

PEER VICTIMISATION IN SCHOOLS: THE VICTIMS

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1 Introduction

Peer victimisation among learners is not new. Most adults can remember incidents of bullying in which they were the bullies or intended victims. In fact, the common perception has been that bullying is a relatively normal and harmless experience most learners go through. Bullying has only received research attention since the early seventies when a Norwegian researcher, Olweus, began to study this phenomenon. His book, *Aggression in the schools - bullies and whipping boys* (1978), is still considered the first scientific study of peer victimisation. Although the literature on bullying has grown significantly since the 1980s, little research has been published in this area from a South African perspective.

2 Definition of bullying

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 children. These negative acts are not necessarily 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.

The following are common examples of peer victimisation:

- **Physical bullying** includes punching, poking, strangling, hair pulling, beating, biting, excessive tickling and direct vandalism.
- **Verbal bullying** includes such acts as hurtful name-calling, persistent teasing, gossip and racist remarks.
- **Relational bullying.** This occurs when a child is deliberately excluded from activities; this very often takes place during break times.
- **Emotional bullying** includes terrorising, extorting, defaming, humiliating, blackmailing, rating/ranking of personal characteristics such as race, disability or ethnicity, manipulating friendships, ostracising and peer pressure.
- **Sexual bullying** includes many of the above as well as exhibitionism, sexual positioning,

sexual harassment and abuse involving actual physical contact and sexual assault (the latter category was excluded from this investigation).

Three common categories of bullies are usually identified:

- **Proactive bullies** need no provocation and are naturally more aggressive towards others. This group frequently has poor social relational skills and compensates for this lack by picking on others.
- **Reactive bullies** have often been victimised by other bullies and then retaliate by becoming bullies themselves.
- **Proactive victims** provoke fights or aggressive encounters with others. They are quick to become oppositional or defiant and cry or display exaggerated responses in conflict situations. This group is the most rejected by peers and has the fewest friends (The Colorado Institute for Conflict Resolution and Creative Leadership 2000:1).

3 Prevalence rates

With regard to the incidence of bullying, Mellor (1993:2) found, inter alia, that

- it happens at all schools
- it has to be acknowledged as a possible problem before it can be tackled
- schools that have taken action have been successful in reducing the levels of bullying.

An international survey (US Department of Education 1999:1-66) found that the percentage of students who reported being bullied at least once during the current term ranged from a low of 15 to 20% in some countries to a high of 70% in others. Of particular concern was frequent bullying, typically defined as bullying that occurs once a week or more. According to Borg (1999:137-153), the prevalence of frequent bullying reported internationally ranged from a low of 1.9% among an Irish sample to a high of 19% in a Malta study.

A British study of twenty-three schools found that direct verbal aggression was the most common form of bullying, occurring with similar frequency in both sexes. Direct physical aggression was more common among boys, while indirect forms were more common among girls (Whitney & Smith 1993: 3-25).

In a study of several middle schools in Rome, Baldry (1998:361-374) found that the most common types of bullying reported by boys were threats, physical harm, rejection and name-calling. For girls, the most common types were name-calling, teasing, rumours, rejection and taking of personal belongings.

The Forum on Children and Violence (UK) claimed that between 40 and 60% of children were bullied at some stage (BBC News: 16 March 1999).

In a Scottish study of 942 learners, Mellor (1990:1-8) found that 50% said that they had been bullied at school at least once or twice during their school careers.

Studies in Scandinavian countries established that there seems to be a strong correlation between bullying other students during the school years and involvement with crime and the criminal justice

system as adults. Ericson (2001:1-2) and Banks (1997:2) stated that in one study, 60% of those characterised as bullies in Grades 6 to 9 had at least one criminal conviction by the age of 24.

Research in the USA revealed that half of all violence against teenagers occurs in school bullying, on school property or on the streets in the vicinity of the school. In a survey of 558 students in a Midwestern middle school, Espelage (1999) found that 80% of the students had engaged in bullying in the previous 30 days. Among adolescents, 80% to 90% reported some form of victimisation by a bully at school (CNN.com 20 August 1999).

Eliason and Frank (2000:1-4) conducted a survey of school violence in twenty schools in the Cape Metropolitan area and found that

- violence was endemic to both primary and secondary schools
- possession of weapons was a major problem in all the schools
- fighting/physical violence and vandalism were reported in 95% of the schools
- assault occurred on a regular basis in 60% of the schools
- gangsterism was present in 50% of the schools.

4 Method and respondents

The major outcomes of the study were to identify key concerns regarding the victims of 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 finalised in a form consisting of 19 pages and comprising 34 main questions, focusing on the issues mentioned above.

The researchers were able to generate a non-probability sample by means of the convenience sampling technique consisting of learners from Grade 6, 7, 8, 9,10 and 11 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 depicts the general characteristics 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, Institute for Criminological Sciences and 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. For example, statistical significance at the 5 percent (0.05) level or less 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 study was exploratory and the purpose was to acquire descriptive information from learners to help schools assess the following issues:

- the nature and extent of bullying occurring at a school
- how learners react(ed) to bullying
- whether victims had informed others and what the outcomes were.

Table 1 Characteristics of the research group

Demographic variable	N=207	%
Age		
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
Gender		
Male	97	46.9
Female	110	53.1
Grade		
6	31	15.0
7	33	15.9
8	28	13.5
9	31	15.0
10	35	16.9
11	49	23.7
Population group		
Black	124	59.9
Coloured	7	3.4
Indian	5	2.4
White	71	34.3
Unspecified/Other	0	0

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. The majority 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%), 69.1 percent were secondary school learners (Grade 11: 23.7%). More than half (59.9%) of the learners were blacks, followed by whites (34.3%), Coloureds (3.4%) and Indians (2.43%).

5 Results

When asked about their experience of bullying, 39.1 percent of the learners indicated that they had never been bullied during the 2002 school year, and 42.5 percent indicated that they had been bullied once or twice a month (21.7%) or once or twice a year (20.8%). Of particular concern was frequent bullying, typically defined as bullying that occurs once a week or more.

Table 2 How often have you been bullied at school this year?

Variable		Every day	Once or twice a week	% Once or twice a month	Once or twice a year	Never	Total
Gender							
Male	N=97	2.1	11.3	22.7	18.6	45.3	100.0
Female	N=110	3.6	19.1	20.9	22.7	33.7	100.0
Age							
Under 15 years	N=92	5.4	16.3	28.3	15.2	34.8	100.0
Over 14 years	N=115	0.9	14.8	16.5	25.2	42.6	100.0
Grade							
6	N=31	3.2	22.6	32.3	3.2	38.7	100.0
7	N=33	12.1	15.2	33.3	15.2	24.2	100.0
8	N=28		10.7	21.4	28.6	39.3	100.0
9	N=31		35.5	6.5	22.6	35.4	100.0
10	N=35	2.9	11.4	14.3	31.4	40.0	100.0
11	N=49		4.2	22.4	22.4	51.0	100.0
Population group							
Black	N=124	3.2	19.4	19.4	18.5	39.5	100.0
Coloured	N=7		28.6	28.6		42.8	100.0
Indian/Asian	N=5		20.0		20.0	60.0	100.0
White	N=71	2.8	7.0	26.8	26.8	36.6	100.0
Total	N=207	2.9	15.5	21.7	20.8	39.1	100

The prevalence of frequent bullying reported in the present investigation is 18.4 percent (2.9% every day and 15.5% once or twice a week). Thus, bullying is a phenomenon with which the majority (60.9%) of the respondents were familiar and had experienced during 2002. Table 2 illustrates demographic variations in the occurrence of bullying. There were no significant differences in the numbers of male (54.70%) and female (66.3%) who were bullied - with slightly more females subject to peer victimisation, the genders were more or less equally likely to be victims of bullying. Respondents in the age group under 15 years (21.7%) were more frequently bullied compared to the over 14 years (15.7%) group. Bullying occurred most frequently in Grade 9 (35.5% once a week or more), followed by Grade 7 (27.3% once a week or more). These differences measured as statistically significant at the 0.1% level of significance (Chi-square: value 46.321; df 20; p .001). No significant differences in the general frequency were observed among Coloured (57.2% bullied), black (60.5% bullied) and white (63.4% bullied). White learners reported lower involvement in frequent bullying (9.8% once a week or more).

Table 3 Did any of the following things happen to you while you were being bullied this year?

Nature of bullying	%		Total
	Yes	No	
Being teased in an unpleasant way	48.8	51.2	100
Being called hurtful names	50.7	49.3	100
Being left out of things on purpose	27.5	72.5	100
Being threatened with harm	22.2	77.8	100
Being hit, kicked or pushed	23.2	76.8	100

The survey results shown in Table 3 indicated that most of the learners were subject to the milder forms of bullying such as being teased in an unpleasant way (48.8%) and being called hurtful names (50.7%). Of the respondents, 27.5 percent reported being left out of things on purpose at times. More serious bullying acts occurred less frequently. For instance, 22.3 percent indicated that they were threatened with harm while 23.2 percent reported being hit, kicked or pushed.

Across gender, the most frequent types of bullying reported were name-calling and teasing, followed by deliberate exclusion from a group, hitting and kicking and being threatened with harm. The female respondents reported being teased in an unpleasant way (53.6%), being called hurtful names (54.5%) and being left out of things on purpose (57.9%). Equal numbers of female (52.2%) and male (47.8%) participants indicated being threatened with harm. However, direct physical assault among the male learners (62.5%) supported the notion that males (boys) are likely to be more violent and destructive in their peer victimisation. These differences measured as statistically significant at the

1% level of significance (Chi-square: value 6.139; df 1; p .013).

No significant differences in the occurrence of teasing, name-calling or deliberate exclusion were observed between the age groups. However, it was noticed that threats to harm increased in accordance with the age of learners (19.6% in under 15 years compared to 24.3% in over 14 years). The occurrence of physical bullying showed a higher incidence among the younger learners (29.3%) than among the older learners (18.4%).

When the results were analysed according to class (Grade), no notable differences were found regarding teasing and name-calling. The highest incidence of bullying by being left out of things on purpose was observed in Grades 11 (40.8%) and 6 (35.5%) compared to 11.4 percent among the Grade 10 respondents. These differences measured as statistically significant at the 5 % or <5% level of significance (Chi-square: value 11.225; df 5; p .047). Respondents in Grade 10 (31.4%) and Grade 11 (24.5%) were more exposed to being threatened with harm than those in Grade 6 (12.9%). Being bullied physically was common among the Grade 6 (35.5%) and Grade 7 (30.3%) groups, but decreased gradually and only 12.2 percent of the respondents in Grade 11 experienced this form of peer victimisation.

An analysis of the responses of the population groups revealed that the white (60.6%) and black (45.2%) learners were more often bullied by teasing than their Indian (20.0%) and Coloured (14.3%) counterparts. These differences measured as statistically significant at the 5 % or <5% level of significance (Chi-square: value 9.587; df 3; p .022). More of the black (56.5%) and white (45.1%) respondents were subject to name-calling than the Coloured (28.6%) and Indian (20.0%) respondents. Approximately one-third of the blacks (28.2%) and whites (29.6%) had been left out of things on purpose at times, compared to 14.3 percent of the Coloureds and none of the Indians. A higher percentage of black (29.8%) and Coloured (28.6%) learners were threatened with harm than whites (9.9%) and the Indians (0.0%). These differences measured as statistically significant at the 1% level of significance (Chi-square: value 12.032; df 3; p .007). Almost one-third (28.6%) of Coloureds, one-quarter (25.8%) of the blacks and one-fifth (19.7%) of whites were bullied by being hit, kicked or pushed compared to none of the Indian respondents.

Table 4 In what grade is the learner who bullies you?

Grade level of the bully	%		Total
	Yes	No	
In my class	43	57	100
In the same grade but in a different class	33.3	66.7	100
In a lower grade	7.2	92.8	100
In a higher grade	38.2	61.8	100

Table 4 shows that the bully was most often indicated as being from the same class as the victim. This was reported by 43 percent of the victims. The survey results revealed that the bully was singled out by one-third of the victims as being in the same grade, but in a different class. In 38.2 percent of the cases, the bully was from a higher grade. At a 1% level of statistical significance, more female (50.9%) respondents were bullied by learners in their own class than the male (34.0%) respondents (Chi-square: value 5.999; df 1; p .014). Another difference at the 5% level of statistical significance was that 45.4 percent of the male group were bullied by learners in a higher grade compared to 31.8 percent of the females (Chi-square: value 4.006; df 1; p .045). No significant differences were found in the various age groups regarding the grade level of the bully. The findings corresponded to a large extent with those of the general investigation group. Almost half of the respondents in Grade 6 (48.4%), Grade 7 (48.5%), Grade 9 (48.4%) and Grade 11 (46.9%) said that they were victimised by learners in the same class. Most of the learners in Grade 6 (45.2%) and Grade 8 (46.4%) reported being bullied by learners in higher grades. Nearly fifty percent of the blacks (47.6%) and Coloureds (42.9%) reported bullying incidents by learners in the same class. Significant differences (5 % level) emerged between the blacks (46.0%), Coloureds (28.6%), whites (28.2%) and Indians (0.0%) regarding being bullied by learners in a higher grade (Chi-square: value 9.564; df 3; p .023).

Table 5 Looking back over your experience at school this year, were you ever bullied by:

Characteristics of the bullies	%		Total
	Yes	No	
A boy	49.3	50.7	100
A group of boys	28	72	100
A girl	24.6	75.4	100
A group of girls	15.9	84.1	100
Both boys and girls	15	85	100

Table 5 indicates the difference between genders (and individual and group-related incidents) in bullying. Almost fifty percent (49.3%) of the bullying during 2002 was done by a boy, followed by a group of boys (28.0%) and a girl (24.6%). Statistical differences emerged between the reports of male and female respondents. At a 5 % level of significance

- more male (45.4%) than female respondents (31.8%) were bullied by a group of boys (Chi-square: value 4.476; df 1; p .034)
- more female (36.4%) than male respondents (11.3%) were hurt by a girl (Chi-square: value 17.383; df 1; p .000)
- more female (21.8%) than male respondents (9.3%) were victimised by a group of girls (Chi-

square: value 6.049; df 1; p .014)

Respondents in the group under 15 years were more often bullied by a boy (55.4%), a group of boys (32.6%), both boys and girls (18.5%) and a group of girls (17.4%) than those in the older age groups.

Regarding the grade levels, a few distinct trends in the learners' responses can be identified:

- Almost half or more of the respondents in Grade 6 (48.4%), Grade 7 (60.6%), Grade 8 (57.1%) and Grade 10 (48.6%) were victimised by a boy.
- Approximately one-third of the learners in Grade 6 (38.7%), Grade 7 (30.3%) and Grade 9 (32.3%) indicated they were bullied by a group of boys.
- More than one-third of the respondents in Grade 8 were bullied by a girl.
- Of the victims in Grade 7, 24.2 percent were hurt by a group of girls.
- Most of the respondents (21.4%) who were bullied by boys and girls were in Grade 8.

To the question of whether the participants had been bullied by a boy, more than half of the blacks (51.6%) and 71.4 percent of the Coloureds answered in the affirmative. More than one-fifth of the respondents were bullied by a group of boys: blacks (28.2%), Coloureds (28.6%), Indians (20.0%) and whites (28.2%), while the majority (57.1%) of the Coloured group were hurt by a girl. Of the whites, 21.1 percent indicated that they had been bullied by a group of girls.

According to the analysis of data regarding feelings about bullying (data not presented in tables), the following significant findings emerged:

- When those who reported being bullied were asked how they generally felt about it, more or less equal numbers of respondents felt most angry (25.1%), or mostly sad and miserable (26.6%). A smaller group (18.8%) indicated that the victimisation incident had not really bothered them.
- In terms of their feelings about themselves, 36.7 percent of the learners felt worse about themselves, while 25.6 percent felt much the same afterwards.
- Most of the participants (43.0%) had never thought of staying away from school because of the victimisation. However, 18.4 percent of the learners had thought of doing so but had not. About ten percent of the respondents stayed away from school once or twice (6.3%) and more than twice (2.4%) because of bullying.

Table 6 presents the responses to the question of telling other persons about being bullied. Most of the respondents had not told someone about their bullying experiences. This should be regarded as a negative sign, indicating that the victims were unwilling to speak to someone about what had happened to them. Some of the respondents had told various people, most commonly their friends (43.5%), parents (31.9%), followed closely by siblings (30.9%) and then a teacher or another adult at school (18.8%).

Table 6 Have you told any of the following persons about being bullied?

Persons told	%		Total
	Yes	No	
My mother or father	31.9	68.1	100
My sister or brother	30.9	69.1	100
A teacher or another adult at school	18.8	81.2	100
A friend or another learner at school	43.3	56.6	100

A few significant trends emerged in the responses of the male and female respondents:

- More female than male learners were willing to discuss the victimisation incidents with
 - ▶ parents (38.2% females compared to 24.7% males - a statistically significant difference at the 5 % or <5% level of significance. Chi-square: value 4.287; df 1; p .038)
 - ▶ siblings (33.6% females compared to 27.8% males)
 - ▶ friends (49.1% females compared to 36.1% males)
- Both genders were less willing to share their experiences with teachers (20.0% females and 17.5% males).

Significant statistical differences at the 5% level of significance were found regarding the willingness of the respondents under 15 years to tell siblings (38.0%) (Chi-square: value 3.937; df 1; p .047) and teachers (26.1%) (Chi-square: value 5.687; df 1; p .017) in contrast to 25.2 percent and 13.0 percent, respectively, in the over 14 years group. About equal numbers (under 15 years - 42.4% and over 14 years - 44.37%) told a friend or another learner at school. Of the younger age group, 37.0 percent discussed the matter with parents compared to 27.8 percent of the older learners. About equal numbers of respondents under 15 years (42.4%) and over 14 years (44.3%) told a friend or another learner at school about their bullying experiences.

Approximately one-third or more of learners in the lower grades reported telling their parents (35.5% in Grade 6 and 42.4% in Grade 7) and siblings (35.5% in Grade 6 and 39.4% in Grade 7) in marked contrast to respondents in the higher grades (22.9% learners in Grade 10 and 24.5% in Grade 11 told their parents, while 25.7% in Grade 10 and 20.4% in Grade 11 discussed it with siblings). Significant differences (5 % or <5% level) emerged between the learners in the lower grades (Grade 6 - 33.5% and Grade 7 - 30.3%) and the higher grades (Grade 10 - 5.7% and Grade 11 - 18.4%) in terms of telling a teacher or another adult at school about bullying (Chi-square: level 15.057; df 5; p .010).

The data analysis revealed homogeneous findings amongst population groups:

- More than forty percent of the Coloured (42.9%) and white (40.8 %) learners mentioned bullying incidents to their parents, while the percentage among the blacks (26.6%) and

- Indians (20.0%) were significantly lower.
- Close to one-third (31.5%) of the blacks and over half (57.1%) of the Coloureds were prepared to report occurrences of bullying to siblings, while fewer Indians (20.0%) and whites (28.2%) indicated the same willingness.
- Less than one-third of all the respondents were willing to report bullying incidents to teachers: Coloureds (28.6%), blacks (20.2%), Indians (20.0%) and whites (15.5%).
- Nearly sixty percent (57.1%) of the Coloured learners and forty percent and more of the other respondents (whites - 40.0%, blacks - 41.9% and whites - 45.1%) told a friend or another learner at school about their bullying experiences.

An analysis of those respondents who had told someone (data not shown) found that 43.0 percent reported that it made the situation better. Of the others, 11.6 percent indicated that things did not change as a result, while 2.9 percent stated that it made the situation worse.

6 Conclusion

Approximately (42.5 percent) of the respondents had been bullied once or twice a month (21.7%) or once or twice a year (20.8%) during 2002. Of particular concern was the occurrence of frequent bullying (once a week or more) reported (18.4%).

Most of the learners had been subjected to milder forms of bullying, such as teasing (48.8%) and name-calling (50.7%). More serious bullying incidents occurred less frequently. Less than one-third (23.2%) of the learners reported being hit, kicked or pushed. More than half of the female respondents had been teased in an unpleasant way (53.6%), been called hurtful names (54.5%) and deliberately been left out of things (57.9%). However, direct physical assault among the male learners emphasised the view that boys are likely to be more violent and destructive in peer victimisation.

Of the sample, 43.0% percent indicated that they had been bullied by learners from the same class while in 38.2 percent of the incidents, the bully was from a higher grade.

Almost fifty percent (49.3%) of the bullying in the sample was done by a male learner, followed by a group of boys (28.0%) and a single girl (24.6%).

Responding to the question of how the victims generally felt about the victimisation incident, more or less equal numbers of the learners felt mostly angry (25.1%) or mostly sad and miserable (26.6%). Regarding feelings about themselves, more than one-third of the learners felt worse about themselves after being bullied. Most of the respondents (43.0%) had never thought of staying away from school because of peer victimisation. However, about ten percent of the respondents had stayed away from school because of bullying.

The study pointed out a taboo on telling other persons about being bullied. Most of the victims had not told anyone about their experiences. Of the victims who shared their experiences with others, 43.5 percent had told friends, followed by parents (31.9%), siblings (30.9%) and a teacher or other adult at school (18.8%). Noticeably more female than male learners were willing to discuss the victimisation incidents with parents (38.2% females and 24.7% males), siblings (33.6% females and

27.8% males) and friends (49.1% female and 36.1% males). Respondents in the lower grades were more willing to tell others about being bullied than those in the higher grades.

Of the respondents who had told someone, 43.0 percent indicated that it made the situation better, while 11.6 percent indicated that things did not change as a result. It is uncertain what effect telling different persons may have had on the peer victimisation situation (ie, telling friends as opposed to telling adults and a certain extent of reluctance to share the experience with teachers).

The prevalence of bullying in the sample is substantial and although the current study provides a foundation for understanding the peer victimisation problem the issue merits more intensive research.

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