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## Adolescent girls' behavioural characteristics and their vulnerability to bullying in Manzini high schools

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Incidences of school bullying appear to be on the rise in most schools across the globe, and schools in Swaziland are no exception. Sadly, adolescent girls appear to be most susceptible to being bullied. This study considers how some of the traits of young girls tend to expose them to incidences of bullying. The approach was qualitative and employed the multiple case study research design in which data was obtained through focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 24 girls from three schools, by purposive sampling. Content analysis was employed to analyse data from the FGD. Results show the relevance of Routine Activities Theoretical framework in explaining the incidences of bullying among adolescent girls. Low self-esteem and the feeling of loneliness appeared as two major characteristics making girls more susceptible to incidences of bullying. Data interpretation suggests that loneliness tends to expose the girls as suitable targets. Schooling presents a lonely and unprotected experience for girls, where likely offenders take advantage of their isolation. The authors argue that the schooling experiences of adolescent girls require urgent intervention, in which curriculum experts ought to consider bullying lessons for both girls and boys.

**Keywords:** adolescent girls; high schools; peer bullying; personal characteristics; Swaziland; vulnerability

### Introduction

Researchers are unanimous on the negative impact of bullying on all those involved, notably the victims, perpetrators and bystanders (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), 2016; Van der Zanden, Denessen & Scholte, 2015; Verma, 2015). The academic lives of victims of bullying are often badly compromised, and the probability of dropping out of school is usually very high in the long run. Girls in Hyde's (2001) study report losing their concentration in class, feeling bad about themselves, missing school and even dropping out. Swearer and Hymel (2015:345) report that "being bullied by peers has been linked with [...] poor school adjustment, being unhappy, feeling unsafe, being truant, and performing poorly" at school.

Studies show that being bullied is known to be associated with a wide range of mental health problems (Tshotsho & Thwala, 2015; Undheim, 2013), where victims are more anxious and insecure than other students. Psychological bullying can make victims feel hurt and withdrawn. NASEM (2016) reveals that most victims of bullying experience physical injury, stress, sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. These elements can prevent victims from experiencing and enjoying the fullness of life. Bullying generally causes mental stress and fear, which usually breaks down an individual's sense of self-confidence and self-esteem. According to McGraw (2008) bullying makes a victim feel afraid and angry. They develop anger for what is happening to them, to which they are unable to react. The anger is usually expressed at family members, such as the parent or siblings. Girls who are victims of bullying may have difficulty forming and sustaining intimate relationships and will fail to have a normal sex life (Verma, 2015).

Moreover, McGraw (2008) argues that bullied girls may mature into women who tolerate and perceive bullying as normal even in their marital relationships. The social adjustment of bully victims has also received the attention of researchers who note that girls with poor social abilities and skills are more likely to be bullied (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Many victims who are bullied repeatedly end up lonely, isolated and may contemplate suicide as a long-term solution (NASEM, 2016). Victims may have difficulty maintaining friendships and may find it difficult to make new friends, even long after the bullying has stopped. Research by Field (2007) reports that bully victims report serious health problems. The health of victims of bullying is regularly compromised, as they report problems such as sleeping difficulties, bedwetting as well as asthmatic attacks (Orpinas & Horne, 2006). Those victims that are sexually bullied, report devastating health consequences in terms of increased exposure to sexually transmitted infections, including human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), as well as unplanned and unwanted pregnancies according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO], 2017). In addition, Kim, Bailey, Erkut, Aoudeh and Ceder (2004) reveal that schools in many countries appear to turn a deaf ear to female students' complaints about their experiences with bullying, with the result that most girls do not report their experiences of bullying, because they believe nothing will be done to address the issue.

Bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that can have negative consequences for the general school climate and on the learners themselves. There is a body of literature that supports the idea that bullying is a

gendered phenomenon (Beckman, Hagquist & Hellström, 2013; Hearn, 2016; Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Studies also indicate that more girls than boys experience intense bullying during the course of their schooling (Beckman et al., 2013; Tshotsho & Thwala, 2015; Verma, 2015; Wimmer, 2009). There appears to be a belief amongst researchers that certain gender-based characteristics appear to render girls more exposed to bullying (Ndibalema, 2013; Swearer & Hymel, 2015; Tshotsho & Thwala, 2015). On the other hand, incidences of bullying have been reported by learners, as well as their parents and teachers, in schools in the Kingdom of Eswatini.

Wimmer (2009:18) argues that “research into bullying can help increase our understanding and awareness of bullying, and can assist with developing strategies to combat bullying early.” There is therefore the need to establish the behavioural characteristics that are responsible for girls’ susceptibility to bullying. The study is theoretical conceptualised in terms of the Routine Activity Theory by Cohen and Felson (1979).

#### Routine Activity Theoretical Framework (RAT)

As noted above, the study reported in this paper employs the RAT to address the gap in literature regarding girls’ susceptibilities to bullying incidences, mainly in schools in the Eswatini Kingdom. Although researchers have long employed theoretical frameworks that attempt to analyse and describe bullying and other juvenile crimes particularly in the empirical social world of the school, little is known about how RAT can be used to explain incidences of school bullying. In particular, not much is known about how RAT can assist in explicating adolescent girls’ susceptibilities to bullying incidences in schools in the Manzini Region of Eswatini.

The Routine Activity Theory states that a crime, in this case, the act of bullying is most likely going to take place in a given time and space when there is an accessible target, in the absence of capable guardian and in the presence of a motivated delinquent (Bock, Shannon, Movahedi & Cukier, 2017; Cohen & Felson, 1979; Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996; Pimple, 2016). According to Cohen and Felson (1979:593) “routine activities increase the probability that motivated offenders will converge in space and time with suitable targets in the absence of capable guardians ...” Thus, as argued by Finkelhor and Asdigian (1996:4), the central theme of RAT denotes that the lifestyle and activities of different categories of individuals are likely to expose them to circumstances where “they are more or less in contact with potential offenders and at risk of potential victimization [*sic*].”

Bullying is thus conceptualised as a lifestyle that occurs when: i) someone directs aggressive

action towards a person or group of persons with the intention to hurt and cause harm; ii) manifests repeatedly over a lengthy period of time; and iii) there exists such an imbalance of power between the party perpetrating the bullying and the party being subjected to bullying that the latter cannot defend himself or herself (Pörhölä, Karhunen & Rainivaara, 2006). Beckman et al. (2013) note that bullying is part of the broader spectrum of peer victimisation that can range from physical and/or verbal aggression to serious threats of bodily harm from the victor to the victim. Finkelhor and Asdigian (1996) argue the need for a modified framework of RAT in order to explain the full range of victimisation that adolescents suffer. They further argue that “because certain offenders are drawn to or react to certain types of victims or certain characteristics in victims, such are more vulnerable” (Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996:6).

Finkelhor and Asdigian (1996) further employed the concept of target congruence explained through the three elements of vulnerability, gratifiability, and antagonism to explain how the personal characteristics of victims expose them to victimisation. The authors explain these three elements thus:

*Target vulnerability denotes characteristics like weakness that make the victims easier to victimise; target gratifiability resonates through the characteristics like gender that make the victim an appropriate source of gratification; and target antagonism entails characteristics that arouse the perpetrator’s anger, resentment or jealousy.* (Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996:15)

By applying the modified version of RAT bullying, we are offered the opportunity to learn more about a bully’s behaviour, and more importantly, why adolescent girls are more susceptible to their acts. However, before proceeding we thought it appropriate to further examine existing literature on the characteristics that make adolescent girls most vulnerable to bullying in the light of the above theoretical assumptions.

#### Empirical Discussion

Researchers have identified some personal characteristics that appear to make adolescent girls easily prone to bullying. According to Wimmer (2009:19), “researchers have agreed that there are differences in the ways males and females bully, how they are bullied, and what they are bullied about.” For instance, Macintyre (2009) notes that girls with low self-esteem and self-concept lack self-confidence. Within a social context such as the classroom or the school, they become easy prey for bullies. Macintyre (2009) and Rigby (2010) argue that positive self-esteem and a healthy accurate self-image provide adolescent girls with motivation, confidence, friendship and resilience. On the other hand, girls with a low self-esteem and a poor self-image feel frustrated, rejected, as well as

afraid, and are highly likely to become targets to bullying (Rigby, 2010). From the routine activity framework, Finkelhor and Asdigian (1996:15) argue that these traits ought to be “viewed as features that make victims congruent with the motives, needs or reactivities of particular offenders.”

Researchers have also note that adolescent girls are more susceptible to displaying a pronounced sense of loneliness and withdrawal against challenging situations. Studies by Beckman et al. (2013) and Betts, Gullone and Allen (2009) reveal that young girls mainly show withdrawn sulky behaviour and a verbal expression of feeling lonely when faced with difficulties within group interactions. Such feelings of loneliness and withdrawal are judged to inhibit a given individual's ability to deal with particular situation. Betts et al. (2009) argue that children who inhibit their emotional expression so as to manage emotions such as anger or sadness, show higher levels of symptoms of anxiety and depression. Field (2007) suggests that bullies are known to thrive within such situation in which their victims are perceived as defenceless. This would seem to be congruent with the suggestion by Bock et al. (2017:139) that “the absence of a capable guardian increases the likelihood of crime occurring.” Thus, the absence of capable guardian exacerbates the vulnerability of the adolescent girls, by exposing them to the bullies who are constantly on the lookout for such vulnerable victims.

Appearance of the learners has been identified by researchers as something that may cause them to be bullied. Hearn (2016:32) argues that generally, adolescent girls face what the author calls “appearance culture.” This appearance culture mainly resonates through the observable bodily or physical differences between adolescent girls and boys, which appear to expose them to higher risks of being bullied by boys. Cohen and Felson (1979:593) argue that routine activities (attendance of school, in this case) increase “the probability that motivated offenders will converge in time and space with suitable targets [...]” The suitability of the target is what Finkelhor and Asdigian (1996:15) refer to as “target gratifiability,” where girl victims possess certain qualities that make them suitable victims. For instance, Beane (2009) and Fraser-Thill (2007) argue that girls who are physically weaker than their male peers are placed at increased risk of being bullied. However, it is not only merely by being weaker that an individual girl is exposed to bullying; rather, the possibility of the willingness to inflict boldly pain may serve as a motivation for the perpetrator.

Last but not least, researchers likewise argue that having over-protective parents can increase children's chances of being bullied (Fraser-Thill, 2007; Jan & Husain, 2015; Ndibalema, 2013;

UNESCO, 2017). Parents of bullying victims tend to overprotect them. These parents tend to avoid open confrontations with their children, and try to create a sense of harmony in the household at all costs (Fraser-Thill, 2007). In the case of the girl child, however, routine activity theory (RAT) framework argues that this increases her chances of being victimised since it makes the child less able to deal with conflicts in the absence of the ‘over-protective’ or capable guardian (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996; Pimple, 2016). Both Field (2007) and Ndibalema (2013) argue that girls brought up by over-protective parents who treat them as their equals often relate well to adults, but have less opportunity to mix with their peers. Such children, however, feel disempowered once they are removed from the protective presence of their parents.

#### Research Objective

The objective of this study was to explain adolescent girls' behavioural characteristics and their vulnerability to bullying in high schools around the Manzini Region of Eswatini. Specifically, the study aimed to determine which characteristics make adolescent girls more susceptible to bullying.

#### Research Questions

The research question that informed the study was: what are adolescent girls' behavioural characteristics that render them vulnerable to bullying in Manzini high schools?

#### Methodology

##### Research Approach

The study followed the qualitative research approach, and made use of the multiple case study research design. A multiple case study according to Anderson, Leahy, DeValle, Sherman and Tansey (2014:89) “enables replication (by the use of more than one case) to independently confirm emerging constructs and identify complementary aspects of the phenomenon under investigation by analysing within and across settings.” The researchers chose the multiple case study design in order to obtain varied views on the girls' experiences with bullying.

##### Participants' Selection

Participants in the study comprised 24 adolescent girls between the ages of 13 and 19 years, who were in Forms 1 to 5 as at the time of the study in three selected schools in the Manzini Region. Both the schools and the girls were purposively selected. The researchers approached the Guidance and Counselling teachers working at the selected schools to help in identifying the girls who had experienced bullying. These teachers kept records of cases of bullying involving at the selected schools.

### Instrument and Procedures

As noted above, 24 girls from three schools took part in three separate focus group discussion (FGD) sessions. Mishra (2016) notes that focus group discussion constitutes a good way to bring individuals from similar context to discuss specific topic of interest in order to obtain information on collective views, as well as the meaning that lies behind those views. The aim of the FGDs was to discuss and understand issues relating to the characteristics that make adolescent girls vulnerable to bullying. Each FGD session lasted between 45 minutes and 60 minutes; where FGDs took place after school hours to reduce environmental distractions. The researchers facilitated the FGD sessions, while a tape recorder was used for recording information from the participants. Notes were also obtained during the periods of the FGDs.

### Trustworthiness

Measures of trustworthiness entail achieving data truthfulness and correctness such that the readers of the research report are able to understand the report as credibly as possible (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Mtyuda & Okeke, 2016). In improving the trustworthiness of the emerging report from data, the researchers remained attached to the objectives of the study by ensuring that appropriate girl participants were selected for the study. The use of the focus group discussion approach enabled obtained data to be enriched by the expression of both personal and group feelings. Mishra (2016) argues that focus groups enable researchers to explore topics of interests from a group perspective. More so, group discussions were held in the participants' natural setting in order to reduce distraction, while the use of a tape-recorder ensured that participants' contributions were transcribed verbatim. These measures support the researchers' claim to trustworthiness.

### Ethical Considerations

The following ethical procedures were observed before and during the FGDs. First, a letter of introduction was obtained by the researchers from their institution where the researchers are based. They then approached the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) for final clearance to conduct the study. Once that was obtained, permission was sought and obtained from the principals of the participating schools to conduct the study in their respective schools. Following this order, the class teachers were asked to assent to their pupils to take part in the study, while the career guidance teachers were also consulted. It ought to be noted that due to the age of the participating girls, they were too young to consent for themselves. However, the girls' parents were approached to provide assent for their daughters to

participate in the study. The girls, their parents and the teachers were then assured that the researchers would make every effort to prevent harm in whatever form to the wellbeing of all the participants in this study. Participants, who needed counselling, were referred to the schools' counselling units for that purpose. The girls were then informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage they felt the need to do so. Finally, pseudonyms were used to report responses from each respondent to conceal their identity.

### Data Analyses

The thematic analysis model was adopted in the analysis of data obtained from focus group discussion (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). A thematic approach requires researchers to become familiar with the data, generate initial codes, identify themes, review themes, define the themes and record the analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017:3354). The choice of this approach was considered appropriate due to its relevance in analysing data obtained through the focus group discussion. Within the thematic analysis framework, the researchers were able to transcribe, synthesise, organise, analyse and interpret the data. Synthesising and organising of data involved a coding process that allowed for data reduction in order to sieve data of impurities from the emerging themes. The themes that emerged were used to explain the characteristics that make adolescent girls vulnerable to bullying.

### Results

#### Some Characteristics Impacting Adolescent Girls' Vulnerability to Bullying

The girls who took part in the study clearly revealed some of what they felt caused them to be easy prey to bullies. These feelings are outlined thematically below.

#### *The link between low self-esteem and girls' bullying*

Self-esteem in the school context is a term used to reflect a learner's overall evaluation of his or her own worth. Such a psychosocial state encompasses beliefs and emotions such as triumph, despair, pride, and shame. Bauman (2012) notes that it is usually not very difficult to pick out learners with lower self-esteem, because while in class, such learners tend to be quiet, and do not readily participate in class activities. A learner's self-esteem may be reflected in their behaviour, with regards to their level of confidence in themselves, their sense of shyness, or level of thoughtfulness.

Evidence from the focus group discussion (FGD) suggests that some of the participants acknowledged having issues with low self-esteem that made them targets for bullying. However, the girls echoed that the feeling of low self-esteem emanates from the fact that they come from very humble families. Participants noted that in their

schools, it has become the norm that children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds socialise alone. One participant complained that the boys in the class always made fun of her, saying “*her home is made out of match sticks*,” and that she was greatly affected by the situation as she did not choose to be born in a poor family.

Low self-esteem further complicates the situation for the victims as their tendency to suppress their feelings increases. This scenario makes it difficult for such category of learners to confide in anyone, whether friends, parents or their teachers. According to Field (2007), such victims become isolated, misunderstood and unsupported. In line with the routine activity theory (RAT), the isolation and withdrawal that emerges from the feeling of low self-esteem thus prepares a good breeding ground for victimisation of such learners.

#### *Loneliness and girls' susceptibility to bullying*

Learner loneliness can be conceptualised as his or her subjective feeling of isolation. Rosenstreich and Margalit (2015) argue that such a psychological state of the mind can have a very harmful effect on learners' physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being. Loneliness emerged as one of the factors contributing to the bullying of adolescent girls in the schools according to the FGD data. When the group participants were asked how bullying contributed, one of the girls noted “*when the students, especially the boys see that you are lonely, they approach you and mock you. They associate your loneliness with poverty. Sometimes they will throw leftovers like slices of bread at you.*”

The participants in the FGD indicated that loneliness attracts bullying in the sense that when the other children see that a girl is lonely, they want to know why she is not socialising with the others. Failure to give them a satisfactory answer results in acts of bullying. One participant said:

*I am very lonely at school. I keep to myself even during break and lunch time. The other students would look at what I am eating, and mock me. Sometimes the students, particularly the boys would use their cell phones to take photographs of my lunch box and its contents. I do not have friends, but would love to have at least one.*

When asked why she didn't have a friend, she said that none of the girls approached her. She said she was afraid to approach them herself for fear of being rejected. One participant in the group offered to keep her company during break and lunch time, as she also did not have a friend.

#### *Parenting style and girls' predisposition to bullying*

Parenting styles matter with regards to how children develop and socialise within the classroom. Some parents may be overprotective, while others may manipulate and bully. There is evidence that the families of victims are sometimes

characterised by overly protective mothers, who may discourage the development of independence and self-confidence in their children, particularly the girls (Estell, Farmer, Irvin, Crowther, Akos & Boudah, 2009). Some of the participants in the study pointed out that their parents were over-protective of them, for lack of trust. The girls in the study indicated that they were not allowed to socialise with other children. It would then appear that over-protection from parents caused some of the girls to lack the ability to protect themselves from the bullies.

This notwithstanding, it emerged from the FGD that equally, some of the girls' parents were not at all concerned about the welfare of their children. On the one hand, some of the girls complained of over-protection, as we have noted above, while others bemoaned the lack of protection on the part of their parents. According to Coloroso (2008), children raised by such parents who do not show concern for their welfare are vulnerable to bullies, and make no attempt to stand up to them, giving in to their requirements. Macintyre (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. One participant indicated that her parents cared less about her schooling and her movements. To buttress her against the parental lack of care she experienced, the girl participant notes:

*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.*

It is obvious that the girl participant and those like her feel that their parents' lack of care resulted in them being prone to being bullied. What is more, within the framework of the routine activity theory (RAT), it has been previously argued in this paper that bullying acts are most likely going to occur when there is an accessible target, and where there is no vigilance of a capable guardian (Pimple, 2016).

#### **Discussion**

The findings of the study revealed that a number of characteristics contribute to make adolescent girls vulnerable to bullying. Low self-esteem and loneliness were cited by the victims as the most common characteristics. This would seem to concur with the findings in the study by Pontzer (2010) in which he argues that adolescents are vulnerable to bullying because of low self-esteem. Although this study did not obtain data on the causes of low self-esteem among the girls, so as to rule out other factors.

A study by Rigby (2010) notes that the list of characteristics that might predict bullying is so

wide that, at some point in their life, all children may be in at least one of the following categories, which include low self-esteem, inability to solve problems, emotional problems, signs of depression, low academic achievements and absenteeism, behavioural disorders, sleeping disorders, stress as well as avoiding eye contact. Rigby (2010) also reports that victims of bullying tend to see themselves as less popular than bullies. The findings of the current study concur with those revealed earlier by Juvonen and Graham (2001), who also note that the levels of self-esteem were lower in victims of bullying than among perpetrators. This notwithstanding, within the framework of Routine Activity Theory (RAT), the feeling of low self-esteem appears to feed into the scheme of the bullying perpetrators. Having perceived a sense of lack of confidence and weakness in their victims, the bully then becomes motivated, while the victim presents an appropriate source of gratification (Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996).

Loneliness emerged in this study to be one of the factors contributing to the bullying of adolescent girls in the schools. FGD data reveals that when the bullies saw that the child was lonely, they approached her and mocked her. They would interrogate her to find out why she was not mixing with other students. Her failure to give a satisfactory answer would result in acts of bullying. Sometimes, schooling presents a lonely journey for some learners away from home. This scenario may seem to be the case, mainly for learners who come from over-protective homes; such learners would most likely feel unprotected and insecure when distanced from home by the necessity of schooling. From the RAT framework, such revelations further authenticate the argument that the presence of a motivated offender is necessarily fuelled by the absence of capable guardians that might intervene. For this reason, the act of bullying is not so much about feeling lonely on the part of the girls; it would seem to be justified by the fact that the perpetrator found loneliness a motivating pre-condition for bullying.

The above findings are similar to the findings of a study conducted by Brunstein Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld and Gould (2007), in which they postulate that those who often felt lonely were more likely to report being a target of bullying. Victimized adolescents may be widely disliked, or not well-liked by their peers. On the other hand, adolescents are more likely to seek out targets who have been isolated by their peer group without receiving any negative evaluation (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). Victimized adolescents often experience peer rejection and deviant affiliation, leaving them more vulnerable to aggressive peers. Many victims of bullying have a tendency to suppress their feelings, which makes it difficult for them to confide in anyone. As a result, this

increases their feelings of isolation, anxiety, and withdrawal. According to Field (2007), they become isolated, misunderstood, and unsupported. Therefore, these problems become a good breeding ground for victimisation.

Parenting style has been noted to play key role in how an individual responds to incidents of bullying within a public arena such as the classroom. The FGD evidence indicated that some were brought up by authoritarian parents, who were over-protective, and which made them less able to stand up for themselves in the absence of their over-protective and capable guardians. This particular finding concurs with the findings by Fraser-Thill (2007), who revealed that parents of bullying victims tend to over-protect their children, thereby rendering their children powerless, which increases their chances of being bullied while away from the watchful eyes of their over-protective parents.

On the other hand, FGD reveals that some of the female participants experienced a permissive parenting style; a scenario in which parenting is high in warmth, but low in control, and that allows children to behave as they so wish. Coloroso (2008) states that children raised within such parenting style are vulnerable to bullying, as they make no attempt to stand up to bullies. Macintyre (2009) believes children must be taught by their families to look after themselves in order to reduce their susceptibility to deviant forms of manipulation, such as bullying. Children are exposed to numerous forms of manipulation when their parents do not feature much in their lives.

The harmful effects of bullying specifically on adolescent girls are varied and long-term; as such these should not be neglected. Such effects extend the academic lives of girls, and to other victims of bullying. The schooling experiences of victims are often badly compromised. Girl victims who end up dropping out of school as a result of their bullying experiences are likely to have their future blurred with uncertainties. The impact of bullying on the career prospects and personality of adolescent girls therefore requires urgent intervention that calls upon experts to consider options that target both girls and boys in context.

#### Recommendations

To tackle the menace of school bullying for both perpetrators and victims, all stakeholders must be brought on board. It is recommended for teachers to endeavour to create a classroom environment that will make it less likely for learners to want to bully those around them. This refers to positive classroom climate in which all learners are taught the importance of compassionate as well as learner-to-learner supportive behaviour. Teachers must live out these positive attitudes themselves, such that learners perceive their efficacy. Teachers may require additional professional development skills

in the area of managing positive classroom environment that discourage bullying among learners.

School psychologists and counsellors should work in partnership with teachers in assisting them to manage behaviours that encourage bullying among learners. They can provide on-site training to teachers in managing and preventing bullying inducing behaviours among learners. As part of this training, Van der Zanden et al. (2015:477) note that by encouraging teachers to reflect on their own behaviours, “school psychologists can help teachers to fine-tune their skills and to maintain changes in their interpersonal behaviours over time.”

On the other hand, school psychologists and counsellors have a duty with the victims in particular, as well as perpetrators. The girl victims in this study had difficulties opening up their experiences with the researchers. This particular attitude could be one of the long-term effects of bullying that borders on self-esteem and self-image of the victims. School psychologists and counsellors can develop positive personality-relevant and empowerment training skills for the girl victims. Such training may go a long way to beef-up the self-confidence of the victims in being able to handle the situation in many ways.

Finally, the position of teachers makes it imperative that they work in partnership with parents of victors and victims. Theoretically, no-one has more information about girls than their parent/s. As with the victims, sometimes the problem is about getting the information in the most appropriate manner from the parents. Teachers’ professional development training ought to include skills in communicating with parents in specific issues as bullying. Working in partnership with parents may go a long way in helping victims to recover much quicker.

#### Limitations of the Study

The researchers had some challenges with some of the girl participants, who proved reluctant to open up. Issues around bullying for the adolescent girl victims were considered too sensitive, more so because it touched on their self-esteem resulting from bullying experiences. This scenario may have impacted the quality of data obtained from the participants on the issues in focus. The use of instruments such as the participant diary may have been very useful in this regard. Future researchers are encouraged to test such methods.

The diary instrument is a qualitative approach to data collection in which a short multi-page booklet will be handed to the participants to carefully and privately document their experiences relating to the area being researched. The researcher/s collects these little booklets from the participants at the end of a given period. Depending

on the duration of the fieldwork, diaries may be administered up to five times, and collected from each participant diary keeper, say, at the end of each week. Diaries have the potential to reveal valuable information that the participant may not be willing to disclose by other means. We would therefore remind our readers to be mindful of these limitations when making use of this paper.

#### Note

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