Educators' perceptions on bullying prevention strategies

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I report on an investigation into a group of Free State educators' recognition of bullying, their reactions to incidences of bullying, and their perceptions of the effectiveness of a number of bullying prevention strategies. The research instrument was a synthesis of the Delaware Research Questionnaire and questions based on findings from previous research on bullying in the Free State. The first important result was that Free State educators had frequently witnessed learners being physically and verbally abused by fellow learners. The second was that more than 80% of the respondents were willing to intervene in such cases. Thirdly, the results indicated that the respondents saw parental involvement as critical in preventing bullying. Finally, some comments and recommendations are made regarding the role of parents, educators, the police, and learners in the prevention of bullying.

Introduction

Children's experiences in schools are fundamental to their successful transition into adulthood. In school, children negotiate and renegotiate their relationships, self-image, and independence. They cultivate interpersonal skills, discover and refine strengths, and struggle with vulnerabilities. As such, schools must provide a safe environment for children to develop academically, relationally, emotionally, and behaviourally (Wilson, 2004:293). The contrary, however, seems to be prevalent. Numerous newspaper articles are published on the prevalence of bullying in South African schools (De Bruin, 2005:3; Smit, 2005:5; De Vries, 2004:4; Kalideen, 2004:1). According to one of these articles, a ten-year-old Pretoria boy is fighting for his life after he was hanged in the school's bathroom by his schoolmates (De Bruin, 2005:3). In an article by Serrao and Russouw (2005:3) a father alleges that his sixteen-year-old daughter was repeatedly sexually and physically abused by three girls in her school's hostel. According to the father, these girls forced his daughter to drink liquid bleach. She died. In another newspaper article Naran (2005:4) pleads for the "reclaiming of our lawless schools". It therefore seems that South African schools are failing to provide a bully-free environment in which teaching and learning can prosper. According to the Code of Conduct of the South African Council of Educators (SACE, s.a.:1) educators must take "... reasonable steps to ensure the safety of the learner". It is furthermore important that educators take note of Squelch's (2000:53) comment that the school has a legal duty to

> ... provide learners with a safe and secure environment, and to protect them from deviant behaviour that affects their well-being and infringes on their basic rights to security, human dignity, privacy and education.

A school's inability to honour these obligations may have dire consequences.

In 2005, for example, the Gauteng provincial Department of Education was named as the respondent in an average of 12 civil cases a month, which centered on injuries inflicted by learners on other learners on the school premises. According to Makgalemele (2005:1) these cases are in line with Section 60 of the South African Education Law and Policy Handbook, which states that the State is liable for damage or loss owing to any act of omission in connection with an educational activity conducted by a public school, and for which a public school would be liable but for the provision of this section (*cf.* Education Law Newsletter, 2001:1-4; Crawthon, 1999:1-2 for discussions of similar civil cases lodged by parents against educational authorities in the USA and New Zealand).

Bullying also has serious short- and long-term consequences for the bully, the victim, and the school community. Children who are victims of bullying often suffer psychological complications. These may include sleep disturbances, psychosomatic complaints, irritability, an increased frequency of illness and diseases related to chronic stress, and regression to more immature behaviour, such as enuresis, comfort habits and nail biting (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005:330; Ma, Stewin & Mah, 2003:251). Within the school environment, the victim may have impaired concentration, a decreased academic performance, practice truancy from school (to prevent bullying occurring), or absent him/herself from special school activities or certain classes. He/she may fear rejection, being excluded or ignored, feel betrayed, or fear being ridiculed in class by the spread of nasty rumours (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005: 330). Victims of bullying may also feel lonely and isolated from their friends and classmates (Banks, 1997:2). Victims have lowered self-esteem, increased anxiety, and increased depression. This may result in suicidal thoughts and even suicide (Collins, McAleavy & Adamson, 2004:56). Victims of bullying often bring home their frustrations from school and lash out at their parents who, unfortunately, are most likely unaware of their children's victimisation at school. As a result, family relationships are likely to deteriorate (Whitted & Dupper, 2005:167; Selekman & Vessey, 2004:247).

Like victims, children who bully others are also at risk for social and emotional problems. Bullying among elementary-age children may be an indication of more violent behaviour in later grades (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005:330; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005:103). Bullies are also likely to gravitate towards other aggressive children and be involved in gangs and delinquent activities. Bullies are also more likely to end up in the criminal justice system (Whitted & Dupper, 2005:167; Selekman & Vessey, 2004:247; Ma *et al.*, 2003:251; Piskin, 2002:558). Smokowski and Kopasz (2005:103) have found that a disproportionately high number of bullies under-achieve in school and later perform below potential in employment settings. Research (Roberts, 2000, in Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005:103) has suggested that adults who were bullies as children are more likely to display aggression toward their spouses and are also more likely to use severe physical punishment on their own children.

According to Whitted and Dupper (2005:167), as well as Garrett (2003:9), the repercussions of bullying, even when it does not escalate into violence, are rarely limited to the victims and bullies alone. Learners in schools with serious bullying problems feel less safe and less satisfied with their schools. Learners in schools, where problems of bullying are ignored and aggressive behaviour is not addressed, are likely to become more aggressive and less tolerant as well. Bullying thus negatively affects the school climate and the learning environment.

From the preceding discussion the following research problem was identified:

(Some) educators are failing to honour their legal and moral obligations to secure a bully-free school environment despite the dire consequences of bullying for children's academic, relational, emotional, and behavioural development.

Against the background of the foregoing statement of the problem and a short literature review, I attempt to answer the following overarching research question:

What can be done to prevent bullying?

The following sub-questions will be answered by means of a quantitative, exploratory, descriptive research method:

- What are Free State educators' perceptions of the nature and extent of bullying in their respective schools?
- What are Free State educators' reactions to incidences of bullying?
- What are a group of Free State educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of a number of bullying prevention strategies?

The reasons for focusing on Free State secondary school educators were threefold:

- Whilst little research has been done on Free State learners' perceptions and experiences of bullying (De Wet, 2005a:1-10; 2005b:82-88; Greeff 2004:1-22; Department of Health, 2002:145) no evidence of research on educators' perspectives on bullying in the Free State could be found.
- For logistical reasons research on school bullying in South Africa is done on a provincial rather than national level (e.g. Neser, Ovens, Van der Merwe, Morodi & Ladikos's [2003] research on school bullying in Gauteng).
- This study offers an interpretative, rather than a comparative exploration of educators' perceptions of school bullying. According to research findings by Piskin (2002:558), Banks (1997:1) and Olweus (1994:19; 23-25) age, rather than factors such as size of the school, racial composition and school locality, influences the extent of bullying. According to the above-named researchers bullying appears to be less widespread amongst older learners, and the percentage of victims drops when age increases. Also the form of bullying changes. Whereas physical bullying is predominant amongst younger learners, verbal and psychological bullying becomes more common amongst older ones. It was therefore decided to focus only on bullying in secondary schools.

Literature review

Defining bullying

According to Dan Olweus (1994:9), one of the world's leading experts on bullies and their victims, bullying is an accumulation of negative reactions — occurring repeatedly and over a period of time — directed toward one learner by another learner or learners. Those negative actions, which can include threats, physical attacks, words, gestures, or social exclusion, occur in a context always characterised by an imbalance between the victim and the bully. Besag's (1989 in Ma *et al.*, 2001:249) definition represents a sound recognition of the principal elements of bullying:

> Bullying is repeated attacks — physical, psychological, social or verbal — by those in a position of power, which is formally or situationally defined, on those who are powerless to resist, with the intention of causing distress for their own gain or gratification.

Bullying can be either direct (e.g. verbal and physical aggression) or indirect (e.g. threats, insults, name-calling, spreading rumours, writing hurtful graffiti, or encouraging others not to play with a particular child). Indirect bullying involves purposeful actions that lead to social exclusion or damage to a child's status or reputation, in an attempt to get others not to socialise with the victim (De Wet 2005b:83; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005:102). Whitted and Dupper (2005:168) delineate two other types of bullying — racial bullying and sexual bullying. Racial bullying may consist, among other things, of making racial slurs, writing graffiti, mocking the victim's culture, or making offensive gestures. Sexual bullying includes passing unwanted notes, jokes, pictures, taunts, or starting rumours of a sexual nature. Sexual bullying may also involve physically intrusive behaviour, such as the grabbing of private parts or forcing someone to engage in various sexual behaviours.

From the above definitions it is clear that bullying always includes the following three elements: the intentional use of aggression, an unbalanced relationship of power between the bully and the victim, and the causing of physical pain and/or emotional misery.

The extent of bullying

Although the majority of studies on bullying and victimisation of learners have relied mainly on self-reporting learner questionnaires (Holt & Keyes, 2004: 122; Juvonen, Graham & Schuster, 2003:1231), educator rating of learner behaviour has been considered valuable. Educators have ample opportunities to observe learners for relatively long periods of time in many school settings (Holt & Keyes, 2004:122; Juvonen *et al.*, 2003:1231; Pakaslahti & Kelikangas-Järvinen, 2000:178). According to Pakaslahti and Kelikangas-Järvinen (2000: 178) educators also have extensive experience with large numbers of adolescents which provides them with an implicit normative data base against which to judge behaviour. According to Crothers and Levinson (2004:499) educator rating scales are especially useful when data on bullying need to be gathered quickly and easily. Educators can assess large numbers of learners rapidly,

the cost of surveying educators is minimal, and responses among and between educators may be easily compared.

Educator rating of learner behaviour may, however, be biased. Educators also lack access to many contexts of peer interactions and, therefore, may sometimes be inaccurate in rating their learners' behaviour. This may explain why studies on bullying have found that bullying is often viewed differently by learners and educators. These differences may also be attributed to the use of different measuring instruments and definitions, as well as the difficulty of distinguishing between bullying and other forms of harassment (Crothers & Levinson, 2004:498; Selekman & Vessey, 2004:246; Smith, 2004:98; Treml, 2001:107-108). To overcome these difficulties, Crothers and Levinson (2004: 499) suggest the use of an educator questionnaire in conjunction with either sociometric devices or interviews and observations.

The following research results show the considerable variations in educators' and learners' reporting on the extent of bullying. In a comparative study by O'Moore and Hillery (1991:59-60), it was found that educators in Ireland identified only 24% of the total number of bullies identified by the learners. However, in a later study (O'Moore, Kirkham & Smith, 1997, in O'Moore, 2000:102), it was found that 21% of primary school principals and 24% of second-level principals thought that the level of bullying among their learners was higher than the levels reported by the learners. Studies carried out in Italy also indicate that there is a discrepancy between the perceptions of educators and learners on the levels of bullying in Italian schools (Menesini, Fonzi & Smith, 2002:394). According to Holt and Keyes (2004:122), as well as Smith (2004:99), the majority of studies on the extent of bullying have found that educators have reported lower prevalence rates of bullying than learners.

The lack of research in South Africa on educators as witnesses, victims and perpetrators of bullying is apparent from the literature study as well as from the introductory comments. For this reason it is not possible to give a comparative analysis of data pertaining to learners' experiences and educators' perspectives on the extent of bullying by learners. Reference will therefore be made only to findings from three learner self-report surveys. Neser *et al.* (2003:5) found that 60.9% of the 207 participants in a research project in Gauteng indicated that they were bullied during the 2002 school year. According to the First South African national youth risk behaviour survey (Department of Health, 2002:145) 49.3% of secondary school learners in the Free State reported that they had been bullied in the month preceding the survey. A study by De Wet (2005a:87) revealed that 54.28% of the participants in a research project in the Free State indicated that they had been the victims of bullying at some time or another during their school career.

Strategies for preventing or reducing bullying in schools

Because bullying differs from other kinds of violence, it does not lend itself to the same interventions that may be effective in addressing other types of conflict among children. Conflict resolution, peer mediation strategies, and

group therapy that focuses on increasing self-esteem have been shown to be relatively ineffective with bullies, because bullying behaviour results from a power imbalance, rather than from a deficit in social skills (Whitted & Dupper, 2005:167; Selekman & Vessey, 2004:248).

Several decades of prevention research has greatly expanded the knowledge base of "what works" in school-based programmes, including identification of essential strategies in successful school-based prevention programmes (Whitted & Dupper, 2005:169). According to Whitted and Dupper (2005:169) and Ma *et al.* (2003:259) the most successful school-based intervention programmes do more than reach out to the individual child; they seek to change the culture and climate of the school through a systematic, school-wide intervention approach. Advocates of the whole-school approach, rather than individual-orientated intervention to combat bullying, presuppose that bullying behaviour may be controlled and re-channelled into more socially acceptable behaviour by means of a systematic restructuring of the social milieu (Olweus, Limber & Mihalic, 1999:1). According to these authors, such restructuring should lead to fewer opportunities for bullying behaviour and fewer rewards (a status enjoyed by the bully among fellow learners). Furthermore, such restructuring should lead to the promotion and recognition of positive, friendly and pro-social behaviour.

Several anti-bullying programmes are available to make learners and educators aware of the nature and scope of the problem at their respective schools, as well as to empower them to identify and support victims, and prevent bullying (Treml, 2001:114; Guerin & Hennessy, 1999:1-5). Based on the anti-bullying programme of Olweus (Olweus *et al.*, 1999:9-10), I attempted to focus on the key strategies and role-players in such a programme. The decision to focus on Olweus's programme was manifold. It is a comprehensive intervention programme. It is probably the most widely recognised programme for addressing bullying. The programme targets all learners and relies on educators and other staff members, as well as on parents, for implementation. The programme prompts school personnel to create a school environment that is characterised by warmth and involvement, has firm limits on unacceptable behaviour, and allows adults to act as both authority figures and role models (Cipani, 2005:5; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005:106). The implementation of this programme has led to a substantial reduction, of up to 50% or more, in the frequency with which learners reported being bullied and bullying others (Cipani, 2005:5; Olweus *et al.*, 1999:10). This whole-school approach is a synthesis of several prevention strategies, with the aim of intervening on three levels.

1.   *School-wide intervention:*
Intervention at school level includes the administration of a questionnaire to establish the nature and scope of bullying at schools, school conferences, establishment of a bully prevention committee, and development of a co-ordinated system to supervise learners during breaks. Parents and educators should meet regularly to discuss common problems and strategies.

2. *Classroom-level intervention:*

Intervention within the classroom context includes drawing up and enforcement of class rules preventing bullying. Regular discussions should be held between class educators and learners to discuss various aspects of bullying and other anti-social behaviour. Discussions should be held between class educators and parents.

3. *Individual-level intervention:*

Intervention on an individual level includes discussions held with bullies (or small groups of bullies) and victims, as well as their parents, to ensure that bullying is ended and that victims receive the necessary support.

Parents, educators and learners (including bullies, victims and other learners) should therefore be involved with the establishment and implementation of an anti-bullying programme.

Attention will now be given to the findings of an investigation into a group of Free State educators' perceptions on the extent of bullying in their respective schools, as well as their reactions to the incidence of bullying. The respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of a number of prevention strategies, most of which may be linked to the strategies of Olweus's programme, will also be given.

Empirical investigation

Research instrument

An investigation was conducted to determine the experiences and perceptions of a group of Free State educators with regard to bullying. The research instrument was a synthesis of the Delaware Bullying Questionnaire, Sections A and B (State of Delaware, s.a.), and questions based on findings from a previous study, Section C. Section A of the structured questionnaire provided biographical details of the respondents. In Section B, questions were asked about the respondents as possible observers and/or listeners of bullying (Table 1), as well as their reactions to incidences of bullying (Table 3). In Section C, the respondents were asked to give their perceptions on a number of bullying prevention strategies. These strategies were obtained from a previous study directed at Free State learners. In this study, the following question was asked to 600 randomly selected learners: "What can be done to make schools, in which bullying is a problem, safer?" Two hundred and seventy-seven (46.17%) of the learners suggested strategies on how to make schools, that experience a problem with bullying, safer. A list of all such strategies was drawn up. Synonyms were added for the various strategies (Table 2) (see Naoum, 2002:102-105 for a discussion of the coding of responses to open-ended questions).

The universum of this study consisted of educators at secondary schools in the Free State. A test sample of 60 schools was randomly drawn from an address list supplied by the Free State Department of Education. Six hundred questionnaires (10 per school) were mailed. Three hundred and twenty-six (54.83%) returned questionnaires were suitable for processing. The average age of the respondents, of whom 100 (30.67%) were male and 226 (69.33%)

female, was 39 years 8 months. The respondents' average number of years of teaching experience was 14 years 9 months.

The term bullying was standardised by introducing the following definition early in the questionnaire:

> Bullying means that one person, or a group of persons, targets another person with repeated direct or indirect negative actions over a period of time, which are harmful to the target, either emotionally or physically. A negative action occurs when a person knowingly inflicts, or attempts to inflict, physical or emotional injury or discomfort upon another person (State of Delaware, s.a.:1).

Data analysis

In Section B of the questionnaire (Table 1), respondents had to make use of the following responses: 1 = daily, 2 = once or twice a week, 3 = once or twice a month, 4 = once or twice a year, 5 = never. In Section C of the questionnaire (Table 2), the respondents had to make use of the following responses: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = unsure, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree. The data were analysed using the Data Analysis Tool of Microsoft Excel and Intercooled Stata software packages.

According to Goddard and Melville (2001:47), criterion-related validity, as well as construct validity, may be increased if use is made of an existing instrument. Therefore, an existing instrument (Delaware Bullying Questionnaire) was adapted for the South African context and used. As such, the validity of the study was ensured. Another aspect of validity, namely, content validity, was also applicable here. Content validity is obtained by consulting the viewpoint of experts when compiling an instrument. The questionnaire should therefore be representative of existing knowledge on the issue (Goddard & Melville, 2001:47). An in-depth literature study was undertaken prior to the empirical study and it confirmed that the questionnaire covered existing knowledge on the issue of school bullying. Content validity was thus ensured. Reliability implies that the instrument or procedure measures are consistent (Goddard & Melville, 2001:41). In the instrument that was used, responses were mainly indicated on a 5-point Likert scale (Tables 1 and 2) and the Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the responses could therefore be determined. The Alpha coefficient for this study was calculated to be 0.7410. According to Nunnaly (in Santos, 1999:2), it is generally accepted that a score of 0.7, or higher, implies an acceptable level of reliability and the responses to the questionnaire were accordingly considered to be reliable.

Results

Table 1 summarises what the respondents saw and/or heard with regard to various types of bullying, from the most common to the least common types.

It appears from Table 1 that the respondents were mostly witnesses of direct physical bullying. More than 40% of the educators indicated that they had witnessed incidents of physical bullying on a daily basis. Only 6.44% of the educators had never seen incidents of physical bullying. It is also evident

Table 1   What the respondents have seen and/or heard with regard to bullying

Item	Rank order	Mean rating	Questions	1		2		3		4		5	
				N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	1	2.267	How often have you seen learners bully others by laying hands on them (hitting, kicking, pushing or physically hurting them) at school or on the school bus/taxi?	131	40.18	65	19.94	63	19.33	46	14.11	21	6.44
2	2	2.387	How often have you heard learners bully others by saying mean things, teasing or calling other learners names in school or on the school bus/taxi?	107	32.82	85	26.07	61	18.71	47	14.42	26	7.98
3	3	3.018	How often have you heard learners spreading rumours about fellow learners to be mean at school or on the school bus/taxi?	48	14.72	71	21.78	91	27.91	59	18.01	57	17.49
5	4	3.070	How often have you heard or seen learners leaving their fellow learners out of activities to be mean?	44	13.50	70	21.47	85	26.08	73	22.39	54	16.54
4	5	3.420	How often have you heard learners bullying others by making sexual comments to be mean to other learners?	26	7.98	55	16.87	79	24.23	88	26.99	78	23.93
Av.		2.832											

1 = Daily;   2 = Once or twice a week; 3 = Once or twice a month; 4 = Once or twice a year;   5 = Never

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Table 2 Educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of a number of bullying prevention strategies

Item	Rank order	Mean rating	Strategies	1		2		3		4		5	
				N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	1	1.340	Bullies' parents should be informed of their children's misbehaviours.	259	79.45	47	14.42	4	1.23	8	2.45	8	2.45
2	2	1.426	Parents should maintain strict discipline.	233	71.48	71	21.78	9	2.76	2	0.61	11	3.37
11	3	1.445	Positive relationship between the school and the police.	218	66.87	86	26.38	7	2.15	15	4.60	–	–
8	4	1.454	Learners should be encouraged to report acts of bullying to the educators.	229	70.25	73	22.39	3	0.92	15	4.60	6	1.84
9	5	1.509	The school's code of conduct must prohibit bullying.	254	77.91	28	8.59	6	1.84	26	7.98	12	3.68
10	5	1.509	Serious cases of bullying should be reported to the police.	220	67.48	76	23.31	10	3.07	10	3.07	10	3.07
12	7	1.515	Bullies should receive professional help.	213	65.34	85	26.07	10	3.07	9	2.76	9	2.76
3	8	1.537	Positive educator-learner relations.	215	65.95	78	23.93	13	3.99	9	2.76	11	3.37
19	9	1.540	Schools should adopt anti-bullying policies.	198	60.74	104	31.90	6	1.84	12	3.68	6	1.84
5	10	1.574	Educators should maintain strict discipline.	205	62.89	86	26.38	9	2.76	21	6.44	5	1.53
13	11	1.583	Educators should talk to the bullies.	202	61.96	93	28.53	7	2.15	13	3.99	11	3.37
20	12	1.626	The implementation of an anti-bullying programme by schools.	198	60.74	88	26.99	13	3.99	18	5.52	9	2.76
14	13	1.755	Educational talks on bullying.	179	54.91	102	31.29	11	3.37	14	4.30	20	6.13
21	14	1.758	Learners should be encouraged to tell their parents if they have been bullied.	184	56.44	90	27.61	10	3.07	31	9.51	11	3.37
17	15	1.761	The promotion of positive values.	180	55.22	101	30.98	11	3.37	11	3.37	23	7.06

1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Unsure; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly disagree

Table 2   continued

Item	Rank order	Mean rating	Strategies	1		2		3		4		5	
				N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
4	16	1.920	Regular playground duty by educators.	159	48.77	105	32.21	13	3.99	27	8.28	22	6.75
18	17	1.942	Bullies should be punished.	147	45.09	104	31.90	27	8.28	43	13.19	5	1.54
6	18	2.030	Members of the learners' representative council and class captains should maintain strict discipline.	136	41.72	123	37.73	6	1.84	43	13.19	18	5.52
22	19	2.135	Learners should be encouraged to tell their fellow learners if they have been bullied.	143	43.87	99	30.37	8	2.45	49	15.03	27	8.28
7	20	2.273	Learners should unite against bullies.	132	40.59	91	27.91	19	5.83	50	15.34	34	10.43
15	21	3.887	Separation of learners of different races.	42	12.88	27	8.28	20	6.14	74	22.70	163	50.00
16	22	3.969	Separation of learners of different ethnic groups.	33	10.12	31	9.51	26	7.98	59	18.10	177	54.29
Av.		1.886											

1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 =Unsure; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly disagree

Table 3   Respondents' reactions to incidents of verbal and physical bullying

Reaction	Verbal bullying		Physical bullying	
	N = 316*	%**	N = 311***	%
I walked away and ignored it	8	2.53	8	2.57
I stood and watched	2	0.63	5	1.61
I helped the person who was being targeted	279	88.29	279	89.71
I helped the bully	29	9.18	18	6.11
I laughed	–	–	–	–
Total	318	100.63	311	100

*   Some of the respondents indicated more than one reaction
       Ten of the respondents indicated that they had never witnessed verbal bullying
**   Percentage of the respondents who had seen/heard incidents of bullying
***   15 of the respondents indicated that they had never witnessed physical bullying

from Table 1 that, according to the respondents, the majority of Free State learners had been exposed to direct verbal bullying on a weekly basis. Only 23.93% of the respondents had never witnessed incidents where learners were sexually harassed by their fellow learners.

Table 2 summarises the respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of a number of bullying prevention strategies.

The respondents did not see intervention strategies as involving educators, but saw those, in which parents played a key role, as the most effective bullying prevention strategies (Table 2, items 1 and 2). This does not mean that the respondents negated the role that educators can play in preventing bullying in schools. It would probably be the educators who would tell the parents of the children's misbehaviour (Table 2, item 1), create an atmosphere of trust in which the learners would be willing to confide in them to report acts of bullying (Table 2, item 8) and establish positive educator-learner relations (Table 2, item 5).

From Table 3 it becomes apparent that the majority of the respondents were willing to intervene in cases of verbal and physical bullying.

Although it is heartening to note that 88.29% of the respondents intervened in cases of verbal and 89.71% in incidences of physical bullying, cognisance should be taken of the fact that some of the educators ignored incidences of bullying, or even helped the bullies. The seriousness of these negative actions are scrutinised, among other things, in the following section.

Discussion and recommendations

An important prerequisite for the successful implementation of a bullying prevention programme is acknowledgement by role players that bullying is a problem that needs to be addressed (Olweus *et al.*, 1999:10). The use of a questionnaire, such as the Delaware Bullying Questionnaire (State of Delaware, s.a.), is a useful tool to create this awareness. The study showed that

the majority of the respondents realised that bullying was a pervasive and serious problem in some Free State schools: only 6.44%, 7.98% and 17.49% of the respondents indicated that they had never witnessed or heard of incidences of physical, direct, and indirect verbal bullying, respectively (Table 1). The respondents, and other educators who are aware of the seriousness of the problem, should take the initiative to pilot an awareness campaign. They should also involve colleagues, learners, parents, educational officials and academia in the development and implementation of either a new, or an adapted, version of an existing anti-bullying programme in their schools. Only then would educators be able to honour their legal and moral obligations towards the learners entrusted to them.

The finding of this study, namely, that direct physical bullying, was the most common type of bullying that the respondents had seen (Table 1, item 1), confirmed Hazler, Miller, Carney and Green's (2001:143) observation that verbal or social/emotional abuse in confrontations is less likely than physical abuse to lead people to identify scenarios as bullying. The possibility that the respondents had overestimated the extent of physical bullying in Free State schools was illustrated by the following statistics: A relatively high percentage of the respondents (40.18%) indicated that they were witnessing daily incidents of physical bullying (Table 1, item 1). However, in a self-reporting study on bullying in Free State secondary schools, it was found that only 6.25% of the boys and 1.68% of the girls, who formed part of the study, were physically abused on a daily basis (De Wet, 2005b:85). It is therefore important that educators take cognisance not only of physical, but also of verbal, sexual and emotional bullying.

A comparison of educators' and learners' perspectives on bullying is highly relevant as it may have an influence on intervention strategies. According to Menesini *et al.* (2002:395) an examination of different educator and leaner questionnaires often reveals different conceptualisations. In an attempt to overcome this differentiating conceptualisation the current study used the same working definition as De Wet (2005b:85). The contrasting findings, however, affirmed Menesini *et al.*'s (2002:395) observation that educators and learners, although they may have lived and observed the same problems in the class and school setting, may have reacted and judged different aspects of behaviours and events differently.

Encouraging learners to report acts of bullying to their educators (Table 2, item 8) is ranked as the fourth most important prevention strategy by the respondents. This finding was in line with one of the prevention strategies in Olweus's anti-bullying programme (Olweus *et al.*, 1999:9-10). It should however be noted that, according to earlier research (De Wet, 2005a:6; Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003:543; Piskin, 2002:558), learners are unwilling to tell others, especially educators, that they are being victimised by bullies. It is therefore crucial that educators acknowledge that they may have a credibility problem with some children when it comes to dealing satisfactorily with bully/victim problems. This can be remedied by demonstrating that educator intervention is much more likely to result in satisfactory outcomes for those learners they seek to help. It is also vital that educator intervention does not make matters

worse. It is furthermore necessary to stress that the breaking down of com-
munication barriers between educators and learners is a prerequisite for the
success of any intervention strategy.

The success of any anti-bullying programme rests on the creation of a
school environment "... characterised by warmth, positive interest, and the
involvement of adults" (Packman, Lepkowski, Overton & Smaby, 2005:549).
It is therefore disconcerting to note that some of the respondents indicated
that they ignored incidences of bullying, while others said that they would
rather help bullies and not their victims (Table 3). These educators are acting
in contravention of the Children's Charter of South Africa (1992: art. 8[3]) and
the principles of the Code of Conduct for Educators (SACE, s.a.:1). These
negative actions of the respondents may have dire consequences for them-
selves and the educational authorities — as explained in the introductory
section of this article.

It seems, with the exception of one of the four prevention strategies which
directly involved educator participation in the battle against bullying ("Lear-
ners should be encouraged to report acts of bullying to the educators"), the
respondents saw prevention strategies involving educators as relatively inef-
fective. The maintenance of strict discipline (Table 2, item 5), the necessity for
educators to talk to bullies (Table 2, item 13) and the responsibility of educa-
tors to do regular playground duty (Table 2, item 4) were placed 10th, 11th
and 16th in rank order by the respondents. In contrast with this relatively low
prioritisation of the role that educators should play in preventing bullying by
the respondents, it is evident from the introductory section of this article and
Olweus *et al.* (1999:10) that educators have a crucial role to fulfill in a bully-
ing prevention programme. Yet, they receive little or no help or training in how
to deal effectively with bullying (Juvonen *et al.*, 2003:1236; O'Moore, 2000:
110). Therefore, it is essential to educate educators about ways in which
schools may alter social norms towards bullying, to assist them to intervene
effectively with incidents of bullying, and to work together with therapists and
school psychologists to deal with the symptoms of bullying and victimisation.

The importance that the respondents attached to the prohibition of bully-
ing in a school's code of conduct (Table 2, item 9) was in line with Olweus's
strategies (Olweus *et al.*, 1999:10) and the provisions of the Guideline for the
acceptance of a code of conduct for learners (RSA, 1998:11; 14). These guide-
lines name bullying as one of the learner offences that may lead to a learner's
suspension.

The value that the respondents placed on the role that parents should
play in combating bullying (Table 3, items 1 and 2) was a confirmation of
Selekman and Vessey's (2003:248) view that parents should form a partner-
ship with the school in trying to prevent bullying. Selekman and Vessey
(2003:248) suggest that parents should be used in empowering victims,
bullies and bystanders in the struggle against bullying. Piskin (2002:558)
found that victims of bullying would rather tell their parents than their edu-
cators. According to Piskin (2002:558) this may be ascribed to the fact that
while parents pay attention to "the problem" when their children are bullied,

educators pay more attention to the bullies. However, the emphasis that the respondents and these researchers laid on the necessity of parental involvement, in the fight against bullying, does not make provision for the following realities: a lack of parental involvement in some societies and the unwillingness of a large number of parents to acknowledge that their children misbehave at school (Rademeyer, 2005:9). Nonetheless, educators should not fight a lone battle. According to Olweus *et al.* (1999:10) educators should communicate on a regular basis with the parents of bullies, victims and innocent bystanders on school-wide, classroom and individual levels.

The respondents' perception that the police can play an important role in preventing school bullying was firstly illustrated by the fact that a large percentage of the respondents (93.25%) either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that positive relations with the police were an effective strategy for preventing bullying (Table 2, item 11). Secondly, 90.79% of the respondents indicated that they either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that serious cases of bullying should be reported to the police (Table 2, item 10). From the foregoing data it could be deduced that a relatively large percentage of respondents were in favour of a zero tolerance policy with regard to bullying. According to Casello (2003:875-875) the adoption of a zero tolerance policy is based on several presuppositions. Firstly, that bullying in schools is out of control, therefore zero tolerance is meant to be a just and swift response to a crisis situation. Secondly, it is meant to be implemented as a whole-school package which includes funding for mediation, counselling and conflict resolution programmes. Thirdly, it is believed by some that a zero tolerance policy will reduce bullying. Note should however be taken of Casello's (2003:884) comment that a zero tolerance policy should be seen only as a short-term response to a situation that is out of control. Casello (2003:884) warns that "... a zero tolerance policy institutionalises criminal justice approaches to school discipline".

Cognisance should also be taken of the fact that the practice of assigning police officers to serve in schools is becoming more common in the USA and Britain. The Bedfordshire Police (2004), for example, has a School Liaison Officers programme which is designed to increase contact, co-operation and communication between local youth and the police. Researchers in the USA (Goggins, Newman, Waechter & Williams, 1994 in Brown & Benedict, 2005: 267) have found that learners, educators and participating officers believed that officers contributed to school security. The researchers concluded that "... police co-operation within public schools can be perceived as beneficial for all stakeholders". The assigning of police officers to schools has financial implications. An adopt-a-cop strategy should therefore be considered in the fight against bullying in Free State secondary schools.

A juxtaposition of Olweus *et al.*'s (1999:9-10) bullying prevention strategies and Table 2 reveals that Olweus's programme does not make provision for police intervention or co-operation as bullying prevention strategies. The fact that strategies involving the police were placed 3rd and 5th in rank order by the respondents firstly showed how important it is that bully prevention programmes be tailor-made for the unique circumstances of each country and

individual schools. Secondly, it illustrated that researchers should scrutinise the possible influence of the prevailing culture of violence in South Africa on bullying in South African schools.

It seems that the respondents may have underestimated the role that learners can play in preventing bullying (Table 2, 19th in rank order), because there is a growing interest in peer support and mediation as an approach to bullying. According to Smith (2004:100) these methods hold promise, but more evaluative research is needed. The aforesaid finding may suggest that the respondents are not aware of the fact that learners would rather tell their fellow learners than adults, especially educators, that they have been victimised.

The study was limited by several factors. Firstly, the study included only a very small sample of secondary school educators. Secondly, the sample was not a true reflection of the male-female ratio of secondary school educators in the Free State (Free State Department of Education, 9 October 2006: pers. comm.). Thirdly, the accuracy of the data was limited by the educators' accuracy in reporting their observations. This study should therefore be seen as preparatory as well as exploratory research on school bullying in the Free State. It is recommended that future research should carefully consider the sample and the administration for the study.

Concluding remarks

There has never been a stronger demand from the South African public to reduce school violence (Beaver, 2005:9; Blaine, 2005:4; Mhlongo, 2005:3; Rademeyer, 2005:9). Ma *et al.* (2003:264) assert that the goal of creating safe schools cannot be achieved unless the issue of bullying is adequately addressed. Therefore, there is a need for the South African research community to research bullying in schools periodically and systematically. They should also, in partnership with other role players, initiate development of a comprehensive whole-school prevention programme that can be adapted to the specific needs of individual schools. When bullying is tolerated, the whole school environment is tainted and learners are unable to learn, grow and interact in a safe milieu. Educators, learners, parents, as well as other role players, should work together to reduce bullying by implementing effective prevention strategies to create a school environment that prioritises respect, recognition, security, and growth for all learners.

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