

Post level 1 to 3 educators' perceptions of contributing factors to school-based workplace bullying in South Africa

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Received: Aug 19, 2026

Accepted: Sep 16, 2026

Published: Sep 16, 2026

Abstract— This study aimed to explore contributing factors to school-based workplace bullying perpetrated by management against post-level 1 to 3 educators within secondary schools in Cosmo City, located in the City of Johannesburg, South Africa. To understand the lived experiences of these educators, the researchers adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions as the primary data collection tool. Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Ultimately, 16 participants were recruited to participate in this study. Grounded in organizational justice theory, the findings identified several key factors contributing to workplace bullying, including contextual factors, weak policies and reporting mechanisms, lack of job opportunities, limited legal remedies, and strong competition for promotional posts. These results demonstrate that the contributing factors behind school-based workplace bullying are systemic issues that require holistic interventions for complete eradication. Based on these insights, the study offers targeted recommendations: first, the Department of Education should develop more efficient anti-bullying policies; second, schools must implement effective internal re-ports and monitoring mechanisms; and finally, teacher training institutions should establish dedicated workshops to help newly hired educators identify and effectively address bullying in the workplace.

Keywords— Bullying; contribution; school-based workplace bullying; school violence, post level 1 to 3 educators

1. INTRODUCTION

School-based workplace bullying is a global issue. Mosito and Sitoyi (2024) state that schools in South Africa, like many other schools around the world, have not been immune to workplace bullying. The protection of post level one to three or early career educators is also a worldwide concern, where workplace bullying was identified as the top safety concern among educators in American schools by Reisert et al. (2023). Recent studies from the Dublin Anti-Bullying Centre have discovered that more than a third of educators and upper management have experienced workplace bullying at some point in time by fellow educators and staff, with exclusion and neglect being the most frequent experiences (Sargioti, Kuldass, Foody, Otero, Kinahan, Canning, Heaney & Norman et al., 2023). While workplace bullying is insidious and hidden in essence, the author suggests that it impacts the school as an institution significantly, as it affects educators and influences the culture of education and understanding, thereby justifying an inquiry.

Nielsen and Einarsen (2018) assert that workplace bullying is a global phenomenon with comparable characteristics and consequences across the world. As reported by Moon et al. (2020), 80% of educators in Canada and the United States had experienced physical, psychological, and verbal abuse. In a nationally representative survey of Israeli post-level one educators, 4% stated that they had been financially exploited by their management (Maeng et al., 2020). The scenario in Taiwan is similar, with about one-third of post-level three educators engaging in verbal and/or physical aggressive behavior against other educators (Moon et al., 2020). Furthermore, educators may experience feelings of blame, helplessness, or insecurity, particularly when administrators fail to intervene and provide adequate support (Maeng et al., 2020). An

international article (Citizen Digital, 2025) revealed that an educator in Nyamira County in Kenya was hospitalized after being assaulted by the principal for arriving late at work. Educators are reluctant to report mistreatment in the workplace as they feel that there will be no consequences taken against the perpetrator (Mosito & Sitoyi, 2024). In his study Ariza-Montes et al., (2015) disclosed that educators reported a variety of abusive behaviors from school principals, such as insensitivity to personal issues, disrespect for them as individuals and professionals, and disrespectful conduct not limited to yelling at educators, participating in sexual harassment, and being impolite are a few instances of these behaviors. Moreover, Kaduma (2024) explains that these unethical behaviors have a negative implication on the work habits and performance of the educators.

In South Africa, post level one to three educators experience abuse from different stakeholders in the school, such as the management, learners, and other educators. De Wet and Jacobs (2021) disclosed that educators experience bullying not just from their peers and school administrators, but also from learners, parents, and support personnel within the school environment. This complexity makes educator-targeted workplace bullying more intricate compared to other types of workplace bullying. Studies have shown that this issue is on the rise. According to Mollo (2024), cited in PSASP section 5.1.1.5 (DBE, 2016), principals are required to follow the applicable safety laws in order to maintain a safe, secure, and disciplined school atmosphere. However, in addition, Sambo and Govender (2023) reported that principals also reportedly engaged in discriminatory changes to a victim's workload, either by assigning targeted educators a more demanding workload or by assigning them little responsibility. Although the departmental heads (post-level 3) are responsible for assigning workloads to educators in South African public schools, in the majority of cases, their judgments are not final until the principal gives the approval, which takes away the power the departmental head has over their assigned departments. For this reason, the author asserts that the involvement of principals who, in most instances, lack subject expertise leads to conflict and stress in several departments where department leaders are intimidated into changing and implementing changes directed by the principal (Mahome et al., 2023).

Despite the growing scholarly attention given to school-based workplace bullying, existing literature has predominantly concentrated on learner-to-teacher aggression and general occupational stressors experienced by educators within school environments. This narrow focus has resulted in an incomplete understanding of workplace bullying dynamics in education settings. In particular, the role of school management teams especially principals as potential perpetrators of bullying remain underexplored in mainstream public schooling contexts (Subedi, 2020; Chauke, 2021). Consequently, the structural and managerial dimensions of bullying within schools have not been sufficiently theorised or empirically interrogated.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that educators in South African public schools are not immune to workplace bullying, regardless of their professional rank, school enrolment size, or institutional context (Van Wyk, 2023). Gaffney et al. (2019) further emphasise that bullying in these settings represents a pervasive and severe occupational stressor that contributes to unsafe and psychologically harmful working conditions. However, despite this recognition, extant studies have largely failed to disaggregate the experiences of different educator categories, particularly post-level 1 to 3 educators, who may be uniquely

vulnerable to managerial forms of bullying. In addition, while workplace bullying in schools has been widely acknowledged, its specific causes especially those linked to hierarchical power relations between school management teams and educators remain insufficiently examined (Scheeler et al., 2022). This study addresses this critical gap by focusing specifically on the factors contributing to school-based workplace bullying perpetrated by school management teams against post-level 1 to 3 educators in secondary schools. By centring the experiences of this often-overlooked group, the study moves beyond generalised accounts of workplace bullying to provide a more nuanced, context-specific understanding of how managerial practices and institutional dynamics contribute to bullying behaviours in schools.

The study therefore aims to explore the factors contributing to school-based workplace bullying perpetrated by management towards post-level 1 to 3 educators in secondary schools in Cosmo City, City of Johannesburg, South Africa. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: What are the factors contributing to workplace bullying perpetrated by management towards post-level 1 to 3 educators in secondary schools of Cosmo City, City of Johannesburg, South Africa?

In terms of contribution, this study enriches the limited empirical literature on school-based workplace bullying by foregrounding the lived experiences of post-level 1 to 3 educators as victims of managerial bullying. It provides empirical evidence that can inform policy development, leadership training, and institutional accountability mechanisms within the South African schooling system. In doing so, it raises awareness among policymakers, scholars, and practitioners regarding the often-hidden dynamics of managerial bullying in schools (Mahome et al., 2023). Importantly, the study contributes to the development of contextually relevant interventions aligned with South African labour legislation aimed at preventing and addressing workplace bullying in educational settings. Finally, by amplifying the voices of post-level 1 to 3 educators, the study contributes to participatory knowledge production and ensures that the lived realities of victims are incorporated into policy and practice. This is significant for shaping more inclusive, ethical, and responsive school environments where educator well-being is prioritised and protected.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Factors contributing to school-based workplace bullying

2.1.1 Power imbalance

The literature consistently positions power imbalance as a central mechanism through which school-based workplace bullying is produced and sustained. Rather than being a neutral organisational feature, power is constructed as a relational dynamic that shapes whose voices are legitimised and whose experiences are marginalised (Lam & Xu, 2018; Nelson, 2016). Within school contexts, this imbalance is intensified by hierarchical authority structures that privilege school principals, often enabling control over educators' professional lives and institutional participation. However, while Lam and Xu (2018) and Nielsen and Einarsen (2018) conceptualise school-based workplace bullying as dependent on unequal power relations, their framing tends to assume a relatively stable perpetrator–victim binary. In contrast, Nguyen et al. (2021) complicate this view by demonstrating that power struggles may also occur laterally among colleagues, particularly where perceived dominance or professional status is threatened. This suggests that

bullying is not only vertical (principal–educator) but also horizontal, challenging simplified organisational interpretations.

Empirical literature further indicates that this power differential is not merely structural but is often enacted through subtle managerial practices. Rasa et al. (2019), for example, demonstrate how power can manifest in discriminatory treatment, unjust criticism, and deliberate withholding of information, which may position educators for failure. This aligns with Gündoğdu (2022), who argues that managerial authority can be misused in ways that directly shape educators' attitudes, performance, and perceptions of school climate. When these findings are read together, they suggest that power is not only possessed but actively exercised through everyday managerial interactions that may constitute bullying.

Although gender has historically been used to explain abuse in hierarchical environments, this explanation appears increasingly limited. While some studies associate managerial abuse with male authority figures within school environment, Molefi (2022) cautions against gendered assumptions, showing that harassment may also occur across gender lines. Similarly, Sibisi et al. (2025) emphasise that school-based workplace bullying is better understood through hierarchical position, seniority, and institutional support rather than gender alone. This broadens the analytical lens beyond individual characteristics to structural positioning within schools.

Despite these insights, the literature remains fragmented in its application to South African schools. While global studies acknowledge hierarchical school-based workplace bullying patterns, there is limited contextual evidence explaining how these dynamics are experienced by post-level 1 to 3 educators within resource-constrained and highly bureaucratic school environments (Rasa et al., 2019; Lam & Xu, 2018; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Molefi, 2022). As a result, the interaction between institutional hierarchy and everyday educator vulnerability remains under-theorised. This gap is particularly significant given evidence that educators in lower post levels often lack institutional voice and protection, which may reinforce a culture of silence (Nguyen et al., 2021; Sibisi et al., 2025).

2.2 Contextual factors contributing to school-based workplace bullying

Contextual factors in workplace bullying literature are increasingly understood not as background conditions but as active contributors to the production and normalisation of bullying behaviours within schools.

2.2.1 Overcrowding

Overcrowding is widely recognised as a systemic constraint that affects teaching quality; however, its link to school-based workplace bullying is more complex than commonly acknowledged. While Tshangana et al. (2023) and Mbanga (2023) describe overcrowding in terms of resource shortages and high learner–educator ratios, these conditions also reshape managerial expectations and accountability structures in ways that may intensify educator vulnerability. A key tension in the literature lies in how responsibility is distributed. On one hand, overcrowding is presented as a structural challenge that limits teaching effectiveness (Mbanga, 2023). On the other hand, principals are sometimes portrayed as deflecting

responsibility by expecting educators to manage overcrowding independently. This creates a contradiction between systemic constraints and individual accountability, suggesting that overcrowding may become a vehicle through which managerial pressure is indirectly exerted.

This dynamic is further complicated by evidence that workload allocation is not always neutral. Likuru and Mwila (2022) argue that educators perceived as less favoured may be assigned larger classes or inappropriate subject loads, indicating that overcrowding can be used as a form of differential treatment. This interpretation is supported by Mbanga (2023), who conceptualises excessive workload as a form of workplace harm. Together, these perspectives shift overcrowding from being a purely logistical issue to a potential mechanism of institutionalised inequity. Moreover, the psychological and professional consequences of overcrowding are consistently emphasised across studies. Tshangana et al. (2023) and Mbanga (2023) highlight burnout, stress, and reduced job satisfaction, while Seherrie (2023) extends this argument by linking overcrowding to inadequate learning resources, which further constrains teaching effectiveness. However, although the effects are well documented, the literature largely remains descriptive in identifying outcomes rather than explaining how organisational practices convert overcrowding into sustained educator marginalisation. A notable limitation across studies is the absence of intervention-focused research. While overcrowding is repeatedly identified as a challenge, there is limited evidence of practical or policy-driven solutions (Seherrie, 2023; Tshangana et al., 2023). This reinforces a broader gap in the literature regarding how structural school challenges are translated into managerial practices that may either mitigate or intensify workplace bullying.

2.2.2 Lack of job opportunities

The literature on employment scarcity highlights a dual relationship between structural unemployment and workplace vulnerability. On one level, the shortage of permanent teaching positions contributes to systemic inefficiencies in staffing and skills distribution (Ventista & Brown, 2023; See et al., 2020). On another level, it produces conditions in which educators accept precarious employment, which may expose them to managerial control and exploitation. A key theme across studies is the mismatch between educator qualifications and teaching assignments. Perryman and Calvert (2020) and See et al. (2020) argue that assigning educators to subjects outside their expertise is not an individual failure but a structural outcome of shortages. However, while this explanation highlights systemic constraints, it does not fully account for how such mismatches are experienced within school power relations, particularly when they become grounds for criticism or humiliation by management. Dreer (2023) extends this argument by showing that such conditions undermine educators' psychological well-being and professional identity, suggesting that structural shortages may indirectly enable bullying practices.

The literature further reveals that employment insecurity shapes compliance behaviours among educators. Perryman and Calvert (2020) and Mbanga (2023) note that some educators accept exploitative conditions, including financial demands or imposed union affiliations, due to fear of unemployment. This indicates that unemployment does not only operate at the point of hiring but continues to structure ongoing workplace relations by weakening educators' ability to resist unfair treatment. Sibisi et al. (2025) reinforce this by arguing that such practices erode independent support systems, thereby intensifying vulnerability to managerial control.

In addition, Coetzee and Steyn (2017) argue that inexperienced educators may interpret managerial authority as absolute, which further entrenches hierarchical dependence. This perception contributes to self-silencing behaviours and reduced reporting of bullying, particularly in contexts where job security is uncertain. However, while these studies identify fear and vulnerability, they rarely integrate psychological, organisational, and structural dimensions into a unified explanatory framework. A further limitation in the literature is the fragmented treatment of reporting mechanisms and institutional accountability. Although studies acknowledge underreporting and fear of retaliation, few provide a comprehensive analysis of how organisational culture, employment precarity, and power relations interact to suppress reporting behaviour (Dreer, 2023; Ventista & Brown, 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). Similarly, Cakirpaloglu et al. (2018) highlight the lack of attention to whistleblowing experiences in schools, particularly within South African contexts. The literature suggests that unemployment is not merely an economic condition but a structural factor that reshapes workplace power relations, potentially enabling bullying through dependency, fear, and institutional silence. However, the absence of integrated models that combine psychological, organisational, and structural explanations remains a significant gap, particularly in relation to South African secondary schools and post-level 1 to 3 educators.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Organizational Justice Theory, originally developed by Greenberg (1987), provides a useful but insufficiently complex lens for understanding causes of school-based workplace bullying in schools when applied in isolation. While the theory is widely used to explain how employees' perceptions of fairness influence attitudes and behaviour (Neall & Tuckey, 2021), its explanatory value becomes more significant when viewed in relation to power asymmetries embedded within school management structures. In the context of post-level 1 to 3 educators, fairness is not simply a perceptual issue but is shaped by hierarchical authority, discretionary managerial control, and institutional culture, all of which can enable or conceal bullying behaviours. The theory distinguishes between distributive, procedural, and interactional justice (Hendra et al., 2022), yet these dimensions should not be treated as neutral organisational categories. Instead, in school environments, they often function as mechanisms through which inequality is either reproduced or contested. For example, distributive justice becomes problematic not merely when resources or workloads are unevenly allocated, but when such allocation is influenced by favouritism, punishment, or managerial bias. In such cases, inequality is experienced by post-level 1 to 3 educators not as administrative variation, but as targeted marginalisation that may constitute bullying.

Similarly, procedural justice cannot be reduced to formal adherence to rules. Although Neall and Tuckey (2021) emphasise fairness in decision-making processes, the literature does not sufficiently interrogate how "procedures" themselves may be selectively applied or strategically bypassed by school management teams. Martinko et al. (2018) demonstrate that when educators are excluded from decision-making or when procedures are inconsistently applied, these actions are interpreted as unfair. However, what is often underexplored is that exclusion may also operate as a deliberate power strategy, reinforcing managerial dominance while silencing lower post-level educators. Interactional justice further exposes the relational dimension of workplace bullying, particularly in how authority is communicated. While respectful treatment is central to the theory, William (2024) and Hashish et al. (2024) show that dismissive, hostile,

or degrading communication from management significantly contributes to emotional distress and reduced professional confidence. However, the limitation of the justice framework is that it risks framing such behaviours primarily as “perceived disrespect,” rather than recognising them as potential manifestations of institutionalised bullying practices embedded in hierarchical school cultures.

Organizational Justice Theory becomes more analytically robust. Power relations help explain why justice violations persist despite formal policy frameworks. William (2024) argues that these combined perspectives provide a more comprehensive understanding of workplace bullying; however, even this integration remains incomplete if it does not fully account for how structural inequality normalises unfair practices. In South African schools, particularly at Cosmo City Secondary School, managerial authority is not only administrative but deeply hierarchical, meaning that unfair practices are often difficult to challenge, report, or contest. From this perspective, bullying is not an isolated behavioural deviation but a systematic breakdown of justice norms that are actively shaped by institutional power. Neall and Tuckey (2021) correctly argue that bullying reflects violations of justice principles, yet the deeper issue lies in how organisational structures permit repeated and unchallenged violations. Thus, distributive, procedural, and interactional injustice should be understood as interconnected rather than separate dimensions, collectively reinforcing a school climate where post-level 1 to 3 educators are structurally vulnerable.

However, Organizational Justice Theory is not without limitations. One key critique is its tendency to prioritise individual perceptions of fairness, potentially overlooking the broader institutional and systemic conditions that produce inequality (Hayes & Keyser, 2022). In the context of schools, this limitation is significant because it risks reducing structural bullying to subjective interpretation rather than examining the organisational systems that enable managerial dominance. Lin et al. (2022) similarly argue that the theory insufficiently addresses entrenched power hierarchies and leadership styles that shape workplace relations. Furthermore, the assumption that employees evaluate fairness in a rational and consistent manner is increasingly contested. Hayes and Keyser (2022) highlight that emotional, relational, and historical factors significantly influence how fairness is interpreted. This is particularly relevant for post-level 1 to 3 educators, whose experiences of vulnerability, fear of victimisation, and job insecurity may shape how they interpret managerial actions. As a result, what the theory frames as “perceptions of injustice” may in practice reflect lived experiences of intimidation and control rather than purely cognitive evaluations. Despite these limitations, the theory remains useful for this study when critically applied rather than descriptively used. It enables an analytical reading of how management behaviours in schools such as unfair workload distribution, exclusion from decision-making, and disrespectful communication operate as mechanisms through which bullying is enacted and sustained. In this sense, distributive injustice is evident when workloads, promotions, or teaching resources are allocated through favouritism; procedural injustice emerges when educators are excluded from transparent decision-making processes; and interactional injustice is experienced when management engages in hostile or dismissive communication (Martinko et al., 2018; William, 2024).

These injustices are not isolated occurrences but mutually reinforcing conditions that contribute to emotional distress, professional dissatisfaction, and declining morale among post-level 1 to 3 educators (Hashish et al., 2024). Hodgins, MacCurtain, and McNamara (2020) argue that such violations have direct

implications for well-being and job performance, reinforcing the argument that workplace bullying is fundamentally linked to organisational fairness. In this study, Organizational Justice Theory is therefore not applied as a descriptive framework of fairness alone, but as a critical lens for exposing how institutionalised unfairness becomes normalised within school management practices. It allows the study to move beyond identifying bullying behaviours to interrogating how such behaviours are legitimised through organisational structures, power relations, and decision-making systems. In doing so, the theory supports a more nuanced understanding of how workplace bullying is produced, sustained, and experienced by post-level 1 to 3 educators in South African schools, particularly within contexts characterised by hierarchical authority and limited accountability.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 *Research approach, design and paradigm*

This study adopted a qualitative research design, which Ugwu and Ese-Val (2023) define as an approach centered on understanding human emotions, ideas, and experiences. Typically gathered in narrative form, qualitative data aims to uncover deep insights that can later inform testable hypotheses, ultimately exploring how individuals perceive their environments. This approach was highly suited for this study as it allowed researchers to explore how post-level 1 to 3 educators perceive the contributing factors of school-based workplace bullying. A primary advantage of this method is its inherent flexibility. As Ganapathy (2024) notes, data collection instruments like semi-structured interviews allow researchers to adapt questions, investigate fresh concepts, and follow unexpected conversational paths based on participant responses. This adaptability encourages authentic, open dialogue, which is vital when exploring sensitive issues such as victimization, bullying, and abuse of power (Kraus et al., 2022). Consequently, the fluid nature of the qualitative approach enhanced both the depth and validity of the gathered data. To guide the research, an interpretivist paradigm was applied. Turin et al. (2024) describe interpretivism as a framework of viewpoints, standards, and ideas that shape how we perceive and comprehend our surroundings. Fundamentally, interpretivism posits that reality is subjective, socially constructed, and mediated through personal experiences and social interactions (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Accordingly, this study focused on the pluralistic realities experienced by different post level 1 to 3 educators across various schools. Because school-based workplace bullying is experienced differently by each educator, the perceived contributing factors vary; what constitutes a driving factor for one individual may not hold true for another. Therefore, the core focus of this interpretivist study was to explore how post-level 1 to 3 educators conceptualize these contributing factors through the lens of their unique experiences.

4.2 *Population, sampling, participants and recruitment*

Stratton (2024) defines a population as the complete group of individuals or objects sharing a common characteristic specified by the researcher's sampling criteria. In this study, the population comprised post-level 1 to 3 FET Phase educators within Cosmo City Township, Gauteng Province. To explore the factors contributing to school-based workplace bullying by school managers, the study integrated purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to intentionally select post-level 1 to 3 educators who had experienced school-based workplace bullying by management, ensuring the collection

of detailed, high-quality data. Given the sensitive nature of school-based workplace bullying, identifying participants who were willing to come forward was difficult. To overcome this, snowball sampling was implemented, allowing initial participants to refer the researchers to other victims. This chain-referral method leverages social networks to connect researchers with new participants through insider suggestions. Ting et al. (2025) note that this technique is highly effective in sensitive research areas where fear of retaliation or emotional discomfort hinders open self-identification. This combined sampling strategy maximized data depth, maintained strict adherence to the study's criteria, and fostered participant trust through peer-to-peer referrals (Ting et al., 2025). Ultimately, 16 participants were recruited. The primary researcher initially selected two participants per school via purposive sampling, who then referred two additional bullied colleagues from their schools. To be included, participants had to be permanently employed post-level 1 to 3 educators in Cosmo City, have experienced workplace bullying by school management, be willing to provide voluntary informed consent, and be capable of communicating fluently in English. The exclusion criteria ruled out non-teaching staff, temporary or substitute teachers, and school principals, as the latter group comprised the perpetrators being investigated. Table 1 below presents the participants' demographics.

Table 1: Participants' Demography

Table 1: Participants' Demography

Participants	School A	School B	School C	School D
Males	2	2	2	2
Females	2	2	2	2
Number of Participants per school in total	4	4	4	4

4.3 Data collection and procedure

Data collection serves as the primary mechanism for gathering information to gain a deeper understanding of a research topic (Hameed et al., 2023). Following our initial question phase, we conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with a small group of participants selected through purposive and snowball sampling. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) emphasize that semi-structured interviews help researchers collect rich data from key informants regarding their personal experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. By using this approach, we explored the issues raised in the open-ended questions in much greater detail. The questions encouraged participants to reflect on their personal journeys and emotions, helping us identify recurring themes that required further investigation. Because we used open-ended questions, participants could express themselves naturally in English, which fit perfectly with our study's interpretivist lens. We utilized an interview guide featuring predetermined yet flexible questions. To help participants prepare mentally without scripting their answers, we briefed them on the general themes beforehand rather than giving them the exact questions. We completed the interviews over a 30-day period, allocating at least 45 minutes per session. Ultimately, this process allowed us to step into the participants' world and gain genuine insight into their thoughts and interpretations. Finally, to respect their schedules, we conducted the interviews during school breaks or after work hours, audio-recording each session with the participants' prior consent. Table 2 below shows the open-ended questions.

Table 2: Open ended questions

Open ended questions
• What do you think is contributing to school-based workplace bullying perpetuated by management towards post level 1 to 3 educators in your school? • Do you think that the pressure to achieve academic goals or fulfil administrative requirements impacts the way management interacts with educators? Please elaborate. • In what ways do you think the personal attitudes or personality traits of managers contribute to instances of school-based workplace bullying? • In what way does unhealthy competition between educators contributes to school-based workplace bullying perpetuated by management towards post level 1 to 3 educators in your school?

4.4 Data analysis

We analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. This approach allowed us to produce comprehensive, meaningful insights directly from the participants lived experiences and viewpoints. By applying thematic analysis, we critically explored the recurring patterns and issues surrounding how school managers perpetrate workplace bullying against post-level 1 educators. The first author took the lead on analyzing the data, while the second author routinely reviewed and verified the analytical process to boost consistency and credibility. This collaborative dynamic ensured a highly systematic and trustworthy interpretation of the findings. Our analysis moved through six interconnected phases. First, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading the interview transcripts multiple times to grasp underlying meanings and note preliminary ideas. Second, we generated initial codes by identifying and categorizing sections of text that spoke directly to the causes of workplace bullying. Third, we developed themes by clustering related codes into broader categories that captured the educators' shared viewpoints. Fourth, we reviewed these provisional themes against both the coded extracts and the entire dataset to check for relevance and alignment with our research goals; at this stage, we revised, combined, or discarded themes to keep the analysis accurate. Fifth, we defined and named the themes, assigning clear, descriptive labels to capture the true essence of what the victims experienced. Finally, we compiled the analysis and presented our findings in a cohesive narrative form.

4.5 Ethics and trustworthiness

The University of South Africa’s College of Education Ethics Committee granted formal ethical clearance for this study (Ethics Certificate Ref #: 10045) before we began collecting data. We also secured additional permissions from the relevant District Education authorities and the participating schools and utilized the AI tool Grammarly to edit and proofread the final manuscript. Throughout the inquiry, we strictly observed core ethical principles: informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. We gave participants comprehensive information about the project, and they provided written consent before their interviews. We also reminded them that they could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. To protect their identities, we used pseudonyms, anonymized all transcripts, and placed the data in secure storage accessible only to the lead researcher. No coercion was used, and participation was entirely voluntary. To ensure the study's overall trustworthiness, we focused heavily on credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, reliability, and integrity. We enhanced credibility by using triangulation and member-checking, which allowed us to verify that we accurately captured the participants' perspectives. We maintained dependability and reliability by consistently using semi-structured interviews, capturing audio recordings, and keeping a meticulous audit trail. To support transferability, we provided detailed descriptions of our research context so other researchers could understand the setting. Finally, we achieved confirmability and integrity by grounding our findings entirely in the participants' actual accounts and direct quotes, ensuring an ethical and authentic representation of their lived experiences.

5. FINDINGS

The study aimed to explore factors contributing to school-based workplace bullying perpetrated by management towards post-level 1 to 3 educators in secondary schools of Cosmo City, City of Johannesburg, South Africa. Table 3 below shows educators’ in-formation.

Table 3: Educators at post levels 1 to 3: Educators’ information							
Participant Code	Age Group (Years)	Gender	Post Level	Years of Experience	Grades Taught	School	Subject(s) Offered
PL1	24–30	Female	Post Level 1	1	8–9	A	EMS
PL2	55–60	Male	Post Level 2	27	10–11	A	Business Studies
PL3	38–40	Male	Post Level 3	5	10–12	A	Economics
PL4	31–40	Female	Post Level 1	8	10–12	A	Physical Sciences
PL5	36–40	Male	Post Level 1	14	8–10	B	CAT and Technology

Participant Code Age Group (Years) Gender Post Level Years of Experience Grades Taught School Subject(s) Offered

PL6	27–30	Female	Post Level 1	5	8–9	B	Creative Arts
PL7	45–50	Male	Post Level 1	5	11–12	B	Geography
PL8	38–40	Female	Post Level 1	7	10–11	B	Tourism
PL9	33–40	Female	Post Level 1	12	10–12	C	Mathematics
PL10	33–40	Male	Post Level 1	11	10–11	C	Life Sciences
PL11	40–50	Female	Post Level 1	17	8–9	C	Life Orientation
PL12	29–30	Male	Post Level 1	5	8–9	C	Technology
PL13	45–50	Male	Post Level 1	18	10	D	History
PL14	55–60	Male	Post Level 1	35	8–9	D	EMS
PL15	35–40	Female	Post Level 1	15	10–12	D	Life Sciences
PL16	31–40	Female	Post Level 1	8	11–12	D	Economics and EMS

One superordinate theme emerged from the semi-structured interview Causes of school-based workplace bullying perpetrated by school managers against post-level 1 to 3 educators comprises five subthemes namely, contextual factors, weak policies and reporting mechanism, lack of job opportunities, limitation of legal remedies, strong competition for promotional posts.

Causes of school-based workplace bullying perpetrated by school managers against post-level 1 to 3 educators.

Contextual factors

Numerous factors contribute to the workplace bullying faced by post-level 1 to 3 educators in the workplace. Several participants were asked to share their lived experiences and background factors that contribute to workplace bullying. Through the data collected, several participants believed that background factors played a crucial part in workplace bullying experienced in Cosmo City township schools. Participants enlightened how the following contextual factors, such as excessive workloads and being made to teach overcrowded classrooms, contributed to the bullying experienced in the workplace.

PL2 explained:

The issue in our school is that we have a high number of enrolments every year; only a few educators are selected to teach a large number of learners, depending on our relationship with the management. If you are not on good terms, it means you will be given a class with a high number of learners as a form of punishment.

PL13 explained that:

We are given three days for marking, last year I had a backlog of marking because I had 434 scripts to mark within three days, and this was only for one grade.

PL8:

I had 150 Grade 11 learners, which I also had to mark, and management gave me no grace and wanted the marks in as soon as possible. It was overwhelming for me, but I had to do it, while other teachers only had 120 scripts to mark.

According to the responses from participants two and thirteen, overcrowding in schools is used as a strategy to punish educators; it is no longer primarily an issue of the school lacking space to accommodate a certain number of learners, but is used to punish a few educators who are not on good terms with the management. The issue is that post-level 1 to 3 educators have no input regarding the decisions of the school, such as the placement of learners. In addition to the remarks made by the participants, it is evident that favoritism is considered one of the contextual factors contributing to workplace bullying in township secondary schools. Educators who are on good terms with the management are allocated classes with lower enrolment numbers, while those who are not favored are assigned to overcrowded classrooms. This unequal treatment undermines the productivity of post-levels 1 to 3 educators, as teaching in overcrowded classrooms is significantly more challenging and less conducive to effective teaching and learning.

Weak policies and reporting mechanisms

Participants shared their experiences of unfair job allocations and work overloading in their institutions. The study showed that educators at post-level 1 to 3 often experienced excessive workloads and the inequitable distribution of responsibilities. These actions were seen by participants as types of school-based workplace bullying that had a detrimental impact on their work performance, emotional well-being, and level of job satisfaction. The participants alluded to how weak policies and reporting mechanisms contribute to this form of workplace bullying in their schools.

PL4 mentioned that:

Our school is like a playground, you know, in my entire life of teaching, I have never seen a circus like this. I worked in three different schools before coming to this school, but I have never seen a school without proper policies; in fact, I have never seen any policy since I arrived at this school. I believe that if there were proper channels and proper anti-bullying policies, our school could be functioning well. Last month, I saw one of my colleagues breaking down in front of learners because his HOD had spoken harshly to him in front of the learners, but he could not report the matter to anyone, as the same HOD has a good relationship with the principal. And I could not advise him on what to do because I also do not know.

The above response indicates the absence of effective policies in the school. This adds to the work environment confusion and unprofessionalism. The participant uses terms "like a playground" or "like a circus" to characterize the school, suggesting chaos and poor administration. Without clear anti-bullying policies and reporting channels, post-level 1 to 3 educators are unable to deal with harassment or mistreatment in a meaningful way.

The emotional cost of workplace bullying and educators' inability to seek help, particularly when the bully has a close relationship with the principal, is demonstrated by the incident of an educator who broke down in front of learners. The systemic failures in protection, guidance, and leadership accountability that permit bullying and harassment to continue unchecked are further highlighted by the participants' uncertainty about how to give other colleagues advice.

Another participant, PL9, indicated that:

In the year 2023, I was sick and could not report to work as I had to go and see the doctor. I sent an apology to both my HOD and the deputy principal. Unfortunately, the HOD was also not present at work and only replied to my message the next morning. The doctor booked me off for three days. When I returned to work, the principal summoned me to his office and asked me why I did not report when I was absent. I told him I had reported it to the deputy, and his response was extremely harsh. He asked me to indicate that between him and the deputy, who had hired me and told me not to forget where my bread was buttered. I did not tell anyone about this because I was scared to be victimized for reporting the matter, and also, to whom do I report, who will not get me into more trouble?

The participants' responses indicate fear and anxiety over being abused by the school management. Though the participant had informed both the deputy principal and the head of department (HOD) about their medical absence, the principal responded negatively, inquiring if they had told them properly and added a menacing comment about "not forgetting where your bread is buttered." This shows how power can frighten others, therefore discouraging the educators from expressing themselves or asking for help. The participant's unwillingness to disclose the event shows a culture of fear, and that there are no effective anti-bullying policies or proper reporting channels in their schools

Lack of job opportunities

Post-level 1 to 3 educators, especially those in township secondary schools like those in Cosmo City, face workplace bullying as a result of the limited job opportunities. Due to the restricted employment opportunities and high unemployment rates in the South African education industry, there is fierce competition, job instability, and power imbalances that might make individuals more susceptible to bullying. Participants explained their experiences regarding the lack of job opportunities.

PL1:

When I came to this school, it was through the other principal, who knows my current principal. I had to travel the whole night without knowing where I would sleep. On my arrival in the morning, the principal approached and offered me a place to stay with him for those months while I am still awaiting payment. Due to my desperation because of being unemployed for three years, I accepted the offer, but the whole stay came with a price. I ended up leaving the job due to the trauma I was experiencing at his home, asking me to do the duties of a wife. I ended up leaving the job after eight months of being paid, as I could not take it anymore. Shortly after that, I got this current post.

PL11:

To tell the truth, the shortage of jobs makes it very hard to complain. Many qualified unemployed educators are seeking employment day in, day out. So even if you are ill-treated by the management, you need to keep quiet because no one wants to lose their job.

The above responses emphasize the vulnerability that educators at post levels 1 to 3 experience due to the scarcity of employment, also demonstrating their openness to exploitation and abuse. According to PL11, educators are reluctant to report mistreatment because they are concerned about being fired, given the scarcity of employment opportunities. Together, these reports show how economic stress increases the likelihood of the management's abuse of authority.

PL6:

Being a new teacher on a contract, it is really not easy; you become very vulnerable. If you complain that you are treated unfairly by the management, you first worry about how this will affect the renewal of your contract; this fear causes us to remain silent. For example, on my side, I am given a heavier workload than some other teachers; if I dare and try to speak out about it, I will be told that I am not grateful and that I must remember that I am on contract.

PL10:

It's difficult to report bullying while under a temporary contract. For recommendations and renewal, you rely on management. As a result, you persevere even when you are treated unfairly. I occasionally feel trapped. It's difficult to get another teaching position, even if the atmosphere is dangerous. Thus, you remain and put up with the circumstances because you need the income and the experience. Because we require permanent positions, many of us remain silent. We are afraid of being labelled as troublesome. Bullying is allowed to persist because people are afraid of losing their jobs.

The participants' responses above indicate that newly hired educators at post-level 1 reported that workplace bullying was largely caused by the scarcity of employment opportunities. Due to the scarcity of

permanent teaching positions and job insecurity, participants expressed fear of reporting bullying. Due to their temporary contracts and reliance on management referrals for permanent employment, many claimed that they had put up with unjust treatment, excessive workloads, and verbal abuse. Additionally, the responses showed that the competition for a few positions led to hostility and exclusion, with new educators frequently viewed as expendable. As a result, the participants described feeling stuck in bad school settings where bullying was common, since quitting the field or finding another job seemed impossible.

Limited legal remedies

This study highlights that the limited legal remedies available to post-level 1 to 3 educators in Cosmo City secondary schools contribute to the workplace bullying they experienced. According to the participants, educators frequently turn to teacher unions for help and direction when bullying occurs. Nonetheless, many participants complained that these systems sometimes failed to react quickly or efficiently, leaving educators feeling alone.

PL11:

I don't report to the union, as some of the union representatives are close friends with the principal, so it will be pointless because your matter will not be taken seriously. The union representatives will tell you that they will talk to the principal, but no action will be taken.

PL12:

Our principal is a site steward as a SADTU representative in the school; he coerced educators to vote for him. Now, in this case, who do we report to? In this school, we will die due to the silence. All these new teachers bow down to him, the minute he renews their contract, he makes them join the union and always instructs them to vote for them.

The participants' responses show that certain educators do not view unions as an effective means of reporting workplace bullying. Participants believe that the way school management and union representatives interact can influence how complaints are resolved. As a result, post-level 1 to 3 educators believe their concerns will not be taken into account sufficiently and are less inclined to report bullying. Furthermore, the data show that power imbalances in schools might cause reporting systems to become more complex. If individuals in managerial roles also have authority within union systems, educators might think they have no secure or independent platform to express their worries. Educators, particularly those with temporary contracts, are wary of this situation as they may worry about the consequences of speaking up.

PL4:

I was still forced to work under the same circumstances and with the same principal even after I had filed the case. I was being bullied by him. You understand that the union cannot solve all your issues. You get a feeling of being trapped if they postpone the case. It's possible to wait for several months without getting feedback. You are informed that the matter is still being processed when you follow up. Some teachers stopped reporting because they don't believe the union will accomplish anything.

PL9:

The problem is that there are limited legal remedies available to report bullying; we rely on the unions to protect us; however, nothing is done. You cannot go to the social media and expose the principal, as the law is against that. I cannot even afford a good lawyer to assist me to address this suffering. Lawyers are expensive, and the senior people who love the principal will protect him at length.

The participants' responses indicate that there are insufficient precautions in place for those who are bullied at work. The participants express annoyance at the delays in union procedures, stating that cases can take months with no response. Such delays can lead to feelings of being stuck since post-level 1 to 3 educators are forced to carry on teaching in a hostile setting while they wait for help. Consequently, some educators lose faith in the reporting mechanism and eventually cease reporting incidents. Furthermore, the participants highlighted how challenging it is for educators to fight bullying because of the few legal options available. According to the participants, post-level 1 to 3 educators rely mostly on unions for protection, but very little seems to be done in response to complaints. The response also mentions financial obstacles since many educators might find it excessively costly to file a lawsuit using private attorneys. Additionally, the participants posit that people in positions of power may protect one another, making it more difficult for victims to get justice. This causes educators who believe the system is biased against them to feel helpless. Delays in union intervention, financial obstacles to legal assistance, and few alternative reporting options all contribute to the persistence of workplace harassment, as evidenced by these responses collectively.

Strong competition for promotional posts

According to this study, educators at post- level 1 to 3 indicated that competition for promotional posts contributes to factors influencing workplace bullying in the township schools of Cosmo City. Participants shared that some educators work closely with the principal by betraying other educators in order to gain the advantage of obtaining promotions.

PL7:

My current HOD used to be so close to the principal by passing false information about other teachers just to be favored by the principal. I am talking about someone who used to be a union representative in our school. When the vacancy for an HOD was advertised in our school, we all knew that the post was his.

PL1:

In this school, every staffroom has a spy that frequently visits the principal's office to report on other colleagues. There is no privacy; even some of our personal details are known by the principal. You will hear him passing a remark in the corridors about your personal life. This is all because everyone wants to be promoted, and in our school, the principal is believed to be the one who can make that happen.

According to the participants, the intense competition for promotional positions contributes to a toxic atmosphere within schools, generating feelings of mistrust and suspicion among staff. According to

educators, some colleagues try to position themselves favorably with the principal by spreading false information, revealing details about others, or remaining closely aligned with the principal. These acts imply that the process of promotion is unfair and make some educators think that some people are now in a good position to obtain promotional opportunities. Consequently, educators at post-levels 1 to 3 may find themselves feeling mistrusted, exposed, and anxious in the classroom. The fight for promotion can encourage behaviors that compromise colleagues instead of teamwork and professionalism. This condition promotes workplace bullying because some educators face monitoring and professional development barriers. Generally, the study indicates that strong competition for promotional posts might affect the professional atmosphere negatively in the school.

PL8:

The current acting deputy principal in our school allegedly helped the principal to make one of our colleagues resign; it was alleged that the educator slept with a learner. At first, I believed it, but after the teacher resigned, once during a staff briefing, the principal was reprimanding one of the colleagues by mentioning that whoever wants to mess with him will leave like the former teacher. He further said he has the power to make or break you.

PL4:

The principal once threatened me that he would open a case for defamation of character, as he knows that I always talk about him around the school. He said he has a tape recording where I am accusing him of misusing funds in the school. Later, I found out it was one of the teachers who is now the site manager for the SSIP programme. I was made to realize how low people can go just to get promotion posts.

The participants' responses indicate that the fight for promotional posts causes conflict among post-level 1 to 3 educators. To gain favor and raise their chances of promotion, some educators may associate themselves with the principal. By doing this, they run the risk of revealing details about other educators that might put others at risk. Additionally, respondents recalled times when school principals employed intimidation and coercion to prevent educators from challenging their decisions. Consequently, some post-level 1 to 3 educators feel intimidated and powerless. Because post-level 1 to 3 educators may experience being singled out, silenced, and undermined at work while others benefit from their proximity to management, these dynamics lead to workplace bullying. The study's overall conclusion is that the battle for promotions can have a detrimental impact on professional connections and the general environment of the school.

6. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that factor contributing to school-based workplace bullying in township schools cannot be understood as isolated interpersonal misconduct, but rather as an outcome of embedded organisational structures shaped by unequal power relations, weak accountability systems, and constrained employment conditions. When interpreted through Organisational Justice Theory, the findings reveal sustained violations of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice, which collectively normalise bullying within school environments.

Contextual factors

The study revealed that factors contributing to school-based workplace bullying is closely intertwined with how authority is exercised in allocating workloads and instructional responsibilities. While overcrowding is often framed in policy discourse as a consequence of systemic resource constraints, the present study indicates that its impact is mediated by managerial discretion, thereby transforming a structural challenge into a relational tool of control which is agree with the study conducted by De Wet (2024). This duality is important, as it reveals how scarcity conditions can be reproduced and intensified through organisational decision-making practices. From the perspective of distributive justice, the unequal allocation of teaching responsibilities reflects perceived inequities in workload distribution. Such perceptions are consistent with Likuru and Mwila (2022), who argue that managerial preferences can shape the distribution of teaching burdens in ways that disadvantage certain educators. While Scherrie (2023) attributes overcrowding primarily to infrastructural and resource limitations, the findings of this study suggest that resource scarcity alone does not explain inequitable allocation patterns. Instead, scarcity becomes an enabling condition through which managerial discretion is exercised, often in ways that are perceived as punitive leading to school-based workplace bullying that post level 1 to 3 educators suffered in the hands of school managers. The exclusion of post-level 1 to 3 educators from decision-making processes further reflects a breakdown in procedural justice, which emphasises fairness in how decisions are made rather than only their outcomes. Tshangana et al. (2024) caution that excessive centralisation of authority within school leadership structures undermines perceptions of fairness and institutional legitimacy. In this regard, decision-making practices in the participating schools appear to reinforce hierarchical control rather than participatory governance, thereby weakening educators' sense of agency and professional respect. Gündoğdu (2022) similarly argues that misuse of managerial authority has measurable effects on educators' attitudes and institutional engagement. Within Organisational Justice Theory, such dynamics are not merely administrative shortcomings but constitute structural injustices that shape everyday experiences of work. Consequently, bullying behaviours are sustained not only through individual acts but through organisational systems that normalise unequal power relations.

Weak policies and reporting mechanism

The present study found that the mere presence of policy frameworks is insufficient if they are not consistently enforced or trusted by staff. This distinction is critical, as organisational justice is not only about formal rules but also about their perceived legitimacy and implementation which results to school-based workplace bullying. A key theoretical insight from the study is that weak or ineffective institutional policies significantly erode procedural justice, thereby creating conditions in which workplace bullying can persist without meaningful redress. Although formal policies are widely regarded as mechanisms for safeguarding fairness, the findings suggest a disjuncture between policy existence and policy effectiveness. Lin et al. (2022) emphasise that the absence of anti-bullying policies increases vulnerability to workplace harassment, while De Wet (2021) argues that well-implemented policies can enhance institutional trust and reporting confidence. Ahmad et al. (2021) note that perceptions of fairness and transparency reduce bullying behaviours, yet the findings suggest that procedural opacity and inconsistent enforcement instead reinforce silence and resignation. In such contexts, reporting mechanisms lose

credibility, and educators increasingly perceive institutional processes as symbolic rather than protective. Importantly, these conditions also reflect violations of interactional justice, where educators experience not only procedural exclusion but also disrespectful and dismissive treatment in interpersonal engagements. The combination of weak procedures and poor-quality interpersonal treatment intensifies perceptions of organisational injustice and contributes to emotional withdrawal and institutional distrust.

Lack of job opportunities

The study further highlights that school-based workplace bullying is intensified by broader labour market conditions characterised by unemployment and contractual insecurity. These conditions generate structural vulnerability, particularly among post-level 1 to 3 educators, whose employment status is often contingent and unstable. Perryman and Calvert (2020) argue that labour scarcity increases acceptance of exploitative working conditions, as individuals prioritise employment continuity over workplace fairness. This finding is reinforced in the present study, where job insecurity appears to function as a disciplining mechanism that limits resistance to managerial abuse. Within Organisational Justice Theory, this reflects a distortion of distributive justice, as access to stable employment becomes uneven and precarious. It also weakens procedural justice, as contract renewal processes are perceived as discretionary rather than transparent or merit based. Consequently, post level 1 to 3 educators may interpret managerial authority not as institutional governance but as personalised control over career survival. Motsei and Nkomo (2016) further explain that hierarchical organisational structures can enable the use of positional power to enforce compliance and suppress dissent. Salin (2021) similarly notes that employees in insecure employment conditions are more likely to tolerate bullying due to fear of job loss. In this context, workplace bullying becomes normalised not only through managerial behaviour but through structural dependency relations embedded in the labour market.

Limitation of legal remedies

Another critical dimension emerging from the study is the limited effectiveness of formal legal and institutional remedies. Although formal legal protections exist in principle, educators reported that these mechanisms are often perceived as inaccessible, delayed, or compromised in practice which makes post level 1 to 3 to be the victim of school-based bullying practice by school managers. Langeveldt (2023) identifies multiple legal avenues available to victims of workplace bullying, including delictual and constitutional claims. However, Mbanga (2023) highlights that practical barriers such as cost, legal literacy, procedural complexity, and fear of retaliation significantly limit access to justice. The findings of this study align strongly with this position, suggesting that the existence of legal remedies does not automatically translate into effective protection. From an Organisational Justice perspective, this reflects a systemic failure of procedural justice at the institutional interface, where grievance mechanisms lack credibility and efficiency. William (2024) argues that managerial abuse of authority erodes educators' trust in institutional fairness and undermines professional dignity. Similarly, Hendra et al. (2022) note that structural power can be used to reinforce exclusion and protect dominant actors from accountability. The consequence is a growing perception among post level 1 to 3 educators that justice mechanisms are not

neutral but embedded within existing power structures. This perception further discourages reporting and reinforces institutional silence, thereby perpetuating the cycle of bullying.

Strong competition for promotional posts

The study also reveals that competition for promotional opportunities is a significant site through which organisational injustice and school-based workplace bullying are produced by school managers towards post level 1 to 3 educators. Promotion processes are perceived as being influenced by relational proximity to management rather than transparent merit-based criteria. Bayram et al. (2024) argue that preferential treatment undermines fairness principles within organisational systems, thereby eroding trust and legitimacy. While some studies suggest that such practices are not widespread (Topsakal et al., 2024; Sakçak et al., 2021; Karakose et al., 2024; Papadakis et al., 2024), the present findings indicate that even the perception of favouritism is sufficient to destabilise workplace relations and generate hostility. This reflects a direct violation of distributive justice, as promotional outcomes are perceived to be unevenly allocated. It also reflects interactional injustice, where interpersonal relations become instrumentalised for career advancement, resulting in mistrust, surveillance, and reputational harm. Sakçak et al. (2021) similarly note that principals may favour individuals aligned with their perspectives, thereby reinforcing internal alliances that shape career trajectories. Within such environments, promotion becomes not a structured professional process but a contested social field in which power relations determine outcomes. As a result, school-based workplace bullying becomes embedded in promotional structures, where competition fosters unethical behaviour, undermines collegiality, and reinforces managerial dominance. The organisational climate thus shifts from one of professional collaboration to one characterised by fear, suspicion, and strategic compliance. The findings demonstrate that workplace bullying is sustained by interconnected failures in distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. These failures are not incidental but embedded within organisational practices, labour market conditions, and institutional governance structures. Organisational Justice Theory therefore provides a coherent explanatory framework for understanding how perceptions of unfairness translate into sustained vulnerability among post-level 1 to 3 educators.

Policy and practical implications

This study offers critical policy and practical implications for eradicating factors contributing to school-based workplace bullying by bridging macro-level policy with micro-institutional practice. At the policy level, the Department of Basic Education must formalize comprehensive regulatory frameworks that empower School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to exercise robust oversight over managerial conduct, establishing formalized channels for educator representatives to collaborate with the SGB in fostering a zero-tolerance organizational culture. These localized policies must align directly with the statutory code of conduct to ensure legally enforceable anti-bullying mechanisms. Practically, schools must translate these frameworks into action through mandatory induction and continuous professional development workshops centered on the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document. By demystifying statutory rights and responsibilities, school management can actively socialize staff into high standards of

professionalism and implement context-specific anti-bullying protocols complete with clear reporting and disciplinary pathways thereby securing a psychologically safe educational workplace.

Theoretical implications

By integrating Organizational Justice Theory with critical power analysis, this study advances the academic understanding of school-based workplace bullying by demonstrating that such behavior is not merely isolated interpersonal friction, but a systemic manifestation of institutionalized injustice embedded within hierarchical governance. Empirically, the findings expand Greenberg's (1987) classic framework, showing that in resource-constrained township schools, the dimensions of justice do not operate as neutral administrative categories; instead, they serve as mechanisms of structural control and marginalization. Specifically, distributive injustice is exposed when systemic challenges like overcrowding and resource scarcity are weaponized through arbitrary managerial discretion to impose punitive workloads on post-level 1 to 3 educators. Furthermore, procedural injustice is illuminated not just by a lack of transparency, but by the strategic bypassing of formal policies, the centralization of decision-making, and the erosion of reporting mechanisms, which collectively transform accountability structures into symbolic, rather than protective, instruments. This systemic breakdown is reinforced by distorted interactional justice, where disrespectful communication and relational proximity to management dictate professional advancement, establishing promotion as a contested field dominated by favoritism. Ultimately, this study offers a vital theoretical contribution by demonstrating how broader macro-labor constraints such as high unemployment and contract precarity intersect with micro-institutional power structures to normalize multiple, mutually reinforcing injustices, thereby constructing a pervasive organizational climate of fear, silence, and structural vulnerability for post level 1 to 3 educators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To mitigate the systemic violations of organizational justice that contributes to school-based workplace bullying and safeguard the physical and psychological well-being of post level one to three educators, it is recommended that schools institutionalize transparent, merit-based workload distribution frameworks. Furthermore, middle-management actors, specifically Heads of Departments must be structurally empowered and supported to execute their duties equitably, ensuring that subject and task allocations are determined by professional competence and pedagogical consistency rather than deployed as mechanisms of punitive control. One limitation of this study was that some school principals restricted the researchers from collecting data on school premises due to concerns that the schools could be exposed regarding workplace bullying directed at post-level 1 to 3 educators. Furthermore, the use of purposive sampling resulted in the inclusion of a limited number of conveniently selected schools, thereby limiting the generalisability of the findings to all secondary schools. Since the study prioritised the lived experiences of post-level 1 to 3 educators, the data relied predominantly on subjective perceptions, which are inherently susceptible to self-report bias. Participants' responses may have been influenced by social desirability tendencies or inaccuracies in recalling past experiences of school-based workplace bullying. Future studies should therefore include school management teams and administrative staff to obtain broader perspectives

on the contributing factors to school-based workplace bullying, as these groups may also experience victimisation. Despite these limitations, the strength of this study lies in providing victims of school-based workplace bullying with an opportunity to voice their perspectives on the factors that render them vulnerable to such experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that post-level 1 to 3 educators in South African township schools exhibit heightened structural vulnerability to school-based workplace bullying perpetrated by school management teams. This phenomenon is driven by a complex intersection of micro-institutional and macro-economic factors; specifically, severe labor market precarity and high unemployment compel post level one to three educators to tolerate predatory managerial behavior to secure or maintain permanent employment. This structural dependency enables school managers to abuse their positional power, frequently weaponizing administrative tasks through the inequitable and punitive allocation of workloads and instructional responsibilities.

6. Acknowledgment

We would like to thank all the participants who participated in this study

7. Declaration of interest statement

We have no conflict of interest.

7. Funding Declaration

No funding was received for the preparation of this article.

8. Declaration of Generative AI Use

AI Grammarly tool was used for editing and proofreading the Grammarly. Beside this no other AI tool was used for writing this manuscript.

9. Author Biographies

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10. Statement about Ethical Clearance

The University of South Africa's College of Education Ethics Committee granted formal ethical clearance for this study (Ethics Certificate Ref #: 10045) before we began collecting data. We also secured additional permissions from the relevant District Education authorities.

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