into categories that shared similar notions. This was accomplished by reading through the different interviews and recognizing individual ideas that share the same meaning and using quotations from participants to confirm themes identified. These concepts were composed into themes that were articulated on the basis of concepts that emerged out of the interviews conducted.

Ethical deliberations

Punch (2013: 60) has emphasized the importance of ethical considerations, "researchers have two basic categories of ethical responsibility: responsibility to those, both human and nonhuman, who participate in a project; and responsibility to the discipline of science to be accurate and honest in the reporting of their research. The University of Fort Hare Ethics Committee approved the topic for the research and provided the researcher with a clearance certificate as permission to conduct the study. The ethical clearance number was TAN051SHEN01. Finally, an ethical clearance certificate was provided to the schools to ensure them that the research was approved by the University of Fort Hare. Ethical consideration of the purpose of this study included absolute confidentiality of participant identities. The participants were asked to participate in the study voluntarily and were not being coerced. The participants were assured of no harm as they were informed that they are not obliged to answer questions that make them uncomfortable and also that they may leave at any time when they feel uncomfortable. Regarding informed consent, the objectives of the study were read and explained to the participants, and those willing signed the consent form to participate in the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The mind map below is a summary of these findings that illustrates how school violence escalate to the ultimate point of suicide as elucidated in the findings.

Figure 1: Escalation of school violence
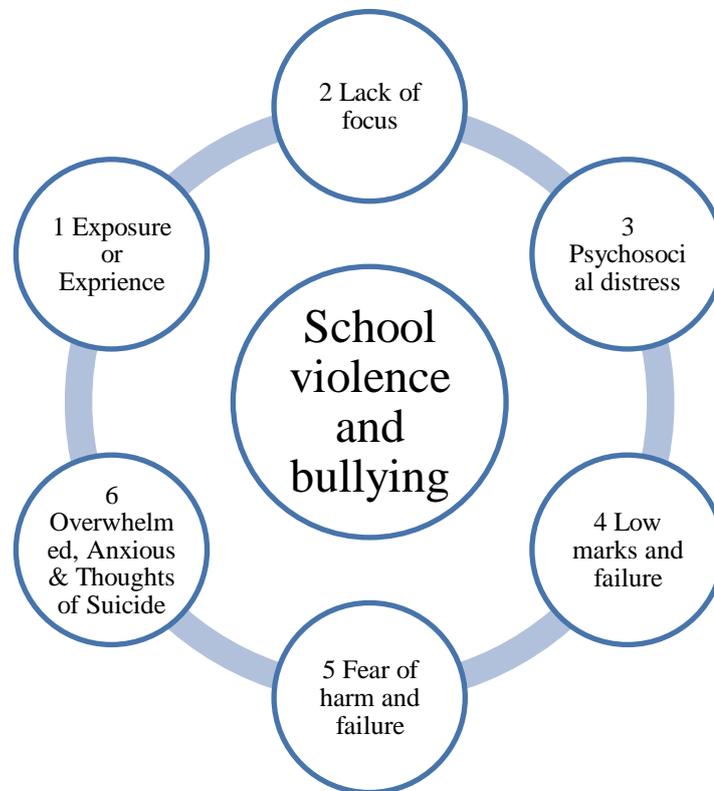
Theme 1: Violence affects academic performance and psychological progress of learners

Learners exposed to violence are at increased risk of developing problems associated with the school including: mental health problems, learning disabilities, language impairments, and other neurocognitive problems (Perkins and Graham-Berman; 2012). These problems interact to create a multifaceted complex of defects and disabilities where intervention access points are hard to assess. Frequently, psychological problems and academic problems develop in parallel (Perkins and Graham-Berman; 2012). Five educators and five social workers indicated that school violence negatively affects the academic progress of learners (victims) directly or indirectly. Absenteeism due to distress, was identified to have a negative effect on the academic progress of learners.

ED 5 said as follows:
> Gangs are territorial, so depending on the area learners reside in, if there was a fight, they will be absent from school because the gangs do not care whether you are part of them or not. The gangs control the area in which they live and learners suffer academically because they will rather stay away from school for long periods and fail than be harmed physically.

SW 5 indicated as follows:
> Learners become so terrified of being harmed in school and this results in low concentration, absenteeism, withdrawal and isolation from peers.

ED 1 maintained as follows:
> Learners, who have progressed brilliantly over the years, now perform poorly because they are stressed out by the atmosphere which surrounds them at school. Some of these learners have lost sight of their dreams and ambition, their only interest is making it to the next day alive.

As revealed in the systems theory of violence, a safe environment is a pre-condition for positive and productive learning. When learners feel unsafe in a classroom, it is expected that their concentration will drop, thus leading

to underperformance (Osborne, 2011). This finding in in line with that of Hong and Eamon (2011) who found that when learners feel unsafe in school, one response is to stay at home. This is the main way in which school violence affects academic outcomes. Principals from the different schools selected in Hong and Eamon's study indicated that violence within the school system reduces attendance, increases deviant behaviour (which ultimately reduces the likelihood of completing Grade 12 and gaining access to tertiary education). Thus, the occurrence of school violence has a direct and undesirable influence on the economy of South Africa as very fewer youths are getting education while many of them winding up in conflict with the criminal justice system (which is costing the country a substantial amount of money to either attempt rehabilitation or detainment in a correctional centre).

The findings of this study are also in agreement with those of Sherr, Hensels, Skeen, Tomlinson, Roberts and Macedo (2016) who found that the experience of violence extends beyond the scholastic career and poses a major risk for learners. School violence infringes on educational and employment opportunities of learners. Since sexual persecution is often associated with deviant social behaviours, including substance abuse, school violence increases risks including unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections as well. There is a high rate of school drop-out in Sarah Baartman District Municipality due to the high rates of adolescent pregnancies and the fear of being attacked and brutally assaulted by peers and gang members. The rate of absenteeism at schools in Sarah Baartman District Municipality has escalated to a point where the staff of these schools now has to go to the residences of learners to plead for them to come back to school and write exams in order to advance to the next grade.

Finally, exposure to violence is related to problems in school operation, including mental health, cognitive processing and language development (Perkins and Graham-Berman, 2012). Learners with histories of exposure to violence are frequently not referred for mental health services as social workers discovered during the cause of this study. Hence, learners often develop emotional, and behavioural conditions. Approximately two in ten learners experience some type of abuse (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, and Hamby, 2005), as either physical; emotional or sexual violation or the neglect of proper care. "Abuse has particular effects on the development of academic skills such as language learning, cognitive processing and self-regulation" (Perkins and Graham-Berman, 2012). Interpersonal (school violence) and intrapersonal (community violence) experienced in childhood are associated with numerous psychosocial problems including, "attachment problems, speech, language and social interactions, delays in emotion processing, and intellectual and behaviour" (Azar and Wolfe, 2006). A better understanding of the developmental trajectory of the relation between school-related function and exposure to violence, at both the level of behaviour and the level of intellectual/ cognitive development, will assist in guiding educators and social workers toward sensitive periods in development (Perkins and Graham-Berman, 2012). Learners who have a background of exposure to violence follow certain developmental trajectories, "often withdrawing socially or behaviourally regressing, which can cause problems with peer relationships, especially in demanding social settings, such as in school" (Perkins and Graham-Berman, 2012). Early exposure to violence impedes cognitive development, "learners exposed to violence may exhibit neurological changes that lead to problems of cognition in memory, executive functioning (the ability to organize and synthesize information), self-regulation, language causing learning delays or disabilities" (Perkins and Graham-Berman, 2012).

Theme 2: Effects of violence on learners: Suicide and fear

Suicide is the ultimate result of school violence worldwide. For adolescent learners, the struggle is real. The media reveals that suicide is committed every hour, and for every death, there are at least twenty attempts. According to the world health Organisation, South Africa occupies the eighth position in terms of adolescent suicide. Within Sarah Baartman District Municipality, all learners who participated in the study maintained there is a need for support structures in schools. Most of their loved ones resulted to suicide due to school violence.

STU 17 declared as follows:

> I have been reading many newspaper articles and, on a frequent basis, there are reports of numerous suicides committed and this is scary. As peers, we hardly discuss our concerns with one another and it is troubling because one is never certain whether you will see your friend the following day or not.

STU 24 indicated as follows:

> I have grown to hate the school system simply because it is now causing young people to take their lives instead of educating them for a better future. School staff are aware of what is happening but still, there is no support structure put in place to assist us as learners to deal with the anxiety caused by school violence.

STU 7 maintained as follows:

> I lost two of my closest childhood friends to suicide in a matter of one month. One of my friends was sexually violated by a male educator and could not cope with the shame; the other was cyberbullied and could not handle the public humiliation. This was so much for me to take and I still cannot get over what happened and how fast it happened with no warning. I now have no one close I can really speak to and it is frustrating.

Violence-related incidents within schools have received many media broadcasts across the country in recent years. In 2013 only, local broadcasts of outrageous violent acts proved to be fatal most of the time. This irrefutable fact has fuelled public view that school-based violence in South Africa is ever increasing at an alarming rate. School violence has become a disturbing and shocking matter over the years in South Africa and throughout the world and learners see no other alternative but to commit suicide (Payne and Smith, 2013). The systems theory of violence defines a school as an institution governed by a set of rules and regulations. According to the Constitution of the country (South Africa), each person has the right to quality basic education. As a democratic country, South Africa should be providing equal opportunities to all inhabitants/ citizens, specifically the underprivileged. Looking at the finding of this study the school has some inadequacies as a functional system meaning the school system encourages "practices and procedures that prevent learners from learning. Schools that tolerate abuse and lacks disciplinary policies" as stated in the systems theory of violence simply because learners now live in fear of their lives in schools hampering the psychological well-being of learners (Zastrow, 2016). Furthermore; majority of depressed learners, mentally challenged learners and even suicides are in government/ public schools thus evident that there is still a massive gap of equality in schools because private school learners are linked with human resources who assist with their challenges because the parents of learners are financially able to acquire help when needed.

The findings of this study corroborate with those of Shilubane, Bos, Ruiter, Borne and Reddy (2015) who found that personal and environmental factors are some of the causes of suicide amongst South African youth. In a study conducted in Cape Town on the association of risks of suicide amongst learners in high schools, it was revealed that aggression behaviour, low value of self-worth, apparent stress, bullying and unachieved academic goals were some of the causes of suicide. Shilubane *et al* (2015) conducted a study in Limpopo Province on environmental factors relating to attempts to commit suicide by high school learners. Some of the factors identified were: lack of counsellors in schools; conflicting interpersonal relationships with peers; over-exposure to negative atmospheres; history of family and peer suicide attempts; forced sexual intercourse; and poor living circumstances. In Sarah Baartman District Municipality (Eastern Cape Province), similar factors were identified as some of causes of suicide. However, the main causes identified by learners and educators within the District were: racial segregation; stress; bullying; and jealousy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

The implication on social work practice is that social workers are critical at all levels of intervention and their sole focus is the client and not the environment. In the Eastern Cape Province, this is typical social work practice as there are very few schools with school social workers thus, making it difficult for social workers to embrace the school environment with all its sub-structures. Furthermore, there is a need for social workers to conduct home visits (involving learners) and to carry out community upliftment projects to ensure that learners realise and understand the link between the home, the school and the community. The major challenges faced by social workers in the prevention of school violence are:

- Non-referrals of victims or potential victims for counselling;
- High caseloads that prevent social workers from concentrating fully on school violence prevention programmes as their clients remain their main priority;
- Inadequate human resources to provide services. Social workers employed by non-government organisations are usually the ones hosting programmes at schools. There are very few social workers and one social worker is expected to provide services to between five and seven schools (an indication that the severity of the problem is not addressed as a matter of urgency); and
- Lack of community participation in violence prevention projects and campaigns.

It is very difficult for non-social workers to perform roles reserved for social workers at school. There is, therefore, a need for schools to ensure that social workers are present at schools in order to intervene when there is a social problem at the school.

CONCLUSION

Living in constant fear is a common phenomenon among learners throughout the world. Learners fear for their lives as they are surrounded by widespread violence on a daily basis (resulting in major anxieties). The fear caused by threats of violence and the actual violation are associated with feelings of anxiety, rage, sadness, frustration and uncertainty about the future. With these emotional escapades, learners are bound to lose focus in their school work. Some may even decide stay away from school due to fear and uncontrollable emotions. In order to avoid violence in schools, learners miss out on valuable programmes and skills that could be of value to them and assist them in positive decision-making (even in adulthood). Suicide has become a major concern in schools across South Africa. According to the media and social media, learners take their own lives without alerting their friends

and family members due to stress and anxiety about the horrifying conditions of their schools. Adolescents are faced with major challenges such as: family matters; school violence; religious activities; recreational activities; friends; and some work over holidays. All the pressure and no one to provide guidance (limited interventions from counsellors and social workers), make many learners crack and opt for suicide, as opposed to living with stress and anxiety.

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