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Interrogating Causes and Effects of Bullying on Social Development of Adolescent Boys in Zimbabwean Boarding Schools: A Psycho-Social Analysis

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Abstract

The security and safety of boy children in boarding schools is an issue of concern. This is due to the fact that children tend to bully one another where in most cases the younger boy-children remain victims because they fail to defend themselves. Their social development is often threatened. This qualitative case enquiry attempted to present an analysis of the boy-child's experiences of bullying in four Zimbabwean public boarding schools; first as victims and eventually growing up to become perpetrators as well. The study is tethered on a modeling theoretical framework (Albert Bandura). Data were collected through two Focus Group Discussions held with learners from four boarding schools. Sixteen (16) boys from four (4) boarding secondary schools, aged between 14-18 years comprised the sample. The purposefully selected perpetrators and victims met separately in an effort to obtain authentic data from both sides. To augment boy-child data, four (4) school heads, four (4) senior masters and four (4) boarding masters were interviewed. In all, 28 male participants were involved in the enquiry. It was evident that inequalities still existed in the ways in which boys treated each other especially during the first few weeks of a school term. Bullying was found to be affecting learner's self esteem over prolonged periods resulting in the victim's loss of self confidence. Prolonged bullying ended up altering children's once acceptable characters leaving them hopeless, fearful, depressed and less involved in school tasks. As victims grew older and their perpetrators were leaving school, they also changed to become perpetrators, thus making it a school culture. Many bullying cases were not reported because victims feared repeated abuse. Therefore, many children learnt to bully at school. The study recommended a relook into the lives of learners growing in boarding schools with the hope of establishing ways of eradicating bullying. (300 words)

Key words: Zimbabwe, Boarding Schools, Bullying, Social Development, Adolescents, victims, perpetrators

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Introduction

Ninety percent (90%) of boarding school time for adolescents at school is filled with happy learning moments, but the remaining 10% can bring in excruciating bullying circumstances (Matsilelele, 2015). Bullying involves manipulation of the environment so that others behave negatively towards the victim. It is a type of physical and emotional violence that threatens the social development of affected children, mostly in boarding schools.

When children are left in boarding schools, it is the hope of parents that the school authorities take over the roles of parents as ‘loco parentis’. This involves making sure all children are protected from all forms of harm including bullying. When children are bullied their academic performance is compromised, implying that their future is negatively affected. It is important that the causes of bullying be interrogated so that when children interact on their own they do so in a spirit of collegiality and do not impose themselves over others. The causes of bullying should be investigated and ways of going around them found for the benefit of children who are left at care institutions (Wolke & Leyera, 2015).

While many people around the world view bullying as sometimes an unavoidable part of growing up, more and further research is revealing the dark underbelly of childhood bullying and the lasting effects it can have on a person (Brank, Hoetger and Hazen, 2012). Boys, especially the young adolescents, are victims more often when considering different forms of bullying (Silva et al, 2013). It also seems that there are more incidences of bullying in boarding schools than day schools. Bullying has both short and long term effects on the victim and the perpetrator.

Bullying is long standing mental or physical violence, conducted by an individual or group against someone who is not able to defend him/herself in that actual situation (O’Moore and Minton’s, 2004). It is a situation whereby an individual is exposed repeatedly to abuse or harassment by one or more individuals (Okechukwu, 2014). Perpetrators of bullying aim to gain control and dominance over their victims (Padgett, 2013; Shetgiri, 2013). It was once viewed as harmless behavior that helped in building an individuals’ character. Today, frightful cases of bullying are being experienced in boarding schools (Olson, 2010). The security and safety of adolescents in boarding schools is an issue of concern where social development of children is often threatened by various forms of bullying. In boarding school set ups, the victims are more defenseless as compared to their day-school counterparts because they live away from their parents.

Bullying takes various forms namely; Covert/ Psychological Bullying (not easily noticed eg. social exclusion, gossiping, verbal attacks), Overt Bullying (Physical aggression that leaves identifiable marks like wounds, Verbal & Cyber Bullying as in name calling, abusive language, threats and Relational Bullying involving manipulated friendship or intentionally isolating

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someone, spread of rumors. Bullying affects all learners. While bullying has been associated with immediate psychological and physiological effects such as anxiety, depression and poor physical health, research indicates many of these effects persist long into adulthood (Wolke and Leyera, 2015).

In a longitudinal study spanning four decades, researchers checked in with students who had been bullied in primary school and private boarding schools at ages 23, 45 and 50 (Hymel and Swearer, 2015). Researchers found that as late as age 50, adults who had been bullied especially those who had been bullied repeatedly were significantly more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and overall poorer physical health (Hertz, Donato and Wright, 2013).

In addition, those who had been bullied were less likely to live with a partner and less likely to report having close friends on whom they could rely. The victims of bullying are not the only ones who are worse off down the line. Adults who were the perpetrators of bullying in their childhood are more likely to exhibit antisocial personality disorder in adulthood, and are more likely to become criminals (Wolke and Leyera, 2015).

The major proportion of bullying goes unreported as victims are threatened into silence while both teachers and some parents do not take the problem seriously as they regard it as part of growing up. In bullying the hurt that is done to the victim is both intentional and unprovoked resulting in negative effects on the victim's self-esteem. Bullying is usually done on the basis of imbalance of power where the victim is unable to defend him/herself in the actual bullying situation.

Causes of bullying in boarding schools

Bullying can be a result of a variety of factors though it is difficult to ascertain which particular factor is responsible for a particular form of bullying. These factors include genetic predisposition, early socialization, modeling, operant conditioning, disorder in functioning of the superego, environmental factors and peer pressure.

Younger boy-children remain victims of bullying because in many cases, they fail to defend themselves. Some learners end up hating going to school for fear of bullies as was the case with Carl Jung's developmental experiences (Santrock, (2012). Jung often fainted whenever he thought of going to school as a result of having been bullied on his first day at school (Santrock).

In Zimbabwe, an article in "The Masvingo Mirror" of August 1-6, 2014, reported on an incident of a case of a form 3 boy who died at a certain high school after having been severely assaulted by four form 6 male students on allegation of having stolen their money. The incident took place without the awareness of the teachers and the school administration. The school staff only learnt of the issue when the learner had passed on. If some effects of bullying in secondary schools result in death, then one wonders, how many minor or trivial incidents go unnoticed.

Even after this narrated incident of bullying in Zimbabwe, it has been noted that bullying is an under-researched area (Campbell, 2010; Dunne, 2010; Kabiru, 2013; Gudyanga, 2013;

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Matsilele, 2015). It has not received wide spread attention in education programmes (Hawkins in Blazer, 2012), hence the need for further research on the subject. This enquiry investigated effects of bullying on social development of adolescent boys in selected Zimbabwean boarding schools.

Theoretical Framework

The study is tethered on a neo-behaviourist modeling theory by Albert Bandura (Santrock, 2010). He contends that although behavior is shaped by reinforcement within the environment, he distinctly believes that imitation is equally important; hence his theory is centered on modeling and vicarious learning. Central to his explanation of imitated behavior is the Bobo doll experiment (Santrock). The Bobo doll experiment emphasizes positive reinforcement through rewards, negative reinforcement, punishment and imitation as in vicarious learning. Unlike animals, Bandura explains modeling in human beings using cognitive processes of attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation.

Bully behavior is central to this study. Bully behavior in boarding schools is usually noted in the ways in which boys treated younger and weaker school boarders especially during the first few weeks of a school term. Prolonged bullying ends up altering children's once acceptable characters. They grow as victims, but eventually learn to imitate older perpetrators and eventually changing to become perpetrators too. The trend then moves gradually to form a school culture.

The Problem

Though some researchers have reported varying rates at which bullying seems to be on the decline (McCallion and Feder, 2013; Gudyanga, 2014; Wallace, 2015; Jenco, 2017), remaining victims still suffer bullying effects. Many incidents of bullying go unnoticed, resulting in fewer cases getting reported. By reviewing writings on the prevalence of researches on bullying, it appears more were rather quantitative. Not many have tackled qualitative research on bullying in Zimbabwe. In this qualitative inquiry, voices of the bullying victims and perpetrators are heard.

Major Research Question

How does bullying affect the social development of adolescent boys in boarding schools?

The Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case enquiry attempted to present an analysis of the boy-child's experiences of bullying in boarding schools; first as victims and eventually growing up to become perpetrators as well.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the common causes of bullying that are prevalent in boy's boarding

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schools.

2. To examine the effects of bullying on the social development of the learner.
3. To map up strategies of curbing the problem of bullying in boarding schools.

Methodology

This qualitative case inquiry is situated within an interpretive research paradigm. It is characterised by the individual's concern and effort to understand the person from within (Cohen et al, 2011; Okeke and van Wyk, 2015). It is a qualitative constructivist, naturalistic, post-modern approach or a systematic, interactive approach (de Vos et al, 2011). It describes lived experiences of bullied boy children in boarding schools.

Boy child participants were purposively sampled as follows; sixteen (16) boys from four (4) boarding secondary schools, aged between 14-18 years, four (4) school heads, four (4) senior masters and four (4) boarding masters were interviewed to augment boy-child data. In all 28 male participants were involved. Perpetrators and victims met separately in an effort to obtain authentic data from both sides.

Instrumentation

Data were collected through four Focus Group Discussions held in four boarding schools with a total of sixteen conveniently selected boy children in Manicaland, Zimbabwe. Some observation checklists were used by teachers and face to face Interviews were held with teachers, heads of schools and boarding masters.

Ethical Considerations

Rights of participants were considered in this study. All were afforded the right to privacy, confidentiality, and dignity of treatment. Informed consent was sought from all adults and issues of assent for minors involved were well handled by school heads in their loco parentis positions.

Data Analysis Plan

Illustrated in figure 1 below is the Tesch's qualitative model of data analysis drawn in Ganga (2013). Qualitative data analysis procedures were utilized to categorize and reduce data into major themes as they emerged from the research findings. Within these themes the researcher was able to place vignettes taken from the participants, thus making the study results more qualitative.

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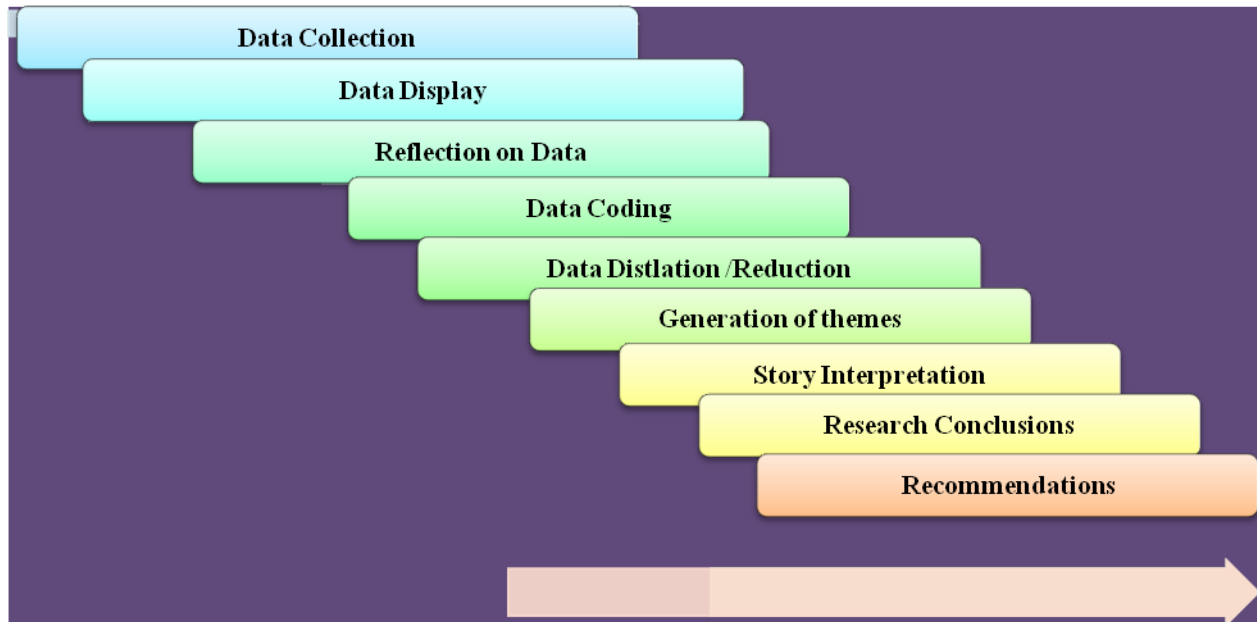


Fig. 1. Iterative-Simultaneous-Process (Adapted from Tesch’s, 1990)

Data obtained was placed into related themes following the iterative process diagrammed in figure 1 above. The study unveiled several factors that were considered to contribute to likelihood of bullying behaviours among male learners especially in boarding schools.

Findings and Discussion

Hallam and Reeds (2005) contend that physiological theories say that the bullies are genetically different from others thus nature plays a big part. The living environment also plays a part as was noted in some causes of bullying raised by the participants in this enquiry.

Causes of Bullying

Some of the causes raised were school culture, previous abuse at home, issues of jealous about each other’s performance, Socio Economic Status (SES) of some children as well as mere cruelty.

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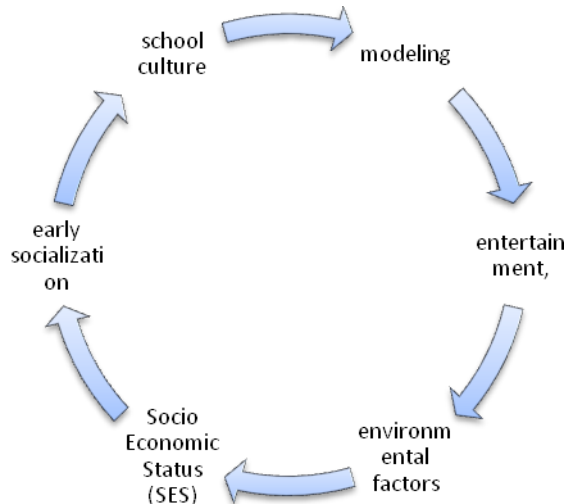


Figure 2. Causes of Bullying

From the researcher’s focus group interactions with participants and face to face interviews, numerous causes of bullying were unveiled which include early socialization, modeling, entertainment, peer pressure and some environmental factors (fig.2). Most of the findings here confirmed reviewed literature.

The older participants, i.e. teachers and school heads, explained the fact that bullying behavior can be understood in terms of early socialization. The participants explained that they had observed interactions within their own home surroundings. According to Leedom (2017), if a child was deprived of motherly love during the first seven years, he/she could develop conduct disorders during childhood and anti-social personality disorder. There is a tendency of such children to compensate their shortcomings by inflicting pain on others. In the same vein O’Moore and Minton (2004) argue that dysfunctional families can contribute to the development of bullying behaviors in children. In dysfunctional families the socialization processes are characterized by inflicting pain on others. The interactions between the family members in a dysfunctional family are based on those with power imposing themselves on those without power.

Children who lack adult supervision or who are abused at home are at a higher risk of bullying others in schools. Since they do not have supervision most of the time, they may inadvertently get used to inflicting pain on other children. Parents who are too liberal with discipline may also expose their children to the risk of being bullies when they go to school. This implies that when schools are dealing with issues of bullying at boarding schools, there is need to look at the children’s social background.

Most perpetrators interviewed, admitted that they copied what their older boarding school brothers were doing to every new school boarder year after year. Social learning theorists like Albert Bandura attribute bullying to both modeling and operant conditioning. Davison and Neale (1990) also contend that children can learn aggressive behaviours such as bullying from adults

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who behave in this way. In concurrence, Rivara (2016) asserts that bullying behavior is a serious problem among school-age children and adolescents; it has short- and long-term effects on the individual who is bullied, the individual who bullies, the individual who is bullied and bullies others, and the bystander present during the bullying event (Rivara). Bullying can be either direct or indirect, and learners may experience different types of bullying. Children who are from families where bullying and aggressive behaviours are practiced are more likely to practice the aggressive behaviours.

As the children modeled bullying behaviors at school, they ended up by hating the game but as years passed by, they started to enjoy this rather negative school culture. Research points to world wrestling federation where glorification of bullies is done in the name of entertainment. Thus children who watch world wrestling federation on television may learn both physical and verbal bullying. It is important to point out that the high rates of domestic violence means that many young people grow up expecting that violence is an acceptable way to get what one wants. Aggressive behaviours such as bullying may be seen as an effective means of achieving a goal and is likely to be reinforced.

The children admitted that most bullying done in their schools was as a response to peer pressure. Within the school environment the peer groups will often bully another group or individual for reasons which may be real or imagined or simply to have fun. Some bullies in some studies have admitted to acting as part of a group for half of the bullying incidences they have been involved in. It is also important to note that bullying by an individual is often conducted with support of a group where the bully is glorified and seen as a hero.

All the school heads we interviewed, confirmed Rivara (2016) contention that, institutions like boarding schools can also contribute to bullying behaviors. If the institution in which bullying takes place does not have high standards for the way people should treat each other, then bullying may be more likely and or prevalent. In cases where the rules are lax or are not strictly enforced there is room that bullying will occur. Institutions that have strict rules and close supervision of activities that children will be doing are likely to have fewer cases of bullying than where children are left unattended for long periods of time. Thus the institution would have an influence on why children bully.

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Effects of Bullying

The effects of bullying were rather numerous as is reflected in figure 2 below.

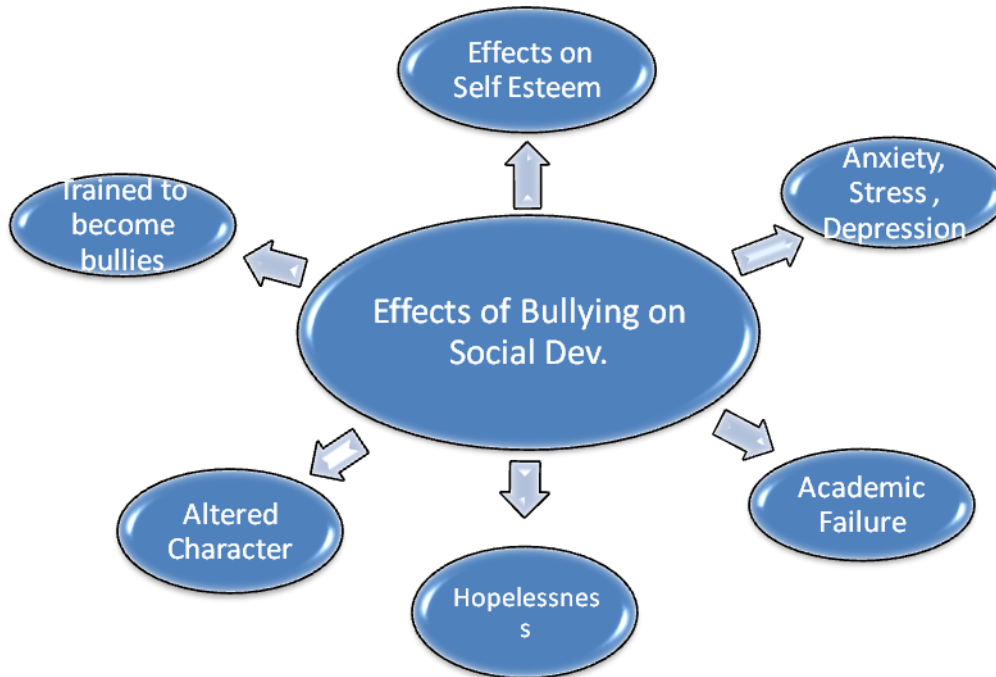


Fig. 2. Effects of Bullying on Social Development of Children

Enlisted below are some of the findings the researcher picked up from the participants' responses:

- Bullying was found to be affecting learner's self esteem over prolonged periods resulting in the victim's loss of self confidence.
- Prolonged bullying ended up altering children's once acceptable characters leaving them hopeless, fearful, depressed and less involved in school tasks.
- As victims grew older and their perpetrators were leaving school, they also changed to become perpetrators, thus making it a school culture.

In a culture fascinated with winning, power and violence, some experts suggest that it is unrealistic to expect that children will not be influenced to seek power through violence in their own lives. They will be viewing it as legitimate way of meeting their ends. To confirm such desires, a number of responses were uttered and reported here as vignettes by victims of bullying.

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- “I was instructed to slow down on academic performance, *Itawo dofo muclass*”
- ‘Procure extra pocket money to cater for bigger brothers, *mufana puwa mari nevabereki tidye*’.
- ‘I was forced to read aloud lengthy papers as guidelines for an upper class seminar discussion in the hostels’, *ndakamanikidzwa kuverenga mapepa evakuru kwandiri kudzimba dzevana vechikoro*.
- ‘I was forced to sing whilst the rest of the boys laughed’, *ndakamanikidzwa kuimba vamwe vachindiseka*.
- I was forced to wash older boy’s clothes during everyone else’s leisure or resting time, *ndakamanikidzwa kusuka nhumbi dzevakomana vakuru panguva yedu yekuzorora*.

The bullies generally enjoyed satisfaction in seeing other children in pain. Research has established that children raised in a positive home environment with these personality traits can learn empathy and compassion which puts them at lower risk for bullying (Murphy, Tubritt, O’Higgins Norman, 2018). It is argued that there are certain personality traits that appear among most bullies such as aggressiveness, impulsive behavior, low in empathy and therefore not sensitive to the plight of others.

Tattum (1993) also suggest that children with a genetic predisposition to bullying may have risk for bullying lowered through provision of boarding school environment in which relations between learners are positive. For instance, some respondents suggested group counseling as a means in which bullying behaviors are noticed and worked on by therapists. The schools should cultivate a culture of empathy where emphasis is on collegiality and deriving satisfaction from helping others. Schools that recognize and reward those that practice anti-bullying behaviors reduce the possibility of the bullying behavior manifesting.

Bullying may have unpleasant long lasting consequences on the victims such as depression, low self esteem, loneliness difficulty in sleeping well, hating school and having poor academic performance or even dropping out of school (Adams & Lawrence, 2010). It is not surprising to find victims of bullying developing ideas of committing suicide. A safe and healthy school environment can promote a learner’s academic performance and achievement (Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo and Li, 2010) and this can only happen if the environment is caring, supportive and safe. Victims of bullying usually demonstrate several psychological problems some of which are depression and anxiety. Students who are bullied regularly do substantially worse in school and receive poorer grades and participate less in class because being bullied impairs concentration.

The learners’ silence and lack of participation is often interpreted by teachers as lack of motivation to learn. These victims may view the school negatively and may become low achievers, and in such instances they are viewed as ‘dumb’ (Adams & Lawrence, 2010). Most victims do not know how to fight back whether they are physically or verbally attacked (Adams & Lawrence, 2010). The victimized children are likely to be lonely, fear school, avoid others,

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develop low-self-esteem and be depressed (Reijnetjes, et al, 2010). On a sad note, it is disturbing to note that children who were bullied at secondary and high school are likely to be bullied at college or even at workplace (Adams & Lawrence, 2010).

Bullying may also have negative consequences on the perpetrators themselves. It has been observed by school staff that bullies are also affected too in their academic work due to lack of concentration while mapping out more bullying tactics on their victims. It has been observed that young children who are bullies and aggressive are likely not to change their behavior as they grow up into adults (Luiselli et al, 2005). Quite often, bullies look upon themselves negatively, as being failures that lack a sense of belonging because peers may be uncomfortable to relate with them. They do not make many friends at school and are usually lonely and more likely to report poorer academic achievement and may drop out of school.

Vaillancourt, Hyme and McDougall (2003) observe that like victims, bullies are likely to suffer similar signs such as depression, suicidal tendencies, loneliness and substance abuse. These behaviours normally occur if they are fully made aware of their actions. and have been found to be susceptible to developing anxiety disorders and to abuse substance and involved in crime. Peer victimization cannot be ignored as it is closely linked to educational outcomes (Junoven, Wang & Espinoza, 2011).

Attempts to curb bullying

Bullying should be viewed as an unacceptable form of interpersonal behaviour. Unfortunately most bullying incidences go unreported as victims feel that adults do not take the problem of bullying seriously and at times blame themselves for being bullied. At times the victims are shy and not assertive enough to open up and state the situation they are in.

Some learners are said to be resistant to bullying because they develop survival mechanisms and are able to ignore the actions of the bullies and continue with their everyday lives. Others thrive whilst others do not. Resilience involves the ability to recover quickly from stress and subsequent stressors by way of coping after a traumatic event (Shepherd, Reynold & Moran, 2010). Resilience entails the ability of the victim to 'bounce back' from adverse experiences by way of retaining psychological equilibrium and being able to operate in a competent manner with little or no indication of the impact of the adverse event (Theron & Theron, 2010). Resilience takes place due to some learned coping skills experienced during stressful events.

Even though victims may develop resilient responses to bullying, they may not be considered to be less harmed and affected. Therefore, it would be wise for school staff to be on alert and establish means to educate and empower the child as well as giving care and supervision of all children. Failure to render care and support for children facing abuse can result in school dropouts, unnecessary transfers and enemies among learners which can filter into their adult lives.

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Conclusion and Recommendations

Bullying may be rampant because some members of society view it as a rite of passage. Bullying incidences are more in boarding schools than in day schools because learners in boarding schools spend more time in the school premises during the course of the school term away from the safety of their parents. The practice has negative consequences on victims in terms of academic performance of learners and their social relationships too with other learners and other people.

In addition, it has a negative impact on the victim in terms of suppressing positive emotions and a sense of positive self-esteem whereby the victim is left with a sense of self-condemnation, guilt, self-pity, fear, anxiety and insecurity. Many cases are not reported because victims feared repeated abuse. It was evident that inequalities still existed in the ways in which boys treated each other especially during the first few weeks of a school term. A relook into the lives of learners growing in boarding schools with the hope of establishing ways of eradicating bullying is essential. Establish safety nets within schools. Educate, empower and care for every learner. Parent school development associations, heads of schools, teachers and the learners can work together to eradicate bullying tendencies in schools.

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