

# PEER VICTIMISATION IN SCHOOLS: THE OBSERVATION OF BULLYING

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## 1 Introduction

The school plays a central role in a child's socialisation and it is critical that schools offer a safe environment in which learning and growth can take place. Violence “contaminates” the school environment and jeopardises the educational process. Crime and violence in schools are therefore matters of significant public concern. Although the perception of risk is often greater than the reality, many schools face serious problems. It is important to understand these problems so that effective strategies can be developed to prevent school violence and increase school safety.

Peer victimisation or bullying is one of the hidden elements of the culture of violence that contributes to different manifestations of violence in our society, such as child abuse, domestic violence, workplace violence, hate crimes and road rage. Dominating male and female bullies bully others who are weaker and less powerful. Men bully their female partners, women (and men) bully children, older children bully younger children and younger children often bully their pets. Violence seems to travel from the strongest to the weakest or from the most powerful to the least powerful (the so-called “vortex of violence”) (Perry 1996:66-80). People who are the object of violence absorb it, modify it and pass it on. Young children who are at the bottom of this vortex often do not have anyone to pass it on to, so they absorb it, accumulate it and wait until they are old enough to erupt in some dramatic way that hurts other people.

## 2 Conceptualisation and importance

Bullying among learners is best defined as intentional, repeated hurtful acts, words or other behaviour, such as name-calling, threatening or shunning committed by a child or children against another child or other children. These negative acts are not intentionally provoked by the victim and for such acts to be identified as bullying, an imbalance in real or perceived power must exist between the bully and the victim (Coloroso 2002:1-2). It is not a question of a single attack directed at one child here and at another there, but the victim is subjected to systematic harassment. It is difficult for the victims to defend themselves and they experience a sense of helplessness or defencelessness vis-à-vis the bully.

A report on the BBC News (21 April 1999) emphasised the importance of taking note of the occurrence of bullying, noting that

- Most incidents of school violence begin with bullying.
- School violence is on the increase.
- Bullying plays a role in serious incidents of violence such as the Columbine massacre in the USA.

### 3 Bullying and normal peer conflict

A bullying situation is characterised by six defining factors:

- **Intent to harm.** The perpetrator finds pleasure in taunting or trying to dominate the victim and continues even when the victim's distress is obvious.
- **Intensity and duration.** The bullying continues over a long period and the degree of bullying is damaging to the victim's self-esteem.
- **Power over the victim.** The bully has power over the victim because of age, strength, size or gender.
- **Vulnerability of the victim.** The victims are more sensitive to teasing, cannot adequately defend themselves, and have physical or psychological qualities that make them more prone to victimisation.
- **Lack of support.** The victim feels isolated and exposed. Often, the victim is afraid to report the bullying for fear of retaliation.
- **Consequences.** The damage to the victim's self-esteem is long lasting and leads the victim to withdraw from school activities, or to also become aggressive.

In a normal peer conflict situation, none of these elements are present. Hence those involved in a normal peer conflict situation

- do not insist on getting their own way.
- provide reasons for why they disagree.
- apologise and offer win-win situations.
- are free to bargain and negotiate in order to have their needs met.
- can change the topic and walk away (Weinhold 1999:14).

### 4 Method and respondents

The study was exploratory and the purpose was to acquire descriptive information from learners to help schools assess the following issues:

- the nature and extent to which bullying does occur in a school
- how children react(ed) to bullying
- whether the victims informed others and what the outcomes were
- the contributing factors to peer victimisation
- measures against bullying
- gender, age and other demographic differences regarding all of the above.

The major outcomes of the study were to identify key concerns regarding bullying in schools, and to make information available to legitimate and interested stakeholders in the development of problem-solving strategies.

During the first semester of 2002 a structured survey questionnaire was constructed and subjected to the criticism of colleagues, members of the Department of Education and others familiar with the nature and scope of the study. On the basis of ensuing feedback, the draft instrument was revised and drawn up in its final form, consisting of nineteen pages and comprising thirty-four main questions, focusing on the issues mentioned.

The researchers were able to generate a non-probability sample by means of the convenience sampling technique consisting of Grade 6, 7, 8, 9,10 and 11 learners from six primary and secondary schools, in District 4, Tshwane South. The sample does not permit generalizations outside the group of sample elements. Table 1 provides an overview of the general demographics of the respondents. For the purpose of Chi-square calculations, the age variable was regrouped into two sub-categories, namely “Under 15 years” and “Over 14 years”.

The questionnaire was administered in each school by lecturers from the Department of Criminology, the Institute for Criminological Sciences and staff of the Department of Education in Gauteng in classrooms during normal class periods. The survey was conducted in August/September 2002 and the learners completed 220 questionnaires. Seventeen were not correctly completed and could not be used in the study. This investigation served as a pilot study for the main survey to be completed at the end of 2002/beginning of 2003. The results were entered into the Statistical package for Social Sciences (SPSS) data processor and analysed by means of frequencies and cross-tabulations utilizing chi-square statistical tests. The statistical meaning attached to the concept “significance” means probably true and/or not due to chance. A research finding may be true without being a significant indicator in a certain context. Levels of significance indicate how likely a result is due to chance. Statistical significance at the 5 percent (0.05) level indicates that a finding has a 95 percent (or higher) chance of being true. Subsequently the accepted levels of significance reported in this study are as follows. The 5 percent level of significance includes all chi-square values where  $p < 0.05$  and  $p > 0.01$ . Secondly the 1 percent level of significance covers all chi-square values where  $p < 0.01$  and  $p > 0.001$  and thirdly the 0.1 percent level where  $p < 0.001$ .

The survey results were analysed for this article according to their relevance for the following questions:

- How do children feel at their schools regarding safety and happiness?
- What is the learners' observation of bullying regarding the frequency, nature and location of peer victimisation, and the characteristics of the bullies?

Table 1 depicts the characteristics of the research group. Approximately equal numbers of each age group were represented in the sample. Most of the respondents were in the age group over 14 years (55.6%) with the highest representation in the 15 years (19.8%) and 16 years (20.8%) age groups. Most of the respondents were female learners (53.1%), while males constituted 46.9 percent of the sample. Of the respondents, 30.9 percent were from primary schools (Grade 6: 15% and Grade 7: 15.9%) and 69.1 percent were from secondary schools (23.7% in Grade 11). Most of the respondents (59.9%) were blacks, followed by whites (34.3%), coloureds (3.4%) and Indians (2.43 %).

**Table 1**      **Characteristics of the research group**

<b>Demographic variable</b>	<b>N=207</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Age</b>		
12 years or under	34	16.4
13 years	30	14.5
14 years	28	13.5
15 years	41	19.8
16 years	43	20.8
Older than 16 years	31	15.0
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	97	46.9
Female	110	53.1
<b>Grade</b>		
6	31	15.0
7	33	15.9
8	28	13.5
9	31	15.0
10	35	16.9
11	49	23.7
<b>Population group</b>		
Black	124	59.9
Coloured	7	3.4
Indian	5	2.4
White	71	34.3
Unspecified/Other	0	0

## **5**      **Results**

In a previous investigation (Neser et al 2001), 20,5 percent of all the learners pointed to “crime and violence in school” as the most important problem facing young people. It was also evident that a higher percentage (57%) of male learners than female learners (43%) viewed “crime and violence in school” as the main issue of concern in schools. Crime and violence were singled out as the most important problem by 44.7 percent of all coloured learners compared to 23.9 percent of Indian, 21 percent of black and 13.4 percent of white learners.

## 5.1 Feeling safe and happy

**Table 2 Feeling safe and happy at school**

Question	% Total					
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
Do you feel safe at school?	53.1	16.9	21.3	5.8	2.9	100
Do you often feel sad and unhappy?	2.9	5.3	49.8	25.6	16.4	100

N=207

Table 2 reports the group's perceptions about feeling safe and happy at school. Results reveal that more than half (53.1%) of the learners always felt safe at school. However, it is significant that about ten percent of the sample rarely (5.8%) and never (2.9%) felt safe at school. The majority (49.8%) indicated that they sometimes felt sad and unhappy at school. Nearly half of the group rarely (25.6%) or never (16.4%) felt unhappy. Results from the analysis of the age/grade/population group/gender subgroups (data not presented in table 2) indicated that learners' opinions differed at the 5 % level of significance regarding:

- “Do you feel safe at school?”

Chi-square:

Age: value 12.776; df 4; p .012 (1% level)

Grade: value 31.841; df 20; p .045 (5% level)

Population group: value 34.859; df 12; p .000 (highly significant)

The percentage of respondents over the age of 14 years who reported that they always feel safe at school (45.2%) was smaller than the group under the age of 15 years (63.0%). It was evident that nearly three quarters of the learners in Grade 6 always felt safe at school compared to 34.3 percent of the learners in Grade 10. Regarding feeling safe at school, the various population groups differed as follows in their responses under the category “always”:

- ▶ blacks 57.3 percent
- ▶ coloureds 57.1 percent
- ▶ Indians 80.0 percent
- ▶ whites 43.7 percent

- “Do you often feel sad and unhappy?”

Chi-square:

Gender: value 10.895; df 4; p .028 (5% level)

Grade: value 35.628; df 20; p.017 (5% level)

Population group: value 25.887; df 12; p.011 (1% level)

In reply to the question “Do you often feel sad and unhappy?”, more than half (52.6%) of the male learners indicated that they rarely (29.9%) or never (22.7%) felt sad or unhappy at school. Among the female learners, however, only about a third (32.7%) of the group rarely (21.8%) or never (10.9%) felt sad or unhappy. Less than one-third (32.3%) of the Grade 6

learners compared to 6.5 percent of Grade 9 and 11.4 percent of Grade 10 learners never felt unhappy. The overwhelming majority of Indians (80.0%) indicated that they rarely (40.0%) or never (40.0%) felt sad or unhappy compared to 33.8 percent of the black learners.

## 5.2 Observing peer victimisation

Bullying is a phenomenon familiar to the vast majority of all learners, with less than ten percent (8.7%) of the respondents stating that it never happened at their school. About two-thirds of the respondents were of the opinion that learners are bullied every day (34.8%) or once or twice a week (33.8%). Table 3 represents demographic variations in the respondents' observation of the frequency of bullying.

**Table 3 How often would you say learners are bullied at your school?**

Variable		% Frequency				Never	Total
		Every day	Once or twice a week	Once or twice a month	Once or twice a year		
<b>Gender</b>							
Male	N=97	30.9	28.9	13.4	13.4	13.4	100.0
Female	N=110	38.2	38.2	13.6	5.5	4.5	100.0
<b>Age</b>							
Under 15 years	N=92	33.7	31.5	16.3	7.6	10.9	100.0
Over 14 years	N=115	35.7	35.7	11.3	10.3	7.0	100.0
<b>Grade</b>							
6	N=31	19.4	29.0	22.6	9.6	19.4	100.0
7	N=33	45.5	24.2	12.1	6.1	12.1	100.0
8	N=28	28.6	42.9	14.3	7.1	7.1	100.0
9	N=31	25.8	54.8	9.7	9.7	00.0	100.0
10	N=35	40.0	31.4	5.7	14.3	8.6	100.0
11	N=49	42.9	26.5	16.3	8.2	6.1	100.0
<b>Population group</b>							
Black	N=124	25.8	40.3	12.1	7.3	14.5	100.0
Coloured	N=7	71.4	14.3	14.3	00.0	00.0	100.0
Indian/Asian	N=5	40.0	40.0	20.0	00.0	00.0	100.0
White	N=71	46.5	23.9	15.5	14.1	00.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	N=207	34.8	33.8	13.5	9.2	8.7	100

It is evident that more female respondents were of the opinion that bullying occurred every day (38.2%) and once or twice a week (38.2%) compared to the male learners (30.9% every day and

28.9% once or twice a week, respectively). Statistical analysis of the data indicated that females and males differed statistically at the 5 % level of significance in this regard (Chi-square: value 10.302; df 4; p .036). There appeared to be no significant differences in the perceptions of the age groups regarding the frequency of bullying at their schools. The numbers reported corresponded to a large extent with perceptions of the total investigation group. Almost half of the respondents in Grade 7 (45.5%), Grade 10 (40.0%) and Grade 11 (42.9%) believed that learners were bullied on a daily basis at their schools. However, nearly one fifth (19.4%) of the learners in Grade 6 reported that bullying never takes place at their schools. Four distinct trends (statistically significant on the 1% Chi-square: value 28.909; df 12; p .004) level can be identified in the perceptions of the population groups regarding the frequency of peer victimisation:

- The majority of the Coloured learners (71.4%) witnessed bullying at their schools on a daily basis.
- Only one quarter (25.8%) of the black learners observed peer victimization every day.
- No Coloured, Indian/Asian or white learners indicated that they ever observed bullying at their schools.
- Both the black (40.3%) and Indian/Asian (40.0%) respondents reported relatively high frequencies of bullying incidents once or twice a week.

The respondents' perceptions differed statistically at the 1% level of significance in terms of their population groups (Chi-square: value 28.909; df 12; p .004).

**Table 4      How often have you seen any of the following things happen to other learners at your school?**

Nature of bullying	%					Total
	Every day	Once or twice a week	Once or twice a month	Once or twice a year	Never	
Being teased in an unpleasant way	34.8	36.7	14	5.3	9.2	100
Being called hurtful names	35.7	39.1	11.6	4.8	8.8	100
Being left out of things on purpose	19.8	31.4	21.7	4.8	22.3	100
Being threatened with harm	10.6	24.6	21.7	19.4	23.7	100
Being hit, kicked or pushed	15.5	25.6	17.9	19.3	21.7	100

N=207

The survey results as shown in Table 4 revealed that most learners observed only milder forms of peer victimisation, such as teasing and name-calling, on a very frequent basis. For instance, 35.7 percent reported that they witnessed incidents of learners being called hurtful names on a daily basis,

while 34.8 percent indicated that they noticed the occurrence of unpleasant teasing every day. Nearly one fifth (19.8%) of the group said they saw learners being left out of things on purpose on a daily basis. The respondents observed more serious bullying acts, such as being threatened with harm or being hit, kicked or pushed, on a less frequent basis. Nearly one-quarter of the respondents indicated that they saw learners being threatened with harm (23.7%), or being hit, kicked or pushed (21.7%). What was alarming, however, was respondents' observation of bullying in the form of being threatened with harm (24.6%) and being hit, kicked or pushed (25.6%) once or twice a week. The analysis of the population subgroup (data not shown in Table 4) indicated that the learners' perceptions differed statistically at the 1 % level of significance in terms of:

- Learners being left out on purpose (Chi-square: value 27.953; df 12; p .006) (1% level). In response to the question of how often learners saw other learners being left out of things on purpose, about one-third of the black respondents (33.1%), 4.2 percent of the whites, 14.3 percent of the Coloureds and 20.0 percent of the Indians indicated that this form of bullying never occurred.
- Learners being threatened with harm (Chi-square: value 34.857; df 12; p .000) (highly significant) With reference to this more serious level of bullying, 60 percent in the Indian group indicated they never (40.0%) or almost never (20.0% once or twice a year) witnessed other learners being threatened with harm compared to 40.9 percent of the white group (11.3% never and 29.6% once or twice a year).
- Learners being hit, kicked or pushed (Chi-square: value 36.786; df 12; p .000) (highly significant).. Nearly one-third (28.6%) of the Coloured learners observed this form of peer victimisation on a daily basis, whereas only 11.3 percent of white learners saw it every day.

**Table 5 Have you noticed bullying going on in any of these places at your school?**

Location of bullying	% Every day					Total
	Every day	Once or twice a week	Once or twice a month	Once or twice a year	Never	
In my classroom	11.6	36.7	20.8	11.1	19.8	100
On the playground	24.6	33.3	18.8	7.7	15.6	100
Walking to or from school	11.6	26.1	15	10.6	36.7	100
In the bathroom	7.7	11.6	14	7.2	59.5	100
In the hall	4.8	13.5	16.4	13.5	51.8	100
While participating in organised sport	6.3	17.9	19.3	17.4	39.1	100

N=207

Table 5 illustrates the respondents' perceptions of the place where bullying took place. The playground (24.6% every day) was the most common site for bullying, followed by classrooms (11.6% every day) and while walking to and from school (11.6% every day). A minority of the learners indicated that bullying occurred in the bathroom (7.7% every day), while participating in organised sport (6.6% every day) or in the hall (4.8 % every day). More than half of the sample never observed peer victimization in the bathroom (59.5%) or in the hall (51.8%). According to the analysis of the data of the gender/population group subgroups (data not presented in Table 5), the respondents' perceptions differed statistically at the 5 % level of significance regarding:

- Learners bullied in classrooms  
Chi-square:  
Gender: value 9.633; df 4; p .047 (5% level)  
Of the respondents, 13.6 percent of the females and 9.3 percent of the male learners indicated that bullying took place in classrooms on a daily basis.
- Learners bullied on the playground  
Chi-square:  
Population group: value 27.697; df 12; p .006 (1% level)  
More than one-fifth (21.8%) of the black learners compared to 5.6 percent of the white learners reported no bullying on the playground.
- Learners bullied when walking to and from school (population groups)  
Chi-square:  
Population group: value 51.813; df 12; p .000 (highly significant)  
With regard to this location of peer victimisation, nearly one-fifth (19.4%) of the black respondents indicated that it occurred daily compared to 11.6 percent of the whites and no Coloureds or Indians.
- Learners bullied in the bathroom  
Chi-square:  
Gender: value 9.515; df 4; p .049 (5% level)  
Most (74.6%) of the female respondents indicated that bullying never (69.1%) or hardly ever (5.5% once or twice a year) took place in the bathroom. Just over half (57.8%) of the male respondents agreed.  
Chi-square:  
Population group: value 25.023; df 12; p .015 (1% level)  
Of the black learners, 11.3% percent noticed bullying in bathrooms, compared to only 2.8 percent of the white and no Coloured or Indian learners.

Table 6 indicates a noticeable difference between the genders' perception of the characteristics of bullies. The investigation group singled out boys (68.0%) and groups of boys (67.1%) as the perpetrators of bullying in about equal numbers. A significant percent (47.0 %) of the respondents reported mixed groups as the culprits. However, peer victimisation by girls should not be discounted. Close to forty percent (38.6 percent) of the learners witnessed incidents involving girls in bullying activities. The percentage was even more significant in the case of a group of girls (44.0%).

**Table 6 Who have you seen bullying other learners at your school?**

Characteristics of the bullies	%		Total
	Yes	No	
A boy	68	32	100
A group of boys	67.1	32.9	100
A girl	38.6	61.4	100
A group of girls	44	56	100
Both boys and girls	47.8	52.2	100

N=207

The analysis of the data of the grade/gender/population group subgroups (not included in Table 6) indicated that the learners' views differed statistically at the 5 % level of significance in terms of:

- Bullying by a girl  
 Chi-square:  
 Gender: value 7.365; df 1; p .007 (1% level)  
 Grade: value 14.070; df 5; p .015 (1% level)  
 In reply to the question of whether the participants had seen a girl bullying other learners at their schools, 47.3 percent of the female group and 28.9 percent of the male respondents answered in the affirmative. Less than one-fifth (19.4%) of the learners in Grade 6 observed the occurrence of bullying by a girl, compared to 53.6 percent and 51.0 percent of the respondents in Grades 8 and 10, respectively.
- Bullying by a group of girls  
 Chi-square:  
 Gender: value 8.919; df 1; p .003 (1% level)  
 Population group: value 8.143; df 3; p .043 (5% level)  
 More than half (53.6 percent) of the female respondents observed peer victimisation by a group of girls compared to 33 percent of the male respondents. The majority (85.7%) of the Coloureds indicated that bullying is done by groups of girls, compared to 49.3 percent white and 37.9 percent black respondents, respectively.
- Bullying by both boys and girls  
 Chi-square:  
 Gender: value 4.247; df 1; p .039 (5% level)  
 Most (54.5%) of the female learners indicated that bullies came from both gender groups and 42 percent of the male respondents saw bullying by mixed groups at their schools.

## 6 Conclusion

The respondents generally perceived their schools to be safe places. More than half (53.1%) of the learners were satisfied with the safety situation at their schools (always felt safe at their schools). Many respondents (49.8%) indicated that they sometimes felt sad and unhappy at school.

Bullying is a reality in the daily life of the majority of the participants. Of the respondents, 34.8 percent indicated that learners were bullied every day and 33.8 percent indicated once or twice a week.

Most of the learners observed the milder forms of bullying on a regular basis (being called hurtful names [35.7%] and being teased in an unpleasant way [34.8 %]). In comparison, the respondents observed more serious peer victimisation, such as being threatened with harm, less frequently (24.6% daily). Physical bullying involving hitting, kicking and pushing occurred regularly (25.6% witnessed it once or twice a week).

The most common location for bullying reported by the sample as a whole was the playground (24.6% daily), followed by classrooms (11.6% every day) and while walking to and from school (11.6% daily).

The respondents indicated boys (68.0%) and groups of boys (67.1%) as the main role players in bullying other learners. It should be noted, however, that the percentages were fairly similar (high). This suggested that learners rated boys as bullies more often than girls. This could be due to an element of bravado on the part of boys, but it does seem to warrant further investigation.

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