School Principals' Experiences and Observations of Educator-targeted Bullying

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Samevatting

Die treitering van opvoeders geniet teenswoordig groot belangstelling weens die negatiewe invloed daarvan op onderrig en leer. Desnieteenstaande is nóg die fenomeen nóg die aanleidende risiko-faktore genoegsaam beskryf. Hierdie studie ondersoek skoolhoofde se ervaringe en waarnemings van die treitering van opvoeders deur leerders. Die studie vind binne 'n interpretiewe raamwerk, wat ervaring en interpretasie beklemtoon, plaas. Data is met behulp van in-diepte fokusgroeponderhoude met 12 skoolhoofde ingesamel. Kwalitatiewe inhoudanalise is gebruik om die data te analiseer. Inligting wat van die deelnemers verkry is, is gebruik om die fenomeen te beskryf. Bronfenbrenner se model van aaneenskakelende stelsels, wat as teoretiese raamwerk gebruik is, beklemtoon die wederkerige interaksie tussen die riskio-faktore vir opvoedertreitering. Op die maktostelselvlak is armoede, MIV en VIGS, die disintegrasie van die gesinslewe, misdaad in die gemeenskap, televisie, asook dwelm- en alkoholmisbruik as risiko-faktore geïdentifiseer. Op mesovlak is die onbekwaamheid van opvoeders en dissiplinêre strategieë as risiko-faktore bespreek. Op die mikrostelselvlak het die deelnemers leerders se regte, arrogansie, 'n gebrek aan respek vir opvoeders en die onsedelike optrede van opvoeders as risiko-faktore genoem.

1. Introduction

To educate means to lead forth, to shape attitudes and character, thereby giving form to ideas (Van Brummelen, 1988:5). Learners should be "guided, assisted,

unfolded, enabled and disciplined" by their educators to become "fully educated responsible adults" (Oosthuizen, Wolhuter & Du Toit, 2003:460). Education is, from a Christian perspective, concerned with the shaping of the total life of a learner, which implies that education has to be *paideia Christi* – a well-rounded education in Christ (Oosthuizen *et al.*, 2003:460). The role of the educator is thus more than guiding the learner to social change, competence and good citizenship; it is bringing the learner to *Christ-likeness* (Byrne, 1988:122, 129). Two of the prerequisites for well-rounded education are educators who are able and willing to lead and guide their learners into discipleship, and a structured teaching and learning environment which is "permeated by love, understanding and righteousness" (Oosthuizen *et al.*, 2003:460). Principals and educators should therefore strive to forge their schools and classrooms into environments where learners learn to accept and use their abilities in relationships to themselves and others and to experience the joys and difficulties of a united working towards common goals. Educators should act as counsellors, mentors and role models to their learners and strive towards providing a "secure and loving environment within which honest interchange is possible" (Van Brummelen, 1988:66). Schools and classrooms however never function as perfect teaching and learning environments. Sin disrupts and educators have to deal with this reality on a daily basis. According to the Bible, the child is not naturally inclined to be good and innocent in the presence of God and his/her fellow human beings. This explains, according to Rossouw (2003:419), the presence of misconduct, deviant behaviour and disciplinary problems in the lives of human beings in general, and of children in particular.

Information extracted from newspaper reports reveal that learner misbehaviour in South African schools is often of such a serious nature that it may prevent the realisation of secular (education in which human beings are central) and Christian (God is central) educational goals alike. Four examples will suffice:

- A KwaZulu-Natal educator told Masuku (2008:6) that she has been called names, "pointed at with the finger" and "almost assaulted" for asking learners why homework was not done.
- A Mthatha educator's car was torched by a 16-year-old learner because he asked the learner to remove a hat in class (Booi, 2008:3).
- A 15-year-old screwdriver-wielding learner who threatened to kill his educator has been allowed to remain at school after "apologising for his behaviour". According to the victim's colleague the educator questioned the learner about an item of clothing that was stolen from a fellow-learner (Naidu & Maluleka, 2008:3).
- A Nyanga educator was stabbed by one of his learners whilst he was busy teaching. A year and a half later he was threatened with dismissal if he did not

resume his teaching responsibilities (at the same school). Education authorities ignored his fears of more assaults (Fredericks, 2009:9).

The newspaper reports draw attention to learners who physically and psychologically targeted their educators and their private property. Whilst some of these incidences may seem trivial (e.g. name calling) others are life threatening. All four victims had one thing in common: they had lost their enthusiasm for their chosen profession. One of the interviewees said that she had "hoped to fulfil her passion for working with and in the community", but now she wakes up every morning knowing that she "faces the unknown because anything can happen to her while she is in her classroom" (Masuku, 2008:6).

The above newspaper reports show that if learner abuse is directed towards those who are supposed to motivate, inspire and guide (i.e. educators) (cf. Byrne, 1988:122), it may lead to the disintegration of teaching and learning. Benefield (2004:1) found that despite "a wealth of anecdotal evidence" there is very little research data available on the physical and emotional abuse of educators. De Wet and Jacobs (2006:70) found that there is a dire need for qualitative research on the phenomenon in the South African context. A literature review (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006:56; Matsui, 2005:1; Benefield, 2004:1-20; Pervin & Turner, 1998:4; Terry, 1998:255-267; Houghton, Wheldall & Merrett, 1988:279-311) furthermore reveals that the phenomenon and the risk factors have been insufficiently described. Against the backdrop of the foregoing, the aim of the author's study was to seek answers to the following questions from informed participants:

• What is the nature and extent of educator-targeted bullying?
• What are the risk factors for educator-targeted bullying?
• What is the impact of educator-targeted bullying?
• What can be done to prevent this type of behaviour?

This article will report on findings emanating from the first two research questions.[1]

2. What is educator-targeted bullying?

Research on bullying in schools was conducted for the first time during the early 1970s by Dan Olweus in Norway (Olweus, 1994:1). From overviews on research on bullying by De Wet (2005:82), as well as Smith and Brian (2000:1-9), it appears that bullying in schools is a problem not only in Nordic countries but also, amongst others, in the USA, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan and South

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1   Findings from the other two research questions will be reported in a follow-up article.

Africa. Olweus (1994:9) defines bullying as follows: "a student is being bullied or victimised when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions by one or more students". Olweus (1994:82) explains the term negative action as follows: "a negative action is when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another". The negative action can be verbal, e.g. threatening, teasing, ridiculing or swearing at someone; it can also be physical contact when someone is, for example, beaten, knocked, kicked or pinched. It is also possible to bully someone without using words or physical contact – pulling faces, making rude signs or intentionally ignoring someone (Olweus, 1994:9).

A decade after Olweus created an awareness of bullying amongst learners, Leymann (Agervold, 2007:165) used the word 'mobbing' to describe ganging up on someone using rumour, innuendo, humiliation, isolation and intimidation in a concentrated and direct manner in the workplace. The term 'workplace bullying' was introduced by Gary and Ruth Namie (cited in Koonin & Green, 2004:73) to describe the hurtful and repeated mistreatment of people by their bosses, co-workers and/or subordinates. Lutgen-Sandvik's (2003:474) definition of workplace bullying reads as follows:

> Employee emotional abuse is targeted, repetitive workplace communication that is unwelcome and unsolicited, violates standards of appropriate conduct, results in emotional harm, and occurs in relationships of unequal power.

Whilst an abundance of publications on workplace bullying is available (e.g. Martin, 2008:22; Tepper, 2007:261-285; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003:473), little evidence could be found of research on the topic in school context. Riley and Duncan (2007, cited in Scanlan, 2007:1), Cemaloglu (2007:789-802) and Blase and Blase, (2004:160-169) have nonetheless found that bullying amongst educators is a serious workplace problem in the USA, Turkey and Australia.

The preceding discussion focuses on bullying amongst peers (children and co-workers) or supervisors and workers. Researchers (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006:53; Pervin & Turner, 1998:4-8; Terry, 1998:255-267) have identified yet another combination of perpetrators and victims: learners who bully their educators.

According to Pervin and Turner (1998:4) it might be argued that educator-targeted bullying and disruptive behaviour is the same thing. According to them, disruptive behaviour includes talking out of turn, calling out, non-verbal distraction of others from their work, interfering with other learners' equipment or material, verbal abuse of learners and educators and physical aggression. Dunham (1984:33) uses the term 'disruptive' to describe a wide range of behaviour problems which includes learners who refuse to co-operate and do little or no work in class, and learners who are openly aggressive towards other learners and educators. Dunham (1984:33) identified the following six categories of disruptive behaviour in order of frequency: rowdyism, actual violence, damage to property, threats of violence, theft and sexual misconduct.

Rowdyism is defined as "deliberate lateness to lessons, disturbance in the lessons, verbal abuse and refusal to co-operate" (Dunham, 1984:33). Pervin and Turner (1998:4) list the following behaviour as acts of educator-targeted bullying: persistent, intentional, vigorous abuse of the educator; swearing and/or mocking the educator; knowingly ignoring the educator; making personal comments about the educator and damaging the educator's property. Matsui (2005:1) defines educator-targeted bullying as "threats of physical assault, verbal abuse, racial and sexual slurs, repeated intimidation, disrespectful behaviour, vandalism of personal belongings and persistent class disruption". Learners who indulge in educator-targeted bullying thus aim to undermine the educator's confidence.

According to Smith, Singer, Hoel and Cooper (2003:176), school and workplace bullying are related, because the definitions commonly used are comparable, emphasising persistent and repeated negative action which is intended to intimidate or hurt another person in a weaker position, or a systematic abuse of power. The foregoing explanation and definition of educator-targeted bullying concurs largely with Smith *et al.*'s (2003:176) exposition of the commonalities between school and workplace bullying. An important element should be emphasised, namely that bullying is characterised by an "unbalanced relationship of power between the bully and the victim" (De Wet, 2005:82). In educator-targeted bullying the educator, who is supposed to be the leader and mentor who guides his/her learners (Oosthuizen *et al.*, 2003:460; Byrne, 1988:122) and is seen to hold a position of "greater authority and status" (Benefield, 2004:2) is disempowered and stripped of his/her confidence by the negative actions of his/her learners.

3. Research on educator-targeted bullying

Despite the culture of silence surrounding educator-targeted bullying because of victims' fear that disclosure will reflect poorly on them (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006:56) and definitional vagueness (Pervin & Turner, 1998:4), research findings reveal that educator-targeted bullying is a fairly common problem in Canada (Matsui, 2005:1), South Africa (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006:56), New Zealand (Benefield, 2004:1-20) and the United Kingdom (Pervin & Turner, 1998:4; Terry, 1998:255-267; Houghton *et al.*, 1988:279-311). Studies conducted as early as 1976 (Mills, cited in Houghton *et al.*, 1988:297) in the UK identified verbal abuse/swearing and personal and insulting comments against educators as a pervasive problem. All of the aforementioned research articles are based on the results from questionnaire surveys. Results predominantly centre on the nature and prevalence of educator-targeted bullying, the possible influence of demographic variables on educator-targeted bullying, as well as the impact of educator-targeted bullying on the victims' professional and private lives. To avoid repe-

tition, relevant results from these studies will be juxtaposed with the current study under the heading 'Discussion'. This will be done with caution – the author's study is grounded in an interpretive framework whilst all the aforementioned articles' epistemological roots are in positivism.

4. Theoretical framework

The socio-ecological model is a theoretical framework that can be used to examine the multiple effects and interrelatedness of social elements in an environment. There are several adaptations of the socio-ecological model. However, the initial and most utilised version is Uri Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979:3) stated that "the ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls". The author uses a three-level ecology model to represent the complexity of educator-targeted bullying. The first level identifies biological and personal factors that influence how individuals behave and thus increase their likelihood of becoming victims or perpetrators of bullying: demographic characteristics, personality disorders, and a history of experiencing, witnessing or engaging in bullying behaviour. The second level focuses on the organisational or institutional factors that shape or structure the environment within which the individual and interpersonal relations occur. These aspects can be rules, policies, and acceptable behaviour within more formal organisations (e.g. schools). The third level looks at the broad societal factors that help to create a climate in which bullying is encouraged or inhibited: the responsiveness of the criminal justice system and/or trade unions, social and cultural norms regarding gender roles, the social acceptability of bullying and violence and political instability (cf. Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg & Zwi, 2002:1085).

5. Research methodology

5.1 Research approach

The research approach was qualitative. The research was undertaken within an interpretative framework with its emphasis on experience and interpretation. Interpretive research is concerned with meaning and it seeks to understand people's definitions and understanding of situations. Henning (2005:21) emphasises that the interpretive paradigm does not concern itself with the search for broadly applicable laws and rules, but rather seeks to produce descriptive analysis that emphasises deep, interpretive understanding of social phenomena. This ties in with the focus of this study, as its purpose is to gain an understanding of school principals' experiences and observations of educator-targeted bullying.

5.2 Research method

5.2.1 Participants

Participants of the two focus group interviews were 12 school principals (9 male and 3 female). Five of the principals were attached to primary and seven to secondary schools. The average years in the teaching profession for the participants were 21 years (SD = 5,77). The mean experience as school principal was 8 years (SD = 4,22). The interviews were conducted during 2008. School principals busy with their Advanced Certificate in Education Leadership studies were invited to take part in the research project. For the two focus group interviews, convenience sampling included participants on the basis of their availability.

5.2.2 Data collection

Data collection was by means of in-depth focus group interviews. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Reflective field notes were taken for the sake of triangulation.

The participants were provided with a tentative interview schedule during preliminary discussions with the researcher. The following questions were put to them:

- What are your experiences and observations of educator-targeted bullying?
- What are the risk factors of educator-targeted bullying?
- What is the impact of educator-targeted bullying?
- What can be done to prevent this type of behaviour?

The research aim and method were explained to the participants. During the interviews a "funnel structure" was used, starting with the broad question: "Would you please tell me of incidences of educator-targeted bullying at your respective schools?" Through this question the participants were eased into a process where they were actively interacting, sharing their personal, as well as members of their staff's exposure to educator-targeted bullying. Through this question, followed by probing and follow-up questions, the participants were guided in addressing different aspects of educator-targeted bullying. Thus, the interview guide was only an aid to ensure whether the groups had addressed all the preset categories.

5.2.3 Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was chosen as

> an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analysis rules and step by step models (Mayring, 2000:5).

According to Schilling (2009:108) this approach combines the strengths of the grounded theory approach in discovering 'natural' categories with the strategies and standards (transparency and validity) of traditional content analysis. Nieuwenhuis's (2007:106-115) and Henning's (2005:104-106) guidelines for qualitative content analysis were used to reduce, condense and group the content of the focus group interviews. A coding frame was drawn up, also providing for verbatim reporting where applicable. The researcher used preset codes (*a priori* coding) that she had identified whilst doing the literature review for this study. She worked though all her data and coded it. Related codes were thereafter organised into preset categories (cf. tentative interview questions). These preset categories were also identified whilst doing the literature review. After she had completed her categorisation she reread the transcriptions to check whether she had captured all the important insights that emerged from the data. From the categories, patterns and themes which could also be linked to the research question, sub-questions were identified and described. The identification of emergent themes allowed the information to be analysed and related to the literature. The researcher used an independent qualitative researcher to do an independent re-coding of the data in order to determine whether the same themes became evident and could be confirmed (cf. Henning's, 2005:106) arguments against the use of an independent coder). Consensus discussions between the researcher and the independent expert were held in order to determine the final findings of the research.

5.2.4 Literature study

A literature study (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Matsui, 2005; Benefield, 2004; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Terry, 1998) was done to identify codes and categories, support the findings and to compare the findings with those of previous research studies in order to establish differences, similarities, gaps and unique contributions.

5.2.5 Validation

Validation within an interpretive approach to qualitative research is marked by a focus on the importance of the researcher, and interpretations that are temporal, located and always open to reinterpretation (Creswell, 2007:205). The following two validation strategies were used:

- Data (literature study, interview transcripts and reflective field notes), investigator (the independent expert and the researcher read and coded the transcripts and took part in consensus discussions) and theory triangulation (the use of multiple perspectives on bullying to interpret the data) were used to strengthen the study.

- Rich, thick descriptions allow readers to make decisions regarding transferability. The detailed descriptions in this article may enable the readers to transfer information to other settings and thus determine whether the findings can be transferred.

5.2.6 Ethical measures

Care was taken to adhere to ethical measures during research on a topic that may be sensitive to the participants. When the interviews were conducted the principals received an explanation of the research aim and method. They were informed in writing of the prevailing ethical considerations (Strydom, 2005:57-68), e.g. the participants' voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality. All the participants gave their informed consent.

6. Findings

This article focuses on the following two preset categories:
- The nature and extent of educator-targeted bullying.
- Risk factors of educator-targeted bullying.

All the themes discussed in this article were directly derived from the data.

6.1 The nature and extent of educator-targeted bullying

Analysis of the verbatim responses of the participants revealed how, when, where, by whom and to what extent they and/or members of their staff were bullied.

Data from the focus group interviews established that educators were physically and psychologically abused by learners. The following are examples of psychological abuse that happened within the school grounds: learners' threats to lock an educator in his classroom, insulting graffiti in the learners' bathrooms, the utterance of "vulgar words", defamation of educators' character, cruel personal comments (a principal said one of the members of his staff is called "boggeltjie" because she is hunchbacked), and threats of violence ("I don't know if the gun was loaded", "he threatened me with a knife" and "he told me he was going to stab me"). The view of one of the participants, namely that "it is not really violence in the sense of grabbing somebody, it's a mental thing" is challenged by the data. Educators had objects thrown at them while they were writing on the blackboard; they were slapped in the face and chased around the school building. Three principals described how they were forcibly held captive and attacked in their offices. One mentioned that her hands were tied behind her back. Grade 11 learners threatened to kill her child if she did not succumb to their demands. Educators' classrooms were trashed with water and/or spray-paint, their cars were scratched and the tyres slashed.

Victims were also targeted after hours. The principals referred to, amongst others, a learner who threatened that he would "get the educator in the street", learners who "waited for [a principal] at street corners", threatening him, learners throwing stones and eggs at educators' homes, trashing their private property and defacing

it with graffiti. Mention was also made of older learners who drive aggressively and purposely cut in front of female educators, thus intimidating them.

The following quotation exemplifies the stance of participants that educator-targeted bullying is often all-encompassing:

> They waited for me at street corners, armed with stones. They threatened me and said I should watch my back. One of the learner's brothers attacked me in my office.

With reference to the forgoing quotation which shows that some educators were victimised by multiple bullies – some not directly associated with the school – participants described how gang activities in the community spilled over into the school. Gang members collectively victimised educators with whom learners (gang members) had squabbles. A principal described how she was victimised by a whole bunch of learners repeatedly over time:

> I had threatening telephone calls. The first time I was threatened over the telephone, and then I got a threatening letter posted on my door. The letter stated that they would not kill me; they would target my child. They would make my child mad at me because he would know he was going to be killed because I didn't want to help them. It is not nice to sit in your office with your hands tied behind your back.

The following table of significant quotations, extracted from the data (cf. findings pertaining to learners' rights and disciplinary practices as risk factors of educator-targeted bullying), juxtapose learners as assertive and proud individuals who need to be protected against out of control and disempowered adults.

Table 1: Juxtaposition of principals' (unintended) portrayal of learners and educators

Learners	Educators
Children are proud of themselves	Fear … you will be in trouble
… are fully aware of their rights	… might appear on the front page
… will not hesitate to report educators	We are not protected by the department
Our children need protection	… yell at the children
… enjoy having power	… run to the principal's office
Nothing happens to them	… don't have any recourse
Proud	
… do not want to be embarrassed	

The foregoing negative depiction of educators suggests an imbalance of power: the learners have power, are proud, assertive and seemingly untouchable ("nothing happens to them"). Educators, on the other hand, act as victims who have failed their profession, lost esteem with their principals and forfeited the support of their employer

(Department of Education). Participants' negative depiction of educators, as people who have brought their profession into disrepute will be elaborated upon in the discussion of the individual risk factors of educator-targeted bullying (Theme 1).

Members of the focus groups differed in their view on the pervasiveness of educator-targeted bullying. Some principals found it "unacceptable" and on "a very large scale". A female principal said that the victimisation was so intense that she feared for her life. Others said that "it happens on a small scale" and "it is minimal". Principals seem to be in agreement that whilst the problem is more serious in secondary schools, it is also escalating in primary schools, "because they are copying the behaviour from neighbouring secondary schools". On the question on whether or not the problem of educator-targeted bullying is escalating, the participants' consensus is reflected by the next quotation: "it is different … it is definitely worse".

 The foregoing exposition of the nature of educator-targeted bullying has shown that educators were exposed repeatedly over time to psychological and physical abuse during and after school hours by one or more learners, and/or family, community and gang members. The abuse is characterised by an imbalance of power. The intensity and the perceived seriousness of these negative acts differed.

6.2 Risk factors of educator-targeted bullying

An analysis of the verbatim responses of the participants revealed that, in accordance with Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory the risk factors of educator-targeted bullying may be found on the micro, meso, and macro systems levels (cf. Table 2).

Table 2: Risk factors of educator-targeted bullying

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Individual risk factors on micro system level: Learners' and educators' behaviour and perceived status	Learners • Emphasis on learners' rights • Arrogance and entitlement of learners

	Educators
	• Rebel against educators as symbols of power
	• Learners' status is enhanced at the cost of disempowered educators
	• Unprofessional conduct leads to a loss of status and disrespect:
	  • Conflict between educators' professional and private lives
	  • Learner-educator relationships: friend, lovers and drinking buddies

Theme 2: Institutional risk factors on meso system level: Teaching and learning milieu	Classroom practices
	• Bored children misbehave
	• Ignorance about what is happening in their classes
	Disciplinary strategies
	• Learners target educators who are:
	  • too strict
	  • not strict enough
	  • not able or willing to discipline learners
	  • use inappropriate disciplinary strategies
	• The abolishment of corporal punishment
	• The lack of appropriate, easy to implement disciplinary strategies
	The absence of anti-educator-targeted bullying policies

Theme 3: Societal risk factors on macro system level: Socio-conomic factors	Socio-economic factors: Poverty • Hunger • Frustration and anger
	HIV and AIDS
	The disintegration of family life • Sibling-led households • Lack of authority figure(s) at home • Parents not willing/able to discipline their children • Parents set wrong examples
	Disintegration of the community • Lawlessness • Personal conflicts spill over into the school
	Television
	Drug and alcohol abuse

Theme 1: Individual risk factors on the micro system level: Learner and educator behaviour and perceived status

The learners

Several participants share the view that the emphasis on learners' rights is the key to their abusive and disrespectful behaviour towards educators. According to

them, this emphasis has not only led to the bullying of educators, but also to their disempowerment. The following two narrations may be seen as validation for this view:

> Nowadays the rights of learners are overriding those of the educators. It is quite difficult for educators to discipline learners because educators fear that if you try to discipline them you will be in trouble, even though the learner was actually wrong. Teachers fear that they will appear on the front pages of newspapers. Educators are not protected by the department.
>
> Learners do these things because of the rights they claim they have.
>
> Learners actually enjoy having power … and nothing happens to them.

Whilst some of the participants suggested that learners misuse their rights ("they will not hesitate to report an educator who inflicts corporal punishment on them, to the police", "educators don't have any recourse" and "if you discipline the child the child will run to the police"), others are in favour of the protection of the children's rights ("we have good laws that look after the interests of the children … our children need protection"). Participants are of the opinion that bullying is indicative of the arrogance of the bullying learners ("today's children are too proud of themselves" and "they don't want to be embarrassed"). To illustrate learners' arrogance and a demeanour of entitlement a participant described how she was victimised by a group of Grade 11 learners who were not promoted to the next grade at the end of the school year. They gave her an ultimatum: her child's life or "new report cards".

Educators

An analysis of the interviews revealed that the fundamental reasons for educator-targeted bullying are learners' total disregard for those who are perceived to be in a position of power and their lack of respect for educators. These sentiments were verbalised as follows:

> Teachers are often seen as symbols of authority – and that is why children bully them.
>
> Children don't have any respect for teachers.

The following comment by one of the principals led the group to critically evaluate the teaching profession:

> The status of the educator has gone down over the years … we must reflect on our behaviour to see if we contribute to the learners' behaviour. How do we behave outside the classroom? The children don't respect us anymore.

The group's reflective responses to this challenge paint a grim picture of educators who have failed the profession (also cf. Table 1). An analysis of the data suggests inappropriate conduct. A principal said educators often lead dual lives ("After

hours they act immorally, yet at school they are disciplinarians"). According to him this duality may lead learners to disrespect and consequently bully their educators. A participant, who identified corruption and crime in the community as reasons why learners disrespect their educators, mentioned that educators "who reside in crime-infested communities" are often part of "crime syndicates".

The group's reflective discussions also revealed, as will become evident in the next three paragraphs, that educators' unethical relationships with their learners as friends, lovers and drinking buddies contribute to the victimisation of educators.

Several principals believe that socialisation between educators and learners may lead to the victimisation of the befriended and/or other educators. One of the participants aptly noted that these children "see themselves as the educators' equals. They want to stampede authority and bully and victimise their educators". The danger of educators becoming friends with learners is spelt out by one of the participants:

> If the teacher is too friendly with the children he will have disciplinary problems. The moment he tries to discipline the children they'll retaliate. You can't be a friend one moment and a teacher the next moment.

A principal said that a few years ago some of his educators and learners were regularly "drinking and socialising in a popular tavern". The educators' drinking buddies ran amok in the school – victimising educators and learners. It was, however, difficult to discipline them, because they used personal information about educators and the principal to backchat them: "I had a drink with Mister so-and-so or Miss so-and-so. You will tell me nothing." Another participant mentioned that "most of the time these learners who are drinking with their educators are buying the liquor because the educators don't have money … 'I provide you (with alcohol); you can't tell me what to do and not to do'", consequently "innocent educators suffer". This view is supported by other participants. Speaking from personal experience, a female principal warned that educators may abuse their friendship with learners to harm colleagues ("Educators who are jealous use children to pull you down").

Mention was also made of sexual relationships and love triangles involving educators and learners. Principals believe that educators' romantic involvement with learners may result in the victimisation of educators by jealous learners. It seems as if these triangles not only involve male educators. One of the principals referred to "a female teacher who was fighting over a boy".

Educator-targeted bullying risk factors on the individual system level thus revolve around the behaviour of learners and educators: learners act in an insolent, conceited and defiant manner. Educators are often disempowered, have lost the

respect of the learners and other role players, and are involved in illegal activities and/or improper relationships with their learners.

Theme 2: Institutional risk factors on the meso system level: Teaching and learning milieu

Teaching practices

A few of the principals noted that educators who keep learners busy in a meaningful way during school hours have less chance of being victimised. It seems as if the opposite is happening: work is often too difficult or too easy – resulting in educator-targeted bullying. A principal said that

> … when they are not doing well academically, they become bored and when educators reprimand them they become rude or they try to threaten educators or even become violent.

Mention was also made of the necessity of educators to be aware of what is happening in their classes. They should be able to comprehend what their learners are saying (about them). A principal said:

If teachers are not able to speak the learners' home language children will not hesitate to demean them.

Disciplinary strategies

Principals identified disciplinary strategies as an important risk factor. From the ensuing exposition of the data it will become clear that principals believe that educators who are (too) strict may encourage bullying:

> He threatened me with a knife because I disciplined him for not coming to school … he will not allow anyone to reprimand him.

Mentioned was also made of strict educators who fell prey to bullying after-hours. Participants suggested that "gentle" or inexperienced educators have to bear the brunt of learners' anger and frustration against other (strict) educators. These educators seem to be easy targets: "If you are not strict enough with the children they will bully you".

It was furthermore alleged by some interviewees that learners target educators who are not able to discipline learners themselves. They said that if educators regularly bring misbehaving learners to them to be disciplined they "lose face". Learners will consequently not hesitate to talk in a disrespectful way to these educators. From the discussion it seems as if principals do not have sympathy for educators who are targeted by learners because of their inability to discipline them. One of them said:

> Teachers can't just run to the principal's office every second period. That is why I tell them: 'Give me R500 of your salary and I will discipline your learners, otherwise you do it yourself'.

Inappropriate disciplinary strategies may also lead to victimisation, as exemplified by the next two extracts from the interviews:

> I am very strict with teachers who scream at children … children don't like it. If teachers shout and humiliate children they will retaliate. I always tell my teachers if they want misbehaviour in their classes they should yell at the children.
> I remember an educator who tried to discipline a child, but used the wrong method (did not say what method) and this child fought back.

Two of the principals consider the abolition of corporal punishment in South African schools as an important contributing factor. One of them said:

> Since the outlawing of corporal punishment the scale of bullying and victimisation against educators has grown quite aggressively.

According to him "alternative methods of punishment are not easy to implement".

The principals are in agreement that there are no sound anti-victimisation policies or action plans in place to fight educator-targeted bullying and if and when they have to address the problem "there was no consistency".

The inability or unwillingness of educators to discipline learners, as well as inappropriate disciplinary practices impact negatively on yet another risk factor of educator-targeted bullying, namely the dwindling status of educators.

Theme 3: The broad societal risk factors on the macro system level: The influence of socio-economic factors on educator-targeted bullying

A refrain that links the discussions is "our children are not children anymore". Participants referred to the fact that learners are "frustrated". They identified poverty, HIV and AIDS, dire home circumstances and the moral crisis in the community as a whole as reason for this frustration. According to these participants, learners vent their frustration at what may seem to them, unfathomable problems by lashing out at their educators. The aforementioned sub-themes, as extracted from the data, will now be discussed.

Poverty

Participants discussed the influence of poverty on learners in general and on educator-targeted bullying in particular. The following two quotations exemplify their view that the learners' behaviour is often an act of frustration because of "chronic poverty":

> … there is nothing to eat … there is nothing at home … and when teachers don't reach out to these children they become like hungry lions; yes, they become dangerous towards educators.
> The children see that the teachers have money … [and]… are well dressed, but they are poor. They thus strike out at educators.

It seems as if, as illustrated by the first of the foregoing two quotations, that bullying may also be a cry for help.

HIV and AIDS

Although the participants did not connect HIV and AIDS directly with educator-targeted bullying, they frequently referred to the influence of this pandemic on the disintegration of family life, the absence of authority figures and poverty. HIV and AIDS may thus be seen as an ever-present reality in the lives of learners that impact negatively on educator-learner relationships.

The disintegration of family life

The following two narrations illustrate the influence of the existence of sibling-led households on educator-targeted bullying:

> Children stay on their own … there are no parents; at home he is the head of the family. He therefore looks upon teachers as his equals … at home he must take the decisions; he decides when they must move and what they must do to survive …
> Both parents are dead … children have to fend for themselves and they grow up with no clear direction on what is right and what is wrong and how to behave.

Some learners, as illustrated by the previous two quotations, have no parents to act as role models or to discipline them, while others grow up in single parent households or households where the parents are often absent (e.g. seasonal farm workers) or are looked after by members of the extended family. The following quotations demonstrate the extent of the problem:

> If you want to speak to their parents they will tell you we don't have parents, or: 'I don't have a dad'.
> Some children are in the care of their grannies … and if she becomes ill she can't leave the house.

A principal elaborated: "Yes, the granny is a cripple; she has Parkinson's … or granny is always drunk".

It furthermore seems that parents often abdicate their responsibilities or set bad examples, thus perpetuating educator-targeted bullying. The next three examples will suffice:

> Parents don't set a good example … they don't discipline their children … they shift their responsibility onto the school … they don't take any responsibility.
> Parents abdicate their responsibility … they push their responsibility onto the school … if you call the parents they'll tell you 'Sir, give the child a hiding, I can't do it any more'.
> Parents fight a lot, and the children see these things and do it at school.

Community factors

Participants probed the possible impact of community factors on educator-targeted bullying. The view of a female principal, namely that "it's a community problem [because] the children do not come from the school, they come from the community", was supported by a colleague, saying that "nobody is addressing the lawlessness in the community, and that is how they grow up". Principals argued that conflicts amongst community members often spill over into the school. For example mention was made of personal differences between a parent and an educator that led to the child's targeting the educator during school hours. A principal described how he was victimised by learners because the community wanted another person to be appointed principal. He believed that parents, members of the community and even some of his staff members instigated the victimisation.

Poverty, the disintegration of family life, the HIV and AIDS pandemic, and crime and violence are interrelated and encompassing realities in South African communities. Learners have to face these issues on a daily basis. It is therefore understandable that principals constantly maintained that "our children are not children anymore" during the focus group interviews. Although the participants condemned the bullying of educators, they showed empathy for children lashing out at what seem to be the insurmountable problems they have to face.

The influence of television on educator-targeted bullying

A few of the participants blamed television for educator-targeted bullying. According to them, learners imitate "wrong role models" and "want to be like these big guys they see on television". A participant said that "the media should be careful about what is reported and what is not".

Drugs and alcohol abuse

Several principals mentioned that drug and alcohol abuse are serious problems at their schools. According to them children often come to school intoxicated. These have lead to, amongst others, the verbal and physical abuse of educators.

7. Discussion

The aim of this article was to shed light on the phenomenon of educator-targeted bullying. The findings, based on group interviews with principals, give insight into the nature of educator-targeted bullying, as well as individual, institutional and broad societal risk factors of educator-targeted bullying.

Findings from the current study, namely that educator-targeted bullying is a fairly common problem in the schools where the participants work is in line with results from quantitative studies. Four examples will suffice: In a study conducted in the Free State and Eastern Province 76,7% of the 579 respondents indicated that they had been exposed to some or other form of educator-targeted bullying (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006:61). Benefield's (2004:6) survey in New Zealand revealed that more than 90% of the 587 respondents were victims of educator-targeted bullying during the year preceding the survey. The majority (91%) of educators teaching at an Inner London school (n = 84) indicated that at some time in their teaching careers they had suffered from educator-targeted bullying (Pervin & Turner, 1998:5). Terry's (1998:263) study on educator-targeted bullying in the North Midlands (England) found that 63% of the male and 50% of the female respondents had been subjected to bullying "once or more" during the term preceding the survey.

Whilst the aforementioned studies (cf. De Wet & Jacobs, 2006:62; Matsui, 2005; Pervin & Turner, 1998:5; Terry, 1998:264) aimed at ascertaining respondents' level of exposure to certain pre-determined forms of educator-targeted bullying, the aim of the current study was to gain an understanding of principals' experiences and observations of educator-targeted bullying. The following may be seen as a summation of participants' views of what educator-targeted bullying entails: educator-targeted bullying is the intentional physical and/or psychological abuse of educators by one or more of their learners, parents, and community or gang members during and/or after school hours. Educator-targeted bullying may also include vandalism of the victims' personal and/or allocated school property. An educator is bullied when he/she is repeatedly over time exposed to negative actions. A single negative act may sometimes be seen as educator-targeted bullying. The abuse occurs in relationships of unequal power. This description demonstrates the comparability of educator-targeted bullying with learner-on-learner and workplace bullying. All three types of bullying are characterised by the repeated, systematic abuse of power.

An important motivation for the current study was the dearth of research on the risk factors of educator-targeted bullying (cf. Smith & Brain, 2000:1-9 for an overview of research on bullying). It is therefore problematic to evaluate the findings of the current study on the risk factors of educator-targeted bullying with prior comparable studies. Readings of the literature on learner misbehaviour reveal that the following risk factors of educator-targeted bullying are also the reasons for learner misbehaviour per se:

• **Individual factors on micro level**: the emphasis on learner rights (Naong, 2007:295; Rossouw, 2003:424) and unprofessional educator conduct

(Rossouw, 2003:426; Wolhuter & Steyn, 2003:527; Weishew & Peng, 1993:13).

- **Institutional factors on meso level:** incompetent educators (Rossouw, 2003:425), inappropriate disciplinary strategies (Naong, 2007:296-297; Weishew & Peng, 1993:13) and the abolition of corporal punishment (Naong, 2007:292-297).
- **Broad societal factors on macro level:** lack of parental involvement and the disintegration of family life – the latter because of poverty and HIV and AIDS (Rossouw, 2003:426; Wolhuter & Steyn, 2003:530-531), the influence of the media (Wolhuter & Steyn, 2003:531), as well as alcohol and drug abuse (Rossouw, 2003:426; Weishew & Peng, 1993:13).

The similarities between risk factors of educator-targeted bullying and learner misbehaviour underline the necessity to develop and implement an all-encompassing school policy that will not only address deviant behaviour, but also school violence, learner-on-learner bullying and educator-targeted bullying. educator-targeted bullying should never be seen in isolation – it is but one of many embodiments of sin that may lead to the breakdown of teaching and learning and consequently the prevention of *paideia Christi*.

Bronfenbrenner's model of interlinking systems emphasise the reciprocal interaction between the risk factors of educator-targeted bullying. At the macro systems level poverty, HIV and AIDS, the disintegration of family life, crime-infected communities, television, as well as drug and alcohol abuse were identified as educator-targeted bullying risk factors. At the meso systems level educator incompetence and inappropriate disciplinary strategies were discussed as risk factors. At the micro systems level, participants named learner rights, arrogance, entitlement, a lack of respect for their educators and immoral behaviour by educators as fundamental risk factors. Although it is possible to isolate the different levels to enhance understanding of the complexity of risk factors of educator-targeted bullying, it is impossible to separate them.

The reciprocal influence of the disintegration of micro, meso and macro systems on one another is echoed by South African academics. Whilst Schoeman (2006:81) writes about the "lack of morality rampant in our society", De Klerk and Rens (2003:359) make mention of a "moral crisis in schools". Schoeman (2006:82) has found that a spirit of scepticism and uncertainty has culminated in the invalidation of values such as honesty, integrity, chastity, virtue, responsibility, decorum, modesty, diligence, thrift, obedience and respect. Schoeman (2006:82) argues that all of these values have become relative and mean "all things to all men". The latter is underlined by the government's "morality renewal programme" (cf. Schoeman, 2006:81; De Klerk & Rens, 2003:354). De Klerk and

Rens's (2003:354) view, as stated in their article on the role of values on school discipline, is thus applicable to educator-targeted bullying:

> What is necessary in schools is not new policy, more programmes or better projects, but virtuous people who live according to a specific value system. What leads to a lack of discipline or lies at the root of a lack of discipline, can possibly be ascribed to the absence of a value system grounded in a specific life-view perspective.

Any attempt to address educator-targeted bullying will thus have to start with the instilling of a specific life-view perspective in schools. Rossouw and De Waal (2004:286) also mention that proper behaviour, based on certain internalised values, forms the basis of all education, and if this is not upheld by the educator, he/she will have "little more to offer the learner than mere instruction of subject content". Christian educators should regard it as their duty to guide their learners through character-building and discipline, in accordance with the principles of the Bible, to Christ-likeness. Christian educators should not only guide their learners, but also provide them with "respectable models … exemplarity lives that can be emulated" (Rossouw, 2003:432). Not only school, but also community related factors (the disintegration of family life, poverty, HIV and AIDS, the media, the abuse of drugs and alcohol, lawlessness, gangsterism and conflict) and individual factors (learners' lack of respect, arrogance and entitlement, as well as educators' immoral and criminal behaviour) were identified as risk factors of educator-targeted bullying. It is thus not only the task of the school, but also that of the broader community, to "help young people to make wise choices and act with self-discipline" (De Klerk & Rens, 2003:369) and to address broad community problems – e.g. HIV and AIDS, poverty, crime and gangsterism – that may impact negatively on educator-learner relationships.

Some methodological concerns about this study should be expressed. The information collected, especially from one of the two focus groups, may be biased because of the domination of the discussion by two outspoken individuals. Typical of the nature of qualitative research, the study was limited to a relatively small group of principals. It is not intended that the findings be generalised. The intention is to make role-players aware of educator-targeted bullying. The study is not replicable in its exact form, but it is hoped that the issues raised will be able to inform future practice.

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