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## **SCHOOL LEADERS' VIEWS OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF PROTESTER VIOLENCE ON SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS**

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### **Abstract**

The reputation of schools' status as 'safe spaces' is under threat in South Africa, both from within the school and also from outside the schools. While service delivery protests are traditionally recognised as affecting other day-to-day activities in communities, their impact is often left unaccounted for in relation to the right to education as professed in the South African constitution. This study sought to explore school leaders' lived experiences of the consequences of protester violence on selected South African schools using Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to discuss and explain the research phenomenon. Using a qualitative approach and underpinned by a phenomenological design, the data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 17 purposively sampled school principals at public schools in Umjindi Circuit under the Ehlanzeni district of the Mpumalanga Department of Education. The study found that violent protests severely disrupt schools through threats and assaults on staff and learners, vandalism, theft, and interruptions to teaching and assessment. These events led to absenteeism, academic decline, trauma requiring counselling or hospitalisation, and financial strain from repairing damage. Together, they destabilise schools as safe learning spaces. Practical responses include strengthening safety preparedness with clear procedures and local law enforcement support, providing accessible counselling, and adopting flexible catch-up and assessment measures. Building regular dialogue with parents and community leaders may also prevent grievances from escalating into school-based violence.

*Keywords: Education, Protests, Psychosocial wellbeing, Schools, Violence*

### **1. Introduction**

In recent decades, South Africa's education sector has been repeatedly disrupted by various forms of protest, ranging from industrial actions and community demonstrations to service delivery strikes that spill over into school environments. While the right to peaceful protest is constitutionally protected in the constitution, the escalation of protests into violent action has become a recurring and deeply troubling phenomenon (Robbertze, 2025; Mutongoza, 2023). Violent protests in and around schools have been reported in urban, peri-urban, and rural settings, and they often resulting in damage to infrastructure, interruptions to teaching and learning, and harm to both staff and learners (Baloyi, 2024; Kgatle, 2018). These incidents are not isolated events but form part of a broader national context of social unrest, inequality, and dissatisfaction with service delivery (Maluleke, 2023; Khambule, Nomdo & Siswana, 2019).

The intersection between community protest and schooling is particularly concerning given the centrality of education in addressing South Africa's historical inequities and socio-economic challenges. Schools are intended to function as safe, structured spaces dedicated to learning, personal growth, and social development, yet Mahaye and Dlomo (2023) and Mutongoza (2023) warn that in South Africa they become sites of violence where their foundational role is compromised. Research has shown that violence in and around schools has a profound negative impact on learner attendance, educator morale, and academic performance (Mothelesi, Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2022; Mushoma, 2020). Moreover, the destruction of school property during violent protests imposes financial burdens on already resource-constrained institutions, delaying recovery and reinforcing cycles of instability (Baloyi, 2024; Mamokhere, 2021).

Protest-related violence differs from other types of school violence in that it is often driven by external socio-political grievances, involves actors from outside the school community, and can occur with little warning. Its effects according to Mushoma (2020), are multidimensional, including physical harm to individuals, psychological trauma, loss of instructional time, and material damage to school resources. In many cases, these effects are cumulative, as one disruption sets off a chain of challenges that hinder recovery long after the initial incident has ended (Vuma, 2021; Skelton & Nsibirwa, 2017).

The South African school system operates under challenging conditions even in the absence of violent unrest. Many schools, particularly in rural and township areas, struggle with overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to teaching resources (Mutongoza & Hendricks, 2025). Violent protests exacerbate these challenges, often leaving principals and educators with little capacity to address the immediate crisis while simultaneously managing long-term consequences (Skelton & Nsibirwa, 2017). Principals, as the administrative and instructional leaders of schools, are uniquely positioned to witness the impact of such violence, from disruptions to the curriculum and increased absenteeism, to the deterioration of learner performance and the strain on school finances.

Despite this central role, the voices of principals have not been sufficiently documented in the literature on protest-related school violence. Studies such as Nyawo and Buthlezi (2024) and Mahaye and Dlomo (2023) reveal that much of the policy and public discourse on the issue is shaped by government reports, media coverage, or generalised accounts that overlook the realities experienced by school leaders. Capturing principals' perspectives was therefore critical, as they are responsible for managing the immediate safety of learners and staff, safeguarding school property, and devising recovery plans in the aftermath of disruptions. Their experiences provided valuable insights into the short- and long-term implications of violent protests on educational outcomes and institutional stability.

## **2. Problem Statement**

While violent protests in South Africa are widely acknowledged as a societal challenge, there is limited empirical research exploring their specific implications for schools from the perspective of those tasked with leading them (Mkhize, 2024; Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011). In particular, as argued elsewhere by Motsa (2023), the lived experiences of principals who bear the dual responsibility of protecting learners and staff while maintaining educational continuity, remain underrepresented in the academic literature. This lack of focused inquiry has continued to hamper the development of targeted strategies to mitigate the academic, psychosocial, infrastructural, and financial consequences of such violence in South Africa (Maluleke, 2023; Skelton & Nsibirwa, 2017). This study sought to explore selected South African school principals' perspectives on the implications of protestor violence on schools.

## **3. Theoretical framework**

This study follows Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), the theory is that "the ecological environment is conceived topologically as a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next." The theory emphasises the principle of interconnectedness between settings, resulting in settings receiving equal force and consequences to the connections among them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For this study, schools are nested inside a socio-ecological environment, and the violence (force and consequences) affecting the schools is significantly characterized by the school's internal and external environment (Klun et al., 2025).

The interconnected structures include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem is the immediate setting a person interacts with directly, such as schools, family, and peers. The mesosystem considers the connections between these settings, such as how a lack of communication between schools and families worsens the impact/ consequences of protest violence at schools. The exosystem refers to the larger systems that influence a person indirectly, like the decisions made by the district, department of education, or the government, but shape policies without involving school principals and families directly. The macrosystem considers cultural norms and values as well as broader social aspects that shape development such as the history of protest in South Africa as a way of resistance, social and political wars, and cultural understanding of violence. Using this theory as a lens allows the study to explore, describe, and explain the consequences of protester violence on selected South African schools.

## **4. Methodology**

An interpretivist paradigm underpinned this study to help guide the study to focus on participants' subjective perspectives and interpretations of how they view and experience the consequences of protester violence on

selected South African schools (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). In essence, a qualitative research approach was used to generate thick descriptions/ explanations of the research phenomenon in participants' natural settings. Moreover, phenomenology underpinned the study as it enabled the research phenomenon to be described using participants' own words and lived experiences. With regards to site, the research was located in the Umjindi Circuit of the Ehlanzeni Department of Education in Mpumalanga province. The sample consisted of 17 public school principals with the intent to capture a range of perspectives about the research phenomenon. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, which allowed the research to include only principals who had direct and relevant experience with protester violence.

Data was collected using individual semi-structured interviews. This data collection method permitted open-ended questions and probing that focused on the research questions. The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded for data analysis purposes after obtaining participants' consent. In this regard, the collected data was analysed using thematic analysis. Using thematic analysis helped in identifying patterns and key themes from the transcribed verbatim accounts of participants.

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by North-West University prior to data collection. Similarly, all participants were told about the purpose of the research and signed informed consent forms. Hence, they agreed voluntarily to take part in this research knowing that they had the right to withdraw at any time without facing any consequences. Participants' anonymity and privacy were ensured through the use of pseudonyms.

## 5. Findings

The principals' accounts revealed that violent protests had severe consequences for schools, affecting the safety of staff and learners, damaging infrastructure, disrupting teaching and learning, and creating long-term emotional and financial burdens. Seven key themes emerged from the data.

### 5.1. Physical violence and threats against the school community

Principals described incidents in which protestors threatened and physically assaulted teachers, principals, and learners, often using dangerous weapons. The intrusions were direct and intimidating, disrupting lessons and placing lives at risk. As one principal recalled:

*...bese if they find a teacher inside the classroom bathretenishe, with a knife. Atsi ateacher bavele batsi khweshawena... [... then if they find a teacher inside the classroom they threaten him with a knife, while he teaches they just say move out of the way.] (P10)*

Another reported that:

*They were burning tires and then they also broke one colleague's car which was nearby where they were protesting ... they burned a tire next to the car and they also hit a window. (P4)*

Several principals observed that protestors used pangas, bottles, and other dangerous weapons, sometimes attacking learners directly:

*People were invading the school to attack other learners and threaten them. (P10)*

*They were using pangas and some of the dangerous weapons, which are traditional in character. (P11)*

Participants themselves were also targeted. One principal recounted:

*...and also they wanted to beat me as the principal but I ran away, I ran away for my safety. (P4)*

The violence often resulted in physical injuries to staff and learners:

*I remember one teacher was beaten by a group of learners during the day of protest and he ran away, he was injured in such a way he had to take some medical leave of which it has been a delay to the progress of learners. (P6)*

*...learners are afraid because there was a learner stabbed of a bottle...There were two educators strike with rocks. So there were injuries involved... (P14)*

### 5.2. Vandalism and destruction of school property

Principals reported extensive damage to school property during the protests. Vehicles were vandalised, windows smashed, and classroom equipment destroyed.

*...we also had to buy some new globes to replace the globes that were stolen and destroyed by the learners. They stole and damaged the light bulbs... (P7)*

*...they did vandalize many schools, for example like Emjindini secondary school, they went there and they vandalised the gate there... (P12)*

Classroom furniture was thrown, broken, or burned:

*...they were destroying the furniture; throwing chairs...they were removing the globes in the classrooms and throwing them down to the ground floor... (P7)*

*...the infrastructure of the school is vandalised and we don't have enough chairs now because they broke our chairs and broke our tables including our fans. (P12)*

*...they vandalised also the chairs, do you understand? They also broke the windows there because they were angry. (P15)*

### **5.3. Looting and theft**

Several principals noted that protestors exploited the unrest to steal school resources:

*Children who are coming from those violent communities to loot even some of school properties while the violence is taking place...they come to our school they take that opportunity to even take or steal other things that belong to the school. (P2)*

*They did not just damage our school, they also saw an opportunity to loot, steal school belongings. (P6)*

### **5.4. Disruption of teaching and learning**

Violent protests severely disrupted the curriculum and assessment schedules. Lessons were missed, tests postponed, and recovery efforts were often unfeasible.

*...it (protestor violence) affected the whole week because some learners decide not to come to school because they were scared of what happened the previous day...if you have a plan to have a class test for the following day you won't have the class test because some learners were absent... (P7)*

*...it delays the progress of our programmes that we have as a school ... most of the subjects will then suffer behind with their ATP's, with their pace setters and tests. (P13)*

*We are unable to finish the ATP in time. (P9)*

*...if you are not teaching for a week it means the following week you are supposed to do a curriculum recovery plan ... you cannot do a recovery plan as that will take time during the examinations. (P1)*

Some principals linked the disruptions directly to poor academic performance:

*...we experienced the high failure rates... (P9)*

*...we experienced high failure rate which is the one that cause the school to be an underperforming school. (P13)*

### **5.5. Learner and teacher absenteeism**

Fear and injury led to high rates of absenteeism. Learners sometimes stayed away for weeks until they felt safe to return.

*Whenever they (learners) see something like that, they will be absent for a whole two weeks hoping that they will come back when everything is solved. (P1)*

*So absenteeism is very high and if absenteeism is high, we cannot operate normally as a school and the whole situation is no longer awesome... (P12)*

*Our learners were disturbed. Being absent from school for a period of 19 days is not a child's play. (P12)*

Teacher absenteeism also disrupted learning:

*...one teacher was beaten...he was injured in such a way he had to take some medical leave... (P6)*

*...they (Protestors) won't allow any teacher to come to the school in the following day. (P7)*

### **5.6. Trauma and emotional distress**

The psychological impact of the protests was profound. Principals described learners and teachers as traumatised, with some requiring hospitalisation and counselling.

*...and teachers and learners were traumatised... (P12)*

*We had learners who were extremely traumatised. This other one (learner) even went to hospital to be treated for trauma because what was happening was very scary. So some learners they had trauma attacks...collapsing...they had to go through counselling because of this protestor violence. (P4)*

### **5.7. Financial strain on schools**

Repairing damaged infrastructure and replacing stolen resources placed additional financial burdens on schools.

*...now they (schools) have to start the classes afresh because the whole structure is now damaged...So the government need to have more money for the school budget now. (P8)*

*It (the impact) is too costly again, because we need to use some finances of the school, for an instance, you need to buy some teachers resources. (P12)*

## 6. Discussion of findings

The findings of this study reveal that violent protests in and around schools create a web of immediate and long-term consequences for the teaching and learning environment. While much of the literature on school-based protests in South Africa has highlighted issues of service delivery protests spilling over into schools (Mahaye, Dlomo & Ajani, 2023; Mamokhere, 2021; Ngcamu, 2019) the present study provides rich, first-hand accounts from principals, showing the complexity of these impacts.

The data show that violent protests not only involve symbolic expressions of dissent, such as burning tyres, but also escalate into direct physical threats against teachers, learners, and principals. Incidents involving knives, pangas, and bottles reflect a breakdown of the school's status as a protected and safe space (Mutongoza, 2023; Mouton, Louw & Strydom, 2013). This mirrors international findings in conflict-affected contexts where schools, despite being educational sanctuaries, become sites of violence (Devries et al., 2022). The use of such weapons intensifies fear, undermines authority, and signals to learners that violence is a viable form of expression, an outcome that undermines long-term social cohesion and discipline. The destruction of property and looting during protests points to opportunistic criminality intertwined with political unrest. This aligns with Coetzee and Steyn (2017) work on school violence, which notes that collective unrest often provides a cover for theft and vandalism. Broken gates, smashed windows, damaged furniture, and stolen light bulbs compromise the school's physical environment and also necessitate financial redirection from educational resources toward repairs. This has a cyclical effect because as infrastructure deteriorates, the learning environment becomes less conducive, potentially exacerbating absenteeism and disengagement (Robbertze, 2025; Manyuny, Shonisani & Mulovhedzi, 2020).

A consistent theme across the findings is the disruption of curriculum coverage and assessment schedules. Missed classes, postponed tests, and the inability to recover lost time (particularly when incidents occur close to examinations) mirror prior studies on the detrimental effect of instructional time loss on learner achievement (Khosa & Mulovhedzi, 2020; de Vos, 2018). Principals' accounts of increased failure rates confirm that such disruptions have quantifiable academic consequences. Furthermore, Skelton and Nsibirwa (2017) further caution that blocking learners' access to schooling during protests constitutes a direct violation of their right to education as enshrined in the South African Constitution. For Kgatle (2018), fear-induced absenteeism among both learners and teachers emerged as a key outcome. In some cases, learners remained at home for up to 19 days following a protest, suggesting deep psychological scarring. This finding resonates with research by Mahaye et al. (2023) and Mushoma (2020), who show that exposure to community violence has lasting effects on children's mental health, often manifesting in avoidance behaviours such as school refusal. The trauma responses reported (collapsing, hospitalisation, and the need for counselling) highlight that the impact of protestor violence extends beyond academic loss into the realm of psychosocial wellbeing. Such trauma can hinder concentration, memory, and overall school engagement (Kgatle, 2018).

The financial implications of repairing vandalised infrastructure and replacing stolen items exacerbate the already limited resources of many schools. In contexts where maintenance budgets are stretched thin, such incidents can delay infrastructural recovery for months or even years, as noted by participants. This prolongs the disruption to teaching and learning and creates visible, lingering reminders of violence, which can perpetuate feelings of insecurity (Mutongoza, 2023; Ngcamu, 2019). A critical insight from these findings is that the impacts of protestor violence are not discrete but interconnected. Physical violence fosters fear and absenteeism; absenteeism leads to curriculum disruption; curriculum disruption contributes to poor academic performance; and property damage imposes financial strain, which further delays recovery (Robbertze, 2025; Khosa & Mulovhedzi, 2020). This interconnectedness reflects how multiple environmental factors interact to influence educational outcomes. The principals' accounts clearly illustrate how community unrest penetrates the school micro-system, altering its functioning and resilience.

## 7. Conclusion and recommendations

The study showed that violent protests in and around schools have far-reaching consequences that are both immediate and long-term. Principals' accounts revealed that schools are disrupted in their daily functioning and also destabilised in their role as safe learning spaces. Physical violence, vandalism, looting, and intimidation created an environment of fear, resulting in teacher and learner absenteeism, lost instructional time, and declining academic performance. Beyond academics, the psychological toll was evident in reports of trauma, hospitalisation, and the need for counselling, while financial strain from repairing damaged infrastructure and replacing stolen resources further limited schools' ability to recover. These interconnected impacts highlight how protests undermine the resilience of schools and erode their educational and social functions simultaneously.



In response, schools and education authorities can take practical steps to lessen these effects. Strengthening basic safety measures, such as closer coordination with local law enforcement and establishing clear emergency procedures, can improve preparedness without requiring major new resources. Providing access to counselling services and ensuring referral pathways for traumatised learners and staff would help address the emotional impact in an achievable way. On the teaching side, flexible catch-up plans and adjusted assessment schedules can support continuity when learning is disrupted. Finally, promoting regular dialogue between schools, parents, and community leaders may reduce the likelihood of grievances escalating into school-based violence. These modest but realistic measures can help protect teaching and learning, while reinforcing schools as spaces of safety and stability.

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