Exploring the complexity of bullying conception and implications for school-based interventions in Maune Circuit of the Capricorn District of the Limpopo Province in South Africa

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Abstract

Bullying is a widespread problem that affects schools worldwide, with serious impacts on learners' academic, social, and emotional health. In South Africa, bullying is a significant concern, particularly in rural areas such as the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn District in Limpopo Province. This study aimed to explore the complex understanding of bullying and its implications for school-based interventions in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The research used a qualitative case study method, including interviews and observations. Additionally, data were gathered from learners, teachers, principals, and SGB members through purposive sampling. The total sample consisted of twelve participants, chosen based on their experiences and grade level. The collected data were analyzed thematically. The findings indicated that strategies to reduce school bullying in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn District include ongoing education about the dangers of bullying and fostering mutual respect among children. The study also found that schools need effective policies to address bullying. These policies should be consistently followed, and teachers should receive training on handling bullying incidents. Positive discipline approaches may be helpful, as they teach learners to take responsibility for their actions. The results have important implications for education policymakers, school administrators, and practitioners, emphasizing the need for targeted and effective measures to prevent and tackle bullying in rural South African schools.

Keywords: anxiety, bullying, discipline, intervention, learners' rights,

Introduction

Bullying is a widespread and deeply troubling issue that affects schools worldwide, including South Africa. The Maune Circuit of the Capricorn District in Limpopo Province is a region where bullying has been recognized as a significant problem. To develop effective strategies to address this issue, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of how bullying is conceptualized and experienced within this specific context. This study aims to explore the complexity of bullying and its implications for school-based interventions in the Maune Circuit, with the ultimate goal of informing

the creation of targeted and effective anti-bullying programs. Bullying is defined as "repeated acts of unprovoked aggression that are damaging psychologically or physically for the victim, and where the strength of the aggressor and the victim is unequal" (Halim et al., 2022). It is regarded as a form of violence that harms others and occurs at school or during various activities when a learner or group of learners uses their strength to hurt other individuals or groups. There are three types of bullying: psychological, physical, and verbal. Psychological bullying can be described as any intentional and purposeful mental abuse, such as spreading false rumors about others or insulting others. Physical bullying involves using one's body and physical acts to exert power over others (Halim et al., 2022). Verbal bullying includes taunting, malicious teasing, name-calling, making threats, shouting at others, or humiliating them (Olivier et al., 2022).

The purpose of this study is to explore the complexity of bullying conception and its implications for school-based interventions in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn District in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Despite efforts to address bullying, it remains a significant concern in South African schools, particularly in rural areas such as the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn District in the Limpopo Province. The complexity of bullying conception and the lack of effective interventions tailored to the specific needs of this context exacerbate the problem. Tumelo & Johannes (2024) in their study state that the issue of bullying in schools between learners themselves and teachers (teacher-learner bullying) was always identified as a serious issue that increases the number of learner dropouts, instills fear, and disturbs teaching and learning programmes. This is supported by (Maluleke, 2023), indicating that this issue made the parents, teachers, SGB, and other stakeholders have sleepless nights as the health and psychological well-being of the learners and teachers were compromised. Ngoveni, Khosa, and Mofokeng (2024) further agree that safety and security in various South African schools were compromised as the incidents of mostly physical, sexual and cyber-bullying were taking place at their highest pick, whereby almost every year the media reports the death of more than ten learners who have committed suicide due to this challenge.

Bullying can have negative effects on victims' physical health. For example, the victim can harm themselves if they are bullied; sometimes they are even beaten up by the bully, which can cause physical injury. Also, emotionally, they can be affected as they may be depressed, both in the short term and in the later stages of life (Babaee, Nojomi, Asadi-Aliabadi & Eshrati, 2021). The bully and the Victim face the most brutal consequences of bullying and are at a greater risk for mental health issues and behavioral problems than those who are not being bullied (Armitage, 2021). Bullying is very harmful and very dangerous for bullies, victims, and the community at large. Learners who display very disturbing characteristics, such as being aggressive at an early stage, normally later in life show unusual behaviors such as gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and child abuse (Nhambura, 2020). The researchers Chitsamatanga and Rembe (2020) define school violence as a form of violence and criminal offence which occurs within an educational setting and affects routine educational-related matters of many South African schools. (Sifunda, 2023) agrees with the statement by clarifying that incidents associated with bullying are

traumatizing and are categorized as assaults, threats, forcing a learner to perform certain tasks, intimidation, and others. Wisudayanti and Dewi (2023) further supported this by saying that threatening other learners and the application of physical force to harm the next person, either physically or emotionally, is regarded as bullying, and it changes the nature of the school setting. Therefore, based on the agreements stated above, it is clear that both teachers and learners are repeatedly bullied in the school premises, with and without the concern of the supervisors; it is now an issue of concern that requires urgent attention.

Sprague and Walker (2021) stated that the learners and teachers are no longer feeling safe and comfortable due to frequent violent behavior, which is unhealthy for the school atmosphere as it causes trauma and psychological problems. The researchers Jenkins, Miller, Kaminski & Putzeys (2023), argue that the school setting is not directly a place where undesirable incidents emanate, the root cause of the matter is deeply rooted in the communities where these learners come from and spread easily in schools as places of accommodating various individuals with various characters. (Modiba, 2020) agrees with this statement by indicating that the community, tribal offices, and the parents should form part and parcel of the solution-seeking committees to create a harmonious school environment where teachers can teach and learners learn. In this case, it is prominent and essential to include various stakeholders in the school affairs to provide different viewpoints and collectively seek solutions for the challenge of bullying taking place in the school environment.

Despite the growing body of research on bullying, there is a dearth of studies that explore the complexity of bullying conception in rural South African contexts (Maunder & Crafter, 2018). Existing studies have primarily focused on urban areas, neglecting the unique challenges and dynamics of rural settings (Steyn & Singh, 2018). This study aims to address this research gap by exploring the complexity of bullying conception in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn District in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Unlike previous studies that have focused primarily on the prevalence and consequences of bullying, this study explores the complexity of bullying conception, including the social, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to bullying. Based on the above, this study poses the following research question:

- What is the complexity of bullying conception and implications for school-based interventions in Maune Circuit of the Capricorn District of the Limpopo Province of South Africa?

Literature review

Bullying as a concept

Olweus (1978) presented in his research the recognition and understanding of bullying, characterized as a model of violence that inflicts physical, emotional, and psychological harm on another individual; it is also repetitive towards the victim and occurs in a context characterized by an imbalance of power. In the early 1990s, schools transitioned from solely educational institutions to environments where children experienced violations and were subjected to peer intimidation (Mbah, 2020). Bullying

is recognized as a significant issue that impacts children globally, resulting in detrimental effects on their mental health and academic performance.

According to Owusu (2020), bullying is a pattern of unpleasant, undesirable, and aggressive behavior that mostly involves teenagers and school learners where power imbalance prevails. The findings by Saadu (2024) seem to agree with the above statement by stating that this kind of behavior usually gets repeated if not noticed and reprimanded through disciplinary and other correctional measures. Therefore, based on this agreement, it means that this phenomenon has serious, everlasting negative impacts and effects on bullies and also those who are bullied. These actions include treating others badly, propaganda, attacking other people physically and verbally, and segregating others due to gender, race, and other related factors.

In contrast, Belal and Lazeb (2020) had a slightly different view and suggested that bullying affects individuals or learners who are bullied, bullying others, witness the incidents, and the school in totality. Therefore, this suggests clearly that this has a negative result on the mental and physical health of many learners, and also instills a sense of fear within learners. Most of the researchers, such as Adlem (2021), have attested to the statement by stating that this societal issue, as a systemic challenge, affects and interrupts the daily educational programme in all South African schools. In this case, this action, which takes place in most of the public schools, sometimes consists of groups of learners always taking advantage of and isolating other learners.

Types of bullying

Bullying manifests in various forms, often unnoticed, as it may not be physical but occurs through verbal and non-verbal means, deliberate social exclusion, and technological harassment, all intended to harm individuals who are powerless to defend themselves (Armitage, 2021). The researcher Hoosen, Adams, Tiliouine & Savahl (2022) indicates that South African Schools experience bullying in different ways, and this makes learners be subjected to various unpleasant actions against each other daily. This is supported by Khan, Safdar & Razain (2024), stating that nowadays learners experience cyber-bullying than other kinds of bullying that were applied before, and it affects and destroys the mental health of the learners. However, the study conducted by Brombos, (2022), further complements the idea by saying that types of bullying including physical injuries caused by different tensions deform the character, confidence and health of the learners, but even the propaganda, cyber-bullying and verbal bullying distract most of the learners in pursuing their daily educational programme.

Physical bullying

 Bork-Hüffer, Mahlknecht, & Kaufmann (2021) explain physical bullying as an action whereby the perpetrator harms the victim bodily with any destructive objects. It involves actions such as hitting, kicking, pushing, or punching intentionally to cause harm. Physical bullying can also be covert, where actions are hidden by the perpetrator, for example, actions such as intentionally locking the victim in the class or school toilets. Sexual bullying can also be classified as physical bullying because it

involves the physical encroaching on others' space, such as forced sexual activities and unwanted touching (Walters & Espelage,2020).

It also involves making remarks about someone's body, asking questions about someone's sex life, telling sexually offensive jokes, or sharing pornographic videos or pictures. The findings of the study of Shen (2024) indicated that learners from sexual and/or gender minorities are more at risk of experiencing sexual bullying in schools. Therefore, this implies that the schools should make sure that the school settings are safe and free from harmful objects and substances. This process will only be possible with the use of prescribed and recommended departmental policies.

Verbal bullying

According to Barus, Safitri,& Husaini (2023), verbal bullying is an act of presenting offensive and undesirable remarks to someone in a repeated manner without any sign of remorse. This is supported by Mutunga (2023), in stating that the most offensive and unnoticed type of bullying is verbal one because almost every day in school settings and where groups of people merge, this kind of behavior is likely to take place in such places. The findings above by Tekel, Karadag and Mutunga seem to agree with findings of Pulciani (2021), that verbal bullying can also be covert, where the behavior marked by subtle and hidden actions in absence of teachers or adults, that can significantly affect victims, frequently resulting in wounds that are not readily apparent. This victimization involves actions such as intentionally dismissive sighs when someone shares ideas or sharing a joke about someone's intellectual ability. Therefore, based on this agreement, it means that many learners in schools do this type of bullying without being aware, while some act intentionally. Although it was formerly believed that physical bullying was the most prevalent type, the findings of the study by Goodwin et al. (2019) indicated that verbal bullying happens more frequently. Furthermore, the study of Shute, Didaskalou, and Dedousis-Wallace (2022) indicated that teachers view verbal bullying as less severe than physical bullying and are less likely to intervene.

Psychological bullying

As we recognize the stage of physical bullying where the victim gets hurt and the doings can be seen with the naked eye, it has also been noted that sometimes bullying happens on a stage where the naked eye cannot see but leaves the individual damaged in a psychological and emotional state of being. Psychological bullying is any intentional and purposeful mental abuse that causes victims to have low self-esteem and confidence. It includes negative actions that disrupt someone's reputation, such as gossiping, intentional exclusion of someone from a social group, sarcastic comments or gestures, and engaging in threatening comments or behavior. Gaffney et al. (2021) claim that verbal psychological bullying is overt in the sense that sarcastic comments or gestures can be heard or seen by the witnesses. On the other hand, non-verbal psychological bullying is covert, which includes the intentional exclusion of a learner from a social group. For example, a learner may be intentionally ignored or left out of group activities, causing a learner to be isolated and demotivated.

Covert bullying is noticed to be one of the most difficult forms of bullying for victims to substantiate because teachers cannot prove or see it happening. Montes, Sanmarco, Novo, Cea, and Arce (2022) indicate that psychological bullying at school can lead to feelings of suicide among victims due to the intense level of anxiety and distress that violence can cause. This is in line with the research conducted by Walters (2021), stating that this type of bullying has been identified as one of the most serious and theoretically serious forms of school violence. The findings above by Sandra and Montes et al. seem to agree with the findings of Goodwin et al. (2019), which indicates that those involved in prolonged and serious psychological bullying at schools experience a wide range of mental health, academic and social problems if they do not receive support, which indicates that. In this regard, this suggests that teachers and principals must always strive to create a conducive schooling environment by arranging awareness programs about bullying in general.

Cyber-Bullying

Cyber-bullying incidents continue to be in the spotlight and news headlines nationally and internationally. This is a serious area of concern in South African Schools. Jamal (2024), cyberbullying is an aggressive act that is delivered through electronics such as cell phones and social media to spread propaganda and hurt the emotions and lower self-esteem of others. It involves the spreading of rumors, distributing videos and images to harm the victims and damage people's reputations on social networks such as Facebook, TikTok, or Twitter, just to name a few. Secondary schools are the primary settings for this type of modern bullying. Mtshazi (2021) indicated that a greater number of female learners in South African secondary schools are subjected to cyber-bullying compared to their male counterparts, who are more prone to experiencing physical bullying. Cyberbullying in schools may result in a significantly elevated high school dropout rate, harassment, suicide, and poor academic performance (Jabulani & Edward, 2021). The findings of the study of Ganca (2024) show that mitigating cyberbullying can be challenging for teachers due to monitoring difficulties outside school hours and a lack of clear policies from policy-makers, which is the DBE.

Policies used to address bullying in schools

The departmental policies, laws, and legislations in education are necessary for effective and violence-free teacher education, which is meant to create a teaching profession ready to meet the needs of a democratic South Africa in the 21st century (Makiwa, 2021). Motala (2020) conducted a study on the transformation of education in secondary school, and his findings indicated that South Africa as a country was once ruled under an apartheid type government whereby the system of education was structured uniquely, but the post-apartheid society has undergone some transformations and adopted respect for human rights. However, this is supported by the Constitution of South Africa (1996), which states that all South Africans have the right to live peacefully and be free from any type of violence.

The Constitution is the highest law in South Africa, enacted as Act NO.108 of 1996. All education policies and laws are governed by the Constitution (Masekela et al., 2024). Section 29 of Chapter 2 of the Constitution highlights the right to basic education, emphasizes the safety and security of every learner, and abolishes corporal

punishment. Several legislative Acts and policies are enforced to reduce bullying and promote safer learning environments in South African schools. These Acts include SASA 86 of 1996 and the Children's Act 38 of 2005.

South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 OF 1996

The South African Schools Act of 1996 was a significant piece of legislation that sought to alter the country's educational system during the years apartheid era (Motala, 2020). Its fundamental aim is to establish a uniform, equitable, and inclusive system that would provide all children with a top-notch education regardless of their circumstances or background (Mazibuko, 2022). According to Msimanga (2021), one of the main ways SASA reduces bullying is by mandating that schools create and follow a student code of conduct.

In order to reduce bullying behavior, SGBs of all public schools are required by Section 8 of the SASA to establish a code of conduct that specifies appropriate behavior as well as disciplinary measures. The Department of Basic Education (2021) supports this by stating that the adoption of policies and the school's code of conduct forbids teachers from acting in an undesirable manner and communicates simplicity and viability to the compound teaching-learning process. Maluleke (2023) corroborates the above findings by indicating that SASA provides a foundation for the execution of school safety regulations, which include bullying prevention as a component of larger safety campaigns. However, according to Shean and Mander (2020), schools must keep an eye on learner security and safety and report on it, including handling the psychological and emotional components of safety. Masekela, Ngobeni, and Sepang (2024) urge educators to report bullying incidents to higher authorities by using departmental policies and relevant resources, such as the SASAMS.

Children's Act 38 of 2005

Bullying in South African schools is mostly addressed by the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Msimanga, 2021). AS a vital instrument in the fight against bullying, this Act places a high priority on the safety, protection, and well-being of children. Bullying and other forms of physical, mental, or psychological abuse are expressly forbidden by Section 134 of the Act (President of the Republic of South Africa, 2006). According to the analysis of O'Connor (2021), the Act creates the National Child Protection Register, which keeps track of instances of child abuse, including bullying, and stresses that every child has the right to be protected from harm (Rees, 2021). It also ensures that schools and authorities take the appropriate steps to prevent bullying behavior.

This register helps track and monitor bullying cases, facilitating effective intervention. Furthermore, the findings of Kempen (2020) revealed that the Act empowers children to report bullying incidents to authorities, including social workers, police, or educational officials. It ensures confidentiality and protection for child victims. The Children's Act 38 of 2005 imposes a duty on parents, caregivers, and educational institutions to ensure children's safety and well-being (Government Gazette, 2006) Children's Act reinforces the constitutional right to be free from emotional and physical harm, making schools legally accountable for preventing bullying and reporting serious incidents.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that will be used for this study is Social Dominance Theory (SDT). Social Dominance theory, which was developed by Sidanius and Pratto (2001), and Dominance theory, which was developed by Long and Pellegrini (2003), give a detailed analysis of the bullying phenomenon. Being power hungry and wanting to dominate is the main reason that influences bullying behavior among learners. The bullies use intimidation and embarrassment as ways of obtaining power. Dominance theory and the Social Dominance theory make it obvious that school-going children, mostly adolescents, bully others in their attempt to be high in the pecking order both in the group and individually (Kakuru, 2020). They then maintain their bullying reputation by bullying other students. In short, school children use bullying as a means of gaining and maintaining dominance among their fellow school-mates. Bullying is normally a group process, and the fellow group of members decides whether a bully can form or establish dominance (Radliff, Hall & Ökten, 2021). For instance, in a classroom situation, if the bullying is being shown more respect and support by his or her classmates, the bully will have or gain dominance and social dominance within the classroom. In addition, if the perpetrator becomes a leader of a group of adoring followers, the other members may enjoy more power because of the reputation of the leader of the group. For the group to continue enjoying social dominance, they have to continue bullying or harassing vulnerable members of the class. In short, learners who are hungry for dominance are aggressive and they bully others to obtain reputational, social, and status power. Individual-based social hierarchies are different from group social hierarchies in that an individual gains social status and power through personal characteristics such as intelligence and physical appearance. For instance, in a classroom situation, the bully is recognized with certain physical characteristics; he may be old, tall, or muscular. These physical skills make him more powerful than other students; thus, he gains social dominance. Indeed, it is evident that bullying is a successful method of obtaining dominance and social power.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study research method (Machimana et al., 2018; Rashid et al., 2019) within an interpretivist philosophical framework. Qualitative research is an approach that seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of human behavior, experiences, and social context (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020). Qualitative research uses specific research methods such as interviews and observations to collect, organize, and present qualitative data. The main purpose of the qualitative research approach was to find the exact meaning and predictions that may apply to other educational institutions with the intention of establishing, confirming, and validating relationships between factors investigated. Furthermore, qualitative research is also important in investigating participants' subjective experiences, feelings, and interpretations, offering a contextualized comprehension of the research problem (Given, Saumure & Kuby, 2021). Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for investigating complex social phenomena in social sciences research, including education (Creswell, 2020; Guetterman et al., 2019). For this particular research study, the use of qualitative methods is more beneficial as the

researcher needs the participants' personal views. Therefore, a qualitative approach was found appropriate for the study on strategies teachers use to mitigate the challenges of learner bullying because it helps to understand the types of behavior that lead to bullying actions, and to know about the various experiences of individuals.

Design

The research design that was used for the purpose of this study is the phenomenological research design. Muzari et al. (2022) define a research design as a plan or blueprint of how the research is to be conducted. The phenomenological research design is a suitable design to study human lives in their natural settings. According to De Vos et al. (2019), this approach aims to understand and interpret the meaning that participants give to their everyday lives. In addition, he points out that a phenomenological study is a study that describes the meaning of experiences of a phenomenon, topic, or concept for various individuals. Therefore, to be able to do this, the researcher must be able to enter the participant's world. This is achieved by analyzing the conversations and interactions between the researcher and the participants. One of the ways they achieve this is through interviews as a method of data collection. Every researcher has a list of research questions that need to be assessed, and this could be done through the phenomenological research design.

Sampling

Noori (2021) defines population as the total number of participants who are targeted by the researcher to get information from. Knowing and comprehending the demographic from which the research study`s participants are drawn is crucial at all times. The researcher can get a broad understanding of the population`s behaviors by understanding its features. The population of the study was comprised of four (4) learners, four (4) principals, two (2) principals, and two (2) School Governing Body (SGB) members. In total, the sample size of the study was made up of twelve (12) participants. The researcher made use of a non-probability sampling method where purposive sampling was used to select sampled participants and two secondary schools in Maune Circuit (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020). The principals and teachers have more than five years' experience in teaching and can intervene in learners' problems because they have been there for a long time. Learners in the sampled school were from grades 8-10. The researcher also varied gender to select the participants to avoid bias. Two male learners, two female learners, two female teachers, and two male teachers. The individuals selected for this study volunteered to participate. Ethical approval was obtained to conduct the study, and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Before the interviews, they were provided with an informed consent form to read and sign. This study ensured confidentiality by using pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Data collection

In this study, semi-structured interviews and observations were used to collect data. According to Noori (2021) semi- semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to

follow a general interview framework while allowing for spontaneous exploration of pertinent issues. Ruslin et al. (2022) emphasize that the researcher needs to be more attentive to the responses of participants to identify new emerging lines of inquiry that are directly related to the phenomenon being studied and explore and probe these. The researcher developed the interview schedules for the participants, where a tape recorder and notebooks were used to record the responses of the participants, for the researcher to remember them. The duration of the interviews was 45 to 60 minutes per participant. The interviews aimed to answer the main research questions on the strategies teachers use to mitigate challenges of learner bullying in secondary schools in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn North district of Limpopo province of South Africa. Sepedi (Home language to the participants) was used to clarify some of the complex issues relating to the study, particularly to some of the learners and the members of the SGB who were not fluent in English. Observation is based on the observer's subjective interpretation of what they see, and it can capture the complexity and subjectivity of human behavior (Noori, 2021). However, the researcher adopted structured observation to guide the data collection of this study. Structured observation aids the researcher in identifying certain types of behavior they intend to observe (Fix et al.,2022). The researcher developed an observation tool to record the behavior and actions of learners. The researcher monitored learners during morning devotion, throughout all breaks, and after. To ensure anonymity, code names were used instead of real names. The researcher named participants as follows: learners were given code: The researcher named participants as follows: learners were given code: L031, L032, L033, L034, teachers: T051, T052, T053, and T054, principals: P061 and P062, SGBs: S071 and S072.   This also applied to the names of the two participating schools, which were identified by the codes school A and B.

Data analysis

The generated data were then analyzed through coding and thematic analysis. According to Christou (2022), the thematic analysis enables the researcher to identify codes and categorize patterns and themes that emerge from the data. The data analysis process began with manually transcribing the semi-structured interviews and observations. The transcripts were carefully reviewed and corrected multiple times to ensure the data were clean before coding. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the content and an initial insight into the data by making notes and comments on interesting and recurring ideas. In the next stage, relevant ideas were identified and labeled with short codes to assist the researchers in associating segments with the research question. Patterns were identified through a rigorous process of data familiarization, data coding, theme development, revision, and similar themes were linked together. From the interviews, themes were identified and used to explain the effects of school bullying on the well-being of a child. Thematic analysis is suitable for questions related to people's experiences, people's views, and perceptions. The researcher analyzed the data thematically by first transcribing and familiarizing herself with the collected data, followed by organizing it according to categories, which led to themes. Hendricks et al. (2019) highlighted that the concepts are composed into themes that are articulated based on concepts that emerged out of the interviews conducted. As guided by Korstjens and Moser (2022), triangulation of

data and member verification were also used to enhance credibility. Multiple methods of data collection were used to reduce the chances of bias and enable other researchers to use the study for future research.

Findings

The data were collected using semi-structured interviews and observations, which provided information on strategies teachers use to mitigate the challenges of learner bullying in secondary schools in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn North district of Limpopo province of South Africa. The findings of this study were then presented in themes. The themes that emerged from the data collected were discussed and analyzed in detail. They were supported by the participants' verbal responses.

Table 1: Themes, sub-themes, and discussion from the findings

Themes	Sub-themes	Discussion
The nature of Bullying Experienced	Physical-bullying	Learners reported widespread physical bullying (pushing, slapping, beating), verbal bullying (name-calling, insults, teasing), and cyberbullying (rumours, photoshopped images, online harassment via WhatsApp and Facebook). These experiences negatively affected learners' self-esteem and emotional well-being. Teachers and principals confirmed the prevalence of all three forms.
	Verbal-bullying	
	Cyber-bullying	
Intervention Strategies	Policy implementation, teacher training, and awareness	Participants emphasized the importance of a well-enforced policy and regular teacher training. Suggestions included displaying anti-bullying posters, appointing class mentors, and creating reporting channels. Learners should be made aware of how to report bullying safely and confidentially.

	Involvement of parents	Teachers noted that bullying often stems from violent or neglectful home environments. They recommended involving parents through workshops to teach positive parenting and discourage violent behaviour at home, which could influence learners' behaviour at school.
	Monitoring of learners during school hours and beyond school premises	During observations, minor signs of exclusion, teasing, and physical aggression were noted during break times. After school, bullying increased due to a lack of adult supervision. This highlights the need for schools to engage communities and parents in learner monitoring beyond school grounds.

Theme 1: The nature of bullying experienced by learners

The researcher wanted to establish the types of bullying experienced by high school learners in Secondary schools in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn district of the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Participants reported that the types of bullying experienced by learners included physical, verbal, and cyberbullying. This table indicates the types of bullying experienced by secondary school learners daily.

Sub-theme 1: Physical Bullying

Participants of the study reported that physical bullying was prominent in their respective high schools in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn district of the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Physical bullying included acts of pushing, shoving, beating, kicking, body shaming, slapping, and pinching. A majority of the participants affirmed that physical bullying was rife in their schools, and some of them had experienced it. The following are verbal quotes from the participants:

A boy used to beat me every day after school. This happened on my way home. He made me pay him if I did not want to be beaten. At times, he would make fun of me, and other learners laughed at me. He even called me names, and it was so embarrassing. (Participant L031, 15-year-old boy, School A, In-depth individual Interview).

I have experienced physical bullying in the form of kicking, slapping, and shoving. A boy used to provoke me to fight him. He would first shove or slap me. He would then beat me in the hope that I would fight back, but I never retaliated because I was scared. (Participant L033, 17-year-old boy, School B, In-depth individual Interview).

Physical bullying is very common in my school. I have experienced it many times in the form of slapping. A group of girls used to harass me because I passed tests. They would force me to tell them answers when we were doing our schoolwork, and if I refused, they would slap me, and some would run their hands over my face. (Participant L032, 16-year-old girl, School A, Individual interview).

Head teacher participant (P061) reported that physical bullying was prevalent in his school. The children (particularly boys) reported that physical bullying, particularly beating, kicking, shoving, slapping, and pinching, was quite prevalent, and according to the South African Schools Act, these are acts of misconduct by learners, and they deal with them frequently. The following are direct quotations from the participants:

In most cases, learners report physical bullying, which includes shoving, pushing, beating, slapping, and kicking. (Participant P061, 46-year-old, male, head teacher, School A).

Learner's report being kicked, pushed, and at times being beaten. At times, their items are stolen. (Participant P062, 40-*year-old*, female, head teacher, School B).

Often, it is the beating that is common. The older pupils have a tendency to beat the younger ones for no reason at all, and at times for petty issues. Boys also like beating girls. (Participant S071, 39-year-old male, SGB, School A).

Sub-theme 2: Verbal Bullying

Participants of the study reported that verbal bullying, which manifested itself in the form of name-calling, harassment, teasing, and insults, was predominant in their schools. A significant proportion of participants from the interviews revealed that they had experienced verbal bullying. Below are verbatim quotations from the learner participants:

I was verbally bullied by almost everyone at school, mostly because of my body weight. I was called "fatty" by almost everyone. Their eyes told a story every time I passed by them. Some would stare at me and laugh. Even some teachers used the name in class. I always felt embarrassed. During lunch, some learners would take my food and tell me that I am not supposed to eat because I am already fat. Nasty comments were passed every time I had to say something in class. (Participant L032, 16-year-old girl, School A, In-depth Individual Interview).

Girls in class often scold me and verbally call me by names of all kinds. They think I stole a school bag from one of their friends, yet I never stole it. Now, most of my classmates call me a thief and also call me by the brand name of the lost schoolbag, and I hate it. Sometimes the words they say are hurting and embarrassing. (Participant L034, 16-year-old boy, School B, In-depth Individual Interview).

My classmates call me names because of my physical features. I do not like it, and I have told them several times that they should stop it, but they continue. (Participant L031, 15-year-old, Boy, School A, In-depth Individual Interview).

The study findings from in-depth individual interviews with head teachers seemed to be consistent with findings from the learners' interviews that verbal bullying was common in Maune Circuit High schools and was characterized by name-calling, insults, teasing, and harassment among learners. Head teacher participants reported that verbal bullying was rampant among learners in their respective schools. The following are example statements from head teacher (principal) participants:

Verbal bullying is very common among learners, especially girls. They call each other names, and such aggression can proceed from school to their way home. Some of them do report the hurtful words they receive, and it always baffles me as to why the learners behave this way. (Participant P062, Female teacher, School B).

It's shocking if you hear some of the verbal lashing these kids pour on others. It's a serious problem, especially among girls. They insult others and give them nicknames. It is important to keep tracking verbal and emotional bullying because it can easily drive the isolated learners into serious actions like suicide. (Participant T051, 54-year-old, male teacher, School A).

Some learners do report that they are verbally bullied by other learners in different ways. Some report insults, demeaning words, mockery, and hateful words. I always wonder how these learners come up with such painful words and spill them on others. (Participant T053, 46-year-old female teacher, School B).

Sub-theme 3: Cyberbullying

The findings from in-depth individual interviews also showed that cyberbullying was widespread in high schools in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn district of the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Participants reported that they had experienced cyberbullying, and it constituted embarrassing text messages that were sent on mobile phones through social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Messenger. A majority of participants from the interviews reported that cyberbullying was prevalent in their schools. Below are example statements from the learner participants:

A group of girls used to circulate false stories in class and at school, which were very painful about me on Facebook. Other learners would laugh at me and give me odd looks. I felt like a laughing stock to everyone. (Participant L034, 18-year-old, girl, School B, In-depth Individual Interview).

My picture on WhatsApp was photoshopped to show me in a bad way. It was then circulated on social media. It seemed like everyone believed the story because even teachers asked me about it. Some learners would send it even to me with insults. It was a very painful situation for me, and I even thought of dropping out of school. (Participant L032, 16-year-old, girl, School A, In-depth Individual Interview).

A boy used to take a picture of me with his phone every day at school without me knowing. On weekends, he would then send the pictures online, claiming I was his girlfriend. I never knew about this until a friend of mine alerted me. I felt so embarrassed because even some teachers

knew about it. (Participant L033, 17-year-old boy, School B, In-depth Individual Interview).

Head teacher participants reported that cyberbullying was prevalent and pervasive in their respective schools and was about spreading rumors and false information about a learner on social media using platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram. Head teachers reported that cases of cyberbullying had been reported to them in their schools. Below are verbatim quotations from head teacher participants:

I sometimes get reports that some learners are harassing others through cellphones and circulating false stories about them. As a school, we have always encouraged learners to use their cellphones responsibly, but sometimes our pleas fall on deaf ears. (Participant S072, 54-year-old, male, SGB, school A).

Cyberbullying is mostly used by the learners when they are out of school because our policy does not allow them to bring their phones to school. However, some learners do come and report that they are cyberbullied by their schoolmates, and most of the time, we intervene because we want to help the bullied student. (Participant P062, 40-year-old, female, head teacher, School B).

Some learners have reported that there are other learners who make fun of them on social media, especially on Facebook and WhatsApp. They even come with proof at times. Usually, it is false stories that are circulated, which make the victim seem funny or bad. We then try to calm the situation by talking to the bully. (Participant P061, 46-year-old male, head teacher, School A).

Theme 2: Intervention strategies

When participants were asked about ways to mitigate bullying in secondary schools, they suggested many ways to combat bullying. This question was mainly directed to teachers, principals, and members of the SGBs because they are the ones dealing with issues relating to bullying daily. The participants suggested that there should be a policy that addresses school bullying. The policy must be adhered to so that there is consistency when dealing with cases of bullying. They also suggested that teachers should be trained on dealing with bullying. This is because some teachers do not know how to deal with bullying, so in some cases, they end up perpetrating bullying, yet they think they are solving the case. They also said the problem begins at home, so parents can also be taught how to raise children. The problem of bullying can be eradicated. If a child is being raised in a broken home, it is very likely that that child will be a bully.

Sub-theme 1: Policy implementation, teacher training, and awareness

The school has a policy that addresses bullying, but the problem is that not all teachers adhere to the policy. They want to deal with bullies themselves. They do not want to pass the cases to the deputy teachers' office. This leads to inconsistency when dealing with bullying because some students end up at the deputy head teacher's office, yet some students are just getting a slap on the wrist. To eradicate bullying, there should be a policy that will be adhered to. It's not enough to have the policy alone, but it must also be followed for consistency. (Participant T051, School A, In-depth Individual Interview).

The school must also create a self-awareness programme that addresses bullying; for example, posters and chats that teach students about bullying. The self-awareness programme should provide channels for learners can report bullying. Each class must have mentors who deal with students personally so they can be able to talk to students about their private lives. (S071, School A, In-depth Individual Interview).

The school should train teachers on how to deal with school bullying. Most of our colleagues are not trained on dealing with bullying, so they end up not giving the bullies the punishment they deserve. If bullies do not face the consequences of their actions, they may be encouraged to repeat that action because they know very well, they are going to get a soft punishment. So, to combat bullying, in-service training should be organized where teachers will be trained, and upcoming teachers should be trained at universities. (P062, School B, In-depth Individual Interview).

Sub-theme 2: Involvement of parents

On combating bullying, parents should be brought into the equation. The problem is, many of our students are from broken families. They see their father beating their mother, and they think it is right, so if parents can be talked to on how to raise children and avoid doing bad things in front of children. (T051, School A, In-depth Individual Interview).

Sub-theme 3: Monitoring of learners during school hours and beyond school premises

A researcher observed the morning devotion session to gather data on the behavioral patterns, social interactions, and bullying indicators among students. During the observation, it was noted that the level of participation and attention among learners varied, with some actively engaging in prayers and discussions while others seemed distracted. During the observation was revealed that the interactions between learners include instances of leadership, support, and empathy. However, a researcher did not notice any significant conflicts or instances of bullying, such as exclusion, teasing, or physical aggression.

During break times, it was observed that learners were interacting with each other in the playground. Some learners were playing together, laughing and having fun. However, a researcher also noticed that some learners are being left out or excluded from games. A few were seen teasing or mocking others, which made them look sad or upset. The researcher saw some learners pushing each other, which is a sign of physical bullying. Outside the school yard, it was observed that many learners are engaged in physical and verbal bullying on their way home. It was observed that there is no monitoring and supervision of learners once they are out of the school yard. Overall, observations during break time and after school show that learner bullying is a concern in secondary schools. There is a need for SGBs, principals, and teachers to implement effective strategies to mitigate learner bullying.

Discussion of findings

Findings from the study indicated that providing continuous education about the dangers of bullying was also another strategy for curbing bullying among high school students in selected high schools in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn district of the Limpopo province of South Africa. This suggests that teachers should reach out to

learners by instilling an attitude that bullying is not allowed among learners so that they can see bullying as an inhuman act and a serious violation of the basic human rights as outlined in the South African Bill of Rights and the South African Schools Act. As stated by The Constitution and the Bill of Rights, bullying breaches at least six rights protected by the Bill of Rights, rights which a school must uphold; the Children's Act which places an extremely onerous duty of care on educators and other staff in a school, which can even extend after school hours and requires staff to stand in loco parentis (in the place of a parent) in respect of children under their care. They also found out that the provision of continuous education about dangers of bullying could be used as a strategy to curb bullying seems to be in alignment with a study by Harlanova, Sivrikova, Popova and Lapeva, (2019) which revealed that that to curb bullying all students, faculty and staff members at school should be trained on bullying and intervention.

When the participants were asked how school management authorities implement measures to mitigate learner bullying in schools, they suggested that there should be a policy that addresses school bullying. The policies that are currently there must be adhered to so that there is consistency when dealing with the cases of bullying. They also suggested that teachers should be trained on dealing with bullying. This is because some teachers do not know how to deal with bullying, so in some cases, they end up perpetrating bullying, yet they thought they were solving the case. They also said the problem begins at home, so parents can also be taught how to raise children. The problem of bullying can be mitigated. If a child is being raised in a broken home, it is very likely that that child will be a bully. This agrees with the observations made by Sibanda (2015), who opines that schools need to create a user-friendly teaching-learning space where educators can teach freely and learners learn without obstacles such as possible bullying activities, as the process of learning needs a conducive learning environment that cherishes the innocence and values human dignity. Also, the observations made in this study complement the observations made by (Smith, 1994) who suggested that the South African democratic government established and encouraged officials in different ranks of authority to strive in providing education in user-friendly school settings with the support of a variety of departmental policies. In addition to that, positive discipline could be used because it teaches learners to take responsibility for their actions.

Ethical considerations

The permission to collect data was obtained from the TREC at the University of Limpopo, School of Education. The Committee approved the topic for the research and provided the researcher with a clearance certificate as permission to conduct the study. The ethical clearance number was: REC-0310111-031. The researcher also requested permission to collect data from the Department of Basic Education in Maune Circuit and the principals of the two sampled schools through permission letters. Informed consent and assent forms were issued to the participants as a way of asking permission them. The teachers, principals, and SGBs were requested to sign the informed consent form, and learners who were above 18 years of age signed the informed assent form, which was also translated to their home language. Data collected throughout the study were kept in a safe place to ensure that there is

confidentiality. To ensure anonymity, code names were used instead of real names. During the interview, the researcher avoided all reasonably foreseeable risks of harm or discomfort, as well as any questions that could trigger discomfort to participants.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the complexity of bullying conception and implications for school-based interventions in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn District of the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The study adopted a qualitative case study, which included interviews and observations. The findings of the study revealed that in the Maune Circuit of the Capricorn district of the Limpopo province of South Africa, learners are not firm on bullies. Learners are not provided with continuous education on the dangers of bullying behavior. From the findings of the study, it can be concluded that learners lack mutual respect among themselves. They bully each other. On the other hand, teachers are not aware of policies on the protection of learners. If they are aware, they are reluctant to implement them whenever there are cases of bullying in schools.

Recommendations

Learners must receive continuous education on the dangers of bullying behaviour. This should come from the educators, SAPS, Department of Health, Social workers, and other related stakeholders. Educators should familiarize themselves with policies on the protection of learners and implement them when necessary. Teachers need to be observant of learners' changes in behaviour in class, and if there is worrying behaviour, deal with it as soon as possible. Bullying needs to be taken seriously, and the perpetrators should face the consequences, not just an insignificant punishment. The departments of guidance and counselling in schools should be strengthened so that the victims and the bullies can get counselling.

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