

## **Bullies and Victims at a Public Secondary School: The Teachers' Perspective**

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**ABSTRACT** Bullying is widespread and perhaps the most underreported safety problem in public schools. It occurs more often at school than on the way to and from there. As schools continue to address the problem of bullying and its consequences, an understanding of the perpetrators of bullying and their victims is important for creating successful prevention and intervention strategies. The present paper sought to understand bullies and victims from the perspective of teachers at a public school. An exploratory design was employed. Eight participants were purposefully sampled for the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data. It emerged from the study that bullying was prevalent at the public secondary school. There are diverse factors associated with both bullies and victims. There is need for early identification of learners who are likely to engage in bullying as well as those likely to be victimised by their peers.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Providing children and youth with safe schools and communities is a theme expressed around the world that crosses cultural barriers and economic borders (Carran and Kellner 2009). Bullying refers to aggressive behaviour or intentional 'harm doing' which is carried out repeatedly and over time in an interpersonal relationship characterized by imbalance of power (Cantone et al. 2015; Olweus 1999). Similarly, Slee (2003:7) defines bullying as "physical, verbal or psychological attack or intimidation that is intended to cause fear, distress or harm to the victim, and where the intimidation involves an imbalance of power in favour of the perpetrator". Bullying has defining features which set it apart from simple conflict between peers which include the intention to cause harm, repeated incidences of harm, and an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim (Droser 2013; Olweus 1993). Bullies enjoy more physical or psychological power than the victim. They apply this to devalue their victims and make themselves appear superior (Hazler 1996). Although power imbalance is an issue in bullying; most students are not bullied by their older peers. They are bullied by members of their class or year group (Rivers 2001). Victimization refers to a learner who is subjected to negative actions by other learner(s) with the intention to hurt (Wolke et al. 2008).

### **Prevalence**

Bullying is highly prevalent among adolescents and it involves the repeated use of aggression and power. Through repeated aggressive tendencies, the perpetrator acquires and consolidates power over the victim. Poor learner discipline is an acute problem in schools (Timm and Eskill-Blockland 2011). Learner discipline is particularly prevalent in schools situated in underprivileged communities. The behaviour problems are associated with poor academic performance, lack of employment opportunities, influence of media, parenting styles, lack of parental supervision at home, peer pressure and poverty. Lack of discipline among learners is also attributed to substance abuse, child abuse, exposure to violence at home and moral degradation (Price 2004).

### **Forms of Bullying and Victimization**

Bullying occurs in various forms. The forms include physical, verbal, relational and sexual bullying Cantone et al. 2015; Janssen et al. 2004). Similarly, Hawker and Boulton (2000), categorised peer victimisation into physical (for example direct hitting, verbal (for example, teasing), generic (for example target made fun off), relational (for example victim excluded from group), indirect (nasty note sending) and cyber (for example use of internet and cellphones to victimise another) (Betts 2014; Smith et al. 2008).

The most common types of bullying reported at public schools are direct physical, direct verbal (for example to be belittled about looks or speech) and indirect bullying. Male students were found to be the main perpetrators of direct physical bullying such as hitting, slapping or punching (Carran and Kellner 2009). Direct and verbal bullying involves name-calling and taunting (Roffey 2000).

The other names for indirect bullying are relational or social bullying. This form of bullying is intended to hurt victims by damaging their self-esteem or social relationships (Archer and Coyne 2005; Betts 2014). It includes behaviours that undermine other students' confidence and self-esteem through words, actions or social exclusion (Hazler 1996; Roffey 2000), rumour-mongering and giving nasty looks (Archer and Coyne 2005). It is commonly used by female students towards other girls in the context of their intimate friendship groups rather than boys (Russell and Owens 1999). Furthermore, Rivers (2001) indicates that indirect bullying can be as subtle as frightening someone with a particular or constant stare.

Another form of bullying that attracted increased attention in the last decade is cyber-bullying which involves using electronic means such as the internet, email and mobile phones. Nasty messages or images can be spread quickly and seen by many people in a short space of time (Droser 2013). According to Dehue et al. (2008), cyber-bullying usually takes place outside school premises and hours.

### **Characteristics of Bullies**

Early in life, bullies tend to be aggressive, and if unchecked, they will continue a progress developmental pattern toward severe aggression or violence even toward themselves (Droser 2013; Dwyer et al. 2000). It is not surprising that the bullies are more likely to be convicted of a crime. Bullies tend to come from families with low parental monitoring and involvement, as well as inconsistent and harsh discipline, more aggressive than their peers (Carney and Merrell 2001), have poor social skills, difficulty keeping positive relationships while others possess advanced social competence that they use to manipulate others (Vaillancourt et al. 2003). Bullies are more likely than their peers to engage in externalising behaviors, to experience conduct

problems and to be delinquent (Nansel et al. 2001). Their parents are authoritarian, condone fighting back, use physical punishment, lack warmth, and display indifference to their children (Baldry and Farrington 2000). Bullying is also associated with the school's failure to meet the needs of the students. Negative outcomes can occur and the student can be put at-risk for academic and social difficulties (Eccles et al. 1993). Bullying is prevalent in high-conflict schools and informal relations (Espelage 2012).

### **Characteristics of Victims**

Previous researches reported victims of bullying as passive, anxious, weak, lacking self-confidence, unpopular and having a low self-esteem (Drover 2015; Hazler 1996; Skinner 1992). These are usually academically struggling students (Carney and Merrell 2001), those with special educational needs (Nabuzoka and Smith 1993; West 2015) or students from ethnic minorities (Smith and Sharp 1994). In contrast some students with a high self-esteem were as likely to be victims as those with a low self-esteem. However, such students reported more extensive bullying, higher levels of stress, and more negative effects of stress. According to Bowers et al. (1992), bullied students often came from highly protective, close-knit families and lack exposure to handling conflicts. As a result, they tend to over-rely on parents or guardians and this increases their sense of "helplessness" and "victim" thinking.

### **Gender and Age Differences in Bullying**

Although both genders will engage in all forms of bullying, boys are more likely to use primarily overt bullying (direct and physical) while girls are more likely to engage primarily in covert (verbal and relational) (Espelage and Swearer 2003; Olweus 1993; Reid et al. 2004). Consistent with this finding, Pellegrini and Bartini (2000) reported that males tend to be more physical while their female counterparts use more subtle indirect strategies, such as spreading rumors and enforcing social isolation. Relational aggression is more effective for girls' tight-knit peer groups than males' less intimate peer groups (Simmons 2002). Adolescent girls are driven by the desire to be popular and social comparison than their male counterparts. Male students bul-

lied both male and female students while females bullies same sex peers (Pellegrini and Bartini 2000). However, other studies suggest that there is no gender difference bullying among students (Berger 2007).

Although research on bullying in public schools has been growing for several decades, few studies have examined the patterns of bullying and victimization among students who are often characterized by risk factors identified with bullies and victim (Carran and Kellner 2009). In addition it has been reported that teachers tend to under-estimate the frequency and magnitude of bullying. They have insufficient knowledge of the various forms of bullying behaviours that go on in schools (Rivers and Soutter 1996). Adults including teachers have limited knowledge on bullying (Frisen et al. 2007). Research studies have indicated that children often do not agree with adults on various aspects of bullying (Stockdale et al. 2002). Thus, the teachers need to be clearer about the nature of bullying that occur in their schools as well as knowledge of the victims and the bullies. In addition, it is important that all stakeholders have a better understanding of characteristics of bullies and victims; and how they are affected to help them devise strategies for addressing bullying effectively. Although there has been a proliferation of researches on bullying in schools (Rigby 2003), the phenomenon continues to be a problem despite the best efforts of teachers, researchers and clinicians (Mackay et al. 2011). It is against the above discussion that the present study attempts to contribute the Zimbabwean situation to a body of existing literature.

### **Aim of the Study**

The present study sought to examine teachers' perceptions of school bullies, victims and the subsequent consequences for both. Specifically it was guided by the following questions: 1). what forms of bullying are prevalent at the public high school? 2). what are the characteristics of bullies and victims? 3). How does bullying affect the bullies and victims?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Design and Setting**

The data were examined for similarities and the differences between teachers' beliefs on the

types of bullying prevalent at a public secondary school, characteristics of both bullies and victims and consequences thereof. A case study was conducted with teachers at a day public high school. The school was situated in a high density suburb of Masvingo city in Zimbabwe. All teachers and students were of Black African ethnicity.

### **Participants**

Purposive sampling was used to select eight teachers (gender: male = 2, female = 6; age range = 43-49 years; mean age = 46.2 years; mean teaching experience = 17.1 years; Ethnicity = Black African). All the teachers had professional training in the subjects that they taught.

### **Research Instrument**

An interview guide with open ended questions was used to collect data. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers to gather their views on bullies and their victims (Seidman 1998). Interviews helped to unfold the meaning of the teachers' experiences and to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanation (Sewell 2001). Semi-structured interviews allowed the study to particularly focus on the complexity of bullies and victims (DeVos et al. 2002).

### **Data Collection**

Arrangements to conduct the interviews were made with the principal and focal person. Interview dates were scheduled on days and times that were convenient to the participating teachers. Interviews were individually conducted by the researcher. A private room was used to maintain privacy and minimise disruptions.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data. Data reduction was done to select, simplify, focus, make abstractions and transform the massive information of written words that appeared in interview transcripts (Miles and Huberman 1994). The data reduction strategies suggested by Creswell (1994) were used. Initially, a sense of the whole study was obtained by reading through entire transcripts. Transcripts

were read carefully as meanings and thoughts were assessed. Similar topics were clustered together to form columns that were labelled as major topics, unique topics and minor topics. Data belonging to each category was assembled and a preliminary analysis was performed. This was done until all the data had been categorised and saturated.

### Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study with the teachers was obtained from the school principal. Informed consent was individually obtained from the participating teachers prior to conducting interviews. Anonymity in reporting and confidentiality of the disclosures were assured and observed throughout the study. Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study if they needed to. The participants were not exposed to harm.

### RESULTS

Four themes emerged from the study. The four themes include incidences of bullying, forms of bullying, characteristics of bullies and the characteristics of victims.

**Table 1: Themes and subthemes that emerged from participants' responses**

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
1. <i>Incidences of Bullying</i>	1.1 Increasing
	1.2 Decreasing
2. <i>Forms of Bullying</i>	2.1 Physical bullying
	2.2 Verbal bullying
	2.3 Psychological abuse
3. <i>Characteristics of Bullies</i>	3.1 Selfishness, rude and aggressive
	3.2 Come from non-intact families
	3.3 Come from abusive home and school
	3.4 Older
	3.5 Bullies were male
	3.6 Lonely, often moody and sickly
	3.7 Academically struggling
4. <i>Characteristics of Victims</i>	4.1 Vulnerable and fearful
	4.2 Low self-esteem
	4.3 Victims were younger
	4.4 Victims were female
	4.5 Victims were of small physical stature
	4.6 Introverted, weak and lonely
	4.7 Academically struggling

Table 1 shows mixed views on the incidences of bullying that were reported as increasing while other participants indicated that they were decreasing. Bullies were characterized as selfish, rude aggressive, coming from on-intact families, abusive homes and schools, older, male lonely, moody and sickly. Victims of bullying were characterised as vulnerable and fearful, having low self-esteem, younger, female, having small bodies, introverted, weak, lonely and academically struggling.

### DISCUSSION

It emerged from the present study that most of the teachers believed that incidents of bullying were on the decrease. This finding affirms Timm and Eskill-Blockland's (2011) and Smit's (2003) suggestions that bullying is highly prevalent among adolescents. Furthermore, the finding suggests a disconnect between teachers' awareness of the prevalence of bullying at their school. A plausible explanation for this disconnect is that some teachers take the interest to understand and deal with acts of bullying while others may not be interested. Members of the school disciplinary committee keep track of bullying incidences. In addition, the teachers' difference in the perceived awareness of bullying may reflect a lack of knowledge on bullying and the school policy on dealing with the problem.

Teachers indicated that the common forms of bullying at their school were physical, verbal and psychological. This finding gives credence to earlier studies (Hawker and Boulton 2000; Janssen et al. 2004) that cited physical, verbal and psychological abuse as common forms of bullying (Smith et al. 2008) among students. According to Archer and Coyne (2005), psychological bullying is intended to hurt victims by damaging their self-esteem or social relationships (Betts 2014). It is used to undermine other students' confidence and self-esteem (Archer and Coyne 2005; Hazler 1996; Roffey 2000).

It is surprising that in this era of high usage of the internet and cell phones even in the developing parts of the world such as Africa, the teachers did not cite cyber bullying and sexual bullying. Cyber bullying entails the use of internet and cellphones to victimise another (Droser 2013; Smith et al. 2008). The teachers did not report it as it commonly occurs outside the school hours (Dehue et al. 2008). They could

have been reluctant to discuss issues that occur outside their area of jurisdiction. Cyber-bullying usually takes place outside school premises and hours. However, one may not ignore the possibility that the teachers demonstrated lack of awareness of bullying tendencies among their students.

The analysis revealed that the teachers perceived bullies as selfish, rude and aggressive. This line of argument is shared by Dwyer et al. (2000) and Cantone et al. (2015). In their reports, Dwyer et al. (2000) and Cantone et al. (2015) warn that if unchecked, bullying may develop into severe aggression or violence even toward self. Furthermore, the teachers suggested that bullies come from non-intact families. This finding affirms previous studies. Carney and Merrell (2001) reported that bullies tend to come from families with low parental monitoring and involvement, as well as inconsistent and harsh discipline. Furthermore, Baldry and Farrington (2000) opines that parents of bullies are authoritarian, condone fighting back, use physical punishment, lack warmth and display indifference to their children. However, some bullies possess advanced social competence that they use to manipulate others (Vaillancourt et al. 2003). These findings are contradictory to the previous finding (Bowers et al. 1992) that bullied students often come from highly protective, close-knit families and lack exposure to handling conflicts. Such students over-depend on their parents or guardians thereby increasing their sense of "helplessness" and "victim" thinking.

Schools are not an exception as the present study indicates that bullies come from abusive environments. In line with this finding, Espelage (2012) argues that bullying is prevalent in high-conflict schools. In addition, such schools fail to meet the needs of the students (Eccles et al. 1993). Consistent with previous findings; bullies were also reported as having abnormal personality. According to Nansel et al. (2001), bullies are more likely than their peers to engage in externalising behaviors, to experience conduct problems and to be delinquent.

The teachers described victims of bullying as fearful and vulnerable, with low self-esteem and weak. This finding is congruent with previous researches that indicated that victims of bullying are passive, anxious, weak, lacking self-confidence, unpopular and having a low self-esteem (Hazler 1996; Skinner 1992; West

2015). The present study also affirms the notion that victims of bullying struggle with their academic work (Carney and Merrell 2001; Drover 2015; Nabuzoka and Smith 1993; West 2015). This is not surprising as failing impacts negatively on one's self-esteem. In contrast, there was no evidence to suggest that some victims of bullying had high self-esteem (Bowers et al. 1992).

Gender differences in patterns of bullying were observed. The results of the present study suggest that physical bullying is mainly committed by boys and girls mainly used verbal bullying (Cantone et al. 2015; Espelage and Swearer 2003; Droser 2013; Olweus 1993; Pellegrini and Bartini 2000; Reid et al. 2004). Also, this finding lends support to Carran and Kellner's (2009) finding that male students were the main perpetrators of direct physical bullying while females commonly use verbal bullying through name-calling and taunting (Roffey 2000). Simmons (2002) asserts that relational aggression is more effective for girls' tight-knit peer groups than males' less intimate peer groups. Females are driven by the desire to be popular and social comparison than their male counterparts. The study refutes Stassen's (2007) finding that there is no gender difference in bullying among students.

The victims of bullying are often younger with a small physical stature. In line with this finding, Drover (2015), Pellegrini and Long (2002) and Pepler et al. (2006) suggest that bullying decreases with age, although there is an initial increase when pupils transition from primary to secondary school. Therefore bullying is prevalent among younger students.

## IMPLICATIONS

Based on these results, there are practical implications of these results for intervention strategies. Teachers who took part in the present study had varying views on the prevalence of bullying, its forms as well as the characteristics of bullies and victims. This calls for an urgent need to equip teachers with accurate information on bullying as they are key stakeholders in the detection and reduction of bullying among students. One life is too precious to be lost and bullying has devastating consequences on the victim. The present study provides information which may harmonise the understanding of bullying among stakeholders such as students,



teachers, parents, counsellors, principals and school governing authorities. Correct knowledge of bullying will lead to the formulation and use of effective intervention strategies.

### CONCLUSION

Overall, the participants indicated that acts of bullying were common at the public school where the study was conducted although most teachers indicated that it was decreasing. Physical, verbal and psychological bullying were common. Physical bullying was mainly perpetrated by male students while the female counterparts used verbal bullying.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings underscore the need for teachers and parents to collaboratively work towards reducing bullying among the students. The study recommends that teachers be equipped with information on all forms of bullying to enable them to detect signs of bullying early and then develop and implement comprehensive bullying reduction strategies.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study was not without limitations. Self-reports made by the participating teachers may not be dependable. Another possible limitation is that the sample of teachers may have been unusually knowledgeable about other forms of bullying such as relational bullying; sexual bullying and cyber bullying. Future research should attempt to collect data from a larger and diverse population to increase generalisability of the findings.

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