Article

Addressing School Violence in the Foundation Phase: The Role of Leadership and Community Involvement in Rural Areas

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Abstract: School violence in rural Foundation Phase schools, particularly in South Africa's Vhembe District, is an increasing concern linked to poverty and limited resources. Learners in Grades R to 3 often face bullying, aggression, and classroom disruptions, which harm both their emotional well-being and academic progress. Although school leadership and community involvement play a crucial role in creating safer school environments, there is limited research on their effectiveness in rural contexts. This study investigates how leadership and community participation can help address violence in rural Foundation Phase schools. Using Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the study follows an interpretive paradigm and qualitative case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations involving 30 purposively selected participants, including principals, Foundation Phase teachers, and community members from six rural schools. Thematic analysis revealed that while school leaders are key to implementing anti-violence measures, they often lack training and resources. Community involvement is recognised as vital, but actual collaboration between schools and local stakeholders remains limited. The study highlights the need to strengthen school-community partnerships and improve leadership capacity. Measures to ensure trustworthiness included member checking, detailed contextual descriptions, and maintaining an audit trail. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and ethical clearance were also observed. The article recommends targeted leadership training in conflict resolution and violence prevention, along with structured community engagement initiatives. These strategies aim to improve school safety and support young learners' holistic development in rural settings

Keywords: School violence; foundation phase; rural education; school leadership; community involvement.

Introduction

School violence in South African primary schools has become a pervasive issue, particularly in rural areas where structural and socioeconomic challenges intensify its impact. In the Foundation Phase, where learners are in their formative years, exposure to violence such as bullying, aggression, and verbal abuse poses significant risks to their emotional development and academic performance. The situation is particularly dire in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, where recent reports reveal that approximately 35% of Foundation Phase learners have either experienced or witnessed violent incidents in their schools (Limpopo Department of Education, 2023). These incidents range from physical altercations to persistent bullying, highlighting a disturbing pattern of unsafe school environments that hinder early learning outcomes.

Despite the presence of national frameworks like the South African Schools Act (SASA) and the National School Safety Framework (NSSF), many rural schools struggle to implement safety measures effectively due to limited financial resources, staff shortages, and inadequate training (Mokhele & Zulu, 2022). Geographic isolation compounds the issue, reducing access to essential professional development opportunities that could empower educators to manage classroom behaviour and prevent violence proactively.

Effective school leadership is a vital factor in addressing violence in schools. Research indicates that schools with strong leadership structures and active school governing bodies (SGBs) are more capable of enforcing discipline and maintaining order (Moyo, 2023). However, in the rural context, school leaders often lack the necessary training and support to manage these challenges. Community involvement remains underutilised despite its potential. Local leaders, parents, and stakeholders possess valuable social capital that could enhance safety initiatives, yet weak collaboration, historical mistrust, and socio-economic constraints often hinder meaningful partnerships (Ndlovu & Mkhize, 2024). This article adopts Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to explore how school leadership and community engagement can be integrated to mitigate school violence in the rural Foundation Phase context.

The aim of this article is to examine how school leadership and community involvement can help address school violence in rural Foundation Phase schools.

To achieve this, the research is guided by the following questions:

i. How do school leaders implement policies to prevent and manage school violence in the Foundation Phase?
ii. What challenges do school leaders and communities face in addressing school violence in rural areas?
iii. How can school-community partnerships be strengthened to create safer learning environments?

Literature Review

This literature review explores the critical role of school leadership and community involvement in addressing school violence in rural areas. It examines challenges, best practices, and collaborative strategies needed to create safe and supportive learning environments.

1. The Role of School Leadership in Addressing Violence

This literature review emphasises the crucial role of school leadership in preventing and managing school violence, particularly in rural settings. Effective leaders are responsible for implementing policies that promote discipline, inclusivity, and respect, thus fostering a positive school culture (Moyo & Hadebe, 2021). However, rural schools often face challenges such as inadequate leadership training, limited staff, and socio-economic pressures that hinder policy enforcement and violence prevention efforts (Ngubane & Sithole, 2020). Leadership also involves modelling respectful behaviour and establishing a school environment grounded in trust and open communication, which discourages aggression (Masuku & Dlamini, 2022). School leaders are tasked with initiating programmes like peer mediation, mentorship, and social-emotional learning to reduce aggression (Khumalo, 2023), but rural schools frequently struggle with implementation due to funding constraints and lack of external support.

To overcome these barriers, leadership development programmes should train principals and educators in conflict resolution, restorative practices, and community collaboration (Mthembu, 2023). Partnerships between schools, families, and communities are essential for strengthening leadership capacity and creating safer school environments for rural learners.

2. Community Involvement in School Safety

This literature review highlights the vital role of community involvement in promoting school safety, especially in rural areas. Collaboration among schools, parents, local authorities, and NGOs helps reduce violence, foster positive learner behaviour, and create a secure learning environment (Mthembu & Dlamini, 2020). Active parental engagement through participation in meetings, discipline discussions, and mentorship instils consistency and responsibility in learners (Khumalo & Sithole, 2021), though rural communities often face barriers like poverty and limited education.

Local government support is crucial for providing resources such as safety infrastructure, trained staff, and counselling services, yet rural schools frequently suffer from inadequate assistance (Masuku & Ngwenya, 2022). NGOs also offer valuable interventions, including peer mediation and emotional learning programmes, but their efforts are constrained by funding and logistical issues (Moyo & Hadebe, 2023).

Khumalo (2019) reinforces the significance of community involvement in school safety by framing it within a social justice perspective. His study argues that school violence directly undermines the foundational principles of socially just education, particularly in marginalized communities. By highlighting the necessity of collective responsibility, Khumalo emphasizes that meaningful engagement of local communities, including parents, teachers, and civil society is essential in countering violence and fostering safe, inclusive school environments. This aligns with broader calls for participatory approaches that place the community at the centre of sustainable school safety efforts. To enhance school safety, the review recommends collaborative strategies such as parent education, school-community safety forums, and increased government involvement. Strengthened partnerships can help ensure a safe, nurturing learning environment for rural learners.

3. Challenges in Addressing School Violence in Rural Areas

Rural schools face several challenges in preventing and managing school violence, primarily due to limited resources, poor infrastructure, and low parental involvement. Compared to urban schools, rural institutions often lack funding, professional training, and basic safety measures, making it difficult to maintain a secure environment (Department of Basic Education, 2021; Ngcobo & Mthethwa, 2022).

Financial constraints limit the ability of rural schools to hire security staff, offer counselling, or implement violence prevention programmes. Many schools lack fencing, lighting, and surveillance systems, which increases their vulnerability to both internal and external threats (Shabalala, 2023). Deteriorating infrastructure and unsafe recreational spaces contribute to an environment where violence can thrive (Mokoena, 2020).

Parental involvement is also minimal in rural areas due to factors such as long working hours, low income, and limited education levels. This lack of engagement makes it harder for schools to enforce consistent behavioural expectations, both at school and at home (Moloi & Mokhele, 2021; Mahlangu, 2023). However, research shows that strong parental support is linked to reduced violence and improved learner behaviour (Sibanda, 2022). To address these issues, the literature recommends increased government investment in security, staff training, and learner support services. Schools should also consider community-based safety programmes and encourage parent-school collaboration through workshops and local initiatives (Baloyi & Ndlovu, 2024). A coordinated approach involving schools, government, and the wider community is essential to reduce violence and ensure a safe learning environment for rural learners.

4. Best Practices for School-Community Partnerships

School-community partnerships are essential in reducing school violence and creating safe learning environments. Effective collaborations between schools, parents, community leaders, NGOs, and law enforcement help promote positive learner behaviour and conflict resolution (Moyo & Sibanda, 2020; Khumalo & Dlamini, 2021). Key strategies include parental involvement through workshops, mentorship programmes linking learners with positive role models, and peer mediation initiatives that equip learners with conflict resolution skills. These approaches help reduce aggression, bullying, and disciplinary issues, especially in schools lacking formal disciplinary systems (Mahlangu & Nkosi, 2021; Shabalala & Mokoena, 2022).

Partnerships with law enforcement and NGOs also contribute valuable support through counselling, teacher training, and safety interventions (Dube & Ngwenya, 2024). However, rural schools face challenges such as limited resources, low parental engagement, and weak leadership structures, which hinder the implementation of such programmes. Therefore, best practices indicate that a coordinated and multi-stakeholder approach, supported by strong leadership and long-term community collaboration, is crucial for effectively addressing school violence in rural areas.

Theoretical Framework
This article is based on Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT), which explains that behaviour is learned by observing and imitating others. According to Bandura (2019), children often learn how to act by watching the people around them, especially parents, teachers, and peers. In the case of school violence, learners who witness aggressive behaviour at school or in their communities may begin to copy these actions, especially if they see such behaviour being rewarded or going unpunished.

SLT is useful for this article because it shows the important role that school leaders and community members play in shaping learners' behaviour. Teachers, principals, and school governing bodies (SGBs) serve as role models who can teach and reinforce positive social behaviours. When these figures consistently promote discipline, introduce anti-violence programmes, and interact respectfully with learners, they help reduce the likelihood of violence in schools (Mokoena, 2021). Parents, caregivers, and community leaders can influence children's behaviour outside school, and their involvement can also strengthen efforts to prevent violence.

The theory also supports interventions like mentorship, behaviour management, and conflict resolution training. These approaches work by exposing learners to positive role models and encouraging non-violent behaviour (Dlamini & Mthembu, 2023). SLT emphasizes the need for ongoing cooperation between schools and communities to establish and maintain safe and respectful learning environments. By applying Social Learning Theory, this article explores how school leadership and community participation can work together to reduce violence in rural Foundation Phase schools. The theory helps explain how violent behaviours are learned and offers a foundation for creating strategies that promote positive behaviour among young learners.

1. Conceptualizing School Violence in the Foundation Phase
School violence in the Foundation Phase includes physical, emotional, and verbal abuse such as bullying, harassment, and classroom disruptions. At this early stage of development, children are highly vulnerable, and exposure to violence can harm their emotional well-being, behaviour, and academic performance (Mahlangu & Pitsoe, 2020). If unaddressed, such behaviours may become normalized, contributing to a harmful school climate. Bullying is one of the most common forms of violence, often involving exclusion, intimidation, or physical aggression. Victims may suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety, and learning difficulties (Ngidi, 2021). Teachers play a significant role; their behaviour and discipline methods can either reduce or worsen violence. Harsh discipline and teacher disengagement often create unsafe learning environments.

Environmental and social challenges, especially in rural schools, also contribute to violence. Overcrowding, lack of supervision, and inadequate resources are common in such settings (Mabasa & Dlamini, 2022). Weak parental and community involvement makes it difficult to establish consistent behavioural expectations across home and school contexts. Rather than relying on punishment, prevention through proactive strategies is more effective. Interventions such as social-emotional learning, teacher training in positive discipline, and active community engagement can help foster safer, more supportive environments (Mthembu, 2023). School leadership is also crucial in promoting respectful interactions and constructive conflict resolution.

This paper views school violence as a broader social issue requiring collaboration among schools, families, and communities. Building a culture of non-violence and mutual respect, especially in the early years depends on strong partnerships between educators, parents, and community members. Munusamy et al. (2024) emphasize that violence in youth contexts, although often associated with adolescents, has psychosocial roots that begin early and are shaped by both community and institutional responses. Their findings reinforce the need for early intervention and systemic collaboration to curb long-term violent behaviour patterns.

Methodology
This article employed an interpretive research paradigm to explore school violence and the role of leadership and community engagement in rural schools. A qualitative case study design was used, focusing on six schools in the Vhembe District, allowing for an in-depth understanding of challenges and intervention strategies. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions with

teachers, principals, parents, and community leaders. A purposive sampling strategy selected 30 participants, and thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns in the data. Credibility was ensured through member checking, and transferability and dependability were strengthened through detailed contextual descriptions and an audit trail. Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

The Findings
The findings emphasise the crucial role of school leadership and community involvement in addressing school violence in the Foundation Phase. School leaders, though essential in enforcing policies, often lack sufficient training in violence prevention. Limited community participation and challenges such as resource shortages, low parental involvement, and weak policy enforcement hinder effective violence prevention. However, leadership training, increased parental engagement, and stronger community partnerships have proven to be effective solutions in reducing violence and creating a positive learning environment.

1. The Role of School Leadership in Preventing School Violence in the Foundation Phase
Findings from this article reveal that school leadership plays a crucial role in preventing violence in Foundation Phase settings. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, behaviour is learned through observing others, modelling, imitation, and reinforcement. Therefore, in the context of early childhood education, school leaders and teachers serve as critical role models from whom learners observe and adopt both positive and negative behaviours. However, a significant challenge identified is that many school leaders lack the training and resources necessary to model and enforce effective, non-violent behavioural strategies. Principal 2 explained:

> *"We are responsible for maintaining discipline, but dealing with violent behaviour in young children requires specialised skills. Many of us have not been trained in conflict resolution or child psychology, which makes it difficult to handle aggressive incidents appropriately."* (Informant 1: Principal 2)

This reflects a key barrier to operationalising Social Learning Theory in practice: without professional development in child behaviour management, educators may struggle to consistently model the pro-social behaviours children need to observe and imitate. This gap between policy and practice undermines the effectiveness of observational learning opportunities. Both principals and teachers noted that learners often bring aggressive behaviours into the classroom from their home and community environments. Foundation Phase Teacher 6 (Grade R) stated:

> *"Some learners come to school with aggressive behaviours they have picked up from home or their communities. We try to teach them positive behaviour, but without parental support, it becomes an ongoing struggle."* (Informant 2: Teacher 6)

This aligns directly with Social Learning Theory's assertion that children learn behaviour by observing those around them. If aggressive behaviour is modelled at home, and school environments do not counteract it with consistent, positive reinforcement and role modelling, learners are likely to replicate what they see in their immediate social environment. Thus, leadership-driven collaboration with families becomes essential to ensure that learners are exposed to consistent behavioural models across contexts. Several leaders mentioned using structured play and positive reinforcement as strategies to support behaviour change. Principal 1 highlighted:

> *"We have introduced structured play sessions where learners engage in cooperative activities. This has helped them develop social skills and resolve conflicts in a positive manner rather than resorting to violence."* (Informant 3: Principal 1).

These activities offer learners opportunities to observe, practice, and internalise conflict resolution and cooperative behaviours, which are key mechanisms of social learning. Structured play, therefore, acts as a

practical application of Social Learning Theory by enabling learners to imitate positive peer interactions under teacher guidance. The findings highlight the lack of specialised support staff as a major barrier to sustainable violence prevention. As noted by one Foundation Phase HOD:

"We need school counsellors who specialise in early childhood behaviour management. Right now, teachers have to act as counsellors, social workers, and disciplinarians all at once, which is overwhelming." (Informant 4: Foundation Phase HOD 1)

Without trained professionals to support consistent behavioural interventions, the modelling of appropriate responses to aggression becomes inconsistent, weakening the reinforcement processes central to social learning. Some school leaders have adopted restorative justice practices, which not only address behavioural issues but also teach children to reflect on their actions and develop empathy, both of which are essential for internalising pro-social models. As Deputy Principal 1 shared:

"Instead of punishing children immediately, we use a restorative approach. We talk to them about their feelings, encourage them to express emotions, and help them understand the consequences of their actions." (Informant 5: Deputy Principal 1).

This was also supported by one of the community leaders.

"School leaders are the moral compass of our educational institutions. When principals and teachers model respect, empathy, and non-violent conflict resolution, they lay the foundation for peaceful school environments. But they cannot do it alone, without proper training and community support, we risk raising children who mirror the violence they see rather than the peace we hope to teach." (Informant 6: Community Leader 1).

This approach supports Social Learning Theory by fostering emotional regulation and empathy through guided reflection, modelling, and reinforcement of appropriate behaviour. The findings clearly demonstrate that school leadership in the Foundation Phase has a critical role in shaping learners' behaviour through the principles of Social Learning Theory. Effective leadership not only requires the ability to model positive behaviour but also to create environments in which such behaviour is consistently observed, practiced, and reinforced. Professional development increased parental involvement, structured social learning opportunities, and additional support staff are essential for translating the theory into practice and successfully preventing violence in early childhood educational settings.

2. The Importance Of Community Involvement In Preventing School Violence In The Foundation Phase

The findings of this study highlight the crucial role of community involvement in preventing school violence among Foundation Phase learners. Drawing from Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which posits that children learn behaviour through observing and imitating others, particularly those they view as role models and this discussion contextualises the findings within an established body of knowledge that highlights how behaviour is socially constructed through interactions across home, school, and community environments.

Several participants emphasized that violence among learners is often a reflection of what children see and experience at home or in their communities. Principal 4 remarked:

"We often deal with cases where young learners display aggressive behaviour because of what they experience at home or in their communities." (Informant 7: Principal 4).

This aligns directly with Social Learning Theory's emphasis on vicarious learning where children adopt behaviours, whether violent or peaceful, by observing parents, siblings, neighbours, and community leaders. If violence is modelled or reinforced in the home or surrounding environment, learners are likely to replicate such behaviours in school settings. Therefore, community influence is not peripheral but central to

shaping the behavioural patterns learners bring into the classroom. Despite the recognition of the community's influence, the data reveals that there is often a disconnect between schools and families in addressing behavioural issues collaboratively. Foundation Phase Teacher 3 observed:

> *"Some parents believe that disciplining a child means using physical punishment. When learners bring these behaviours into school, it becomes difficult to teach them conflict resolution skills."* (Informant 8: Teacher 3).

This was also supported by Parent 3:

> *"Children don't just learn at school, they watch everything we do at home and in the community. If we want them to stop fighting in class, then we as parents must also show them how to solve problems calmly. It's not just the school's job; it starts with us at home."* (Informant 9: Parent 3)

This emphasise the shared responsibility between home and school, reinforcing Bandura's idea that behaviour is learned through observation and imitation across social contexts. This finding reveals how observational learning of violent discipline at home undermines the school's efforts to model and reinforce non-violent behaviour. In the absence of consistent, positive role modelling across settings, the internalisation of peaceful conflict resolution strategies becomes fragmented or ineffective. Social Learning Theory teaches us that children require consistent reinforcement and modelling across contexts to learn alternative, prosocial behaviours. Some schools have attempted to close this gap through initiatives like parenting workshops. Deputy Principal 2 explained:

> *"We have started a parenting workshop inviting parents and guardians to discuss child discipline and emotional well-being."* (Informant 10: Deputy Principal 2).

This initiative aligns with Bandura's notion that social contexts can be intentionally structured to promote the learning of desired behaviours. By creating learning environments for parents and guardians, schools help shift the types of behaviours children observe at home, potentially replacing punitive models with constructive and empathetic ones. These workshops also offer opportunities for re-socialisation, in which caregivers can learn and internalise non-violent parenting strategies, enhancing the consistency of behavioural modelling between home and school. However, the low turnout at such events reveals a gap in community engagement and communication. Foundation Phase Teacher 2 expressed:

> *"When we call parents for meetings about school violence, many do not attend. Some feel that discipline is the school's responsibility..."* (Informant 11: Teacher 2).

From a Social Learning Theory perspective, this lack of engagement severely limits the potential for learners to receive coherent behavioural modelling across different social environments. Children rely on cues from multiple sources, such as teachers, parents, and community leaders, to guide their understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. When schools and communities fail to collaborate effectively, learners receive mixed signals, which weakens their ability to internalise peaceful conflict resolution strategies. The findings also reveal that many schools lack strong partnerships with external community support structures, such as child welfare services, religious organisations, and local NGOs. Foundation Phase Teacher 3 noted:

> *"If we had better collaboration with child welfare services and psychologists, we could provide more support for learners struggling with violent behaviour."* (Informant 8 repeated: Teacher 3).

This points to an underutilisation of community role models and support systems that could help reinforce the prosocial behaviours schools seek to cultivate. Social Learning Theory acknowledges the importance of broader environmental models—not only direct caregivers and teachers but also figures in the

wider community who shape children's values, attitudes, and behaviours. Thus, the study's findings confirm that community involvement is not simply supportive; it is central to shaping the behavioural ecology in which learners grow and learn. Without a shared commitment to modelling non-violent behaviour at all levels, including the home, school, and community, the impact of school-based interventions will remain limited.

Grounding the discussion in Social Learning Theory highlights the interconnectedness of social environments in shaping learner behaviour. The theory not only explains why community involvement is essential but also offers a roadmap for improving violence prevention: children must consistently observe non-violent, empathetic behaviours across their social environments. This requires intentional collaboration between schools, families, and communities. Structured engagement strategies such as parenting workshops, joint community-school forums, partnerships with local NGOs, and awareness campaigns rooted in shared values of care and non-violence can significantly strengthen the modelling and reinforcement processes at the heart of Social Learning Theory and ultimately reduce school violence in the Foundation Phase.

3. Challenges In Implementing Violence Prevention Strategies In The Foundation Phase

Findings from this article indicate that several challenges hinder the successful implementation of violence prevention strategies in Foundation Phase schools located in rural areas. These challenges, such as limited resources, lack of parental involvement, and weak policy enforcement, significantly reduce the effectiveness of creating a safe and supportive learning environment. When viewed through the lens of Social Learning Theory, these challenges take on deeper significance, as they directly interfere with learners' opportunities to observe and model non-violent behaviours.

According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, children learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and modelling, particularly from influential figures such as parents, teachers, and community leaders. However, a recurring challenge across the findings is the lack of trained role models, such as school counsellors or mental health professionals, who could consistently demonstrate positive conflict resolution skills. As Principal 3 noted:

> "*Without specialised personnel, teachers who may lack psychological training are left to manage emotionally distressed learners*". (Informant 12: Principal 3).

This limits learners' exposure to constructive behavioural modelling, which is critical at this developmental stage. The absence of parental involvement undermines the consistency of behavioural messages communicated to learners. Social Learning Theory posits that consistent reinforcement across environments strengthens learning. When parents disengage from school initiatives or maintain conflicting disciplinary approaches, such as promoting corporal punishment at home, children receive inconsistent behavioural cues, thereby weakening the internalisation of prosocial behaviours. As Foundation Phase Teacher 4 explained:

> "*Many parents do not attend meetings or share responsibility for discipline, resulting in learners modelling behaviours that may contradict school-based expectations*". (Informant 13: Teacher 4).

Poor socio-economic conditions that limit parental involvement can also make the problem worse. One deputy principal indicated:

> "*Long working hours and financial hardship prevent some parents from participating in their children's behavioural development*". (Informant 14: Deputy Principal).

From a Social Learning Theory perspective, this lack of engagement deprives learners of essential reinforcement and observational learning at home, making school-based interventions less impactful.

The inconsistent enforcement of school policies also affects modelling. When policies promoting non-violent discipline are not uniformly implemented due to lack of monitoring or support, teachers struggle to uphold the very behaviours they are expected to instil in learners. Without institutional backing, educators are

left to navigate behavioural management inconsistently, reducing the modelling clarity learners require to internalise non-violent responses. This gap is intensified when some parents reject non-violent discipline strategies, expecting teachers to use corporal punishment instead. The inconsistency between what learners are taught and what is practiced around them leads to confusion, undermining behavioural development.

To apply Social Learning Theory effectively in violence prevention efforts, it is crucial to strengthen all modelling systems in the learner's environment where teachers, parents, and community stakeholders must collaborate to present unified behavioural expectations. This means increasing investment in professional development for educators, recruiting qualified behavioural role models such as counsellors, and launching community-wide awareness programmes to promote the benefits of non-violent discipline. In doing so, learners will be exposed to consistent behavioural modelling across their social environments, enhancing the internalisation of peaceful conflict resolution skills and improving the success of violence prevention strategies in the Foundation Phase.

4. Effective Strategies For Reducing School Violence In The Foundation Phase

Findings from this paper indicate that Foundation Phase schools in rural areas can effectively reduce school violence through leadership training, parental engagement, and community partnerships. These strategies are not only practical but also align with *Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory*, which posits that learners acquire behaviours through observing, imitating, and modelling the attitudes and actions of others within their social environment (Bandura, 1977). Each of these strategies contributes to shaping learners' behaviour by influencing the social models they are exposed to at school, at home, and within the community.

One of the most effective strategies for reducing school violence in Foundation Phase schools is leadership training for principals, deputy principals, and teachers. Participants emphasised that such training enables school leaders to adopt proactive approaches to managing aggression and promoting positive behaviour. Principal 2 remarked:

> "*Before attending a leadership training workshop, I struggled to handle cases of aggression in the classroom. The training helped me understand how to use conflict resolution techniques, restorative discipline, and emotional intelligence when dealing with learners.*" (Informant 15: Principal 2).

Through the lens of Social Learning Theory, this finding underscores the importance of educators serving as *primary role models* for young learners. When teachers and school leaders consistently model non-violent conflict resolution and emotional regulation, learners observe and internalise these behaviours, thereby reducing the likelihood of aggression. This is supported by Naicker and Mestry (2023), who affirm that effective leadership training equips educators to create environments that discourage violence and reinforce pro-social conduct. Despite the benefits, participants acknowledged barriers to accessing leadership training in rural settings. Foundation Phase Teacher 4 noted:

> "*Workshops on school safety are rare, and when they do happen, not all teachers can attend due to budget constraints...*" (Informant 13 repeated: Teacher 4).

In terms of Social Learning Theory, the limited exposure to positive adult models, especially those demonstrating alternative responses to conflict, can hinder learners' behavioural development. Therefore, increasing access to ongoing professional development is crucial to ensure that all educators are equipped to consistently model desirable behaviours. Parental involvement emerged as another vital strategy for reducing school violence. Many participants agreed that learners exhibit more positive behaviour when parents reinforce discipline and values at home. Foundation Phase Teacher 4 stated:

> "*We see a difference in children whose parents are actively involved in their education...*" (Informant 14 repeated: Teacher 4).

This observation aligns with Social Learning Theory in that *parents are key socializing agents*, and their engagement helps reinforce the behavioural norms promoted at school. When there is consistency between the home and school environments, learners receive coherent messages about acceptable behaviour, which supports internalisation and imitation of pro-social actions. Mthembu and Zulu (2022) similarly note that lack of parental supervision correlates with increased instances of school violence.

However, parental involvement is often hindered by economic and logistical challenges in rural areas. To address this, flexible communication methods and inclusive participation strategies, such as mobile messaging and home visits, should be employed. These approaches ensure that parents remain active contributors to the behavioural modelling process, even when physically absent from school settings. Findings also highlighted the role of community partnerships in reducing school violence. Collaboration with local organisations, law enforcement, and social workers provides learners with access to a broader network of *positive role models* and reinforces pro-social behaviour through collective community influence. School Governing Body Member 2 commented:

> *"When we work with the local police and community leaders, we see an improvement in school safety..."* (Informant 16: SGB Member 2).

Through the framework of Social Learning Theory, the presence of respected community figures modelling discipline, cooperation, and respect reinforces these behaviours in learners. According to Davids and Waghid (2023), these partnerships are effective because they address the broader socio-economic factors that contribute to aggression, while simultaneously offering visible, constructive behavioural examples for children to emulate. An innovative strategy shared by participants was the implementation of school-based mentorship programmes, where older learners from local high schools serve as role models for Foundation Phase learners. As Foundation Phase Teacher 2 shared:

> *"We recently started a mentorship programme where older learners from the local high school serve as role models..."* (Informant 17: Teacher 2).

This initiative reflects the core of Social Learning Theory that learners, particularly in early childhood, are likely to model their behaviour on peers they admire or view as competent. By fostering intergenerational mentorship, schools create additional layers of observational learning that support non-violent peer interactions and cultivate a respectful school culture. All strategies identified, such as leadership development, parental involvement, and community engagement, gain enhanced effectiveness when viewed through the lens of Social Learning Theory. By surrounding learners with consistent, credible role models who demonstrate appropriate behaviour, schools can actively reduce incidents of violence and support the development of emotionally intelligent, socially responsible individuals.

Discussion

The findings indicate that reducing school violence in the Foundation Phase requires a comprehensive approach that includes leadership training, greater parental involvement, and stronger community partnerships. School leaders must receive ongoing professional development on conflict resolution and non-violent discipline strategies. Parents should actively reinforce positive behaviour at home, and schools should adopt flexible strategies to accommodate working parents. Community involvement, collaboration with local organisations, and mentorship programmes can enhance school safety and promote positive behaviour among young learners. Rural Foundation Phase schools can create a safer and more conducive learning environment for all children by implementing these strategies.

Effectively addressing school violence in the Foundation Phase requires a comprehensive approach that incorporates strong leadership, active community involvement, and the efficient use of available resources. While challenges such as inadequate training, weak policy enforcement, and limited resources persist, implementing targeted interventions such as leadership training, structured community engagement,

and parental involvement can significantly enhance school safety. By prioritising these strategies, rural schools can create a supportive environment where young learners feel safe, respected, and encouraged to thrive.

Recommendations in this article emphasise the importance of equipping school principals with targeted training in conflict resolution, restorative justice, and proactive discipline to create safer learning environments. Schools should strengthen community engagement by collaborating with educators, parents, local organizations, and community leaders to address the root causes of violence. Adequate funding, professional development, and expert guidance are necessary for effectively implementing and sustaining anti-violence policies in rural schools. Additionally, introducing school-based violence prevention programs, such as mentorship and peer mediation, will help students develop conflict resolution skills and foster a culture of respect, ultimately reducing incidents of violence.

Conclusion
This article highlights the important role that school leadership and community involvement play in reducing school violence in rural Foundation Phase schools. Effective leadership, supported by conflict resolution and violence prevention training, is key to creating a safe and positive learning environment. Building stronger connections between schools, parents, and local organisations is crucial for forming a collective effort to prevent violence. By focusing on these areas, schools can foster an environment where young learners feel safe, respected, and encouraged to thrive. Strengthening leadership and community participation will not only help reduce violence but also support the academic and emotional development of children in these rural schools While this study has addressed key aspects of leadership and community involvement, further research is needed to deepen our understanding. The following areas are recommended:

  i.   Regional Comparisons: Studies could compare rural and urban Foundation Phase schools to identify differences in how school violence occurs and is managed.
 ii.   Long-Term Effects: Research is needed to examine the long-term impact of leadership and community initiatives on school safety and learner development.
iii.   Learner and Parent Perspectives: Including the views of learners and parents can give a more complete picture of how school violence is experienced and addressed.
 iv.   Cultural and Traditional Leadership Roles: Future research should explore how traditional leadership and cultural practices influence community responses to school violence.
  v.   Evaluation of Current Programmes: There is a need to assess the effectiveness of existing violence prevention and conflict resolution programmes in rural schools.
 vi.   Gender-Based Violence: More research is needed on how school violence affects boys and girls differently, and how responses can be made more inclusive.

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