Towards Creating a Bullying Proof School Environment: Views of School Administrators and Educators in the Midlands and Matabeleland South Regions of Zimbabwe

Mercy Kurebwa & Zamani Mzaca
Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe.
Email: kurebwam@zou.ac.zw

Abstract: This qualitative study explored the perspectives of school administrators and teachers regarding bullying in *secondary schools of the Midlands province and Matabeleland South province of Zimbabwe. Utilizing semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, including school heads and educators, the research aims to understand the prevalence, forms, causes, and consequences of bullying in these contexts and develop strategies of creating a bullying proof school environment. Findings reveal that bullying manifests in various forms—physical, verbal, relational, cyber, and psychological. It irrevocably results in significant emotional distress, academic decline, and school dropout syndrome among victims. The study highlights the common challenges faced by schools: including parental disengagement, insufficient disciplinary measures, and a lack of trained staff to handle bullying cases effectively. Participants lamented a culture of silence among victims due to fear of retaliation, which further perpetuates the cycle of bullying. To address this issue, educators advocated for clear bully-proofed school rules, regular counselling sessions, and the implementation of anonymous suggestion boxes, which provide a safe channel for victims to report incidents. Effective deterrents include perpetrator temporary exclusion from school activities, and collaboration with law enforcement for severe cases. The research emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to tackle bullying, integrating community involvement, and more vibrant systemic changes within school policies. By applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study underscores the interconnectedness of individual, relational, and societal factors in shaping the bullying landscape. Ultimately the study seeks to feed into the development of effective strategies for fostering safe educational environments in Zimbabwe.*

Keywords: Bullying, Bullying Proof policy, Discipline, School Administrators, Community Involvement

1. Introduction

The scourge of bullying in Zimbabwe's post-independence schools has reached alarming proportions, with one school head describing it as a "veld fire" that has invaded educational institutions with devastating consequences. The tragic outcomes of bullying have been well-documented: some victims losing their lives, others left to nurse physical injuries, and a significant number developing a negative attitude towards schooling, leading to a high dropout rate. In fact, research has shown that bullying can have a profound impact on the academic and emotional well-being of students. A staggering 30% of Zimbabwean schoolchildren have experienced bullying at some point in their academic journey (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2020). This may be just a tip of the iceberg: more cases often go unreported.

New students are vulnerable to various forms of bullying, including name-calling, physical abuse, intimidation, confinement, extortion, and being coerced into doing older students' homework (Zindi, 2019). The root causes of bullying are complex and multifaceted, with factors such as intrinsic and inherent hatred, family background, teacher favoritism, jealousy, unreported previous cases, and complacency among educators contributing to its prevalence (Gomba and Zindoga, 2021).

The Matabeleland South Region and Midlands Region of Zimbabwe have been identified as hotspots for bullying, with a high incidence of cases reported in 2020 (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2020). This school region was chosen as the focus of the study due to the alarming statistics, hence the need for research to understand the causes and consequences of bullying in schools. By investigating the prevalence and factors associated with bullying the researchers aimed to unearth strategies for preventing and addressing this serious issue.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned in terms of theoretical framework by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, as a comprehensive lens through which to explore the phenomenon of bullying among school-aged children. Bronfenbrenner's theory suggests that a child's development is profoundly influenced by various interconnected environmental systems, including the microsystem of immediate contexts like home and school, the mesosystem of interactions between these settings, and the exosystem that encompasses broader social and economic influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In the selected context, Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework is particularly relevant. It allows researchers to analyze bullying behavior not just because of individual characteristics, but as an outcome influenced by a constellation of environmental factors. For example, the microsystem includes the immediate social environment of schools and homes, where relationships among peers, educators, and family members can either perpetuate or mitigate bullying behaviors. The mesosystem further illuminates how interactions between these two contexts (such as communication between parents and teachers) can influence students' experiences and responses to bullying.

Furthermore, the exosystem sheds light on external societal factors, such as cultural norms, economic conditions, and community support structures that shape attitudes toward bullying and its prevention. Understanding these systems helps in identifying the broader context within which bullying occurs. Also, it reveals the multiple layers of influence on both aggressors and victims.

By employing this holistic perspective, the study aims to gather insights from school administrators and educators regarding the factors that trigger bullying in their specific contexts. This approach will enable a thorough understanding of the relational dynamics at play in schools, as well as the societal influences that contribute to the bullying epidemic. It also emphasizes that addressing the challenge of bullying requires intervention across various levels: from personal education and awareness among students, to systemic changes in school policies and community awareness.

Ultimately, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory serves as a valuable framework for this study, guiding the exploration of bullying through a multifaceted lens, thus contributing to more effective strategies for fostering safe and supportive educational environments in Zimbabwe.

2.2 The Concept of Bullying

Bullying is characterized as unwanted and aggressive behavior among school-aged children, involving a real or perceived power imbalance. This behavior is not only repeated but has the potential to recur overtime (Olweus, 1993). In the context of schools, bullying frequently takes the form of intentional violence perpetrated by an aggressor against a student who is perceived as weaker. Victims of bullying are often viewed as passive, submissive, less assertive, or physically less capable, which typically corresponds with a lower social status among their peers (Arafat, 2017; Shetgiri, 2013; Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

Research conducted by Ates (2017) as cited in Gomba and Zindoga (2021) reveals that victims of bullying often experience significant emotional distress. They are prone to anxiety, low self-esteem, and social rejection. They commonly exhibit reluctance to engage in school activities. Furthermore, many victims may display shyness and lack the confidence to report their experiences of bullying. This silence can perpetuate the cycle of victimization, emphasizing the compelling importance of addressing this issue within the educational context.

In Zimbabwe, particularly in the Midlands and Matabeleland South regions, exploring the perspectives of school administrators and educators on bullying can provide critical insights into the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions. It is vital to understand not only the administrative approaches to combating bullying but also the educators' roles in fostering a safe and inclusive school environment. By examining these views, we can identify potential areas for improvement,

and from there develop more effective strategies for mitigating bullying in schools.

2.3 Forms of Bullying

Bullying in schools can manifest in many ways, each shows up in many ways, each with its own tactics and effects on victims.

Physical bullying is a common type where force or violence is used to scare or hurt the victim, like kicking or hitting (Smith et al., 2017). In Zimbabwe, cultural views on discipline can inflame physical bullying, so educators need to grasp how it affects students' well-being and school performance.

Another type is verbal bullying, where mean words are used to hurt or scare others, such as name-calling or threats (Wang et al., 2019). Verbal bullying might ride upon wider societal issues like gender norms. Understanding how educators handle verbal bullying can show if anti-bullying efforts are working.

Then there's relational bullying, which involves manipulation and exclusion to harm others, like spreading rumors or excluding people from social groups (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In Zimbabwe, relational bullying can link to community ties and cultural practices, so school leaders must create welcoming environments that counter these behaviors.

Cyberbullying is on the rise with technology, using digital platforms to harass others, like sending hurtful messages online (Kowalski et al., 2014). As tech use grows in Zimbabwe, it's crucial for educators to address cyberbullying in the curriculum and work with parents to prevent it.

Lastly, psychological bullying uses mind games to intimidate or manipulate, like constant criticism or making the victim feel guilty (Salmivalli, 2010). It's sneaky and can leave victims feeling lost. Exploring how school staff handle psychological bullying can improve support systems for students' mental health.

Understanding these forms of bullying is key to fighting them effectively in schools. A well-rounded approach that tackles each type can create a safer, more supportive environment for all students. By looking at how school leaders in the Midlands and Matabeleland South regions view bullying, we can tailor interventions to fit the local culture better.

2.4 Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the prevalent forms of bullying experienced in secondary schools in the Midlands and Matabeleland South regions of Zimbabwe?
2. What are the perceived causes and contributing factors to bullying among students as identified by school administrators and educators?
3. What are the emotional and academic impacts of bullying on victims in the identified regions?
4. How do school administrators and educators address and manage incidents of bullying within their institutions?

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the challenges of bullying in Matabeleland South and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe from the perspectives of secondary school administrators and teachers. This approach is well-suited for gaining an in-depth understanding of the complex and nuanced issues surrounding bullying in these provinces. The use of semi-structured interviews with 10 school heads and 20 senior schoolteachers in each province allowed for the generation of rich and detailed data, which was then analyzed thematically.

The selection of schools and participants was purposive, aiming to represent a range of rural, semi-urban, and urban, in the two provinces. This approach ensured that the sample was diverse in the local context, which is essential for gaining a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by schools in addressing bullying.

The use of probes to elicit detailed narratives from participants allowed for a deeper understanding of their perspectives and experiences, which is a key strength of qualitative research. The fact that interviews were conducted in the language preferred by participants, either English, Ndebele, or Shona, also ensured that the data was generated in a way that was comfortable and accessible for participants.

The analysis of the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework allowed for the identification of themes and patterns which were strongly linked to the participants' own perspectives. This inductive approach is well-suited for qualitative research, as it allows for the development of theory and understanding that is grounded in the data.

In terms of methodology, the study appears to have been rigorously conducted, with informed consent and confidentiality maintained throughout the data generation and analysis process. The use of field notes to record non-verbal cues and contextual details also adds richness and depth to the data.

Overally, the study provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the challenges of bullying in Matabeleland South and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe, from the perspectives of secondary school administrators and educators. The findings of this study have the potential to make recommendations for addressing the challenge of bullying in these provinces and contribute to the development of effective strategies for preventing and responding to bullying in schools.

The following ethics procedures were considered:

• Permission was sought from the participants to take part in the study and only those who agreed took part in the study

. • The names of the participants were fictitious to protect their anonymity

• The information from the participants was kept private and confidential.

• The participants were informed that taking part in this study is voluntary and that they can withdraw anytime they wish to without any penalty.

• Permission to conduct the study in the schools was granted by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe

4. Results and Discussion

The study reveals a substantial prevalence of various forms of bullying (physical, verbal, relational, cyber, and psychological bullying). These behaviors are consistent with classic definitions articulated by scholars such as Olweus (1993). They highlight the complex nature of bullying as it evolves, particularly in the context of technology and societal influences (Kowalski et al., 2014). Victims, regardless of whether they attend day or boarding schools, confirmed their experiences of intimidation, name-calling, social exclusion, and online harassment, proving indeed that bullying is a pervasive issue that transcends school types and settings.

The underlying causes contributing to bullying, (such as intrinsic hatred, jealousy, and societal norms) are corroborated by literature. This suggesting that behavior is often influenced by cultural contexts and familial patterns (Gomba and Zindoga, 2021; Wang et al., 2019). For instance, the study highlights how senior students frequently bully juniors, potentially reinforcing a tradition of violence. These findings indicate an urgent need for tailored interventions that address the cultural and social dynamics within schools.

The adverse effects of bullying on victims are significant, manifesting as anxiety, low self-esteem, school dropout rates, and reluctance to participate in academic activities. This aligns with earlier research indicating that bullying severely impacts victims' mental health and academic performance (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Many victims also resort to drastic measures, such as stealing money for "protection fees," further perpetuating a cycle of fear and disengagement from school. The long-lasting consequences of victimisation call for schools to prioritize mental health resources and support for affected students.

A major barrier to effectively managing bullying incidents reported by participants is the glaring lack of cooperation from parents and community members. Educators feel unprepared to manage bullying, as many incidents go unreported due to victim fears and a culture of silence (Ates, 2017). As supported by the findings, collaboration between schools and families is crucial for fostering a supportive environment that addresses bullying comprehensively. This disconnection not only affects the victims but also places a burden on teachers, who must divert valuable time from instruction to managing disciplinary issues. Participants also suggested the introduction of victim friendly structures where the victim gives an account of the bullying incident in a calm environment without the offender's presence.

Participants proposed various strategies to minimize bullying, such as establishing clear anti-bullying school rules, conducting counseling sessions, and implementing anonymous suggestion boxes. These proposals reflect evidence-based practices proven to deter bullying behaviors and foster resilience among students (Salmivalli, 2010). Involving parents in the process and developing community awareness campaigns, as indicated in the discussions, are very vital for reinforcing anti-bullying measures. The participants also suggested the incorporation or inclusion of statements in the school rules and regulations, statements on the forms of bullying and forms of punishment that offenders should expect. They also suggested that these rules and regulations must be signed by the parents or guardians and learners as learners are admitted into the school.

The findings underline the urgent need for a multifaceted approach that involves all stakeholders to combat bullying- a scourge that persists in the school system.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The conclusions drawn from the study on bullying by examining these key stakeholders' views, gave the researchers deeper insights into the multifaceted nature

of bullying behaviors and the systemic issues that perpetuate them.

A significant focus of the study is the long-lasting impact of bullying on victims, which underscores a crucial concern for teachers and school administrators. Understanding that victims may experience heightened anxiety, lower self-esteem, and increased dropout rates reinforces the urgency for administrators to prioritise mental health support and to create a safe climate within schools. The psychological toll on students can compromise their overall educational experience, making it imperative for school leaders to recognize bullying as more than a disciplinary issue; it is a key factor affecting academic performance and student well-being.

The findings further reveal that cultural and social dynamics play a significant role in shaping bullying behaviors. In the context of the Midlands and Matabeleland South, where traditional practices and hierarchical student relationships may prevail, it is essential for educators to critically assess how these dynamics influence interactions between students. By articulating their views on the cultural dimensions of bullying, school administrators can promote a more informed approach to conflict resolution and restorative practices that challenge a culture of violence and foster respect and empathy.

Collaboration among schools, families, and community members emerges as a pivotal conclusion directly related to the views of school administrators and educators. The study indicates that a lack of parental involvement exacerbates bullying. Thus, school leaders must actively engage parents and community stakeholders in discussions about bullying prevention. Educators can share their insights and experiences to advocate for stronger partnerships that leverage community resources and support, fostering a holistic approach that addresses bullying both culturally and contextually.

To combat bullying effectively, a comprehensive strategy is essential. This aligns with educators' perspectives, as they recognize the need for tailored interventions. The study underscores the importance of adopting evidence-based strategies adaptable to specific school environments. Educators' insights can inform the development of initiatives such as clearly communicated bullying –proofed school rules, counseling programs, and anonymous reporting systems that resonate with their community context.

Finally, the emphasis on tailoring interventions speaks to the experiences of school administrators in the Midlands and Matabeleland South regions, where unique dynamics may influence bullying incidents and responses. Engaging educators in exploring local factors affecting bullying will enhance the effectiveness of anti-bullying

programs. By fostering educators' involvement in decision-making processes, schools can cultivate a sense of ownership and responsibility toward creating safe educational environments.

Overall, the findings of the study on bullying strongly endorse the need for school administrators and educators in Zimbabwe to work collaboratively, employing culturally sensitive strategies to effectively address bullying. By exploring their views and experiences, we can develop informed, contextually relevant solutions that empower all stakeholders to contribute to preventing and mitigating bullying behaviors in schools.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several key recommendations can be made to address the complex issue of bullying in schools.

1. Firstly, it is essential to develop and implement a comprehensive anti-bullying policy that is culturally sensitive and responsive to the unique dynamics of each school environment. This policy should be developed in collaboration with students, parents, educators, and community members to ensure that it is effective in preventing and addressing bullying behaviors.
2. Secondly, schools should prioritize mental health resources and support for affected students, including counseling sessions, peer support groups, and access to mental health professionals. This is crucial in addressing the adverse effects of bullying on victims' mental health and academic performance.
3. Thirdly, educators need to be adequately capacitated to manage bullying incidents, and schools should provide them with the necessary training and resources to do so. This includes training on recognizing the signs of bullying, responding to incidents, conducting victim-friendly bullying hearings and developing strategies to prevent future incidents.
4. Fourthly, collaboration between schools and families is crucial in fostering a supportive environment that addresses bullying comprehensively. Schools should work with parents to develop strategies for preventing and addressing bullying and involve them in the process of developing and implementing anti-bullying policies.
5. Finally, schools should establish a culture of empathy and inclusiveness, where students feel safe and supported. This can be achieved by promoting a growth mindset, encouraging positive relationships between students, and fostering a sense of community and belonging.

In terms of specific strategies, the study suggests that establishing clear bully-proofed school rules, conducting counseling sessions, and implementing anonymous suggestion boxes can be effective in deterring bullying behaviors and fostering resilience among students. Additionally, involving parents in the process and developing community awareness campaigns can help to reinforce anti-bullying measures.

Overally, addressing bullying in schools requires a multifaceted approach that involves all stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, and community members. By working together, we can create a safer and more supportive environment for all students to thrive in.

Acknowledgements

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