Original Research

Will You Protect Me or Make the Situation Worse?: Teachers' Responses to School Violence Against Students With Disabilities

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Abstract

School violence is a global public health epidemic, with students with disabilities at a significantly greater risk than their non-disabled peers. Students with disabilities are more vulnerable to school violence from peers, teachers, and school staff due to stereotypes and prejudice. Teachers are pivotal in preventing violence and intervening, but literature on the role that teachers play in responding to disability-based violence is limited. Guided by the social–ecological framework of bullying, this qualitative study explored educators' responses to school violence against students with disabilities in Zambia. Data generation included document review, interviews, and focus groups with 33 teachers and 12 parents, and child-friendly methods with 90 students with disabilities. Findings illuminated that students with disabilities are less safe in schools. Teachers are not responding to violence seen or heard about due to stigmatizing beliefs and cultural norms surrounding disability and violence, with students with disabilities blamed for the violence and the response being

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their burden. Students with disabilities felt protected by special education teachers; however, disability-based stigma did not end with the student. By association, special education teachers were experiencing stigma from other teachers and were discouraged to respond. This stigma undermined the support special education teachers could provide to decrease school violence. Findings provide direction so teachers can respond to school violence in prosocial ways that create an environment where students with disabilities feel safe.

Keywords
child abuse, cultural contexts, bullying, disability, vulnerability to abuse, developmentally delayed

School violence is recognized as a global public health epidemic, with an estimated 246 million children experiencing violence at school every year, equating to approximately 1 in 4 students (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2017). Of this estimate, the proportion of children affected by school violence varies between countries. In Zambia, the country of this study, nationally representative data from the Global School-Based Health Survey (GSHS), indicated that 67% of schoolchildren had experienced violence within the last 30 days (Siziya et al., 2012). Forms of violence found in schools are physical and psychological, interpersonal and institutional, usually occurring simultaneously. In this study, school violence is described as "...violent acts that disrupt learning and have a negative effect on students, schools, and the broader community" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2019). Perpetrators of violence against children at school include peers, teachers, and school staff. Of the violence that occurs at school in Zambia against students, the prevalence of being bullied by peers was 63% and virtually all (97%) reported that they received corporal punishment by teachers over the course of the year (Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010).

The impact of school violence is far-reaching beyond the individual. Not only does it harm children's physical, mental, and emotional health (Ferrara et al., 2019), but it also impacts their education with long-lasting effects beyond the school years. Within school, children have decreased class participation, lowered school performance, increased grade repetition, and increased dropout rates (Boden et al., 2007; Cornell et al., 2013; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). Victims are more likely to not finish school, be unemployed, and receive lower wages (Ellery et al., 2010). The impact of school violence also extends to the family and community and can become intergenerational with those exposed to violence more likely to perpetrate violence against their children (Pereznieto et al., 2010).

School Violence Against Students with Disabilities

While school violence can and does occur against children of all groups and demographics, those with disabilities are at a significantly greater risk than their non-disabled peers (Swearer et al., 2012). This increased rate of violence against children with disabilities is driven by stigma-related factors including stereotypes and prejudice (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM, 2016). Stigma-based bullying represents the overlap between bullying and discrimination and can be defined as bullying motivated by a stigma (Earnshaw et al., 2018). Stigma-based violence involves behaviors related to the type of discrimination (e.g., sexual harassment directed towards girls and racial slurs directed at minority youth). The impact of stigma-based violence is severely negative because it targets students that are already oppressed and further exploits their marginalized positions (Price et al., 2019). Emerging evidence on stigma-based violence describes the overlapping effect between bullying and discrimination; however, the majority of studies focus on race and sexual orientation (Galán et al., 2021), with a dearth of work with students with disabilities. In this study, we illuminate the interaction between disability and school violence and how they interact and overlap in a school-based context in Zambia.

Children with disabilities are described as children who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (United Nations (UN), 2006). Evidence from a systematic review found that in high-income countries, children with disabilities experience violence four times more frequently than non-disabled children (Jones et al., 2012). This systematic review noted the lack of data from low and middle-income countries (LMICs), pointing to underrepresentation in researchers considering the issue of violence against children with disabilities in LMICs. This is of great concern since children with disabilities are overrepresented in LMICs, an estimated 85% of children with disabilities live in these countries (Maulik & Darmstadt, 2007). Although some 93 million children are living with disabilities in LMICs, and across the world there have been many policy developments in inclusive education with more children with disabilities having access to education (Van Mieghem et al., 2020), almost nothing is known about the violence these children experience at school. Of the limited evidence that exists on school violence against students with disabilities in LMICs (Njelesani, 2019; Njelesani et al., 2018; Nyokangi & Phasha, 2016), none have included Zambia as a study site. Despite this dearth of evidence, violence against children with disabilities can be expected to be higher in Zambia where there are greater stigmas associated with having a disability, fewer resources available for families who have children with

disabilities, and wider accepted use of corporal punishment in disciplining children (Stoltenborgh et al., 2013).

Teachers Responses' to School Violence

Schools are obligated to protect children from all forms of violence in schools. As the primary support person in the school environment, teachers, in particular, are pivotal in preventing violence and intervening. Teachers thus have a unique role and opportunity to address school violence (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). Teacher responses to school violence are multifaceted and dependent on a variety of factors including context, environment, culture, and the perceived severity of the act of violence. Responses also require that teachers feel a responsibility to intervene in situations (Bilz et al., 2017). Studies find a direct correlation between educators' having an attitude supportive of violence against children and the prevalence of school violence against children (Swearer et al., 2010a).

Teacher efforts to prevent and intervene in violence are most effective when they closely supervise students (e.g., in classroom and playground) and respond promptly and decidedly to an episode of violence (Olweus, 1994). On the contrary, a failure to act or an inconsistent response can cause more problems for victims (Bradshaw et al., 2007). The way teachers respond also sends a message of what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015; Bauman et al., 2016). Teachers, therefore, have an opportunity to create a caring and supportive environment where children are protected from violence and feel safe (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014).

Teachers' Responses to Stigma-Based Violence

Research on stigma-based violence, although increasing in the last two decades (Domínguez-Martínez & Robles, 2019; Earnshaw et al., 2018; Mulvey et al., 2018), is still limited compared to other forms of school violence. Students discriminated by race, ethnicity, weight, gender, and sexual orientation reported that teachers are ineffectively responding to incidents (Kosciw et al., 2014). Teachers were found to inconsistently or never intervene, even when an assault had occurred. The lack of teacher action contributed to school environments that were not safe for discriminated students, signaled that stigma-based violence is acceptable, and led to students not reporting incidents (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014).

Most of the published research on stigma-based violence is from high-income countries and does not examine the interaction between disability-based stigma and school violence nor the reasons why teachers might not be intervening. Therefore, this study investigates teachers' responses to disability-based violence in Zambia, where this issue has yet to be explored, to

understand how to strengthen the education system and support teachers to intervene.

Child Disability in Zambia

Zambia is a lower–middle-income country located in Southern Africa with a population of near 17 million. It is a youthful country, about half of the population is under the age of 15 (World Health Organization, 2021). The Zambia National Disability Survey conducted in 2015 estimated the prevalence of disability to be 4.4% among children (UNICEF, 2016). Overall disability rates were higher among females, and visual impairments were the most common type of disability reported. Across disability categories, another disability survey in Zambia found that persons with sensory, intellectual, and mental health conditions experienced more exclusion and less social participation than persons with physical impairments, contributing to further bias against people with hidden disabilities (Eide & Loeb, 2006).

Since the early 1990s, the Government of Zambia has worked to develop education policy and improve access to education for Zambian children with disabilities (Ngulube et al., 2020). In addition to signing various international initiatives and resolutions (e.g., signing United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008 and ratification in 2010), work has been done to develop national policies and strategies (e.g., Education Act 2011) that ensure access to education for children with disabilities. Despite these initiatives, the National Disability Survey reported that fewer children with disabilities attend school than non-disabled children, and girls and rural children with disabilities were the least enrolled (UNICEF, 2016). These findings are consistent with a previous disability study conducted in 2006 that reported that 25% of children with disabilities did not attend primary school (Eide & Loeb, 2006). These education gaps stem from communities' lack of knowledge and stigma regarding how children with disabilities should participate in Zambian society (Njelesani et al., 2014; UNICEF, 2018). The social exclusion continues into adulthood, persons with disabilities are not invited to participate in traditional ceremonies, they are denied their rights to get married, have children, and make decisions about their lives (Eide & Loeb, 2006).

School Violence in the Zambia Context

While there is no national study on violence against students with disabilities, some evidence exists on violence against students broadly and available evidence as reported above suggests that students in Zambia experience high rates of violence overall. Despite Zambia's adoption of legislation in 1998 banning corporal punishment in schools, corporal punishment and other forms

of discipline are widely favored in schools. UNICEF (2014) documented that violence against children takes many different forms in Zambia and is often rooted in cultural beliefs and widespread gender norms. They found physical violence and sexual abuse common in schools and that most violent acts were perpetrated by people known to victims, including teachers and peers. No existing research explores the role that teachers play in responding to the school violence that students experience in Zambia, and, in general, there is a paucity of related research in LMICs. Since research suggests that educators should be major players in reducing school violence (Swearer et al., 2010a), the purpose of this study was to examine how teachers' addressed school violence against students with disabilities in Zambia.

Theoretical Framework

Limited research exists on the response of teachers to disability-based violence. This may partially be because school violence against students with disabilities is seldom studied across ecological systems and therefore fails to provide a comprehensive view across multiple contextual levels (Swearer et al., 2010a). This study draws therefore from the social-ecological framework of bullying (Swearer & Espelage, 2010) to study school violence between and within ecological systems in the Zambian context, including across the levels of the victim, bully, bystander, teachers, school, and national education system. The social–ecological framework of bullying proposes that "a bullying interaction occurs not only because of individual characteristics of the child who is bullying, but also because of actions of peers, actions of teachers and other adult caretakers at school, physical characteristics of the school grounds, family factors, cultural characteristics, and even community factors" (Swearer & Doll, 2001, p. 10). Disability scholars have recognized the importance of research frameworks that consider factors beyond the individual-level (e.g., impairment type) as factors at the micro (e.g., school climate) and macrosystems (e.g., child protection policies and disability rights movement) have a profound effect on disability-based violence (Curtiss & Kammes, 2020).

Reflexivity

The research team consisted of occupational therapy scholars, Zambian youth researchers, and a Zambian advisory board of child protection, inclusive education, and disability advocates. The first author of this paper has considerable experience in child protection qualitative research and a history of working in Zambia with the youth researchers in this study. Research assistants were youth with disabilities trained in qualitative research. They co-constructed and piloted the research tools and assisted with data collection and analysis. The advisory board was key in mitigating concerns during the

research, including participant recruitment and power dynamics, and reviewing and providing feedback on findings.

Methodology

Participants

Students with disabilities attending primary and secondary mainstream schools where inclusive education was offered, and their parents and teachers were included in this study. Participants were recruited from three provinces in Zambia: Central, Southern, and Lusaka. Nine schools across these provinces were selected since they offered a substantial variation in geography and the time since inclusive education programming had been offered. From each school, at least two teachers and three students were recruited. Students were required to be a current student and self-identify as having a disability. Sampling was purposive. After obtaining a list of identified teachers and students from school headteachers, purposeful sampling was used to select and invite participants of varying genders, ages, abilities, and teachers with years of teaching experience. Parents were recruited from local parent associations. Sessions were conducted in person, in Nyanja, Bemba, English, or Zambian sign language according to the participants' preference.

Methods

Data was generated between June 2019 and February 2020 using qualitative methods with participants and a review of school documents (i.e., incident reports and school violence policy). With students, child-friendly methods were used that had previously been co-constructed with youth with disabilities, including vignettes, cartoon captioning, photo-elicitation, drawings (e.g., Draw a place at school where you feel safe), sentence starters (e.g., If I am hurt at school I can go to……), semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Methods were selected for use with each child that considered their age, strengths, preferences, and abilities (e.g., using vignettes with children with visual impairments). Data with teachers was generated through semi-structured interview questions (e.g., What is your school's child protection policy?), focus groups, and vignettes (e.g., Scenario of what they think happened when a teacher witnessed sexual assault against a youth with disability by a colleague). All parents participated in a focus group. Data generation was conducted at schools for students and teachers, and community centers for parents. Locations within schools and centers were selected to take participants' accessibility, comfort, safety, convenience, and anonymity into consideration.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, translated into English as needed, and transcribed. Data analysis was informed by the qualitative data analysis approach described by Miles and Huberman (1994) and the coding methods described by Saldana (2009). First, we imported all data into Dedoose qualitative software program and read the data several times. Then, using a flexible coding system with a set of guiding questions (e.g., What appears to be understood as the preferred way to respond to school violence?) derived from and consistent with the research aim and the guiding theoretical framework, we coded data using both a priori (e.g., Policy- Modes through which school and national policies influence teacher's response) and inductive codes (e.g., Victim blaming- Teacher's response was to blame the student for the violence the child experienced). From these codes, pattern coding was used to group similar codes into emerging themes. Rigor was achieved at this stage using analysis meetings and reviewing the emerging themes with an advisory committee comprised of representatives from the University of Zambia, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Youth, child protection and disability non-governmental organizations (NGO) representatives, school administrators, teachers, and students with disabilities. The advisory group reviewed the preliminary themes, shared impressions, developed explanations, and discussed alternate interpretations of the data. Once final themes were generated, the organization of themes was reviewed to ensure the themes were internally coherent, consistent, and distinct. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, reflexive and analytical memos were written (Birks et al., 2008).

Ethical Considerations

Gathering data on violence against children is a complex task, and fraught with ethical and methodological challenges, but not asking at all would mean that teachers, students, and parents are denied an opportunity to participate in a process that could lead to reductions in violence and improved outcomes for students. To address the ethical concerns, a child protection reporting plan was used. The plan included the interviews ending with scripted closures that differed depending on what was disclosed with information about whether or not to involve child protection officials and what would happen next. During the informed consent process, participants were fully informed of how disclosures of criminal acts would be handled and of their right to not take part and to withdraw at any stage from the study. Research approval was received from the Research Ethics Boards at New York University and the University of Zambia. All adults provided written consent and verbal assent was received from child participants. Consent for the children to participate was obtained by

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants.

	Lusaka Province	Central Province	Southern Province	Total
Students with disabilities	44	20	26	90
Teachers/ Administrators	18	2	13	33
Parents	4	0	8	12
Total	66	22	47	135

the school in loco parentis when parental consent could not be obtained (i.e., parental contact information not available).

Findings

Participant Characteristics

A total of 135 participants from the Lusaka, Central, and Southern provinces of Zambia participated in this study (see Table 1). Of the 135 participants, 90 were students with disabilities, 33 were teachers and administrators, and 12 were parents of students with disabilities. Overall, 65 participants were females and 70 were males. The age range of the students was from 7 to 27 years old, and teachers and administrators were all over 18 years of age.

In this study, students with a breadth of impairments were included including children with visual, hearing, intellectual (i.e., a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information and to learn and apply new skills (impaired intelligence) WHO, 2021), physical (e.g., epilepsy, albinism, hydrocephalus, and cerebral palsy), and multiple impairments (e.g., intellectual impairment and blindness) (see Table 2).

Of the nine selected schools, two were in Central, three in Southern, and four in Lusaka provinces, with three being in rural and six in urban settings. Seven of the schools were primary (i.e., grades 1–7) and two were secondary schools (i.e., grades 8–12). All of the schools were public mainstream schools (i.e., general education schools that enroll students with disabilities) where inclusive education programming was offered. In all of the schools and classrooms, the majority of children enrolled were non-disabled with the selected schools enrolling none to four students in each class.

Reported Violence

The majority of students and parents spoke of incidents of school-based violence. This violence was perpetrated by other students, teachers, and staff,

Table 2. Demographics of Student Participants.

	Lusaka Province (n = 44)	Central Province (n = 20)	Southern Province (n = 26)	Total (n = 90)
Female	12	8	16	36
Male	32	12	10	54
7–13 years old	6	8	11	25
14 years old and above	38	12	15	65
Visual impairment	4	6	4	14
Hearing impairment	8	1	1	10
Intellectual impairment	13	3	5	21
Physical impairment	14	7	4	25
Multiple impairments	5	3	12	20

and the type of violence varied. For example, students described being hit (i.e., corporal punishment) by teachers in the classroom and being called names (i.e., verbal abuse) by peers on the playground. The physical violence described came from both teachers and students. The student participants reported being victimized by non-disabled students, no accounts were given of violence amongst students with disabilities. When it was a teacher perpetrating the violence, it was described as beating and often seen as corporal punishment. One student spoke about corporal punishment that the whole class received, "teachers beat [students] with stick this year and last year" (boy with disability, Central province). Another student described an incident that occurred specific to their impairment, "We were studying in class and the teacher said "Don't make noise". But I couldn't see, so my friend was explaining to me. Then the teacher beat me for making noise" (girl with disability, Southern province). A similar incident was reported from another student with a disability, "My class teacher beat me in front of everyone because I asked for help from someone else, she thought that I think she is not good enough to teach" (girl with disability, Southern province). Physical instances of school violence were not limited to teachers. Many students described physical violence from other students, often in the schoolyard or places outside of the classroom. These statements from students illustrate this violence; "He called me big head and threw stones at me" (boy with disability, Lusaka province) and "They chase me around so that they can beat me. They throw stones at me" (boy with disability, Southern province).

School-based violence also took the form of name calling and verbal abuse. Again, this type of violence was perpetrated by both teachers and students. A parent reported verbal abuse their child received from a teacher, "Teachers give children animal names" (mother, Lusaka province). A student with physical impairments spoke of the mocking they received from teachers, "You are unable to stand? Your legs are lame" (girl with disability, Central province). Students reported many instances of exclusion and name calling from peers. One child after trying to play in a game with classmates was told, "No, you can't play because you are disabled" (girl with disability, Central province). A student described an instance of students perpetrating violence against deaf students, "Since they can't hear, other students said disgusting things, even not good to listen" (boy with visual impairment, Lusaka province).

No Response

Overall, from the accounts of students, parents, and teachers alike, teachers most often did not report or address incidences after witnessing or hearing about violence towards students with disabilities no matter the type or severity of the violence. In this study, a non-response meant no reporting, punishment of the perpetrator, or consoling the victim was undertaken despite having been alerted to the incidents. This lack of response to address the violence could be attributed to the beliefs of teachers and systemic oppression of children with disabilities indicated in the following sub-themes.

Victim blaming. Teachers did not recognize who was perpetuating the violence, instead, they blamed the students with disabilities. One teacher stressed how they did not believe how any incidents could occur as the student's disability was not visible. Therefore from their perspective, the bullying was only in the student's imagination. They commented, "The problem is with the child, not the friends. They just think weird things the problem is the child. Their mind bullied them. I did not believe that story, as you couldn't see such problems in the leg" (teacher, Lusaka province). Teachers not only victim-blamed the student but also held the student's parents responsible. A student reported that if a student with a disability was falsely blamed for damaging property a teacher would, "Call parents to charge them with broken window and ask them to pay" (girl with disability, Southern province).

Grow up as real boys. For some teachers, the lack of response was embedded in the cultural and social norms that support school violence. Being bullied was seen as a rite of passage for boys to grow up as real boys. A teacher commented, "Certain elements in our culture. When bullied, you should not cry as boy child. Grow up as real boys" (teacher, Southern province). There was also

an underlying assumption that school violence was to be expected. One teacher stated that violence, was normal within the classroom while they were teaching, "Fighting is high-in the classroom even when you are teaching" (teacher, Southern province). Another teacher was adamant that violence was "Not severe here" but at the same time expressed, "But you know African children" (teacher, Lusaka province).

Brother's keeper. Teachers' also held the assumption that students would care for one another which alleviated the teacher's responsibility to address school violence. One teacher stated, "Everyone is their brother's keeper" (teacher, Southern province). This assumption puts the responsibility on the students to care for each other and address the school violence themselves. Unsurprisingly, a lot of students with disabilities mentioned telling their friends when they were hurt and when they needed help. A parent stated that when his child was hurt, the ones who helped him were, "Mostly his friends, even taking him to the bathroom" (parent, Lusaka province). Another student expressed that, "If I am hurt at school, I just have to talk to someone who makes me feel better, someone like a good friend, my best friend" (boy with disability, Lusaka province). Related to the idea that the response is the burden of the children, were the messages of forgiveness, tied to Christianity, the prominent religion in Zambia. A teacher revealed that, "At school they learn "forgive and forget" if someone hurts them" (teacher, Lusaka province). The students were taught not to report or ask for help and instead to forgive the perpetrator and forget about it. This in turn meant the teachers had less of an onus to address it as the students did not report these incidences.

Lack of direction. Teachers' not responding was also tied to not being informed of what to do. School and government child protection policies were not existing or implemented in many schools and little training was provided. Several teachers commented, "Most schools do not have child protection policies" and, "Government and private sector (schools) don't implement protection policies. Only USAID sponsored schools" (teacher, Central province). Even if there was a policy in place, these policies were often not implemented. A headteacher emphasized that their school had a child protection policy but "We don't force teachers to sign" (teacher, Lusaka province). There was also a lack of training, with most teachers not having received child protection or inclusive education training at their teacher college or as a post-professional in-service.

Punitive

When teachers did respond, they most often took punitive measures. Punitive measures included any action or response that teachers took to violence

witnessed or heard about that punished perpetrators (e.g., expulsion and reported to a higher authority). When violence was from peers, punishments most commonly involved expelling the perpetrator, as one teacher expressed, "I'd meet the pupils and emphasize the school rule-expulsion" (teacher, Southern province*)*. This teacher also expressed that when witnessing violence against a student that was perpetrated by another teacher, they would report the incident, "I'd warn teacher, report him/her to police" (teacher, Southern province). There were also cases where the punishment was unspecified but assumed to be corporal punishment. Both students with disabilities and parents talked about this punishment, "The teacher punished them" (boy with disability, Central province). A mother, who heard about school violence against her daughter, informed the teacher about the incident. The mother expressed that, "Teachers punish the kids" (parent, Lusaka province).

Prosocial

In contrast to punitive responses, some teachers responded from a prosocial perspective. Prosocial responses included preventive or caring actions teachers took that supported victims. Prosocial responses were most often reported by students to have occurred by a teacher trained in special education working in their mainstream school. However, these special education teachers were often discouraged and even stigmatized for responding when students with disabilities faced school violence. When special education teachers did respond and report the school violence towards students with disabilities, not only was no action taken by the administration but the special education teachers were often stigmatized themselves for advocating for students with disabilities. Another obstacle special education teachers faced when utilizing prosocial measures was the gap in authority. Special education teachers did not have the same level of authority compared to their peers. When special education teachers witnessed violence at school and responded by trying to stop the action, other teachers would overrule them. For instance, a student stated, "One class teacher slapped me in the presence of the special education teacher, I was slapped so bad that I started having a seizure, special education teacher tried to stop but she was pushed away" (boy with disability, Southern province). Special education teachers were also seen to protect students with disabilities from violence through taking preventive measures such as protecting them and their belongings from harm. When asked about a place where they feel safe in school, a student expressed, "Resource room (overseen by special education teacher), where my belongings are kept to not be stolen" (boy with disability, Central province).

Discussion

The experiences of students with disabilities, teachers, and parents indicate that school remains an unsafe place for students with disabilities in Zambia. All respondents reported interpersonal violence occurring at school and that the violence goes unaddressed and unreported. This violence perpetrated by peers and teachers supports previous findings that children with disabilities are 3.7 times more likely to experience violence than their non-disabled peers (UNESCO, 2017). With the lack of reporting within the sites studied, we can assume the rate may be underestimated and therefore even higher in Zambia.

Applying the social–ecological framework of bullying illuminated how factors across multiple systems exist that must be addressed to prevent disability-based violence in Zambian schools. General education teachers in the study did not respond to school violence nor held perpetrators, fellow teachers or staff, or the broader school system accountable. School guidance and counseling teachers also have a role in monitoring school violence; however, no formal reports were identified having been made in part as the document review indicated that the reporting process is not well defined. In addition to having a lack of reporting procedures, teachers did not respond nor hold schools accountable given the inherent power and cultural dynamics within school systems. Teachers believe they may be transferred or fired if they report any incidences that may be perceived to bring blame or shame to the school (Mtonga, 2010). To protect teachers and instill confidence that they will not be retaliated against, a recent study on teacher ethical conduct in Zambia indicated the need for teachers to be introduced to codes of ethics and the enforcement of education laws (Mwelwa & Mulenga-Hagane, 2020). Furthermore, anonymous reporting channels may be considered to be implemented in Zambia as they have been found to be effective in other educational systems outside of Western contexts where teachers were hesitant to report wrongdoings (Gökçe, 2013).

Teachers suggested that students with disabilities needed to work out their differences with non-disabled students on their own. Shifting the responsibility to the students aligns with cultural beliefs and norms in Zambia, that child rivalry is a normalized part of childhood behavior, thereby normalizing the violence (Brudevold-Newman et al., 2018). In Zambia, there is also the traditional practice of assigning social responsibility to young people to prepare them for participation in the local community (Serpell & Adamson-Holley, 2015). However, given the power dynamic between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, with the perpetrator holding a dominant role (Veenstra et al., 2007), we need to question whether students can be left to work it out on their own. Students with disabilities hold less power in these interactions and need trusted adults to help. By teachers intervening and stopping incidents, in particular the first time they occur,

violence is less likely to escalate over time (Yoon et al., 2016). The decision to have the students work it out indicates that teachers were focused on the root of the violence to be at the interpersonal level (i.e., interaction among student with a disability and non-disabled peers), and in interviews they did not indicate possible wider institutional or contextual factors for violence, such as the lack or failure of response by teachers or the broader school environment policies.

As school violence involves others beyond the perpetrator and victim, the effect of teachers and peers who witnessed the school violence must also be taken into account. The bystander-effect (i.e., presence of other people reduces the likelihood that an individual will help) therefore may have contributed to the non-response actions from other students and teachers (Fischer et al., 2011). Peer reticence to intervene as bystanders is supported in the literature (Rock & Baird, 2012), and occurs as student bystanders may feel powerless to intervene or believe that they would be the next target. As discussed above, teacher bystanders may not have thought the incident warranted attention, feared retaliation, or not known what to do given the lack of reporting procedures. Any implemented anti-violence strategy should emphasize the role of bystanders, this may affect change at the peer level (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005) and increase teacher efficacy in addressing school violence (Farley, 2018).

This study investigated teachers' responses to disability-based violence in Zambia and makes an important contribution to the literature as it illuminates that teachers discriminate against students with disabilities and are not responding to violence seen or heard about. The lack of action is similar to previous research findings on stigma-based violence against students with stigmatized identities (Price et al., 2019). Disability-based stigma affected teachers' responses or lack thereof to school violence across the individual, micro, and macrosystems. Students with disabilities were blamed to incite the violence. This victim blaming is rooted in the disability-based stigma that includes beliefs about children with disabilities that shape how they are treated. In Zambia, these beliefs are broadly related to the idea that the child's disability is the fault of the family, with the mother often blamed, and therefore the family should feel ashamed and be rejected from the community (Hearst et al., 2020). Further beliefs that perpetuate school violence are that children with certain impairments (e.g., Deaf children) are difficult and prone to agitation and violence. Additionally, deaf children are at a higher risk of violence due to beliefs that they cannot talk or communicate (Bennett, 2001). When teachers held such stigma and blamed the students with disabilities, they made the situation worse, giving power for non-disabled students and other staff to rationalize the violence. Previous studies have indicated that incidents of physical violence are perceived by teachers to be more severe than verbal acts, and teachers are therefore more likely to respond (Chen et al.,

2015). However, in this study the lack of response did not appear connected to the type or severity of violence, instead, it appeared related to disability-based stigma as the teachers that did respond were special education teachers trained in disability and inclusion. This finding is supported by previous work on stigma-based violence that reported teachers did not respond even in cases of assault against youth (Msibi, 2012).

Students were observant of how teachers did or did not respond to school violence. These observations by students influenced their perception of whether that teacher is someone who will protect them or make the situation worse (Bauman et al., 2016; Troop & Ladd, 2015). Most of the actions by teachers, be it blaming the victim or ignoring incidents, made the situation worse for the students with disabilities in this study; however, special education teachers were found to protect students with disabilities, a novel finding of this study, that is not widely discussed in the literature. Also, unique to this study and in which evidence is limited, in particular outside of high-income contexts (Cho et al., 2020), is the idea that special education teachers had many challenges to carrying out their work and supporting students with disabilities, including stigma from other teachers and administration. Disability-based stigma did not end with the student, but by association to the students with disabilities' status in their schools, special education teachers were experiencing stigma, referred to as stigma by association or courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963). This stigma against special education teachers undermined the support they could provide thereby compromising their professional role and contributing to institutional violence as stereotypes of disability and resulting practice created inequality and prevented children's access to support (Neille & Penn, 2015). These findings also support recent studies that courtesy stigma is a cross-cultural factor to be considered (Kayama et al., 2019), but which has previously received limited attention outside of Western contexts and in particular LMICs.

When teachers did respond, most often it was punitively, consistent with disciplinary practices (e.g., suspension and heightened supervision) reported globally (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). Unfortunately, punitive approaches have a poor history of effectiveness, (Swearer et al., 2010a). Instead, evidence supports school-wide efforts that increase inclusion and reduce behaviors school-wide as the most effective strategies (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). Key to considering inclusive school-wide efforts in Zambia are strategies teachers in low resource settings can use to counter disability-based school violence. In Zambia, these could be built upon the current gender-based school violence intervention programs (e.g., Comprehensive Sexuality Education and Guidance and Counselling) (Parkes et al., 2017), and consider how the intersection of disability further affects violence. Existing mainstream anti-bullying interventions used in Zambia such as Peace Clubs and the Good Behavior Game (Musariwa, 2017), could also be designed to be inclusive of

students with disabilities. Furthermore, there are existing community-based child protection mechanisms that can be adapted to address school-related disability-based violence. For example, Girl Power, is a non-formal child protection mechanism that connects community members, school representatives, traditional leaders, and the Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare, to work together to establish child protection mechanisms (Chilwalo, 2020).

As the study highlights, most teachers were not supported to respond to school violence nor did they have sufficient training in child protection, disability, or inclusion. A finding akin to numerous studies that report that teachers is unaware of how to prevent or respond to acts of violence (Athanasiades et al., 2015; Byers et al., 2011; Craig et al., 2011). Without this training, teachers were not cognizant of how students with disabilities were more vulnerable to school violence than non-disabled peers. In Zambia, to support efforts already made by the Ministry of General Education and the Ministry of Higher Education, further training could be incorporated into existing teacher training college curriculum for the next generation of teachers, and professional development programs for current teachers. For example, the current psychosocial curriculum of the Teachers' Diploma Program, educates teachers on psychosocial well-being and enhancing psychosocial support to students (Kaljee et al., 2017). Sensitizing teachers in training to disability offers an opportunity for countering stigma in educational settings. By bringing in special education teachers to conduct this training may also help reduce the courtesy stigma.

Professional development sessions for teachers are held weekly at schools. Historically, these sessions have focused on pedagogy, with social issues including child protection and school violence not included. The Government of Zambia recognizes they will not reach their quality education global development aims and improve the education system by focusing on pedagogy, as evidenced by education policies that emphasize holistic development (Njelesani, 2011). However, a shift in focus from didactic teaching strategies to professional development that includes how students' academics are affected by several factors including socio-emotional development and experiences of violence is needed at the school level. This shift could be feasible as it may not require substantial funding, but key will be training lead by school guidance and counselling teachers and special education teachers, with their mental health expertise.

As an increased number of children with disabilities enter schools and nations turn their focus from accessibility to quality of education, of which safety is paramount, this study is highly pertinent and well-positioned to inform education mandates so that violence in schools is less of a barrier to education for children with disabilities. Key is the need for government-mandated child protection policies implemented at the district level in schools

that includes a common definition of school violence, procedures to investigate reports, and reporting mandates (Brown et al., 2020). The Zambian Government has worked towards improving awareness and sensitization of the inclusion of children with disabilities, and a mandated national child protection policy in schools would be a natural next step to ensure children with disabilities can participate in school without the threat of violence. Senior Education Standards Officers at the provincial level in charge of guidance and counselling, and special education will be key in policy development and then uptake at the district levels as their role involves overseeing child protection and disability matters. According to the Zambia Agency for Persons with Disabilities (ZAPD), a quasi-government institution under the Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare, the current 2017–2021 strategic plan includes goals that focus on students with disabilities (ZAPD, 2017). These goals include lobbying and advocating for the inclusion of children with disabilities in schools and increasing community awareness and sensitization at district, provincial, and national levels on disability issues. However, addressing disability-based violence has not yet been prioritized in the strategic plan. Although some schools did have child protection policies, teachers were not mandated to follow them and the schools did not reinforce policies. This finding is supported by similar research wherein teachers were aware of child protection policies, but they were not rigidly implemented (Bayucca, 2020). Therefore, in addition to policy development, regular monitoring of the implementation is necessary. In Zambia, schools are inspected and monitored by District Education Standards Officers, and child protection could be a part of the routine inspection. In both the development and monitoring, it is essential to involve the disability community, students with disabilities and their parents, and traditional leaders to maximize effectiveness.

Limitations

Findings of this study were based on the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents in Zambia and as such may not be transferable to other contexts in which child protection policies and cultural norms differ. However, while this qualitative study is not generalizable to all contexts, the findings have generalizable applications for other resource-limited regions including enhancing the effectiveness of educator support, informing school child protection policies, and directing further research as very little is known globally about school violence against children with disabilities in low and middle-income contexts. The qualitative approach guiding this study is not intended to predict where, when, or how teachers will respond to school violence, but offers an understanding from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. Future research could examine solutions to address disability-based school violence in Zambia

from the perspectives of community members, teachers, administrators, parents, and students with and without disabilities.

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