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Bullying in an educational setting in Limpopo Province: Insights from the social work discipline

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is arguably the most prevalent form of aggression and violence experienced by learners during their schooling years. This phenomenon is gaining increasing recognition among social scientists globally and is becoming a pressing concern at local levels. Bullying is associated with a myriad of social issues, including mental health problems, trauma, diminished academic performance, school dropout rates and, tragically, suicide. Given the emotionally demanding nature of the social work profession, understanding bullying is of utmost importance. The study was conducted in five regions of the Limpopo province of South Africa. This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the understanding of bullying among social workers in educational settings. Social workers were targeted as the study participants. The study aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of bullying using face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with participants selected through purposive sampling. Prior to data collection, participants provided their informed consent and were informed of audio-recording procedures. Thematic content analysis was applied to analyse the data. The study was guided by the ecological approach as a theoretical framework. The study findings revealed that the participants have a clear understanding of bullying. The study recommends continuous training and recruitment of social workers in schools.

Keywords: bullying; context; learning; social work; understanding

INTRODUCTION

Incidents of bullying take place pervasively in learning institutions, attracting local and international attention (Baadjies, 2015). Bullying is a universal concern that occurs to the weak and defenceless, and it can take physical, verbal, emotional and cyberbullying forms (Meter & Bauman, 2018). It remains a serious concern that has fundamental consequences for the victims, perpetrators, bystanders, teachers, the school community and parents (Brandt, 2017). Three elements characterise bullying: the intention to harm another learner, repeated behaviour, and asserting the dominant power of the perpetrator over the victim (Betts, 2016). Bullying has become a serious concern for the wellbeing of learners and threatens the mental health of all involved in the phenomenon. It requires immediate, effective attention to address its prevalence (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). It is a behaviour inflicted on a learner repeatedly to cause harm to the learner physically, socially, emotionally, verbally and through the use of technological devices (Singh, 2017). Bullying is universally considered a human rights issue because of its characteristic use of violence, aggression and abuse. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, section 12, guarantees the right to freedom of security. It protects the rights of people against any form of violence and ensures human dignity (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). The Children's Act of South Africa provides that any form of violence against a learner is considered abuse. Bullying is understood to be an abuse of another child in a learning institution (RSA, 2006). The provisions of the South African Schools Act highlight the importance of respecting the rights of other learners. It portrays bullying as a violent behaviour prohibited within the learning context.

Bullying incidents continue to increase in learning institutions, and this is a concern for the wellbeing of learners (Hendricks & Tanga, 2019). South Africa is not immune to the prevalence of bullying incidents (Graham, 2023). The global statistics show the vulnerability of boys being exposed to bullying, with 32% of boys having experienced bullying as compared to 28% of girls who experienced bullying (Global School Health Survey, 2015). In Washington, the children who are between the ages of 10-13 accounted for 32% of victims of bullying as compared to 34% of children between the ages of 6-9. Bullying was reported to account for 25% of incidents in learning institutions in the Nyanga district of Zimbabwe (Magwa & Mayisela, 2024; Gomba & Zindonda, 2021; Gutuza & Mapolisa, 2015). Findings from Egypt indicate that boys are more at risk of being bullied than is the case with girls. The prevalence amongst boys accounts for 54%, and girls account for 54.5 percent of exposure to bullying (Sweidan, El-Beialy, El-Mangoury et al, 2024). These figures show the prevalence of bullying worldwide, which requires urgent attention (UNESCO, 2018). Cyberbullying affects more than 50% of learning institutions in South Africa, showing a widespread issue in the country's educational environments (Paat & Markham, 2021). Learners are bullied through technology, social media platforms, text and emails (Bernstein & Batchelor, 2022; Staples, 2016).

BACKGROUND, RATIONALE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Bullying is one of the phenomena that leads to violence and disruptions in learning institutions. It has been found to be the leading cause of violent crimes taking place in learning institutions, and it undermines the provision of a safe learning environment (Nthate, 2017). In some instances, bullying reveals elements of gender-based violence and gender inequality in schools

(Mngandi & Tandwa, 2017). Schools have become unsafe environments for learning because of the daily incidents that threaten the safety and security of learners and their education. Schools must be safe environments where learners can freely attend without fear of violence (Brandt, 2017). Victims of bullying are deeply affected by the incidents of bullying that take place within learning institutions. Learners get stressed by the incidents, become depressed and traumatised, and this is reflected in a drop in school attendance and school performance (Hendricks & Tanga, 2019). They contemplate suicide, and some even commit suicide because of bullying in learning institutions (Armitage, 2021; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). The bullying of a 17-year-old girl in Cape Town led to the girl hanging herself (Serra, 2015). Some of the victims of bullying feel compelled to join gangs that are bullying others to feel safe and protect themselves from the continuous occurrence of bullying (Magidi et al., 2016). Learners withdraw socially because of bullying, isolate themselves, and may become aggressive and violent (Khasawneh, 2020). Some learners conflict with the law because they want to defend themselves against the bullies who continuously inflict harm on them (Xu et al., 2016). Fundamentally, bullying effects have a significant impact on the mental health of learners who become victims of the incident (Paat & Markham, 2021). The presence of social workers in school for early detection and intervention may minimise the impact that bullying has on learners (Cabrera, Larranaga & Yubero, 2024).

Social workers have a key role to play in the fight against bullying within learning institutions. They offer programmes that aim to address the phenomenon proactively and reactively (Graham, 2023; Mguye & Omodan, 2023). Social workers provide psychosocial services to the victims of bullying, the perpetrators of bullying, the bystanders, the school community and the parents of the child. They provide inclusive services to address the challenges experienced (Masilo, 2018; Nthate, 2017). Social workers provide therapeutic services, awareness campaigns, recommend preventative measures and educational programmes to address the phenomenon of bullying. When a school is affected by bullying, social workers provide debriefing services to help the learners with emotional problems (Xweso et al., 2024). Social workers respond to bullying reported within the school environment to provide services. Frequently, social workers provide educational programmes involving the learners, teachers, SGB and parents about bullying and its impacts (Masilo & Matlakala, 2023). Family preservation services and parenting programmes are provided during bullying incidents. Social workers further arrange family group conferences to understand the child holistically (Pretorius, 2020). Although the context of this study is the learning environment, it is important to understand that bullying occurs beyond the learning context. It takes place in workplaces, in communities with different groups like LGBTQIA+, people living with disabilities, and in higher education. Bullying takes place in families and also in sporting environments where there is a convergence of lots of people.

In describing the problem for this study, it is argued that bullying is a stressful phenomenon that creates fundamental problems in the lives of learners and other stakeholders such as parents, teachers, community leaders and SGBs. The observations of bullying incidents and the prevalence of bullying attracted the researcher's interest to conduct this study. Bullying is becoming increasingly prevalent, with many incidents reported in the media globally. A significant number of the victims of bullying contemplate suicide, and others commit suicide

(Masilo & Matlakala, 2023). Schools have become crime scenes with a lot of violence and aggression. The aim of the study was to explore social workers' understanding of bullying in a learning context. The objective was to explore and describe the phenomenon of bullying in a learning context, and to develop intervention guidelines for social work practice. The research question was aimed at understanding the social workers' role in addressing bullying in a learning context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bullying context

The bullying that occurs in public has a greater impact than the incidents that occur anonymously (Masilo, 2018). Social workers explore the nature of bullying among learners within a learning context (Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2019). This is because of their proximity to the phenomenon in providing interventions to prevent it and programmes to address it (Smith & Slonje, 2010). The acts of bullying that take place in public or attract significant publicity have a huge impact compared to unreported incidents (Sticca & Perren, 2012). The incidents in the presence of bystanders have a huge impact on the victim, the bully and the bystanders (Moreno et al., 2018). Bystanders may directly or indirectly approve of the bullying behaviour by cheering on the perpetrators (Cross et al., 2015). The response of the bystanders may indicate the acceptability of the behaviour displayed in the bullying incidents (Campbell & Bauman, 2018). Some violent and aggressive behaviour in private may not be categorised as bullying, whereas similar behaviour in public will be labelled as bullying (Berne et al., 2019).

The global prevalence of bullying in a learning context

Bullying has dramatically increased in learning institutions in all regions of the world. North America accounted for 31.7% of bullying incidents, with Europe and the Caribbean accounting for 25% and Central America being the lowest with 22.8% (Modecki et al., 2018). In America, the number of learners who are bullied between the ages of 12 and 18 has notably increased. American schools have been experiencing a surge in bullying incidents within the school environment (Wang et al., 2019). Sub-Saharan Africa shows the highest increase in bullying. It accounts for 48.2% of bullying cases. North Africa has a huge number of learners who are bullied in schools, contributing 42.7% of bullying, while the Middle East has 41.1% (UNESCO, 2018). South Africa has also seen an increase in bullying incidents in schools, which poses a serious threat to the well-being and mental health of learners. Cyberbullying in South Africa reflects figures of 58% of learners having experienced bullying in a learning context (Pillay, 2021). This form of bullying is critical, considering its consequences and its effects on the learners and the teachers (Farhangpour, Maluleke & Mutshaeni, 2019).

Anti-bullying programmes and policies

The anti-bullying programmes and policies are fundamental in reducing the incidence of bullying globally. These policies aim to reduce or eliminate bullying incidents to provide a safe learning environment for school learners (Senekal, 2020). Countries with anti-bullying policies and legislation have been able to manage and reduce the number of incidents taking place in their schools through establishing safe school environments (Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2015).

Social workers use anti-bullying programmes to be proactive in their service to address bullying incidents reported in schools. They educate the stakeholders involved in bullying (Faris & Felmlee, 2014). These programmes are targeted at schools where a significant number of bullying incidents take place. The implementation of anti-bullying and harassment policies is important in the fight against bullying (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Sokol et al., 2016). The development of these policies assists in the effective interventions provided by stakeholders like social workers, teachers and the school governing body.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The ecological approach was found to be relevant for this study, and the study adopted this framework to provide comprehensive background for analysing contextual factors influencing the phenomenon. The theoretical framework recognises the relevance of understanding the interaction between individuals and their environment. This theory focuses on the engagements and interactions between a person, families and the environment (Gitterman, 2009). It is a transactional relationship that a person has with the environment where they come from and live. It focuses on the person-in-environment and on the interactions communities and institutions have with the environment (Teater, 2020). The natural settings and environment where people stay influence the everyday lives of individuals within communities. Social workers should consider the impact of the environment when providing interventions to clients (Kirst-Ashman, 2013). Bullying behaviour is not separate from the environmental factors that influence the behaviour of learners to be violent and aggressive (Hendricks & Tanga, 2019). Learners' engagement with the environmental factors at schools and communities can influence the behaviour that learners may manifest within the school environment (Sikhakhane et al., 2018). The violent culture within communities has the potential to influence the behaviour of other learners to become bullies. School is where bullying normally occurs, especially involving learners (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018). Although bullying occurs within the school environment, some incidents may not get the attention of the school management, governing body, administrative personnel and teachers (Smith, 2016). Various aspects, including domestic violence, influence the culture of violence. Gangsterism influences the behaviour manifested by the learners at learning institutions (Sikhakhane et al., 2018). Violence within the school environment is influenced by ecological and environmental factors such as gangsterism, imbalances of power and peer pressure.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research was important because the researcher sought to understand the feelings and attitudes of the participants in the natural settings (Habib, 2022). It adopted an exploratory, descriptive and contextual research design to investigate the phenomenon (Lapan et al., 2015). An exploratory research design was used to explore the participants' understanding of bullying. The researcher gave a clear account of what was explored during the interviews. The researcher described the participants and their role in the study (Matthew & Ross, 2018). A contextual research design implies a design that emphasises an understanding of the phenomenon within its specific context. It involves explorations of behaviours, feelings and experiences in real-world settings. The contextual research design was used to provide context and understanding of the procedures, experiences

and actions in a context that is localised for the participants (Randles, 2017). It was used to identify and suggest contextually relevant alternatives that align with the participants' lived experiences and local realities within the study. This design allows the researcher to understand the phenomenon within its specific environment deeply (Babbie & Mouton, 2017). Limpopo has been experiencing an increase in bullying cases, with some drawing international headlines (Muthevhuli & Obadire, 2021). The researcher had previously practised as a social worker in Limpopo Province. The inclusion criteria that needed to be met by the participants included:

- The participants must be employed by the Limpopo Department of Social Development as social workers and must be linked to or based in schools. School-linked social workers are those employed by the Limpopo Department of Social Development and are given specific schools to respond to bullying incidents. School-based social workers are those based in schools but still employed by Limpopo DSD.
- Must have been exposed to the phenomenon of bullying and responding to it in learning institutions for a period of over three years;
- Must be a good-standing social worker, registered and licensed to practice with the South African Council for Social Services Professions.

Social workers who are not providing services related to bullying incidents and who are not responding to incidents of bullying in schools were not included in the study. The social workers providing employee wellness services in health and other settings were also excluded from participating in the study. The research study did not include social workers in private practice and NGOs..

The researcher used purposive sampling to select the sample because of their knowledge of the targeted population. The study gathered data using a face-to-face semi-structured interview schedule with 21 social workers participating in the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2017), as that was the saturation point. English was used to communicate with the participants because of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the participants (Matthews & Ross, 2018). The average time spent with the participant during data collection was 40 minutes. The researcher approached individual participants and social work supervisors who knew the social workers' focus areas to recruit the study participants. The researcher targeted participants with experience in working with bullying and those who are based in schools or linked to schools. The selection was based on eligibility regarding experience in dealing with incidents of bullying and being school-based or linked to a learning institution. Data were audio-recorded with verbatim transcriptions of data. The thematic content analysis was applied to comprehensively analyse the data collected following the Tesch's approach (Creswell, 2014). The study used an independent coder to validate the collected data and ensure the findings were dependable.

Ethical considerations were a fundamental part of the research project to ensure observation of the universal ethical standards and principles. In order to ensure informed consent, the participants were informed about the study's aims, risks and benefits (Polit & Beck, 2014). The researcher ensured that participants signed the informed consent form for their participation in the study. The researcher informed the participants that there is no remuneration for participating in the study because of ethical provisions. The participants were informed that

their participation in the study was by choice and explained to the participants what the study was about. The participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study without giving notice. The researcher informed the participants about the benefits of participating in the study and what the findings may address. The information provided by the participants was kept confidential. The participants were informed that their participation in the study would remain confidential and that all the information they shared would be kept confidential. The researcher ensured that no persons had access to the confidential information, including the transcribed data. The audio-recording interviews were kept safe in a lockable cupboard with restricted access. Only the research supervisor had access to the data collected from the participants. The participants were allowed to choose a suitable place/venue where they would be comfortable conducting interviews. The personal information of the participants remained anonymous to protect their identities (Deepika et al., 2022). No identifying information was used as the researcher used pseudonyms to identify the participants to avoid compromising their identity. The real names of the participants were not used to protect their identities. Avoidance of harm was fundamental in the study, and the researcher employed this to ensure that participants were not harmed after they participated in the research study (Moreno, 2017). The researcher arranged with a psychologist to provide debriefing services to the participants, if necessary. This was important to manage the harm that might have been caused by participating in the study (Picardi & Masick, 2014). The researcher applied for permission to conduct the study from the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa. The application for ethical approval for the study was granted, with ethics approval number 69719675_CRECHS_2022.

FINDINGS

The study aimed to establish social workers' understanding of bullying in a learning context. Bullying was revealed to be the continuous misuse of power that is intentional by a learner using either physical, emotional, verbal, psychological or cyberbullying. The participants of the study revealed that there are a range of elements that describe bullying. These elements include the use of violence, threats, insults, kicking and using technological devices to harm and hurt other learners. Bullying is understood to be a universal phenomenon with negative effects on the learners within a learning context. The developed themes are developed and discussed below.

Theme 1: Understanding bullying in a learning context

The participants provided a range of responses on their understanding of bullying in a learning context. It stems from the imbalance of power targeted at the weak within the school environment, using various means. The participants further indicated that it is offensive behaviour that is used repeatedly and over time, targeting learners who cannot defend themselves. This happens over an extended period of time and instils fear among the victims (Pabian & Vandebosch, 2016; Ttofi, 2015). Bullying may harm the victim in their social, emotional, physical and psychological dimensions. The characteristics of bullying must include intent, repetition and a power imbalance (Gladden et al., 2014). Below are some of the verbatim responses of the participants.

I understand bullying to mean the repeated use of violence, aggression and insults to inflict harm on the participants. Learners who are weak and vulnerable are targeted and exposed to bullying. Sometimes, learners get bullied because of their physical appearance.

Look, I think bullying should have the intention to harm the next person continuously. However, I do not significantly subscribe to the notion of continuous or repeated violence. Bullying is any form of violence to which learners are exposed.

Well, I know bullying to be characterised by violence targeting vulnerable groups in schools. At times, victims surrender their lunch to the perpetrators because of fears of assault and body shaming. It is a broad phenomenon, depending on the type you are talking about.

Based on the submissions of the participants, bullying is understood to entail acts of violence and aggression. This suggests that the social work profession understands the nature of bullying in a learning context (Espelage & Holt, 2013; Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2019). The participants understand bullying to involve the use of physical violence, aggression, verbal abuse and technology to inflict harm. The literature reflects the participant's understanding of the phenomenon. The participants' narratives confirm the views of Werth et al. (2015), who submit that violence is the key element of bullying. They further argue that bullying targets individuals who are perceived to be weaker and defenceless.

Theme 2: Common types of bullying

The participants were asked to share their understanding of the types of bullying commonly experienced. A significant number of participants indicated that bullying takes various forms and includes the use of violence and aggression to inflict harm on the victim. They noted that bullying is expressed directly or indirectly and can take physical, verbal and cyber forms. The participants further highlight that bullying includes the interaction that happens face to face that has elements of pushing, insults and beating. They indicated that bullying takes physical form where the victim is targeted through hitting, punching, spitting and kicking. Physical bullying is a direct action entailing the use of force, power imbalance, violence and aggression. Verbal bullying was found to be the use of oral or written communication forms to cause harm to the victim who is targeted (Eriksen, 2018). It includes threats, insults, inappropriate sexual utterances and gestures that are displayed to the victims. Verbal bullying happens more in a learning context and can take place in person and through the use of technology. Cyberbullying is one of the most commonly used types of bullying in a learning context. The participants indicated that this type of bullying extends its scope from the school environment to the communities where learners stay (Camodeca & Coppola, 2016).

In my area, we do not have many bullying incidents. The common types of bullying I respond to are physical and verbal forms of bullying. Learners physically violate each other and become aggressive.

Physical and verbal forms of bullying are the most common types of bullying that learners are exposed to in schools. This involves teasing, assault, pushing, insults, threats, and inappropriate use of language.

I think the common type of bullying that I respond to is physical bullying. Recently, I have been responding to cyberbullying incidents wherein learners use technology, texts and social media to inflict harm on other learners. This has been seen to cause serious mental health problems and lead to contemplation of suicide and, ultimately, suicide.

The above excerpts show the common types of bullying that participants understand and respond to daily. These are types of bullying experienced globally by learners. Younan (2019) explains that bullying involves the use of technology, social media, emails, text, and the publication of inappropriate pictures and videos to hurt the targeted learner. Technology is used to instil fear in the victim, shame the victim and humiliate them (Camodeca et al., 2015; Owens, 2016). They further indicate that most victims of cyberbullying contemplate committing suicide, whereas some commit suicide because of the exposure that they have experienced (Owens et al., 2014; Quirk & Campbell, 2015). The publication of inappropriate materials can be viewed by various people within the community and at school. This makes it difficult for the learners to have the courage to face the world and instead resort to suicide (Masilo, 2018; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). The researcher views the participants' understanding as aligning with the global understanding of the common types of bullying in schools, such as physical, verbal and cyberbullying. These are the types that expose learners to stress, depression, trauma and suicide. These types of bullying make it difficult for learners to cope with the stressors associated with bullying.

Theme 3: Possible causes of bullying in a learning context

The participants indicated factors that lead to bullying in a learning context. They point out that various factors at school and home influence bullying in the learning context. The participants indicated that chief among the causes of bullying are the family circumstances and the violent and aggressive behaviour that children are exposed to. The participants indicated that learners who perpetrate bullying think violence is the only solution to resolving conflicts or differences and apply it within the school environment (Camodeca et al., 2015). Learners' personalities are one factor that influences children's behaviour towards other learners in school. Media and TV are some of the factors that also influence the behaviour of children to abuse others (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). The following are the comments by the participants regarding the causes of bullying.

The circumstances within families influence the violent behaviour of learners at school. Neglecting the behaviour of parents and poor parenting are some of the causes of bullying. When children are from dysfunctional families, they run a risk of bullying other learners at school. Children learn behaviour from the streets because their parents are not guiding them.

When children are exposed to violence and aggression by their parents and siblings, they become violent within the school environment with other learners. Learners think this is a way of resolving conflicts when they are having disagreements with other learners. Learners adopt the aggressive and violent behaviour they observe as a mechanism for solving problems.

Gangsterism is one of the reasons that causes bullying in a learning context. When learners affiliate with gangsterism, they feel they have the power to violate other learners. Peer group pressure, which is violent, is one of the causes of bullying. Bullies feel they have the support of other members of the group or peers, and they inflict harm on others.

The media is one of the causes of bullying because of the violence shown on TV. Children are exposed to violent behaviour from the media and want to try what they see in the media with their peers at school. Violent and aggressive conduct observed on the phones and TV leads to bullying of other learners within the school environment.

It was interesting to learn that poor parenting is one of the underlying causes of bullying. Additionally, peer group pressure and gangsterism were found to be influential factors that led to bullying. Masilo (2018) explains that dysfunctional family behaviours are the leading contributor to bullying among learners. Learners observe violent behaviour from family members and try the behaviour when with their peers at school. Children observe activities through the media, TV and social platforms and imitate them in reality (Masilo, 2023). Failure to regulate children when watching TV has a fundamental consequence that influences the behaviour of children. Parents' failure to participate in school activities and children's academic work is another factor influencing learners involved in this bullying behaviour (Owens et al., 2014). The researcher views the revelations about poor parenting, neglecting behaviour and involvement in gangsterism to be key causes underlying bullying behaviour. Children who grow up without the support or presence of an active father figure are more likely to be vulnerable to learn and adopting behaviours influenced by environmental factors. This is especially the case if there is limited positive guidance at home.

Theme 4: Bullying risk factors in schools

The study established that various risk factors are understood to perpetuate bullying in learning institutions. The participants indicated that the presence of weapons within the school environment is one of the risk factors identified to influence bullying. Obesity is one of the factors that risk learners being exposed to bullying in schools. Body shaming is a growing trend and is used to expose learners to bullying within the learning environment. The participants further identified poverty as one of the factors that expose learners to bullying and subject them to inhuman treatment by the perpetrators of bullying in schools (Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

Our schools have become a war zone with different types of weapons used against learners and teachers. The safety of the learners has been compromised in schools because of the availability of weapons. Schools are supposed to be safe spaces to encourage learning to take place without barriers. Bullies use these weapons to injure other learners and to threaten bystanders. Fears are instilled through the use of these weapons.

One of the most common risk factors for bullying is obesity. Learners who are obese are always at risk of being teased and body-shamed by bullies in the learning environment. The verbal form of bullying is used here to make the learners feel less of themselves and deteriorate in confidence. Learners who are obese often feel like dropping out of school because they are being targeted.

Learners who come from poor families are often vulnerable to abuse and violence. Poverty is one of the risk factors of bullying because learners ill-treat the victim of bullying. Learners from poor families are treated inhumanely.

These findings support the views of Juvonen and Graham (2014), who stated that possession of weapons constitutes bullying as a risk factor in a learning environment. Obesity of learners was found to make learners vulnerable to violence and verbal bullying. This was echoed by Staples (2016), who explained that learners who are obese run a risk of being bullied in a learning environment. These factors make schools unsafe places for learning and make learners fearful of going to school. Learners are recorded as absent from school because of their fears and violent school environment (Masilo, 2018). Learners' grades also decline because bullying incidents lead to a lack of concentration in schools (Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2015; Staples, 2016). Social workers understand these factors and provide information to alleviate the risk factors that have the potential to derail the academic progress of learners and subject them to mental health problems (Masilo, 2023; Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

Theme 5: Social work interventions in bullying

The study revealed that the social work profession is a critical role player in addressing bullying in learning institutions. Education on the nature of bullying and the consequences of bullying are some of the aspects that social workers target when providing interventions. The study identified bullying as a social problem that creates a range of other problems that require the intervention of social workers. The study revealed that social workers conduct awareness and preventative programmes to reduce the incidents of bullying. These are proactive programmes that prevent bullying from taking place. Social workers were further found to provide therapeutic services to learners involved in bullying, with the victim and the perpetrator taking priority. They provide counselling services to the victim of bullying, the perpetrator and the bystanders (Masilo, 2018).

Social work professionals are central to managing, identifying, and preventing bullying. The participants indicated that social workers provide education about preventative programmes for bullying. Awareness campaigns targeting bullying hotspots are fundamental to ensuring social work intervention.

Social workers provide counselling to the learners involved in bullying. The counselling targets the victim of bullying, the bully, and the bystanders.

Psychosocial support services involve parents of the learners involved in bullying, the teachers, the administrative personnel and the school governing body. Social workers also provide debriefing services to those who may have witnessed the incident (Smith, 2016; Toseland & Rivas, 2017). Realising that the social work profession in learning institutions is important to provide effective social work intervention to deal with daily bullying incidents and other social problems. Social workers attend to all social problems, provide interventions and work with parents to address the learners' concerns. Therapeutic services are key in providing interventions to the victims and the perpetrator.

Proactive programmes such as awareness and preventative campaigns are important in dealing with bullying within learning institutions (Masilo, 2023). Social workers aim to address these problems, which are reported before they become widely prevalent. Social workers understand bullying to be violence and aggression that takes place repeatedly in the school environment, targeting the most vulnerable in that context (Hall, 2017). The most common forms are physical, verbal and cyberbullying. These types of bullying put pressure on the mental health of learners, and some contemplate suicide, while others succeed in committing suicide. The study found that in South Africa, social workers provide anti-bullying programmes to the school community and educate the school community regarding bullying and its consequences to the victims of bullying, the perpetrators, the teachers, the school governing body and the parents (Masilo, 2018).

DISCUSSION

The study findings outlined social workers' understanding of the bullying phenomenon. It further establishes the devastating effects that bullying has on learners. Interestingly, the study highlights social workers' important role and interventions in the phenomenon. Social workers understand the psychosocial support services they should provide to the learners involved and who are exposed to bullying (Masilo, 2023). Social workers are critical stakeholders in learning contexts to address social problems. This, therefore, makes it critical that social workers are recruited to schools to address the social problems. It has been found that some types of bullying lead to stress, depression, trauma and contemplation of suicide, and sometimes even lead to suicide (Staples, 2016). The presence of social workers in schools will assist in addressing the environmental factors that promote bullying. These would include poor parenting, poverty, gangsterism, peer pressure, dysfunctional families and the availability of drugs and weapons. Hall (2017) finds that cyberbullying needs to be understood as a type of bullying that has destructive effects on learners. This is indeed true, because of the lack of capacity by learners to deal with emotions associated with adverse social media posts and the display of inappropriate pictures, videos and other materials. Despite the understanding of social workers of the phenomenon of bullying, the shortage of social workers in schools continues to hamper the comprehensive services required to address bullying. Singh (2017) explains the importance of social workers addressing the possible causes and risk factors of bullying in a learning context. The researcher concurs with this emphasis on the importance of social workers in schools. Educators are not empowered to deal with social ills within the school environment. They are forced to attend to social problems that actually require the expertise of social workers and hence may neglect their teaching responsibilities. The absence of a father figure in the lives of children is one of the factors leading to of bullying. This was a significant revelation in the study because it indicates that children learn bullying behaviour from the streets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Social workers should be continuously capacitated and provided with updated programmes of interventions in bullying within a learning context.
- Empowerment and enhancement of expertise and skills must be prioritised to ensure competence and improved social work interventions.
- Schools should have full-time social workers to address bullying-related problems and other social ills.
- Research needs to be continuously conducted on improving social workers' response to bullying.
- Social workers should develop and adopt a constructive and proactive approach to addressing bullying.
- Social workers must recognise the environmental factors leading to bullying within the learning context for effective interventions.
- A comprehensive, integrated approach that includes different stakeholders should be implemented for intervention.
- Social workers should understand bullying to include the continuous deliberate abuse of power against the victim involving physical, verbal and cyberbullying.
- School social workers must have clear programmes, techniques, and policies to address bullying effectively.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that recruiting full-time social workers in schools is fundamental in addressing bullying. This would enable social workers to address the symptoms of bullying and provide proactive and reactive services. The study has established that social workers clearly understand bullying, as well as the need for a positive move toward preventing and managing the phenomenon. The presence of social workers in schools will assist in addressing the risk factors and the causes of bullying within a learning environment. Restoring safety in a violence-free zone within the school environment is very important. The social worker's viewpoint on bullying could assist in addressing bullying in a learning context. Although there is an understanding of bullying within the social work profession, it is important to have continuous education to provide updated knowledge and information. The behaviour that can be identified as bullying occurs in various contexts, including the learning context. The risk factors identified with bullying need to be addressed to understand bullying better. Understanding the nature and causes of bullying ensures an integrated approach to providing interventions.

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