

Bullying in South African Schools

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Abstract:- The study highlights the negative influence that bullying has on learner safety and suggests solution to the problem. Literature study and the focus group interviews revealed that bullying causes absenteeism and impact on individual learner's self-esteem. The victims fears coming to school and becomes bogged up and in lull attempt to maneuver out of the maze situation.

By way of extrapolating facts, this article further highlight that bullying influences the victims performance. The past exposure to bullying by bullies is not always equivalent in magnitude to the pain and humiliation bullies went through when they themselves were bullied by fellow learners. In addition the article further reconnoiters bullying in schools; as already mentioned in abstract by way of exploration of the solution to the problem. Learners were given an opportunity to shed their views in focus groups about bullying. Learners further suggested procedures to ensure their safety in school.

A qualitative interpretive paradigm was used in this study by focus groups in sampled schools in South Africa.

Keywords: Bullying, Safety, Schools, Violence

I. INTRODUCTION

Bullying has negative and serious consequences for the school. Learners can be encouraged by the school to report all incidents of bullying (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011). Bullying contravenes the learner's right not to be taught in an environment that is harmful to their health or well-being. Unsafe learning environment creates fear which has a negative effect on teaching and learning (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013).

The study aims to suggest ways to resolve bullying in schools. In view of the aforementioned study aims, the following research questions emerged:

- In which context does bullying takes place in schools?
- What can be done to stop bullying; based on international perspective and the education policy and law in South Africa?

Bullying is violence that involves shoving, and dragging another learner (Lawrence, 2007). It is intentional (Nieuwenhuis, 2007) deliberate, repeated hurtful acts, words or other behaviour, such as name-calling, threatening or shunning. It is committed by a learner or learners against another learner or learners (Neser et al, 2004). It is an act that

is taken with the intent to inflict pain and harm and involves fighting, stabbing, hitting with an object such as stone and stick, and wrestling (Lawrence, 2007). The act also includes damaging belongings, taking money, stealing money or food or taking away friends from learners (Bodenstein & Potterton, 2002). A learner is bullied when exposed, repeatedly over a period of time (Carlyle & Steinman 2007), to negative actions from one or more other learners. These negative actions are by physical contact, through words, or in other ways, such as making faces or dirty gestures (Smit, 2003, Learner Discipline, 2007). In Mncube and Harber (2013), O'Connell et al., (1999) states that bullying can be direct or indirect. "Direct bullying involves physical contact or verbal abuse whereas indirect bullying involves subtle social manipulations such as gossip, spreading rumour and exclusion" (Mncube & Harber, 2013:8). Smit (2003) regard bullying as a very old phenomenon among children. De Wet (2005) calls it "a centuries old phenomenon". De Wet (2005) further says that traditional wisdom regards bullying as not seriously harmful, a natural part of growing up (Leach et al., 2014), and helpful in toughening up children and preparing them for adulthood.

In the following discussion focus will be on the global literature perspective about bullying. The next sections of the study will be triangulation within the qualitative research approach by focus group discussions; and outline in comments that justified that bullying has negative influence on teaching and learning.

II. BRIEF GLOBAL LITERATURE PERSPECTIVE ON BULLYING

The article is fundamentally grounded as a point of departure in the research study discussion on perspectives of different writers and authors in their works on bullying. Bullying is prevalent among school learners (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011). Bodenstein and Potterton, (2002) cites that learners who are bullied can feel scared, vulnerable and very alone, while bullies are sometimes cunning and often do things so that they are not noticed. They add that the majority of incidents occur in places where there is little adult supervision. Smit (2003) point bullying as a serious problem that can dramatically affect the social and academic progress of victims.

III. BULLYING AS PEER VICTIMIZATION

In view of the serious consequences of bullying (Bodenstein & Potterton, 2002, Learner Discipline, 2007), prevention and intervention programs are crucial. "There seem to be general agreement that the best programs to stop bullying are those that involve the whole school approach" (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011). In the whole school approach there is an understanding of the school as an entity consisting of learners; teachers; principals; school management teams; school governing body and parents or caregivers as interdependent components (Burton, 2007). Burton (2007) adds that all these components are interrelated and are found within a wider context which includes home, community and society. The afore-mentioned author elaborate that bullying is just one area of the low level violent behaviour that are often overshadowed by both conciliatory socio-cultural beliefs (for an example "boys will be boys) and high-level violent behaviour (for an example weapon carrying, school associated homicide and suicide, gang-related activity, so on and so forth). Victims are repeatedly and over time exposed to negative actions from one or more other learner with intend to distress or harm the victim. The power imbalance often exists and is typically physical but may also be a social imbalance. Negative actions may range from non-verbal to directly observable behaviour which includes punching, throwing objects, and vandalism of property (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011).

Carlyle and Steinman (2007) cite that previous research suggests that bullying is more common among males than females. Though numerous studies have found no gender differences, and some suggest that results may be influenced by gender role stereotypes and how aggression itself is measured. However, the general trend in bullying behaviour is supported in a reasonable way. As such the expectation is that males will bully and be victimized more than females.

Bullying has serious consequences for the entire school. Those bullied report feelings of vengefulness, self-pity and anger after a bullying incident. If these feelings are not dealt with, such reactions are likely to turn into depression (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007), physical illness, and even suicide (Bodenstein & Potterton, 2002, Learner Discipline, 2007).

Blosnich and Bossarte (2011) maintain that the consequences of bullying and peer victimization are widespread and range from poor mental and physical health, to psychosomatic outcomes, to poor academic performance. There is a positive association between bullying, and psychosomatic complaints that includes headaches, sleep disturbances and anxiety. There is a risk of depression among those who reported being bullied and those who bullied others.

Despite a heightened interest in bullying by the general public and academic world, there seems to be lack of understanding and/or insight on the part of some South African teachers on the subject (Joubert, 2007). An eight year old Brakpan schoolboy was, for example, physically and verbally abused by a class mate for more than six months.

However, the principal of the school failed to take disciplinary action (Joubert, 2007) against the alleged bully, or to adhere to a request from the parents to place the alleged bully and his victim in separate classes. The principal told a newspaper reporter that there is no proof to show that the child has attacked him. "We decided to leave things as they are. We have observed no trauma. The alleged victim has been coming quite happily to school. If anyone has shown trauma, it is the boy who says he attacked him. We noticed that his schoolwork has been slipping" (De Wet, 2005). The preceding quotation of a principal response to bullying incidents suggests that there is indecisiveness and a lack of condemnation of bullying by some teachers (De Wet, 2005). Victims of bullying are reluctant to talk out of fear that this will aggravate the situation. Victims and onlookers are often trapped into silence (De Wet, 2003). Blosnich and Bossarte (2011) cite that the ridiculed learner is likely to become unhappy and to develop low self-esteem.

IV. METHOD OF STUDY

The qualitative approach used in this study is based on the understanding of school safety phenomenon from a closer perspective of learners in North West Province in South Africa (Eliyahu, 2013). The researcher has aligned with the naturalistic inquiry perspective of the qualitative research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), which calls for data collection strategy that is interactive. Focus group members interacted during sessions as they shared their views on given topics and substantiated where necessary. Each focus group in four sampled schools consisted of 8 learners, 1 non-teaching staff member who is either a gardener, cleaner or administrative assistant from each four sampled schools.

Qualitative approach is conducted in a natural setting. It gives a description of people's individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts and perceptions (Eliyahu, 2013, Kawulich, 2005, Creswell, 2001). Qualitative approach gives meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things (Tewksbury, 2009, Berg, 2007). In this instance focus groups members came to an understanding during discussion to the meaning; what constitute bullying; characteristics of bullying; and how their school posters and signage rebuke bullying.

Qualitative research approach in this study will discover to understand the experiences, thoughts and perspectives of the participants. Qualitative research will produce descriptive data of participants' spoken words and observable behaviour. It endeavours to understand the perspectives of people in their everyday life (Fox & Bayat, 2007, Kawulich, 2005, Neuman, 2005). It is constantly adapted to the reactions of subjects as they describe their experiences in the interviews (Merriam, 2009). Focus groups interviews undertaken by the researcher at sampled schools were recorded; the information was carefully analyzed and triangulated to global literature perspective on bullying. The researcher thereafter archived recorded voice responses.

In qualitative research approach; the views; feeling; attitudes; likes and dislikes pertaining the issue under investigation; interviews; printed and audio-visual material are perused. In other words the research design is ethnographic. Ethnographic research intends to obtain a holistic picture of the subject of study, with emphasis on parting the everyday experiences of individuals by observing and interviewing them and relevant others. The researcher adhered to the principles of qualitative research; which are respect, non-coercion, non-manipulation and support for democratic values (Gill & Johnson, 2002).

Results obtained are reliable and valid. Similar questions were asked to all focus groups and their responses were related. Learners completed consent forms indicating that they were not forced nor manipulated to participate. The research study results gave feedback on how bullying create an unsafe school environment, as well as the context in which this takes place. In essence learners in purposive focus groups thematically shed their understanding and made contributions through ideas and opinions to promote safe school environment for all. Researcher conducted focus group interviews in sampled schools. The research findings revealed there were incidents of bullying and lack of safety in schools. The findings constitute a serious threat to effective teaching and learning and to the lives of learners. For example, bullying; gang fights and vandalism of school property in school B.

The delimitation and demarcation of the area of study is bullying in schools, as defined in accordance with the field of study which is education law and policy. The study is on bullying in schools and how unsafe and detrimental it is to effective teaching and learning. Most schools experience similar problems therefore the findings of this study can be extended to other areas as well. The area of study is safety in schools. The study is confined to schools in South Africa which were established in accordance with the terms of the Group Areas Act of 1950 (Teppo, 2004, Bush & Heystek, 2003). The scope of the study is on how to promote the safety of learners.

V. THE SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE AND FINDINGS

As mentioned earlier the perspective of learners and non-teaching staff on bullying was discussed in focus groups. The findings were triangulated with literature study and the applicable education law and policy of the country.

A. Learners' response on bullying and the law

The learner in school B was bullied by other learners because of the small pants she worn. The reasons for the learner wearing the small pants could perhaps be due to low home income, parents neglecting the child or other reasons at home hindering the purchase of the proper pants size. The ridiculed learner was unhappy and likely to develop low self-esteem. The learner got victimized (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007) by peers through bullying. Because of the serious consequences (Bodenstein & Potterton, 2002, Learner Discipline, 2007) bullying can have for the entire school,

learners at school A and school B should be encouraged to stand up to bullying as a group or even on their own so long as it is safe to do so. The school should encourage them to make clear that bullying is unacceptable and no one should be ridiculed, taunted or even be hurt. Learners should be informed that all incidents of bullying and peer victimization should be reported to adults (Blosnich & Bossarte (2011). Without the support and protection from the teacher in *loco parentis* (Masitsa, 2011), the results may otherwise as Carlyle and Steinman (2007) mentioned that those bullied report feelings of vengefulness, self-pity and anger after a bullying incident. Joubert (2007) highlight the fact that the principal represent the employer in the school and should never turn a deaf ear to a victim's complaint, nor decide not to report an incident of sexual misconduct or abuse. Failure to adhere to the afore-mentioned by the school authorities could be held as being deliberately indifferent to the learners' rights to security, dignity; and abuse (Alexander & Alexander, 2005).

B. Strategies to eradicate bullying in South African Schools triangulated with findings

Bullying is an organized abuse of power in its most serious forms and may lead, among others, to murder, or a serious assault and rape (De Wet, 2003). (De Wet, 2003). The South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996, section 20(a) is explicit that the school governing body of a public school must promote the best interest of the school and try to ensure its development through the provision of quality education for all learners. From this statement it is clear that the SGB is responsible for a safe environment for learners at the school. This assertion resonate with section 12 and Section 24 of the Constitution (RSA) respectfully referring to the freedom and security of the person and that everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being and to have the environment protected for the benefit of present and future generations through reasonable legislative measures. It can be reasoned that a school policy on safety serve a legislative purpose though it is a subordinate legislation.

It is assumed to be of the essence for every school to have a policy on safety because school environment is an environment in which learners spend 33% of their daily life with their teachers and fellow learners. With the presence of the school safety policy, it makes it possible for staff and learners to function in a safe environment conducive to effective learning and teaching (Tabancali & Bektas, 2009:281, Constitution SA; Chapter 2: Bill of Rights, Section 29: Education). When there are safety measures, learners are more likely to perform better and teachers feel secure when delivering education.

Learner A in school C has this to say when she appealed to the school authorities for accessibility and implementation of the school safety policy to all at school. "*The safety policy is not accessible and many learners are bullied and are not helped*".

Learner B said: *“We are frequently reminded about the safety policy in a verbal way at the school assembly session on Mondays that no drugs, weapons, and cell phones are allowed on school premises”.*

In school C learners believes that bullying result in school phobia as the learner becomes afraid of coming to school because of name-calling by bullies. School D shares the same sentiment when learners maintained that bullying creates fear of school attendance in the victim. In school A, Learner A is of the opinion that bullying promoted absenteeism. Learner C said she manifested bullying as other learners called the victim names right on the school premises.

Learner C in school A has this to say: *“I manifested bullying in my school as other learners called the victim names right on the school premises. The victim was a girl and appeared small in physique”*

In the aforementioned situation of bullying it is clear that the victim has been humiliated in public and treated unfairly as witnessed by fellow learners. It is a contravention of Section 9 of the South African Constitution of 1996; which is the key provision of the Bill of Rights (Nieuwenhuis, 2007).

In school B a fellow learner was turned into a joke for the small school pants she was wearing. Unfortunately in the aforementioned school not all learners reported cases of bullying for fear of attack by bullies after school. The above-mentioned incidents of bullying in school A and school B are a contravention of Section 9 which is interwoven with Section 12. In reference to bullying in school A, Section 12 (1) of the Constitution states the right of everyone to freedom and security of the person, which includes the right (a) to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources; (d) not to be tortured in any way; and (e) the right not to be treated or punished in a cruel (Maphosa & Shumba, 2010), inhuman or degrading way (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Section 12 (1) guarantees the safety and security of all learners in schools (Maphosa & Shumba, 2010), Section 12 (2) guarantees everyone’s right to bodily and psychological integrity (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). It protects learners from bullying mentioned in school C. This section attempts to prevent the occurrence of violence, cruel treatment and degradation of learners.

Bullying can be prevented by having class rules that give a clear guideline for acceptable behaviour. The class supervision by the teacher in school A and school B can help learners to feel safe and protected. The teacher should perhaps focus on continuous development of social skills amongst learners, and clarify in class and school assembly that learners who bully others would be called to account. This will send out a clear message that bullying will not be tolerated. The teacher should focus more on changing bullying behaviour than punishment (Learner Discipline, 2007).

As the teacher assumes the *loco parentis* (Masitsa, 2011) role in school A, school B, school C and school D, subsection 12 on Freedom and Security of the Person is considered. The subsection discourages learners in school A to ridicule and call a girl ‘names’ who was a bullying victim just because of the bullies’ judgments regarding her physical appearance. In school B two conflicting views existed among LA and LB. LA said she never experienced or witnessed bullying at her school. LB disagreed and said that there is bullying as she witnessed a fellow learner turned into a joke for the small school pants she was wearing, for that the victim was belittled by bullies. This makes victims to be reluctant to attend school. LB however appreciates that there is a teacher who intervenes meaningfully to quell bullying tendency of bullies. Unfortunately not all learners reports cases of bullying for fear of attack by bullies after school.

In school C, LA says bullying result in school phobia as the learner becomes afraid of coming to school because of name-calling by bullies. The similar view held has been advanced by LA in school A and LA in school D. Mncube and Harber (2013) assert that apart from the distress and unhappiness caused by bullying, this could result in absenteeism and some victims transferring to another school to escape the problem.

In school D learners regard bullies as sometimes members of gangs. Learners who reported gang members to teachers were likely to face threats from the same gang outside the school premises after school hours. Learners in school B agree with learners’ standpoint in school D on this matter.

Learner B in school D said: *“We are not safe because the fence at the back of the school premises has been brought down, and this makes it easy for the strangers to access our school premises with ease”.* In the same school Learner C said: *“A learner was stabbed with a knife and we suspect that it was a gang related incident, fortunately he did not die”.* The aforementioned indicate that there is lack of control of access by strangers to the school premises.

C. Poor safety in schools and its influence on teaching and learning

The constitutional right to safety (De Waal, 2011) of learners in schools implies removal of any threat of physical, emotional and mental harm to learners. The improvement of school’s safety and security can decrease school problems and improve the delivery of education. The safety of learners in and around schools can be threatened by violence, drugs, corporal punishment, traffic and bullying (School Based Violence, 2011). The afore-mentioned implies that bullying is not the only safety threat; there are other threats as well. All learners and teachers have a constitutional right to attend schools that are safe, secure, and successful (Masitsa, 2011). The prevalence of violence and threat of violence within schools throughout South Africa compromises the learning process and hinders quality learning and teaching (Leoschut, 2008). Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) maintain that the effects of school violence on learning and teaching are: poor

academic performance; bunking of classes; chaos; and lost time; and depression.

LA in School A and LB in School B suggested religious teachings of moral values could help inculcate learner positive behaviour adaptation in schools and families. LB emphasized that respect is one of the principles to be taught when talking issues of safety on school premises. Below are the recommendations of the study.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The school policy should amongst others include anti-bullying clauses that are drafted in consultation with all stakeholders in a school. The policy should encourage adopting proposals to eradicate any form of bullying in schools. Professional support from social workers should be enlisted to schools to support children who have been victims of bullying and peer victimization.

Learners should be encouraged by the school to make clear that bullying is not acceptable and that no one should be ridiculed, taunted or hurt. They should also be informed that all incidents of bullying should be reported to adults. Learners with behavioral problems should be referred to behavioral specialists for counseling.

Schools should invite motivational speakers to encourage learners to refrain from engaging in violence. Role models (School-Based Violence, 2011) in the community would also influence children to be positive in thinking and action. School visit by religious leaders and preaching to learners during assembly sessions could convert and also discourage bullying behaviour.

VII. SUMMARY

The aforementioned research findings justified the fact that effective schools have strategies to deal with bullying. Bullying as a problem should be eradicated through implementation of policy and procedures on the matter. The school should have class rules that give a clear guideline for acceptable behaviour and focus on continuous development of social skills amongst learners. Teachers should call upon learners who bully others to account for their behaviour. This will send out a clear message that bullying will not be tolerated.

Learners' should be encouraged to stand together against bullying and also report any bullies to teachers. The school should declare bullying as a serious contravention of the school safety policy; and an ingredient to unsafe school environment that has a negative effect on teaching and learning at school. Schools should hold safety campaigns and display posters and bill boards in emphasis on safety awareness. School development plans and improvement plans should take into consideration the safety of learners and teachers on school premises. In addition; the policy should discourage learners to engage in violent behavior.

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