



e-ISSN 3026-3468

p-ISSN 3026-2593

Article info

Received manuscript:

23/05/2026

Final revision:

18/08/2026

Approved:

19/08/2026

This work is
licensed underCreative Commons Attribution
License 4.0 CC-BY International
license**EVALUATING THE BENEFITS AND LIMITATION OF
SELF-DEFENCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS AS A
TOOL FOR PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE
VIOLENCE****Galit Mordecai¹, Constance Matshidiso Lelaka^{1*}, Daniel Tuelo Masilo¹**¹University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa*Correspondence E-Mail: tshidi.lelaka@wits.ac.zaDOI: <https://doi.org/10.30598/baileofisipvol4iss1pp182-200>**ABSTRACT**

Child sexual abuse continues to be a challenge globally and in south Africa. There are many sources of literature that call for preventative interventions against child sexual violence. Without any form of intervention, sexual violence against children and adolescents will continue to be a problem. There is a huge need for interventions within schools to mitigate sexual violence. The aim of this study was to investigate the limitations of self defence education in South African schools as a strategy for preventing child sexual violence, with a focus on understanding its challenges, risks, and areas where additional interventions are needed to enhance child safety. Therefore, this study employed a qualitative research design and data was collected from Six purposively selected teachers aged between 30 to 65 years. Face to face semi-structured interviews was conducted for the purpose of data collection and analysed thematically. The findings indicate that self-defence programmes in schools may positively contribute to children's confidence, personal development, awareness of their rights, and ability to protect themselves and others. However, concerns were raised regarding the possible misuse of self-defence skills, unrealistic expectations of safety, legal misunderstandings, psychological impacts, and the need for qualified instructors. Participants therefore emphasised the importance of awareness programmes, parental involvement, and school counsellors to support the safe and appropriate implementation of self-defence education.

Keywords: Child Sexual Abuse, Schools, Self-defence, Teachers

INTRODUCTION

Sexual abuse and sexual violence are often used interchangeably, but they require clarification. Sexual abuse is a broad category encompassing non-consensual and coercive sexual acts, whereas sexual violence is a subset characterized by physically aggressive non-consensual actions that may cause harm to the victim (Basile & Saltzman, 2002). For the purposes of this study, "sexual violence" is used to represent all behaviours under sexual abuse, including sexual assault, as defined both legally and by the experiences reported by children and adolescents in South Africa (Artz et al., 2018). Sexual abuse often occurs repeatedly across childhood and adolescence, with evidence showing that many children experience multiple incidents (Artz et al., 2018), highlighting the persistent nature of this issue.

The literature emphasizes the urgent need for preventative interventions against child sexual violence. Exposure to sexual violence can lead children to normalize such behaviour, creating a harmful cycle (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013). Studies in South African schools have revealed alarming levels of harassment and abuse both en route to and within school environments, underscoring the need for school-based interventions (Ngidi et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2018). Girls are particularly vulnerable, and children often delay or fail to report abuse, especially when perpetrators are family members or close associates (Jamieson, Sambu, & Mathews, 2017; Meinck, Cluver, Boyes, & Loening-Voysey, 2016). Geographic and environmental factors, including urban versus rural location, parental monitoring, and household conditions, also influence abuse prevalence (Artz et al., 2018). The long-term consequences of sexual violence are profound, contributing to substance abuse, risky sexual behaviour, and mental health disorders such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Artz et al., 2018).

Despite recognition of the problem, literature indicates a lack of research on effective interventions within the South African context. International studies suggest that self-defence programs can empower children and reduce their vulnerability. For instance, self-defence courses in the United States and Kenya demonstrated that the majority of participants successfully applied the skills to prevent sexual assault (Brecklin & Ullman, 2005; Sinclair et al., 2013). School-based intervention programs from 2000 to 2021 increased knowledge, awareness, and personal safety skills, demonstrating positive outcomes in preparing children to recognize and respond to sexual abuse (Yusof et al., 2022). The efficacy of such programs is influenced by school support, teacher attitude, and the quality and consistency of program content (Blakey, Glaude, & Jennings, 2019). Similarly, research in China showed that school-based programs delivered by teachers were more effective than parent-led interventions in improving children's knowledge and skills for personal safety (Jin et al., 2017).

These findings indicate that self-defence education, when implemented effectively, has the potential to empower children, increase their awareness of sexual violence, and contribute to prevention. This study therefore aimed to investigate the limitations of self-defence education in South African schools, examining its challenges, potential risks, and complementary strategies that could enhance its effectiveness. By exploring both the disadvantages and methods to strengthen self-defence interventions, the research seeks to contribute toward reducing the prevalence of sexual violence against children in South Africa.

The researchers adopted empowerment theory as the theoretical framework underpinning this study. In social work, empowerment theory advocates intervention approaches that enable individuals to develop autonomy, enhance their capacity for self-determination, and gain greater control over their lives. The theory recognises that oppression is a significant contributor to disempowerment, particularly among marginalised and vulnerable populations (Sunkad, 2023). According to Zimmerman (2000), empowerment theory provides a distinct framework for designing interventions and promoting social change by facilitating the mobilisation of individual, familial, and community strengths and resources. Empowerment is

therefore understood as the process of unlocking the potential of social systems while identifying and creating opportunities and resources that enhance effective social functioning and enable individuals to address their problems, needs, and challenges (Miley & DuBois, 2026). In the context of this study, empowerment theory was adopted to explore participants' perspectives on the potential of self-defence education as an empowering preventive strategy for reducing child sexual abuse among school-going children in South Africa. By equipping children with knowledge, practical skills, and confidence to recognise, resist, and report abusive behaviour, self-defence education aligns with the principles of empowerment theory by fostering individual agency and enhancing children's capacity for self-protection.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research approach to investigate the limitations of self defence education in South African schools as a strategy for preventing child sexual violence, with a focus on understanding its challenges, risks, and areas where additional interventions are needed to enhance child safety, as qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of beliefs and experiences (Aspers & Corte, 2019) and exploratory designs are particularly suited for topics with limited prior research (Žukauskas, Vveinhardt, & Andriukaitienė, 2018). The study targeted Life Orientation teachers, whose subject focuses on preparing students for life beyond school (Majid, 2018), and purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their expertise and experience relevant to the topic (Campbell et al., 2020). Teachers were recruited from private schools in Johannesburg through formal introductions and referrals, ensuring a cross-section of perspectives from individuals with varying experience, gender, and curricular exposure.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, allowing open-ended responses and follow-up probing to capture teachers' views on child sexual abuse, disadvantages of self-defence, and complementary strategies to enhance its effectiveness (Adosi, 2020; Smulowitz, 2017; Adams, 2015). Thematic data analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterns in the data, involving familiarisation, coding, searching for recurring themes, reviewing and refining these themes, and selecting those most relevant to the study's aim, teachers' understanding and opinions of self-defence, drawbacks, and additional methods to support implementation (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability by maintaining accurate records, detailed procedural documentation, supervisory oversight, and clear reporting to allow replication in other contexts (Forero, Nahidi, De Costa, Mohsin, Fitzgerald, Gibson, McCarthy, & Aboagye-Sarfo, 2018). Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study, guided by risk assessment and professional social work standards to protect participants' rights and ensure integrity during data collection, analysis, and reporting.

The researcher conducted the study with six participants (n=6) who all participated voluntarily. The ethnic group of all the participants was Caucasian. Four of the participants were female, and two of the participants were male. The ages of the participants ranged between 30 and 65 years. The participants' teaching experience ranged from a minimum of two years to a maximum of thirty years. Four participants worked under the Independent Examinations Board curriculum, while two participants worked under the Cambridge curriculum.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Emerging Themes

Thematic analysis of the data generated several main themes, each comprising a number of subthemes. Table 1 presents an overview of the main themes and corresponding subthemes identified from the participants' accounts.

Table 1 Main Themes and Corresponding Subthemes Identified from Participants' Accounts

Themes	Sub themes
Theme 1: The Advantages of Self-Defence	• Improved self-esteem, self-awareness, and personal development • Increased knowledge of children's rights • Development of physical self-defence skills • Empowerment through the ability to protect oneself and others
Theme 2: Disadvantages of self-defence	• Inappropriate behaviour or use of skills taught through self-defence • Fostering false expectations that child is strong enough • The need to hire qualified instructors or pay for teachers to be trained • Misunderstanding the legalities around the use of self-defence • Psychological consequences of exposing children to this topic
Theme 3: Methods to be used in conjunction with self-defence courses	• Awareness programs • Parental involvement and school counselors

Sources: Research analysis, 2026

Theme 1: The Advantages of Self-Defence

The findings revealed several perceived advantages of implementing self-defence programmes within school environments. Across the participants' accounts, self-defence was understood not merely as a set of physical techniques for responding to threatening situations, but as an educational intervention with broader developmental implications for children. Participants particularly associated self-defence education with improvements in children's self-esteem, self-awareness, personal development, knowledge of children's rights, physical preparedness, and capacity to protect themselves and others. These perceptions suggest that the potential value of self-defence education extends beyond immediate physical protection and

encompasses psychological, developmental, and rights-based dimensions of children's safety. This interpretation is consistent with previous research indicating that self-defence programmes can contribute positively to children's confidence, resilience, and awareness of personal safety (Decker et al., 2018).

Improved Self-Esteem, Self-Awareness, and Personal Development

All participants emphasised the developmental benefits that they associated with self-defence training. In their accounts, participation in self-defence programmes was perceived as having the potential to strengthen children's self-esteem, self-awareness, and personal development by enabling them to recognise their own value, strengths, and capabilities. Rather than positioning children solely as potential victims who require protection from adults or peers, participants viewed self-defence education as an opportunity to develop children's sense of agency and confidence in responding to situations that may threaten their safety.

Participants further indicated that self-defence could provide children with practical skills and strategies for responding to potentially harmful situations. The significance of these skills, therefore, was not limited to the physical ability to defend oneself. Participants associated the acquisition of such knowledge and skills with a broader process of personal development in which children become more conscious of their own capacities and more attentive to their surrounding environments. Participant 3 explicitly highlighted this dimension, stating: "Self-defence would also help students improve their awareness of their surroundings" (P3).

This account indicates that self-defence was perceived as contributing to children's situational awareness, which participants regarded as an important component of personal safety. The emphasis on awareness is particularly significant because it positions self-defence as a preventive educational practice rather than an intervention that becomes relevant only after a threatening situation has occurred. From the participants' perspectives, developing awareness of one's surroundings may enable children to recognise potentially unsafe circumstances and respond more appropriately.

The perceived developmental value of self-defence was similarly reflected in Participant 5's account: "Self-defence would help with self-knowledge, skill and development. It would also help children with knowing their rights and equipping individuals to defend themselves and others" (P5).

The statement connects three dimensions that participants perceived as mutually reinforcing: self-knowledge, skill development, and awareness of rights. This suggests that the educational value of self-defence was understood in broader terms than the acquisition of physical techniques. For participants, knowing how to defend oneself was connected to knowing oneself, understanding one's capabilities, and recognising one's entitlement to safety and protection.

Increased Knowledge of Children's Rights

Participants also identified increased knowledge of children's rights as an important advantage of self-defence education. The accounts suggest that children's ability to protect themselves was understood partly through their awareness that they possess rights that should be recognised and respected. In this sense, self-defence education was perceived as providing children with knowledge that could contribute to their understanding of personal boundaries, safety, and their right to defend themselves.

Participant 5's observation is particularly relevant in this regard, as the participant explicitly connected self-defence with "knowing their rights" and with being equipped to defend oneself and others (P5). This perception broadens the conceptual scope of self-defence education. Rather than treating children's safety exclusively as a matter of physical capacity, participants framed it as also involving knowledge and awareness. Such a framing is important within the context of child sexual violence because children's vulnerability may be shaped not only by their physical capacity to respond to a threatening situation but also by their understanding of their rights and their ability to recognise circumstances in which those rights may be violated.

Importantly, the researchers framed this dimension within the context of children potentially needing to defend themselves against both peers and adults. Consequently, participants' accounts positioned self-defence education as relevant across different interpersonal contexts rather than limiting its application to particular forms of interaction or particular perpetrators. The emphasis on children's rights therefore reinforces the broader educational function attributed to self-defence programmes by the participants.

This finding can be interpreted through the principles of empowerment theory. From an empowerment perspective, interventions should not position participants merely as passive recipients of protection or services. Rather, individuals should be engaged as active participants who develop the knowledge, capacities, and resources necessary to exercise greater control over circumstances affecting their lives (Zimmerman, 2000). Within the present findings, participants' emphasis on children's knowledge of their rights reflects this principle because self-defence education was perceived as contributing to children's capacity to understand and act upon their own interests and safety.

Empowerment through the Ability to Protect Oneself and Others

Another significant dimension identified across the participants' accounts was empowerment. All participants raised the idea that self-defence training could reduce children's feelings of vulnerability by enabling them to assume a more active role in protecting themselves. The perceived empowering function of self-defence therefore appears to operate through both practical and psychological mechanisms: children acquire skills that may assist them in responding to threatening situations while simultaneously developing greater confidence in their ability to act.

Participant 6 captured this perception explicitly: “I would guess it would empower participants to be able to protect themselves instead of being a victim” (P6).

The distinction between “protect themselves” and “being a victim” is particularly important in understanding how participants conceptualised empowerment. The statement suggests a shift from a passive position of vulnerability towards a more active position in which children are perceived as capable of exercising some degree of agency in relation to their own safety. Within the participants’ accounts, therefore, empowerment was not understood simply as confidence in performing physical techniques. It was associated with the broader capacity to recognise vulnerability and respond to it through knowledge, awareness, and practical skills.

This interpretation aligns with empowerment theory, which emphasises the importance of providing individuals and communities with resources, knowledge, and skills that enable them to exercise greater control over circumstances affecting their lives (Turner & Maschi, 2014). Applied to the present findings, self-defence programmes may be understood as one mechanism through which children can acquire both practical and psychological resources relevant to their personal safety. The participants’ accounts indicate that the empowering potential of such programmes lies in equipping children with the capacity to participate more actively in their own protection rather than relying exclusively on external actors.

The empowerment dimension also extends to the ability to protect others. Participant 5 referred to equipping individuals to “defend themselves and others” (P5), indicating that the perceived benefits of self-defence education were not necessarily confined to individual protection. Participants’ perceptions therefore suggest that the development of self-defence skills may also be understood in relational terms, in which children’s awareness and capacity can contribute to the protection of others.

Taken together, the findings under Theme 1 indicate that participants perceived self-defence education as having a multidimensional value within school environments. Its perceived advantages encompassed personal development, increased self-esteem and self-awareness, greater knowledge of children’s rights, the development of physical self-defence skills, and empowerment through the capacity to protect oneself and others. Importantly, these dimensions were not presented by participants as isolated outcomes; rather, they were interconnected through a broader understanding of children as individuals who can develop knowledge, awareness, confidence, and practical capacity in relation to their own safety. In this respect, the findings support an understanding of self-defence education as an intervention that may contribute not only to physical protection but also to children’s developmental and empowering experiences.

Theme 2: The Disadvantages of Self-defence

Despite the perceived benefits of self-defence education, participants also identified several potential disadvantages that would need to be carefully considered before its implementation as an intervention in school settings. These concerns primarily related to the

possible misuse of self-defence skills, the development of a false sense of security among children, the financial and training requirements associated with programme implementation, potential misunderstandings concerning the legal boundaries of self-defence, and possible psychological consequences of exposing children to issues related to sexual violence at a young age. Importantly, these concerns represent the perceptions and expectations of the participants rather than established empirical outcomes. They therefore require careful consideration and, where appropriate, further empirical investigation.

Potential Misuse of Self-Defence Skills

The most consistently identified concern across the participants was the possibility that children might misuse the skills and techniques acquired through self-defence training. Participants expressed concern that children could potentially apply physical self-defence techniques during interpersonal conflicts, including conflicts with other children. This concern was raised as a potential unintended consequence of providing children with physical skills without ensuring that they also develop a clear understanding of when and why those skills should appropriately be used.

Participant 2 articulated this concern as follows: “Children could misuse self-defence in the sense of bullying, but if true understanding is provided to children about the principle that they should not use it to harm one another, especially without true cause.” (P2)

This account highlights an important distinction between acquiring self-defence skills and understanding the appropriate principles governing their application. From the participant’s perspective, the potential for misuse may be reduced when children are provided with an explicit understanding that self-defence is intended for protection rather than for aggression or interpersonal retaliation. Consequently, the concern identified by participants does not necessarily imply that self-defence education inherently encourages aggressive behaviour; rather, it highlights the importance of ensuring that physical techniques are accompanied by appropriate education concerning their purpose, limitations, and responsible use.

At the same time, the concern regarding the misuse of self-defence skills should be interpreted cautiously. The available evidence does not appear to provide sufficient empirical support to establish that participation in self-defence programmes necessarily increases children’s likelihood of using such skills inappropriately. Indeed, self-defence programmes are generally intended to teach children appropriate responses to situations involving threats to their safety. The concern raised by participants should therefore be understood as an anticipated or anecdotal risk rather than as an established consequence of self-defence education. Nevertheless, it remains relevant to programme design because instructors may need to establish clear behavioural expectations and reinforce the distinction between self-defence and aggression throughout the programme.

Development of a False Sense of Security

A second concern identified by participants was that self-defence education might unintentionally create a false sense of security among children. Participant 3 expressed the concern that children could perceive themselves as sufficiently capable of dealing with dangerous situations simply because they had acquired self-defence skills:

“I feel that teaching self-defence could possibly foster a false sense of security amongst children. There are those children who might feel that they have now been given ‘super-powers’ and they could get themselves into dangerous situations because of it.” (P3)

The expression “super-powers” illustrates the participant’s concern that children may overestimate the extent to which self-defence skills can protect them from harm. The issue, therefore, is not necessarily the acquisition of self-defence skills itself, but the possibility that children may develop unrealistic expectations regarding their physical capacity to manage dangerous circumstances. Such expectations could potentially influence how children assess risk and respond to situations perceived as threatening.

This finding highlights the importance of establishing realistic expectations within self-defence education. Participants’ accounts suggest that children should understand that self-defence training does not make them invulnerable and that physical intervention is not necessarily appropriate or effective in every threatening situation. Clear instruction concerning personal safety, appropriate responses, and the limitations of physical self-defence would therefore be important considerations in the implementation of such programmes.

Financial and Training Requirements

Participants also identified the practical and financial implications associated with implementing self-defence education within schools. In particular, schools may need to incur costs either by providing teachers with appropriate training or by employing qualified self-defence instructors. This consideration is particularly relevant because participants perceived self-defence education as extending beyond the teaching of physical techniques. Teachers or instructors may also be expected to address more complex issues, including the legal boundaries surrounding the use of self-defence.

The participants highlighted that children may need to understand circumstances in which self-defence can legally be used and the extent of the physical measures that may be considered permissible (Goosen, 2013). Communicating such legal concepts to children may be challenging because the principles governing self-defence can be complex and may be open to misunderstanding when simplified for younger learners. Consequently, participants perceived the competence and preparation of instructors as an important consideration in programme implementation. Whether the programme is delivered by teachers who have received appropriate training or by specialised self-defence instructors, the content would need to be communicated in a manner that children can understand without creating misleading

interpretations of their legal or physical capacity to respond to threats.

Participant 2 further emphasised this concern: “There is a risk that children may not understand that self-defence should not inflict any more harm than the harm that is posing a threat to their safety.” (P2)

This observation reinforces the importance of communicating the boundaries of self-defence. The participant’s concern suggests that children may not automatically understand the proportionality between a threat and an appropriate defensive response. Therefore, the educational challenge extends beyond teaching children how to perform physical techniques; it also involves helping them understand the circumstances and limitations associated with their use.

From a broader child-protection perspective, however, these implementation challenges should not necessarily be interpreted as sufficient grounds for excluding self-defence education from prevention strategies. Rather, they point to the need for a comprehensive approach in which self-defence education is carefully designed and integrated with other forms of prevention and protection. Upholding the best interests of children in matters of care and protection necessitates comprehensive intervention strategies to address child sexual abuse. Within this context, prevention remains particularly important, and self-defence education may constitute one component of a broader preventive response to child sexual abuse in South Africa.

Potential Psychological Consequences

A further concern raised by participants related to the possible psychological consequences of exposing children to the topic of sexual violence at a young age. Participant 4 expressed concern that increased awareness of sexual violence could potentially result in children becoming excessively suspicious or fearful of adults’ ordinary expressions of care and affection:

“From a psychological perspective, they might then be over-aware and over-analyse an adult who is simply being kind or showing care or even showing love... and think this adult is someone who is trying to sexually abuse them. I think it may be more so in this generation where they are sensitive... They could become too scared to go out and live their lives.” (P4)

Participant 4’s account illustrates a perceived tension between increasing children’s awareness of potential sexual violence and avoiding the development of excessive fear or suspicion. From this perspective, an intervention designed to improve children’s awareness of sexual abuse could, if inadequately communicated, potentially be interpreted by children in ways that make ordinary social interactions appear threatening. The concern therefore relates not to awareness itself, but to the manner and developmental appropriateness with which sensitive information is introduced and discussed.

This concern should likewise be interpreted cautiously because the participant's perception does not, in itself, establish a causal relationship between exposure to self-defence or sexual-violence education and negative psychological outcomes. The available evidence identified within the present study does not provide sufficient basis to conclude that such programmes necessarily produce heightened fear, suspicion, or anxiety among children. Nevertheless, the possibility of unintended psychological consequences represents an issue worthy of further investigation, particularly when designing programmes that address sensitive topics such as child sexual violence.

Theme 2 demonstrates that participants did not perceive self-defence education as an intervention without limitations. Their concerns centred on the possibility of skills being misused, children developing unrealistic perceptions of their physical capabilities, the financial and professional resources required for appropriate implementation, difficulties in communicating the legal boundaries of self-defence, and possible psychological consequences associated with exposure to sensitive topics. Importantly, these concerns should not be interpreted as evidence that self-defence education is inherently harmful. Rather, they highlight the conditions and safeguards that participants believed should be considered when such programmes are introduced into school environments. The findings consequently point towards the importance of qualified instruction, clear behavioural and legal boundaries, age-appropriate communication, and careful attention to children's psychological responses when developing self-defence education as part of a broader child-protection intervention.

Theme 3: Methods to be used in conjunction with self-defence courses

Participants were asked whether they considered other interventions to be more effective than self-defence courses in preventing child sexual violence. The participants did not uniformly identify alternative interventions as being more effective than self-defence education. Rather, their responses indicated that self-defence should be implemented alongside other complementary interventions to provide a more comprehensive approach to the prevention of child sexual violence. The participants particularly emphasised the importance of awareness campaigns, age-appropriate and grade-specific education, parental involvement, and the involvement of teachers and school counsellors. These responses suggest that participants viewed self-defence not as a standalone intervention, but as one component of a broader preventive framework.

Awareness Campaigns and Preventive Education

Awareness campaigns emerged as an important complementary intervention. Participant 1 identified several forms of educational intervention that could be implemented alongside self-defence education: "Awareness campaigns are vital... to help develop self-awareness, and the rights and responsibilities of the child... Grade specific targeted teaching should be used." (P1)

This response highlights three interconnected dimensions of prevention: awareness, knowledge of children's rights and responsibilities, and education that is appropriately targeted

according to grade level. The emphasis on grade-specific teaching suggests that participants considered the communication of information about child sexual violence to require an approach that is appropriate to children's developmental and educational contexts. Within this perspective, awareness campaigns could complement the practical skills provided through self-defence by strengthening children's understanding of personal safety, rights, responsibilities, and the situations in which protective responses may be required.

Participants further suggested that a more holistic educational approach could strengthen the preventive function of self-defence programmes. Participant 3 supported this perspective by suggesting that Life Orientation should incorporate preventative techniques relating to child sexual violence, particularly because the subject is intended to prepare children for experiences and challenges they may encounter beyond the school environment. This observation positions prevention education within an existing educational structure rather than treating child sexual violence prevention as an isolated intervention.

Participant 2 extended this perspective by emphasising that education should not be directed exclusively towards children. According to the participant, educating everyone involved would be essential to strengthening children's protection from child sexual violence. This suggests that prevention was perceived as a shared responsibility rather than one that should be placed solely on children. Awareness therefore extends beyond equipping children with knowledge and skills and involves creating a broader environment in which children's safety can be recognised and supported.

These responses indicate that participants perceived awareness campaigns and preventive education as complementary mechanisms through which the limitations of a skills-based self-defence programme could be addressed. Whereas self-defence provides children with practical knowledge concerning physical protection, awareness-based interventions can provide a broader understanding of rights, responsibilities, prevention, and personal safety. The combination of these approaches was therefore perceived as potentially providing a more holistic preventive intervention against child sexual violence.

Parental Involvement and Supportive Relationships

Parental involvement was another important complementary approach identified by participants. Participant 4 stressed the importance of involving parents in the prevention process, particularly in relation to identifying and responding to potentially concerning situations before they escalate. The participant also emphasised the importance of establishing trusting relationships between children and the adults who are positioned to provide support:

"Parents should be able to prevent situations (of child sexual violence) or intervene before a situation escalates... an effective method would be a trusting relationship between the child and the teacher, and the child and their parents. If it's not a teacher, then possibly a school counsellor with some level of confidentiality. I don't know if it would be more effective than the self-defence course because, like I said, if children can't

defend themselves, then they won't have anything to tell their parents. It should be used hand-in-hand." (P6)

This account illustrates the participants' preference for an integrated rather than competing model of intervention. The participant did not position parental involvement as a replacement for self-defence education. Instead, the statement that the interventions "should be used hand-in-hand" indicates that different forms of intervention were perceived as addressing different dimensions of child protection. Self-defence may provide children with practical skills for responding to potentially threatening situations, while trusting relationships with parents, teachers, and school counsellors may provide important avenues through which children can communicate concerns and seek assistance.

The emphasis on parental involvement is consistent with research indicating that parenting programmes can contribute positively to child sexual abuse prevention by supporting parents and caregivers in identifying concerning behaviours, creating safer environments that may facilitate children's disclosure, and encouraging caregivers who may be engaging in harmful behaviours to seek appropriate assistance (Mendelson & Letourneau, 2015). Within the context of the present findings, parental involvement can therefore be understood as an important relational component of prevention. The effectiveness of prevention is not dependent solely on children's individual capacity to protect themselves, but also on the availability of supportive adults who can recognise concerns, respond appropriately, and provide a safe environment for disclosure.

This observation also resonates with the principles of empowerment theory. Empowerment theory recognises that particular actions, activities, or structures may function as empowering processes, with such processes contributing to outcomes in which individuals become more empowered (Zimmerman, 2000). In the present context, involving parents and other trusted adults can be understood as creating supportive structures through which children may have greater access to knowledge, assistance, and protection. The child is therefore not positioned as solely responsible for preventing or responding to sexual violence; instead, responsibility is distributed across the social relationships and institutional structures surrounding the child.

The Role of Teachers and School Counsellors

Participants also highlighted the importance of trusted adults within the school environment. In particular, the involvement of teachers and school counsellors was perceived as potentially strengthening the broader intervention process. The emphasis on trust is significant because children may require an adult with whom they feel sufficiently safe to disclose concerns about experiences of sexual violence or situations that make them uncomfortable.

The inclusion of school counsellors was particularly relevant to this perspective. School social workers and related professionals can provide crisis intervention when a child's well-being

is threatened and can contribute to educational activities involving children, teachers, and parents on specific issues (Avant & Lindsey, 2016). Their involvement may therefore provide an additional source of support within a broader prevention framework. In the context of the participants' accounts, school counsellors can complement self-defence education by contributing to the supportive and relational dimensions of prevention.

The participants' emphasis on teachers, parents, and school counsellors consequently points towards the importance of creating a supportive network around children. Such a network can provide opportunities for education, prevention, communication, intervention, and support. Rather than relying exclusively on children's ability to respond to threatening situations, this approach acknowledges the role of adults and school-based structures in creating conditions that support children's safety and well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the limitations of self defence education in South African schools as a strategy for preventing child sexual violence, with a focus on understanding its challenges, risks, and areas where additional interventions are needed to enhance child safety. Three research themes emerged as follows: advantages of self-defence, disadvantages of self-defence, and methods to be used in conjunction with self-defence courses. The findings of this study suggested that there is need for self-defence for learners yet very little literature is accessible to prove the concerns regarding disadvantages of self-defence. It was concluded that more research would need to be conducted on this matter. Teachers suggested that there are no identified interventions that would be better than a self-defence course though, but that they should be used hand-in-hand with other preventative interventions. The implications of the aforementioned findings are that there is need for self-defence courses in schools. The consensus is that the implementation would need to be well thought out and intentionally appropriate for each grade and age group.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was granted by the University of Witwatersrand, School of Human and Community Development Ethics committee, Constituted under the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical). The clearance certificate number is Protocol Number: SW23/05/13. Furthermore, permission for conducting the study was also obtained from all participants before the collection of data. The anonymity and confidentiality of participants was observed throughout the process of the research till the end.

REFERENCES

- Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting semi-structured interviews. In *Handbook of practical program evaluation* (4th ed., pp. 492–505). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch19>
- Adosi, C. M. (2020). *Christopher Mensah Adosi* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Cape Coast].
- Ahmed, S., Shamsuddin, I., Iqbal, B., Bano, R., & Akhtar, A. (2021). Child sexual abuse: Efficacy of teachers' role in its prevention. *Elementary Education Online*, 20(3), 2166–2174. <https://doi.org/10.17051/ilkonline.2021.03.252>
- Allen, K. P., Livingston, J. A., & Nickerson, A. B. (2020). Child sexual abuse prevention education: A qualitative study of teachers' experiences implementing the Second Step child protection unit. *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 15(2), 218–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2019.1687382>
- Artz, L., Ward, C. L., Leoschut, L., Kassanje, R., & Burton, P. (2018). The prevalence of child sexual abuse in South Africa: The Optimus Study South Africa. *South African Medical Journal*, 108(10), 791–792. <https://doi.org/10.7196/SAMJ.2018.v108i10.13533>
- Aspers, P., & Corte, U. (2019). What is qualitative in qualitative research. *Qualitative Sociology*, 42(2), 139–160. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7>
- Avant, D. W., & Lindsey, B. C. (2016). School social workers as response to intervention change champions. *Advances in Social Work*, 16(2), 276–291. <https://doi.org/10.18060/16428>
- Basile, K. C., Smith, S. G., Breiding, M. J., Black, M. C., & Mahendra, R. (2014). *Sexual violence surveillance: Uniform definitions and recommended data elements* (Version 2.0). National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Bettinson, V., & Wake, N. (2023). A new self-defence framework for domestic abuse survivors who use violent resistance in response. *The Modern Law Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2230.12837>
- Blakey, J. M., Glaude, M., & Jennings, S. W. (2019). School- and program-related factors influencing disclosure among children participating in a school-based childhood physical and sexual abuse prevention program. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 96, 104092. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104092>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). *Thematic analysis*. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.
- Bright, M. A., Roehrkaase, A., Masten, S., Nauman, A., & Finkelhor, D. (2022). Child abuse prevention education policies increase reports of child sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 134, 105932. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105932>
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: Complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 25(8), 652–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>
- Chaudhry, M. N. (2017). *The identification of child neglect in social work practice* [Unpublished manuscript].
- de Jong, R., Alink, L., Bijleveld, C., Finkenauer, C., & Hendriks, J. (2015). Transition to adulthood of child sexual abuse victims. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 24, 175–187. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2015.04.012>

- Decker, M. R., Wood, S. N., Ndinda, E., Yenokyan, G., Sinclair, J., Maksud, N., Ross, B., Omondi, B., & Ndirangu, M. (2018). Sexual violence among adolescent girls and young women in Malawi: A cluster-randomized controlled implementation trial of empowerment self-defense training. *BMC Public Health*, 18, Article 1344. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-6220-0>
- Do, H. N., Nguyen, H. Q. T., Nguyen, L. T. T., Nguyen, H. D., Bui, T. P., Phan, N. T., Do, H. T. T., Ha, G. H., Phan, H. T., Nguyen, T. H. T., Ngo, A. T., Pham, K. T. H., Tran, B. X., Latkin, C. A., Ho, C. S. H., & Ho, R. C. M. (2019). Perception and attitude about child sexual abuse among Vietnamese school-age children. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(20), 3973. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16203973>
- Forero, R., Nahidi, S., De Costa, J., Mohsin, M., Fitzgerald, G., Gibson, N., McCarthy, S., & Aboagye-Sarfo, P. (2018). Application of four-dimension criteria to assess rigour of qualitative research in emergency medicine. *BMC Health Services Research*, 18, Article 120. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-018-2915-2>
- Fryda, C. M., & Hulme, P. A. (2015). School-based childhood sexual abuse prevention programs: An integrative review. *The Journal of School Nursing*, 31(3), 167–182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059840514544125>
- Gibson, S., Benson, O., & Brand, S. L. (2013). Talking about suicide. *Nursing Ethics*, 20(1), 18–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733012452684>
- Goosen, S. (2013). Battered women and the requirement of imminence in self-defence. *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal*, 16(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.4314/pelj.v16i1.4>
- Hailes, H. P., Yu, R., Danese, A., & Fazel, S. (2019). Long-term outcomes of childhood sexual abuse: An umbrella review. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 6(10), 830–839. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(19\)30286-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30286-X)
- Han, J., & Yin, H. (2016). Teacher motivation: Definition, research development and implications for teachers. *Cogent Education*, 3(1), Article 1217819. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1217819>
- Hlavka, H. R. (2019). Regulating bodies: Children and sexual violence. *Violence Against Women*, 25(16), 1956–1979. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219875817>
- Hollander, J. A. (2014). Does self-defense training prevent sexual violence against women? *Violence Against Women*, 20(3), 252–269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801214526046>
- Hollander, J. A. (2016). The importance of self-defense training for sexual violence prevention. *Feminism & Psychology*, 26(2), 207–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353516637393>
- Jamieson, L., Sambu, W., & Mathews, S. (2017). *Out of harm's way? Tracking child abuse cases through the child protection system in five selected sites in South Africa*. Children's Institute.
- Jin, Y., Chen, J., Jiang, Y., & Yu, B. (2017). Evaluation of a sexual abuse prevention education program for school-age children in China: A comparison of teachers and parents as instructors. *Health Education Research*, 32(4), 364–373. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyx047>
- Johnson, A. K., & Sloth-Nielsen, J. (2020). Child protection, safeguarding and the role of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child: Looking back and looking ahead. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 20(2), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.17159/1996->

2096/2020/v20n2a13

- Kam, P. K. (2021). Strengthening the empowerment approach in social work practice: An EPS model. *Journal of Social Work*, 21(3), 329–352. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017320911348>
- Kelly, L., & Sharp-Jeffs, N. (2016). *Knowledge and know-how: The role of self-defence in the prevention of violence against women* (PE 571.385). European Parliament.
- Machisa, M. T., Mahlangu, P., Chirwa, E., Nunze, N., Sikweyiya, Y., Dartnall, E., Pillay, M., & Jewkes, R. (2023). Ntombi Vimbela! Sexual violence risk reduction intervention: Pre and one-year post assessments from a single arm pilot feasibility study among female students in South Africa. *BMC Public Health*, 23, Article 1265. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-16149-x>
- Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, 9(3).
- Majid, U. (2018). Research fundamentals: Study design, population, and sample size. *Undergraduate Research in Natural and Clinical Science and Technology (URNCTST) Journal*, 2(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.26685/urnctst.16>
- Markwei, U., & Osei-Hwedie, K. (2019). Betrayed and broken: A study of the experiences of victims of child sexual abuse in the Ga community in Accra, Ghana. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 28(4), 472–488. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2019.1581869>
- Martin, I. (2014). *Oxford dictionary of social work and social care* by John Harris and Vicky White [Book review]. *Journal of Social Work*, 14(5), 543–545. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017313518411>
- Meinck, F., Cluver, L. D., Boyes, M. E., & Loening-Voysey, H. (2016). Physical, emotional, and sexual adolescent abuse victimisation in South Africa: Prevalence, incidence, perpetrators and locations. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 70(9), 910–916. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2015-205860>
- Mendelson, T., & Letourneau, E. J. (2015). Parent-focused prevention of child sexual abuse. *Prevention Science*, 16(6), 844–852. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-015-0553-z>
- Miley, K. K., & DuBois, B. (2026). *Social work: An empowering profession*. Pearson.
- Millum, J., & Bromwich, D. (2021). Informed consent: What must be disclosed and what must be understood? *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 21(5), 46–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2020.1863511>
- Ngidi, N., Moletsane, R., & Essack, Z. (2021). “They abduct us and rape us”: Adolescents’ participatory visual reflections of their vulnerability to sexual violence in South African townships. *Social Science & Medicine*, 287, 114401. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114401>
- Nyandieka, L. N. (2002). Managing a household survey: A practical example from the Kenqol Survey. *Health Policy and Planning*, 17(2), 207–212. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/17.2.207>
- Oben, A. I. (2021). Research instruments: A questionnaire and an interview guide used to investigate the implementation of higher education objectives and the attainment of Cameroon’s Vision 2035. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 8(7), 113–127. <https://doi.org/10.46827/ejes.v8i7.3808>

- Perumal, D. (2013). Misguided reform: Regulating consensual sexual activity between adolescents in South African law from a gender perspective. *Agenda*, 27(3), 107–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2013.849789>
- Phillip, O., & Amone-P'Olak, K. (2019). The influence of self-reported childhood sexual abuse on psychological and behavioural risks in young adults at a university in Botswana. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 49(3), 353–363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246318801723>
- Potenza, G. M., Konukman, F., Yu, J. H., & Gümüşdağ, H. (2014). Teaching self-defense to middle school students in physical education. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 85(1), 47–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2014.855581>
- Ravalier, J. M., Wegrzynek, P., Mitchell, A., McGowan, J., McFadden, P., & Bald, C. (2023). A rapid review of reflective supervision in social work. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53(4), 1945–1962. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac223>
- Rheingold, A. A., Zajac, K., Chapman, J. E., Patton, M., de Arellano, M., Saunders, B., & Kilpatrick, D. (2015). Child sexual abuse prevention training for childcare professionals: An independent multi-site randomized controlled trial of Stewards of Children. *Prevention Science*, 16(3), 374–385. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-014-0499-6>
- Rumble, L., Febrianto, R. F., Larasati, M. N., Hamilton, C., Mathews, B., & Dunne, M. P. (2020). Childhood sexual violence in Indonesia: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 21(2), 284–299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018767932>
- Sinclair, J., Sinclair, L., Otieno, E., Mulinge, M., Kapphahn, C., & Golden, N. H. (2013). A self-defense program reduces the incidence of sexual assault in Kenyan adolescent girls. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 53(3), 374–380. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.04.008>
- Smulowitz, S. (2017). Interview guide. In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (pp. 1–2). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0124>
- Strydom, H., Fouché, C. B., & Delport, C. S. L. (2005). *Research at grass roots: For the social sciences and human service professions* (3rd ed.). Van Schaik Publishers.
- Sunkad, G. (2023). Social empowerment. *Scholastic: Journal of Natural and Medical Education*, 2(1), 12–16.
- Teater, B. (2020). *An introduction to applying social work theories and methods* (2nd ed.). Open University Press.
- The Department of Justice and Constitutional Development. (2013). *National Register for Sex Offenders (NRSO)*. https://www.justice.gov.za/forms/form_nrso.html
- Turner, S. G., & Maschi, T. M. (2014). Feminist and empowerment theory and social work practice. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 29(2), 151–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2014.941282>
- Veenema, T. G., Thornton, C. P., & Corley, A. (2015). The public health crisis of child sexual abuse in low- and middle-income countries: An integrative review of the literature. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 52(4), 864–881. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2014.10.017>
- Walsh, K., Berthelsen, D., Nicholson, J. M., Brandon, L., Stevens, J., & Rachele, J. N. (2013). Child sexual abuse prevention education: A review of school policy and curriculum provision in Australia. *Oxford Review of Education*, 39(5), 649–680. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2013.843446>

- Wangamati, C. K., Yegon, G., Sundby, J., & Prince, R. J. (2019). Sexualised violence against children: A review of laws and policies in Kenya. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 27(1), 16–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2019.1586815>
- Ward, C. L., Artz, L., Leoschut, L., Kassanjee, R., & Burton, P. (2018). Sexual violence against children in South Africa: A nationally representative cross-sectional study of prevalence and correlates. *The Lancet Global Health*, 6(4), e460–e468. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(18\)30060-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(18)30060-3)
- Yusof, R., Norhayati, M. N., & Mohd Azman, Y. (2022). Effectiveness of school-based child sexual abuse intervention among school children in the new millennium era: Systematic review and meta-analyses. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10, 909254. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.909254>
- Žukauskas, P., Vveinhardt, J., & Andriukaitienė, R. (2018). Exploratory research. In *Management culture and corporate social responsibility*. IntechOpen. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.70631>
- Zimmerman, M. A. (2000). Empowerment theory: Psychological, organizational, and community levels of analysis. In J. Rappaport & E. Seidman (Eds.), *Handbook of community psychology* (pp. 43–63). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-4193-6_2