



## The social and emotional effects of bullying on learners in learning institutions in South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

*Bullying is a significant concern for learners in South African educational institutions, and it requires immediate attention and intervention from interested parties, such as social workers. This form of violence is prevalent during the school years and involves aggressive behaviour towards victims. The phenomenon of bullying attracts local and global interest from social scientists, who use it as a term to describe its social and emotional effects. The concept is associated with mental health problems, a decline in school performance, school dropout, contemplation of suicide, suicide, and other complex social problems. Social workers are well-versed in the concept of bullying due to their involvement with the issue. The study utilized qualitative research, employing purposive sampling, and thematic analysis to analyze data from a sample of 21 social workers linked to schools. The research design employed was exploratory in nature. The study utilized face-to-face, semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection, with an interview guide serving as the instrument. Prior to collecting data, the researcher obtained permission from participants and sought their consent for audio-recording. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, debriefing, beneficence, confidentiality, and avoiding harm, were closely followed. The study drew on two theoretical frameworks, namely the ecological and strength-based approaches.*

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## Introduction

Bullying has become a serious concern amongst the learners in learning institutions in South Africa and is a threat to mental health. It is a phenomenon that requires urgent attention and interventions in learning institutions (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Bullying is considered a human rights matter and requires legislation that provides guidance on how to deal with it. Section 12 of the South African Constitution provides for the protection against the violation of human dignity of any person in South Africa. It further provides for the safety and protects citizens from treatment that is inhuman (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). Bullying is the misuse and repeated form of violence and aggression through physical, verbal, and cyber (Zastrow, 2017). Bullying has been identified as destructive and causes lots of damage in the lives of children. Intrapersonal problems are some of the consequences of bullying which leads to mental health problems (Xu, Jun, Zhu & Bellmore, 2016). Section 10a of the South African Schools Act discourages the elements of bullying and has identified the humiliation of learners to be seeking urgent attention. The South African Children's Act 38 of 2005 categorised bullying as a form of abuse of another child (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2005). The Department of Education has highlighted that there is a total of 1345 schools that have been found to be violent hotspots in South Africa (Naidu, 2019). The abuse of Children is a punishable act in the South African law. This therefore means that learners who bully others are involved in acts of crime and are in conflict with the law as provided by the Child Justice Act.

There is a surge of bullying incidents in South African schools that has drawn the attention of government and social scientists. 58% of learners have been exposed to bullying in learning institutions in South Africa through the use of social media. Cyberbullying is

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on the rise with serious negative effects on learners (Harrinton-Johnson, 2021). Traditionally, bullying has been a phenomenon that involves boys in learning institutions. 28% of girls have been identified to be perpetrators of bullying in Maseru, Lesotho (Smith, 2014). The figures of bullying amount to 3.2 million in South African learning institutions with adverse problems that affect the social functioning of learners (Staples, 2016). Girls account for 40% of bullying against each other on a weekly basis (Naidu, 2019). In Limpopo, a learner from Mbilwi secondary school was bullied and the video attracted media attention locally and globally and she committed suicide (SABC, 2021). A similar incident occurred in Bhisho High School where a learner swallowed pesticides and died in hospital (News24, 2021). Another case of a female learner was reported in Botlokwa and thus has led to the learner contemplating suicide (The Citizen, 2022). Learners who are being abused are unable to report incidents of bullying to teachers at learning institutions. Over 67% of learners who have been abused or bullied have not reported it to the school management or teachers (Liang, Flisher & Lombard, 2018).

Bullying has negative consequences on the social, physical, emotional, and psychological part of the learners (Masilo, 2018). Some of the consequences of bullying include exposing learners to trauma, anxiety, fears, stress, and sleeping disorders. They further include depression, contemplating suicide, drop in school performance (Thwala, Okeke & Tshotsho, 2018). Bullying severely impacts the future of the learners in schools because some isolate themselves and some become aggressive and end up being bullies (Singh, 2020). The social functioning of the learners gets interrupted and leads to some learners becoming criminals and getting involved in bullying and other violent crimes (Smith, 2014). Perpetrators of bullying grow up knowing that there is nothing wrong with bullying because there is no consequence for many of them. They see it as a custom, norm that every learner needs to go through in learning institutions (James, 2017). Mental health problems are some of the effects that bullying has on the learners and it affects their concentration level. The consequences of cyberbullying mainly lead to serious effects. This is because the materials used through the technology reach a huge audience within a short period (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018).

Learners provide various reasons for their involvement in bullying incidents and this differs from one learner to the next. Learners are bullied because they can't afford to buy certain clothes or technological devices (Walter & Roberts, 2016). Other learners are bullied because of the structure of their bodies and when they don't fit within a certain group (Harber, 2014). Children from poor families are more likely to be bullied in learning institutions. However, due to their lack of basic needs, they find themselves bullying other learners and taking their lunch boxes (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018). Learners are subject to bullying because they have a poor accent and do not to the standard of a particular group. They are being defamed and made to feel less of a human being and embarrassed (Harber, 2014). Sexual orientation is one of the major factors that lead to bullying incidents in schools. Learners are harassed, stigmatised, and physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation (Coyne & Monks, 2013).

Domestic violence is one of the factors that leads to bullying. Learners who are exposed to domestic violence at home turn to perform the behaviour they have observed at home (Masilo, 2018). Children use aggression and violence to cope with the challenges of domestic violence they experience at home. Learners believe violence is the method of solving problems as they have learned from home (Bezuidenhout, 2013). This is the indication that the environment influences the social behaviour of people as outlined by the ecological perspective which argues that the environment plays a crucial role in the behaviour of learners (Masilo, 2018). Learners who use alcohol and drugs are likely to engage in antisocial behaviour and are likely to be influenced by alcohol (Coyne & Monks, 2013). Bullies from poverty families engage in violent behaviour, and aggression to be able to have something to eat. They rely on their victims to be able to have lunch, to have money so that they can address poverty (Singh, 2017).

The social work profession is a critical stakeholder in the service of bullying in learning institutions. Social workers provide psychosocial services, counselling services, educational programmes, and preventative services to learners, parents and stakeholders in learning environment (National Association of Social Workers, 2015). They provide debriefing services to the victims of bullying, the bullies and the learning institution community (Horton, 2016). Social workers address the root cause of bullying and involve parents in the intervention identified to be suitable for the victim and the bully (Branch, Ramsay & Barker, 2013). Bullying is not a new phenomenon in social work profession and involving social workers in bullying incidents is a necessity (Zastrow, 2017). Social workers engage learners in behavioural programs, peer group pressure, anti-social behaviour programs, and behaviour modification programs (Masilo, 2018). They further provide parenting programs, family preservations, community awareness programs and stakeholder awareness programs to deal with bullying (Toseland & Rivas, 2017). The involvement of family group sessions and conference provide a sustainable intervention required to deal with bullying. Family group services provide more support, and guidance than individual services (Masilo, 2023). Social work services provided to groups and in the community is ideal and provide more holistic programs to be able to address bullying (Getz, 2013).

## **Literature Review**

### **Description and Understanding of Bullying**

Olweus has been conducting research on the phenomenon of bullying for over 40 years and has described bullying as involving the interaction between the perpetrator and the victim. It is the use of violence, aggression, and repeated behaviour that is intended to cause harm (Olweus, 2013). It is the continuous misuse of power to threaten the victims, and inflict harm through physical, emotional, psychological, and verbal violence (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2018). There are arguments in the research about the understanding of bullying. There is however agreement that it involves the intention to inflict and cause harm and that there is an imbalance of

power between the victim of bullying and the bullies (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). The vulnerabilities of the victims are used to achieve power. These vulnerabilities include poor academic performance, physical appearance, and the family situations of the victims (Smith, 2014). These cause problems and affect the social and emotional effects of learners in learning institutions.

Bullying comprises various types including physical bullying (e.g kicking and pinching), verbal bullying (e.g swearing, threats, insults, and name-calling), and cyberbullying (e.g use of technology, distributing inappropriate pictures and video) (Smith, 2014). Learners are subjected to bullying using any form outlined to describe bullying.

### **The prevalence of bullying**

Studies conducted in Western Europe and America suggest that there is a prevalence of bullying in learning institutions. Young people who are aged between 11 and 15 are mostly affected by bullying in Europe and America (Global School Health Survey, 2015). There is an increase in the victimization of learners in learning institutions in America. 32% of boys as compared to 28% of girls experienced bullying in learning institutions (Wang, Chen & Zhang, 2019). South Africa is not immune to the prevalence of this phenomenon. South African learning institutions account for more than 58% of learners who are bullied through the use of social media (Harrinton & Johnson, 2021). There is a dramatic increase in cyberbullying and has negative social and emotional effects on the lives of learners. Cyberbullying is more prevalent because of the accessibility of social media and technological devices (Staples, 2016). More than 16% of learners were reported to have been exposed to cyberbullying in South African schools. South Africa has witnessed a surge in bullying incidents with some attracting international media attention (Harrinton & Johnson, 2021).

### **Bullying as causes of violent crimes in South African schools**

The phenomenon of bullying contributes significantly to violent crime in South African schools. Bullying is increasingly becoming instigator of violent crime in learning institution (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2014). It impacts negatively to the learners in learning environment. One of the victims of bullying in Parrow, Cape Town, who sustained injuries had to go through facial surgery (Nthate, 2019). Bullying compromise the safety of learners and teachers in learning environment and is a good platform to nurture violent crimes. The violent crimes leads to social and emotional effects and has serious consequences (Gini, Pozzoli & Hymel, 2014). Most violent crimes in learning institutions involves bullying that includes the weapons and the needs for the victims to defend themselves (Rodkin, Espelage & Hanish, 2015). The Minister of Education has highlighted that 1345 schools have been designated as hotspots for bullying in South Africa. This means these schools have violent crimes resulting from bullying (Naidu, 2019). The hotspot figures shows that bullying is a significant contributor of violent crime in South African schools. They further shows that bullying needs special attention and interventions to address the social and emotional effects (Naidu, 2019).

### **Health consequences of bullying**

Bullying has negative consequences to the victim, the perpetrators of bullying and the bystanders in learning institutions (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). The consequences includes the physical injury, anxiety, social and emotional problems, depression and mental health. This affects the victims on the short and long term basis (Smith, 2014). There is a close link and association between school bullying and the later health problems. In a long term, victims, perpetrators and bystanders suffer health problems because of bullying (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). The health consequences of bullying leads to further effects that includes contemplation of suicide and suicide. Victims, perpetrators and bystanders further struggle with sleeping (Staples, 2016). Some of the victims of bullying cut themselves to suppress thinking about bullying and focus on the actual pain they are experiencing. They inflict physical injuries on their bodies and isolate themselves to focus on the sustained injuries (Harber, 2014).

### **The social and emotional effects of bullying**

The phenomenon of bullying has a serious social and emotional effects on the victim, the perpetrator, bystanders and the school community (Madonna & Murphy, 2015). Learners who are bullied develop laziness, withdraw from the social and community activities, and isolate themselves from other learners (Nansel, 2014). They feel socially and culturally rejected and cannot reach out to other learners or have a conversation. They develop low self-esteem, and self-confidence that leads to poor performance in class and school dropout (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Learners who are victims of bullying develop fear, anxiety, stress, trauma and depression. They struggle with sleeping, and appetite and contemplate suicide with some committing suicide. Some of the victims of bullying become violent and criminals in self-defence against the bullies (Walter & Roberts, 2016). Bullying has a significant impact on the lives of learners and has serious effects which affect the lives of learners socially and emotionally. Some of the negative effects of bullying can graduate into adulthood and may compromise the future of the learners and their academic work.

### **Importance of social work in the bullying phenomenon**

The social work profession plays a critical role in addressing and combating bullying in learning institutions (Smith, 2016). Bullying is a social issue that disrupts the social functioning of learners in learning institutions and communities and this requires the attention of social workers. Social workers are equipped to provide anti-bullying programs and address anti-social behaviour (Masilo, 2018). They provide therapy to the victims of bullying, and bullies and also render preventative programs to reduce and combat it. They further render debriefing services to those who have witnessed the phenomenon taking place (Smith, 2016). Social workers are able to run campaigns against violence, social crime prevention, and behaviour modification programs. These assist in dealing with violent behaviour and modifying the behaviour that is considered to can contribute to bullying (Earnshaw, Elliot, Reisner, Mrug, Windle,

Emery, Peskin, & Schuster, 2017:31). They instil discipline amongst learners and look at the environmental factors that lead to bullying behaviour. It assists in rooting out the problem making the correct diagnosis and providing the correct intervention for those affected by the incident of bullying (Terry, 2015).

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

This paper has adopted the ecological perspective as the relevant theoretical framework. It is an approach and perspective applied in social work to deal with difficult situations and focus on the people and their environment (Pawar, 2014). It focuses on the person-in-environment, the interaction that people, families, and communities have with their influence which influence their decision (Zastrow, 2013). It further focuses on the natural world and environment and the importance of the environment within which people stay and which they are part. The environment comprises the physical and the social world which includes the houses, work, laws, and rules within the community (Payne, 2014). Learners mix with other children in school and the interaction between the learners can lead to bullying. It is inevitable that learners will interact within the learning environment. Bullying has a specific environment where it takes place, especially in learning environments (Smith, 2014). School toilets and classes are often the places identified for bullying to take place. Teachers, administrative personnel, and other stakeholders may not be able to recognize or know some of the incidents of bullying taking place within the learning environment (Sikhakhane, Muthukrishna, & Martin, 2018). It is often not seen or visible to the management of the school. The school environment may require the installation of security cameras to properly monitor the violent behaviour that is unacceptable within the school environment (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018). This will assist in detecting the behaviour that is suspicious within the school environment.

The main purpose of learning gets disrupted within the school environment because of the violence and incidents of bullying that take place. This means that social workers need to ensure a conducive learning environment that is free from bullying, violence, and aggression. Education needs to be provided by social workers within the school environment to ensure a safe school and provide behaviour modification programs to the learning environment. School-linked social workers play a fundamental role within the school environment and bring awareness about the social and emotional effects of bullying.

### **Research and Methodology**

The study used the qualitative research approach and exploratory, descriptive, and contextual research designs were adopted to give meaning to the research (Lapan, Quartaroli & Riemer, 2015). The participants had to meet a set of criteria to participate in the study. The criteria include:

- i. The participants must be social workers who are linked to school employed by the Department of Social Development.
- ii. Must have three years of experience working with bullying in learning institutions.
- iii. Must be certified to practice as a social worker by the South African Council for Social Services Professions.

The generic social workers who are not offering bullying services and are not linked to school were excluded from participating in the study. The social workers in private practice, NGOs, and those who are hospitalized and on sick leave were also not eligible to participate in this study.

The study was conducted in all five regions of Limpopo province because of the prevalence and the increasing rate of bullying incidents taking place in learning institutions within the province. The data was gathered using face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 21 participants interviewed (Babbie & Mouton, 2017:289). Data collection was stopped at data saturation and the study reached the point of data saturation when interviewing the participants 21. The interview was conducted using English (Mathews & Ross, 2018). The period and duration of the interviews varied with each participant with 40 minutes as the average.

The study employed the purposive sampling method to choose the sample. The study followed the tech's approach using thematic content analysis for data analysis (Creswell, 2014). Data was validated using the independent coder to ensure the dependability of the findings of the study. Various ethical principles were adhered to ensure the credibility of the research findings and the participants were informed about the benefits and the risks of participating in the study (Polit & Beck, 2014). The researcher assured the participants about confidentiality and informed them about the content of the study and an informed consent form was signed. Anonymity ensured that the identity of the participants was not compromised (Moreno, 2017). Debriefing services were made available in situations where participants experienced harm in the study and there was a significant consideration for the avoidance of harm (Picardi & Masick's, 2014). The College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa granted the ethical approval.

### **Findings and Discussions**

#### **Findings**

Bullying is a devastating and complex social issue and requires the attention of social workers to provide preventative intervention to address the phenomenon. The participants of the study who are social workers have identified a number of effects on the social and emotional part of the victim because of bullying. Some of the social and emotional effects of bullying include withdrawal from

the community and school, isolation, fears, anxiety, engaging in crime, trauma, depression, drop in school performance, gangsterism, and suicide. Some of the effects are that learners become bullies in self-defence, graduate to become criminals, are absent from school, carry weapons, and develop low self-esteem and confidence.

Low self-esteem and confidence was one of the main effects identified in the study on the social and emotional aspects. The low self-esteem affect the performance of the learners in class and also leads to school drop out and other social problems which affect the social functioning of learners. This further leads to anxiety, fears, withdrawing from community and cultural activities, stress and depression. Trauma and anger are some of the effects experienced by the learners who have been victimized through bullying.

*“the victims they also suffer from stress which lead them to trauma or other psychological issues for themselves. They exclude themselves from activities which they previously participated that involves learners, norms, culture and the community. (Participant A)”*.

Participant E has similar understanding of the effects of social and emotional bullying. He further highlight that victims of bullying become criminals as they grow up because their actions have not been punished as they were children.

*“learners who are exposed to bullying experience so much problems and end up becoming criminals and violent. They end up carrying weapons to defend themselves from bullies who continuously perpetuate bullying. They do this due to observation that there is no punishment for the bullies who subject the victims to bullying. (Participant E)”*.

### **Isolation and withdrawal**

Learners finds themselves withdrawing from the social activities within the community because of stress and fears of violence in their lives (Smith, 2014). Learners who are victim of bullying no longer participate in schooling activities, isolate themselves from the cultural activities and associating with fellow learners and the community (Madonna & Murphy, 2015). The victims struggle to have interaction with the school environment because some of them are stigmatized by fellow learners. They become absent from school and this affects their mental health (Terry, 2015). They struggle to deploy the coping mechanism to be resilient when experiencing a similar incident of bullying. They struggle to deal with the pressure and decide to withdraw from the entire community and the school environment (Sinokowski & Kopasz, 2015).

*“I think learners isolate themselves from participating in social activities, association with other learners within the school environment. They fear violence directed at them and withdraw from participating in any activities. They believe isolation assists them because they are no longer with the people that may be aggressive against them. (Participant F)”*

Learners get exposed to mental health problems because of the problems of bullying. The following extract concur with participant F.

*“Learners experience significant mental health problems and contemplate suicides. They do not have the capacity to handle the pressure, stress and depression because of bullying. Cyberbullying is the critical cause of mental health problems and learners contemplate and commit suicide because their pictures have been distributed through the use of technology. (Participant J)”*

Similarly, some participant believe that learners often are absent from school because they do not know how to deal with exposure of bullying. They become absent which leads to drop in school performance and school drop out.

*“absenteeism is one of the issues experienced by the victims of bullying. Sometimes the bystanders and learners who witnessed the bullying become absent from school because of lack of debriefing. The bullies also get absent because intervention services neglect them. The learners find themselves struggling with academic work because they are mostly absent fearing violence and aggression against them in the school environment. (Participant N)”*

### **Contemplate suicides and suicide**

Victims of bullying in learning environment suffer huge embarrassment when they are bullied, and experience critical hardship. They get exposed to undue pressure and subject the learners to trauma, anxiety, fears, and contemplate suicide (Madonna & Murphy, 2015). Learners are unable to handle the pressure especially when it involves the use of social media, technological devices to spread inappropriate message and pictures of the victim. The learners contemplate suicide because they do not want to face those people again (Smith, 2014).

*“cyberbullying makes learners to develop suicidal thoughts. They fear learners and the school community are gossiping about her/him because of materials distributed using technology. They attempt on their lives and overdose on drugs and medication to commit suicide. Participant G)”*

Additionally, Participant O points that learners take it further from contemplation to literally committing suicide. They decide to commit suicide to avoid stigmatization from the fellow learners.

*“learners commit suicide because of the phenomenon of bullying. South Africa has been experiencing an increase in the incidents of bullying and some have gained local and international media attention. Various areas, towns, provinces have experienced bullying in learning environment. Learners commit suicide to rest and avoid facing people. (Participant R)”*

## Conclusions

The paper provides a detailed description about the social and emotional effects of bullying on learners in learning institutions in South Africa. Various effects have been found to affect the learning environment and compromised the safety of students. School linked social workers should be deployed to address the bullying incidents and work with all relevant stakeholders on a daily basis. Social work intervention to include the victims of bullying, the bullies, teaching staff, administrative personnel, and debriefing be provided to bystanders. Guidelines to be provided to indicate how bullying is to be addressed in order to combat it holistically. The social worker to have educational, preventative programs to provide education about the effects of bullying on everyone. This include identifying the root cause of bullying in order to deal with it. Bullying must be treated with respect and urgency. This is because it involves the most vulnerable in learning institutions and violate the human and constitutional rights of learners.

Bullying continuous gain momentum in learning institutions in South Africa. Despite efforts by the government departments, human rights commission, and other stakeholders. Full time social workers are a necessity to be able to address the challenges about bullying phenomenon. The role played by social workers in dealing with bullying is critical to ensure good mental health of the learners and stakeholders within the learning environment. Behaviour modification, anti-bullying programs are fundamental and need to be rendered by social workers to address the phenomenon. Strength based approach is also important to help the bullies to focus on their strength and avoid engaging in violence, aggression and the disruption of proper functioning of the victims.

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