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Exploring Causes of Bullying among Grade Eight and Nine Learners in a South African Education District

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Abstract: Bullying is a social phenomenon that has become a complex problem worldwide due to the complications that arise from its persistence among school-going adolescents. This study explored the causes of bullying among grades 8 and 9 in one secondary school in Amatole East District, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. This qualitative study employed constructivism paradigm and a case study design. It utilised interviews to elicit data from 15 purposefully sampled participants. This study was informed by Travis Hirschi's 1968 Social Control Theory, and I used Braun and Clark's thematic analysis steps to analyse and interpret the data. The study found that bullying is triggered by jealousy and envy among learners, inadequate school furniture, family environment, physical attributes, lack of moral education, lack of sexual orientation education, and age differences among learners. Therefore, the study concluded that in order to detect the causes of bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners, teachers must apply Social Control Theory in the school environment by establishing consistent and supportive teacher-learner relationships to easily identify learners' behavioural changes and promote support, peer relationships, and unity among learners. This will reduce internal motivation that leads them to initiate bullying and violate other learners' rights. Additionally, the findings of this study will enable school stakeholders to develop intervention strategies, including disciplinary measures for learners, providing sexual orientation education, and involving parents in their efforts to manage bullying among grades 8 and 9 learners.

Keywords: Bullying, causes of bullying, deviant behaviour, bullying victims, social control theory.

1. Introduction

Bullying is the intentional and repeated act of causing harm or discomfort to another person (American Psychological Association, 2022, 2008). It has been a global issue among grade 8 and 9 learners for centuries, as each generation and society has found different ways to engage in bullying. Sherrow (2011) even links bullying to the earliest forms of human existence, as ancient humans saw it as a means of survival. Numerous studies have identified various triggers of bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners, which can lead to serious consequences, including dropping out of school and suicide due to the psychological effects of bullying. Loop (2018) found four main causes of bullying among learners in Pennsylvania: low self-esteem, dominant personalities, peer pressure, and the desire to fit in, as well as a lack of teacher support. Her research revealed that learners may engage in bullying to boost their self-esteem, gain power over others, conform to their peers, or because they do not feel welcomed by the school environment.

In Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Suri et al. (2022) have observed a rise in cases of bullying among school-going adolescents. Factors such as seniority, a history of previous bullying, economic status, and background can contribute to bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners in Yogyakarta (Nurlia & Suardiman, 2020). Noboru et al. (2021) have highlighted that learners with physical and psychological disorders often experience bullying in the form of mockery and belittlement from their peers. In China, Li and Hesketh (2021) have reported that factors such as the exclusion of bullying

from the school curriculum and teachers' inability to recognise and address bullying behaviour contribute to its escalation. In American schools, an improperly designed physical environment can also contribute to bullying among learners (Izadi & Hart, 2024). For example, unclear signage, narrow pathways, and a lack of gender-neutral bathrooms can create a sense of panic and intolerance among learners, leading to verbal and physical harm towards one another.

In European countries, specifically Germany, learners are being bullied because of their sexual orientation, as stated by Germany Education (n.d). This bullying has alarming consequences, including suicide. In the United Kingdom, Tidy (2021) reported that learners express their anger and frustration through bullying, which is believed to stem from their upbringing, violent video games, and lack of respect. In Brazil, a study conducted by Veloso et al. (2020) found that bullying is driven by factors such as skin colour and body appearance. Learners with dark skin face prejudice-based bullying, while others are ridiculed for being overweight. Numerous studies have shown a connection between the lack of school intervention in bullying cases and the causes of bullying. Khairy et al. (2021) conducted a study in Egypt that associates bullying with a negative family environment. The way parents communicate with their children at home can contribute to verbal bullying among learners. Similarly, Udoh (2024) found in a study conducted in Nigeria that children imitate the vulgar manner in which they are addressed by their parents.

In South African schools, family relations are seen as the root of ongoing bullying trends. Okeke et al. (2024) perceive family dynamics as a cause of anger, jealousy, and the desire for superiority among learners. Despite South Africa being referred to as a Rainbow Nation, learners in South African schools experience bullying based on their nationality, which affects their sense of belonging in both school and their communities, according to Mcube and Chinyama (2020).

In the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, gender diversity exposes learners to a disproportionate amount of bullying, including exclusion from school's extracurricular activities. Mguye and Omodan (2023) conducted a study that states learners who exhibit qualities associated with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) genders are subject to social exclusion and physical assault. In addition to the causes related to traditional bullying, Mtshazi (2021) mentioned learners' exposure to digital devices, specifically mobile phones, as a factor that motivates deviant behaviour, such as exchanging impertinent texts and making intimidating phone calls.

It is apparent that learner victimisation and humiliation are triggered by similar reasons globally. Studies conducted in various countries have identified comparable causes of bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners. However, studies addressing this phenomenon in the Amathole East district are scarce. This lack of research limits school stakeholders from identifying bullying and implementing effective strategies to combat it, as they cannot rely on generalised literature.

1.1 Problem statement

The severity of consequences experienced by learners who have been reported as victims of bullying is evidenced by a plethora of studies. These consequences include adverse psychological imbalances, anxiety, and unsatisfactory academic performance (Martinez et al., 2024). Similarly, studies have reported that bullying negatively affects the academic progress of learners as it results in learner dropouts and truancy (Nikolaou, 2022), lack of self-esteem, impaired concentration (Boulton & Macaulay, 2023), as well as increased drug intake by learners (Mesas et al., 2024), which in turn contributes to unsatisfactory performance. These assertions critically express that victims of bullying can be observed through their gradually declining performance levels, truancy, inconsistent social life, bruises, and other physical injuries.

While numerous studies have identified the causes of bullying in their respective regions, studies addressing this phenomenon in the Amathole East District are rare, if present. Thus, this results in school stakeholders' inability to identify bullying in their respective schools. For this reason, this

study aims to explore the causes of bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners to help school stakeholders observe and manage bullying prior to its unpleasant and lifelong ramifications.

1.2 Research question

- What causes bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners in a South African district?

1.3 Theoretical framework

I used Social Control Theory to understand the nature of deviant behaviour, specifically bullying, in this study. Travis Hirschi developed Social Control Theory (SCT), also known as Social Bond Theory, in 1969 (Schubert, 2015). SCT states that delinquency involvement is the result of an adolescent's failure to form or maintain a bond with society, which includes attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief (Wiatrowski & Swatko, 1979). In other words, students who lack positive relationships with their peers, parents, and teachers are more likely to engage in deviant behaviours. Jang and Agnew (2015) explicitly expressed that negative relationships between parents and students, as well as teachers and students, contribute to students' involvement in criminal acts.

Social Control Theory is a comprehensive approach that helped me understand the factors that lead school-going adolescents to engage in bullying. It provides a thorough explanation of the root causes of deviant behaviour among students. This theory recognises that students who struggle to form strong interpersonal relationships with their peers, parents, and teachers are more likely to engage in bullying because there is no one to dissuade them from their internal motivations to initiate such behaviour. By understanding the underlying reasons behind bullying, schools can identify the causes and implement specialised strategies to address the problem and maintain a peaceful and inclusive school environment for all students.

2. Methodology

This study was conducted within the constructivism paradigm, as it is compatible with the qualitative research approach. Omodan (2024) has confirmed that the constructivism paradigm allows for a better understanding of human behaviours and reactions through interaction with participants who provide their self-constructed perceptions of the phenomenon being studied. This means that researchers can construct a unique reality by analysing and interpreting participants' views, feelings, reactions, and experiences. The constructivism paradigm is appropriate for this study because it aims to collect descriptive and self-constructed data on the causes of bullying from grade 8 and 9 learners who have experienced bullying. Since the goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of the causes of bullying through interaction with participants, a qualitative research approach was employed. The qualitative research approach is suitable for this study because it enables the exploration of human experiences and self-constructed ideas using textual methods of data collection and analysis (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). It is also useful for understanding participants' perceptions and cultural context (Madonsela et al., 2022). A case study design was utilised to explore the phenomenon of bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This design allows for the acquisition of concrete, contextual, and in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world subject (McCombes, 2019), as well as understanding complex issues in their real-life settings (Crowe et al., 2011). Therefore, a case study design was employed to gather comprehensive data on the causes of bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners who were interviewed during the third academic term of 2022.

2.1 Sampling of Participants

This study employed a purposive sampling technique. I used this technique to intentionally handpick grade 8 and grade 9 learners who were identified through their frequent bullying reports, as well as 5 teachers who were responsible for the learners, in order to share their knowledge by responding to the in-depth interview questions. These participants were sampled from a Secondary

School in Amatole East District, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The Education District is located in a rural setting. I individually approached and briefed 20 participants about the study and its voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, consent, and privacy. 15 participants participated in the study, and the minors were given consent forms to be signed by their guardians or parents and the school principal.

2.2 Data collection tools

After I was given permission to collect data at the school, I physically visited the school and interacted with participants using recorded one-on-one in-depth interviews to gather data. This method has been proven appropriate for this study as it allowed me to obtain high-quality descriptive data from participants (Indeed Editorial Team, 2022) and encouraged them to freely express their beliefs about the causes of bullying without feeling intimidated (Omodan & Ige, 2021). In addition, in-depth interviews uncover complex issues during the research process and enable researchers to observe participants' emotions and reactions. All interviewees were asked the same questions, which were translated into their native language to prevent any misunderstandings. Furthermore, I avoided asking leading questions in order to obtain authentic views from the participants on the phenomenon.

2.3 Data analysis and interpretation

To analyse, interpret, and make sense of the data collected from the participants, I utilised thematic analysis as interest was focused on seeking an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a dataset (Braun & Clark, 2012). Thematic analysis is a method of describing data, but it also involves interpretation of the processes of selecting codes and constructing themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). I accomplished this through the utilisation of universally putative Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step analysis process, which involves eliciting, categorising, and filtering primary data into systematised themes and sub-themes that respond to the research question. To successfully analyse and interpret the data, I transcribed recorded interviews and identified similar themes. Participants' articulations were then presented in their original nature; that is, they were not edited to maintain their originality and content. Moreover, to address potential subjectivity during data interpretation, I utilised in-depth interviews, which enabled me to probe participants for more distinct articulations so that I could interpret the data according to the meanings of the participants, not those of my interests. Furthermore, after analysing the data, I allowed participants to review and confirm whether the analysis presented according to their articulations (Campuslabs, 2020) and was not influenced by my bias. Additionally, this study has been reviewed by at least 3 blind reviewers to ensure whether the findings are reasonable.

2.4 Ethical considerations

According to Creswell (2013), the researcher must respect the participants' rights, needs, values, and desires. Therefore, participants were allowed to withdraw their participation if they lost interest in the study (Tsotetsi & Omodan, 2022). Pseudonyms were used to minimise the risk of identification and protect participants from being held accountable for their statements. The participants were labelled as follows: TM for male teachers, TF for female teachers, LF for female learners, LM for male learners, and P for the principal. I obtained ethical clearance and a letter of consent from the Faculty of Education at Walter Sisulu University (Butterworth Campus) to conduct the study. Approval was also obtained from the Department of Basic Education and the school where the data was collected.

2.5 Trustworthiness

According to Connelly (2016), it is imperative to ensure the trustworthiness of the study and its findings. This can be achieved by acknowledging all the elements of trustworthiness, which include credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability. Therefore, to ensure credibility, I

recorded in-depth interviews because some participants were eloquent, and I may end up taking incorrect notes. So, to be certain that I presented accurate participants' articulations, I recorded the interviews and transcribed them later. To ensure dependability, after the transcription of participants' interviews, I asked participants to verify whether their articulations were transcribed correctly. To ensure transferability, I thoroughly elucidated the study's objective to the participants so that they can provide desired inputs that can be applied to similar settings should the readers assume that the findings are identical. Lastly, to ensure conformability, this study has been reviewed by several external reviewers to ensure its quality and authenticity.

3. Discussion of Findings

Data collected from the sampled participants through the utilisation of in-depth interviews to explore the causes of bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners are presented below. These causes were broken down into sub-themes, namely, jealousy and envy among learners, inadequate school furniture, family environment, physical attributes, lack of moral education, lack of sexual orientation education, and age differences among learners.

3.1 Jealousy and envy among learners

Learners and some teachers claim that bullying arises from learners being jealous of others' outstanding performance, social status, and backgrounds. Moreover, female learners are perceived to be exceptionally jealous in the classroom. Participants articulated that:

> LF2: *"Bullying occurs because bullies are jealous of other's outstanding performance. They steal their assignments and homework to copy them."*
> LM1: *"If you are the most clever girl or boy in the classroom, they just beat you because you know better than them."*
> TF3: *"The other thing is jealousy, especially among girls. Learners who perform well in the classroom end up being called names that tend to demotivate them."*

According to the participants' views, it is noticeable that learners' bullying behaviour is driven by jealousy towards those who score better marks in the classroom. They attempt to equalise themselves with the best performers by stealing and copying their assessments. This analysis is supported by LF2, who stated that bullies steal assignments from the top scorers in order to copy them. LM1 revealed that bullies assault high-achieving learners for no apparent reason. Lastly, TF3 linked jealousy with gender, stating that female learners are exceptionally jealous and tend to demotivate those with outstanding performance through name-calling.

It has also been brought to attention that learners from households ranging between lower to average social status envy those whose homes can afford to provide them with a luxurious life. This envy can even lead to the point of stealing from them.

> LF3: *"I mean if you have everything…and wear nice clothes a bully can just hate you for that."*
> LF4: *"They are jealous because other children come from rich houses and other children are poor and they take their money and lunch box."*

Participants revealed that learners engage in bullying behavior because they envy learners who come from financially stable homes. LF3 stated that learners develop hatred towards those who seem to have everything and wear nice clothes, while LF4 linked bullying with lower social status. She mentioned that learners from poor homes usually take money and lunch boxes from those who can provide them.

Based on these findings, individual differences among learners in the same classroom, specifically differences in intelligence levels, result in learners with low IQ developing jealousy towards those

with average and high IQ. Chandra and Azimmudin (2013) associate low IQ with poor performance, average IQ with better performance, and high IQ with outstanding performance. On the other hand, the inability of parents to provide for their children due to low-income levels caused by a lack of employment opportunities, especially in rural settings, results in learners feeling inferior and envious of those whose parents can provide for them. Furthermore, not having what other learners boast about is depressing and causes learners to steal or forcefully take from others. These findings align with the study conducted by Gordon (2020), which stated that jealousy and envy become a form of power whereby bullies aim to deprive others of what they have, whether it be a special talent, popularity, or nice clothes.

3.2 Inadequate school furniture

Inadequate resources in overcrowded Grade 8 and 9 classrooms have been identified as one of the major causes of bullying among Grade 8 and 9 learners. According to the data collected, learners often fight over desks and chairs. Participants reported:

> TF2: *"Grades 8 and 9 are the most crowded classes in school. We hear quarrels in the morning, which turn out to be older learners taking younger one's chairs and desks and telling them to look for theirs in other classes."*
> LF4: *"Other boys they were fighting because of the desk."*

According to the revelations of the participants, bullying is also caused by inadequate school furniture. Learners fight over the available desks and chairs in the classroom. TF2 mentioned that younger learners suffer the most because older learners take desks and chairs from them. This also leads to physical assault, as LF4 stated that learners even fight over desks.

Based on the analysis of researchers, this study discovered that the government's decision to move grade 8 and 9 learners from Junior Schools to Secondary Schools has resulted in overcrowded classes and insufficient furniture to accommodate large numbers. Moreover, the government's failure to provide schools with sufficient furniture causes chaos among learners, as they all feel entitled to have at least a desk and a chair and end up fighting with other learners over the few available pieces of furniture. This reason is supported by Ricky's revelation (2001) that when learners are not provided with all the resources they need, such as supporting equipment, books, or desks, they are likely to engage in bullying behaviour as they scramble for the few insufficient resources available.

3.3 Lack of sexual orientation education

Participants revealed that some learners have not yet accepted homosexuality. Instead, they exclude those who are homosexual from participating in school activities and label them with derogatory names. TM said:

> *"Some learners have adopted this LGBTI life whereby some girls hang out with boys, and some boys prefer to hang out with girls and do things in a girlish way. Some boys exclude them when engaging in some activities and call those by unspeakable names."*

According to the above statement, homosexual learners experience discrimination and exclusion from school activities because of their sexuality and preferences. This analysis is based on a statement by TM, who emphasised that learners, particularly boys, exclude homosexual learners from participating in certain school activities and label them with unpleasant names.

Based on this analysis, although homosexuality has become increasingly common among adolescents, teachers are reluctant to provide sexual orientation education to learners at an early stage of their upbringing. This leads to discrimination and exclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI) learners from educational activities. This finding supports Saavedra and Cord's (2022) report, which states that LGBTI learners are excluded from learning

opportunities because the education system does not prioritise inclusion and equity in the classroom. This means that as long as the education system fails to incorporate sexual orientation education specifically focused on sexual orientation, misconceptions, discrimination, and exclusion of LGBTI learners, especially homosexuals, will continue to be persistent problems among learners.

3.4 Family environment

Family environments have a tremendous influence on learners' behaviours. As they grow and mature in their homes, they observe various behaviours that impact their well-being over time. Substance and alcohol abuse is a social problem that learners imitate from their families, friends, or even strangers. When learners consume intoxicating substances, they are capable of engaging in inhumane actions. Participants have made it clear that learners bring these substances onto school grounds and consume them during school breaks. Participants revealed the following:

> LM5: *"Some learners came from homes where their parents drink alcohol, so they just steal alcohol and drink it before they come to school and arrive at school drunk, then they start insulting others and beating them when they reply."*
> TF3: *"Learners do not just smoke tobacco or fags; they smoke cannabis which turn them into wild animals who are always ready to assault others. Some grade 9 learners were caught with hooker pipe and flavored cannabis and were thrown into the toilet…"*
> LF5: *"Other learners teach others to smoke weed in the toilets and when others do not want to smoke, they insult him/her."*

These findings reveal that aggression among learners in grades 8 and 9 is rooted in their use of alcoholic beverages stolen from their parents. According to LM5, learners come to school drunk from the alcohol they have stolen and cause chaos in the school environment. TF3 draws attention to the trend of underage learners smoking cannabis on school grounds, which she believes is the cause of bullying, as learners tend to behave inhumanely after smoking. LF5 confirms TF3's statement that learners bring cannabis onto the school premises. She also mentions that learners influence others to smoke and insult them if they refuse.

On the other hand, several participants have confirmed that learners have psychological problems. They explain that learners display anger issues, which they believe stem from their experiences and observations at home. Participants further explain that:

> LM3: *"It is caused by anger. Anger can control and take over your brain, making you think and do. If someone grew up in a bullish home like his or her mother was beaten by his father, that someone would think bullying is a better way to resolve things."*
> LM5: *"Other children grew up in a home with fighting parents, so they just extend their anger into school"*
> P: *"...also the home setting sometimes these learners grow up at home where there is this too much beating, father beat the mother then they try now to do that whenever they meet beat girls or the other boys."*

According to these assertions, participants associate bullying with inherent behavior. For example, LM3 stated that learners who grew up in violent homes believe that the only way to solve problems is by engaging in violent acts. P supported this statement, stating that learners practice violence on other learners regardless of their gender because they have witnessed it happening at home. On the other hand, LM5 raised concerns about the psychological issues experienced by learners brought up in violent homes. The pain of witnessing their parents fighting turns into anger that they cannot control, and they end up extending it to other learners in school.

Based on the researcher's analysis, the home environment strongly influences learners' behavior since they observe almost every action and behavior that their parents and other people engage in and imitate it. Khairy et al. (2021) indicated that bullying stems from the negative family environment

where learners are supposed to be molded and informed about the negative effects of bullying other learners. These actions and behaviors, which include but are not limited to alcohol and drug abuse, cause those who have imitated them to mistreat other learners at school to the point of injuring them. This confirms the relationship between substance abuse and bullying and aligns with the affirmations of Masilo (2018) that when school learners consume alcohol and drugs, they become more courageous in bullying others and committing violent acts against the victims.

3.5 Lack of moral education

Apart from the aforementioned causes, participants also highlighted an absence of moral education. Some pointed out that learners in child-headed families do as they please without parental or guardian guidance. They observe and imitate street and community behaviours and adopt them. Participants revealed that:

> LM3: *"It is caused of disrespect by someone taking him or her as a fly."*
> LM4: *"Some bullies do not have respect; they even reply in an unacceptable way to teachers because they say teachers are not going to beat them."*
> TF2: *"Children do not grow up with moral education; they adopt behaviours they observe in the streets and think it is acceptable."*

These extracts reveal that learners exhibit disrespect because they know there will be no punishment for their immoral behaviour. This analysis is based on the assertion by LM4, who stated that learners disrespect teachers even because they know they will not be punished. Growing up in backgrounds with no proper nurturing results in learners observing behaviours including strong language and indecent ways of replying to other children and elders on the streets; as TF2 stated that children do not receive moral education; instead, they imitate behaviours they see in the street and perceive them as acceptable.

Based on the above analysis, learners initiate bullying because they were not exposed to moral education at an early stage of their development, resulting in their inability to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable practices. This finding is compatible with Mohd's (2021) report clarifying that students who lack moral values are unlikely to differentiate between right and wrong. These findings are also consistent with Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, where he states that behaviour is observed, and without positive reinforcement, learners end up imitating inhumane behaviours.

3.6 Physical attributes

Findings revealed that learners in grades 8 and 9 ridicule and tease other learners based on their physical features, such as body size and facial appearance. Although body shaming is widely recognised as a repugnant action, learners continue to engage in it regardless of the victim's reaction. Participants disclosed that:

> TF1: *"I can also mention physical appearance. As we are people, we are different. When there is a learner that is different from others, for example, if the learner is obese, too thin, or ugly or is older than others they tend to bully those types of children by calling them names."*
> TF3: *"The other thing is, learners ridicule others for being obese and ugly."*
> TM: *"A group of boys usually ridicule thick learners, calling them animal names. They even tease them for being not so beautiful."*

Participants were concerned about the prevalence of body shaming among learners. Learners perceive others' different appearances as ludicrous and use spiteful names to describe them. This is according to TF1, who stated that learners are bullied in the form of name-calling because of their weight, facial appearance, and age. Similarly, TF3 also mentioned that obese and unattractive learners experience bullying in school. However, a group of learners can gather their strength against

a single learner or another group of learners. This statement is derived from TM, who associated body shaming with boys, stating that they ridicule learners for being obese and unattractive.

Based on the above analysis, these findings unfold that learners are bullied because of their visible physical differences, which makes school much tougher for them as they experience emotional calamities arising from being dehumanised since their physical appearance does not identify with others. These findings are consistent with the views of Noboru et al. (2021) and Steyn and Singh (2017), affirming that physical attributes such as weight, disability, and appearance, as well as psychological disorders among potential victims, trigger learners to initiate bullying.

3.7 Age difference among learners

The age difference among grade 8 and 9 learners is a bit alarming and problematic. Older learners perceive younger learners as their puppets and force them to do anything that will make them feel powerful and get the desired attention. This raises the sentiment that older learners in the classroom exert power over the younger ones in various ways. Participants stipulated that:

> TF1 *"There are learners that are in their 20s who perceive themselves older. They send the young ones to fetch them water, scatter dirty papers in the class, force the young ones to collect them, and force them to clean their shoes."*
> LM4 *"Older boys run away with food, leave the whole class hungry, eat food alone, and chase others away."*

Participants observed age difference as one of the causes of bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners. It has emerged that older learners practice power and seek attention by maltreating young learners in the classroom. TF1 revealed that learners in their 20s tend to enslave younger ones by sending them to fetch water, clean their shoes, and order them to collect dirty papers that they intentionally scattered. Older learners deprive young ones of the right to basic school nutrition. As LM4 stated, older boys run with food and chase any learner trying to confront them.

These findings identified the domination of young learners by young adults. Anthony Pierce, quoted by Barbeau (2010), observed that "young adults" are problematic in the classroom, which is supposed to have an average age range of 13 to 16 years in the grade 8 and 9 classes. This shows that the Department of Education forgoes age restriction in learner admission, resulting in teachers' inability to discipline young adults in the classroom. Furthermore, it has emerged that older learners bully young ones because they know they will not retaliate. De Wet (2005) unveiled that younger pupils are bullied because they are powerless and afraid of the older learners.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

This qualitative study involved 15 purposefully sampled participants, and data was collected through in-person in-depth interviews. The study focused on exploring the causes of bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners in the Amathole East district of the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. From the analysis and interpretation of the data, I discovered several triggers of deviant behaviour among grades 8 and 9 learners that stakeholders may not anticipate unless they are communicated, as these triggers are internal factors that agitate hostility among learners. This study concluded that jealousy and envy among learners, inadequate school furniture, family environment, physical attributes, lack of moral education, lack of sexual orientation education, as well as age difference among learners cause learners to victimise others, which affects their performance, as they experience a concoction of negative emotions affecting their mental functioning. In addition, the findings of this study will enable school stakeholders to develop intervention strategies, including learners' disciplinary measures, offering sexual orientation education, and involving parents in their attempts to manage bullying among grades 8 and 9 learners. For an effective and efficient response to the causes of bullying among grade 8 and 9 learners, I recommend that:

- Teachers must apply Social Control Theory in the school environment by constructing consistent and uniform teacher-learner bonds to easily identify learners' behavioural transformations.
- Foster support, peer relationships, and oneness to occupy the vacuity among learners. This will deaden internal motivation that triggers them to initiate bullying and infringe on other learners' rights.

5. Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Due to the small number of participants who consented to be part of this study, I cannot generalise the findings to the entire school population. This is because there may be different causes of bullying for each participant who could not be included in this study. However, as I have been temporarily working at the school where the research was conducted, it was not difficult to recruit participants. This is because I could identify students who had been exposed to bullying and already knew teachers who were responsible for the welfare of the students.

6. Suggestions for Future Studies

This study unveiled several causes of bullying, which are deemed to result in negative effects, including psychological problems that affect learners' academic performance and social life. Therefore, I suggest future research on whether school and parental collaboration can remedy learners' internal motives to initiate bullying so that such problems can be outdated.

7. Declarations

Data availability: The data supporting the findings of this research can be obtained upon request from the corresponding author. While the data is included in the article, ethical guidelines obtained for the study prevent its public accessibility in order to uphold confidentiality between the author and participants. This measure guarantees the protection of communication during the study and ensures compliance with established rules of engagement between the parties involved.

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