

# Investigating educators' perspectives and strategies for reducing school bullying

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## Abstract

*There is an abundance of anti-bullying programmes and bully prevention initiatives; yet bullying remains a serious problem. Educators are the key role-players in the development and implementation of a successful anti-bullying programme. An understanding of educators' views on bullying is therefore a prerequisite in the prevention of bullying. The aim of this article is thus to report on findings from an empirical study that explored educators' proposals on how to curb bullying. Educators, who were furthering their studies at the University of the Free State, were invited to take part in a study on different types of bullying. This article focuses on the prevention strategies of 91 participants who wrote about learner-on-learner bullying. A content analysis of the responses of the participants revealed that in accordance with Benbenishty and Astor's social-ecological model, risk focused prevention should involve the school, the family and the community as interrelated ecological systems. Based on the findings, it is suggested that schools should try to involve as many individuals and groups as possible to develop and implement anti-bullying programmes. These programmes should recognise the role of the interrelated ecological systems in the prevention of bullying and cater for the distinctive needs of individual schools.*

## **'n Onderzoek na opvoeders se perspektiewe en strategieë vir die vermindering van afknouery by skole**

### **Opsomming**

*Daar is 'n magdom anti-afknoueryprogramme en voorkomings-inisiatiewe. Tog is afknouery 'n ernstige probleem. Opvoeders is sleutelfigure in die ontwikkeling en toepassing van 'n suksesvolle anti-afknoueryprogram. Insig in opvoeders se sieninge oor afknouery is dus 'n voorvereiste in die stryd teen afknouery. Die doel van hierdie artikel is om verslag te lewer van bevindinge van 'n empiriese ondersoek na opvoeders se voorstelle oor hoe om afknouery hok te slaan. Opvoeders wat besig was met verdere studie aan die Universiteit van die Vrystaat is genooi om deel te neem aan 'n ondersoek na verskillende tipes afknouery. Die artikel is toegespits op die voorkomingstrategieë van 91 deelnemers wat op leerder-op-leerderafknouery gefokus het. 'n Inhoudontleding van die response van dié deelnemers toon, in ooreenstemming met Benbenishty and Astor se sosiaal-ekologiese model, dat risikogefokusde voorkomingsprogramme die skool, die gesin en die gemeenskap as interafhanklike ekologiese stelsels moet betrek. Op grond van die bevindinge word voorgestel dat skole poog om soveel moontlik individue en groepe by die ontwikkeling en toepassing van anti-afknoueryprogramme te betrek. Hierdie programme moet erkenning verleen aan die bydrae wat die interafhanklike ekologiese stelsels in die voorkoming van afknouery kan maak, en voorsiening maak vir die eiesoortige behoeftes van individuele skole.*

### **1. Introduction**

School bullying is extremely prevalent in schools today (Greeff & Roodt, 2012:686-687; Hazler & Carney, 2006:275; Limber, 2006:294; Rigby, 2008:32). Research (Rigby, 2008:70), however, indicates that bullying often continues without intervention. Bullying results in negative consequences for both the victim and the bully. The consequences to the victim may include the following: a loss of confidence, lower self-esteem, depression, loneliness, difficulty concentrating, academic work slides, truancy tendencies, the de-

velopment of school phobic responses and suicidal ideation (Beane, Miller & Spurling, 2008:395; Greeff & Roodt, 2012:686; Limber, 2006:294). The bullies may learn that using aggression is a successful strategy for getting what they want; realise that they can get away with violent behaviour; become disruptive as a dominant group and band together; become even more disruptive and eventually test educators to see “how far they can be pushed” (Beane *et al.*, 2008:395). Bullies are also more likely than their non-bullying peers to report poorer academic achievement, become truants and drop out of school (Limber, 2006:294).

Educators have a singular duty, based on their profession, as well as a delegated duty, based on the authority delegated to them by the parents or guardians of the children enrolled at the school, to act *in loco parentis*. This compels educators not only to take care of their learners, but also to maintain order (Joubert & Prinsloo, 2008:145); thus protecting any learner from being bullied while taking the necessary steps to prevent, or at least reduce, this form of destructive behaviour from taking place at the school. In South Africa, a country in which human rights are strongly emphasised (Eloff, Oosthuizen & Steyn, 2010:132), attention should be given to Olweus’s (2001:11) assertion:

It is a fundamental democratic or human right for a child to feel safe in school and to be spared the oppression and repeated, intentional humiliation implied by peer victimization or bullying. No student should be afraid of going to school for fear of being harassed or degraded, and no parent should need to worry about such things happening to his or her child.

Eloff *et al.* (2010:132) concede that the legal framework in South Africa within which educators teach can be commended from a reformational-pedagogical perspective. It not only emphasises the rights of the learners, but also the importance of educators acting in the best interests of the learners. Oosthuizen, Wolhuter and Du Toit (2003:460) nonetheless stress that the role of the educator is more than protecting learners’ human rights and interests or adhering to legal and constitutional imperatives; it is also about the structuring of a teaching and learning milieu which is “permeated by love, understanding and righteousness”. This may only be possible if educators are guided by the five principles of Jesus’ teaching

practices:<sup>1</sup> Jesus' teaching was authoritative, not authoritarian and encouraged people to think. Jesus lived what he taught and had a love for those he taught (Pazmino, 2001:114).

Most researchers (e.g., Berger, Karimpour & Rodkin, 2008:313; Espelage & Swearer, 2008:337) concur that a reduction in bullying is most likely to occur if schools adopt a whole school approach in which educators play a leading role. Berger *et al.* (2008:313) eloquently emphasise the role educators ought to play:

Any prevention program requires teachers as principal implementers. High quality prevention programs are related to high teacher involvement in planning and implementation. ... Without the buy-in, support and motivation of teachers, a comprehensive school-wide program cannot be effective.

Despite consensus among researchers, educators and policy makers about the negative impact of bullying on victims and perpetrators and an abundance of anti-bullying programmes, Berger *et al.* (2008:296) found that anti-bullying programmes have not been successful or consistent in their quest to eradicate bullying from schools. One possible explanation for this difficulty is that educators, who should play a key role in bullying prevention, are not fully committed to fighting this plague (cf. Rigby, 2008:200). A better understanding of what educators perceive to be necessary to reduce bullying and an incorporation of their views into an anti-bullying programme might increase their commitment to the cause. The aim of this article is thus to report on findings from a qualitative study on educators' perspectives on what can be done to reduce bullying. Their suggestions, linked with existing research findings on bully prevention (cf. Sections 5 and 7), will inform my recommendations on how to address bullying.

## **2. Concept clarification**

Olweus (2001:5), one of the world's leading experts on bullying, defines school bullying in the following general way: "... a student is being bullied or victimised when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative action on the part of one or more other students." This definition emphasises the negative (aggressive) actions that are carried out repeatedly and over time. The definition further specifies that in bullying, there is a certain imbalance of power or strength: the person who is exposed to negative actions

has difficulty defending him- or herself (Olweus, 2001:6). Olweus (2001:6) identifies specific forms of bullying: physical and verbal (including racial and sexual) harassment; threatening and coercive behaviours; as well as more indirect ways of harassment, including “relational” victimisation in the form of active social isolation, back talking, having rumours spread, and so on. Friendly and playful teasing, as well as fighting or arguing between two or more people of about the same strength is not bullying.

A common Hebrew word which overlaps with the English word “to bully” is “ashaq” (Myers, 2013:1). Myers (2013:1) uses Ecclesiastes 4:1 as point of departure to give a Biblical perspective of bullying:

Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun.  
And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one  
to comfort them! On the one side of their oppressors there  
was power, and there was no one to comfort them.

In his discussion of Ecclesiastes 4:1 Myers (2013:2) highlights (1) the polemical relationship, i.e. an “us and them” mentality, (2) the power imbalance between the oppressor and the oppressed (“power is on the side of the oppressor”) and (3) and the fact that the oppressed are isolated and made to feel alone. Myers’s (2013:2) Biblical perspective of bullying resonates well with Olweus’s (2006) definition of bullying: both stress the imbalance of power, the impact of the negative behaviour on the victims and the victims’ inability to defend him- or herself. Myers’s (2013:2) understanding that bullying may lead to the isolation of the oppressed is supported by Olweus (2001:6). His view that polemical mentality is typical in bullying situations is supported by Huisting and Veenstra (2012:495). This study acknowledges the existence of an “us and them” mentality in bullying situations. In this study I will consequently investigate the role of “social network structures” (Huisting & Veenstra, 2012:496) within the school, family and community through the lens of Benbenishty and Astor’s (2008:64) model.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

In recent years there has been a move from a focus on the individual characteristics of victims and bullies to an understanding of how contexts, both within and outside the school, impact on school bullying (Benbenishty & Astor, 2008:64; Espelage &

Swearer, 2008:340; Hazler & Carney, 2006:278). Researchers such as the aforementioned, who adopt an ecological perspective in studying bullying, argue that aggressive behaviour should be understood as a function of individual and social factors. This approach does not deny the influence of individual characteristics on aggressive behaviour or the knowledge that such an approach has raised, but highlights the complexity of individual behaviour within peer ecologies (Berger *et al.*, 2008:301).

In this study I use Benbenishty and Astor's (2008:64) model to look for ways to address the multiple causes of bullying. Benbenishty and Astor's (2008:64) model is influenced by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological developmental theory. Benbenishty and Astor's (2008:65) approach examines how external contexts in which a school is embedded interact with internal school and learner characteristics to influence levels of bullying in schools. I have reduced Benbenishty and Astor's (2008:64) multiple layers to three. The three-layered and nested contexts include the *school* (e.g., the learners, the peer group, educators, structural characteristics, school climate and policies against bullying), the *learners' families* (e.g., parenting styles and family structure), and the *community* (e.g., poverty, social organisation, crime, the cultural aspects of the learner and educator population and the economic, social and political makeup of the country as a whole). In line with my argument that bullying prevention strategies should be "risk focused" (cf. Beane *et al.*, 2008:397), the foregoing exposition of the model is *mutatis mutandis* applicable to bully prevention: risk factors should be addressed on school, family and community levels. It is therefore important to take note of the risk factors for bullying.

## **4. Risk factors for school bullying: a literature overview**

### **4.1 The school context**

The two ecological systems that have been placed at the centre of Benbenishty and Astor's (2008:64) heuristic model are the learners (and their relationships with their peers) and the school. The peer group and school are closely overlapping microsystems, especially for children whose peer group is located primarily within the school context (Card, Isaacs & Hodges, 2008:133).

#### 4.1.1 *Characteristics of learners and peer group relations as risk factors for bullying*

There is extensive research to suggest that children's relations with their peers are strongly related to their experience of bullying (Berger *et al.*, 2008:304; Card *et al.*, 2008:131). Children who are not liked by their peers are often seen as easy targets by bullies. Bullies may expect and even receive reinforcement or at least little punishment for targeting these "low status" children (Card *et al.*, 2008:131). Card *et al.* (2008:132) note that having friends with certain characteristics (e.g., physical strength and peer acceptance) can protect children from being bullied. However, the friends of the victims of bullying are often also bullied. Victims' profiles often include children who are intelligent, gentle, physically weaker than the bullies, and appear to lack confidence and social skills. Some may fit the stereotypical picture of a weepy, maladjusted, socially awkward and isolated child (Beane *et al.*, 2008:394), but not all victims fit the clichéd picture. Whereas Berger *et al.* (2008:302) point out that some victims are aggressive; Beane *et al.* (2008:394) note that some victims tend to act disruptively. Gender is also a risk factor for bullying: Boys are more often bullied than girls. Gender furthermore, plays a role in the type of bullying to which victims are subjected: Boys are more frequently the victims of physical bullying than girls; girls on the other hand are subjected more often than their male peers to psychological and relational bullying (Berger *et al.*, 2008:302).

While victims are often loners, bullies are viewed by others as popular individuals who have friends, alliances and/or supporters (Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:186). Bullies interact with peers who advocate, support or promote aggressive behaviour. According to Veltkamp and Lawson (2008:189) the bullies' circles of friends are often "identified as official gangs or hate groups". Children who engage in bullying are more likely to be of the male gender; are often older and physically stronger than their victims; have a drive for power and control; or need to dominate others (Beane *et al.*, 2008:394; Berger *et al.*, 2008:300; Rigby, 2008:35; Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:186). Bullies typically, have lower academic competence or intellectual achievement than their non-bullying peers (Beane *et al.*, 2008:394; Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:186). Additionally, it should be noted that boys and girls perpetrate different types of bullying (Berger *et al.*, 2008:300; Rigby, 2008:35).

### 4.1.2 The school

Several aspects of the school have been researched as risk factors for bullying, including the role of the educator, the school climate, order and discipline, the physical structure of the school and the school size.

Researchers (Berger *et al.*, 2008:308; Espelage & Swearer, 2008:345; Limber, 2006:301) found that educators' attitudes towards bullying can be associated with its occurrence. Schools, in which educators are more likely to discuss bullying with learners, recognise bullying behaviour; are committed to stop bullying; and intervene in bullying incidents, are less likely to have a bullying problem. Berger *et al.* (2008:308) and Card *et al.* (2008:133) furthermore found that schools in which educators are aware of school policies on bullying and have received training in dealing with bullying, tend to have learners who view educators as more approachable and willing to take action against bullying. Educators should play a pivotal role in preventing bullying (cf. Section 1), yet studies that examined to whom bullied children report their abuse, found that only a fraction of victims do so to their educators (Card *et al.*, 2008:133). Moreover, it has been found that the majority of educators do not intervene when bullying occurs (Limber, 2006:300). Veltkamp and Lawson (2008:190) list the following reasons for educators' lack of action: Educators often do not know how to act in aggressive situations or fear the child who has instigated the situation. The educator may also not find fault with the bully's actions; thus, educators' lack of action perpetuates bullying.

Espelage and Swearer (2008:345), as well as Limber (2006:301) highlight the link between the school climate and bullying. Limber (2006:301) notes, for example, that schools that have more open communication among educators, as well as between learners and educators are more willing to address bullying and implement anti-bullying programmes in their schools. School alienation or the degree to which a learner finds the work at school meaningless and unchallenging may also influence the frequency of bullying behaviour (Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:189). De Klerk and Rens (2003:362) argue that educators have a key role to play in instilling positive values, based on Biblical principles, in children. This implies, among other things, that learners should realise that bullying, which is characterised by an abuse of power, is wrong and in contravention with Philippians 2:1-11:



Christ has all power, not human beings. Limber (2006:296) furthermore found that whereas harsh discipline practices propagate violence and bullying, caring restorative disciplinary practices model care and respect. Restorative principles imply reconciliation between the bully and the victim, and the redemption and forgiveness of the bully. Through restorative practices the bully and the victim may thus be guided, in accordance with the principles of the Bible, to Christ-likeness (De Wet, 2010:207).

Reports on where children are bullied vary, with classrooms, hallways, playgrounds and areas near the school as the most common sites for bullying (Card *et al.*, 2008:134). Researchers (Card *et al.*, 2008:134; Rigby, 2008:40) furthermore suggest that an absence of an adult presence in certain areas, during certain times, is strongly related to bullying. Bullying nevertheless may go on “under the teacher’s nose” (Rigby, 2008:40). The location not only affects the type of bullying, but also the severity of the bullying (Card *et al.*, 2008:134). Bullying in the presence of adults is likely to be more subtle, consisting of unpleasant “put downs” or sarcasm (Rigby, 2008:42). Berger *et al.* (2008:308), Card *et al.* (2008:134), as well as Veltkamp and Lawson (2008:189) found that neither school nor class size has a significant impact on school differences to bullying.

## **4.2 The family**

Familial factors that have been examined in relation to bullying include: parents’ involvement in the education of their children; parenting styles; attachment styles; family dysfunction; and socioeconomic status. De Wet’s (2010:203) study highlights the disintegration of family life in South Africa as a risk factor for bullying. Some learners have no parents to act as role models, others grow up in single parent households or in households where the parents are often absent or in households that are headed by grandparents or siblings. When parents are emotionally uninvolved, incompetent and/or physically absent, appropriate boundaries are not established for the children (Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:187). Furthermore, children growing up in dysfunctional homes are often exposed to negative moral influences (Windham, Hooper & Hudson, 2005:211). Poor or insecure attachment with parents may lead to a “crises of meaninglessness” among adolescents (Windham *et al.*, 2005:211). Windham *et al.* (2005:212) believe that

“a felt attachment to God might help compensate for a poor or insecure attachment with parents or primary caregivers”.

Several aspects of parenting styles have been studied in association with bullying. Parents' lack of provision of support, involvement, protectiveness and responsiveness are all associated with bullying (Card *et al.*, 2008:134; Espelage & Swearer, 2008:343; Rigby, 2008:1020106; Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:187; Windham *et al.*, 2005:211). Research (Espelage & Swearer, 2008:343; Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:188) furthermore suggests that inconsistent discipline or harsh and aggressive discipline demonstrates a tolerance for aggression by the parents and reinforces inappropriate actions of the child. Bullies have often seen or experienced physical violence or aggression within the home environment (Card *et al.*, 2008:134; Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:187). A lack of parental involvement in the education of their children is also cited as a cause for school bullying (Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:196; Windham *et al.*, 2005:211). Parents of victims of bullying, on the other hand, tend to be intrusive, demanding and overprotective (Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:188).

Parents, as the primary educators, has a key role to play to guide their children into becoming caring well balanced individuals (De Klerk & Rens, 2003:362; Weeks, 2008:127). Windham *et al.* (2005:211) found that children who live in families or environments where human rights are respected, where brotherhood and sisterhood are recognised and where goodwill and empathy towards others are valued are more likely to be insulated from negative moral influences that may contribute to negative behaviour such as bullying.

### **4.3 Community risk factors**

Researchers dealing with risk factors on the community level focus on rural versus urban school settings, neighbourhood characteristics and broad socio-economic problems. De Wet's (2010:207) finding that poverty; HIV and AIDS; the media; the abuse of drugs and alcohol; lawlessness; gangsterism; and conflict, thus perpetuating educator-targeted bullying is also relevant for an examination of the risk factors for learner-on-learner bullying. De Klerk and Rens (2003:359), as well as Schoeman (2006:81) believe that South African society is morally degraded. De Klerk and Rens

(2003:359) argue that this degradation is spilling over into schools. As a result, there is a “moral crisis in our schools”. De Klerk and Rens (2003:359) associate this lack of morality with learner misbehaviour (which includes bullying). Card *et al.* (2008:136), as well as Veltkamp and Lawson (2008:189) additionally found that there is an association between neighbourhood poverty and bullying in schools. Veltkamp and Lawson (2008:189) argue that children who are surrounded by substandard schools and dwellings often feel hopeless and believe that society does not care about their needs. Acts of aggression then become expressions of the anger and frustration with which these children struggle on a daily basis. Research results suggest that there is a greater tendency to bully in urban than in rural areas, but this difference appears to be fairly small (Card *et al.*, 2008:136).

The literature identified school, familial and community risk factors for bullying. Bullying prevention should not be reactive, but planned, risk focused and research based intervention that acknowledges the need to involve all (or most) of the interrelated ecological systems (cf. Section 5). The next section will look briefly at a programme that conforms to the aforesaid criteria, as well as the sequential stages for setting up an anti-bullying programme.

## **5. Prevention programmes**

Prevention programmes differ in terms of the target group they select and their planned impact. Card *et al.* (2008:139) identifies three categories of prevention programmes: (1) Universal preventative programmes are designed to be delivered to entire populations; many school-based programmes include all the learners and fall in this category. (2) Selective prevention programmes focus on at risk individuals and groups. (3) Indicated prevention programmes target high risk individuals who demonstrate early signs of problematic outcomes. Card *et al.* (2008:139) note that bullying prevention programmes within the school have features of all three categories. The treatment of victims or bullies can furthermore be used in isolation, or in combination, with preventative programmes.

Most schools respond to bullying with reactive interventions and policies (Rigby, 2008:157). Instead, researchers such as Rigby (2008:157), as well as Veltkamp and Lawson (2008:196) suggest that

educators establish prevention programmes for their schools that build a more positive environment within the school and the community. Such a programme requires dedication from educators, learners and parents, as well as the community. Although there are scores of anti-bullying programmes (cf. Espelage & Swearer, 2008:336; Hazler & Carney, 2006:278-281; Rigby, 2008:198-201), the subsequent exposition here will focus on Olweus' (1993) bullying prevention programme. The Olweus anti-bullying programme acknowledges, in line with the theoretical framework that underpins this study, that bullying is a complex, multifaceted social problem. The programme was furthermore developed – in line with my argument – to address known risk factors for bullying behaviour and to build on protective factors within the child's social ecology (Limber, 2006:295). The programme is built on several key principles; namely, that it is critical to develop a school environment that is characterised by warmth and involvement on the part of the adults; where there are clear rules for behaviour; where there are consistent and non-hostile sanctions that are consistently applied when rules or norms are violated; and where adults act as authorities and positive role models (Limber, 2006:295). Both educators and parents receive educational material describing bullying and precautionary guidelines. The core features are implemented at school level, class level and the level of the individual learner. School-level efforts include the creation of a coordinating committee to supervise the programme; school-wide awareness and involvement in anti-bullying efforts; improved monitoring of learners; and regular meetings between parents and educators. In the classroom clear rules against bullying and regular discussions about bullying are provided. Both bullies and victims are required to participate in discussions about bullying, with parents of both parties being included in these restorative discussions (Limber, 2006:296; Olweus, 1993:71; Rigby, 2008:198-199). De Wet (2005:723) writes that the following educational values should not only be taught in schools, but cannot be separated from any effective anti-bullying programme:

- School is a place where people feel safe.
- School is a place where people learn.
- School is a place where prejudice, bigotry or sexism will not be tolerated.
- School is a place where each and every individual has value and worth.

- School is for all – learners, educators, administrators – not just for the best, the most well behaved, or the members of any one group. Hazler and Carney (2006:287) suggest the following sequential stages in the development of an effective anti-bullying programme:
- *Initial awareness building*: Create both knowledge and emotional awareness that promotes understanding, and a desire to help and press for timely action.
- *Policy development*: Create agreed upon values, related rules of behaviour, supportive activities, and enforcement procedures involving the fullest possible diversity of school and community participants.
- *Skill development*: Teach a wide variety of social skills that encourage bullies, victims and bystanders to assertively implement social/behaviour values and policies.
- *Continuing involvement*: Provide regular time for discussion on the school's evolving climate, positive change, problems, necessary actions, and how to use previously learned skills.
- *Assessment and adjustment*: Evaluate progress, identify changing needs, and direct adjustment of efforts.

The literature study on the risk factors for bullying, the characteristics of a research-based, risk-focused intervention programme, as well as Hazler and Carney's (2006:287) guidelines for the sequential development of prevention programmes form the backdrop for my empirical investigation into educators' perspectives and strategies for reducing bullying.

## **6. Research methodology**

### **6.1 Research design**

This study followed a qualitative and descriptive research design. Qualitative research can be used to provide an understanding of a specific phenomenon. The focus of this study was educators' perspectives of bullying prevention strategies. The study aimed at providing a description of educators' insights into bullying (Bless, Higson-Smith & Kagee, 2006:46). 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, Van Rensburg and Smit (2011:21)

emphasise that the interpretive paradigm does not concern itself with the search for broadly applicable laws and rules, but rather seeks to produce a descriptive analysis that emphasises a deep, interpretive understanding of social phenomena. This is in accord with the focus of this study, as its aim is to gain an understanding of educators' views on the topic.

## **6.2 Data collection**

During 2012 I invited educators who were furthering their studies at the University of the Free State to take part in a study on bullying. The following introductory detail was given to the participants in a questionnaire:

Bullying includes a variety of behaviours, ranging from psychological acts (e.g. shouting) to physical assaults. Bullying can be either direct (e.g., physical and verbal aggression) or indirect (e.g., threats, insults, name calling, spreading rumours, writing hurtful graffiti, cyber bullying or ignoring the victim). The literature has identified the following types of bullying: learner-on-learner bullying; educator-on-learner bullying; learner-on-educator bullying; and workplace bullying (i.e. workers/educators being bullied by their principals, colleagues or the parents of learners).

A number of open questions were asked, but this paper focuses on the following question that was included in the questionnaire: *What can be done to prevent bullying?*

The majority of the students (181 of 205) completed the questionnaire. More than half of the 181 participants (50.3%) described incidences of learner-on-learner bullying from their perspective as educator onlookers and/or bystanders. Ten (5.5%) participants wrote about their childhood experiences as victims of bullying. The rest of the participants wrote about workplace bullying (32.6%), educator-on-learner bullying (9.9%) and educator-targeted bullying (7.2%). In line with the aim of this article, only the descriptions of learner-on-learner bullying were analysed.

## **6.3 Data analysis**

Henning *et al.*'s (2011:104-106) guidelines for qualitative content analysis were used to reduce, condense and group the content of

the participants' answers to the open questions. A coding frame was drawn up, also providing for verbatim reporting where applicable. I worked through all the data and coded them. Related codes were thereafter organised into categories. After I had completed the categorisation, I re-read the participants' answers to the questions to check whether I had captured all the important insights that had emerged from the data. The categories, patterns and themes, which could also be linked to the aim of this article were identified and described. The identification of emergent themes allowed the information to be analysed and related to the literature. I used an independent qualitative researcher to do an independent re-coding of some of the data in order to determine whether the same themes became evident and could be confirmed. Consensus discussions between the independent expert and me were held in order to determine the final findings of the research.

#### **6.4 Validation strategies**

Validation within an interpretive approach to qualitative research is marked by a focus on the importance of the researcher, as well as on the interpretations that are temporal, located and always open to reinterpretation (Creswell, 2007:205). The following two strategies were used to combat threats to the validity of my study: Investigator triangulation (the independent expert and I read and coded the transcripts and took part in consensus discussions) and transferability (rich, thick descriptions allow readers to make decisions regarding transferability). The detailed descriptions in this article may enable readers to transfer information to other settings and thus determine whether the findings can be applied (Creswell, 2007:202-209).

#### **6.5 Ethical measures**

The participants' dignity, privacy and interest were respected at all times. The questionnaires did not contain any identifying aspects, names, addresses or code symbols. Before completing the questionnaires, the students were also informed that the process was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage during the process. I was present during the completion of the questionnaires at all times and was available, if necessary, to support or refer traumatised participants.

## **7. Findings and discussion**

### **7.1 Introduction**

An analysis of the verbatim responses of the participants revealed that, in accord with Benbenishty and Astor's model (cf. Section 3), bullying prevention strategies may be found on the school, family and community level. The ensuing discussion of the findings of the study will strive to recognise the interrelatedness among the three levels of this theoretical model, and the necessity for bullying prevention strategies to be "risk focused", i.e. address the causes of bullying (Baldry & Farrington, 2000:18). In the discussion of the findings of my study I will link the results with the work of other researchers; an acknowledged and widespread practice among qualitative researchers (cf. Burnard, 2004:178; Flick, 2009:48; Henning *et al.*, 2011:108).

The importance of a cohesive whole school approach to bullying prevention was expressed by numerous participants (e.g., "create awareness to the learners, parents and educators as well as holding workshops for the entire community. ... form a 'community' to fight bullying" and "educators, parents, learners and all stakeholders ... should be involved"). One of the participants also noted that "it is wise to look for the reasons why the bullies are behaving like that". These participants inadvertently support the theoretical framework that underpins this study, as well as my argument that bullying prevention should be risk focused.

### **7.2 The peer group and the school**

Participants' suggestions for bullying prevention focused largely on the role of the school. The participants highlighted the need to create awareness among learners and educators about the phenomenon; to teach learners social skills and values, such as non-discrimination and respect; to address the perceived behaviour inadequacies of victims and bullies; to include bullying in schools' codes of conduct; and to acknowledge the role of educators in curbing bullying.

Rigby's (2008:152) argument that "good schools ... accept the proposition that bullying occurs in all schools, including their own" was echoed by the educators who took part in this study. The



participants furthermore, in line with Olweus's (1993), as well as Hazler and Carney's (2006:287) guidelines for the development of an anti-bullying programme (cf. Section 5), stressed the creation of an awareness of bullying. The following three quotations will suffice: "schools should read to learners the school's code of conduct at the beginning of every year"; "All new and young learners should be made aware of bullying. ... This should be done during orientation of new learners"; and "the principal must talk to the whole school about bullying".

Several participants noted that schools should organise comprehensive anti-bullying campaigns. Suggestions were made on what to discuss during information sessions/anti-bullying campaigns. Apart from the need to disseminate information on bullying per se, participants emphasised the necessity to teach learners socially acceptable behaviour ("educate them about good behaviour" and "inform children about social interaction behaviour"), such as respect for others ("learners should be taught respect for one another" and "She must be taught respect, respect for herself, her teachers and fellow learners") and the acceptance of diversity ("it is not good to discriminate against others" and "everybody has the right to live the way he/she wants"). "Sensitivity training" was suggested by an educator who wrote about learners who bullied the foster child of a woman who is rumoured to be a lesbian. Participants elevated bullying to a human rights issue: "teach learners to respect other learners' rights", "Children must be made aware of the human rights of the victims" and "they should be taught that they have no right to infringe on the rights of other learners". The importance of instilling values such as respect and non-discrimination, and a human rights culture is acknowledged by Biemond (2010:10) and Olweus (2001:11), as well as the school-wide bullying prevention and intervention programme: *Steps to Respect*. The aim of this programme is, among other things, to create a "safe, caring, and respectful culture" (Espelage & Swearer, 2008:337). These sentiments are also supported by Weeks (2008:126). Weeks (2008:126) perceives "caring schools" to be a possible solution for challenging behaviour in schools. According to him the following values are embedded in the ethics of caring behaviour: fairness, honesty, respect for others, responsibility, kindness, modesty, trustworthiness and dignity.

Whereas the previous paragraph focused on the acquisition of generic social skills for all learners, participants also suggested that schools should specifically target the victims and the bullies: the victims should be empowered to act more assertively and acquire social skills while the bullies should be taught non-aggressive behaviour. Participants, who believe that bullying is the result of youths' social awkwardness, suggested that the victims of bullying should be taught "the correct way", "how to make friends" and "how to prevent becoming a victim". Whilst some of the participants wrote that victims should be taught to stand up for themselves, other participants proposed that learners should ignore the taunting behaviour of their bullies. Participants also recommended that vulnerable learners keep company with older, probably stronger learners. These older/stronger learners may protect the younger ones from harm ("buddy system"). Several of the participants believe that bullying is a consequence of learners venting their anger and frustration. They accordingly advocated, among other things, that schools should teach learners anger management skills and give them the opportunity to vent their anger on "boxing bags". The need for personal, social and conflict resolution skills training for both the victims and the bully is also stressed by researchers (Berger *et al.*, 2008:307; Biemond, 2010:153; Hazler & Carney, 2006:283; Rigby, 2008:153; Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:196; Weeks, 2008:127). Biemond (2010:9) aptly writes that schools are prime agencies of socialisation where learners learn how to interact with one another. She advises that learners should be "leren elkaar te dienen in plaats van te overtreffen of te verslaan". Weeks (2008:127) moreover writes that learners need to gain skills in "care giving and the capacity to care".

The importance of schools' codes of conduct, that also include bullying as a serious infringement and the development of anti-bullying policies, were highlighted by participants and researchers (Hazler & Carney, 2006:282; Rigby, 2008:153; Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:196). Participants wrote that schools should not have a haphazard approach towards bullying (e.g., "acts of misconduct should be attended to"; "bullying should be reported at all times" and "bullies should be punished in a certain way"). There seem to be different views on how the aforesaid "certain way" of punishment

should be administered. Reference was made, for example, of a disciplinary committee that should attend to all incidents of bullying. Several participants were in favour of a zero tolerance approach, as illustrated by the following quotations: “educators should enforce discipline”; “keep the bully under constant surveillance to make sure he [sic] doesn’t step out of line”; “bullies should be expelled”; “bullies need to be arrested”; “certain precautions have to be taken to frighten bullies, e.g. corporal punishment” and “we must condemn and punish perpetrators and treat bullying as a crime, i.e. assault” although Limber (2006:296) warns that harsh punishment perpetuates violence. A few participants were, however, in support of restorative practices, as illustrated by the next two quotations:

Identify the bullies and talk to them. The emphasis should not be on retribution, but on educating the bully. They should be shown the perils of their negative behaviour. This should be part and parcel of the educating process.

The teachers must ... be available for helping. They need to create a comfort zone for the bullied so that he/she can feel free to talk to the teacher and seek help.

It should be noted that the above two quoted suggestions ignore a core principle of restorative practices, namely that a caring circle is created where the victim and the bully can face each other in a secure, controlled environment (Hazler & Carney, 2006:280; Rigby, 2008:188-189). Notwithstanding this critique, these participants should be commended for advocating non-hostile disciplinary practices (cf. Limber, 2006:295). Restorative practices will give learners the opportunity to gain skills in care giving, the capacity to care and to forgive. Through restorative practices victims and bullies will be encouraged to see the best in others, as well as to improve the “self” (Weeks, 2008:127). The Christian perspective suggests that we understand the bullies and not judge them. Crowell (2013:2) argues that a judgemental approach to bullying will continue the cycle of violence. Victims should endeavour to forgive their bullies. He cites Matthew 5:43-46 to support his view.

Researchers’ (Berger *et al.*, 2008:312; Limber, 2006:301) contention that there is no perfect pre-packaged programme to reduce bullying is corroborated in the narratives of some of the

educators who took part in the current study. Participants gave guidelines to address specific problems at their respective schools. It was noted, for example, by participants that younger children should not bring money to school, and that “overage bullies” should not be in the same class as considerably younger learners. A participant who described an alleged incident of rape at her school wrote the following: “when learners go to the toilet, they must go in groups, not individually and educators must accompany them”. Another practical, in-house suggestion was that “the little ones must have their break before the intermediate and senior phase”.

A prerequisite for a successful anti-bullying programme is that educators should wholeheartedly support the programme. They are supposed to be the key developers and implementers of the programme (cf. Section 1; Berger *et al.*, 2008:312). Yet, researchers (Berger *et al.*, 2008:308; Espelage & Swearer, 2008:345; Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008:196) found that they are often unaware of the levels of bullying in their schools. Educators who took part in this study showed insight into educators' (often unintentional) ignorance by emphasising the creation of heightened awareness among educators about learner interaction: “Teachers should be more aware of what goes on in learners' lives and at school” and “keep their eyes open”. In the light of Berger *et al.*'s (2008:308) notion that educators often fail to intervene when bullying occurs because they do not recognise bullying, heed should be taken of the proposal by participants that educators should attend workshops on bullying. Espelage and Swearer (2008:346) also advise that educators, pre-service educators, as well as administrative staff and even bus drivers be educated about bullying. The vital role of educators – and other adults – in curbing bullying is furthermore highlighted by several participants who recommended that victims should talk to adults about their harassment. The necessity for victims to tell others about their harassment is supported by Hazler and Carney's (2006:279), and Rigby's (2008:75) finding; namely, that telling others that one has been bullied is an important anti-bullying strategy. Findings by Hazler and Carney (2006:279) that bullying often occurs in areas with minimum or no adult supervision validates the view of numerous participants that educator supervision is crucial for curbing bullying (e.g., “set up monitoring systems” and “be vigilant, not only in the classroom, but also in the

hallways and on the school grounds”). As an alternative to the latter point, a participant suggested that schools employ “child minders” who can look after learners during break.

Although there is no *one size fits all* programme for curbing bullying in schools, research based anti-bullying programmes have been found to reduce bullying (Berger *et al.*, 2008:312; Hazler & Carney, 2006:277; Limber, 2006:301; Rigby, 2008:151). This insight is shared by a participant who said that “we must share best practices with others on how to curb bullying”. Effective interventions should, however, fit the school culture and address the school’s particular weaknesses and strengths. De Klerk and Rens (2003:722) emphasis that even more important than programmatic solutions, is that the foundation for reducing bullying should be grounded in “values filled with life-view contents”. Schools are, moreover, judged by the level of parental involvement and the familial characteristics of the learners they serve.

### ***7.3 The role of the family in reducing bullying***

The literature identified several familial risk factors for bullying (cf. Section 4.2). Risk focused prevention strategies proposed by participants focused on these factors; namely, a lack of parental involvement and authoritarian parenting styles, as well as domestic violence and abuse. Participants’ suggestions that parents take a greater interest in the education of their children and become involved in anti-bullying programmes are in line with the recommendations by Rigby (2008:163) and Veltkamp and Lawson (2008:196). Domestic violence and authoritarian parenting styles model and inadvertently sanction the abuse of power. To counteract the negative impact thereof a participant suggested that the principal or counsellor speak to the parents and recommend that they refrain from fighting in front of their children. This participant also wrote that the help of a social worker should be solicited to resolve the tension at home. Another participant suggested that educators “look for signs of home abuse and report it”. Veltkamp and Lawson (2008:196) suggest that parents learn to model and reinforce socially acceptable, positive behaviour. A multidimensional whole

school anti-bullying programme necessitates that parents be trained so that there “is a unified message from the school to the home regarding bullying prevention guidelines” (Berger *et al.*, 2008:315). Biemond (2010:7) furthermore emphasises the importance of parents and educators “spreken ... met één stem” in creating schools as “moral communities” that permeate respect for one another.

#### **7.4 The role of the community in curbing bullying**

Card *et al.* (2008:144) correctly note that anti-bullying programmes rarely use community-level intervention to combat bullying in schools. Yet, when children leave the confines of the school they are subject to immersion in the culture of the community (cf. Section 4.3). In a country that is experiencing “an intense moral crisis” (De Klerk & Rens, 2003:353), it is understandable that participants highlighted the importance of addressing what they perceive to be moral decay (e.g., “We must speak out and educate society about unacceptable conduct and behaviour”), the necessity that community leaders lead by example (e.g., “role models must be put in place”) and that members of the community exhibit healthy social attitudes towards anti-social and criminal behaviour.

Community participation in curbing bullying also entails, according to participants, regular discussions and presentations by experts and community leaders. Participants perceive these experts and community leaders to be social workers, educationalists, psychologists and pastors. A participant suggested that community involvement be enhanced by “talking to the media”. For several participants, community involvement entails the involvement of the police. Police involvement varied from acting as experts (“police should be invited to schools to give presentations on the results of bullying”), participation in the “adopt a cop”-project to law enforcement (“bullies need to be arrested” and “treat bullying as a crime”). Recommendations by the participants on how schools could involve the community in their efforts against bullying link well with Berger *et al.*'s (2008:315) proposals: (1) Inform residents of the

local community of the school's bullying prevention programme using community meetings and the media. (2) Create opportunities for members of the community to supervise learners. (3) Ask local business owners for donations to the programme. (4) Invite key members of the community (e.g., religious and civic leaders and law enforcement officers) to informational sessions in order to expand the goals of the prevention programme into the community setting.

## **8. Conclusion and recommendations**

There is an abundance of anti-bullying programmes and bullying prevention initiatives. Nevertheless, bullying remains a serious problem in schools. Educators are the key role-players in the development and implementation of a successful anti-bullying programme. I thus argue that an understanding of educators' views on bullying is a prerequisite in the campaign against bullying. This article accordingly, set out to investigate educators' suggestions of how to prevent bullying in schools and was done in order to give guidelines on how to reduce bullying. A literature study established the risk factors that need to be addressed, the characteristics of a relatively successful research based, risk focused prevention programme, as well as the sequential development stages of anti-bullying programmes. An empirical study explored educators' proposals on how to curb bullying. The findings indicate that risk focused prevention should involve the school, the family and the community as interrelated ecological systems.

Based on the findings it is suggested that a school should try to involve as many individuals and groups as possible to develop and implement an anti-bullying programme that caters for the distinctive needs of the school. Those involved in developing prevention efforts must recognise that there are no quick fixes that can be implemented by one or two motivated individuals. One or two committed individuals can and normally do initiate efforts, but the degree of success over time will be related to how many individuals and groups become involved as active participants in a coordinated programme.

The development of an anti-bullying programme is not a haphazard exercise. It is therefore proposed that Hazler and Carney's (2006:287) sequential stages in the development of an anti-bullying programme guide the development, implementation and evaluation of the programme (cf. Section 5). Despite the availability of an array of relatively successful research based anti-bullying programmes (cf. Section 5), there is no perfect pre-packaged programme to reduce bullying (Hazler & Carney, 2006:279). The following guidelines for the development of an anti-bullying programme for an individual school, based on the findings of this study and the existing literature on bullying, should be followed with caution. There are no easy solutions and the interplay between the three ecological levels is constantly changing.

*School level:* Disseminate information on bullying among learners and members of staff. Gather information on the prevalence and nature of bullying. The school's code of conduct should prohibit all forms of bullying. Develop unambiguous rules for acceptable behaviour which should be consistently, restoratively and non-violently applied. Schools should furthermore, create ample opportunities for learners – including victims and bullies – to develop social skills such as anger management and how to make friends. Learners should be taught values such as honesty, integrity, responsibility, diligence, obedience and respect. Schoeman (2006:81), however, warns that a spirit of scepticism and uncertainty in South Africa has culminated in the invalidation of these values. Note should thus be taken of De Klerk and Rens's (2003:353) statement:

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 absences of a value system grounded in a specific life-view perspective.

Any attempts to address bullying in school thus have to start with the instilling of a specific life-view perspective in schools. Christian educators should regard it as their calling to guide their learners through character-building discipline, in accordance with the



principles of the Bible, to Christ-likeness (De Wet, 2010:207). Educators should play a pivotal role in the development and implementation of a school's anti-bullying programme. If educators follow the five principles of Jesus' teaching practice (cf. Section 1), whilst fulfilling their legal and professional obligations to safeguard learners from bullying, they will be instrumental in reducing bullying:

*Educators' teaching with regard to bullying should be authoritative.* Educators should be knowledgeable of the different forms of bullying and the impact thereof on the bully, the victim and the bystanders; be able to identify subtle, covert forms of bullying; and know how to counteract bullying.

*Educators' teaching should not be authoritarian.* Authoritarian disciplinarians model disrespect and violence. Their unforgiving demeanours advocate the right of those in power to abuse and to humiliate. A caring, respectful educator, on the other hand, embodies the Gospel of Mark (12:28-31).

*Educators' teaching should teach learners to think about their own behaviour.* Educators should stimulate learners to reflect on their bullying behaviour. Restorative, caring circles allow bullies and victims to interrogate their own behaviour, and the consequences of their behaviour.

*Educators should live what they teach.* Educators should incarnate their message of non-violence in their life and teaching.

*Educators should love and care for those they teach.* Educators who are guided by Mark 12:31 will protect their learners from harm and guide them to Christ-likeness. When learners, especially alienated learners, believe that their educators care about them, they are less likely to engage in negative behaviour (Weeks, 2008:130). Theron (1996, in Weeks, 2008:127) identified Jesus as the exemplary caregiver. Jesus cared for people by being with them, being where they were and entered into their sorrow and pain. Jesus was also willing and prepared to listen to people. Jesus was the enabler who helped people to discover their own strength and resources that were already part of their experiences and their faith. Jesus portrayed love wherever He

was present. Learners, victims and bullies alike, need such exemplary care from their educators.

*Family level:* Parents or guardians should be involved in the development of a school's anti-bullying programme from its inception. Parents should, furthermore, be informed about the school's bullying policy, restorative practices and available communication channels and always be part of the restorative process. Family discord and dysfunction, a lack of involvement and unloving, autocratic parenting styles were the identified risk factors for bullying (cf. Section 4.2). There are no easy answers for these seemingly insurmountable problems that may cause bullying. It is therefore recommended that parent-educator meetings or less structured discussions are used to alert parents about the impact of their behaviour on their children. Moreover, schools should form formal or informal alliances with community figures, such as pastors, social workers and psychologists in their quest to reduce bullying. These experts could utilise their knowledge to educate parents on the perils of negative parenting styles, harsh punishment or physical and/or emotional abuse of their children and their indifference towards their children's education.

*Community level:* It is important to involve civil and religious leaders and individuals such as, police officers, social workers, medical doctors, nurses and psychiatrists in the battle against bullying. Public and religious platforms and the media could be used to inform the public of the perils of bullying and of appropriate counteraction. Members of the community should know their rights and their responsibilities when they observe incidents of bullying. In the communal spirit they should take co-responsibility for the youth, otherwise the spirit of scepticism and uncertainty will prevail, thus allowing bullying to go unchecked.

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