

## The Effects of Bullying on Teenage Girls in Swaziland High Schools

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the characteristics that make teenage girls vulnerable to bullying in high schools in the Manzini region of Swaziland. It determined how personality traits of victims of different parenting styles contribute to adolescent girls being bullied. The findings of the study revealed that bullying is very rife in schools and that teenage girls experience various types of bullying from their peers. The study concluded that as a result of bullying, the victims experienced a significant drop in school performance. Most of the victims were brought up by authoritative parents and they know how to fend off bullies and are able to respond assertively during confrontations of any kind. The study recommended that school children need to be conscientised about the possibilities of bullies in their midst. There is also need for parents to open up to their children and ensure them that matters reported to them would be handled with care.

**Keywords:** bullying, effects, parenting styles, teenage girls, Swaziland

### 1. Introduction

Child bullying is very rife in many parts of the world (Sheras, 2002). It is a big problem in schools today facing youth, school officials and parents (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Most bullying behaviour happens at school, particularly in the school playground. Bullying can also have lifelong negative consequences both for students who bully and their victims (Banks, 2006).

Sourander, Hestela, Helenius and Piha (2000); Liang, Fisher and Lombard (2007), define bullying as intentional peer-victimization, either physical or psychological, that can involve teasing, spreading rumours, deliberate exclusion from group activities and physical violence such as hitting and kicking. Bullying involves a power imbalance that allows a bully to victimize a less powerful individual (Nansel, et al. 2001). School children are exposed to bullying such as schoolyard fighting, gang violence, assault with weapons and sexual and gender based violence at the hands of their own peers (Pinheiro, 2006). For these children, the potential and promise of schooling is undermined by pain, suffering and fear. Sometimes, the levels and the threat of violence can be so high such that the children drop out of school, thus losing the educational benefit for the individual and society.

Parenting styles have a profound effect on child behaviour (Yahav, 2006). It is important to understand the different parenting styles in order to understand why a child behaves in a particular manner. Parents should not protect their children from negative experiences because such an act prevents them from learning ways of dealing with bullies and makes them more vulnerable.

A study carried out by Sebre et al. (2004) states that good parenting takes time and effort. Emphasis is placed on the fact that parenting cannot be done in a minute here and a minute there. Parents who do not spend time with their children would not know what is happening to their children as they develop. Kelly (2003) emphasises that parents should have time to listen to their children and find out what is going on in their lives. Children should know that they can talk to their parents openly. This will help the parent to detect if there is anything bothering the child at school. In this way, bullying can be detected at an early stage. Children who have good communication with their parents are more likely to ask for advice from them than turn to their peers (Moime, 2009).

The current study sought to explore the effects of bullying on the girl victims as well as the parenting background they experienced. The study was guided by the following research questions: How does bullying affect the victims? What parenting styles have victims of bullying experienced?

## 2. Literature Review

Bullying can have short term and long term effects on a victim (McGraw, 2008). All these effects are damaging on the individual. Some of these effects can take a very long time to heal while others can remain with the victim throughout their lifetime. These effects can include anger, depression, loss of concentration in class and a significant drop in school performance.

### 2.1 *The Effects of Bullying on School Performance*

The academic lives of victims of bullying are often badly compromised and the probability of dropping out of school increases. The vulnerable group in this regard is girls. Girls report losing their concentration in class, feeling bad about themselves, missing school and even dropping out. They fail to study due to the situation at school. Hyde (2001), states that girls continue to face many obstacles that impede their path to learning. Victims of bullying can even be scared to go to the bathroom, or can be anxious during break time and also fail to focus on their school work (Fried & Fried, 2003). As a result, a drastic decline in school performance is likely to be observed (Llyod and Stead, 2001).

### 2.2 *The Effects of Bullying on Social Adjustment*

Girls with poor social abilities and skills are more likely to be bullied. Bullying involves fear anywhere and at any time through virtual communication (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Many victims who are bullied repeatedly end up lonely and isolated. Their social life gets disrupted as they are not invited to join social events. Victims may have difficulty maintaining friendships and may find it difficult to make new friends even long after the bullying has stopped. Adolescent girls today experience repeated bullying through the use of computers, cellphones, and other gadgets. Teenage girls who are victims of bullying complain that the act deprives them of strength to make their own choices as most of the time they comply with what their peers have resolved.

### 2.3 *Parenting Styles of Victims of Bullying*

Olweus (2001) has theorized about an intergenerational link, finding it to be common for the parents of victimized children to have been victimized themselves. Olweus, further states that when former victims have their own children, they may overreact to behaviours they perceive as bullying, contributing to an intergenerational cycle of over protection. This then places the child at a heightened risk of becoming the next generation of victim (Pontzer, 2010). The absence of the father (physical or psychological), the presence of a depressive mother and incidents of domestic violence are factors enhancing bullying behavior in children (Connolly & O'Moore, 2003). When parental involvement crosses the line that separates it from overprotection, problems begin to emerge (Georgiou, 2008). Over protective mothering is associated with higher risk for child victimisation at school (Perren & Hornung, 2005). Highly anxious and extremely protective mothers turn their children into passive and submissive individuals who cannot control their affairs, therefore, rendering them easy targets for bullies (Georgiou, 2008). It is imperative therefore to discuss the different styles of parenting in order to get an understanding of the kind of families the students come from, and why they behave the way they do. These parenting styles are authoritative, authoritarian and permissive parenting.

#### 2.3.1 *Authoritative Parenting*

A study conducted by Richters (2010) says this parenting style makes a comfortable home environment for the child that includes alternatives and choices for the child. There is a high level of communication between the parent and the child, with the expectations and limitations of the child clearly and firmly stated. Children of authoritative parents may be able to cope with unexpected stress and handle problems amicably. Coloroso (2008) asserts that these children are empowered and therefore have no need to manipulate or control others. Through love, support and acceptance, children of authoritative parents are esteemed and are shown how to be co-operative, competent and decisive. They are able to fend off bullies, and are able to stand for what they believe in during confrontations and can use a variety of options when dealing with any situation. According to Coloroso (2008), they are more resilient during times of hardship.

#### 2.3.2 *Authoritarian Parenting*

This style is characterised by enforcement of rules and demand for obedience (Sclafani, 2004). According to this style, parents usually supervise, bribe, order, threaten and worry over children. The children most of the time are told what to think and are not taught how to think. As a result, they are not able to fend for themselves or think of alternatives when they are bullied. Girls from authoritarian families learn to obey without thinking of the alternatives. Since these families use high levels of control, the girls' submissive behaviour can render them to be victimized.

#### 2.3.3 *Permissive Parenting*

These families lack structure, and children do as they please. There is no set time for mealtimes or bedtime. These parents are high in warmth, and low in control (Daniels, 2009). According to Coloroso (2008), these children are vulnerable to bullies, and make no attempt to stand up to bullies, but they give in to their requirements. McIntyre (2009)

believes that it is important for children to be taught through the family how to look after themselves. That way, they are less likely to be bullied because they will be used to voicing out their opinions and standing up for what they believe in.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research and Design*

The research followed the qualitative approach driven largely by a phenomenological research design which describes and interpretes the experiences of participants regarding a particular event in order to understand the participants' meaning ascribed to that event. Macmillan and Schumacher (2010) state that this technique is used to collect data primarily in the form of words rather than numbers. In this study, qualitative research methods were used to elicit information relating to personal experiences of the victims of bullying as Marvasti (2004) states that qualitative research aims to provide detailed descriptions and analysis of the quality or substance of the human experience.

#### *3.2 Participants, Sampling Procedure and Data Collection*

The target population for this study was adolescent girls between the ages of 13 and 19 years doing Form 1 to Form 5 in selected schools in the Manzini region. Swaziland has four regions. Manzini was chosen because it is at the centre and it is the most populated than the other regions resulting in the schools being densely populated as well. When there is overpopulation, it is likely that bullying is prevalent and to find all the different parenting styles from the different types of parents – the working class and the non-working class, highly literate, moderate and lowly literate. Participants for this study were teenage girls with an insight into bullying and victimization. The study used focus group discussions for data collection. Twenty-four teenage girls participated in the focus group discussions. Multi-stage sampling method was used in this study. The multi-stage sampling used simple random sampling at the first stage and criterion sampling at the second stage.

The study used a random sampling technique in selecting the schools. Seven high schools out of 66 were selected in the Manzini region. This is 10% of the total high schools in the region. This study drew on a purposive sample of girls from a bigger population. Guidance and counseling teachers helped in identifying the girls who have been exposed to bullying because they have records of victimized children in the schools. The girls were sampled because they have been exposed to bullying. Teenage high school girls from the schools were selected to be participants of the focus groups. Criterion purposive sampling was used. Each focus group discussion lasted for 45 minutes to an hour.

For this research study, a focus group guide with specific questions related to bullying was used by the facilitator. The researcher served as a moderator or facilitator in the focus group discussions. A tape recorder was used for recording information from the participants. The researcher was able to take notes and also probe for further responses.

Ethical clearance was sought from the Ministry of Education to conduct the research. Parents were asked to consent for participants below the age of 18 years. Permission was sought from the focus group discussion participants to record the discussion prior to the exercise. Participation was voluntary and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study should they wish to. All data were dealt with in a strictly confidential manner.

#### *3.3 Data Analysis*

Qualitative data from the focus group discussions was reviewed and transcribed. The data was classified and described. After classification, relations between different categories were studied. Similar themes were linked together. In the focus group discussions, themes were identified and used to explain the characteristics that make teenage girls vulnerable to bullying. This was followed by a translation and interpretation of similar themes to bring forth concepts.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

Below is a discussion of the themes that emerged from the study.

#### *4.1 Effects of Bullying*

The effects of bullying that were more prominent on the victims were: a significant drop in school performance, loss of concentration in class, failure to study and failure for one to make choices. The effects of bullying are damaging on the individual. The study revealed that as a result of bullying, the victims experience a significant drop in school performance. The victims fail to study at home and cannot even concentrate in class. As a result, their academic work suffers. The study also revealed that the victims have developed a negative attitude towards school, due to the trauma that they experience at school. The victims also mentioned that due to bullying, they found themselves failing to make their own choices. This resulted in them doing things not because they wanted to, but simply because they were obliged to, or they just wanted to please their peers.

The participants unanimously agreed that as a result of bullying, they experienced a significant drop in school performance. They stated that because of bullying, they even failed to concentrate in class. One participant, overcome by emotions said:

*I have now developed a negative attitude towards school and wish I could go back to my former school. In*

*class I hardly ever open my mouth. I have also observed that my performance has dropped drastically, compared to the previous year.*

Another participant indicated that due to bullying at school, she failed to study at home and this impacted badly on her school performance. She lamented saying: *“Each time I try to concentrate on my school work, I just see a film of all that is done to me at school. I cry most of the time, especially in my bedroom”.*

#### 4.2 Parenting Style

The results of this study revealed that most of the victims were brought up by authoritative parents. These are parents who exhibit love, support and acceptance to their children. Their children are esteemed and are shown how to be cooperative, competent and decisive. Children brought up by such parents know how to fend off bullies and are able to respond assertively during confrontations of any kind. This was revealed by the focus group participants who indicated that even though they are bullied, they are able to fend off bullies and to stand for what they believe in during confrontations and can use a variety of options when dealing with any situation. Some of the participants indicated that their parents were very cooperative and concerned about their welfare; as a result, they were able to face the bullies at school and continue with life. Coloroso (2008) asserts that these children are empowered and therefore have no need to manipulate or control others. Through love, support and acceptance, children of cooperative and concerned parents are esteemed and are shown how to be co-operative, competent and decisive. One participant had this to say:

*My parents listen to me. They ask me about my day at school, and also make a follow up on my school work. They keep an eye on what I am wearing since they do not allow us to wear or bring home anything that does not belong to us. They also motivate me to be all I can. At school I am able to face the bullies.*

The findings of this study also concur with the findings of a study conducted by Richters (2010) that revealed that this parenting style (the authoritative) makes a comfortable home environment for the child that includes alternatives and choices for the child. The study further revealed that children of authoritative parents are goal oriented towards their daily activities and they practice achievement oriented behaviour. This concurs with the findings of this study by the focus group participants. They indicated that even though they were bullied, they did not lose focus, as nothing would stop them from achieving their goals.

However, a substantial number of the participants from the focus group discussion indicated that they were brought up by authoritarian parents who were over protective. The participants pointed out that this type of parenting style contributed fully into making them prone to bullying. They indicated that they are not free to mix with other children. They went on to say free children take good care of themselves even in the absence of their parents and pleaded with parents to trust them. They lamented that over protection from parents makes them fail to protect themselves from the bullies. The participants further lamented that they were not allowed to go out on their own. They could only go out in the presence of their parents.

One participant remarked:

*I stay with granny and dad. My mom remarried. Grandma shouts at us saying we want to behave like our mother and get children before we get married. I can't even go to town unless sent. Security is very tight. I can't even attend parties. I am restricted to be at home. You do not just leave home without a reason.*

Still on the same note, another participant indicated that her father is very strict, she only goes out when sent, or when she is with the father. She mentioned that failure to listen to her parents would result in her being dismissed from home. A reasonable number of the focus group discussions participants experienced permissive parenting style. This is what she had to say: *“On weekends I sleep at my friend's place and nobody bothers to find out where I was. The only time I get to have a serious talk with my parents is when I have to remind them about my school fees”.* This is a true reflection of the fact that these parents do not feature much in the lives of their children, thus making them prone to being bullied. They lamented that they only liaised with their parents when they had to remind them about due school fees. This is a true reflection of the fact that these parents do not feature much in the lives of their children, thus making them prone to being bullied. The research by Wang et al. (2012) supports the notion that students who were dissatisfied with their parental care were more likely to engage in bullying or be a victim of bullying. Good communication with parents reduced the probability of victimization as well. Through communication, students confide their problems to their parents and seek better ways to handle them.

The results of this study are in line with what Bandura in his Social Cognitive Theory proposed. Bandura's theory is of the view that children learn behavior as they interact with their parents, caregivers or other significant others. Bandura's theory proposes that aggression is learnt through a process of behavior modeling (Shaffer, 2009). Guest (2007) concurs by stating that the parents can become role models of their children since the children identify with and model much of their behavior and attitudes after their parents. The way the participants in this study react to the bullying is in line with the way they were brought up. Children brought up by authoritative parents were able to fend off the bullies and continue with their lives. However, children brought up by either authoritarian or permissive parents failed to stand up

to bullies, as the lifestyle they had learnt from their homes deprived them of assertiveness. Since these children do not have a good relationship with their parents, they are likely not to have a good relationship with their peers, thus making them prone to bullying.

## 5. Conclusion

Bullying is very rife in Swaziland high schools. Most parents and teachers have taken lightly the fact that children are being bullied in schools. This is evidenced by the fact that even though the children are reporting about the effects and stresses endured after being bullied at school, no action is taken. The results of the study have shown that parents and teachers take lightly the responsibility of making a follow up and that of counseling the bullied children. The findings of the study indicate that most of the victims were brought up by authoritative parents. It is also evident from the findings that parenting styles influence the way that victims of bullying respond to bullying. The findings revealed that children of authoritative parents know how to fend off bullies and are able to respond assertively during confrontations of any kind.

## 6. Recommendations

The study gives the following recommendations:

- There is need for parents to open up to their children and ensure them that matters reported to them would be handled with care. Parents have to embrace the responsibility to find out what goes on in the lives of their children before the children even report that they are bullied.
- School administrators and teachers need to conscientise children about the possibilities of bullies in their midst, that is, preparing them for such before they are even bullied, as bullying has negative effects on them.

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