

# Bullying in schools – The educator's role

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Worldwide there is a problem with violent incidents occurring amongst learners in schools. Bullying is one mode of violence that often occurs at school level. Bullying means repeatedly attacking a person psychologically, physically and/or emotionally in order to inflict harm. Bullying behaviour cannot be ignored, because the victims often report physical and mental health problems caused by the abuse they suffered. The future of the bully is also at stake, because such a person can turn into an abuser in his or her adult years. This research focused on the challenges for teachers in the school system to handle bullying behaviour. The specific aims of the study were to research the role of school policies and ethos, as well as the teacher's role, in dealing with bullying. The researchers investigated the problem by using social identity theory as theoretical framework and Christianity as worldview. The researchers mainly used a qualitative research design. Data for this study were collected by means of a literature study and questionnaires with closed questions as well as open-ended questions about teachers' experiences regarding bullying. The main emphasis was on the feedback on the open-ended questions. It became clear from the research that schools should adopt an anti-bullying policy. Teachers should give more attention to classroom rules and they should become skilled in dealing with bullying. Recommendations were made concerning the role of teachers as well as the place of school ethos and policies when the above-mentioned behavioural problem needs to be managed.

**Afknoery in skole – Die opvoeder se rol.** Wêreldwyd is daar 'n probleem met insidente van geweld wat tussen leerders in skole plaasvind. Afknoery is een wyse van gewelddoetoeffening wat op skoolvlak plaasvind. Afknoery beteken om 'n persoon herhaaldelik sielkundig, fisies en/of emosioneel skade aan te doen. Afknoegedrag kan nie geïgnoreer word nie, omdat die slagoffers dikwels fisiese- en geestesgesondheidsprobleme kry as gevolg van die mishandeling. Die toekoms van die afknoer is ook ter sprake, aangesien so 'n persoon kan ontwikkel in 'n mishandelaar in sy of haar volwasse jare. Die navorsing wat gedoen is, het gefokus op die uitdagings vir onderwysers in die skoolsisteem om afknoery te hanteer. Die spesifieke doelwitte van die studie was om navorsing te doen oor skoolbeleid en etos, sowel as die rol van onderwysers in die hantering van afknoery. Die navorsers het die probleem vanuit 'n sosiale identiteitsteorie as teoretiese raamwerk benader, asook vanuit 'n Christelike werklikheidsbeskouing. Die navorsers het hoofsaaklik 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsmetode gebruik. Data vir hierdie studie is ingesamel deur middel van 'n literatuurstudie en vraelyste met geslote vrae en oop einde-vrae oor die onderwysers se ervarings rakende afknoery. Die klem het geval op die response op die oopvrae. Dit het duidelik uit die navorsing na vore gekom dat skole 'n teen-afknoerybeleid in plek behoort te stel. Onderwysers moet meer aandag skenk aan klaskamerreëls en hulle behoort vaardighede te ontwikkel om afknoery te hanteer. Aanbevelings is gemaak oor die rol van onderwysers asook oor die hulp van skoollede en beleide om genoemde gedragsprobleme te hanteer.

## Introduction

Bullying is a worldwide problem in schools that may escalate into serious forms of antisocial behaviour if nothing is done to control it (Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:101). It is also increasing in severity and frequency in South Africa. A whole-school approach is necessary to combat bullying whereby all stakeholders should contribute to possible solutions to the problem (Lee 2004:2). In this research the emphasis is on how school policy, code of conduct and ethos in general can assist teachers to find solutions to this behavioural problem.

Dr Heinemann, a Swedish physician, in 1972 did research on aggressive behaviour amongst school children, describing it as 'mobbing'. His work marked the early beginning of research into what is currently referred to as 'bullying'. Dan Olweus, a fellow-countryman of Heinemann's, was the first person to systematically investigate the nature, frequency and long-term effects

of bullying in Scandinavian schools. In 1983, his studies culminated in a national survey of the phenomenon in Norway (Rivers, Duncan & Besag 2007:3; Beaty & Alexeyev 2008:3). It was not until the early 1990s that research on bullying began in countries like the United Kingdom where the term 'bullying' was used (Rivers *et al.* 2007:4). All the research notwithstanding, the problem seems to escalate all over the world. Researchers should concentrate on practical solutions to the problem. One of the main sites of bullying is the school, thus *inter alia* the problem should be addressed in the school context.

Apathetic teachers who show little interest in their learners and treat them unfairly, thereby creating an atmosphere that is conducive to bullying, do not help to curb the problem (Barboza *et al.* 2009:107). On the other hand, 'perceived social support from teachers [*is*] associated with lower probabilities of bullying.' Therefore bullying can be curbed through support from teachers and by the way the class is structured and discipline maintained (Barboza *et al.* 2009:117).

The school should be a haven of safety for all learners where they can learn what they need to learn to become decent human beings. A school's policy and code of conduct should have definite rules and consequences for any aggressive or violent behaviour.

The research done focused on the challenges faced by teachers in the school system to handle bullying behaviour adequately. The specific aims of the study were to research the role of school policy and ethos, as well as the teacher's role, in dealing with bullying. Recommendations are made as to the role of teachers as well as the place of school ethos and policies concerning behavioural problems such as bullying.

## Theoretical framework

The researchers used a social-psychological theory namely social identity theory in their research, because of its emphasis on group acceptance, which is needed by most children and adolescents, and which influences bullying. The theory was first described in 1972 by Henri Tajfel, who claimed that a person's social identity is linked to his or her conception of himself or herself as being included in or belonging to a particular social group. Membership of a social group would provide emotional security and significance, thus adding value to the person's life, for instance by enhancing social self-esteem (Rivers *et al.* 2007:6). The person may, however, become so dependent on group acceptance and social identity that he or she may lose his or her individuality to the extent that his or her behaviour is entirely a function of group will, with the result, for example, that he or she may become embroiled in random acts of violence as personal responsibility is swept aside by the overriding momentum of the group (Rivers *et al.* 2007:7). By using the above-mentioned framework the researchers gained some insight into the world of the bully. According to Barboza *et al.* (2009:107) bullying may increase as peer support increases.

Bullies usually associate with peer groups who endorse socially undesirable, aggressive behaviour. Teachers should give attention to the group dynamics in their classrooms and if it is negative, should address the problem. The group can, however, also be used as solution to the problem if they can be positively influenced by the teacher.

The researchers adhered to a Christian worldview in the sense that they investigated solutions to the problem of bullying by emphasising the inculcation of Christian values such as tolerance, neighbourly love, care and respect in learners, so that learners would display these virtues even in a group context. In a theistic framework people typically adhere to values such as honesty, impartiality, courage, self-control, responsibility, concern for others, mercy and justice (Lewis 1946). In Christianity the moral virtues are grounded in the character of Christ and embodied in Biblical ethics. Worldview should become a way of living:

Christians who embrace the [*Christian*] worldview do so because of their belief that worldview is such a fundamental part of human nature that every person has one whether he [*or she*] realizes it or not. (All about worldview n.d.)

In the spirit of the research Christianity is about treating others in a humane way, because 'Jesus came into this world, not as an imposter of humanity, nor as a dim reflection of humanity ... but as a living, fully functional and holistic representative of humanity (Heb 4:15)' (Iselin & Meteyard 2010:39). It is to be hoped that when they teach Christian values, teachers will also educate their class as a group in accepting each other and caring for each other, which is also in line with the positive application of the social identity theoretical framework.

The behaviour of bullies does show a tendency to adhere to group norms that are unacceptable and not seen as normative within the Christian worldview. Stakeholders such as parents and teachers should guide learners to choose behaviour where they treat their fellow human beings humanely and with respect. Belonging to a group as indicated by the social identity theoretical framework is very important for most young people and that should be kept in mind when dealing with bullying.

## Literature review

### Bullying as antisocial behaviour

Bullying typically takes the form of aggressive incidents in which attacks are mounted repeatedly by one or more children on a weaker or smaller child who is perceived as being unable to defend himself or herself. There is a power imbalance between the bully and the victim – it therefore boils down to the systematic abuse of power (Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:101; Barboza *et al.* 2009:102; Crothers & Kolbert 2008:133). Olweus, Limber and Mihalic (in Sciarra [2003:352]), Smokowski & Kopasz (2005:102), Barboza *et al.* (2009:102), Prinsloo (2008:27) and Beaty & Alexeyev (2009:1) explain that there are different kinds of bullying. It can be physical (hitting, kicking, pushing, and choking) or verbal (name-calling, teasing, 'cat-calling', threatening or malicious rumour-mongering) which are direct forms of bullying, usually

perpetrated by boys. Indirect forms of bullying, which mostly happen amongst girls, include obscene gestures, making faces, isolating an individual from a group or withdrawal of friendship. Exclusion from groups (ostracism) is also called relational bullying or social bullying. A more recent kind of bullying is called cyber bullying which involves sending harmful, rude or cruel text messages or images by means of instant messaging, emails, chat rooms or other social network sites (Feinberg & Robey 2009:26; Beaty & Alexeyev 2008:3). Sharp and Sharp (1994, in Suckling & Temple 2002:69) define bullying as a form of aggressive behaviour that is intended to hurt, harm and humiliate. It is typically repetitive in order to instil terror in the victim. The motivation behind most bullying behaviour is intentional power abuse and the need to intimidate and dominate as part of group acceptance, albeit in a negative sense. Bullying behaviour is also not in line with Christian values as summarised by Jesus: 'My command is this: Love each other as I loved you' (Jn 15:12) or 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Mk 12:31, New International Version).

In general, it is thought that bullies are bullied at home or elsewhere, from which they take the lesson that by domineering others one gets what one wants. A family member may get away with bullying another family member, thus teaching the victim to use bullying tactics to gain control over weaker peers (Rivers *et al.* 2007:19–20). Parents of bullies often use power-assertive techniques like physical punishment to manage others (authoritarian parenting style). They may lack warmth and are often not involved in their children's lives. Bullies may imitate their parents' aggressive behaviour (Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:103; Barboza *et al.* 2009:104). Bullies often come from a home background where there is admiration for dominance over others. Some parents for instance may encourage negative social behaviour by encouraging achievement at all costs. High achievement in sports or the academic or social spheres, which has become very important in schools, may become the only goal their children strive for, not caring about others on their way up (Rivers *et al.* 2007:19). Teachers and parents often turn a blind eye to what actually happens to children on their way up the achievement ladder. Such individuals often lack empathy, are heedless of other people's interests or well-being and become autocratic leaders. All of the above negate the Christian values of patience, kindness and trust. Adherence to such values would mean that the child would not be rude, self-seeking, easily angered or keep a record of wrongs (1 Cor 13:4–6, New International Version). The refusal to adhere to values such as these can have dire consequences for the bully and the victim.

### Consequences or effects of bullying

The consequences of bullying can become a vicious circle influencing healthy development in adulthood as well. Seen from the point of view of social identity theory both the victim and the bully eventually experience unhealthy social development.

Problems experienced by victims of bullying may be emotional or social, and include loneliness, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and even thoughts of suicide. Victims often experience high levels of post-traumatic stress and this can lead to mental health problems (Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:104; Rivers *et al.* 2007:27–28; Crothers & Kolbert 2008:133; Prinsloo 2008:30; Beaty & Alexeyev 2008:8). Physical consequences of bullying can be headaches, enuresis, loss of appetite and stomach problems; and educational problems can include absenteeism, withdrawal from social activities at school, loss of concentration and fear of asking questions (De Wet 2005:45). More long-term consequences that may affect victims' lives as adults include poor self-esteem, eating disorders, relationship problems and a lack of conflict resolution skills.

Bullies, on the other hand, learn to use violence and aggression to solve problems. They learn to gain emotional, social and often monetary benefits from their aggressive behaviour. They gain or maintain dominance in an abusive way and often lack a sense of empathy. Poor development of empathy can lead to depersonalisation and alienation from healthy human relationships. The use of social aggression may lead to abuse or a career in crime in adulthood (Rivers *et al.* 2007:29; Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:102; De Wet 2005:45). Many bullies experience mental health problems. They present conditions such as attention deficit or oppositional-conduct disorder. They often turn to substance abuse and in adulthood present antisocial behaviour (Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:103; Prinsloo 2008:33; Crothers & Kolbert 2008:133). Bullies demonstrate poor psycho-social skills and have difficulties with social adjustment and cooperation with peers, because their egocentrism and related positive expectations of antisocial behaviour gets in the way of any movement towards social acceptability. Consequently their social skills are poorly developed, and they produce aggressive and hostile alternatives to situational *stimuli* and demands (Prinsloo 2008:33–34).

It is important to introduce effective measures against bullying in schools, preferably by involving the whole school in dealing with this destructive problem.

### The role of school policy and ethos in dealing with bullying

School ethos is very important in combating bullying. The character of a school is expressed in verbal utterances or other forms of behaviour that are indicative of certain beliefs and attitudes. The mission of the school that cares about its learners according to Christian values should be to curb or eradicate all forms of violence, but not just by negative ruling. A positive, optimistic school will have general principles (e.g. treating everybody with respect) that should be adhered to by all stakeholders (Rivers *et al.* 2007:38–39, 46). According to Prinsloo (2008:27), a safe school environment is characterised by a humane and caring ethos free from discrimination, intolerance and violence.



Unfortunately, it often happens that rules in schools as indicated in the code of conduct are for the learners only, because teachers become bad role models when under pressure and learners are told: 'Do as I say, not as I do' (Rivers *et al.* 2007:46). The competitiveness in the education system causes stress for teachers and learners with the result that principles such as respect, tolerance and care are not adhered to by everybody in the school. There is competition amongst learners for academic, sports and cultural achievements, but also competition amongst teachers for recognition as 'good' teachers. Because of a constant fear of failure, teachers and learners 'lose their moral compass and find that they are working to hidden agendas that require coercion rather than persuasion, and manipulation rather than honesty' (Rivers *et al.* 2007:46).

A school's failure to deal with bullying allows a hostile environment to interfere with learning, whereas dealing with the issue improves school climate, maximises achievements and in general creates a happy community (Beaty & Alexeyev 2008:2). Learners should feel safe in the school. A culture of respect and recognition of human dignity is important. A zero-tolerance policy with swift and serious consequences for engaging in bullying should be part of the school code of conduct. There should be no payoffs for bullying (Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:108).

Most anti-bullying programmes prompt school staff to get involved in learner problems and to create a warm atmosphere with firm boundaries concerning unacceptable behaviour, consistently applying non-hostile and non-violent consequences for violation of rules. Adults should be authority figures as well as role models (Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:106). Bullies should be aware of school policies and the code of conduct and should be held accountable when they fail to adhere to the rules. Behavioural contracts and social skills training can also be helpful (Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:106–107).

Stewart and Knott (1999) add the following recommendations for inclusion in school policy:

- practical strategies to address behavioural problems
- acceptance by staff that some level of confrontation between students is healthy and normal
- programmes and policies that are based on core values (in this framework Christian values) rather than rewards and punishments
- expected student behaviour being modelled and taught by all stakeholders in the school. (p. 113)

If all teachers in a school could be equipped to deal with issues such as bullying, schools would become happy, safe places where learners feel free to explore and learn. Unfortunately not all teachers know how to deal with such contentious issues, nor do they adhere to the values they want to instil in learners.

### **The negative role of teachers in dealing with bullying**

A lack of classroom management skills, poor teaching abilities and an inefficient discipline system can undermine

efforts to curb unruly behaviour (Orpinas & Horne 2006:47). Teachers can be so focused on having good authoritarian classroom discipline that they stoop to techniques such as sarcasm or discrimination, and ignore aggressive behaviour if it suits their interests. Learners may pick up this negative ethic of dealing with subordinates and apply the same techniques with weaker and more vulnerable peers (Rivers *et al.* 2007:47).

Learners often complain that teachers contribute to bullying because they tolerate it. By not speaking up or intervening in bullying incidents they create the impression that they are unaware of or impervious to such incidents or, worse, that they tacitly approve of such undesirable behaviour (Crothers & Kolbert 2008:133; Beaty & Alexeyev 2008:7).

Teachers' attitudes towards learners, parents and colleagues have an important influence on learners' behaviour. Aggressive disciplinary measures can create a negative school environment and teachers can then become role models of the behaviour they are trying to prevent (Orpinas & Horne 2006:48; Rivers *et al.* 2007:41). Perfect conditions for bullying are provided where social relationships are contaminated by fear and injustice (Rivers *et al.* 2007:41). This behaviour contravenes Christian values such as neighbourly love and care. It also shows the negative influence of group association.

The negative influence of teachers has been highlighted above. Such problems often occur because teachers are not equipped to deal with problems such as bullying. The researchers decided to investigate the positive role teachers can play in curbing the problem of bullying and find out whether they are equipped to deal with the issue.

## **Research methodology**

### **Research design**

The researchers mainly used a qualitative research design to study the issue of the teacher's role in curbing bullying in this specific instance. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001:393), qualitative research extends the understanding of a phenomenon and contributes to educational practice, policymaking and social consciousness. Part of the research involved collecting statistical information and there quantitative research methods were used, but the emphasis of this study was on the responses to the open-ended questions posed to the participants.

### **Data collection methods**

Purposive and convenient sampling was used to select teachers from different schools. In purposive sampling researchers purposefully seek typical and divergent data within easy reach of the researchers (convenient sampling) (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpoort 2005:329). A selection of six different urban schools (four primary and two secondary schools) from the General Education and Training (GET) and Further Education and Training (FET) Band in schools

in Gauteng in South Africa was used as a sample of a bigger population of urban schools. Questionnaires were handed to school principals to be distributed to staff members. Eighty teachers responded. The sampling rationale was that the researchers wanted to get information from teachers who were directly involved in teaching and who dealt with various types of learners within the immediate context of the researchers.

Data were gathered by using questionnaires with qualitative and quantitative sections to elicit teachers' views on bullying and to find out whether they were equipped to deal with such behaviour. A printed questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions was personally delivered to schools with a discussion with the principal regarding the rationale behind the research. Leedy and Ormrod (2001:197) state that the anonymity of responses to a questionnaire encourages participants to be more truthful than they would be in a personal interview. The researchers used the qualitative data from the questionnaire for the main emphasis of this research, namely the question whether teachers are equipped to deal with bullying, and the quantitative data to deduce teachers' consciousness regarding the issue.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections of which the first covered biographical detail and the second information about bullying at the specific schools. The concluding section comprised open questions about teachers' training for dealing with bullying problems, and about strategies they would use to limit the occurrence of such incidents. It was important to see whether teachers made positive use of the children's dependence on group association and also whether they kept a humane, caring ethos in mind when dealing with bullying.

### Data analysis and representation

The closed questions elicited views on bullying incidents, types of bullying, places of occurrence and teacher training to deal with bullying incidences. The information was quantitatively applied to deduce teachers' consciousness regarding the issue. The open-ended questions dealt with the way teachers dealt with bullying incidents. Both researchers read through the qualitative responses to the open-ended questions. Data were grounded by hand coding for internal consistency (Haig 1995) and to discover repeating themes in the responses. Comparisons were drawn to point out generalisations and contrasts. Feedback is given in the section on findings, mainly by using a narrative format.

### Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations adhered to by the researchers included gaining informed consent from the school principals and participants. Participation in the research was voluntary. All responses were made anonymously. Confidentiality was important and the researchers adhered to the principle of 'no harm' done to respondents participating in the research.

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established by using different ways to guard against bias in the findings, for instance by employing

more than one researcher and comparing the responses they received in order to show up similarities. The researchers sought to elicit the responses of the participants at a specific time and place and in a specific interpersonal context, thus getting richness and depth of data (Savin-Baden & Fisher 2002:191). The researchers aimed at reporting the participant's viewpoints, thoughts, intentions and experiences accurately by making use of direct quotations in the findings.

## Findings and discussion

The results in the first section on the participants' (teachers') biographical data were as follows: The participants consisted mainly of female teachers (85%), teaching in urban schools with good resources. The majority of the participants had more than 20 years' teaching experience (33%); 20% had between 5 and 10 years' teaching experience, 26% had between 10 and 20 years' teaching experience and 21% had less than 5 years' experience.

In the second section the researchers wanted general information about bullying in the specific schools to see whether teachers were aware of the severity of the problem. Eighty-seven per cent (87%) of the teachers agreed that they were aware of bullying incidents in their schools. According to the teachers, verbal bullying had a high-frequency occurrence, but physical bullying was also rife, and sexual bullying occurred in some instances. This testimony reflected teachers' awareness of bullying incidents and also of the different kinds of bullying. According to the teachers, male learners were more often involved in bullying (72%), whilst females accounted for only 28% of cases overall. This testimony may be based on their perception, because verbal and physical bullying are the more visible kinds of bullying and usually occur amongst boys (Olweus, Limber & Mihalic in Sciarra 2003:352; Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:102; Barboza *et al.* 2009:102; Prinsloo 2008:27; Beaty & Alexeyev 2008:1). Sixty-two per cent of teachers thought that bullying had increased recently. They reported the highest incidence in Grade 4 to Grade 6 (40%), followed by Grade 7 (36%) in primary schools and in Grade 8 to Grade 9 (40%) in secondary schools. Bullying mostly occurred during break (75%), but also after school, before school and during classes. Eighty per cent (80%) of bullying incidents occurred on school grounds, but it also occurred outside the school grounds and in classrooms and toilets. These findings concur with international research which has shown that schools often provide an environment that is conducive to bullying, because of inadequate supervision, especially during break times and after formal school hours (Sciarra 2003:355; Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:102). Problems often occur in hallways, bathrooms and on playgrounds (Orpinas & Horne 2006:48; Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:102). These findings are also in line with the research of Beaty and Alexeyev (2008:8) as well as that of Rivers *et al.* (2007:31). The behaviour of bullies as discussed above shows a tendency to adhere to group norms that are unacceptable and not seen as normative within the Christian worldview.

In the last section teachers were asked whether they felt equipped to work with bullies and victims, and 34% of the

teachers answered 'yes' and 66% answered 'no'. They were also asked if they had received training to help them cope with bullying incidents, whether as part of their formal teacher training, or as part of in-service training at their school. Thirty per cent (30%) indicated that they had, and 70% that they had not received such training. In research done by Crothers and Kolbert (2008:132) teachers who had been exposed to behaviour management problems in class indicated that they had not received training that equipped them to manage such problems adequately.

Teachers were asked in open questions to discuss intervention strategies that they used to handle bullying incidents. Some teachers really thought about the issue to get to the root of the problem, for instance, 'investigate why learners bully if it is another means of frustration outlet and should we look for other signs'. One teacher indicated that 'people need to understand the motivation that drives bullying behaviour.' Most participants felt that teachers have to understand why learners become bullies if they are to address the problem successfully.

Many teachers indicated that they talked to learners about bullying and its effects on bullies and victims, for example, 'prevention by discussing bullying with learners, and indicating how to handle it' and by 'letting learners know pre-emptively that bullying is unacceptable'.

They also tried to help by using techniques that often come intuitively to teachers as part of the helping professions, for example, 'help the learner being bullied by discussing how to stand up for oneself and move out of the situation. Some teachers dramatise incidents where they (victims) must stand up to bullies'. Bullies were confronted and an anger management course was suggested. Victims and bullies were 'referred to the school psychologist' or were referred for counselling (e.g. encourage bullied learners to speak to someone). Sometimes it was better to move bullies to other classes. Most teachers believed in 'equipping learners with coping skills to handle bullies.' Many participants indicated that 'early identification and treatment is critical.'

Teachers believed in 'teaching children that they must know their rights' and some specify that 'no bullies will be allowed in school.' But most importantly they believed that principles for non-violent behaviour and consequences of transgressions should be made part of school policies and codes of conduct: 'Teach learners to respect each other.'

Teachers also believed in 'reporting incidents to relevant authorities (for instance: Take bullies to head of department) and follow up on action taken and eventual outcomes.' It was therefore important to take action so that bullies knew that their deeds would have consequences for them. It is important to 'contact parents – meet with parents (e.g. bullies should be dealt with immediately – parents should be involved)'. If it was a serious case that could not be solved at school, teachers 'may ask parents to report cases to the SAPD.' 'Some consequences contained in the code of conduct may be to make use of detention'; if behaviour did not improve 'disciplinary hearings should take place.'

Teachers seemed mostly to handle bullying with intuitive knowledge, but often lacked the skills to teach learners how to behave. Teachers needed assistance and training to be equipped to handle this contentious issue. According to a female respondent with more than 20 years' teaching experience: 'not all teachers are equipped to handle bullies – especially young teachers – older teachers can handle these situations out of experience'.

Many of the comments from teachers or participants correspond with the recommendations offered in the next section.

## Recommendations

Antisocial behaviour (i.e. specifically bullying) occurs amongst children in most schools. Children who exhibit this type of behaviour tend to develop an in-group mentality and they often ridicule out-groups and are intolerant towards children who are different from them (Rigby 2008:60–61). Teachers should talk to learners about the value of diversity in healthy social development (Rivers *et al.* 2007:12). An ethos of tolerance and respect should become part of every school and classroom in South Africa and children should be taught to adhere to norms of humane and respectful behaviour.

Every teacher should tackle bullying through the curriculum as a whole (hidden and overt curriculum). Teachers should deal with the issue of bullying by using a variety of teaching or learning styles such as discussions, debates and dramatisation so that learners can begin to examine, investigate and understand their own attitude towards and behaviour regarding bullying (Suckling & Temple 2002:15; Lee 2004:62–3). Class rules could follow from these enactments, as well as a better understanding by learners, acceptance of the values instilled in them and therefore a commitment to anti-bullying behaviour (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen & Voeten 2005:468). The process invites learners to develop, practise and implement their own solutions to the problem and take responsibility for finding solutions. The teacher can use content, as well as extracurricular programmes, to develop and instil norms such as tolerance, responsibility and acceptable behaviour. The hidden curriculum also plays a major role. Teachers' attitudes, values, beliefs and handling of relationships with learners, parents and colleagues influence learners in their classrooms (Suckling & Temple 2002:13).

It is important that teachers see classroom management as an aspect of 'instruction, curriculum, and school climate rather than one of control' (Crothers & Kolbert 2008:134). Classroom management should be an integrated combination of instruction, curriculum and school climate, and not focus solely on control and authoritarian discipline. Learners should be actively engaged in the whole classroom process – they should be taught to think critically about issues pertaining to them as learners, but also to their future as adults. Rules are important, but learners should have a say in the setting of rules in a democratic environment. Cooperative learning activities could improve attitudes and relationships between learners (Crothers & Kolbert 2008:134).



Bullying behaviour should not be ignored when seen on the playground or in the classroom, it should be stopped immediately (Rivers *et al.* 2007:31). It is very important that a timetable exists for playground supervision, because bullying often happens where adult supervision is inadequate (De Wet 2005:47).

Training is necessary to help teachers make decisions on when to intervene in incidents between learners. They need training to decide what actions to take when they observe conflict. 'Training courses should also provide [*teachers*] or prospective educators with basic counselling skills to equip them to deal with both the practical and emotional aspects of victimization' (De Wet 2005:53).

With some training teachers should be able to teach learners social skills such as listening, problem solving, conflict resolution and communication skills. Learners should get educated on the value of friendship, respect and tolerance. Learners should learn to identify their own strengths in order to enhance their self-esteem so that they project confident body language in conflict situations. Learners should adopt appropriate verbal strategies when dealing with bullying. They should learn to replace negative statements about themselves with positive and realistic statements. Skills for relaxation and assertiveness skills are also important. Teachers should conduct constructive conversations with the bully and the victim, as well as with the parents (Crothers & Kolbert 2008:135; Beaty & Alexeyev 2008:8; De Wet 2005:47).

## Conclusion

When bullying is tolerated learners are unable to grow, learn and interact in a safe and positive atmosphere. Positive whole-school involvement can promote respect, recognition, security and growth for all learners (Smokowski & Kopasz 2005:108).

The school is the embodiment of socialisation in a safe community; therefore the atmosphere should be such that learners can develop into well-adjusted social beings with a humane outlook on the world around them. Schools need more than a code of conduct, they need an ethos of care, respect and humanness so that all learners can feel safe and secure. Only then can they learn and develop as human beings.

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### Competing interests

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## Authors' contribution

E.V. (University of South Africa) did this research in her research and development leave and contributed especially to the literature review. E.D.P. (University of South Africa) played a major role in collecting the data, but also contributed to the literature review.

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