FACTORS LEADING TO BULLYING AMONG LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY OF KHAMI DISTRICT PRIMARY SCHOOLS, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Bullying in schools is a very old worldwide phenomenon. It is one of the most common forms of violence. What is new is the growing awareness that it has serious damaging effects for bullies, victims, schools and communities. Schools throughout the world have been plagued by bullying which can have negative consequences for the general school climate and for the right of the students to learn in a safe environment without fear. This study set to investigate factors that lead to bullying behaviour among learners. Premised on the qualitative approach the study used the case study research design. The target population were teachers and primary schools learners. The sample comprised forty -five participants from Khami District who were purposefully sampled. The main tools for data collection were in-depth interviews and questionnaires. Data was analysed using percentages and the transcribed data was organised into themes and reported in text form. The findings revealed that the majority of learners and teachers were aware of the bullying that was going on around them. The study also established that the various causes included personal characteristics, exposure to violence and abuse, poor parenting styles, lack of rules targeting bullying, peer pressure, and inferiority complex. Based on these findings, some recommendations for the schools were made. It was recommended that bullying in schools warrants intervention

Keywords: Bullying, victimisation, bully, bullied, learner, violence, victim

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

One of the mostly documented types of violence in schools is bullying. Bullying among school children has become a common but serious phenomenon which infringes upon a child's right to human dignity, privacy, freedom and security (Olweus and Limber, 2010, Roman and Murillo, 2011). Bullying incidents in schools are rising at an alarming rate globally (Olweus and Limber (2010). Several studies have been carried out worldwide on bullying and findings have indicated that bullying has negative effects on the holistic development of learners.

Students are bullied when they are repeatedly exposed to aggressive behaviour from their peers including teachers that intentionally injury or discomfort (Policy Paper 17, 2015). A broad definition of bullying as opined by Olweus and Limber, (2010) is the intentional, repeated, negative, (unpleasant and hurtful) behaviour by one group or more persons directed against a person who has difficulty in defending him or herself. It is comprised of behaviours

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such as teasing, spreading rumors, threatening, hitting, and intentional exclusion. Thus, bullying is any form of deliberate aggressive behaviour towards a person perceived as weak with the intention of inflicting pain or discomfort on them. The physical or emotional intimidation occurs repeatedly overtime to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse (Olweus, and Solberg, 1998),

Various studies have been done internationally in order to ascertain causes and effects of bullying in a bid to come up with measures of eradicating it. The researches have indicated that bullying is a widespread phenomenon. In recent years, bullying has gained momentum and media coverage due to its escalating rate, (Serrao, 2009). School bullying has led to several deaths throughout the entire universe.

Olweus (1993) carried out a study on bullying in Norwegian and Swedish schools and found out that approximately one in seven pupils are involved in bullying either as a bully or victim. In Spain, one in four pupils experience school bullying, with a rate of seven times higher in primary schools than in secondary school (Voors, 2005). In Australia, 17,4% of pupils aged 7 to 9 reported serious bullying, and 31% reported having suffered mild bullying Skrzypiec, 2008 cited in (Roman and Murillo, 2011). McGuckin, Lewis and Cummins (2010), states that previous research carried out in 2002 for the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, (DENI), indicated that forty percent of primary school learners and thirty percent of post primary school learners had been bullied respectively in the two months from the time of data collection.

Research on bullying has gained momentum in Africa, with studies showing that bullying is also common in African schooling system. Chabalala (2011) cites a study by Egbochuku in 2007 which found out that in Nigeria seventy-eight percent of learners in primary schools had been victims of bullying whereas seventy one percent had bullied others. According to Marais and Meier (2010) South Africa paints an equally grim picture on bullying with disruptive behaviour being the consistently discussed problem in South African schools. The South African Council of Educators, (2011) concludes that what is becoming evident in South African society is that bullying is a serious worry in both primary and secondary schools across age, gender, race and school categories.

In a study carried out in Zimbabwe on bullying by Gudyanga, Mudihlwa and Wadesango (2014) on the extent of bullying in Chegutu high schools with a sample of 102 and 90 teachers 64% of the study participants admitted that there was bullying in schools, 28% were not of this idea and 8% were undecided. Zindi (1994) also carried out an investigation into bullying. His study revealed that bullying in schools is rampant. He reported that 16% of students were bullied now and then, and 18% were bullied weekly or more often.

 In a newspaper article entitled: Ministry investigates Milton High school Bullying**,** in the Chronicle dated 8 August 2015, 10 form one pupils were bashed by their seniors form four and upper six classes resulting in some of them being admitted to hospital after sustaining substantial injuries. Newsday dated 19 January 2013 also published a story about Prince Edward high school in Harare, depicting the school as a haven for bully behaviour. It was reported that the school had recorded two deaths of students within a space of four months and it was suspected to be linked to bullying. One student was found dead in a swimming pool, and the other was found dead in a basketball court.

By regarding these studies and reports from newspapers it is possible to see a consistent indication that school bullying is becoming a global phenomenon. Inspired by real life experiences where researchers during years in their teaching profession noted that bullying has serious detrimental effects on children's health and well-being as well as their ability to

learn to their full potential, the researchers were prompted to carry out a study on causes of bullying with the aim of raising awareness in the school community of ways of overcoming it. Knowing causes is one effective way of tackling this problem.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

School bullying is a pervasive problem which many children face (Olweus and Limber, 2010; Ndebele and Msiza, 2014).The researchers' interactive experiences with primary pupils and teachers led to the conclusion that bullying in schools is escalating in recent years. In the context of Zimbabwe, media and police reports are a testimony that bullying is increasing at an alarming rate. Many learners in this area are forced to encounter the challenge of being bullied hence many cases of bullying are being reported in schools. It is the focus of this study to investigate the causes of bullying in Khami district, so as to assist school administrators to come up with policies for managing bullying so that schools become learner friendly for effective learning to take place.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The study provides greater insight to the school administrators and teachers on the factors that contribute to bullying thus helping them to manage discipline from an informed position. It would sensitise teachers on the existence of school bullying thus provide the appropriate learning environment and be sensitive to the learning needs of children to make learning a meaningful and gainful experience for all school children. For the benefit of parents, the study would enlighten them on the issue of bullying thus assist them to be on guard against it. The study will also enlighten learners on the dangers inherent in bully behaviour and also to help them acquire skills in interpersonal relationships especially on ways of handling bullying.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

 i) What are the factors that lead to school bullying among learners?

ii) What recommendations can be made to deal with bullying in schools?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was informed by Bronfenbrenner`s ecological systems theory. The ecological model states that the environment in which the child is brought up is of significant value because it contributes largely to the way a child behaves at school, Bronfenbrenner 1979 (cited in Olweus, 2010). His model has five concentric circles which are the microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystem and chronosystem as illustrated in Figure 1.

Given that bullying is on the rise globally, it is of paramount importance to delve into the social contextual factors that may be promoting bullying tendencies amongst school. Hayes (2001) avers that the most central layer of Bronfenbrenner`s model is the microsystem, which is the child`s immediate environment. It includes all those settings in which a child has direct personal experience such as the family, school, church and peers. Mwamwenda (2010) points out that the child learns and adopts behaviours that they are exposed to within the microsystem especially because they have a direct influence on them. For example, if a child is nurtured in a home where domestic violence is the order of the day, the child is most likely to imitate the behaviour which may translate to school bullying.

The second layer of the ecological model is the mesosystem. According to Santrock (2004), this system is concerned with the relationship between the microsystems. It primarily involves the connections between the child`s microsystems. For example, the home and the

school have to establish a positive relationship to promote the development of a morally upright member of society in a child. However, if the school and the home impart to the child conflicting lessons, the child is bound to get confused and in the process may lose the right path and develop undesirable behaviours which may give rise to school bullying.
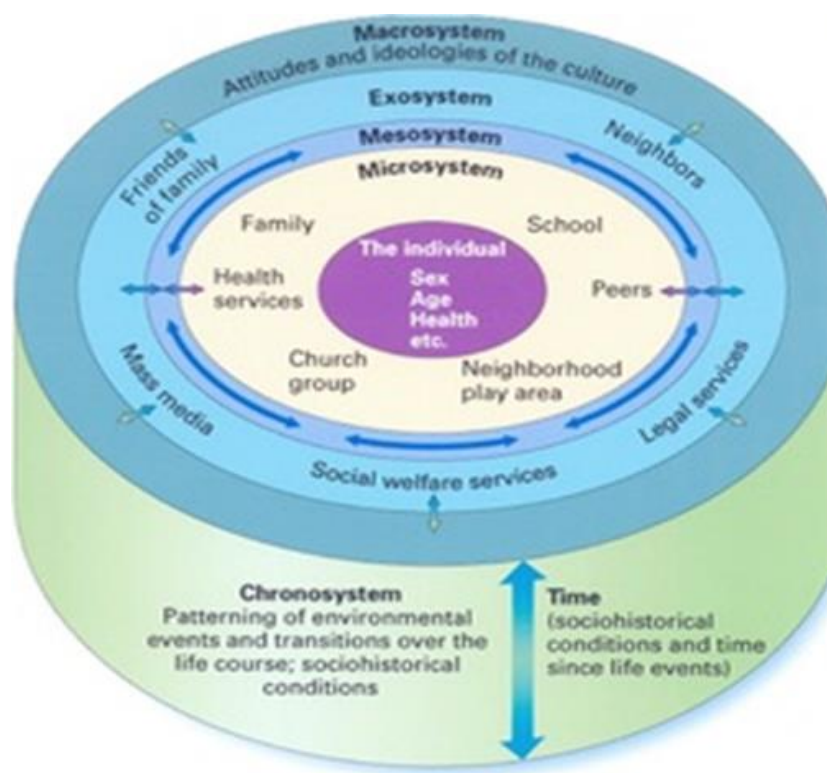

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory model
Adapted from Berk (2006)

The third layer is referred to as the exosystem. Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2010) aver that the exosystem is made up of the community at large including the neighbourhood, the social networks, work-related structures and government agencies. The exosystem involves experiences in a social setting in which the child is a passive participant yet is affected. For example, the parents` friends, parents` workplace, school board among others. A child who grows up in a home that lacks stability and security may cry out for attention the wrong way. He or she may take out his frustrations by meting out violence on other children at school.

The fourth layer of Bronfenbrenner`s theory is the macrosystem. Borich and Tombari (2003) assert the macrosystem contains the overarching values, ideology, laws and world view of a particular society. It includes the general beliefs and values that make up the principles that regulate everybody`s behaviour. Although the institutions of the macrosystem may seem far removed from the child`s development, they play a significant role. Berk (2006), reports that the values, norms and beliefs of the wider society, have a strong influence on shaping the behaviour and ultimately the personality of children. Thus, if a child is brought up in a culture that condones violence as a way of maintaining discipline, then the child sees no fault in exerting the same aggression towards peers at school. Unconsciously, the child perpetuates school bullying.

Finally, Sprinthall, Sprinthall and Oja (2006), state that the last layer of the onion theory is the chronosystem which involves the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course as well as the socio-historic events. For example, the death or the divorce of

parents may stimulate feelings of helplessness in children. Children with anger issues are likely to engage in bully behaviour to compensate for their feelings of fury. The five systems of the ecological model outlined above indicate that the child does not develop in a vacuum, but is influenced by various factors in the immediate environment, society and culture as a whole. The theory is quite useful in explaining and understanding how children develop bullying tendencies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section presents the research methodology of the study.

Research Approach

This study used the qualitative research paradigm. The qualitative approach was adopted in this study because it allowed the researchers to gain an understanding of social phenomenon from multiple perspectives in their natural settings (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010:315) hence furthered the understanding of the phenomenon of bullying.

Research Design

The case study design was employed in carrying out the research. Shuttleworth (2014) points out that case studies are not time consuming since a small sample that can generate meaningful results is studied. The researchers used the case study design because it emphasizes a detailed contextual analysis of a phenomena hence excels at bringing one to an understanding of a complex issue like bullying. The case study was of Khami district primary schools.

Population and Sampling

Cresswell (2006) defines population as a well-defined collection of individuals or objects known to have similar characteristics. In this case, the population comprised primary school learners, teachers and parents in Bulawayo. Purposive sampling was used. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) and Benard (2002), concur that the strength of purposive sampling lies in its intentional bias as the researcher can purposefully select information rich informants. In this case, the sample consisted of fifteen primary school learners from grades five to seven, thirty teachers and selected from the three target schools in Khami District, Bulawayo. The learners comprised children who had been involved in bullying incidences either as bullies, victims or bystanders and this facilitated the generation and collection of relevant and meaningful information. This enhanced the research`s ability to produce a more valid and reliable outcome.

Research Instruments

Cresswell (2006) states that research instruments are measurement tools designed to obtain data on a topic of interest in a study. These include questionnaires, interviews, observation and reading (Annum, 2015). In the current study, the researchers employed interviews and questionnaires to collect data on bullying.

The researchers used individual interviews to collect data from learners. De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, and Delport, (2009) aver that interviews are preferred in most qualitative researches because the researcher is able to probe further, follow up, clarify issues and ask for elaborations from the interviewee. Questionnaires were administered to teachers because they are convenient as they are not time consuming. They also usually allow for anonymity of the respondents which may give rise to honest answers which may improve the validity and reliability of the research results (Kothari, 2012).

Pilot Study

Scade (2015) avers that a pilot study refers to a small scale study conducted prior to the main research study. In the current research, a pilot study was conducted in a school where the main research was not intended to be done. One school in Khami district was selected for the study. The pilot study assisted the researchers to ascertain the appropriateness of the research instruments. After collecting the data, the researchers modified the instruments where there was need.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection is a strategy of systematically searching for and collecting data to increase one`s understanding of a phenomenon, (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). First and foremost, the researchers sought permission to carry out the study from the Provincial Education Director of Bulawayo in Khami District which is under his jurisdiction. Permission to carry out the research was also sought from the respective Heads of the three target schools through meetings. Interviews with learners were done in a free classroom that was offered at the request of the researchers. An interview guide with semi-structured questions was employed to gather information on bullying from the learners. Questionnaires were administered to teachers with the aid of the respective schools` staff members.

Ethical Considerations

Magwa and Magwa (2015:104) aver that ethics are a set of rules or standards governing the conduct of researchers carrying out investigations the researchers in this study considered some ethical considerations during the empirical study. With insight from Denscombe (2002) informed consent was sought from participants. The researchers explained in brief the purpose of the study to the participants. They also clearly indicated to them that they were free to withdraw if they were unwilling. Another practical component of research ethics is the principle of confidentiality which also includes anonymity (Matlala, Nolte, and Temane, 2014). In any research, participants can only be willing to divulge accurate data, especially in cases where sensitive topics like bullying are studied, if the researcher displays beyond reasonable doubt that the information gathered shall be treated with a high degree of confidentiality. The researchers informed the participants that all their responses would be kept strictly confidential and were only going to be used for research purposes only.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, various factors contributing to bullying behaviour were established and these are presented and discussed below.

Personal Characteristics

From both the interviews and questionnaires it emerged that bullying perpetration is associated with certain personal characteristics like endorsement of masculine traits, and inferiority complex. Of the 15 learners, 6 constituting 40 % stated that they were bullied because their predators used their physical strength. One girl child was quoted saying:

> *Big boys especially Grade 7 boys beat up and harass the little ones. This happens a lot during break time. One day one boy slapped me across the face merely because I was just looking at him.*

In line with the above findings Ball, Arseneault, Taylor, Maughan, Caspi, and Moffitt (2008) opine that abuse of physical strength, and antisocial personality traits accounts to bullying behaviour. This line of thought is shared by Harris and Petrie (2003) who posit that some children are bullied because they appear weak in terms of stature. The literature findings of

the National Bullying Prevention Center, USA (2011) support the above view by asserting that bullies target those who are vulnerable and appear weak.

It was also pointed out that gender is a factor that relates to bullying interaction. The study revealed that boys are more likely to experience physical bullying like being hit whereas girls are likely to be targets of indirect forms of bullying like social exclusion. Similarly, Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim and Sadek, (2010) are of the view that while both boys and girls are involved in bullying perpetration boys are involved at greater rates. With boys physical strength compared to age peers seems to be a characteristic associated with bullying although some strong physically adept boys never bully (*http://www.lfcc.on.ca/bully.htm*).

The research findings also indicated that bullying occurs as a result of inferiority complex. It was observed that some children are bullied because of their outstanding academic performance. Academically weak children were said to revert to bully behaviour in order to attract the attention of the teacher and peers or to simply gain popularity. One participant said:

> *I know I am bullied because I do well at school. Those who do not excel are just jealous of me. In fact I think they also dislike me because I am a prefect. I hate it when I am called names like 'Headmaster'. I just ignore even if it hurts me.*

This view is also supported by the literature findings of Ayres and Hedeen (2003) who point out that peer victimisation is rife among low achieving students. They suffer from an inferiority complex then met out violence on others to release their frustrations. Sanders and Phye (2004) acknowledge that backward learners are driven by frustration caused by poor academic performance to bully other children. The findings of Philip (2009) also confirm that some children are targeted by bullies because of their academic excellence. These findings show that academic performance can be used as a basis to bully or be bullied. This implies that some learners who are backward performers fail to accept that they are academically handicapped, thus, take out their anger on the high academic achievers.

Poor School Climate

The study findings revealed that a number of school factors contribute to bully behaviour. Information collected from participants established that bullying in schools can be promoted by lack of rules aligned to bullying. Of the 45 participants, 28 (62.2%) acknowledged that there were no rules that specifically targeted bullying in their schools. One interviewee had this to say:

> *When pupils go to play in the school playground there is little or no supervision. Also some teachers ignore bullying saying it is normal for pupils to engage in bully behaviour.*

In support of the above sentiments, Suckling and Temple (2000) agree that bullying in schools can be caused by poor leadership styles, management practices, lack of supervision and preventive measures. The above information correlates with the research findings of Olweus (2010) which indicate that lack of anti-bullying policies in schools promote bully behaviours amongst learners. Generally, any institution with no rules and strict supervision of learners by staff invites chaos; hence, the findings indicate that without specific rules against bullying, learners will continue to unleash violence on others.

The study also found out that the ban on corporal punishment motivated the rise of school bullying cases. Agere (2015) supports the above sentiments when he states that there was an outcry from the public following the abolition of corporal punishment as most people

observed that the ban would promote unruly behaviour among learners. Indeed, this has come to pass since children nowadays perpetuate peer violence without fear of severe punishment.

Exposure to Media Violence

Through data collected from both interviews and questionnaires, it emerged that some children bully others due to the influence of the media such as some television programmes like wrestling, and some video games. It was said that watching violence in the media may interfere with a child`s psychological processes, hence, may lead to negative thoughts which may translate to bullying. One interviewee commended:

> *Some learners engage in physical bullying because they imitate the aggressive behaviour like "wrestling" which they will have watched on television.*

The relationship between viewing violent behaviour and acting aggressively was first suggested by Bandura (1961:1963) who found out that children who viewed a violent television programme evidenced more coercive behaviour than children who viewed a neutral video (Burkhart, 2012). Violent media whether shown on television, played on a video game, or read in a comic book provides opportunity for observational learning. When frustrated or in angry social situations, aggression scripts may be primed leading to the exhibition of bullying behaviours (Anderson and Bushman, 2002). Carroll (2014) also confirms that violent movies enhance aggression in young children. The above findings indicate that observing violent television models can encourage bullying among learners, Bandura (cited in Mwamwenda, 2010).

Aspects of Home Background

According to the study children from homes with harsh parenting style, and violence in family often have poor role models who display violent or inappropriate behaviour and when they come to school they model that behaviour. If a child is socialised within an environment that upholds violence, then the child carries that violence to school. The results reveal that poor parenting can lead to the development of anti-social behaviours among learners. Implied by the above statements is that parents play a significant role in the creation of bullies through the parenting styles they employ to nurture their children.

One respondent stated:

> *If a child sees his father beating his mother, then he also does the same thing to others at school. Some parents do not care about how they behave in front of their children. They insult, curse each other and even exchange blows. What can children learn in such a home? They copy the behaviour and bully other children.*

 Chabalala (2011); Cook, et al, (2010) and Bowes, Arseneault, Maughan, Taylor, Caspi, and Moffitt (2009) support this observation stating that harsh parenting styles, poor parental supervision, negative family environment, parental conflict, domestic violence, and parental abuse promote bully tendencies among children usually leading to an insecure ambivalent attachment where children lack love. Such children may cry out for attention the wrong way and use bullying as compensatory behaviour. The literature findings of Sullivan (2000) also correlate with the findings of the current study. He asserts that strict parental control of children through harsh physical punishment may actually predispose a child to aggressive behaviour.

Peer Pressure

According to information gathered from the study, it was established that peer pressure is another factor that contributes to the development of bullies. Almost all participant 38 (84%)

were of the view that bullying behaviours almost always occur within the peer context. Youth spend much of their day interacting with peers. It was said that some children engage in bullying 'just to go with the flow'. Children especially at adolescence were said to have a desire to belong to a group. They will do anything so that they can be accepted by their peers. In this way, bullying is perpetuated in schools

This observation is in line with the findings of Philip (2009) who posits that peer pressure plays a key role in promoting anti-social behaviour. Affiliation with aggressive peers is also associated with greater bullying perpetration (Pepler, 2010).The above information clearly shows that some children bully to please their friends or to show allegiance to a group.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study indeed reveal that bullying which manifests itself as beatings, name calling, and exclusion is attributed to a number of factors. Children who are impulsive in temperament are more inclined to develop into bullies. It also emerged from the study that another cause of bully behaviour is an inferiority complex induced by academic backwardness, peer aggression and lack of strict school rules against bullying. Discord in the family characterized by neglect, hostility, and authoritarian parenting was also found to lead to bully behaviour. Pupils can copy parents' aggressive behaviour. Other factors that promote bullying as established by the study include imitating violent models on television shows like wrestling, and peer pressure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the findings of the research study, the researchers made the following recommendations:

1. Without a clear understanding of the different factors contributing to bullying, attempts at measuring its prevalence and impact will remain disjointed. The development of a comprehensive agreed definition of bullying is an essential step.

2. Schools should implement whole school anti-bullying policies in consultation with parents and learners as effective measures of eradicating bullying. The school should develop and review a Code of Conduct which addresses bullying.

3. Workshops on bullying to be held for parents, teachers, learners and other stakeholders.

4. Issues of bullying to be discussed at parents` meetings so that parents are well informed on how to support their children in the event that they become victims or perpetrators.

5. Counselors should provide children with the opportunity to develop good interpersonal skills to avoid violence in schools.

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