

The Perceived Impact Of Bullying On Academic Performance Of High School Learners

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Abstract

Bullying occurs in all phases in South African schools. Despite the existence of this ugly anti-social behaviour among students, the extent to which it affects their academic performance is not research in modern times especially in South African schools. Three research questions and three null hypotheses guided the study. The study adopted a descriptive research design with a sample size of 120 respondents. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire designed by the researchers. The instrument was validated by experts and the internal consistency was determined using Cronbach's alpha and reliability coefficients of 0.87, 0.81 and 0.88 were obtained respectively for clusters A, B and C. The researchers used direct administration and retrieval method in data collection process. Mean and standard deviations were used to answer the research questions that guided the study, while t-test statistic was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study revealed that: increased anger, rage, jealousy, urge to be in control, attention seeking and family dynamics among others are the causes of bullying among students. It was also found that bullying among high school students can affect their academic performance negatively. The study also found that setting up anti-bullying team in schools, building a positive school climate for learning, teaching kindness and empathy to the students and creating opportunities for connections among students were the notable strategies that can be employed to deal with bullying among students. It was therefore concluded that bullying has negative implications on students' academic performance.

Keywords: Bullying, Learners, High School, Academic Performance

Introduction

Bullying is a serious problem experienced in schools worldwide. Bullying in schools has become a global issue, and in some situations, the victims may suffer long-term repercussions. Bullying has many different definitions. The intentionality, repeatability, and power imbalance are prevalent traits of the conduct, according to Jan and Husain (2015). Bullying occurs when an individual or group of students repeatedly harasses a victim, including verbally and physically, in a school setting. Bullying still affects millions of kids in all countries in the world, despite countless studies and efforts made to address the issue. This problem is a major concern to the government, teaching profession as well as the entire society. Makafane (2019) argues that the existence of bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that can create a negative impact for the general school climate and the right of students to learn in a safe environment.

Bullying occurs in all phases in South African schools. According to School-based Violence Report (SVR) (2011), South African society experiences high rate of violence in both primary and secondary schools which affects both students and teachers regardless of age, gender and race. It takes place throughout the school, at break times, in the toilets, on school buses and while waiting for the bus, in group work, and in extracurricular activities (Al-Raqqad, 2017). Bullying at school can sometimes manifest itself in a group of learners calling a particular learner name or isolating him or her, with the support of bystanders who in some cases want to avoid being the next victim. School bullying is a widespread problem that affects learners psychologically, academically, and emotionally.

Bullying is a concern that needs immediate attention in schools as it violates the children's rights to learn in a conducive environment. United Nation Charter (UNC) (2016) asserts that children have right to safe and secure environment; free from fear, harm and humiliation. Bullying deprives students to learn harmoniously in a safe environment. Schools are regarded as a place where students can learn in a safe and protected environment. Makafane (2019) indicates that "bullying prevents students to learn in a harmonious way and sometimes lead bullies to engage in antisocial or delinquent behaviour such as vandalism, shoplifting, truancy and drug abuse as a way of proofing their roughness or toughness". Bullies in most cases are more powerful than their victims (Mosia, 2015).

According to Fluke (2016), bullying is a systematic abuse of power or an aggressive behaviour done with the intention to harm somebody. Bullying can be direct or indirect. Direct bullying includes physical and verbal acts such as hitting, stealing, or name calling while indirect bullying entails social exclusion (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Wolke and Lereya argues that bullying occurs frequently between peers and one in three children reports having been bullied at some point in his or her life time. Bullying is experienced as early as pre-school, although it is at peak during the middle school years and declines somewhere towards the end of high school (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Wolke and Lereya (2015) observed that bullying among students is most often caused by anger, rage, desire to be in control, family socio-economic status, desire to extort money from weaker students among other causes.

Both boys and girls engaged in all forms of bullying but boys experience physical bullying more than other forms. Barrington (2018) indicates that verbal and social bullying are mostly experienced by students, which includes actions like name calling, teasing, spreading rumours, stealing belongings, and physical violence. Physical bullying happens less often than social bullying and cyberbullying. Barrington also indicates that every day students are physically attacked in schools and that have a negative impact on the students' academic performance. Jaan Juvonen, a professor of psychology as quoted by Barrington (2018:3) demonstrates that, "students who are repeatedly bullied receive poorer grades, participate less in class discussions and sometimes labelled low achievers because they do not want to speak in class for fear of getting bullied". Students who are bullied avoid attending school and have higher absenteeism rates, dislike school, receive poor grades and low standardized test scores (Kowalski & Limber, 2012). Bullying in most cases can lead to students dropping out of school due to the fear of bullies. Students who are bullied may turn to lose concentration in the classroom (Al-Raqqad, Al-Bourini, Al Talahin & Aranki, 2017).

Bullied victims don't only perform poorly in school subjects but also have characteristics such as fear for speaking out, low self-esteem and depression for continuously been bullied at school (Makafane, 2019). Bullies are characterized as aggressive, impulsive, strong, and highly popular and have good social and emotional understanding (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Most Bullied victims failed to report when they are abused at school for the fear of being victimized again. In a study, it is highlighted that students who bully others are from families that use fight to solve problems (Ron, 1997). Mosia (2015) argue that, "children who have been physically abused and those who are exposed to violence in their families show physical and verbal aggression towards their peers because they may have had minimal or no exposure to positive modelling of how to deal with frustrating emotions daily". Bullies normally need to be in control, they need to have power over other students and that is why they continue to bully others. Sometimes bullies are just jealous that some students perform well in class or always raise hands to answer questions which make such students target for bullies. Some bullies are bullied by their parents at home, consequently that communicates acceptance of using force on other people and they don't see any problem for bullying others as it is their way of solving their day to day problems (Mosia, 2015). Students who bully others are looking for attention; they want to be the centre of attraction; they may even attract other students to be their friends so that they cannot be bullied. Bullying is an escalating problem in South Africa especially in high schools.

Bullying in schools is not only an educational problem but also a social and psychological problem that violates the victim's basic human rights - the right to safety, the right to dignity, education, and more (Abrahams & Matthews, 2011). Bullying is a major threat to school safety and directly affects the building of a supportive school environment for personal growth and development (Abrahams & Matthews, 2011). The common types of bullying in school are as follows:

- **Verbal bullying:** This type of bullying involves using words on the victim such as calling

them names (Smith, 2016).

- **Cyberbullying:** This is defined as the intentional and persistent infliction of harm through the use of computers, mobile phones, and other electronic devices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2020). Today's teenagers use technologies to harass, threaten, embarrass, send cruel messages, and spread rumours against fellow peers (Berguer, 2015).
- **Physical bullying:** This includes choking, beating, property destruction, stealing, physical threats, obscene gestures, expulsion from a group, and friendship manipulation are all examples of physical bullying, according to Lidzhegu (2019). Physical bullying frequently results in apparent harm, such as cuts and bruises.
- **Social bullying:** Social bullying is defined as the intentional exclusion of a learner from forming part of a social group or a learner being threatened by a particular group of learners. Social bullying involves spreading fake rumours, gossiping, and causing tension among friendships.

Bullying is a big problem in the modern times especially among students. Scholars and researchers have come up with different explanations to the causes of bullying in schools. Some of the causes include family factors, environmental, social, and cultural factors together with peer pressure among others. The extent to which these causes affect or influence the academic performance of students especially in south African schools need to be investigated. Given the above, the aim of this study is to determine the effect of bullying on the academic performance of students in South African high school.

Statement of the Problem

Bullying is an escalating problem in high schools and students continue to bully others either verbally, physically, or socially. Researchers have argued that bullying is an outstanding issue that is hard to handle or stop in schools since it is carried out by students. Different reports and studies have built up that about 15% of students are either harassed consistently or are initiators of bullying behaviour. Bullying exists in many schools even though the school management or education stake holders are not paying attention to the problem. Bullying at school have numerous effects on students ranging from dropout to poor academic performance. Students who are bullied avoid attending school and have higher absenteeism rates, dislike school, receive poor grades and low standardized test scores. Since bullying has several negative effects on students overall being and school achievement, the extent to which it affects the academic achievement of students need to be investigated especially in South African high school. Based on the above, this study intends to examine the effect of bullying on students' academic performance.

Aim of the Study

The general aim of the study is to investigate the effect of bullying on students' academic performance. Specifically, the student seeks to determine;

- i. the causes of bullying among students in high schools

- ii. the effects of bullying on the students' academic performance
- iii. the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions are posed to guide the study.

- i. What are the causes of bullying among students in high schools?
- ii. What are the effects of bullying on the students' academic performance in high school?
- iii. What are the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are formulated to guide the study and are tested at 0.05 level of significance.

- i. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male female teachers on the causes of bullying among students in high schools.
- ii. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male female teachers on the effects of bullying on the students' academic performance in high school.
- iii. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male female teachers on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools.

Method

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. Ten high schools were selected purposively from the Free state province for the study. The selected schools were pre-studied to determine the extent of bullying activities noticed among their students. The sample for the study was 120 high school teachers comprising of 55 male and 65 female teachers as respondents. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers based on modified four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree with numerical values of 4, 3, 2 and 1 point respectively. The instrument contained a total of 35 items and divided into three clusters - A, B and C. Cluster A contained 15 items on the causes of bullying among high school students. Cluster B contained 10 items on the effect of bullying on students' academic performance, and Cluster C contained 10 items on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools. The demographic section contained information on the respondents' gender and teaching experience.

The questionnaire was subjected to face validation by three experts whose corrections were used to make final copies of the questionnaire. After the face validation of the questionnaire, it was subjected to reliability test by administrating it to 20 respondents in schools not selected for the study. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was used to determine the internal consistency of the items. Clusters A to C yielded reliability coefficients of 0.87, 0.81 and 0.88 respectively, this showed that the instrument was reliable and was used for the study. The researchers use direct administration and retrieval method to administer and retrieved the questionnaire from the respondents. The data collected were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and t-test statistic.

The mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while the t-test statistic was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. For the responses of the research questions, items with mean score of 2.50 and above were regarded as agree while items with less than 2.50 were regarded as disagree. For the test of hypotheses, the null hypothesis was accepted when the probability value was greater than 0.05 level of significance, otherwise, it was rejected.

Results

This section deals with the presentation of results. The results are presented in Tables in line with the research questions and the null hypotheses formulated for the study.

Research Question One:

What are the causes of bullying among students in high schools?

Table 1: Mean and Standard deviation of respondents on the causes of bullying among students.

SN	Causes of bullying among high school students	\bar{X}	SD	Dec.
1	Increased anger	2.79	0.45	A
2	Rage	3.32	0.35	A
3	Jealousy	3.10	0.38	A
4	Urge to be in control	3.76	0.20	A
5	Attention seeking	2.98	0.33	A
6	Family dynamics	2.54	0.54	A
7	Parents' socio-economic status	2.59	0.61	A
8	Low self-esteem	2.33	0.76	D
9	Seeking revenge	2.76	0.54	A
10	To get things they want	2.84	0.49	A
11	To gain popularity	2.90	0.43	A
12	Exposure to media contents	3.21	0.36	A
13	Peer pressure	2.54	0.56	A
14	Having low empathy to towards the problem of others.	3.45	0.29	A
15	Need to extort money and other material possessions from the victims	2.46	0.61	D
	Cluster Mean	2.90	0.43	A

The result of the study as presented in Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of respondent on the causes of bullying among students in high schools. Result shows that bullying among students is caused by so many factors such as; Increased anger ($\bar{x} = 2.79$, $SD = 0.45$), Rage ($\bar{x} = 3.32$, $SD = 0.35$), Jealousy ($\bar{x} = 3.10$, $SD = 0.38$), Urge to be in control ($\bar{x} = 3.76$, $SD = 0.20$), Attention seeking ($\bar{x} = 2.98$, $SD = 0.33$), Family dynamics ($\bar{x} = 2.54$, $SD = 0.54$), Parents' socio-economic status ($\bar{x} = 2.59$, $SD = 0.61$) among others. This is because the mean ratings are above

2.50 set as criterion for accepting an item. On the other hand, the respondents disagreed that Low self-esteem ($\bar{x} = 2.33$, $SD = 0.76$) and the need to extort money and other material possessions from the victims ($\bar{x} = 2.46$, $SD = 0.61$) are the causes of bullying among students. The cluster mean of 2.90 with a standard deviation of 0.43 showed that majority of the respondents agreed that items on Table 1 are the causes of bullying among high school students.

Research Question Two

What are the effects of bullying on students' academic performance in high school?

Table 2: Mean and Standard deviation of respondents on the effect of bullying on students' academic performance

SN	Effect of bullying	\bar{X}	SD	Dec.
1	It reduces students' interest towards learning	3.25	0.23	A
2	It increases the dropout rate among students	3.76	0.33	A
3	It leads to absenteeism among students	3.87	0.28	A
4	It creates fear among the weak students.	3.54	0.32	A
5	Bullying leads to depression and anxiety among students	3.34	0.19	A
6	It increases feelings of sadness and loneliness	3.21	0.23	A
7	It leads to low self-esteem	2.90	0.20	A
8	It leads to physical illness among students.	2.86	0.37	A
9	It leads to mental health problem among students	3.88	0.31	A
10	It lessens academic improvement	3.19	0.29	A
	Cluster Mean	3.38	0.26	A

The result of the study as presented in Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of respondent on the effects of bullying on students' academic performance in high school. Result shows that bullying among students has negative effects on students' academic performance. The respondents agreed that bullying among students leads to the following: It reduces students' interest towards learning ($\bar{x} = 3.25$, $SD = 0.23$), It increases the dropout rate among students ($\bar{x} = 3.76$, $SD = 0.33$), It leads to absenteeism among students ($\bar{x} = 3.87$, $SD = 0.28$), It creates fear among the weak students ($\bar{x} = 3.54$, $SD = 0.32$), Bullying leads to depression and anxiety among students ($\bar{x} = 3.34$, $SD = 0.19$), It increases feelings of sadness and loneliness ($\bar{x} = 3.21$, $SD = 0.23$), among others. The cluster mean of 3.38 with a standard deviation of 0.26 shows that bullying among high school students can affect their academic performance negatively.

Research Question Three:

What are the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools?

Table 3: Mean and Standard deviation of respondents on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools.

SN	Strategies	\bar{X}	SD	Dec.
1	Setting up anti-bullying team in schools.	3.00	0.29	A
2	Building a positive school climate for learning	2.54	0.32	A
3	Teachers and parents should teach kindness and empathy to the students.	3.31	0.27	A
4	Creating opportunities for connections among students	2.98	0.29	A
5	The school management should have guidelines and polices to control bullying	3.55	0.18	A
6	Taking disciplinary actions on bullies	3.45	0.21	A
7	Expulsion from school	3.22	0.29	A
8	Teaching students how to handle bullying	2.90	0.30	A
9	Involving students and parents in preventing bullying	2.54	0.26	A
10	Positive behaviours should be rewarded	3.10	0.27	A
	Cluster Mean	3.06	0.28	A

The result of the study as presented in Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation of respondent on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools. Result shows that the following strategies can be adopted to deal with bullying among students, these include Setting up anti-bullying team in schools ($\bar{x} = 3.00$, $SD = 0.29$), building a positive school climate for learning ($\bar{x} = 2.54$, $SD = 0.32$), teachers and parents should teach kindness and empathy to the students ($\bar{x} = 3.31$, $SD = 0.27$), creating opportunities for connections among students ($\bar{x} = 2.98$, $SD = 0.29$), the school management should have guidelines and polices to control bullying ($\bar{x} = 3.55$, $SD = 0.18$), taking disciplinary actions on bullies ($\bar{x} = 3.45$, $SD = 0.21$), expulsion from school ($\bar{x} = 3.22$, $SD = 0.29$), among others. This decision is taken because the mean ratings are above 2.50 set as criterion for accepting an item. The cluster mean of 3.06 with a standard deviation of 0.28 shows that items on Table 3 are some of the strategies that can be adopted to deal with bullying among high school students.

Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the causes of bullying among students in high schools.

Table 4: t-test analysis of the difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the causes of bullying among students in high schools.

SN	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value	Dec.
1	Male	55	2.88	0.36	-0.644	118	0.52	NS
2	Female	65	2.92	0.32				

The result of the study as presented in Table 4 shows the t-test analysis of the significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the causes of bullying among students in high schools. Result shows that a t-value of -0.644 was obtained with a degree of freedom of 118 and a probability value of 0.52. Since the probability value of 0.52 is greater than 0.05 set as level of significance for testing the hypothesis, this means that the result is not significant, and inference drawn is that the difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the causes of bullying among students in high schools is not statistically significant. This equally implies that both male and female teachers share the same opinion on the causes of bullying among students in high school.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the effects of bullying on students' academic performance in high school.

Table 5: t-test analysis of the difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the effects of bullying on students' academic performance in high school.

SN	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value	Dec.
1	Male	55	3.35	0.30	-1.174	118	0.24	NS
2	Female	65	3.41	0.26				

The result of the study as presented in Table 5 shows the t-test analysis of the significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the effects of bullying on students' academic performance in high school. Result shows that a t-value of -1.174 was obtained with a degree of freedom of 118 and a probability value of 0.24. Since the probability value of 0.24 is greater than 0.05 set as level of significance for testing the hypothesis, this means that the result is not significant, and inference drawn is that the difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the effects of bullying on students' academic performance in high school is not statistically significant. This implies that both male and female teachers hold the same view on the effects of bullying on students' academic performance in high school.

H₀₃: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools.

Table 6: t-test analysis of the difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools.

SN	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value	Dec.
1	Male	55	3.04	0.31	-0.755	118	0.45	NS
2	Female	65	3.08	0.27				

The result of the study as presented in Table 6 shows the t-test analysis of the significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools. Result shows that a t-value of -0.755 was obtained with a degree of freedom of 118 and a probability value of 0.45. Since the probability value of 0.45 is greater than 0.05 set as level of significance for testing the hypothesis, this means that the result is not significant, and inference drawn is that the difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools is not statistically significant. This result show that both male and female teachers share the same view on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of bullying on students' academic performance in high school. The result of the study with regards to research question one shows that bullying among students is caused by so many factors such as; increased anger, rage, jealousy, urge to be in control, attention seeking, family dynamics, parents' socio-economic status, among others. On the other hand, the respondents disagreed that low self-esteem and the need to extort money and other material possessions from the victims are the causes of bullying among students. The result from the test of hypothesis one revealed that the difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the causes of bullying among students in high schools is not statistically significant. This implies that both male and female teachers share the same opinion on the causes of bullying among students in high school. The result of the study is consistent with Wolke and Lereya (2015) who found that bullying occurs frequently between peers and one in three children reports having been bullied at some point in his or her lifetime. The authors also found that bullying among students is most often caused by anger, rage, desire to be in control, family socio-economic status, desire to extort money from weaker students among other causes. From the finding of the study, one can conclude that bullying among students is a serious problem that needs to be addressed with urgent attention since it has tendencies of influencing students' academic performance negatively.

The result of the study with respect to research question two on the effect of bullying on students' academic performance showed that bullying among students has negative effects on students' academic performance. The respondents agreed that bullying among students leads to the following: it reduces students' interest towards learning, it increases the dropout rate among students, it leads to absenteeism among students, it creates fear among the weak students, bullying leads to depression and anxiety among students, it increases feelings of sadness and loneliness, among others. It is evident that these abnormalities can lead to decreased in students' academic performance. The result from the test of hypothesis two equally showed that the difference between

the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the effects of bullying on students' academic performance in high school is not statistically significant, this is because the probability value is greater than 0.05 level of significance. This implies that both male and female teachers hold the same view on the effects of bullying on students' academic performance in high school. The result of the study is consistent with the findings of Barrington (2018) that students who are repeatedly bullied receive poorer grades, participate less in class discussions, and sometimes labelled low achievers because they do not want to speak in class for fear of getting bullied. The result also agreed with Kowalski and Limber, (2012) who demonstrated that students who are bullied avoid attending school and have higher absenteeism rates, dislike school, receive poor grades and low standardized test scores. Bullying in most cases can lead to students dropping out of school due to the fear of bullies.

The result of the study on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools shows that the following strategies can be adopted to deal with bullying among students, these include; setting up anti-bullying team in schools, building a positive school climate for learning, teachers and parents should teach kindness and empathy to the students, creating opportunities for connections among students, the school management should have guidelines and polices to control bullying, taking disciplinary actions on bullies, expulsion from school, among others. This decision is taken because the mean ratings are above 2.50 set as criterion for accepting an item. The result on the test of hypothesis three showed that the difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools is not statistically significant. This implies that both male and female teachers share the same view on the strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students in high schools. It is the researchers' belief that if these strategies are followed properly, the cases of bullying among students in school will reduce drastically.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers conclude that bullying among high school students is caused by so many factors such as desire to be in control, anger, jealousy, and other related factors. It was also concluded that bullying among students has negative impact on their academic performance. Thus, there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the causes, effects, and strategies to be adopted to deal with bullying among students.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

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