

# Effects of Bullying on the Psychological Functioning of Victims

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## Abstract

The violation of learners in schools has gained substantial media attention across South Africa in the 20th century. The attitudes of learners have changed and the value attached to education diminished. There are increasing concerns within South Africa that schools are the sites of widespread violence. The aim of this paper was to explore the effects of bullying in schools on the psychological functioning of victims. The study was conducted in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. A qualitative approach and an exploratory research design were used in conducting this study. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 40 participants for the study, made up of 25 learners, 5 social workers, 5 educators, and 5 community members from schools mostly affected by school-based bullying. The data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with the participants and thereafter the data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that bullying within the school environment negatively affects the psychological functioning and academic progress of learners. Exposure to bullying impairs learners' emotions and cognition and it ultimately leads to increased levels of anxiety and depression. Hence, it was revealed that low self-esteem, thoughts of self-destruction and severe behavioural conditions are long-term effects that victims face. One conclusion drawn from this study is that victims of bullying often opt to stay absent from school because of fear. One pertinent recommendation made was to establish support groups for victims that will equip them with skills of empowerment.

**Keywords:** bullying; schools; exposure; psychological functioning; victims

## **Introduction**

Bullying can be described as intentionally harming an individual or group through physical confrontation or electronic intimidation (via social media) over a period, while the victims often cannot defend themselves (Jacobs 2013). Both physical violence and bullying in schools have a negative impact on learners as they cause disruption from their school or academic work, subsequently increasing the rates of dropouts and suicides in schools (Jacobs 2013). Suicide rates have increased over time in schools owing to the fact that victims of bullying and cyberbullying bear no physical scars, hence they pine away in silence, and ultimately the victimisation becomes overbearing and the only solution for them is to take their own lives (UNICEF 2011). The epidemic of bullying and gang-related violence in schools across the country is a major factor of distress to all the citizens of South Africa. There are regular television broadcasts on instances of violent attacks in schools, and articles on these violent attacks and the presence of weapons in schools appear daily in newspapers and on social media (UNICEF 2011).

The Sarah Baartman District is highly affected by violence with 2 in 10 learners having reported to be victimised in their respective schools. It is reported that the number of cases of suicides among learners rose by nine per cent in 2015 and continues to rise annually (Sarah Baartman District Municipality 2016). There are multiple victims of bullying in schools; such victims are psychologically abused through exposure to trauma, anxiety, rejection, distortion and many more factors, thus resulting in depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (Naarse 2015, 4).

According to the study conducted by Small (2015), victims of bullying are learners who are smaller in physique, and who are violated by muscularly built peers. Through investigating the phenomenon of the effects of bullying on the psychological functioning of learners in schools, possible measures to combat the phenomenon were identified which could assist schools in dealing with the issue of bullying. The research question was: How does bullying initiated by learners affect the psychological functioning of victims in the selected schools? The next section of this paper is the overview of the literature, theoretical framework followed by the research methodology. The findings are presented and discussed simultaneously followed by the recommendations and conclusion.

## **Overview of Literature and Problem Statement**

Burton (2008) explains that schools are described as institutions that aim to develop and reinforce social skills and empower people with knowledge that enables them to improve their lives and the lives of people around them. Though research and television broadcasts portray that regardless of widespread discourse, schools appear to be establishments of violence and victimisation (Jefthas and Artz 2010). It is quite apparent to South African inhabitants that violence and bullying are major apprehensions in secondary schools across the country. Another factor that became evident throughout

readings from Small (2015) was that learners are faced with different types of violence of which emotional victimisation or humiliation by cyberbullying via social media occurs more frequently than physical victimisation. The main types of emotional victimisation prevalent in schools are isolation, degradation, rejection, and public humiliation. Cyberbullying causes psychological distress in victims, as there are no bruises visible for them to show as evidence of violation, which impairs the psychological functioning of learners (Jacobs 2013).

Bullying is an authoritative term used in schools that contains spheres of harassment, provocation, victimisation, obnoxious terrorisations and extortion (Naarse 2015). Violation can occur inequitably in a number of scholastic situations, both among educators and learners and between learners and their peers. While a single episode of violation could occur, bullying often involves multiple undesirable, unreciprocated and imposed actions that may have a distressing result on the victim (Jacobs 2013). Both psychological oppression and emotional distress transpire when a learner feels isolated, helpless or anxious by threats of peers and educators in class. This kind of oppression can have enduring effects on the performance and willingness of a learner to keenly participate in the classroom (Tackman 2008). Tackman (2008) furthermore explains that subsequently it could result in a learner demonstrating confrontational and disruptive behaviour in the classroom. Physical violence and bullying in schools may overlap. While the acts and effects of physical violation are often easily recognised, cyberbullying occurs online, therefore it leaves no physical wounds or indication of violation (Jacobs 2013). Yet, it can have a devastating and enduring effect on a learner.

It is contended that while the existence of physical violence in schools has always been known, the presence of bullying in schools unfortunately is still underestimated and therefore receives less attention than it should (Burton and Leoschut 2013). According to Majied (2016), in instances of bullying, the consequence of being subjected to such abuse becomes the fundamental representative of character in the life of the victims as they feel worthless and tend to completely withdraw from society. As a result, victims of bullying do not develop into proficient adults as the abuse hampers them from reaching their complete potential. Subsequently, Aluede (2004) advises that learners should not be bullied because it demeans and dehumanises them, destroys their sense of self, causes them to not progress academically, demotivates them from learning, distorts their personality, causes isolation from peers, and confuses, disgraces, and terrifies them. Learners who have been victims of bullying display the following symptoms:

- excessive anxiety about academic performance;
- change from positive to negative self-perception;
- dread that educators could hurt them;
- excessive crying about scholastic activities;
- migraines;

- abdominal pains;
- decreased functioning in social situations outside class;
- nightmares or insomnia;
- school avoidance; and
- isolation or depression (Majied 2016, 268).

Victims of bullying may contravene themselves; this is revealed clearly in some persons with dissociative identity disorder, in which one personality denies the existence of others. This disorder often manifests in destructive behaviour directed against one's own body (including self-mutilation, burning, pain-inducing masturbation, and eating disorders like bulimia and anorexia). Furthermore, thrill-seeking behaviour including driving while heavily intoxicated or engaging in high-risk sexual behaviour such as unprotected sexual intercourse or sexual activity with strangers is displayed by victims of bullying to numb the pain of their experience (Aluede 2004).

The outcome of bullying learners in schools could lead to serious emotional and behavioural problems, including depression, absence of affection to a parent or guardian, low cognition resulting in poor academic achievement, and lack of social skills. In a study that examined children who have been exposed to bullying in their infancy and later throughout preschool, it was found that these children were constantly irritated, disobliging and unattached to their principal provider. The children involved in the study furthermore, fell short of inventiveness, determination and eagerness to perform (Tackman 2008). In an article published in the Sunday Times in 2015 on emotional victimisation, Naarse (2015, 4) stated as follows:

A nineteen-year-old learner humiliated in public, shunned by friends and hounded by the media, the girl at the centre of the so-called Jules High sex video took her life last year.

The above-mentioned learner was involved in a sex scandal two years before her suicide due to cyberbullying via social media (Facebook videos). The humiliation led her to a decision of taking an overdose of her mother's medication for high blood pressure (Naarse 2015). There are six main types of bullying, namely physical, verbal, sexual, prejudicial, relational aggression and cyberbullying. Most forms of bullying are dangerous as they consist of physical violation, which leaves scarring. By contrast, relational aggression or emotional violation and cyberbullying leave no scars, hence the victims suffer in silence, which not only affects their psychological functioning but their health as well. According to Laas and Boezaart (2014) there are multiple pieces of legislation (the Children's Act, 2005 (Act No. 38 of 2005), the Child Justice Act, 2008 (Act No. 75 of 2008) and the South African Schools Act, 1996 (Act No. 84 of 1996)) that aim at protecting children from bullying. The main act is the Protection from Harassment Act, 2011 (Act No. 17 of 2011). This act clearly states that any scholar who

causes distress to a fellow learner should be disciplined and, depending on the severity of distress caused, expelled.

From the television broadcasts on the high rates of suicide in schools resulting from bullying, it is clear that disciplinary measures are not implemented in all schools across the country (Laas and Boezaart 2014). Therefore, some schools have sought help from social workers (Social Development and Child Welfare) who are helpful in assisting learners overwhelmed by their circumstances at school. Bullying is a major concern throughout South Africa and globally. There are frequent televised broadcasts on the occurrence of violence in schools and newspaper articles on bullying and cyberbullying occurring among peers in schools. Cyberbullying creates a gateway to mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, which at times lead to suicide due to online public humiliation. Hence, an investigation on the effects of bullying on victims in schools became a topic of interest to research.

The goal of this study was to investigate the effects of bullying on the psychological functioning of victims at schools in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The research questions that assisted in achieving this goal were: “How does bullying affect the academic progress of victims in schools in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality?” and “Which factors can be associated with bullying?” Although bullying is a common form of violence in schools, little research has been done to ascertain the effects of bullying on the psychological functioning of victims in South Africa. This study will contribute to the literature in this area and assist school authorities and other stakeholders on mitigating the effects of and/or preventing bullying in schools. The theoretical framework is reviewed in the next section.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study was underpinned in the conflict theory propounded by Karl Marx in 1818. This theory stipulates that society remains in a state of continuous conflict owing to competition for limited resources. This theory maintains that social order is upheld by domination and power of dominant groups rather than consensus and equality (Osborne 2011). Aluede (2004) explains that any institutional practice enforced by dominant groups such as initiating of new grade 8 learners as part of school culture or a process that adversely impacts on individuals or groups by weighing them down psychologically, intellectually, ethnically, spiritually, financially, or physically, can lead to conflict and ultimately violence. When applied to educational practice, it means practices that avert learners from learning, thus impairing learners in over-competitive learning environments, that tolerate mistreatment, and that lack school disciplinary strategies and expulsion procedures (Ward et al. 2012). According to Laas and Boezaart (2014), punishment for actions that avert learners from learning as stated in the said South African Schools Act, includes that learners who cause distress to others must be disciplined through detention (an example of detention is staying behind alone after school hours for a week or more as prescribed by the educator), short-term exclusion (two weeks of not attending school), and ultimately expulsion for one academic year.

Gale et al. (2010) argue that the conflict theory is derived from the systems theory, where conflict depicts a battle for authority between opposing social groups (economic class groupings, gender, ethnic groups and religious conviction). When conflict theorists analyse society, they comprehend the existence of social deprivation of subordinate groups owing to influence, authority and coercion of supreme groups mostly relating to the financial affluence of dominant groups (Ward et al. 2012). With conflict interpretation, the most powerful people often affiliate themselves and work together which denies less powerful individuals from obtaining power and success, thus the powerful and influential continue to monopolise authority and privileges. The principal reason for social problems as explained by conflict theorists are exploitation and subjugation of inferior or less affluent groups or individuals by dominant groups. Within a school context, the popular learners are often the ones who victimise their more reserved peers. In the past it used to be more in the form of threats and physical violation, however, with the recent trends of social media the violation is more emotional through cyberbullying or public humiliation, which is more harmful than physical violation (Majied 2016). The section that follows describes the research methodology that was adopted in conducting the study.

## **Methodology**

This section of the paper briefly describes the research design, study area, population, sample and sampling strategy, instruments of data collection, the method of data analysis, and the ethical issues that were considered in conducting the study.

### **Research Design**

Constructed on the phenomenon that was explored, the research design adopted was exploratory in nature, hence the study adopted a qualitative method of data collection. When a qualitative approach is used, the participants share their experiences and understanding without any judgement from the researchers. The type of qualitative research design chosen was an exploratory case study. The case was defined as the escalation of bullying in schools in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality of the Eastern Cape, and the effects of bullying on the victims. An exploratory case study simply means that the exploration and description of the case occur through detailed and in-depth methods from multiple sources that are rich in context (Denzin and Lincoln 2012). The researchers do not embrace any information that could change the meaning of anything expressed by a participant. A qualitative approach affords the researcher an opportunity to learn and understand diverse social and cultural contexts. Qualitative data take the form of comprehensive explanations and experiences of the phenomenon investigated by individuals. These data could include interview transcripts, images, and audio and audiovisual recordings (Denzin and Lincoln 2012).

### **Study area**

The study was conducted in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa. There are nine local municipalities and approximately 40 high schools

within the Sarah Baartman District Municipality. The schools are multiracial and most of the mixed-race and black learners come from poor socio-economic backgrounds. All the schools in the municipality are affected by bullying, either directly or indirectly (Sarah Baartman District Municipality 2016). This municipality is one of the largest municipalities in the Eastern Cape. The economic stance of the municipality deteriorated over the past five years owing to violence and victimisation. The healthcare facilities have been destroyed in public protests and schools have been burnt down, and the resulting cost of reconstruction has caused a major financial expenditure for the municipality (Sarah Baartman District Municipality 2016).

### **Population, Sample and Sampling Strategy**

The population for this study consisted of learners from Grades 8 to 12, secondary school educators and a representative council of learners (RCLs) from all the secondary schools in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality. In addition, all the social workers from Child Welfare Eastern Cape in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality who could play an active role in curbing bullying in schools were considered in the study. The purpose of a sample is to permit researchers to conduct a study using individuals from the population, to gather authentic results and to ultimately reach conclusions that will relate to the population as a whole. It is very similar to the process of give and take. The population “gives” the sample, and then it “takes” conclusions from the outcomes obtained from the sample (Strydom 2011).

Purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling, was used to select learners who had experience of being bullied. The learners (victims of bullying) who participated in the study were selected with the help of educators who oversee disciplinary issues in selected schools, thus implying that knowledgeable and informed learners were selected. Educators who administer disciplinary issues at the five schools selected were selected based on the high levels of bullying reported in the annual report of the Sarah Baartman District Municipality (2016). This report stipulates that one of the five schools selected had been mentioned numerous times on SABC news as the most notorious school in Port Elizabeth (Naarse 2015). Social workers from Child Welfare are mostly contacted to assist victims of school violence and to assist in supporting learners with severe behavioural problems.

Hence, the sample of this study consisted of 25 learners (5 from each school), 5 educators from the different schools (1 from each school), 5 social workers from Child Welfare, and 5 members of the RCLs (1 from each school). The inclusion criteria that were used to select participants stipulated that participants had to be knowledgeable on bullying and be fully able to express their feelings and experiences.

### **Method of Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection is an important aspect of research. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow depth to be achieved by

providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewees' responses. As the previous point explains, semi-structured interviews have the advantage of enabling researchers to elicit richly detailed responses from participants through open-ended questions and to allow participants to express their views more freely than would be possible in structured interviews (Denzin and Lincoln 2012). Punch (2013) further explains that information acquired through semi-structured interviews can be compared, as all the participants are asked to express their feelings and experiences about the same general themes.

Thematic analysis as termed by Rubin and Rubin (2012) was used to analyse interviews. The process included reading the interview transcriptions after transcribing the recordings and coding the descriptive notions. The researchers analysed the data thematically by organising individual notions into categories that shared similar notions. This was accomplished by reading through the different interviews and recognising individual ideas that share the same meaning and by using quotations from the participants to confirm themes identified. These concepts were composed into themes that were articulated based on concepts that emerged out of the interviews conducted.

### **Ethical Deliberations**

The importance of ethical considerations has been emphasized by Punch (2013, 60), “researchers have two basic categories of ethical responsibility: responsibility to both human and nonhuman who participate in a project, and responsibility to the discipline of science to be accurate and honest in the reporting of their research”.

Taking these elements into account, the researchers requested that all participants sign an informed consent form. The University of Fort Hare Ethics Committee approved the topic for the research and provided the researcher with a clearance certificate as permission to conduct the study. The ethical clearance number was TAN051SHEN01. Finally, an ethical clearance certificate was provided to the schools to ensure them that the research was approved by the University of Fort Hare. Ethical consideration of the purpose of this study included absolute confidentiality of participant identities. The participants were asked to participate in the study voluntarily and were not being coerced. The participants were assured of no harm as they were informed that they are not obliged to answer questions that make them uncomfortable and also that they may leave at any time when they feel uncomfortable. Regarding informed consent, the objectives of the study were read and explained to the participants, and those willing signed the consent form to participate in the study.

### *Trustworthiness and Credibility*

Trustworthiness and credibility were ensured through reaching the objectives of the study without the researchers adding or removing any information, thus the information used for this study is completely authentic, transferable and confirmable.



## Findings and Discussions

### Theme 1: The Effects of Bullying on the Psychological Functioning of Learners in Schools

Bullying is relatively prevalent in schools in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality and has various effects on victims. The following keys were used to identify the various participants in this study:

- ED: educator;
- SW: social worker;
- RCL: representative council for learners; and
- STU: student.

Bullying impacts negatively on victims' academic performance as in the majority of instances the researchers found that bullying was not reported. Thus, victims of bullying are stressed out and suffer from anxiety most of the time. The victims' academic performance results in a shift of focus from achieving academic excellence to isolating themselves from everyone, thus their academic performance becomes poor. All the participants in this study indicated that bullying negatively affects the academic progress of learners (victims) directly or indirectly. In addition, absenteeism due to distress was identified as having a negative effect on the academic progress of learners. Learners exposed to bullying are at increased risk of developing problems associated with the school, including psychological health problems, learning disabilities, language impairments, and other neurocognitive problems (Perkins and Graham-Berman 2012). These problems interact to create a multifaceted complex of defects and disabilities where intervention access points are hard to assess. Frequently, psychological problems and academic problems develop in parallel (Perkins and Graham-Berman 2012).

ED 5 declared as follows:

Often bullies inside the school perimeter are associated with gangs outside the school, because bullies are aware that gangs are feared by most people globally they automatically have monopoly over the peers. Therefore, when learners are threatened, teased or taunted they opt to stay absent from school because learners suffer academically because they will rather stay away from school for long periods and fail than be wounded through physical bullying.

SW 5 indicated as follows:

Learners become so petrified of constant bullying that it affects their concentration, school attendance and it results in withdrawal and isolation from peers.

ED 1 maintained as follows:

Learners, who have progressed brilliantly over the years, now perform poorly because they are stressed out by the atmosphere which surrounds them at school. Some of these learners have lost sight of their dreams and ambition, their only interest is not being cyberbullied through publically humiliation via social media.

RCL 3 said:

I have been bullied by numerous number of my peers since I was in primary school. I am now a grade 11 learner and I have decided that it is best if I withdraw from socialising with my peers completely. This decision came after some learners started mocking me on Facebook stating I am obese and ugly. It has been a very painful experience ever so often I cry myself to sleep at night, I am deteriorating in my academics as well because I have performed poorly in most of my subjects during June 2016 exams.

The educators selected in the different schools from this study indicated that bullying within the school system reduces attendance, and increases deviant behaviour in the perpetrators (which ultimately reduces the likelihood of completing Grade 12 and gaining access to tertiary education). When learners feel unsafe in a classroom, it is expected that their concentration will drop, thus leading to underperformance (Osborne 2011). This finding is in line with that of Hong and Eamon (2011) who found that when learners feel unsafe in school, one reaction is to stay at home, they miss out on class discussions and tasks leading to the grades of learners or victims dropping owing to a lack of understanding. Long periods of absenteeism result in failing a grade, which ultimately could result in dropping out of school. This is the leading manner in which bullying affects the academic outcomes of victims (Hong and Eamon 2011). Thus, the occurrence of bullying could have a direct and undesirable influence on the economy of South Africa as fewer youths are getting a proper education while many of them wind up in conflict with the criminal justice system, which is costing the country a substantial amount of money to attempt rehabilitation or detainment in a correctional centre (Osborne 2011).

The rates of school dropouts in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality are high owing to fear of public humiliation on social networks. The educators who participated in this study explained that the low pass rate at schools in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality has escalated owing to large class sizes, the lack of parental involvement, bullying and high rates of adolescent pregnancies to a point where the staff of these schools now have to go to the residences of learners to plead with them to come back to school and write exams in order to advance to the next grade. The findings of this study are also in agreement with those of Sherr et al. (2016) who found that the experience of bullying extends beyond the scholastic career and poses a major risk for learners. Bullying infringes on the right to education, the right to a safe school environment, and decent future employment opportunities for learners. Victims of unreported bullying often blame themselves (according to the researcher's experience as a social work practitioner) and opt to numb the experience through substance abuse, which in some instances lead to unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (Sherr et al.

2016). Finally, exposure to bullying is related to problems in school procedures, including psychological functioning, cognitive processing and language development (Perkins and Graham-Berman 2012).

Learners with histories of exposure to bullying are frequently not referred to healthcare services and psychotherapy as the researchers established during the course of this study.

RCL 3 mentioned:

As a leader part of the representative counsel for learners our peers respect us. Therefore, many learners have reported various forms of bullying and mentioned that they were struggling to cope with going forward. These incidents have been reported to educators but unfortunately out of 20 cases only 2 learners had one session of counselling and that was it.

Hence, learners often develop emotional and behavioural conditions. Approximately two in ten learners experience some type of abuse (Finkelhor et al. 2005) as physical abuse, bullying, sexual violation or the neglect of proper care. “Bullying has negative effects on the development of academic skills including language and speech problems, cognitive processing and self-regulation” (Azar and Wolfe 2006, 595).

A better understanding of the developmental trajectories related to bullying at both the level of behaviour and the level of intellectual or cognitive development will assist in guiding educators and social workers toward the sensitive periods in development (Perkins and Graham-Berman 2012). Early exposure to bullying impedes cognitive development, “learners exposed to bullying early in life may experience a multitude of problems including problems with behaviour, cognition, self-regulation, and psychological malfunction” (Perkins and Graham-Berman 2012, 97).

The researchers found that victims of bullying are often withdrawn, have few friends or none at all, do not participate in any recreational activities and are socially isolated because they believe what the bullies are telling them causing low self-esteem.

## **Theme 2: Factors Associated with Increased Cases of Suicide in Schools**

Bullying-related suicide is the second theme that emerged in this study. Over the past decade there has been an escalation in the reporting of suicide among students in schools across the Eastern Cape. The following sub-themes emerged:

- 1) subtheme 1: Lack of support structures; and
- 2) subtheme 2: Violence-related incidents.

### *Sub-Theme 1: Lack of Support Structures in Schools*

All the learners who participated in the study maintained there is a need for support structures in schools in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality.

STU 17 declared as follows:

I have been reading many newspaper articles and, on a frequent basis, there are reports of numerous suicides committed and this is really scary. As peers, we hardly discuss our concerns with one another and it is troubling because one is never certain whether you will see your friend the following day or not.

STU 24 indicated as follows:

I have grown to hate the school system simply because it is now causing young people to take their lives instead of educating them for a better future. School staff are aware of what is happening but still, there is no support structure put in place in our schools to assist us as learners to deal with the anxiety caused by bullying.

STU 7 maintained as follows:

I lost two of my closest childhood friends to suicide in a matter of one month. One of my friends was sexually violated by a male educator and could not cope with the shame, the other was cyberbullied and could not handle the public humiliation. This was so much for me to take and I still cannot get over what happened and how fast it happened with no warning. I now have no one close I can really talk to and it is really frustrating.

STU 1 indicated that:

Ignorance is a major contributing factor to all social ills. I have been bullied numerous times it got to a point where I was pulling my hair out as an outlet for my pain. I lost my closest friend a year ago as a result of bullying, he could not take it anymore. My mother noticed how I suffered and took me to the local clinic where I had a conversation with the nurse on duty and it changed my life, she told me I don't have to suffer in silence and that when I speak up the bullies lose power.

Inclusive education forms the ethos of the education system in South Africa and resonates with the Constitution of the country, which recognises diversity and resists exclusivity. Inclusive education is also reflected in education policies such as the Education White Paper 6: Special Education; Building an Inclusive Education and Training System and the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS). Inclusive education, as well as the search to find strategies to identify and remove barriers to learning in South Africa, is a never-ending process and it has, therefore, brought about huge challenges to the education system (Engelbrecht and Green 2007). Educators continue to battle with the implementation thereof, while they are also required to maintain high quality education practices (McLeskey, Waldron, and Reddy 2014). As many as 65 per cent of mainstream educators do not have a formal initial

teacher education qualification (in South Africa many educators hold degrees from various fields and they completed a Higher Certificate in Education to become educators because they could not find employment in their specialised field) that included training in how to respond to diverse learning needs, conflict and violence within the classroom. Thus, there is a lack of knowledge and initial support among educators, which equates to a lack of support provided to students.

### *Sub-Theme 2: Violence-related Incidents*

Violence-related incidents within schools have received a lot of media coverage across the country in recent years. Local broadcasts of outrageous violent acts including multiple stabbings and shootings in schools across the globe proved to be fatal most of the time. This irrefutable fact has fuelled the public view that school-based violence in South Africa is ever increasing at an alarming rate. The researchers have been reading newspapers, news 24 and news broadcasts and noticed that bullying is still not gaining enough attention, the only time bullying is reported on is when the results are fatal. Bullying has become a disturbing and shocking matter over the years in South Africa and throughout the world, and learners' battle to cope as the rates of bullying rise (Payne and Smith 2013).

RCL 1 mentioned:

Within the four years I have been in secondary school there has been an escalation of violence-related cases my school and many other schools across the country as I read in newspapers.

STU 8 said:

I am so overwhelmed by fear because every single week there is at least two violence-related cases that occurs in my school. Just last week one of my classmates was stabbed during break time by another student in grade 8.

Student violence has massively increased in schools across the country. Members of RCLs informed the researchers that incidents of violent confrontations occur daily in their respective schools. Hence, the fear of bullies often hampers the psychological functioning of victims and results in self-mutilation, depression, anxiety and social isolation in victims. The researchers identified that two students who participated in this study were cutting themselves and had visible scars on their wrists. As a democratic country, South Africa should be providing equal opportunities to all citizens, specifically the underprivileged. Looking at the findings of this study, the selected schools have some inadequacies as a functional system, meaning the school system encourages "practices and procedures that prevent learners from learning, tolerates abuse from dominant groups and lacks disciplinary policies" as stated in the conflict theory (Zastrow 2016). Shilubane et al. (2015) found that personal and environmental factors are some of the causes of suicide among South African youth. In a study

conducted in Cape Town on the association of risks of suicide among learners in high schools, it was revealed that aggressive behaviour, fear, low value of self-worth, apparent stress, bullying and unachieved academic goals were some of the causes of violence-related confrontations and ultimately suicide among students. Shilubane et al. (2015) conducted a study in the Limpopo province on environmental factors relating to attempts to commit suicide by high school learners. Some of the factors identified were the lack of counsellors in schools, conflicting interpersonal relationships with peers, over-exposure to negative atmospheres, being bullied by siblings, history of family and peer suicide attempts, forced sexual intercourse, poor living circumstances, and a fear of what tomorrow will bring. In the Sarah Baartman District Municipality, similar factors were identified as some of the causes of violence escalation in schools. The main causes identified by learners and educators within the District were racial segregation, stress, bullying, and fear of public humiliation on social media (cyberbullying).

RCL 5 explained:

Most of the educators in this school are Afrikaans speaking and black students have complained that they are discriminated against because they are taught in Afrikaans and they do not understand. Some students addressed this with educators and they were insulted, this occurred on numerous occasions sometimes students are excluded from participating in activities because of their skin colour.

SW 3 mentioned that:

Schools in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth are infested with drugs and violence. Every now and again there are videos posted on Facebook where students would be brutally assaulting their peers and students are recognised by their uniform. This is really sad as social workers we do go to schools to assist but some students are abrupt and completely disregards us.

## **Recommendations**

There is a need for increased levels of involvement from social workers and psychologists in schools to render counselling services, prevention services and campaigns on bullying, empowerment workshops and support groups for victims of bullying to reduce levels of stress and anxiety in affected learners and to increase positive psychological functioning.

Furthermore, there is a need to create a platform where learners, parents and community members would be encouraged to work together to bring about positive changes in communities with high rates of violence. This will reduce the levels of environmental problems and increase support and communication between the learners, parents and communities.

## Conclusions

Being bullied results in living in constant fear and is a common phenomenon among learners throughout the world. Learners fear for their lives as they are surrounded by widespread levels of bullying on a daily basis (resulting in major anxieties). The fear caused by threats, humiliation and actual acts of bullying is associated with feelings of anxiety, rage, sadness, frustration and uncertainty about the future. With these emotional escapades, learners are bound to lose focus on academics. Some may even decide to stay away from school owing to fear and uncontrollable emotions in order to avoid bullying in schools. These learners miss out on valuable programmes and skills that could be of value to them and assist them in positive decision-making (even in adulthood).

The incidence of suicide has become a major concern in schools across South Africa. According to the media and social media, learners take their own lives without alerting their friends and family members due to stress and anxiety about the horrifying conditions at their schools. Adolescents are faced with major challenges such as family matters, school bullying, religious activities, recreational activities, friends, and even some work over the holidays. Such pressure and no one to provide guidance (limited interventions from counsellors and social workers) result in some learners breaking down and opting for suicide, as opposed to living with the stress and anxiety.

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