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School Bullying: Picture Story Elicitation of Bully and Victim/Target Experiences in a South African Primary School

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Bullying starts in early childhood and continues into adulthood and beyond, leaving emotional scars. Bullying is currently rampant worldwide, including repeated reporting of violence and victimisation in South African (SA) schools. A qualitative research approach was used employing a case study design for this study. The sample comprises seven Grade 4 learners (mixed male, female and race equally chosen) from a public primary school and one white female homeschooler in the town, eMalahaleni, Mpumalanga Province. The two Grade 4 teachers selected the participant learners according to criteria to identify victims/targets and bullies. The main data collection tool is picture story elicitation images for learners, complemented by teacher and parent semi-structured questionnaires. Thematic data analysis was employed, resulting in three themes – learner bullying experiences; teachers' and parents' awareness of causes, and outcomes of bullying experiences; and learners', teachers' and parents' solutions/interventions to prevent/ minimize/stop bullying at school as it manifests in the micro and meso system of Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic theory that forms the bedrock of this study. As a recommendation (one joining many existing anti-bullying programmes), the authors offer a value-driven bullying armor defence mechanism adapted for primary school learners, from a neighbouring secondary school's existing and effective anti-bullying policy (with their permission).

Introduction

Bullying in schools is a universal problem and happens in most schools, and parents and teachers may not be aware of the prevalence of bullying (Shams, Garmaroudi, Nedjat & Yekninejad (2018: 7046). As Ye, Liu, Han, Ferdinando, Seppänen and Alasaarela (2021:1) state, "campus violence .... is the most harmful type of school bullying events". Reddy (2025: 22) postulates that school bullying is a "common and long-standing problem" and that the advancement of technology enables the bully to make use of cyberbullying. A space is created for children to be victimised, harassed and cyberbullied which is on the increase. These harmful effects of which online harassment was found to have "the most severe impact" and the safety

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aspects online, are concerning for parents, teachers and those making policies (O'Neill & Dinh, 2015: 384).

Groman (2019:12) was under the impression that "...bullying was extremely subtle and, I thought, 'normal behavior' for preteens. This belief that bullying is 'normal behavior' is, as I found out, one of the most dangerous myths about bullying." When bullying behaviours are accepted as normal and where they are rejected as not existing or are disregarded, then it is likely that bullying behaviours are unchallenged and are not addressed (Ronksley-Pavia, Grootenboer & Pendergast, 2019: 19). School bullying is regarded as behaviours and even words that are aggressive in order to intentionally hurt the victim, usually by a stronger or an older person towards a weaker/younger person. The result is that the victims suffer from depression, school dropouts and suicide (Ye, Liu, Han, Ferdinando, Seppänen and Alasaarela,2021:1).

Theodorou (2021: 69) states that in many countries action was only taken after children died as a result of bullying, for example, murder and suicide. It is instances such as these that "capture the public's attention and create media frenzies", resulting in communities caring for the victims and engaging in political actions to address the underlying problems of such behaviours (Dowd, 2015: 133).

Little research has been conducted regarding issues such as differing worldviews, diversity and religious affiliation related to bullying. Hence these researchers call for research "towards practices that help to build school cultures in which all students feel safe and welcome and know that their cultural and religious identities are valued" (Schihalejev, Kuusisto, Vikdahl & Kallioniemi, 2020: 3381). Lupindo, Lorenz, French and Salkkovskis (2025: 1) found that in African countries there are high levels of violence in schools and communities, described as high-risk contexts that have emerging economies and economic challenges. These countries are in need of violence prevention measures and interventions in order to prevent long-term damage on psychological, social, behavioural and academic functioning, as well as mental health.

Within the South African context there is a relationship between "childhood adversity, bullying, peer pressure, self-esteem, and mental health" in adolescents within high schools. Findings show that childhood adversity and bullying have a huge impact on adolescents' mental health and that peer pressure exacerbates how bullying and adversity are affected. High self-esteem is a way to mitigate the negative influences of bullying (Ajele, Ramadie, Idemudia & Ugwu, 2024: 634). Particularly bad incidents in the latter part of 2025 in schools have emphasised the urgency to conduct research on this compelling scourge infecting the South African youth and society as a whole. Ongoing bullying upheavals in higher education institutions and schools in South Africa are worrying to academics and their authorities. Violence is increasing alarmingly – physically, verbally, psychologically, sexually and socioeconomically. The seriousness includes killings of learners and teachers daily and government is not doing much to address the problem (Sibanda, 2024: 23).

This article is an effort to investigate the ongoing problem and to call on the authorities to take drastic measures to eradicate, or at least minimize such incidents in the future. The research questions guiding the research are as follows: *1. What bullying experiences do SA primary school learners have? 2. What is the level of awareness of parents' and teachers' regarding causes, experiences and outcomes of bullying activities unique to SA primary school learners? 3.What measures can be put in place in SA primary schools to manage, minimize and abolish*

bullying?

Bullying and its related aspects followed by the underpinning theoretical framework; the methodology, major findings, and their implications, limitations and recommendations are discussed.

Bullying

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2024) has put a definition in place which we adopt as fitting for this study:

School bullying is a damaging social process that is characterized by an imbalance of power driven by social (societal) and institutional norms. It is often repeated and manifests as unwanted interpersonal behaviour among students or school personnel that causes physical, social, and emotional harm to the targeted individuals or groups, and the wider school community.

The leading causes of school bullying are individual risk factors that include "gender, academic performance, narcissism and popularity, and physical characteristic", whereas environmental factors include the school climate and the family relationships since they are negative environments that impact the child's behaviour negatively (Wang, 2023: 3). Contextual situations, such as moving from school to school, interfere and disrupt the child's interpersonal relationships and friendships, other people's views, rejections and labelling, which creates a school life that perpetuates and reinforces a child's bullying behaviour and has a trajectory of persistent bullying. Thus, interventions fail to meet their primary aim to influence their bullying trajectory (Green, Price & Spears, 2024: 242). Bystanders can include peers, fellow learners, friends, people they know, adults, teachers, other school staff and parents. Bystanders may interfere in order to stop the bullying, but this is unlikely as they choose to participate in other activities or be passive (Pfetsch, 2024: 101, 103).

Sidera, Serrat, Brugués and Rostan (2023: 237) states that more than 85% of primary school bullies were also bullied at some time, hence interventions should also keep in mind that bullies may also have been victims. Yilmaz and Günes (2025: 684-685) found that peer bullying in primary schools took place in the form of physical bullying (aggression), verbal bullying and emotional bullying. The coping strategies included asking teachers to help or resorting to retaliative behaviour. Cyberbullying is a reality, however, not much research is done in the primary school context and does not make a significant contribution in this study.

Morals values, spirituality and religion

Falla, Ortega-Ruiz, Runions and Romera (2022: 397) emphasise the important role that morals and ethics play regarding peers' relationships and the cycle of violence. Darwin (2024: 211) found that there is a discrepancy between moral values that are taught in schools and the daily behaviours of the learners. The barriers that cause the discrepancy include moral values that are inconsistently applied, the influences of social media, lack of family involvement and overemphasising "formal religious practices without the internalization of moral values."

By adopting a religious worldview, youth are able to have hope, to be comforted and to find strength where they are faced with different situations that impact their well-being. Accepting a religious worldview is declining, particularly among youth who have experienced

"worldview-related bullying and exclusion" (Rinne, Räihä, Kuusisto & Kallioniemi, 2024: 124, 144). In Kosarkova's and Roubalova's (2023: 24) study, it was found that meaning in life is "associated with religious belief, higher levels of spirituality, a strong connection between religion, religious affiliation, and attendance". Adolescents with higher levels of spirituality are less inclined to bully others, thus strategies are needed to promote the development of spiritual well-being (Dutkova, Holubachikova, Kravcova, et al. 2017:2219).

Anti-bullying interventions

Hensums, De Mooij & Kuijper (2022: 1435, 1443-1444) postulate that school-based anti-bullying interventions are effective, particularly for young children who have been badly victimised, but less effective for learners over 12 years. These authors suggest a multi-tier approach in order to meet the needs of the whole school population's sub-groups, as a "one size fits all" approach will not suffice. It is necessary that the victim and bullies' experiences be acknowledged and subsequently addressed by "establishing a culture of empathy, respect, and kindness" so that all learners are accommodated (Yende, 2025: 127). It is thus necessary that anti-bullying policies be reviewed on a regular basis in order to work on those areas that need to be developed, for example, what staff responsibilities are regarding how to help bullies, how to change their bullying behaviour and advise parents regarding their child's bullying behaviour (Kidwai & Smith, 2024). In order to resist violence in the youth, "community wide" committees should be put in place by all stakeholders such as parents, religious and political leaders, who evaluate their work regularly (Dowd, 2015: 141-147). Darwin (2024: 211) proposes a collaborative approach to address school bullying where the school, family and the community are involved and moral education is more practically applied in the daily lives of learners. This can affect spiritual growth, empathy and respecting differences in an effort to prevent school bullying.

In the Basic Education Laws Amendment Act (Bela Bill), home schooling is an option for parents. However, they need to abide by the provisions as listed in this Bill, for example, assessors need to determine whether the environment is conducive to learning, and the chosen curriculum must align with the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) curriculum. Basic Education Laws Amendment Act 32 of 2024, pg. 22 (Amendment of section 9 of Act 84 of 1996, as amended by section 7 of Act 48 of 1999, section 2 of Act 24 of 2005 and section 7 of Act 15 of 2011), states: "(1) The *governing body* may, on reasonable grounds and as a precautionary measure, suspend a *learner* who is **[suspected]** accused of serious misconduct from attending *school,* but may only enforce such suspension **[only after the *learner* has been granted a reasonable opportunity to make representations to it in relation so such suspension]** in the following manner: (iii) "repeated offences related to bullying, or the imminent threat to commit such an act; …"

- **Amendment of section 10 of Act 84 of 1996 10.** " **[No]** Corporal punishment is abolished and no person may **[administer]** inflict or impose corporal punishment **[at a *school*]** to a *learner* at a *school,* during a *school activity,* or in a hostel accommodating *learners* of a *school.*

Lumadi (2024: 48) found that corporal punishment is still being practiced, despite it being banned in South African schools according to law.

Theoretical framework

The theory we deemed most suitable for this research is Bonfenbrenner's (1979: 3,6) Bio-ecological theory which entails the interaction between the developing person and the

environment; how "a person perceives and deals with his environment: *Development-in-context"* (ibid. 12), thus enabling us to gain a telescopic view of the bullying phenomenon. Bronfenbrenner (1976: 7) explains that where there are interrelations in a child's direct setting, it is the *microsystem*. However, interconnectedness applies in the setting as well as between settings, where the child is either in the setting or not. The former he calls the *mesosystems* and the latter, the *exosystems*. The last system in the interconnected system he calls the *macrosystem,* which is the "manifestation of overarching patterns of ideology and organization of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture" (ibid.8). Later he added the *chronosystem* where "the influence on the person's development of changes (and continuities) over time in the environments in which the person is living" can be examined (Bronfenbrenner, 1986: 724).

In Swearer and Espelage's (2010: 2) "expanded social-ecological model framework of bullying among youth…". There is a "dynamic interplay between individuals and their social contexts", namely culture, community, school, peers, family, bully, bully-victim, victim, and bystander (Patel & Quan-Haase, 2024: 5510). A digital context is added to Bronfenbrenner's other systems, each owning their own "digital-specific factors". This approach enables us to create and implement "effective and age-appropriate cyberbullying prevention and intervention approaches" (Patel & Quan-Haase, 2024: 5521). Since "continuities of bullying over time" exist, it calls for all community members to implement preventative measures in the perpetuation of the bully's "cruel, antisocial behaviour from childhood through adolescence into adulthood" (Cowie & Colliety, 2015: 32). There are also factors that need to be considered that are outside the school environment when considering improving the school such as "violence, unemployment, social exclusion, poverty, etc." that have an impact on the teachers' work. This implies that where there are high social inequalities, violent bullying in the school is likely to take place that calls for actions to take place to improve the school life of the learners (Theodorou, 2021: 77).

Research methodology

For the purpose of this study and with the research questions in mind, the authors deemed a qualitative research approach and case study design to be the most appropriate as it takes place in a natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018: 209). To ensure credibility of our data, that is, to prove how accurate the data is we used triangulation to add "rigor, richness and depth" (Sena, 2023: 96). We used a number of sources such as Bronfenbrenners' theory, methods, literature, reported researched studies (reference section) to support our findings, and different data collection tools (Rule & John, 2011: 108-109). We endeavored to ensure dependability (reliability) using codes grouped into categories and labelled during analysis and confirmability (objectivity) by not missing data that are not applicable to our interpretations (ibid. 94). Reader-determined transferability is applicable as the researcher understands "bullying" in this context the best (ibid. 105).

Sampling

The purposeful sampling approach was used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018: 210). The liaison teacher in this research was the School-based Support Team (SST) coordinator who facilitated the selection of the participant teachers and learners and handed out and collected permission letters and questionnaires. She liaised with the two Grade 4 teachers who selected eight Grade 4 participants (race, sex and same age cohort were dependent on the selection criteria [Table 1 hereunder]. They were able to identify 3 bullies and 4 victims (confirmed by

their observations) that "represented as a microcosm of the wider context"; that is, the selected school (Rule & John, 2011: 13, 23, 40). One homeschooler was selected. Pseudonyms were allocated to the eight participants namely: A1 – A8.

Table 1: Example of the list of selection criteria of bullies/victims and selected participants.

BULLY	VICTIM
• Teasing and name calling and physical bullying, pushing, pinching, slapping; relational and social aggression or exclusion (non-verbally) on a continued basis. • Behavior is aggressive imbalance of power and happens more than once. *Participants (race, sex, LoLT, home language,* socio-economic status – low (L), medium (M), high (H) A1 – black, boy, English, African language, L A8 - white, girl, English, English, L	• Singled out because of specific physical difference or not conforming behavior and stand out e.g. friendless. poor academics, not good at sport. • The victim can be a friend/peer/classmate. *Participants (race, sex, LoLT, home language,* socio-economic status – low (L), medium (M), high (H) A4 – black, girl, English, African language, M A7 – white, boy, English, English, M

Data collection tools

As the main data collection tool, namely picture story elicitation, consisted of five drawings (in sequence – figure 1) that were presented to the respondents on an individual basis using prompts and probing questions in order to elicit picture stories. The respondents' picture elicited stories were recorded and transcribed.



Figure 1: Male and female picture story elicitation (OpenAI, 2025) OpenAI's ChatGPT 5.2 was used to generate the illustrative picture story. In the pictures, A is the bully and B with the glasses, is the victim.

The aim was for the victims/bullies to identify themselves as victims/bullies, how it started and how it is sustained (Green, Price & Spears, 2024: 228). Each respondent's story is his/her own interpretation of the picture story (Patton, 2002:196). The parents of the respondents and the two Grade 4 teachers completed a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of eight questions relating to bullying (bully/victim). In this study we focused on Bronfenbrenner's micro- and meso systems where bullying was manifesting, that is in the school.

Context of the research

The research was conducted in an urban public school in Mpumalanga where the learners were multiracial, primarily from a Christian-based background, and the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is English/Afrikaans depending on the learner's preference. The total number of learners in the school is 1 335. There are 6 Grade 4 classes, of which 4 classes offer English as the LoLT and comprise 90% of the Grade 4 learners (120) in the school, and 2

classes where Afrikaans is the LoLT. The learner-to-teacher ratio is 30:1. The socio-economic status of the public-school learner population is low to medium.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis and techniques were used (Sena, 2023:88). During data analysis, the researchers gave meaning to the transcripts of learners' recorded stories, and the parents' and teachers' questionnaires. Understanding the relationships between the concepts and the themes that were submerged in the theoretical framework as well as the research questions' answers, were needed (Sena, 2023, 86).

Colour coding was done manually to arrive at categories in order to identify the emerging themes (Rule & John, 2011: 77). By using an interpretivist tradition within the case study, we connected the categories of the data with the research questions (Sena, 2023: 89). Key aspects were identified that aligned with the picture sequence. Subsequently, a pattern emerged as follows:

A1 relates his story beginning with the bullying scene where the bully is angry while bullying the target who is scared, while there are bystanders watching. A1 explains A hates B because he is good at things such as basketball, math and fun calculating.
1 = feelings, actions, words, responses of both A and B
2 = bystanders
3 = reasons for bullying
4 = help - teacher
5 = result -apologise- all friends
6 = resolution

Table 2: Example of thematic analysis of findings

Colour coding ®	Categories®	Themes	Research question
Data parts A. Learners' picture elicitation re victim experiences: Pictures 1-5 (initiation and progression of bullying activity to resolving the problem – in chronological order). Learners A1-A8.	*A*. A holistic picture of learner participants being a bullying victim.	*Theme 1:* Learner victim experiences	*1. What bullying experiences do SA primary school learners have?*

Participants' responses depended on "which subject position each participant appears to narrate from" that resulted in identifying themselves as a bully/victim (Butler, Finniear, Doherty & Hill, 2014: 160).

Reporting the results (findings)

The data gathered proved to be sufficient in terms of quality as well as quantity to arrive (after having read them numerous times in order to become fully acquainted with the contents) at answering the research questions and presenting the case as having "depth, holistic and lively". In this case Bronfenbrenner's meso system and the context, is the school. By using the thematic structure the researchers organised the themes and used "cross-case similarities and differences" in order to shed light on the bully phenomenon holistically. The individual stories are available as appendices (Rule & John, 2011: 72-73, 79, 117-120). Each of the eight

participants' transcribed responses were collated into a descriptive, meaningful reflection of their understanding of bullying experiences in their school and how they were able to relate their own bullying experiences as evidenced by selected examples and appropriate substantiating quotes.
The findings are presented under each identified theme and accompanying research question.

Theme 1: Learner victim bullying experiences (picture story elicitation)

Research question 1: *What bullying experiences do SA primary school learners have?*
In the light of school bullying being a global phenomenon including, South Africa, the findings in this case study are in accordance with previous studies conducted and reflect and underscore the increased reported bullying incidences that are currently taking place in South African primary schools.

The bullying phenomenon research that was conducted in the selected school confirms that bullying is prevalent and representative in South African primary schools. The respondents could recognise the bully and victim by means of their physical appearances like the bully is big and has an aggressive stance and the victim is small, wears glasses and takes a submissive stance. Emotional language was also used to describe the bully's facial expression and body language portraying anger, hate, aggressiveness accompanied by verbal abuse, while the victim was described as experiencing fear, sadness, anxiety, timidity and scared facial expressions. The bystanders display mixed reactions such as smiling (delight), crying, pacifying, pity and ambivalence-just watching.
Examples of picture elicited stories are presented to illustrate their bullying experiences (being bullied or bullying):
-Example of social exclusion: -
A8 had similar experiences, *"for 3 years I was the only white one in the class, so I got very alone in that one, I was alone... they took me out of the team (hockey)..."*.
-Examples of physical and verbal abuse: -
A6 related his experiences of bullying in his home (microsystem) and at school (microsystem within the mesosystem). He has endured traumatic experiences such as the death of his father and being physically abused. Bullying and dysfunctions in the micro system, the home, can spill over to bullying in school as the bully has role models at his disposal and the emotions such as anger and scars lead to retaliative behaviour within the macro system, the school.
A5 says: *"So, I had to deal with it by myself, and I tried to remember the Bible because they would have nothing to say about that, because they all believe in the Bible ... [but] they don't really care..."*.
A4's statement, *"Sometimes I don't really want to go to school, because I feel like something bad is going to happen to me … they just shout at me"*
Participants' stories revealed similarities and differences in terms of specifics within the home and school context, that is, the micro and macro system. It appears, however, according to the elicited stories, that the main bullying behaviours were verbal and physical bullying and social exclusion within this age cohort and context.

Theme 2: Causes and outcomes of bullying experiences

Research question 2: *What are parents' and teachers' awareness of causes, experiences and outcomes of bullying activities unique to SA primary school learners?*

The parents' and the teachers' questionnaire responses indicated that they were not always aware of their children being victims of bullying or being a bully. Examples follow: A1's parents are adamant that he was never bullied nor bullied a learner at school... he has never been teased at school. However, according to A1's responses he hinges on the verge of being a bully and has been in trouble before. **A5's** (homeschooler) parents are aware of the bullying activities and have witnessed her being punched in the face.
Bully's reasons for bullying:

- The victims are good at sport and academics and model learners displaying good behaviour such as kindness, good manners and respectful, good relations with learners. They are the teachers' favourite that also arouses jealousy and a need for power, recognition, admiration, popularity, domination (bossy) and gaining friends.
- *"Some of the bullies try to defend themselves while others make the fight worse. This sometimes happens during break, after school and even during class and mostly boys."*
- The victim's physical differences, such as wearing glasses, ugly, fat.
- Circumstances such as not having what other learners have e.g. bicycles or the bully criticises the victim's appearance such as the clothes they are wearing.

These causes do not differ significantly to those reported in other research findings. The differences are circumstantial and bullies' and victims' home background, circumstances, emotional health; how conducive the school is to learning and teaching, support, the bullying policy; parental involvement all contribute and play a big role in learners resorting to bullying activities or being a target/victim.

Theme 3: Parents', learners' and teachers' interventions to prevent bullying at school

Research question *3: What measures can be put in place in SA primary schools to manage, minimize and abolish bullying?*

The research in this case reports that bullying activities are taking place in the selected school which is a concern for the learners, their parents and teachers and needs to be addressed.

Parents' contributions to address the bullying phenomenon include the following: some parents stand up for their bullied children and it is reported to the authorities, treated harshly and a zero tolerance policy is introduced, while other parents are satisfied with how the school handles the bullying; parents who are oblivious of the bullying taking place at the school said their child should report the matter to the teacher and the principal and speak up and be supported. The learner should listen to them and ensure that they are safe; parents, teachers and learners should be trained regarding how to address bullying by monitoring and intervening.

The *learners'* suggestions coincide with the parents' suggestions that have probably influenced their ideas as well as what is taught at school by their teachers. That is, to tell the teacher and parents who will address the matter; to ignore the bully and not to retaliate; to stand up for themselves and act respectfully; to tell the bully how they feel; to talk to the bully and try to

calm things down and say something nice and apologize; be helpful and kind; learners should be made aware of the negative effect it has on others. Tell the bully to stop and walk away.

One *teacher* refers to the school policy that says bullying should be reported timeously, investigated and intervention should take place where teachers, parents and learners should be involved. Learners are encouraged to speak up and be taught about respect and kindness towards others. The second teacher proposes that she should get the whole story from the victim as soon as possible, to contact the bully and victim's parents, and give the bully a demerit. Rules against bullying must be implemented, and bullies should be suspended for two days. Learners should be educated regarding bullying, what the anti-bullying policy says, and offer support where needed. The principal says, *"being a buddy, not a bully. Kindness matters."*

Bronfenbrenner's micro and macro systems

Interconnectedness forms the base of the Ecological Systems theory (Crawford, 2020: 4). It is exactly in the microsystems comprising peers, family, the community and schools where bullying takes place. Where these microsystem components interact, the mesosystem is in play, hence we can understand how the contexts can either exacerbate or buffer the learners' experiences of bullying (Espelage, 2014: 257). Where there are changes in the structure of the family, in the school and in the neighbourhood, as in the case of A6 and A8, it could result in the prevalence and the type of bullying that takes place (Espelage, 2014: 261).

Zaatari and Maalour (2022: 14) explain that where the school is on the microsystem level, the school climate is made up of a number of practices as well as interactions and plays a major role in a learner's sense of belonging to the school. A4 does not want to go to school which is a prime example of having the need of belonging. It is important to consider those aspects not only to do with learners who have direct involvement with bullying, but also aspects in the exo- and macrosystems. Besides being bullied in various direct ways such as name calling, there are also indirect ways of bullying such as not being invited to participate in an event, since peer belonging is important to the learner's well-being in their school. They may feel socially alienated and rejected, not connected and lose meaning (Strindberg, 2023: 875, 887).

It is important to note that spiritual factors do not feature in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory, however, inferences with regard to spirituality can be made in the model (Crawford, 2020: 3). For example, one who attends religious services, as in the case of A8, can include it in their microsystem and A5 who is immersed in a religiously orientated home. She was able to stand on her faith and Biblical knowledge and demonstrate the morals and values her parents taught her. Dowd (2015: 140) opines that it is necessary that the learners' spiritual lives must be included in the educational project, to be effective for the whole person to be nurtured and to build a democratic society. Morals and values need to be inculcated in the development of the child at a tender age, at pre-school level and continued in the formal teaching and learning environment where teachers have the opportunity to embed it in the curriculum.

Cyberbullying was never mentioned and the respondents associated the cellphone with videoing the bullying scene. Thus it is an indication that cyberbullying does not take place in the school phase of the selected school. Technology is used in Bronfenbrenner's microsystem to design and implement the planning of programmes and learning experiences that are meaningful for children (Hatzigianni, Stephenson, Harrison, Waniganayake, Li, Barblett,

Hadley, Andrews, Davis & Irvine, 2023: 14).

Where there are channels of communication for the public to learn from each other for common good, religious professionals will be more ready to work jointly with the public to address bullying. This can be done e.g. via newsletters and social networks, being cautious to use it as promotion or favoring one religion above another. Religious leaders are in a position to advocate spiritual, moral and social realities in a holistic and communal education for learners. Therefore they need to be involved in all levels of government and society in order to promote the laws and policies and programs that are in place to ensure the youth be protected against bullying. In order to resist violence in the youth, "community wide" committees should be put in place by all stakeholders e.g. parents, religious and political leaders that evaluate their work regularly. Religious communities are able to offer alternative spaces as opposed to schools and the cyber space where they can form new relationships and be in a safe environment where there are caring people (Dowd, 2015: 141-147).

Discussion

This study's goal was to gather individual primary school learners' bullying experiences in a South African primary school, by means of a picture story elicitation method. The envisaged outcomes were eight individual stories. Schihalejev, Kuusisto, Vikdahl and Kallioniemi (2020: 371) found that bullying in multicultural schools frequently relates to "visible external features" such as victim's physical appearance, what they wear, who their friends are, what language they speak among others. Learners who come from families that are religiously orientated (as in A5's situation) can also be victims. Important researcher observations were: A1, A2 and A7 focused more on the pictures and what they projected from their own frame of reference, exactly what the pictures emulated, mere descriptions of the figures, facial expressions, bystanders and what they were doing. All the participants identified with the victim possibly to evade the label of being a bully who is socially not acceptable. Most answers were stereotypical and short, lacking elaboration. On the other hand, A3, A4, A5, A6 and A8 had the need and spontaneity to use the picture stimuli to project their feelings and emotions, to express their morals and values (such as kindness, helpfulness) and to respond to probing questions more elaborately, for example, sharing their own home circumstances and experiences openly.

Parents' responses to questionnaire questions were an indication of how involved parents are in their children's schooling. Some parents were actively involved (sometimes to an extreme) and were aware of their children's bullying experiences and took action such as reporting the matter to the principal, while others were unaware and shrugged it off as part of childhood and did not take up the matter with the school. Thus social beliefs play an important role in preparing the context where bullying takes place and emphasizes the role that social beliefs play in the dynamics of bullying (Balanovic, Stuart and Jeffrey, 2016: 54).

In the case of A8, she elaborated on her home circumstances, indicating a dysfunctional family that was also evident in the parent's responses to the questionnaire questions. Although A8 engages in bullying behaviour with siblings at home, this is not the case at school. Pentima, Toni and Roazzi (2024: 1685) claim that where there is a "negative climate" in the context of the family, that is, where punishment, control and neglect is the educational style; poor empathic skills are promoted in their children, resulting in difficulty to regulate their emotions, especially negative ones. Supportive parents will enable them to recognize the needs of their children and their communication skills will enable them to monitor their children's behaviour

without having to use "excessively controlling attitudes", resulting in their children developing healthy moral growth (Toni and Roazzi, 2024: 1685). Harcourt, Jasperse and Green (2014: 386) identified a need for the school, community and family to drive initiatives that will raise bullying awareness by sensitizing the ones who are most influential in preventing bullying and understanding the negative effects it has on people and not to accept it as being a normal and acceptable part of children's lives.

Cowie and Colliety (2016: 24-25, 30) explain that people like parents, health professionals as well as teachers do not empathize with bullies naturally, see them in a negative way and criticize them in order to support and defend the victim/target. It is important to recognize and acknowledge that bullies have emotional difficulties, are vulnerable and identify with what experiences led them to engage in bullying behaviour. A6 for example empathizes with the bully, considering his own bullying experiences. Depending on the social context, like an authoritarian school, the bully may not even be aware of what their bullying effects are on their targets. Very often it can be a protective mechanism as a way to cope with their own bad experiences. Even though bullying behaviour is rewarded and the bully continues bullying, it does have bad outcomes in the long run for both the bully and the target. These factors need to be acknowledged and taken into consideration when interventions are developed. Wang (2023: 3) suggests that it is necessary to consider how bullies and normal children differ psychologically, and the impact and symptoms bullies experience after having bullied others.

Bystander behaviour plays an important role in bullying activities. The responses from the bystanders were varied. For example, A1 notes that the bystanders are "watching" while A2 says that the bully is laughing at the victim and the bystanders also laugh. Where social capital exists such as a friends' or teachers' support is present, as well as ethnic identity, religious orientation and future optimism, it results in increased prosocial bystander behaviour (Evans & Smokowski, 2015: 2289, 2304).

Axford, Farrington, Clarkson, Bjornstad, Wrigley and Hutchings (2015: 242, 246-247) state that where school-based bullying prevention programmes involve parents, it leads to parents who first tell the school that their child is subject to bullying, which enables the school to act appropriately and "to address bullying-related issues effectively at home". Parents need to be informed by way of newsletters and parent-teacher meetings, to educate and support them, to provide a definition for bullying, how the school handles it (school policy), and informs them of the progress.

In one case, the respondent indicated that she was afraid to go to school and did not feel safe as a result of her bullying experiences. Williams, Schneider, Wornell, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, (2018: 310) explain that school safety and avoiding school is associated with predictor variables such as "bullying victimization, student/teacher/parent/administration relations, rule clarity and consistency, school physical environment (negative and positive), and student's belongingness." Feeling safe increases when there are positive learner and teacher relations, where rules are consistent, where the school is clean and there is a feeling of belongingness. It is important to note that the staff have the opportunity to work with both learners' "academic and social-emotional learning." A roadmap needs to be provided for staff to help them intervene and make the necessary modifications that will have a positive impact on the learners' lives (ibid. 202: 245, 255).

Even though the main context of human development is the family, there are other settings

where development also takes place, however the settings are dependent on each other and in this case reference is made to the school and the family. The events that happen at home may affect the progress of the child at school or the other way round (Bronfenbrenner, 1986: 723) and this is evident in the elicited stories.

Overall the results show that there were similarities and differences in the participants' responses and in the bullying participants' stories. The respondents were able to compose their own tailored stories as they were afforded and encouraged to share their bullying experiences.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study was conducted through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's eco-systemic theory (micro and meso) since "From an ecological perspective it is evident bullying operates across multiple nested ecological levels from family microsystem to broader societal influences" (De Simone, Rollo & Rochira, 2025: 2290). The UNESCO (2024) bullying definition was chosen as the most appropriate, amongst others, in the understanding of what bullying entails. The main themes form a kaleidoscope of learner picture elicited stories about victim/bully regarding the challenges and damaging effects of primary school bullying in a South African primary school. The eight elicited stories evidenced similarities and differences that can be due to the mixed sample comprising girls, boys, race and different backgrounds. An exception was A5, a homeschooler who was the outsider in this study who, however, made a valuable contribution from that perspective. All the participants (including the parents) chose to identify as victims, with the exception of A8's parent who describes her daughter under the bully heading. By using this process the authors were able to answer the research questions as they accompanied each theme.

Keywords were repetitively used in the stories such as *mean, sad, kind, help, teacher, sorry, respect.* Verbal and physical abuse and social exclusion featured as the main bullying techniques, while cyberbullying was not mentioned by any of the participants. It is evident that the school is aware of bullying incidents and is attending to the scourge since the learners knew that they had to report incidents to a teacher/parent/principal and that the teacher immediately intervened in a non-disciplinary manner. We intentionally inserted a sign on the fifth and final picture: *Be a buddy not a bully* and also *Kindness matters.* The reason was to leave these as lasting words in the memory of learners and to internalise the concept as a compass when confronted with bullying activities. It becomes part of the ethos of the school as well as ambassadors and role models of the school. In most cases, an act of compassion was demonstrated as the participants expressed feelings of empathy, regret, apology and helpfulness not only from their own frame of reference, but also that of the bystanders. It has been found that adolescent bystander behaviour can either be in the form of helping the victims, just watching the scene, or they can join in with the antisocial behaviour.
The South African National School Safety Framework does not offer roles for teachers to reduce violence and to ensure safety and pedagogic measures and remedial action for the consequences of violence on teaching and learning (Hanaya, McDonald & Balie, 2020: 1, 13). Physical punishment, which causes pain, can lead to challenging behaviour as they copy and learn punishing behaviours in primary schools (Rubbi Nunan, 2025: 141, 152). Teachers are in a position to address bullying in the form of integrating good morals and values in various curriculums where the opportunity lends itself or is incidental. It is also important that a well informed policy, based on recent research outcomes and inputs from the local education district office officials and the neighbouring schools' principals, be put in place. In-service training for

teachers and informative evenings/ workshops and continuous communiques with parents are also called for.

A collaborative approach should be adopted where the principal, teachers, parents and other stakeholders are encouraged to communicate with neighbouring schools that are successful in curbing their learners' bullying activities. The authors approached a teacher in a neighbouring secondary school where their anti-bullying policy is effective. With her permission their policy was adapted and presented as a metaphor (Figure 3).

The victim/target coping armor against bullying

Bullying is depicted as a battlefield of physical and verbal abuse, social exclusion and more. The bully/ies, victims/targets and bystanders need to clothe and protect themselves in a practical way, with a value-driven armor. The particular parts of the armor, namely the belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet and sword, represent a defence mechanism and the victim/target is encouraged to put on the armor:



Figure 3: Weapons as part of your value-driven school's armor against bullying – the gladiator becomes the conqueror (OpenAI, 2024) Adapted from WA DE KLERK SCHOOL'S anti-bullying programme (with permission).

Activity: The learner is told to identify his/her bully at school/neighbourhood. They describe the bully and the activity/ies that took place and visualise the bully as a giant that needs to be conquered. With the use of clay, they build their bully (a small figure that eventually crumbles) and places it next to the depiction in figure 3 (in human size), displayed on cardboard. The learner describes his/her bully. Finally, the learner stands on the figure and calls on the armor. The value of this exercise is for the victim to experience their bully disintegrating and that they are still able to stand as they lean on their armor to help them change from a victim/target to a victor/conqueror.

Limitations

The intervention is only focused on the victim and leaves a gap regarding the bully who also needs intervention, support and counselling. Although spirituality and religiosity are important aspects that need to be acknowledged in the bullying phenomenon, where morals and values are pivotal in the anti-bullying campaign, they did not feature significantly in the findings. For future research, it would be interesting to see how learners from other religions (besides Christian faith) approach the bullying phenomenon, taking into account their beliefs and societal situations and how Bronfenbrenner's theory can be applied or an alternative theory may be needed. An interview instead of a questionnaire may have suited the parents better on such a sensitive topic. It is important to note that although teachers were given bully/target selection criteria, the findings proved some of the selected participants did not meet the criteria (based on their elicited story telling) which is an indication that the teachers are not accurate in the selection process and that future research requires better ways of selecting bullies and victims, which in this case was limited to 8 learner participants. For future research, there is an urgent need to find ways to implement anti-bullying programmes that will suit the educational system of a particular country with its particular bullying activities.

Declarations

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