

## **TOWARDS A MODEL OF COMBATING PEER HARASSMENT AMONG RURAL DAY SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS IN ZIMBABWE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article focuses on the views of what teachers can do to deal with peer harassment which is rampant among learners in Zimbabwean rural day schools so that the wellbeing of learners is enhanced. The study comprised of fifteen learners who were asked to suggest what teachers could do to assist learners when they fell victim to peer harassment. A phenomenological design in which semi-structured interviews were used to elicit the responses from the learners was used to generate the data. Participants for the study were purposively. The criteria for selection was that the participants were aged between thirteen to fifteen years and that they had experienced harassment either as observers or victims. A major finding was that most teachers were not doing much to assist the learners. Failure to do so often led to a number of psychological problems which influenced the wellbeing of learners at school. Most teachers appeared to lack the necessary skills with which they could assist learners who reported that they were being harassed. The study concluded that the simple model could be inculcated in the teacher training curricula to assist rural school teachers to combat peer harassment in their classrooms.

**Keywords:** Youth, model, zero tolerance.

### **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Peer harassment has become pervasive in school settings the world over (Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Siziya, Muula and Rudatsikira (2012, p. 31) also describe it as a public health concern. According to Bellmore and Cillessen (2006, p. 209), exposure to peer harassment in school has a negative impact on learners. Many studies have linked peer harassment to psychosocial problems such as loneliness, rejection, drug abuse, aggression, low self-esteem as well as to psychosomatic problems that include headaches, insomnia and dizziness (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010; Fleming and Jacobsen, 2009; Siziya et al., 2009; Rusby et al., 2005). Studies by Troop-Gordon and Quenette, (2010); Fleming and Jacobsen, (2009); Siziya et al.,(2009); Rusby et al., (2005) also associated peer harassment with school-related problems such as high rates of absenteeism, truancy, lowering of grades and eventually dropping out of school. Houbre, Tarquinio, Thuillier and Hergott (2006, pp.195-196) observed that there was no loser-winner situation for those involved in peer harassment with regards to the effects that it has on an individual since both the harasser and the harassed both experience psychosocial and psychosomatic problems in varying degrees. According to Konu and Rimpela (2002)'s theory of school wellbeing, the social relationships among learners in a school context determine the nature of the wellbeing of the learners.

Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008) acknowledge that peer harassment is a complicated phenomenon and an attempt to define it risks excluding other important aspects of the

phenomenon. In this study peer harassment was perceived as all unsolicited acts by one individual learner directed at another with the intention of harming, intimidating, offending or humiliating the victim within a school setting (Hutzell and Payne, 2012). Peer harassment occurs when both the perpetrator and the victim are peers. In most schools peer harassment is largely referred to as bullying.

In Africa, peer harassment among school going pupils has also been reported in a number of countries. Siziya, Rudatsikira and Muula (2012) The researchers reported that 62.5% of secondary school going adolescents in Zambia indicated that they had been bullied often within a period of thirty days. In another study conducted in Botswana, Shehu (2009) also reported high rates of peer provocation among physical education adolescents. In Zimbabwe, Shoko (2012) reports that educators in some rural schools viewed peer harassment as a rite of passage. In her research Shoko reports that some of the participants who participated in her research even argued that that the 'harassment' is a western notion which did not warrant any serious research. Another term for harassment in Zimbabwean schools is also largely considered as bullying.

In response to WHO (2007) attempt to minimise bullying/ harassment in schools so as to make schools safe havens for children the Ministry of Education and Culture in Zimbabwe merely states through circular minute 35 of 2008 that 'bullying or harassment of one student by another shall not be tolerated...Those who are guilty risk exclusion, expulsion and a ban from attending school in Zimbabwe (p.3). Although this circular exists it appears to be a top down attempt which is geared towards minimising the problem since the learners' voices are strikingly missing from this intervention. Choga (2012, p. 3) describes it as a cancer which needs to be dealt with among learners in Zimbabwean schools. Leach (2008) also confirms that schools some schools are institutions in which learners are taught to engage in various forms of violence and harassment. Responding to the need to make schooling a pleasant endeavour for all Glew, Yu Fan, Katon and Rivara (2008) also concur that many lawsuits have been filed against American schools which fail to protect learners from being bullied or harassed.

The World Health Organisation has since argued that schools should be made havens of safety so that schooling may become an pleasant experience for all learners. In an apparent need to ensure that most schools achieve acceptable levels of safety WHO (2007) suggested distributed guidelines which were aimed at achieving optimal safety levels with intention of improving learner wellbeing at school. For WHO, teachers have a significant role to play so as to ensure that learning was made safe and enjoyable to all learners. Gudyanga, Mudihlwa and Wadesango (2014) also concur and they further suggest that a model which could guide teachers in trying to combat peer harassment among learners be formulated. Troope Gordon (2015) also concurs that teachers are the school's most useful resource in combating peer harassment since they can foster positive interpersonal relationships among their learners at classroom level. In her argument, Gordon designed a model which could be used by teachers to conceptualise peer harassment among learners. The model further suggests that teachers are at the centre of improving learners' interpersonal relationships with a view to minimising the negative influences which peer harassment may have on the learners' wellbeing. This study tries to present a model which the teachers could use to combat the problem of peer harassment at classroom level. Gordon (2015) also agrees that teachers could act as very important agents of change when it came to handling issues of bullying.

Peer support systems. Such peer support systems could be formed by a group of learners at classroom level since they tend to know each other better and to relate with one another in a more intimate manner (Rivera and Menstrel, 2014).

The research was aimed at establishing what the learners thought teachers could do so as to minimise peer harassment in school. Motivated by the rising number of dropouts and suicides among learners, the researcher assumed that most schools lacked comprehensive models which the teachers could use to combat the problem of peer harassment. It was also assumed that a useful model could be designed by using the ideas which were given by the learners themselves since they (the Learners) were the ones who were harassing one another.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Research has established that most school environments are characterized by victimization and harassment (Hutzell & Payne, 2012). According to Siziya et.al (2012), peer harassment in schools is increasingly becoming a public health problem as learners who are constantly exposed to harassment suffer from stress-related problems.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The objective of this study was to explore learners' views relating to what they thought teachers could do in rural day secondary schools to minimise cases of harassment among learners. The guiding question was 'What do you think teachers can do to minimise peer harassment among learners in a school setting?'

The following section of the report presents the methodology which was used to generate the data for the study.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological design to generate the data. Phenomenology explores participants' views relating to a particular phenomenon. In a phenomenological study participants are given a chance to present their perceptions of the phenomenon which is being studied. Creswell (2013) further notes that the participants may be probed to express their views on how the problem which is being studied may be minimised. In a phenomenological study, participants' responses are normally presented verbatim and thus the use of statistics is minimised. Phenomenological studies most often avoid the use of a cookbook approach in which tends to group participants' responses into categories. Categorising the individual participants' responses often presents gives an incorrect impression of what the individual participants would have said. This often creates an unbalanced view of the responses and at its worst it puts words into the participants' mouths thus it threatens the validity of the findings of the study. To minimise the threat to validity participants' individual responses were given as opposed to bunching them together and converting the responses to statistical data.

### **POPULATION**

This paper argues that an effective model could be derived from the views of the learners who were often victims of peer harassment. Thus, the population of the study comprised of Form three learners drawn from three rural day schools in Zimbabwe. The focus on rural a setting was motivated by Evans, Smokowski, and Cotter, (2014) who argue that the forms of harassment are contextual. They further argue that rural learners are often exposed to this problem and more often than not they are often left on their own since teachers tend to ignore

their reports. Furthermore, the choice of a rural setting from which to generate the data was premised on the understanding that learners within a rural setting in Zimbabwe are not often exposed to the sources of information which learners in urban settings are often exposed to, as a result their knowledge of how to combat peer harassment would not be similar to the views of their urban counterparts.

### **SAMPLE AND SAMPLING PROCEDURES**

After obtaining permission from the Ministry of Education in Zimbabwe, form three learners in three rural day schools in Gweru district were approached and requested to volunteer to participate in the study. An invitation letter was circulated in the schools through the school heads. Creswell (2013) emphasizes the importance of ensuring that in selecting participants for interviews the researcher needs to identify participants who are not hesitant to talk about their experiences. The invitations, which also carried a brief explanation about the study, were enclosed in envelopes clearly labelled with the researcher's name. Learners were asked to express their desire to participate (or lack of it) by ticking either 'yes' or 'no' on the spaces provided on the tear off slip of the invitation, signing it and sealing it in the envelope provided before placing the sealed envelope in the suggestion box located on the school premises. Fifteen learners who indicated an interest in participating in the study were then approached privately as individuals and were given further explanations about the roles they were expected to play in the study. Eight of the participants were male and seven were female. Approaching participants as individuals minimized the possibilities of exposing them to further peer harassment as a result of their participation.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study used a phenomenological design. Phenomenology allows participants to describe their experiences from their own perspectives based on the manner in they experience them. Gray (2009, p. 22) suggests that a researcher may select five to fifteen participants for a phenomenological study. This study comprised of fifteen participants. The phenomenological interviews were useful not only because the researcher could explore and record the participants' descriptions of their experiences of peer harassment, but also because during the data generation process it was possible to observe and take note of participants' non-verbal cues which helped to clarify issues and contribute towards the thickness of the description (Creswell, 2013).

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Data was analysed by first transcribing the interviews. The transcriptions were followed by a reading of the transcripts and an identification of key issues which attempted to suggest the intervention strategies which teachers may use so as to minimise peer harassment among learners. All suggestions were noted down and read over and over to ensure that the insights gained were valid. Similar ideas were also grouped together to avoid duplicating ideas. The analysis procedure was inspired by Creswell (2013) who argues that effective data analysis should be reiterative in nature. Each reading of the responses gave deeper and clearer insights of what the participants' responses meant. Thus the spiral approach ensured that the researcher did not impose her own views on what the participants meant and this made the interpretations genuine as it minimised researcher bias which could easily creep in and spoil the validity of the findings.

### **RESULTS**

All the fifteen participants revealed that the teachers were often judgemental and they often believed what the perpetrators said in an attempt to defend themselves whenever they made

complaints that they were being harassed. The female participants who numbered eight in total concurred that they sometimes tended to doubt their teachers' capabilities to stop peer harassment. In particular participant C said *'I reported my molesters to the teachers several times to the teachers, but then the teachers just dropped the issue'*. Participant B suggested that the teachers were not very much concerned about what was happening to the learners particularly when they were out of class. She further argued that the teachers' failure to monitor the learners as they played appeared to provide the perpetrators with more opportunities to harass other learners since they knew that no adult was watching them. Participant G accused the teachers of making empty promises and they later did nothing to stop the harassment. Concurring with Participant G participant E said in an apparently accusatory manner, said *'Once they (teachers) said that the issue would be taken to the office but that hasn't happened yet'*. This also suggested that the teachers did not take reports of peer harassment seriously thus those who harassed her continued to do so unchecked.

Participant C disclosed that even after telling Ms X that someone was harassing her because she had instructed her to sweep, the girl did not take heed of the teacher's orders and she further bragged that *'There was nothing the teacher could do to her to make her sweep'*. She seemed to doubt her teachers' ability to keep secrets since she quipped that *'I felt that if I told the teacher he would talk openly about some issues which the victim wanted to be kept secret'*. This implied that she chose to suffer in silence. Her decision to do so obviously meant that her experiences of being harassed would continue unchecked.

Participant A emphasised that he often looked up to school authorities and in particular the teachers to assist him to deal with the problem but he never got the help which he hoped to get from any of the teachers. The responses of these participants implied that very few victims often reported incidents of peer harassment at school since the teachers did not do much to assist them in avoiding being harassed by other learners. As a result, most of the participants chose to suffer in silence and merely hoped for divine intervention as the only way of ending the problem. Participant D tried to demonstrate how victims often ended up putting their hope their hope that only God experienced because of being harassed by other learners at school, one out the seven females who participated said she only prayed to *God... deal with her one day* (perpetrator). One male participant indicated that when he felt harassed and he could not stand it anymore he kept to himself during break time at school and merely watched others having fun. However, he lamented that it was not easy for him to avoid having fun with his friends. Another male participant revealed that he sneaked away from school well before lessons ended to avoid being harassed while two out of the eight males in one school who had befriended one another so as to comfort each other ended up learning to tell lies to their molesters if they did not find the money with which to pay the boys who were harassing them. Asked where they got the money from with which they paid the boys who harassed them, the two male participants were elusive giving the researcher the impression that the two victims had developed unacceptable means of getting the money. He however, did not say where and how he got the money to appease the boys who were molesting him. It was evident that he either used money which his parents would have given him to buy snacks for break or food for his lunch. Participant H openly said that sometimes he gave away his own lunch to the boys who were harassing him. One female participant emphasised how she often cried and even told her mother that she did no longer wanted to go to school at all. Other participants revealed that they often got assistance from friends who sympathised with them. The friends often merely assisted them by offering them some money to appease the bullies and that such kind of friends did not expect that the victims should pay back the money which they would have given them. The friends just assisted out of a good will or in

an attempt to create lasting friendships with the victims hoping that they too would receive similar assistance if they fell victim to the perpetrators' harassment. Participant C revealed that some victims whom he was not keen to name would sometimes borrow from friends and they pay them back whenever they got the money. Another form of solidarity with the victim was that there were some learners who boldly challenged the bullies to stop harassing their victims. The participants' different responses indicated that peer harassment influenced the learners' wellbeing negatively and as a result they learnt to devise different ways of dealing with the problem.

The participants were then asked to suggest what they wished teachers could do so that their welfare and happiness could improve.

## INTERVENTION STRATEGIES AS GIVEN BY PARTICIPANTS

The following responses were reveal what the participants expected their teachers to do to combat peer harassment among learners. The suggestions which the learners gave are presented as verbatim below.

- Teachers need to dissuade students from provoking each other (Participant C).*
- *...there are things like Scripture Union. Even during assemblies people should be taught that they should understand other students' situations. (Participant F)*
- Teachers should explain that if a girl doesn't like a boy the boy should just accept that she doesn't like him, she's not the only girl in the world. (Participant G)*
- Teachers must show some concern when we are being harassed. It's better to tell the person to stop what they are doing... (Participant E)*
- *I also think the teachers should monitor the playgrounds at break and during lunch ... they should take turns to do that. (Participant A)*
- I once heard my brother saying that his teacher often emphasised that he would not tolerate any learner who harassed others. I think our teacher should also copy that. (Participant B)*
- Teachers should ... emphasise that they would punish any learner who harassed others. (Participant J)*

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The suggestions which all the participants made seemed to suggest that ending harassment among learners lay squarely on the teachers' shoulders. It was also evident that the participants strongly felt that the teachers should lobby school authorities to design anti harassment policies which were aimed at combating peer harassment among learners (Gudyanga, Mudihlwa and Wadesango, 2014). Based on this finding, it was evident that the teachers needed to be guided on how they could act as agents of change within the communities in which they taught. The teachers could assist in helping the communities to encourage communities to discourage some norms and values which were impacting negatively on the learners' wellbeing. Most participants agreed that the schools were critical in combating peer harassment among learners. Unfortunately in this study it emerged that the schools did not seem to have effective anti- harassment policies which are critical in combating peer harassment. Based on what the participants said it also appeared as if teacher the education curriculum did not place much emphasis on imparting skills which the teachers could use to train teachers to recognise the need to come up with ideas which could feed into the design of effective anti harassment policies. The findings appeared to contradict WHO (2003)'s perceptions that schools were expected create learning spaces which are sensitive to

the emotions of the learners. According to Egbochukwu (2007) no school personnel should perceive peer harassment as child's play.

Troop Gordon (2015) also concurs that it is imperative that the teachers should be equipped with skills which may assist them to reduce harassment among learners. Teachers needed to initiate classroom talk which would assist the learners to collaborate with one another in combating peer harassment (Smith, 2004). A model for dealing with the problem of learners who harassed other learners was also lacking as evidenced by the variation in the answers which the participants gave to the question on whether the teachers viewed the whole harassment problems in their classrooms. The model could furnish teachers with basic steps which they could utilize in teaching learners to leave harmoniously with each other. The individual teachers within the schools need to develop listening and observation skills which could assist learners in improving their interpersonal relationships within their classrooms. Teachers could achieve this by creating platforms within their classrooms during which the learners could discuss how they could ensure that their social lives within the classroom setting could be enhanced.

A disturbing finding was that the teachers often dismissed learners who complained that they were being harassed under the pretext that they were disturbing them or that the complainants were merely seeking undue attention. Another finding was that during the school break or manual work sessions learners were left unattended and that it was during such times that they got victimized

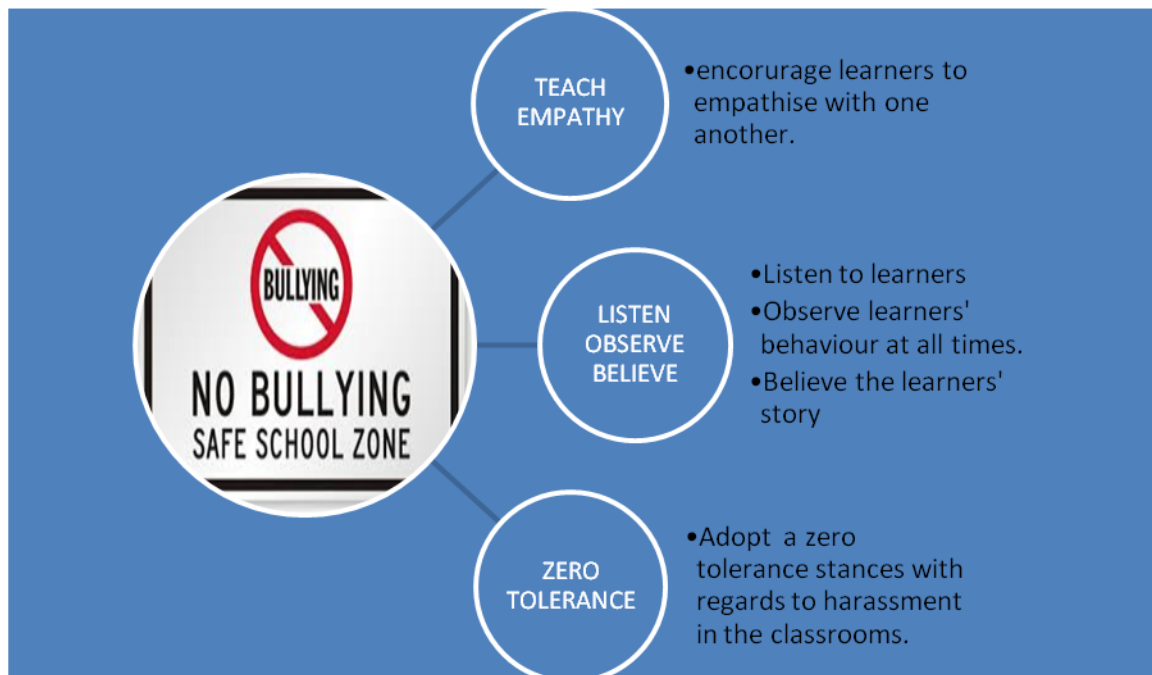
Listening skills on the part of the teacher also seemed to worry the victims. The few teachers who listened sometimes believed the perpetrators never intended to harm their victims and such gullibility on the teachers' part jeopardized the safety of the victims. By not punishing offenders, most teachers put the learners in their classrooms at risk and so their wellbeing was negatively influenced.

A more pertinent finding was that it was also evident that some teachers were unable to keep the complaints which they got from the victims confidentially and this implied that the teachers were failing to protect the victims. The Ministry of Education did not seem to have any specific rules regulations which could guide the teachers' efforts of combating the problem of peer harassment. The scenario which the participants depicted appeared to explain most victim's decisions not to report and silently surrender their problems to God. The participants seemed to suggest that they needed to be listened to and also protected by the teachers. Some of them seemed to suggest that they desired to see the perpetrators getting punished for their misdeeds.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concluded that learners felt that their teachers could play an active role in combating peer harassment among learners. The findings however revealed that the teachers were not playing an active role in ensuring that the learners' safety and wellbeing was guaranteed while at school. This was probably escalated by the fact that the teacher training curriculum was silent on the subject of how teachers could minimize harassment among learners. The following section therefore suggests a simple model which could be incorporated into the teacher training curriculum so as to assist to equip them with basic skills of dealing with the problem of harassment among learners.

## RECOMMNDATIONS



**Fig. 1. A model for combating peer harassment in the classroom**

### Teach empathy

Teacher training curricula should include the teaching of how teachers could train learners to empathize with one another.

### Listen, observe and believe

Teachers need to undergo programs to enhance their listening skills and to cultivate observation skills. Furthermore teachers need to be trained to believe every report of harassment by learners and to find ways of dealing with the problem.

Zero tolerance of harassment of learners.

Teachers should adopt a zero tolerance for peer harassment in their classrooms and they should express their stance to all the learners in their classrooms. Teachers must assist all perpetrators and victims of peer harassment to understand that harassment of whatever form is unacceptable in their classrooms.

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