




Student teachers' preparedness to raise awareness about bullying among Grade R learners



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Background: The prevalence of bullying in South African schools is alarming, and it affects everyone, including children in early childhood development. Teachers have a critical role in raising awareness about bullying to minimise its effects. This implies that student teachers need to be prepared to raise awareness about bullying.

Aim: This study aimed to establish the preparedness of university student teachers to raise awareness about bullying among Grade R learners.

Setting: Using a qualitative approach anchored in a phenomenological design, data were gathered from a university in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Methods: Purposeful sampling was used to sample 25 second-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) Foundation Phase student teachers. In groups of five, students were required to facilitate an antibullying campaign to raise awareness about bullying among Grade R learners. Individually, the student teachers wrote reflective essays on their perceptions of their preparedness to raise awareness about bullying. Data were analysed thematically in line with Braun and Clarke's steps of data analysis.

Results: The study's results revealed that student teachers were not prepared to raise awareness about bullying because of the use of inappropriate activities, poor classroom management, poor planning and discord in students' groups.

Conclusion: To ensure that student teachers are prepared to raise awareness about bullying, this study concludes that higher tertiary institutions should strengthen their training in raising awareness of bullying for student teachers.

Contribution: The study contributes to the body of knowledge on student teachers' preparedness to raise awareness about bullying in schools.

Keywords: Antibullying campaign; BEd Foundation Phase; bullying; Grade R; higher institution; preparedness; reflection; student teachers; teaching school.

Introduction

Bullying in schools

Bullying is an international phenomenon that is on the increase, and it is estimated that 246 million children are bullied in one way or another (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2017). This is becoming more prevalent in South African schools (Isdale et al. 2017; Zuze et al. 2018). Marsh (2018) stipulated that 20% to 29% of learners are involved in bullying at least once per year, either as a bully or as a victim. Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) stated that bullying in South Africa has become evident through media platforms and videos that go viral on social media. Bullying has become visible in the South African media with the recent shocking incident of Lufuno Mavhunga, a learner who committed suicide after she was bullied at Mbilwi High School in Sibasa outside Thohoyandou, Limpopo province (Mlambo 2021). Such incidents are a cause for concern in the entire population, leading one to ponder on the compromised safety in schools. It is extremely concerning that at an early age, children are exposed to hostile circumstances at school (Zuze et al. 2016) and that this has repercussions for their overall well-being.

Dealing with bullying in schools has become increasingly difficult for teachers, especially for teachers who are new to the profession (Mahabeer 2020). Teachers have a critical role in promoting safety in schools, and one example is through reducing bullying behaviours. A study by Yoon and Bauman (2014) argued that teachers are not considered efficient at resolving bullying incidents, and hence, they need more than just knowledge of bullying to adequately

recognise and respond to it. According to research conducted by Mahabeer (2020), teachers reported that they were not well equipped to deal with bullying incidents outside the classroom and on school premises. To respond to the high occurrence of bullying in schools, this study investigated the preparedness of second-year Grade R student teachers in raising awareness about bullying in the classroom. This study is part of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Second-year student teachers were given the assignment to facilitate an antibullying campaign for Grade R learners. This study is critical because it allowed for the evaluation of student teachers' readiness to raise awareness about bullying. Through this study, student teachers were exposed to campaigns as a way to raise awareness of bullying in preparation for the teaching profession. Studies on bullying have emphasised that interventions need to be undertaken early in children's development to prevent bullying incidents (Mahabeer 2020; Yoon & Bauman 2014). Therefore, it is vital to have antibullying campaigns when children are still young, as such campaigns might reduce the occurrence and the effects of bullying in the children's lives.

Definition of bullying

Gladden et al. (2014) defined bullying as negative and intentional actions intended to inflict physical and psychological harm on one or more persons. Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) added that such behaviour is recurrent and includes power imbalances between the bully and the bullied. Thus, the victim usually cannot defend themselves. Bullying can be direct (for example, physical (hitting, pushing and kicking), intimidation, hurtful teasing or verbal name-calling) or indirect (for example, spreading rumours about others and social exclusion) (Wang et al. 2009). Another common form of bullying is cyberbullying, which can be referred to as intentional and repeated harm inflicted through virtual platforms (Englander et al. 2017). This form of bullying has become rife given that many children are exposed to online activities at a tender age. Some of the risk factors associated with different forms of bullying include age, grade, gender, disabilities and low socio-economic status (Pećjak & Pirc 2017; Tippett & Wolke 2014; Zuze et al. 2016).

Risk factors and implications of bullying

Numerous risk factors increase the prevalence of bullying. These include jealousy, race, gender, physical appearance, sexual orientation and family background (De Oliveira et al. 2015). Teachers also attribute the risk factors of bullying in classrooms to forces outside the school (Oldenburg et al. 2015). This implies that teachers should educate the communities about bullying. In their study, Jan and Husain (2015:48) found that the risk factors were mainly because of 'powerfulness, revenge seeking, aggression, jealousy, and physical weakness of the victims'. The implication for teachers is that they need to have a wide knowledge of the risk factors of bullying so that they may be alert from all

angles. Russell et al. (2016) noted that more experienced teachers from racial minority contexts are likely to be aware and reactive to bullying incidents. This infers that race is a risk factor for bullying and that teachers from racial minority backgrounds are more likely to respond to it than their counterparts. Russell et al. (2016) further noted that there is a correlation between socio-economic status, education and bullying behaviours. Those children from a low socio-economic background and the less educated are therefore more likely to be bullied by their counterparts.

Bullying is a global social issue affecting children of all ages, including those in Grade R (Olweus 1993). Yoon et al. (2016) noted that most bullying occurs within the school environment, which underscores the critical role teachers play in enhancing safety in schools by minimising bullying incidents. Different scholars have noted an increase in the occurrence of bullying in South African schools (Isdale et al. 2017; Zuze et al. 2018). A study by Monks, Smith and Swettenham (2003) affirms that bullying and victimisation are common problems in junior school classes. Lidzhegu (2019) also found that in South Africa, teachers, school principals and parents concurred that bullying was a serious issue among primary school children and should not be taken lightly because of its detrimental effects on their well-being. Bullying affects both victims (e.g. ill health and psychiatric problems such as mood disorders) and perpetrators of bullying (e.g. behavioural issues and ineffective emotional adjustment in future) (Arseneault et al. 2006). Research has also shown that both bullies and the bullied tend to perform poorly academically compared to those children who do not take part in bullying (Kim et al. 2006).

The role of teachers in addressing bullying in schools

Combatting the occurrence and effects of bullying is one of the roles of teachers when addressing bullying. This entails the teacher taking the role of a mediator when addressing bullying incidents and educating both learners and parents on bullying issues. To do this successfully, teachers need to be very knowledgeable, skilled and prepared through initial teacher education programmes to properly distribute resources and develop interventions to minimise cases of bullying. Furthermore, teachers are expected to contribute to bullying policy development. Bradshaw et al. (2013) found that even though teachers were part of creating school policies on bullying, they needed further training on cyberbullying and bullying in general. Some teachers were found to be ignoring bullying, hence giving learners the impression that they should not expect the teacher to intervene (Yoon & Bauman 2014). Thus, the teachers' role in intervening in incidents of bullying is critical and should be taken seriously. Mishna et al. (2005) proposed that teachers were uninformed of bullying among learners, which is concerning. Hence, teachers need to play the pastoral role of monitoring learners and looking out for signs of bullying. To do this, they need to know what to look out for. While it is the teachers' role to refer both the bullies and the bullied to an

expert for intervention, Yoon and Bauman (2014) highlighted that relying on referral to authorities may also indicate that teachers are unwilling or inadequately equipped to handle cases of bullying and violence at school and individual level.

Many studies on bullying have focused on understanding bullying, its prevalence and its effects (Jansen et al., 2012; Juan et al. 2018). Also, the main focus has been on children in higher primary grades and high school (Hanish et al. 2004). Very few studies conducted on early childhood and lower grades of primary school have focused on victims (Kochenderfer & Ladd 1996). However, it remains unclear how prepared student teachers and teachers are to raise awareness about bullying in Grade R classes. Given that little, if any, research has been carried out on teacher preparedness to raise awareness about bullying in Grade R classrooms, this study intends to contribute to the dearth of literature in this area.

Aim

This study aimed to investigate the preparedness of student teachers to raise awareness about bullying in Grade R classrooms. In line with this aim, the study sought to answer the following research question: how prepared are student teachers in raising awareness about bullying among Grade R learners?

Theoretical framework

Experiential learning theory (ELT) was used as a theoretical framework that oriented the study. The theory was developed by David Kolb, who was inspired by theorists such as Kurt Lewin, John Dewey and Jean Piaget. Experiential learning has been defined as 'the process whereby knowledge results from the combination of grasping and is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb 1984:38). Experiential learning theory is different from cognitive and behavioural theories, as cognitive theories emphasise the role played by mental processes, whereas behavioural theories disregard the probable role of personal experience in the course of learning. Kolb's ELT is holistic in approach and emphasises how different factors, such as cognition, experiences, emotions and environmental factors, affect the learning process.

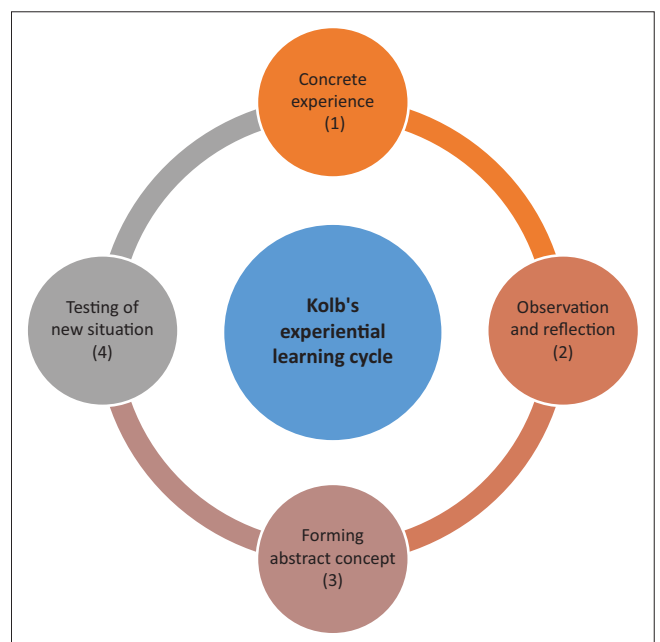
Kolb introduced a model to explain two ways of acquiring experience and described those as abstract conceptualisation and concrete experience. In addition, Kolb noted two ways of transforming experience and described those as active experimentation and reflective observation. The four methods of learning are usually illustrated as a cycle, which can start anywhere depending on people's preferences and learning styles but follows a set sequence (Kolb 2014). Ideally, Kolb suggests that the cyclical model of learning consists of concrete experience, which provides foundational information that is used for reflection. Based on these reflections, people integrate information and form abstract ideas. People then use these ideas to create new theories of their world, which they then test (Kolb 1984). Kolb's claims about the four stages of cyclical learning are depicted in Figure 1.

This scholarly study sought to investigate the preparedness of student teachers to raise awareness about bullying. The objective was to gain insight into the perceptions of student teachers on their preparedness to raise awareness about bullying among Grade R learners.

In this study, the student teachers began in stage three (abstract conceptualisation of the cycle) of the ELT. Student teachers initially conceptualised an antibullying campaign and decided on the model of implementation. The second stage of the learning process fell within the active experimentation, where the student teachers tested their plan. They presented their planned campaign to the lecturer and the tutors for feedback and further guidance on how to improve the campaign. The next stage was the concrete experience, where the students actively experienced implementing the antibullying campaign to the Grade R learners. The final stage of the learning process was a reflective observation, where the student teachers consciously reflected on their experience in the antibullying campaign implementation. Our study drew from the reflections made by the student teachers in the last stage. This theoretical framework methodologically resonated with our scholarly study, which investigated the student teachers' preparedness to raise awareness about bullying in a classroom environment.

Methods

The study used a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design. Phenomenology is useful when studying experiences from the perspective of the participant (Schutz 1970). We chose this design because it allowed us to focus on our scholarship of teaching



Source: Adapted from Kolb, D.A., 1984, *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, viewed 12 January 2022, from <http://academic.regis.edu/ed205/Kolb.pdf>

FIGURE 1: Four stages of cyclical learning.

and learning, as the academics involved, to make recommendations for improvement. Also, this allowed us to acquire details of student teachers' perspectives and interpretations (Moustakas 1994) of their preparedness to raise awareness about bullying. Hence, this approach allowed the student teachers to present their personal experiences from their own views without interference from the researchers.

Data collection

Data were collected using 25 second-year BEd Foundation Phase student teachers' reflective essays. These students were purposefully selected from a group of 110 second-year BEd Foundation Phase student teachers who were facilitating an antibullying campaign for primary school children in a teaching school attached to the university. A teaching school is a school affiliated with a university for learning and research purposes. Purposive sampling enabled us to target participants. Kruger (1988:150) referred to participants as those who 'have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched'. The 25 students were the ones who facilitated the antibullying campaign for the Grade R classes using posters, games, videos, educational storybooks and PowerPoint presentations. The students then wrote a reflective essay on the process of facilitating an antibullying campaign and their perceptions of their preparedness to raise awareness about bullying among Grade R learners.

Data analysis

Data were analysed thematically following the six steps by Clarke and Braun (2017) of inductive thematic data analysis. Firstly, we familiarised ourselves with the data by actively rereading and discussing the reflections by students on several occasions, which provided us with a good orientation to the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). Secondly, we manually generated initial codes by inductively noting interesting points, ideas and connections between data items (Kiger & Varpio 2020). Next, we inductively identified themes by carefully 'analysing, combining and comparing' how our initial codes were related to each other (Kiger & Varpio 2020:5). The themes were then reviewed in step 4 by checking if the codes perfectly fitted into the identified themes and if each theme was adequately supported by relevant data (Braun & Clarke 2006). This allowed us to adjust our themes in line with the codes as well as with the whole dataset. Next, we defined and named the themes by crafting a brief narrative description of each theme (Braun & Clarke 2006). This process guided us in choosing the perfect data extracts to support our themes in the final report. Finally, we wrote up the manuscript by presenting the results from the data analysis and crafting a clear and logical narrative of the data interpretation (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Ethical considerations

Participation in the antibullying campaign and reflective essay writing was voluntary for this study. The student teachers permitted their essays to be used for research

purposes. The identities of the participants were protected by using codes (Check & Schutt 2012). Participants were made aware of the study's aims and were allowed to consent to have their essays used for this study. They were given assurance that their identities would be protected, as recommended by Fleming and Zegwaard (2018). The participants' responses were quoted verbatim to present an authentic version of their views.

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg (ref. no. Sem 2-2021-072).

Results and discussion

From the data analysis, four themes emerged from this study, namely the use of inappropriate activities, poor classroom management, discord among student teachers' groups and poor planning. The participants were coded as Student Teacher A to Student Teacher Y to protect their identity.

Theme 1: Use of inappropriate activities

This theme revealed that student teachers failed to use appropriate activities to align with the developmental level of the Grade R learners, for whom the antibullying campaign was intended. This was evidenced using videos that were too long for the learners:

'To begin with, our video it was long, so the learners were bored and did not show any interest anymore'. (Student Teacher C, black participant, female)

Furthermore, the chosen activities were not always relevant, pointed as follows:

'The activities that were chosen were not many and some of them were not related to the focus of the campaign'. (Student Teacher P, black participant, female)

In some cases, the activities used were not familiar or interesting for the learners, which posed difficulties when using them to get the message of bullying across to the learners. This is supported the following participant, who mentioned that:

'... the game that we originally decided on did not work effectively for the learners. Many of the learners did not know how to play the game even when split into groups consisting of heterogeneous players.' (Student Teacher L, black participant, male)

Additionally:

'The thing that I would change in the planning stage is that I would add more fun games that will interest the learners.' (Student Teacher G, white participant, female)

The above results show that the student teachers were not prepared to raise awareness effectively about bullying, as they were not knowledgeable about the type of activities to use, how they should select those activities and different factors to consider. According to the systematic review that investigated the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions implemented

by teachers at schools, Franklin et al. (2017) discovered that teachers' failure to use appropriate age-level activities for the learners hinders the effectiveness of the interventions. Paulus, Ohmann and Popow (2016) stated that the content and the kind of mental health services available (for example, the nature and format of intervention) tend to contribute to its effectiveness. Similarly, in this case, the inappropriate activities used failed to capture learners' attention and interest, failing to successfully raise bullying awareness. Based on this result, adequate training continues to be underscored as one aspect that can possibly impact the effectiveness of any psychosocial intervention, such as an antibullying campaign.

Theme 2: Poor classroom management

Results of this study also show that student teachers were unprepared to raise awareness about bullying in the classroom situation because of poor classroom management skills. Most of the participants indicated that they failed to implement their campaigns according to the way they had planned them because of failure to manage the learners' behaviour during the implementation stage.

This was supported by a participant, who said:

'During the execution of our campaign, we had noticed that classroom management was an issue as learners' behaviour was out of control. This all happened when we began the games. It had seemed that the learners were so caught up having fun that all the rules went out of the window. It seemed that children were running from one side of the classroom to the other side because it seemed the others were having more fun than what they were having. Group members shouting trying to calm learners down seemed to just cause more havoc and noise.' (Student Teacher A, white participant, male)

Another agreed:

'We did not come up with a classroom management strategy and this led to the classroom being chaotic ... and the learners did not listen when we needed them to ...' (Student Teacher x, race x participant, male)

Another participant also supported this:

'The only problem we experienced during execution was the learners being overexcited and not listening to the instructions of the games ... there was a specific time where we were unable to control the learners. They couldn't listen to our instructions, so we had to come up with multiple ways to make them come to order. So, we managed to come up with some strategies, but they were not effective enough. If we had planned enough the classroom management would have been enough.' (Student Teacher E, black participant, female)

These results confirm the sentiments of Berry et al. (2010), McMahon et al. (2015) and Tatto, Richmond and Andrews (2016) that teacher education programmes are usually criticised for being theoretically and practically inadequate in terms of training teachers for the 21st-century classroom challenges. This is despite the determinations by researchers and teacher trainers, including a good deal of effort that teachers put into classroom management. The results of this

study further concur with those of Terada (2019), who found that nearly half of new teachers reported that they felt 'not at all prepared' or 'only somewhat prepared' to handle disruptive learners. Terada (2019) attributed this partly to the fact that the average teacher training programme devotes very little time to the topic of classroom management. This lack of training, hence, costs teachers valuable teaching time and affects learners' understanding and grasping of important concepts such as bullying. Mulvahil (2018) pointed out that effective classroom management is an absolute must as it impacts successful learning. Resultantly, although student teachers might have had well-prepared campaigns on antibullying, they failed to successfully deliver the information to the learners because of failure to control the disruptive behaviour.

For Wolff et al. (2016), managing classrooms effectively depends on continuous event awareness, recurrent monitoring of the event, recognising who and what needs attention, and knowing how to act and react. According to Kolb's (1984) ELT, people learn through concrete experience by experiencing actual events. In line with this theory, the student teachers need to be constantly exposed to raising awareness about bullying among Grade Rs, so that they can have concrete experiences of learner behaviours. In this way, they can then recognise who and what needs attention and how to act and react through reflective observation, where they analyse their experiences to find out why things happened the way they did (Kolb 1984). Thus, this study revealed that this was lacking among student teachers, as this particular assignment or experience only happens when they are in the second year of their studies and they only get to have the same experience when they qualify as teachers.

Theme 3: Discord among student teachers' groups

Another theme that emerged from the data set, which showed the unpreparedness of student teachers, was discord among the group members. The discord that impacted the execution of the antibullying campaign was caused by racial differences, personality clashes and language differences. This was supported by the following participants, who said:

'Whilst still planning the problems I have observed about the group despite how much we tried, by all means, to work together as a unit there was a lot of disagreement. It was like the group was divided into two groups and according to my observations it seemed as if the whole thing was just a racial feud where the other group felt like the other group was being all bossy and wanted everything to be done their way.' (Student Teacher K, Indian participant, female)

'Personalities clashed and there were few arguments amongst group members, including myself. As a group member, I felt responsible for most of the planning, however, some members did not like how I managed the group.' (Student Teacher Y, coloured participant, female)

'If I had to improve something, I would firstly draw the line between group members and make it clear that they should be one and put every racial war in the past given they were not even there when [black and white] people fought, and they should not

let that get between their opportunity to work together for marks.’ (Student Teacher O, black participant, male)

‘That caused a lot of commotion in the group and because there was a language barrier, there would be cases where each group would communicate in a language only they understand and so would the other group.’ (Student Teacher D, black participant, male)

These results support those of Payne and Monk-Turner (2006), who noted that individual differences among group members, such as race, possibly contribute to discord among group members. For Whetten and Cameron (2012), as cited in Hussein and Al-Mamary (2019), such conflict can be because of personality differences, perceptions, differences in values and interests and limited resources, among many others. Fui and Hassan (2015) also found a positive and significant association between one’s personality and relationship conflict, which is confirmed by the results of our study where students experienced personality clashes while working in groups. In line with Kolb’s theory, through active experimentation and reflection on experience, student teachers can come to realise their differences by forming new ideas through abstract conceptualisation, and hence work on them, so that they can use group work to work towards a common goal when collaboratively raising awareness about bullying. In this case, this experience assisted the student teachers to go through the different learning stages, according to Kolb (1984), to improve their facilitation skills.

Theme 4: Poor planning

Lack of planning among group members was highlighted as another element that revealed the students’ lack of preparedness to effectively raise awareness about bullying. This was evident from the words of the following participants, who said:

‘Some didn’t want to do anything; some didn’t attend planning meetings’. (Student Teacher F, Indian participant, female)

‘As a group, we did not invest much time to prepare and know who was doing what’. (Student Teacher B, coloured participant, female)

‘The only thing that gave us problems was deciding who was going to do what during the actual campaign’ (Student Teacher H, black participant, female)

These results confirm some of the disadvantages of group work which are highlighted by Freeman and Greenacre (2011), who stated that some members tend to depend too heavily on others to do the work, while others may not pitch in to assist and fail to contribute enough to the group. Furthermore, Jones and Conway (2011) also found that university students in their study had disagreements and experienced poor attendance by group members and unpreparedness when working in groups. In line with Kolb’s ELT, reflection helped the student teachers to realise some areas of development in their approach to raising awareness of bullying among young children. When planning to raise awareness on topics like bullying, teachers need to reflect

every time they deliver such lessons, so that they can continually improve their skills to raise awareness about bullying.

Recommendations

The study’s results showed that student teachers were not cognisant of learners’ different developmental aspects when choosing games and activities for the campaign. Therefore, it is imperative to train student teachers on child development from various perspectives, including cognitive, social, emotional, physical and psychological perspectives. Furthermore, student teachers should be taught how to integrate child development knowledge into lesson planning. Based on the results, the study recommends the inclusion of bullying prevention strategies in the university’s BEd Foundation Phase programme. These strategies should be included from the first year to the final year to equip student teachers with skills to raise awareness about bullying in Grade R classrooms, instead of only focusing on second-year students. This exposure could afford student teachers more experiential learning on raising awareness about bullying. The teacher training curriculum also needs to include time management skills when planning and executing lessons or programmes that are meant to raise awareness about bullying in the classroom. Given that the results showed discord in group work, the study recommends that the curriculum also trains student teachers to work with other people, as bullying needs to be dealt with collectively. We also recommend that student teachers be trained on practical strategies to manage diversity so that they can apply the skills in diverse classrooms. Furthermore, similar studies should be conducted in other universities to establish the preparedness of Grade R student teachers to raise awareness about bullying, specifically with Grade R learners in any environment.

Limitations

The study was limited in sample size as it was carried out with only 25 student teachers from one university; hence, this limits the generalisation to other South African universities. Given that there are several universities in South Africa, experiences from other universities may be different from the study sample. Another limitation was the method used for data collection, which was reflective essays on implementing a bullying campaign. This could be limiting in that the study relied on a single method of data collection, whereas the use of more data collection methods like surveys, interviews and observations could have provided different perspectives. Nonetheless, this method obtained participants’ personal views and experiences, which provided a rich understanding of the gaps in student teachers’ preparedness to raise awareness of the topic of bullying among Grade R learners.

Conclusion

Using an antibullying campaign, the study aimed to establish student teachers’ preparedness to raise awareness about

bullying among Grade R learners. Study results show that the student teachers had several shortfalls, such as the inability to choose appropriate activities, poor classroom management, failure to work well in groups and poor planning for the teaching programme. These shortfalls impeded the effective raising of awareness on the topic of bullying to Grade R learners, reflecting that the student teachers were not prepared. There is a need to fully prepare teachers on how to raise awareness about bullying using collaborative teaching methods.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

D.M., L.M. and N.M.P.M. contributed equally to the writing of this article.

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Data availability

Data sharing does not apply to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this article. Data from the student teachers' reflective essays were used in the writing of this article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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