Learners' Perspectives on Bullying in South African Schools

Vusi Mncube[1] and Nyarayi Chinyama[2]

[1]Department of Education, University of Fort Hare, Alice 5700, South Africa
[2]Fort Hare Institute of Social and Economic Research (FHISER), University of Fort Hare, Alice 5700, South Africa

ABSTRACT This paper aimed to investigate learners' perspectives on bullying in two secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal Province. A qualitative approach and a case study research design was used. Interviews and document analysis were also used to solicit data from 10 learners from each school and texts respectively. The Theory of Social Deviance was employed to investigate the reasons why learners bully, or are bullied by, their peers. The results indicated that bullying occurred in different forms, and was caused by different factors, ranging from social to economic issues. The study concluded that there was bullying in secondary schools and that it is the responsibility of all stakeholders to work together to reduce the impact of this scourge. The researchers recommend the establishment of a school-wide task force composed of educators, parents, students and community members, to develop and implement anti-bullying programmes.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study was to understand why learners bully one another in secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. Globally, school bullying has been recorded as a major problem in many countries since the year 2000. In New Zealand, Coggen et al. (2003) found a significant association between experiencing chronic bullying and high levels of mental distress. Among the learners that they studied one had attempted to harm themselves deliberately and one in nine reported attempting to take their own lives. In Australia in 2002 one child in six was subjected to bullying on a weekly basis in schools (Rigby 2002). In line with the above view, Malecki et al. (2015) added that during that time learners in Australia were involved in bullying-related incidents at least two to three times a month. Recently, researchers in the United States of America, Van Geel et al. (2014) as well as Hall and Chapman (2018) yielded diverse rates of bullying, ranging from ten percent to seventy five percent of the victims under their studies suffering extreme cases of bullism in schools. In Finland, bullying has been found to be one of the most common expressions of violence in a peer context (Mazzone et al. 2017). Even though bullying as a type of violence in schools is not a new phenomenon in schools all over the world, a major concern is its changing nature and magnitude (Madikizela-Madiya and Mncube 2014).

Globally, research has however revealed that actions to familial or social problems at home, poor self-esteem, distress or personal insecurity are some of the reasons highlighted by adults such as teachers and parents as causing learners to bully their peers (Thornberg and Knutsen 2011). More so, Zuze et al. (2016) revealed that violence in schools and their communities are often interwoven: thus, schools located in communities where high levels of crime and gang violence were prevalent, experienced higher incidences of bullying. It is therefore crucial to note that the demand for safe schools cannot be achieved unless the issue of bullying is adequately addressed (Mncube and Harber 2013).

In South Africa, the values laid down in our Constitution (Act of 108 of 1996), the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa 1996), Manifesto on Values Education and Democracy (Pillay and Ragpot 2011) and Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education 2010) are premised on the rights of all children to education. These documents challenge us to take up the responsibility of building a human and caring society for all South Africans, which

Address for correspondence:
Dr. Nyarayi Chinyama
Fort Hare Institute of Social and Economic Research,
University of Fort Hare,
Alice 5700, South Africa
Mobile: 0781596075
E-mail: nchinyama@ufh.ac.za

is free from discriminatory intolerance and violence. Although a lot of research has been conducted in South Africa on bullying, we cannot turn a blind eye to the problem of bullying in South Africa. It has become apparent through personal encounters with teachers, friends and children how widespread the problem of bullying is in KwaZulu-Natal.

The current status of bullying as a form of violence in South African schools has been described in paragraphs below as generally recorded from the perspectives of adults through newspapers and news reports. However, it appears from newspaper reports that some of the role players are not willing to listen to the victims and perpetrators of bullying (Pretorius 2010; Burton and Leoschut 2013). To cover this gap this study therefore sought to find out what the victims and the perpetrators of bullying perceive as the causes of bullying in South African Schools and the researchers are confident the study will contribute to the growing impetus worldwide to prevent and address bullying and cyberbullying and support the international drive to end all forms of violence against children, leaving no child behind.

Objectives

Bullying thus not only infringes on the child's right to receive education in a safe and secure school environment, but may also have dire consequences for a child's academic, relational, emotional and behavioural development. This study therefore aimed to find out the perspectives of learners on bullying in secondary schools with the aim to provide recommendations to curb bullying in school communities.

Literature Review

International Perspectives of Learners on Bullying in Schools

Research on the prevalence of bullying has occurred in, among others, Norway, Finland, Britain, Australia, the USA and South Africa is not an exception (Zych et al. 2017). The prevalence of victimisation in secondary schools varies from 11.3 percent in a sample of 5813 learners in Finland, to 49.8 percent in a nationwide sample (n = 7290) of learners in Ireland (Syahruddin 2015). More so, prevalence ranges from 4.7 percent in a sample of 189 Finnish eighth graders, to twenty-seven in a sample of 6758 middle school learners in the United Kingdom. A USA study found that between nine percent and eleven percent of middle school learners were bullied "sometimes" or more frequently (Fredrick and Demaray 2018). In secondary schools (Grades 9-12) the prevalence of bullying ranged from 4.2 percent in a large sample of British learners, to twenty five percent in a small sample of Australian learners (Bhat et al. 2017). On the basis of a large-scale survey, Minton (2016) estimated that fifteen percent of the learners in primary and lower secondary schools (roughly corresponding to ages 7 years through to 16 years) in Norway were involved in bully/victim problems with some regularity – either as bullies or victims.

In addition, Cook et al. (2010) argues that the prevalence and types of bullying differ, depending on age groups. In a meta-analysis of 153 studies on bullying, Hymel and Swearer (2015) found a slight increase of bullying behaviour with age: it peaks during middle-school years (that is 2-15 years of age). Although bullying tends to decrease by the end of high school, this study continued to choose grade 12 learners as participants in the study because they were the ones who were in a position to share a lot of their experiences as victims, witnesses or perpetrators of bullying since they had the longest period of time in high school.

Interestingly, the participants in a study by Glasser (2018) distinguished between different bullying acts on the basis of gender with boys being highlighted as more likely to be involved in bullying than girls (Pepler et al. 2008). However, some studies found a negligible difference in other countries like Ireland and Britain. On that note, Besag (2006) confirmed that the difference was that boys were more likely to be involved in physical forms of victimisation (kicking, hitting), while bullying among girls is more likely to be either relational or verbal (rumour spreading, social exclusion).

Literature has indicated several reasons why learners bully others in schools. Bernstein and Watson (1997) noted that bullying behaviour was reinforced by growing up in a family that

tolerated aggression and the use of power-assertive discipline, such as corporal punishment. Recently, Jan and Husain (2015) confirmed that the causes of bullying included the perpetrator wanting to feel powerful, wishing to exact revenge, venting aggression or acting on feelings of jealousy and having a low level of intellectual functioning.

In Botswana, Tjavanga and Jotia (2012) found that bullying could be attributed to the presence of different ethnic groups being represented in government schools, especially in or around the learners' village or town. Ethnicity thus forms the basis for differentiation and subsequent bullying– issues which appear to be of little concern to the leadership cohort in rural schools (Tjavanga and Jotia 2012).

More so, in developing countries like Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria including South Africa, there have been reports of technology having an impact on high school learners' lives and bullying behavior: as (Young et al. 2019: 17) notes, with more than eighty percent of teenagers in possession of electronic devices, cyberbullying is reportedly overtaking physical bullying, and is being perpetrated via short message service (SMS) texts or apps, on social media forums and in chatrooms, or via gaming where users can view, participate in, or share whatever content they wish. Contrary to other countries mentioned above, bullying in South African schools is related to weapon carrying and involvement in physical fighting on the part of both genders (Liang et al. 2007; Nivette et al. 2019). Furthermore, Beare et al. (2018) highlight that schools are reinforcing the stereotype that educators are always right and learners are always wrong. In particular, the set up in many schools resembles that of a prison, where inmates are constantly watched. In the process, learners' human rights are neglected, and they are subjected and exposed to violent maltreatment, with violence breeding further violence (Mncube and Harber 2013).

Numerous newspaper articles were published on the prevalence of bullying in South African schools (Steyn and Singh 2018). De Wet (2005) in Ngidi and Moletsane (2018), states that in one of these articles, a ten-year-old Pretoria boy was fighting for his life after he was hanged in the school's bathroom by his schoolmates. Apart from the distress and unhappiness caused,

this could also result in absenteeism and some victims moving away to another school to escape the problem (Kearney and Albano 2018). There is sufficient evidence showing how children exposed to bullying as a form of school based violence experience adverse developmental problems, for example, lessened ability for concentration, sleep disturbances, flashbacks and a fatalistic outlook toward their future (Flannery and Farrell 2019).

Furthermore, violence in South Africa has five dimensions, through which a school dehumanises its victims and in effect perpetrates bullying and these are corporal punishment, racism, gender-based violence, high stress levels (associated with tests and examinations) and the militarisation of schooling (Harber 2004). In that view it is the responsibility of a school's administrative team to establish and nurture a safe learning environment which is free from bullying but in order for schools to be safe from bullying, they need to be organised. The problem of disorganised schools has also been recognised as a serious issue in post-apartheid South Africa for some time because bullying mainly occurs in classes which are unattended by teachers (Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya 2014).

By the 1990s bullying mainly included assault and verbal abuse but recently, in South Africa, bullying acts reported serious acts such as stabbing and killing in both public and private schools irrespective of several measures that have been put in place to curb it such as metal detectors and security cameras which are installed in high-risk schools (Garrett 2010). It is also noteworthy that in South Africa bullying is prevalent in schools that are often not well organised, where timetabling is poor, institutional process is arbitrary and ineffective (Olweus and Limber 2019). Contrary, pockets of good practice indicate that well-run, inclusive and more democratic schools can help to reduce external and internal forms of bullying because bullying has reached frightening levels (Slattery et al. 2019). Thus, this study aims to find out learners perspectives on bullying with the aim of providing recommendations on the best ways of combating bullying in schools.

Theoretical Framing

The study on which this paper is based, is underpinned by the Theory of Social Deviance,

which attempts to explain why bullying occurs (for the current purposes, in schools). Deviance is defined as a failure to conform to a set of norms which the people in a community subscribe to. A deviant is someone who occupies a particular (negative) role which is recognised in the course of his/her interactions with others (McIntosh and Rock 2018). Henry (2018) categorises deviance as either primary or secondary: the former is the actual act of rule breaking, while the latter is when the rule-breaker makes adjustments to fend off the reactions which his/her act solicits. Henry (2018) adds that secondary deviance occurs when the rule-breaker commits acts that are socially unacceptable and contravene social mores, or when the perpetrator's actions do not make sense. As early as 1985 Furlong concluded that Deviant behaviour was not inherent, but was learnt through imitation or reinforcement, that is – if it is violent and aggressive, they will learn it (Furlong 1985). Thus, the researchers of this paper sought to establish, amongst others, whether those who bully plan to do so, or whether they act on impulse.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This paper is based on a qualitative study located within an interpretivist paradigm, due to the integration of human interests (Yin 2018). The approach provides an opportunity to explore participants' wealth of experience; their intentions, beliefs, values and reasons for doing what they do; and seeks to make meaning from what they report (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Here, the researchers used a case study design to investigate the phenomenon under study.

Data Collection Methods

Data were captured using audio recordings made during focus group interviews with the selected grade 12 learners. In addition, researchers scrutinised the participating school's disciplinary records as source documents. A focus group interview was conducted with a group of 5 victims and another with the 5 perpetrators of bullying per school, on separate days (to avoid

inflicting further trauma on the bullied individuals). The participants were identified as victim 1 to victim 10 from school A and victim 1 to victim 10 from school B and perpetrators were also identified as perpetrator 1 to perpetrator 10 from school A and perpetrator 1 to 10 from school B. The participants were therefore coded as participant 1A-10A from school A and participant 1B-10B from school B.

Sampling of Learners

The school principal was approached to help identify both the perpetrators and victims of violence. A total of ten Grade 12 learners from each school participated in the interviews, and despite the categorisation, the researchers soon found that the perpetrators of bullying had once themselves been victims of bullying. In addition, those who had been subjected to bullying were asked to supply the names of known bullies, without writing down names on paper. Since this study sought to find out perspectives of learners, the Grade 12 learners were chosen because they were the ones who had stayed for long in high school and it was assumed that they had either witnessed or experienced several incidences of bullying in the school/schools which they had attended.

Data Analysis

Redundancies in the collected data were removed by careful reading through the data and eliminating unnecessary information, to arrive at the meaning of each unit. The remaining units were synthesised according to different themes, as suggested by Leedy and Ormrod (2005). The language of the participants was transformed into the language of science, which is English (Leedy and Ormrod 2005).

RESULTS

Theme 1: The Concept of Bullying

Firstly, the researchers sought to determine whether the participants understood the meaning of 'bullying'. The participants' explanations generally showed that bullying involved force and power being exerted over a victim. Partici-

pants were put in the same group. Five perpetrators and five victims were grouped together per school. The participants defined bullying differently. Some gave examples of how they were bullied. The ability of participants to define bullying shows that they understood what the researchers were investigating about.

For example, Victim 1A said,

Bullying is whereby a person forcefully want[s] you to do things for them, for instance in your family your uncle would ask you to do things for him like wash his clothes while he has his girlfriend and giving you tasks that are beyond your age and when you tell someone that you have school duties then he forces you to do what he told you to do because he knows he is the breadwinner. So you end [up] doing tasks that you are not supposed to do because you are dependent on him. He uses his power to emphasise that 'without me you are nothing and you depend on me.'

Victim 2B had this to say,

I understand bullying as when a person who is advantageous or has prospered in life tries to use his power towards other people to violate them in different ways, either violently or through the words they say to them.

Perpetrator 1B also added,

Bullying is when you overpower someone over different things or issues, and sometimes you can hurt that person since you know that you overpower that person when it comes to fighting or you bully the person because you know the person is shy and he can't talk back.

Perpetrator 2A explained,

A student is being bullied or victimized when he is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other students.

Victim 3A further explained,

These incidents are part of a larger picture of incidents that occur over time but by different perpetrators people that I do not want to talk about. They are mean people. They want to be happy alone, those mean kids who expose us to really mean events. I don't want to talk about them.

The narrations above suggested that the prevalence and impact of a single incidents of bullying can be highly distressing for some of the learners. Perpetrator 4A explained that bullying was not only physically affecting an individual but actions too indicated that bullying was taking place. The cases recorded in the record books there were explanations of friends calling them names and not wanting to be friends and telling them to go away. Some of the records showed that victims sometimes didn't even say anything provocative to their peers but they felt that there was a gulf between them because they just walked past or when they sat together with others they just got up and moved away when they sat down in their table in classes. This shows that bullying is not only physical or verbal, but it can be done through perpetrators actions of undermining others.

Theme 2: Reasons Why Learners Bully Each Other in Schools

While the perpetrators actively put forward reasons why learners bully others, the bullied individuals seemed confused, and admitted they did not understand why they were bullied. They thus largely remained silent on this point.

Perpetrator 1B explained,

I was raised with girls so I felt I needed to protect them from other children when they were bullying them. At home we were always kept indoors, if you go to school it was via a school transport and it drops you off by the gate at home. We were at a coloured school with very few black children, and that time we were new at the school so they were being bullied and I would stand up for myself and my sisters.

Victim 1B further explained,

I was bullied every day for many years. It's a terrible experience because I was bullied in so many ways. I was bullied because of my disabilities, I was having nervousness and I was always laughed at. People jocked about my nervousness. Yhoo, my heart it was painful.

Victim 2A also explained,

I did get bullied because I have really brilliant ideas. I actually had a great ideas. I was afraid of being a failure so I always worked hard. I was just different from other children. They did not like that the teachers always praised me. So they teased me about that.

Perpetrator 1A also explained,

I was just not normal I would say, I mean no one's normal, but I was just afraid of being in

the situation I was, a lot of anger is in me. I just came up with strange ideas of the way I did my things. I was just different, the way I play with others. I didn't always talk to people; they sort of looked at me in strange ways that probably meant I wasn't right. But that's my personality because I'm a serious somebody. I'm quite creative in my ways of doing things, I am too strong to be playing with these children in this school. I am 24 years now, so when I tell them to do certain things they say I am bullying them. I'm a deep thinker and I want to encourage them to be very strong.

Perpetrator 2A also interjected,

They would ridicule us on the fact that we were not fluent in speaking English. We are from afar, and we are a small group, so I was known for fighting other kids as revenge. In each grade I knew who intimidated me and who did not. I got to high school. I was never bullied as I could fight for myself, I think it's something that was caused by someone else, and you beat a person whom you know won't fight back.

Victim 2B also explained,

I was sad all the time, you know I just wanted to go to another school and just start afresh. Basically as soon as everyone got to school I was bullied and I actually, I think because I am a foreign status also maybe because I didn't have any friends to support me. Probably because I was the odd one out, I was really trying acting normal. I mean I wasn't weird, I tried to befriend them and play with locals, but I was like, you know, had really strange reactions. They always wanted to show that I do not belong here. I am ever sad, I am telling you.

The narrations above indicated that there were elements of xenophobia in the schools too because of the different nationalities found in the schools.

Perpetrator 4B also added,

They knew that I cannot fight them. They loved teasing me, they loved talking to me as an unreasonable somebody, and I hated it. So later on I just developed a thick skin. They used to come to me and take my things, even my pen. I stopped that one day when I beat up a certain girl. They think girls they are special. I clapped her and now the boys and girls they respect me. I tell them what to do.

In addition, Perpetrator 5A said,

It happens that you hit another student and within 30 minutes you end up regretting your actions and you don't know why you beat them, but it is a feeling that just comes without thinking.

Perpetrator 4A further explained,

Sometimes it does happen that a person ends up abusing other people not because it is what they have planned, but growing up he was also abused emotionally and physically at home, and they grow up filled with this anger that makes him want to do the same things to other children at school. I think my anger comes from the community and families where I grew up from. Both from my mother's and father's side, I witnessed a lot of fights amongst my family members such that I do not see anything bad from fighting for what I think is right.

As the researchers listened to the participants' stories, they observed that the environment where these learners come from play a role in them being violent because some of them highlighted that at home they were staying alone because there were no parents to guide them. Others were staying with their grannies, so that is why the researchers thought that they became so violent because there was no one to guide them, so when they came to school, it then became a big problem because they did not have the culture of respect from their backgrounds. Although the teachers were not part of the participants, they complained even, saying these learners do not even listen to them. They said they had the code of conduct but that was not working even because the department of education was always on the side of the learners so they could not punish them.

Concurring with the above sentiments, Victim 4A indicated,

Bullying as a form of violence in schools occurs regardless of the fact that schools have codes of conduct which spell out how learners should behave in schools. We've got a code of conduct for learners and for teachers also, it is working somehow but for other learners it is not working because if there are laws they are saying no vulgar language, no late coming, no fighting but they still fight but some they know that there should stick to the rules of school. I think because they are protected by the department of

education, the children, they don't respect their friends.

Perpetrator 5A tried to support his actions,

We are not weak like the ones from area X because we are taught to face the challenges. Now when we tell the people who anger us that we do not like what they will be doing, they tell us we are being too strong to them and they accuse us of being bully. No we are not bullies. We just know what we want. Those from area X. They act like women, Nooo! We do not want to act like that.

The argument above suggests that schools are a microcosm of society and that they merely reflect or mirror the violence of the wider society. The implication here is that socio-economic conditions in the community are reflected in school through learners' behaviour. This is a question that the researchers propose is worth exploring.

However, to indicate that not every culture in the community is not worth bringing to school, Victim 5B said,

We do have some quiet kids who are disciplined and you can see the background that this one is coming from a good home but others have abusive parents but they do not bring that bad behaviour in the school. I know of some of our colleagues who in the area where I come from who have parents who are ever fighting but I have never heard that they fight in school. So I think it is because some of those who love fighting are just learning these habits from colleagues around. So please, do not take it to say that a family with a bully is the one producing the bully. So they end up coming to school and being abusive to other kids.

Perpetrator 3A had this to say,

Bullying is a demon; it's something that you are born with. I can tell you my story that happened yesterday. It's not the first time happening. I have a problem [...] with my younger siblings. My brother plays with me, and if he is not playing [along] and he just does something to me, no matter how small it is, I would hit him and almost hurt him badly. As I'm saying, it feels like a demon.

Perpetrator 4B also added

I do not love children to be around me, I will beat them. I have two siblings, the older one and the youngest, so the oldest I use a belt to beat her and the youngest I would slap him. Sometimes they are from school and I would be sleeping on the bed and they started jumping on the bed and [...] hitting each other and ended up having a heated fight, then I beat both of them up, because I am older. They would just be playing and I just get irritated by them but I don't know whether I see it as playing with them at the time, or what, but I will end up getting angry and hit them. But this was what my big brother used to do even to me. So I do not even see anything bad.

Other participants mentioned that their out-of-school interests and activities presented them with opportunities to escape the many negative experiences they had in school. Even those who bullied them did not get the chance of bullying them when they were at a practice match or at the gym outside the school. This therefore means that if learners have something that they are occupied with in their communities, they forget about mischief. The school time table indicated that there was very little time for field activities because the time table was full of tuition. This can confirm the fact that learners, if left idle, they will end up engaging themselves in unwanted behaviour such as bullying.

Theme 3: Learners' Experiences of Bullying

Both victims and perpetrators recounted their experiences, with the former admitting that they had been bullied several times. Different explanations emerged for this: for example, Victim 1B highlighted her experience with a boy:

I had an unfortunate incident of being intimidated this person was courting me and I didn't like him, and as time went by we had an argument and didn't get along because I told him I didn't like him. I met him after some time and he wanted to speak to me by force, and I told him I didn't want to speak with him and he held my arm and tried breaking it, and kicking me as well ....We were in the same school. I could not report him, because I was afraid of him.

Victim 3B, who later became a perpetrator, recalled,

When I was young there was a boy who was a bit older than us and he had small play cars made of wire, and we used to rent [them] from

him because we all loved playing with them, for instance if he gives it to you in the morning you pay him R5 and he would take it after school and if you had a lot of money you would keep it for a day, sometimes. I paid him the R5 and I played with it. After that, he started wanting money even when I did not take the car. I saw that he was abusing me, beating me. After some time I felt violated and I started doing the same thing to other children. I think it is caused by this older boy who used to bully me, but I think if he didn't bully me I don't think I would have been able to bully other kids. I don't believe one is born a bully or an abuser.

Victim 4A also admitted that some girls bullied others:

There was a girl who was bullying me and she was sending me messages provoking me, swearing me on Facebook and when she texted me, I told her I will deal with her the next day. When you are a victim, you end up developing so much anger and end up being the perpetrator, because when I went to school the following day we started fighting. She was swearing at me and my anger started piling up and I ended up being the perpetrator because I wanted to defend myself. Defending myself meant beating her up, which made me feel better then. Afterwards I end[ed] up regretting beating them. She was saying like 'why are you not gaining some weight?' and I told her my weight is just fine, I asked her if she wanted me to be as fat as her family, and all those things

For the participants, incidents of bullying seemed to occur during recess where the frequent aloneness of the children presented them as vulnerable targets for bullies. The children speculated that this may have been because they were frequently isolated and that other students viewed them as being targeted by bullies. Buster talked about making friends with new children who started at his school, but how these friendships would not last after the children saw him being teased and bullied by others, often as a result of being seen as different by others:

Victim 5A further explained:

I had a couple of friends at that time, but some of the kids who I thought were my friends, actually just ended up bullying me in the end. They stopped being friends with me because

then they got bullied for being friends with me. I had friends from my previous school, so I wasn't really friendless outside school, but I didn't really have any friends inside school. So at lunchtime I might do some homework or I might just sit on my computer and play games in the library.

The findings revealed that bullying stemmed from someone's desires being thwarted, as in the case where the boy's advances were rejected. In one of the cases in the minutes were opportunistic, where a bully tricked other learners of their money. Some of the cases in the minutes showed that some cases of bullying started outside the classroom, but ended up coming back to the school environment with learners coalescing in groups.

Theme 4: Types of Bullying Experienced by Learners

The other question that this study wanted to explore was the types of bullying that take place in schools. There were three major types of bullying revealed by the participants. The findings on this question were subsequently presented. Here, both the perpetrators and victims contributed to the respective discussions by either narrating their experiences and the researchers deduced the type of bullying which they experienced or they actually explained the type of bullying which they experienced.

Victim 2A explained,

I would get here in the morning and find guys that are a bit older than I am and every time when I get to them I have to give them money to buy drugs to feed their habits and things like that, and if I don't give them that money I get beaten up. I don't know why I pay, but I pay because I am forced to do so and I want to please them, and also because they use their power so that they can meet their needs with my money.

Victim 3B complained about the power of social media, where insults and name-calling can lead to physical confrontations when two parties come face to face,

The girl started swearing at me, she called me a bitch. When I got to school I was angry already and I asked her to repeat what she [said] on social media the day before. She said she did not like talking about it, and I was like

'No, you cannot say you don't like talking about it', then the fight started and threw each other on the desks. The teacher was out for a meeting I think.

Victim 4A also stated,

Words would get you scared too. For instance when you are arguing they will threaten you into agreeing with what they are saying, and you don't voice your opinions as you are scared of them. That is verbal bullying.

The discussions above indicate that bullying was both physical and verbal, as stated from the third excerpt above, and according to the participants, it frequently occurred in classrooms when the teacher was absent. As reported, some victims ended up becoming perpetrators, in their quest for revenge. Several of the perpetrators who participated in this study, indicated that they had experienced verbal bullying in their neighbourhood, being disrespected by their peers because they had encroached on "their terrain". The participants mentioned that bullying mainly occurred in secluded places, such as toilets, where boys smoked on the sly and got up to mischief. However, most participants were reluctant to give details of their experiences. Examination of the cases recorded in both schools indicated that there were different types of bullying occurring in the school, and there were indications that the parents of victims of bullying and the perpetrators of bullying were alerted of the cases. There were no concrete measures taken in all the cases which were indicated and some cases were left hanging.

Theme 5: Bullying as a Barrier to Learning

The effect bullying has on learning were also discussed during the group interviews, with both groups confirming the destructive impact thereof. Victim 1A explained physical abuse, and not having anyone to assist the victims,

A boy came to me asking for money, I told him I do not have money, then at break time while eating he came with his friends who surrounded me and asked me if I thought they would not do something to me as I have disobeyed them. He threatened to "wash" me on the lawn with his friends, I just kept quiet and they started searching my pockets and found nothing because I had used all the money dur-

ing break time. The bell rang and all the kids were running back to class. I was still outside with the bullies, scared of them and waiting for them to tell me whether they were done with their business or not, so that I can go. They took me and tied up both my hands and feet on the lawn until [...] after school. Luckily some students saw me and untied me. I went home, but at home I didn't report the matter. Teachers thought I had bunked lessons. I was scared and embarrassed, but I did not identify them in front of my teachers because I was scared. They bullied me because I was fat and new in the school.

Victim 4B recalled being betrayed by a so-called friend as well as a parent, who was supposed to take her side in a dispute based on rumour and hearsay:

I am a victim... when I was in grade 10 there was this other kid I used to walk with to school [...] we did everything together. One day I got to class and she said she heard that I have been gossiping about her, and I asked 'Who said that?' Then she said 'Your Friend', and I asked 'Which friend?' She then answered 'Your friend from home'. So I told her that I had never gossiped about her, for that matter what did I say? She then answer [ed] 'You know what you said'. She then promised to get me when I got home. The issue was about her boyfriend courting me and she told my mom that I [was] dating her boyfriend, and my mom ask[ed] her what she [was] going to do about that, she said she wanted to fight me... my mother told her to come inside and fight [me]. We fought until my sister stopped us, seeing that I was really struggling, then my mom started giving me a beating of my life, saying she doesn't have a child who has a boyfriend in her house. My arms were sore, I spent some days not going to school.

The victim's effort to discuss this incident shows how it impacted her emotionally and how it angered her and made her feel sad at school and at home. These negative experiences had been internalized by the parent as well, for example, the reaction the parent made, beating her daughter so badly, shows that she had internalized the negative experiences from school. More so, some of the participants in the discussion groups were reluctant to recall and share certain negative experiences during the interviews and silences ensued. The researchers concluded that

it was internalizing of negative experiences from the bullying at school. As a result the researchers were forced to probe the participants. A few opened up.

Victim 5A outlined the despair of a bullied individual who turns to bullying:

I was thinking of leaving school because you are being abused, so you end up doing what the bully was doing to you, because it's obvious they don't see a future, so you might as well sit at home and avoid walking around because they want to.

Perpetrator 3B had this to say:

It can result in a lot of things … You get angry, mentally abused, dropping out of school and have a negative attitude towards other people and isolating yourself from people and also wanting to be alone because of the experiences you have had are just not good.

Perpetrator 4B also added,

Bullying can cause you to kill someone […] I can end up in jail, or if there's someone who's always abusing me, I will want to find ways of making them stop, like keeping a knife with me, waiting for that time they strike again.

As stated by the participants, perpetrators sometimes end up in jail. In the main, the participants agreed that bullying changes people, so that they become angry, irritable or insecure, to the extent where they may lash out and kill, or commit suicide. The recorded cases indicated that not only perpetrators carried weapons – victimised individuals also do so in an attempt to protect or defend themselves. According to the victims narrations and experiences there was a statistically significant relationship between bullying and trauma, and this was strongest for the victim. This was also evidenced by the case books which were shown to the researchers by the principals which showed records of cases which were dealt with in the school. Some of the cases which were recorded indicated that the parents of the perpetrators did not visit the school despite the fact that they were called to come and attend to their children's cases.

Theme 6: Preventing Bullying in Schools

The participants indicated a willingness to assist in finding solutions to bullying in schools, with all of them agreeing that diverse stakeholders need to work towards eradicating this scourge.

To this end, Perpetrator 5A suggested what motivated their actions,

People really see things in different ways and we would name-call people as bullies and all sorts of names, not knowing what he has gone through to be like this. I think it would be better if there could be people coming to schools to talk to us, both boys and girls, to find out what is the root cause of this behaviour, and also allow them to actually say what has happened in their lives [to make them] do these kinds of things.

Perpetrator 1A proposed looking at the problem from the point of view of the weak and vulnerable,

We want a person who can come and sit with us as we are now, and discuss these problems […] more especially in grades 7 and 8 who are the targets because they don't really understand what bullying is about, openly explain the kind of situations they are faced with' and their situations will get solved faster. Counselling could also be helpful, so that we are able to share what is bothering us, because I think that is one of the reasons that lead to one leaving school …. So to avoid depression it is good that we sit down and discuss the issues before we are emotionally affected.

Victim 3B concurred,

I think this would be effective if they could start with the lower grades because that's where it starts, because in high school you find that they have been experiencing bullying, just like myself. To target bullies at an early age, to tame them while they're still young, should be priority number one.

Victim 5A advocated for openness and disclosure, in a safe environment,

I think it is important, but the problem is that if there is someone who is abused – whether raped, beaten – it's difficult to open up and say they were abused in such a way. Though that subject can be available, teachers should also assist because a child that is abused should be identified, and they [should] sit them down and allow them to be open about what's happening.

One of the boy Victim 5B complained,

When someone would bully me they [the teachers] would just we must forgive one

another. That is the way they deal with bullying. If it was something like teasing and name calling, they will just take it easy and sometimes they tell me to ignore it, or they shout the bully who will later on come and tease and give me more trouble. They do not even beat them. I just thought that it was a bad way of trying to fix a problem that never really got resolved. It might get resolved for half a day or a week at the most, and even with [telling] the Principal, they'd just tell the kids to stop doing it, then a later they start doing it again. I suggest that they report these issues to the parents so that they can be punished from home as well.

The participants were reserved in explaining the actions that they were supposed to take. Some participants spoke of the lack of supportive relationships from educators who were teaching them on a daily basis. Examples supporting this came from stories that the children shared regarding being isolated; and humiliating punishments, being singled out by teachers, being blamed for incidents at school, being expected to work for longer/harder than they were physical and mentally able, and missing out on educational opportunities like trips and sports. The participants had a lengthy discussion on preventive measures, which included getting prisoners to come and warn the youth about the dangers of bullying, and their experiences as prisoners. Some participants proposed that social workers and psychologists offer counselling sessions at school, so that even if they helped one student with anger issues, it would be worthwhile. A check in the school log books and staff meeting minutes indicated that staff used to discuss about the challenges that they are facing with bullying in the schools. Matters arising from the minutes of the meetings indicated that the recommendations made by the staff members in most of the meetings were not effected as per plan and bullying in those schools escalated.

DISCUSSION

The participants agreed that bullying is a conscious decision on the part of someone with the strength/seniority/power to exploit others whom they know cannot fight back. If they attempt to resist, the perpetrators use their power

to abuse, beat or threaten the victims, using words that will prevent them from defending themselves. The findings confirm those of Mazzone et al. (2017), who define bullying as repeated, aggressive, intentional acts carried out by a group/individual against a victim who cannot easily defend him/herself. As Mazzone et al. (2017) add, repetition, intentionality and an imbalance of power are criteria for defining aggressive behaviour as bullying.

As is evident from the above findings, the perpetrators 'excused' their actions to being possessed by an evil force - an indication of lack of anger management. The situation above may also indicate that bullying was caused by the perpetrators believing that they were more powerful or better than their victims. The findings of this study mirror those of Jan and Husain (2015), who found that bullies were motivated by power, revenge, aggression and jealousy. Nelson et al. (2019) found instances of bullying where ongoing group processes and social hierarchies made bullying the norm, so that students who wanted to fit in with their peers, resorted to this form of aggression. One perpetrator admitted that bullying was often learned behaviour – an indictment on what occurs in families, and a perpetuated cycle, as one of the perpetrators admitted to bullying his siblings.

Harber and Mncube (2012) report that, instead of providing an education and security to learners, schools instil violent behaviour and attitudes in some learners. Where schools are authoritarian rather than democratic in nature, harshness and repression are rife to varying degrees, depending on the setting (Harber and Mncube 2012), and in these prison-like conditions, human rights are neglected (Mncube and Harber 2013) with some learners assuming that it is normal to exercise authority over others, by employing violent means.

The different types of bullying in schools included verbal, sexual (see an earlier comment by Bullied individual 1) and physical abuse, as well as cyberbullying. The findings from this study concur with those of Liang et al. (2007), who found that bullying in South African schools manifests as physical aggression – on the part of both genders. Burton and Leoschut (2013) further note increasing access to social media with learners also at risk of cyberbullying

from their fellow learners – on Facebook, via SMS, in WhatsApp messages or through posts on blogs with devastating consequences.

The findings also revealed that the participants' internalized negative experiences meaning directing feelings inward to oneself, rather than outwards to others. Health problems resulting from this internalization can include anxiety, depression, loneliness, and psychosomatic conditions (Smith 2014). Girls in particular were very reluctant to explain incidents of bullying skirting around the issue rather than addressing incidents of bullying more directly.

These findings further reinforce research that suggested that adults rarely intervened in the playground and classroom incidents of bullying (Brendtro 2001). By not responding to the children's experiences of being bullied, the teachers unintentionally perpetuated and appeared to condone the bullying. This was further reinforced by participants' reports of individual teachers' negative attitudes and behavior directed at some of the children during class time. These findings agree with Farrington's (2019) proposition that adults who fail to respond to bullying, appear to support and condone the cycle of bullying and aggression across generations and school cohorts.

Lastly, the study revealed that bullying imposes many barriers to learning – a finding which supports the view of Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008), who highlight that bullying behaviour consists of short, communicative situations which are often hidden from teachers, but may have very bad endings. Thornberg (2011) confirms that bullying might be portrayed as a social process that applies to the use of labelling, and is associated with stigma, a lack of humanity and the abuse of power, thereby negatively affecting learners' academic achievement. To this end, schools can network with parents, the police, technology providers and community organisations, to provide support systems for the victims (and perpetrators) of cyberbullying.

CONCLUSION

As the comments of both the perpetrators and bullied individuals show, there are many acts of violence at schools that may disrupt the learning environment and negatively affect the safety of learners, as well as their learning. Unfortunately, it can also affect their future prospects and their self-esteem, unless addressed in a timeous and comprehensive manner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that the department of education engages students and teachers as collaborators in campaigns against bullying in order to promote human dignity and children's rights to education in schools. In addition, a majority of learners especially in high schools have cell phones, thus schools can create websites to educate the learners on bullying. The schools should employ adequate school counsellors who will be available to assist learners suffering from physical and psychological aftermaths of bullying. More so, teacher training should be inclusive of techniques for fighting bullying and should equip teachers on how to address learner misconduct using non aggressive techniques. This would widen the teacher's knowledge on the effects of bullying and how children's rights are violated in the process. Anonymous disclosure by victims and a positive response by the school and department of education on perpetrators should also be promoted as this can fight the culture of silence on victims of bullying, especially girls who are either sexually harassed or experience other forms of bullying. Programmes that have been implemented to guide and redress bullying in line with moral, ethical values and principles, norms and beliefs consistent with the constitution should be promoted through a code of conduct. It must be signed by the learners and their parents on admission with explicit guidelines on how learners and parents/guardian should abide by the code of conduct and the channels to follow when one has been victimised.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Beare H, Caldwell BJ, Millikan RH 2018. *Creating an Excellent School: Some New Management Techniques*. Oxford, New York: Routledge.

Bernstein JY, Watson MW 1997. Children who are targets of bullying: A victim pattern. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence,* 12(4): 483-498.

Besag V 2006. *Understanding Girls' Friendships, Fights and Feuds: A Practical Approach to Girls' Bullying.* UK: McGraw-Hill Education.

Bhat CS, Ragan MA, Selvaraj PR, Shultz BJ 2017. Online bullying among high-school students in India. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling,* 39(2): 112-124.

Brendtro LK 2001. Worse than sticks and stones: Lessons from research on ridicule. *Reclaiming Children and Youth,* 10(1): 47.

Burton P, Leoschut L 2013. School Violence in South Africa. Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study, Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. *Monograph Series No.* 12. Cape Town: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.

Cook CR, Williams KR, Guerra NG, Kim TE, Sadek S 2010. Predictors of bullying and victimization in childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic investigation. *School Psychology Quarterly,* 25(2): 65.

De Wet C 2005. The voices of victims and witnesses of school bullying. *Koers: Bulletin for Christian Scholarship= Koers: Bulletin vir Christelike Wetenskap,* 70(4): 705-725.

Denzin NK, Lincoln YS (Eds.) 2011. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research.* London: Sage.

Department of Education 2010. Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System. *Education White Paper* 6. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Farrington DP 2019. Childhood risk and protective factors for early disasters, late disasters and life-course persistent offenders. *Revista Española de Investigación Criminológica,* 17: 1-33.

Flannery DJ, Farrell AD 2019. Evaluating school-based violence prevention programs: Challenges and opportunities now and into the future. In: MJ Mayer, SR Jimerson (Eds.): *School Safety and Violence Prevention: Science, Practice, Policy Driving Change.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 297-323.

Fredrick SS, Demaray MK 2018. Peer victimization and suicidal ideation: The role of gender and depression in a school-based sample. *Journal of School Psychology,* 67: 1-15.

Furlong VJ 1985. *The Deviant Pupil: Sociological Perspectives.* United Kingdom: Open University.

Garrett AG 2010. *Bullying in American Schools: Causes, Preventions and Interventions.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Glasser M 2018. *Perceptions of Bullying and Cyberbullying Situations among Male and Female Middle and Secondary Students in a Single-gender Modern Orthodox Jewish School.* Doctoral Dissertation. New York: Yeshiva University.

Hall WJ, Chapman MV 2018. The role of school context in implementing a state-wide anti-bullying policy and protecting students. *Educational Policy,* 32(4): 507-539.

Hamarus P, Kaikkonen P 2008. School bullying as a creator of pupil peer pressure. *Educational Research,* 50(4): 333-345.

Harber C 2004. *Schooling as Violence: How Schools Harm Pupils and Societies.* Oxford: Routledge.

Harber C, Mncube V 2012. Democracy, education and development: Theory and reality. *OtherEducation,* 1(1): 104-120.

Henry S 2018. *Social Deviance.* New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.

Hymel S, Swearer SM 2015. Four decades of research on school bullying: An introduction. *American Psychologist,* 70(4): 293.

Jan A, Husain S 2015. Bullying in elementary schools: Its causes and effects on students. *Journal of Education and Practice,* 6(19): 43-56.

Kearney CA, Albano AM 2018. *When Children Refuse School: Therapist Guide.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leedy PD, Ormrod JE 2005. *Practical Research.* New York: Pearson Custom.

Liang H, Flisher AJ, Lombard CJ 2007. Bullying, violence, and risk behaviour in South African school students. *Child Abuse and Neglect,* 31(2): 161-171.

Madikizela-Madiya N, Mncube VS 2014. The hybrid nature of school space and the manifestation of violence in South African schools. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology,* 5(2): 197-205.

Malecki CK, Demaray MK, Coyle S, Geosling R, Rueger SY, Becker LD 2015. Frequency, power differential, and intentionality and the relationship to anxiety, depression, and self-esteem for victims of bullying. *Child and Youth Care Forum,* 44(1): 115-131.

Mazzone A, Nocentini A, Menesini E 2017. Bullying and peer violence among children and adolescents in residential care settings: A review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior,* 38(1): 101-112.

McIntosh M, Rock P 2018. *Deviance and Social Control.* Oxford, New York: Routledge.

Minton SJ 2016. *Marginalisation and Aggression from Bullying to Genocide: Critical Educational and Psychological Perspectives.* Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Mncube VS, Harber C 2013. *The Dynamics of Violence in South African Schools.* Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Mncube V, Madikizela-Madiya N 2014. Gangsterism as a cause of violence in South African schools: The case of six provinces. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology,* 5(1): 43-50.

Nelson HJ, Kendall GE, Burns SK, Schonert-Reichl KA, Kane RT 2019. Development of the student experience of teacher support scale: Measuring the experience of children who report aggression and bullying. *International Journal of Bullying Prevention,* 1(2): 99-110.

Netshitangani T 2014. The unprofessional conduct of educators in South African secondary schools and the escalation of violence. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences,* 5(20): 1840.

Ngidi ND, Moletsane R 2018. Bullying in school toilets: Experiences of secondary school learners in a

South African township. *South African Journal of Education,* 38(1): S1-S8.

Nivette A, Sutherland A, Eisner M, Murray J 2019. Sex differences in adolescent physical aggression: Evidence from sixty three low and middle income countries. *Aggressive Behaviour,* 45(1): 82-92.

Olweus D, Limber SP, Breivik K 2019. Addressing specific forms of bullying: A large-scale evaluation of the Olweus bullying prevention program. *International Journal of Bullying Prevention,* 1(1): 70-84.

Pepler D, Jiang D, Craig W, Connolly J 2008. Developmental trajectories of bullying and associated factors. *Child Development,* 79(2): 325-338.

Pillay J, Ragpot L 2011. Values, education and democracy: Manifesto or myth? *Journal of Educational Studies,* (Special issue 1): 104-120.

Pretorius SG 2010. An education system's perspective on turning around South Africa's dysfunctional schools. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences,* 5(15): 348.

Rigby K 2002. *New Perspectives on Bullying.* London: Jessica Kingsley.

Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1996. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996). *Government Gazette No.* 25799.

Slattery LC, George HP, Kern L 2019. Defining the word bullying: Inconsistencies and lack of clarity among current definitions. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth,* 63(3): 227-235.

Smith PK 2014. *Understanding School Bullying: Its Nature and Prevention Strategies.* London: Sage.

Steyn GM, Singh GD 2018. Managing bullying in South African secondary schools: A case study. *International Journal of Educational Management,* 32(6): 1029-1040.

Syahruddin M 2015. *The Relationship between Bullying Type, Bullying Effect, Social Support and Safe School among Bully Victims.* Doctoral Dissertation. Malaysia: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Thornberg R 2011. She's weird! The social construction of bullying in school: A review of qualitative research. *Children and Society,* 25(4): 258-267.

Thornberg R, Knutsen S 2011. Teenagers' explanations of bullying. *Child and Youth Care Forum,* 40(3): 177-192.

Tjavanga H, Jotia AL 2012. School bullies and education in Botswana: Impact on other students and academic performance. *Academic Research International,* 2(1): 641-650.

Van Geel M, Vedder P, Tanilon J 2014. Relationship between peer victimization, cyberbullying, and suicide in children and adolescents: A meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics,* 168(5): 435-442.

Yin RK 2018. *Case Study Research and Application: Design and Methods.* 6th Edition. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Young Oh E, Song D, Hong H 2019. Interactive Computing Technology in Anti-bullying Education: The Effects of Conversation-Bot's Role on K-12 Students' Attitude Change Towards Bullying Problems. Journal of Educational Computing Research. From <https://doi.org/10.1177/07356331 19839177> (Retrieved on 10 April 2019).

Zuze TL, Reddy V, Juan A, Hannan S, Visser M, Winnaar L 2016. Safe and sound? Violence and South African education. *South African Journal of Education,* 38(1): 567-577.

Zych I, Baldry AC, Farrington DP 2017. School bullying and cyberbullying: Prevalence, characteristics, outcomes, and prevention. In: VB Van Hasselt, ML Bourke (Eds.): *Handbook of Behavioral Criminology: Contemporary Strategies and Issues.* New York: Springer, pp. 113-138.