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e-ISSN 2519-593X

Perspectives in Education

2024 42(1): 71-83

## PUBLISHED:

29 March 2024

## RECEIVED:

14 July 2023

## ACCEPTED:

24 March 2024



Published by the UFS

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# When bullying victims are also perpetrators: A qualitative study in high schools in Tshwane District, Gauteng Province

## Abstract

*Whilst traditionally, participation in bullying was understood to refer to being a victim, a bully or a bystander, studies have shown that the prevalence of learners who are both a bully and a victim known as bully-victims is also prevalent both locally and internationally. The aim of the study was to explore and explain reasons why some learners assume the dual roles of victim and perpetrator. A cross-sectional explanatory mixed-method design was used for the study. In the first phase, the Illinois Bully Scale was used to screen for bullying behaviour on a sample of 460 learners, aged 11 to 20 years, with a mean age of 15 years, who attended high schools in a Tshwane District township, Gauteng Province. The learners were categorised as bullying perpetrators, victims, both, or not involved in bullying, based on the scores from the Illinois Bully Scale. A phenomenological hermeneutical method was then used to collect and analyse data from 25 of those with high scores in any of the three categories, namely perpetrators, victims or both as determined using the Illinois Bully Scale. NVivo 14 software was used to conduct a thematic analysis of the data. The focus of this paper is on the perpetrator-victim category, a category of learners that screened positively for being both the perpetrators and victims of bullying. The study found that bullying victims tend to bully those whom they perceive to be weaker than them. Being both a perpetrator and a victim of bullying was found to be as a result of a belief that being a victim of bullying makes one less respectable and bullying others brings back the lost respect. Victims also feel the need to make others suffer the pain of being bullied that they are going through so as not to suffer alone. Victims also bully others as a form of self-protection and defence against being bullied. Furthermore, victims bully those who are weaker than them to get some relief from the emotions of anger and frustration that build up as a result of being bullied by a stronger bully against whom they cannot defend themselves. Bullying creates a perpetual cycle of violence as victims view bullying others as justified as it is "paying forward the pain" that they themselves have been subjected to. Early identification and interventions to prevent and manage bullying in schools are required to break the victim-perpetrator cycles.*

**Keywords:** *bullying; bully-victims; high school learners; perpetrators; school violence; South Africa*

## 1. Introduction

Bullying is a verbally, physically and/or emotionally abusive repetitive or likely to be repeated behaviour performed on a person or group of people where there is an observed or perceived power imbalance in favour of the perpetrator (Gladden *et al.*, 2014). Acts of bullying take many forms, from direct physical harm (physical bullying) to verbal taunts and threats (verbal bullying), to exclusion, humiliation and rumour spreading (relational or social bullying).

Bullying is understood and conceptualised differently in different cultures and by different age groups (Wolke & Lereya, 2015), but is generally known that among children and adolescents, bullying occurs when one with greater social capital or power bullies one who is perceived as a subordinate. In recent years, a new form of bullying has emerged, labelled 'cyberbullying', where the aggression occurs through modern technological devices, specifically mobile phones or the Internet. Cyberbullying occurs when a perpetrator uses technology deliberately and repeatedly to bully, harass, hassle and threaten another person leaving the victims without any escape (Smit, 2015). It is also known that bullying inflicts harm and distress on the victim, which includes physical, psychological, social or educational harm (Gladden *et al.*, 2014; Shiba & Mokwena, 2023), and that the negative consequences tend to linger on into the adulthood of the victim (Copeland *et al.*, 2013). In extreme cases, bullying has been directly linked to suicide among adolescents (Cooper, Clements & Holt, 2012). Whilst evidence has identified bullying as one of the key contributors to violence and abuse among school children (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; UNESCO, 2017), it has been argued that the increasing rates of bullying among South African learners mimic and are influenced by the spiralling levels of violence and crime in the country (Timm & Eskell-Blokland, 2011)

This article is part of a bigger mixed-method study conducted to understand the impact of bullying on perpetrators and victims of bullying among 460 public high school learners in the Tshwane District township, South Africa. The quantitative arm of the study reported 21,96% as victims, 9,57% as perpetrators and 42,39% as both victims and perpetrators (Shiba & Mokwena, 2023). This paper used qualitative methods to explore reasons why some learners become both victims and perpetrators. Therefore, the research question the paper seeks to respond to is: *Why do some learners assume the dual role as victims and perpetrators?*

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Prevalence of bullying

Literature has reported a global high prevalence of bullying among high school learners (Curie *et al.*, 2012; Luxenberg, Limber & Olweus, 2019; Akanni *et al.*, 2020). A study conducted among the 10-to-15-year-old learners in 43 high income countries found the prevalence rates of learners who bully others to vary from 1% to 36%, whilst the rates of those that were victims of bullying were found to be between 2% and 32% (Curie *et al.*, 2012; Luxenberg *et al.*, 2019). International surveys have reported a 61,67% prevalence of bullying victimisation in South Africa (Richardson & Fen Hui, 2018), which was much higher than the 33,8% reported five years previously by Reddy *et al.* (2013). The prevalence rates reported by Reddy *et al.* (2013) and Richardson and Fen Hui (2018) are similar to those found in studies conducted in other African countries, which found the prevalence rate of bullying victimisation among high school learners in Zambia to be 65,1% and that of Botswana to be 81,0% (Richardson & Fen Hui, 2018). This suggests that the rates of bullying victimisation among high school learners in the African Region countries are similar. It is worth noting that Reddy *et al.* (2013)

and Richardson and Fen Hiu's (2018) studies only focused on learners who had experienced bullying as victims only and did not ask the same learners if they had also bullied others which could have classified them as perpetrator-victims and reduced the reported prevalence rates of bullying victimisation only.

In South Africa, available prevalence data found bullying perpetration prevalence rates among high school learners to vary between 3,9% (Mlisa, Ward & Lombard, 2014) and 9,7% (Shiba & Mokwena, 2023) whilst those of bullying victimisation were found to range between 16,5% (Mlisa *et al.*, 2014) and 23,9% (Khuzwayo, Taylor & Connolly, 2016), which indicates lower prevalence rates of bullying perpetration when compared to bullying victimisation. This suggests that in the bullying dynamics one bully may have more than one perpetrator whom they bully.

Whilst international literature shows the rates of learners that are both perpetrators and victims of bullying to be lower than those who are either victims only or perpetrators only (Currie *et al.*, 2012; Luxenberg *et al.*, 2019), studies in African countries, including South Africa, found higher rates of high school learners that are both victims and perpetrators of bullying compared to those who fall into one of the two categories. A study conducted in Egypt reports a 57,8% prevalence of being both a perpetrator and victim of bullying among high school learners, which was higher than the prevalence rates of those that were perpetrators only and victims only found to be 9,5% and 10,5%, respectively (Galal, Emadeldin & Mwafy, 2019). Similar trends are reported in South Africa (Mlisa *et al.*, 2014; Shiba & Mokwena, 2023). A different study reports that learners who were bullied earlier in their lives tended to bully others as time progressed (Myburgh, Poggenpoel & Nhlapo, 2014) but the study did not explore the reasons behind this behaviour.

## 2.2 Factors associated with bullying

Literature has linked bullying to a number of psychosocial and demographic factors, which include current and future mental health problems such as suicidal ideation and plans, self-inflicted injuries, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress (Kubwalo *et al.*, 2013; Reddy *et al.*, 2013; Zaborskis *et al.*, 2018; Tang *et al.*, 2020; Aboagye *et al.*, 2021; Shiba & Mokwena, 2023). Physical and emotional violence in the home, including witnessing intimate partner violence, have significantly been associated with both bullying victimisation and bullying perpetration among learners (Lucas *et al.*, 2015; De Sousa, Peixoto & Cruz, 2021). On the other hand, bullying perpetration in childhood has been associated with perpetration of intimate partner violence in adulthood (Falb *et al.*, 2011; Adhia *et al.*, 2019). The relationship between bullying perpetration in childhood and intimate partner violence in adulthood is therefore bi-directional, which suggests that curbing the problem of bullying among young people may have a positive impact on the rates of intimate partner violence in later life, and curbing intimate partner violence in the home may reduce the rates of bullying among learners.

Learners who are involved in bullying have also been associated with other violent and risky behaviours, such as carrying a weapon to school (Valdebenito *et al.*, 2017; Ganson & Nagata, 2021), involvement in cults and gangsterism (Akani *et al.*, 2020), and abuse of substances (Gaete *et al.*, 2017; Akani *et al.*, 2020; Silva *et al.*, 2020), which further highlight the link between bullying and violent behaviour among high school learners. Addressing bullying among young people is therefore one of the key strategies to reduce the incidence of violence in schools.

Although some studies have found that boys are more involved in bullying than girls, and that the form of bullying that involves physical aggression is regularly associated with boys, with girls mostly involved in relational aggression (Silva *et al.*, 2013; Finkelhor *et al.*, 2015, Akanni *et al.*, 2020), this has been a traditional belief. Other studies did not find gender-based significant differences in the prevalence or type of bullying (Perales-Blum *et al.*, 2015; Juan *et al.*, 2018; Tang *et al.*, 2020), which suggests that both boys and girls are involved in different forms of bullying.

There is paucity of studies that have examined the factors that cause learners to assume both the roles of being a perpetrator as well as a victim known as bully-victims. This is despite evidence that has shown that the negative effects of bullying are more prominent among the bully-victims when compared to those that are perpetrators or victims only (Ozdemir & Stattin, 2011; Copeland *et al.*, 2013; Drubina *et al.*, 2023).

### 3. Theoretical framework

A number of theories have assisted to explain the dynamics around bullying, which has provided a framework to understand the concept of bullying further and provide possible explanations of why some learners assume both the bully and victim role in different instances. This study has applied three theories, i.e. the Theory of Humiliation (Lindner, 2007), the Frustration Aggression Theory (Dollard *et al.*, 1939), and the General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992), providing a theoretical background on the behaviour of bully-victims and the research question that this paper responds to.

Bullying usually occurs publicly, portraying the victim as weak, leading to their humiliation. Lindner (2007), in his Humiliation Theory, posits that the victim's anger towards the perpetrator and pain because of humiliation can be externalised as the desire for retaliation (Lindner, 2007). Retaliation is usually not an option, as the power dynamics in bullying usually favour the bully, and this leads to frustration.

In terms of the Frustration Aggression Theory (Dollard *et al.*, 1939), people who are frustrated experience a drive to be aggressive towards the object of their frustration. However, when expressing that aggression is impossible, as is the case in the bullying power dynamics that favour the perpetrator, their aggression is displaced onto something or someone else who is less threatening as a form of catharsis (relieving emotional tension), as it happens in victims who are also perpetrators of bullying.

The reasons behind learners bullying others when they themselves are being bullied can also be explained by the General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992). The General Strain Theory hypothesises that crime and delinquency result from certain adaptations to strain. Within the context of the General Strain Theory, Agnew (1992), defines strain as negative or aversive relations with others. Bullying can be described as an aversive relation with others in that bullying occurs at a particular level. It also affects relations between the perpetrator and a victim, including between the victim and bystanders who are watching and either seeing the bullying act as a joke, or actually cheering the perpetrator on. According to the General Strain Theory, an experience of strain on an individual will result in depression, anxiety, despair or anger. Agnew (1992) further argues that if the strain results in the anger emotion, it produces a desire for revenge and unless an effective intervention, which he calls a conditioning variable, comes into play, a retribution action occurs. Anger drives the victim also to turn into a perpetrator.

## 4. Methodology

The Illinois Bully Scale was used to screen for bullying behaviour on a sample of 460 learners, aged 14 to 20 years, who attended high schools in the Tshwane District, Gauteng Province. The Illinois Bully Scale, developed by Espelage and Holt (2001) is a validated tool (Balootbangan & Talepasand, 2015; Malaeb *et al.*, 2020) that contains bully perpetration and bullying victimisation subscales. The victim subscale has four questions, with possible scores ranging from 0 to 16, whilst the bully subscale has nine questions, with possible scores ranging from 0 to 36. The scale enables the participants to be categorised as bullying perpetrators, victims or both. A phenomenological hermeneutical method was used to collect and analyse qualitative data from 25 participants with high perpetrator or victim scores or both.

### 4.1 Study setting and participants

The study population consisted of learners from Grades 8 to 11 at Tshwane District township public high schools during the study period. The participants were all Africans, as the targeted township consists of a black population only. Learners with special needs attending special schools were excluded from the study. The township is semi-urban and has a total of 15 public high schools. Out of the 15 public high schools, seven were classified as quintile 4, six were quintile 3 and two were quintile 1. The quintile system is a system that was adopted by the Department of Basic Education in South Africa to classify schools according to the socioeconomic status of the communities they serve. The quintile system categories range from quintile 1 up to quintile 5 with quintile 1 schools being those schools that serve the poorest communities, and quintile 5 the schools serving communities with higher socioeconomic status. All the schools had more than five classes per grade with an average number of seven classes per grade.

### 4.2 Sampling

Multistage sampling was used to select schools and classes to participate in phase one of the study, which included screening for bullying behaviour. Four quintile 4 schools were selected randomly from the list of all seven quintile 4 public high schools. Four quintile 3 schools were also randomly selected from the list of all six quintile 3 public high schools. The two quintile 1 public high schools were purposefully selected to ensure representation of all school quintiles on the sample. Schools' quintile statuses were considered in the sampling method to ensure that the sample was representative of learners across the applicable socioeconomic levels in the study population

Nine high schools participated in the study, as one quintile 4 school declined to participate. One class per grade from Grades 8 to 11 at the nine public high schools was selected randomly and all learners in the selected class were recruited to participate in the study to screen for bullying behaviour. A total of 759 Grade 8 to 11 learners were recruited to participate in the study, while 460 learners participated in the quantitative arm of the study and were screened for bullying behaviour. Participants who obtained high scores for bullying perpetration and/or bullying victimisation on the Illinois Bully Scale (score of eight (8) and above for the victim subscale and nine (9) and above for the bully subscale) in the quantitative arm of the study were approached by the researcher and requested to participate in the qualitative phase of the study, to explain the findings from quantitative phase. The researcher intentionally

included a mix of gender, bullying perpetrators, bullying victims and perpetrator-victims for the interviews. A minimum of eighteen (18) participants were targeted to be interviewed with a minimum of three (3) participants per sampled school until the point of saturation, which is where additional interviews no longer produce new information. The total sample for the qualitative study was 25 learners, 12 males and 13 females.

### 4.3 Data collection

Data collection took place on dates and times agreed upon with a school from August 2021 to May 2022. Data collection took place in an allocated classroom. A researcher developed a guide that was used in the in-depth interviews with learners to ensure standardisation of the interviews. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed later.

### 4.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University Research Ethics Committee SMUREC/H/314/2020. Permissions were also granted by the Gauteng Department of Basic Education, the district office and the management of the schools. The parent consent and brochures were translated into the languages predominantly spoken in the area to ensure that the parents understood the detail before signing. Only learners who agreed to participate, who had written consent from their parents, and had also signed the assent were allowed to participate. Prior arrangements were made with a social worker from the local LoveLife organisation to refer any learners showing signs of distress. LoveLife is a national non-governmental organisation that runs interventions among young people in low socioeconomic communities, to provide them with interventions aimed at ensuring safety and good health of young people. All in all, three learners were referred to the social worker through the school principal and involvement of parents, whilst five learners were brought to the attention of their school principals for assistance. All the referred learners either agreed to be referred or requested assistance.

### 4.5 Data analysis

The qualitative audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and typed in a Microsoft Word format. Data cleaning and editing were then conducted to prepare data for coding. The researcher read the transcript repeatedly in order to become familiar with the data. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. This involved reading each transcript several times to identify and copy verbatim statements, phrases or sentences that describe the experiences of learners who screen positively as bullying perpetrators, bully victim or both, who participated in the qualitative phase of the study. Using Nvivo 14 software, the identified statements, phrases or sentences with similar views were grouped into themes and named according to what they collectively reflected. A codebook was created with several codes and definitions from the initial transcripts. The codebook was refined, reviewed by the study supervisor, and discussed with the researcher until consensus on the names and definitions of the codes was reached. The identified verbatim statements, phrases or sentences formed the core ideas during the writing of the narrative to support each of the themes. This article focuses on the themes that emerged with regard to the circumstances that result in some learners being both perpetrators and victims of bullying.

## 5. Findings

The findings are based on the themes generated from the data regarding the reasons for learners being both perpetrators and a victims. of bullying. Data from this study show that bullying victims often transfer their pain, anger, frustration and experience of being bullied to others, which in turn perpetuate the problem of bullying in schools. Responses suggested that participants saw it as an acceptable action to bully others when one is a victim of bullying as exemplified by the responses.

### Theme 1: Venting anger and frustration of being bullied

Data revealed that high school learners who are victims of bullying in turn bully others who have less power than them as they see the act as bringing them some relief from the anger and frustration. This is exemplified by some of the responses from the participants as indicated by their responses in the excerpts below.

*... those who are bullied also end up bullying others as a way of venting their anger and frustration of being bullied. So this thing becomes a cycle like they bully me I bully someone else and that someone else bully another [14 yrs old, Grade 8, male victim].*

*When you are being bullied you absorb a lot of stress and anger and you want to revenge. But you can't revenge on the one that bullies you because you are afraid of him. So to make yourself feel better you take it out on another learner that you are not afraid of" [16 yrs old, Grade 8, male perpetrator-victim].*

Participants generally showed disregard for others' feelings and only prioritised themselves as exemplified by a 16-year-old old Grade 11 female participant categorised as a perpetrator-victim:

*They are just trying to make themselves feel better and to also lift their reputation that has been affected as a result of them being seen by other learners being downgraded and embarrassed by the bully. It is also the thing of I don't want to feel the pain alone, somebody else has to feel the pain that I am feeling.*

### Theme 2: Belief that by bullying others they can regain some respect

There is a belief among high school learners that bullying another weaker learner when one is a victim of bullying, makes one gain some respect that gets lost as a result of being bullied and also raise the lowered self-esteem.

*... they are also trying to survive the pain, lowered self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness caused by them being bullied. The other person must also see how they help themselves [14 yrs old, Grade 8, male victim].*

*Paying forward the bullying makes you feel better Mam. At least you can see that you are still a respectable human being who can be respected and feared by other people. It brings back the respect that the bully took away from you [14 yrs old, Grade 8, male victim].*

*No one always wants to feel small, Ma'm. When you are going through being bullied, you also want to make others feel what you are going through. It's like a payback [14 yrs old, Grade 9, male perpetrator-victim].*



### Theme 3: Self-protection and self-preservation

At times, victims of bullying bully others as a form of self-preservation and protection from being bullied, as said by the 16-year-old Grade 11, who had come as a new learner in Grade 9 and got bullied. The bully eventually stopped bullying her when she started bullying others herself and in her view, bullying others gave her self-confidence, which she thought made the bully stop bullying her.

*Honestly it (bullying others) helped me. I started to feel confident after that and I could stand up for myself more. The bully eventually stopped bullying me. I don't know why but I think she could see that I was more confident" [16 yrs old, Grade 11, female perpetrator-victim].*

Similarly, a 15-year-old Grade 9 female perpetrator-victim indicated that she beat up the bully who was teasing her about her out-of-shape teeth.

*Every day she would comment about my teeth and said they were funny and made a joke out of me. One day I lost my temper and I pushed her and she fell down and broke her small finger and had to go to hospital to get it fixed. I was suspended from school for two weeks. When I came back, I wanted her to feel my anger and planned to revenge by bullying her. We swapped roles, she became a victim and I became a bully [15 yrs old, Grade 9, female perpetrator-victim].*

## 6. Discussion

The findings from this study revealed the reasons why some learners who are victims of bullying do not settle for being victims, but in turn also bully others who are weaker than them, thus creating a chain of this problematic behaviour.

Firstly, data revealed that victims of bullying also bully other weaker learners as a form of catharsis to relieve the emotions of anger and frustration arising from being victims of bullying. They vent their anger and frustration by transferring it to a less threatening person. This supports and is supported by the Frustration Aggression Theory (Dollard *et al.*, 1939). The Frustration Aggression Theory (Dollard *et al.*, 1939), argue that anger and frustration drive a person to be aggressive towards the object or source of their anger and frustration. However, when that aggression cannot be applied to the source of their anger and frustration, it is transferred to something or someone else as a form of catharsis. Jan and Husain (2015) also found the motivation for bullying others to include revenge and to vent anger.

Secondly, they believe that, by bullying others, they gain back some respect that being a victim of bullying has taken away from them. Bullying commonly occurs in the presence of others who humiliates and devalue the victim (Lindner, 2007). It is logical that the victim believes that by doing the same action they believe took their respect away they will gain back some respect for themselves. This finding confirms the findings by Jan and Husain (2015) who found the motivation for bullying others to include wanting to feel powerful.

Thirdly, bullying victims become perpetrators themselves for self-protection and self-preservation. This finding confirms the evidence that has shown that humans use violence and aggression instinctively to defend themselves against bodily threat or injury (Fields, 2019). Furthermore, the findings align with the General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992) which



posits that when people experience strain, they may respond with crime in order to alleviate the strain and related emotions. According to the General Strain Theory, strains are events and conditions that are disliked, and being a bully victim fits the criteria of a strain, as it is an event and a condition that is disliked. The finding that learners who are victims become perpetrators as well, therefore support and are supported by the General Strain Theory. This finding is also not surprising in view of the evidence that has revealed that many learners choose not to report bullying due to fear of reprisal from the perpetrator (Blomqvist, Saarento-Zaprudin & Salmivalli, 2020) and the belief that teachers will not do anything about it (De Luca, Nocentini & Menesini, 2019; Ronksley-Prava, Grooteboer & Pendergast, 2019). This unfortunately leaves the victims on their own to defend themselves and in the process some become perpetrators themselves.

## 7. Conclusion

The study adds to the body of knowledge on bullying, especially the reasons behind learners assuming the roles of victim as well as perpetrator. This study afforded the learners who are involved in bullying an opportunity to voice their experiences and opinions on the reasons behind learners becoming both victims and perpetrators of bullying. The study findings suggest that anger, frustration, displacement and self-preservation are behind a victim also assuming a role of a bully in a bullying dynamic. The findings emerging from this study are worthy of being further investigated in different settings.

## 8. Recommendations and Implications of the study

- Measures aimed at curbing violence in schools should also focus on prevention and intervention for bullying.
- Early intervention by parents, teachers and other adults in schools is critical to prevent anger and frustration among victims that result in them assuming a perpetrator role and further increasing the chain of bullying behaviour.
- More research is required in the area of bullying, especially to understand the dynamics as well as the motivating and modifying factors to inform interventions.

## 9. Limitations of the study

The sample was drawn from one population group (Black), which compromises the ability to generalise the findings to other population groups.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the parents who granted consent for the learners to participate in the study, the learners who were participants and the educators of the schools where the study was conducted.

## Financial funding of the study

The study and its publication were funded by the National Research Foundation through the Research Chair: Substance Abuse and Population Mental Health (grant115449).

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