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Breaking the Cycle: School Leadership in Action for Creating a Bully-Free Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

Bullying remains a persistent challenge, affecting both students and the overall school environment. Enhancing the school management team's (SMT) capacity to address this issue helps create safer, more supportive environments that foster quality education, aligning with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal. This study explores strategies to enhance the leadership practices of SMT in addressing bullying in South African secondary schools. The study adopted an interpretative paradigm and a qualitative approach, with a multiple case study design. Three secondary schools and nine SMT members were selected using purposive sampling. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and was analyzed thematically. The findings highlight several key areas for improvement. Professional development through workshops was identified as a crucial method for equipping SMT with the knowledge and skills to tackle bullying. The study also found that collaboration with external stakeholders, including the Department of Inclusive Education, the South African Police Service, correctional services, and Non-Governmental Organizations, is essential to provide a holistic response to bullying. Additionally, the study suggests that district-based support teams should broaden their scope, shifting from only curriculum-related matters to social challenges like bullying. Furthermore, integrating bullying prevention into the Life Orientation curriculum was recommended to raise awareness and equip students with the skills to prevent bullying. The study recommends regular training, greater collaboration, and curriculum reforms to foster a bullying-free school culture. The study concludes that a distributed leadership approach, where responsibility is shared among SMTs, external stakeholders, and the district, is essential for creating an environment where bullying can be managed.

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains a pervasive challenge in educational institutions worldwide, posing significant threats to students' safety, psychological well-being, and academic success. According to Hikmat (2024), bullying constitutes any form of intentional, persistent aggression or unlawful conduct aimed at harming or dehumanizing a vulnerable individual. Similarly, Krishna and Souymaja (2022) define bullying as deliberate, hostile behaviour exhibited by an individual or group against a victim who cannot defend themselves over a prolonged period. This persistent issue affects

learners across various educational contexts and continues to hinder the creation of safe and conducive learning environments (Mahon et al., 2023).

Globally, the prevalence of bullying has been extensively documented. The World Education Forum reported that bullying remains a widespread phenomenon in schools, affecting learners of all genders and representing a major international concern (Global Partnership for Education [GPE], 2019). In specific regions, such as Khamis Mushait City in Southwestern Saudi Arabia, research by Alsaleem (2021) revealed that approximately 76% of secondary school learners had experienced bullying. Similarly, a study by Wei and Graber (2023) on high school learners in North Cyprus, involving 856 adolescents aged 15 to 18, found that 9% of learners were identified as bullies, 12.2% as victims, and 5.6% as both bullies and victims.

Bullying in schools is also significantly affecting the African continent. The Global School-Based Student Health Survey (GSHS) highlights widespread bullying across African secondary schools (Mosala, 2023). A study conducted in Malawi, encompassing 561 learners, indicated that 39.6% of male learners and 33.8% of female learners had experienced peer-to-peer bullying and violence (Cahil et al., 2020).

In South Africa, despite legislative and institutional commitments to child protection, bullying persists as a major concern in schools. Reports from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) indicate a high prevalence of violence in secondary schools, with bullying being a common manifestation of such violence (DBE, 2024). Furthermore, legal experts from Harrington Johnson Wands Attorney and Conveyancers (HJWC) estimate that bullying affects over 3.2 million learners in South Africa annually. Alarmingly, 67% of bullied children do not seek assistance from teachers, and 90% of bullying incidents occur among learners within school premises (HJWC, 2024).

Given the gravity of bullying and its detrimental effects, it is imperative to explore leadership practices that school management teams (SMTs) can implement to address and mitigate this issue. Leadership is critical in shaping school environments and fostering a culture of safety, respect, and accountability (Mosala, 2023; Steyn & Singh, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to investigate leadership practices that enhance the capacity of SMT leadership practices to address bullying in secondary schools. The following question guides the study. What leadership practices could enhance the school management team's capacity to address bullying in secondary schools?

The distributed leadership theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how SMTs can address school bullying. This theory challenges traditional top-down leadership models by emphasizing collective leadership responsibility and the involvement of multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes (Harris, 2008). Distributed leadership fosters collaboration, decentralization, and adaptive leadership, enabling school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and external organizations to work together to combat bullying (Bush, 2013; Harris & Spillane, 2008). Distributed leadership ensures that anti-bullying initiatives are more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable by empowering individuals across different school system levels.

The relevance of distributed leadership to this study lies in its capacity to enhance the effectiveness of SMTs in addressing bullying. By decentralizing decision-making, SMTs can involve all relevant stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, departmental officials, NGOs, and students, in developing and implementing anti-bullying strategies (Spillane, 2005). Moreover, this approach allows SMTs to adapt to the ever-changing dynamics of bullying, ensuring that interventions remain relevant and practical (Bolden, 2011). Through shared responsibility and collaborative efforts, distributed leadership equips schools with the necessary tools to foster a safe and respectful learning environment.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research was conducted in three secondary schools in the Free State province of South Africa, specifically within Quintile Three schools. These schools serve economically disadvantaged communities and are categorized as non-fee-paying institutions that receive government subsidies to provide students with meals and stationery (Letuma, 2024a). This study forms part of a broader master's dissertation research project.

Paradigm and Research Approach

In this study, an interpretative paradigm was employed, which is based on a thorough comprehension of the subject matter and looks at how people perceive their environment (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Rahi, 2017). The interpretative paradigm allows researchers to conduct investigations in a natural setting and gain an understanding of human events in a social context (Nickerson, 2024). The researcher was able to interact with SMTs at schools and learn about their perspectives regarding strategies that can improve the leadership practice of SMTs to address bullying in secondary schools. A qualitative research approach was adopted to allow the generation of deep meanings and motives that underlie human routines and issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Taherdoost, 2022).

Multiple Case Study Design

The study employed a multiple case study design involving an in-depth exploration of specific events. Case studies provide a detailed analysis of phenomena by selecting individuals from various contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the cases examined were three secondary schools.

Data Generation Tool and Sampling

Three secondary schools and nine SMTS, three from each school, were selected using purposive sampling. The participants were selected on the basis that they are in leadership positions and they were the most relevant people to assist with the information the researcher sought (Turner, 2019). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data for this study. Semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to preplan the questions ahead of the interview and flexibility to probe for robust data generation during the interview (Maree, 2016; Strydom et al., 2015).

Table 1. Biographical data of participants

Name	School	Position	Gender	Experience in Leadership	Highest qualification
P1	A	Principal	Male	13	BEd
P2	A	Deputy Principal	Male	5	BA Honours (PGCE)
P3	A	Departmental Head	Male	7	BEd Honours
P4	B	Principal	Male	15	BEd Honours
P5	B	Deputy Principal	Female	8	ACE
P6	B	Departmental Head	Female	5	BEd
P7	C	Principal	Male	9	ACE
P8	C	Deputy Principal	Male	5	BEd Honours

Name	School	Position	Gender	Experience in Leadership	Highest qualification
P9	C	Departmental Head	Male	2	BEd

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyze the data. According to Riger and Sigurvinsdottir (2016), TA involves systematically identifying, categorizing, and interpreting significant patterns or themes within a dataset. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2020), this method enables researchers to observe and understand shared experiences and meanings. The study applied thematic analysis to uncover patterns and themes within the data that were considered relevant and insightful (Strydom et al., 2015).

To ensure accuracy before interpreting the data, the researchers familiarized themselves with it by repeatedly listening to and reviewing the recordings. They then generated codes based on the collected information. These codes were further analyzed to develop themes, ensuring a structured and deliberate material organization. The named and defined themes provided more profound insights into the participants' perspectives. Additionally, the researcher identified similarities and differences among participants' viewpoints.

Through this thematic analysis, the study offered profound insights into both shared and unique participant experiences, ultimately enhancing the understanding of effective strategies to strengthen SMT leadership practices while addressing bullying in secondary schools.

Ethical Consideration

The researcher sought permission from the Free State Department of Education to visit the selected schools. Ethical approval was then obtained from the University of the Free State's ethics committee under the reference number UFS-HSD2024/1444. Adhering to the university's code of conduct was essential to ensuring ethical compliance throughout the study. Following this, the researcher requested consent from SMT for their participation in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Data revealed that SMTs can enhance their capabilities in addressing bullying in secondary schools in various ways. Participants proposed workshops, involvement of different stakeholders, support from the District-Based Support Team (DBST), and the idea that bullying should form part of the curriculum in secondary schools.

Workshops

The participants proposed that the department or school can organize workshops to capacitate the SMT members on what bullying is, the different forms and effects of bullying, and strategies that SMTs can use to address bullying in secondary schools.

To improve the capability of SMTs to address bullying in school, P8 (School C) mentioned:

> *Organize a workshop where SMTs are invited to a workshop where they will be capacitated about bullying, what it is, and how to identify incidents of bullying because sometimes, as SMT members, there are certain incidents of bullying that we take lightly, whereas it affects the children, so SMT need workshop even on how to identify those incidents and how they can address it because bullying does not affect learners only.*

P6 (School B) similarly shared:

> *As SMTs, we need a workshop not once every 3 years but at least twice a year where SMTs are capacitated on how to deal with bullying in schools, and that training should involve experts such as a therapist or social worker.*

P2 (School A) further emphasized the importance of workshops in this way:

> *I think SMT members need to be educated through workshops about bullying because due to a lack of knowledge of what it is and how it can be addressed, sometimes SMTs end up being perpetrators of bullying instead of assisting in addressing it.*

The data showed the department should organize workshops more often to help SMTs address bullying in schools. It should not be a once-off workshop where SMTs attend for only one day, but it should be held several times a year. This is where SMT members will learn more about bullying, how to identify bullying incidents, and what strategies they can use to address bullying from experts.

Involvement of Different Stakeholders

The participants also proposed that to address bullying in schools, SMT members should involve various stakeholders in the school to assist in addressing bullying.

P7 (School C) shared:

> *The continuous involvement of different stakeholders in the school helps to reduce bullying. The section on inclusive education should be visible in schools where they talk about this issue in the assembly maybe twice a year. NGOs from the community should also raise awareness in schools as they usually come with an ex-convict to tell learners about the impact of bullying and invite SAPS to come to the assembly to address learners about bullying.*

P2 (School A) further said:

> *I think SMT have (again) needs to meet with all other stakeholders, such as social workers, SAPS, and NGOs and engage with one another to come up with strategies or ways in which collectively we come up with ways we can use to address bullying.*

The extract above suggests that to address bullying, it is not only about SMTs, but different stakeholders need to work hand-in-hand. From the data

Support of DBST

Participants indicated that the DBST (District-Based Support Team) support can also help address bullying in secondary schools.

P6 (School B) shared that there is a lack of support from DBST**:**

> *There is a lack of support from DBST when it comes to social issues, and they are more focused on curriculum, specifically in grade 12. They do not realize that certain social issues, such as bullying in schools, should be addressed to deliver the curriculum well. For example, in my school, there are gangs, and bullying is happening a lot verbally and physically, which affects the delivery of the curriculum since some of the learners no longer feel safe, and this increases absenteeism.*

P7 (School C) further elaborated on the needs of DBST in this way:

> *I think DBST should also play a role in addressing bullying as much as maybe their schedules are tight, but they should provide support to SMT in terms of social issues; in our school, drugs are a problem. I am saying this because whenever we do random searches, we find learners with marijuana with them and that says drugs are a problem and are the one leading cause of some incidents of bullying in our school, so DBST should also support schools in terms of reducing social issues.*

The data suggest that DBST focuses more on the school curriculum, especially in Grade 12, implying minimal exposure to various mechanisms SMT may employ to address bullying.

Bullying Should Form Part of the Curriculum

The participants showed that bullying is prevalent in secondary school, so if it could also be part of the curriculum, then it could help to emphasize the impact of bullying and how it can be addressed.

P9 (School C) proposed in this way to the Department of Education:

> *To assist learners and SMT in addressing bullying incidents in school, I think there should be an introduction to civic education where learners are taught what bullying is, the forms of bullying, the effects of bullying and how bullying can be addressed and build a better society.*

P8 (School C) further elaborated in this way:

> *I think the department should introduce a chapter specifically on life orientation where learners are taught about bullying because there are some chapters now in Life Orientations that are good but not relevant to our society's current issues. So, I think it should be reviewed, and bullying should form part of the curriculum for Life Orientation. In that way, it will be much easier when SMT comes up with strategies to address bullying because learners already know about bullying.*

The extract above shows that although Life Orientation has some aspects linked to bullying, it is limited and should be revised to emphasize this concept in schools.

Discussion

Workshops

The findings of this study highlight that strengthening SMT capabilities in addressing bullying requires targeted professional development through workshops. Participants emphasized that the Department of Education should facilitate regular training sessions to educate SMT members on the nature, effects, and management of bullying in secondary schools, aligning with the argument by Osborne and Hammoud (2017) that leadership plays a crucial role in addressing institutional challenges through structured training initiatives. Kilonzo (2018) asserts that workshops, conferences, and in-service training are essential for providing educators with the skills necessary to tackle the continuously changing difficulties in education. Likewise, Letuma (2024b) reinforces this perspective, emphasising that professional development is critical for initiatives designed to enable teachers to address disruptive behaviours, such as bullying.

From the Distributed Leadership (DL) theory perspective, shared leadership responsibility is fundamental in addressing bullying. School leadership should not be confined to SMTs alone but should be supported by district and provincial education structures. This study suggests that district offices should actively ensure that SMTs receive ongoing training on bullying prevention. Through this decentralized leadership approach, expertise is distributed across different levels of the educational system, reinforcing a collective response to bullying.

Involvement of Different Stakeholders

The study further reveals that addressing bullying effectively requires the involvement of various stakeholders beyond the school environment. Davids and Waghid (2016) emphasize that a cooperative learning environment is vital, as collaboration among teachers, school leaders, and external organizations helps model appropriate behaviour for learners. Participants in this study suggested extending invitations to the Department of Inclusive Education, SAPS, correctional services, and NGOs to assist in addressing bullying in secondary schools. Specifically, SAPS officers could address learners about the legal implications of bullying, while former perpetrators, now inmates, could share firsthand experiences of the long-term consequences of such behaviour.

Additionally, data indicate that the Quality Learning and Teaching Committee (QLTC), comprising pastors, councilors, nurses, and law enforcement representatives, could be pivotal in raising awareness about bullying. Modise (2022) underscores that the involvement of SMTs, school governing bodies (SGBs), and QLTC enhances school environments, reducing social ills and improving academic performance.

According to DL theory, collaboration is a key element in distributed leadership, emphasizing the need for teamwork and partnerships (Harris & Spillane, 2008). This study affirms that SMTs should actively engage with various stakeholders, including community organizations, law enforcement, and education officials, to create a holistic, multi-faceted approach to combating bullying.

The Role of District-Based Support Teams (DBST)

Participants noted that existing DBST structures primarily focus on curriculum-related issues, often overlooking social challenges such as bullying. They advocated for an expanded role of DBSTs in supporting schools academically and addressing behavioral issues. According to *the Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, DBSTs* are responsible for evaluating programs and recommending improvements, which should extend to anti-bullying interventions (Shava & Hystek, 2021).

DL theory underscores the importance of decentralized decision-making, ensuring that leadership responsibilities are distributed among various levels within an institution. By integrating DBSTs into anti-bullying efforts, SMTs can leverage additional resources and expertise, strengthening their capacity to address bullying effectively. This study suggests that such collaboration can create a more responsive and adaptable leadership structure that prioritizes both academic and social well-being.

Integrating Bullying into the Curriculum

The findings indicate that bullying remains a persistent issue in schools, underscoring the need to integrate it into the Life Orientation curriculum. Ojo and Mathabathe (2021) highlight that Life Orientation provides learners with essential life skills, preparing them to navigate social challenges, including peer aggression. However, many learners disengage from the subject due to its perceived lack of relevance (Radzilani-Makatu & Chauke, 2019). Participants in this study recommended a curriculum review to explicitly include bullying education, ensuring that learners understand its impact, prevention strategies, and reporting mechanisms.

From a DL perspective, adaptive leadership is critical in responding to evolving challenges. Leaders must be flexible and willing to modify existing structures to address current issues effectively (Bolden, 2011). Given the increasing prevalence of bullying, SMTs can benefit from ensuring that learners receive comprehensive education on the topic, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to prevent and report bullying incidents. Schools may foster a proactive rather than reactive approach to managing learner behaviour by embedding bullying awareness into the curriculum.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its valuable insights, this study has several limitations. First, it focuses only on SMT members, excluding teachers and learners whose perspectives could offer a more comprehensive understanding of bullying prevention. Second, the research is limited to three secondary schools in one province, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Third, qualitative data from semi-structured interviews rely on participants' perceptions, which may introduce bias or subjectivity. Fourth, the study does not account for long-term changes in bullying behaviour following leadership interventions, limiting its ability to assess sustained impact.

CONCLUSION

This study explores strategies to enhance the leadership practices of SMTs in addressing bullying. This study affirms that enhancing SMT capacity in addressing bullying requires a multi-faceted approach rooted in distributed leadership principles. Workshops, stakeholder collaboration, DBST support, and curriculum integration collectively strengthen the ability of SMTs to combat bullying. By embracing decentralized decision-making, shared responsibility, and adaptive leadership, SMTs can cultivate safer and more inclusive school environments. The findings underscore the need for continuous professional development and strategic partnerships to ensure sustained bullying prevention and intervention efforts. This study introduces several novel contributions to the discourse on bullying prevention in secondary schools. First, it applies Distributed Leadership (DL) theory as a lens to emphasize shared leadership responsibility in

addressing bullying, a perspective often overlooked in existing literature. Second, it proposes integrating bullying education into the Life Orientation curriculum, ensuring learners actively engage in prevention strategies. Lastly, it highlights the need for District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) to extend their role beyond academics to include behavioral interventions.

Based on the findings of this study, the following areas are recommended for further research: Firstly, explore learners' perceptions of the relevance of Life Orientation in addressing bullying, as understanding their views may help improve the subject's impact. Secondly, examine models of multi-stakeholder collaboration in tackling bullying, focusing on how partnerships between schools and external organizations can enhance intervention efforts. Thirdly, assess the effectiveness of Distributed Leadership (DL) in implementing anti-bullying strategies, particularly how shared leadership influences outcomes. Finally, analyze how anti-bullying education is integrated into the Life Orientation curriculum and its effectiveness in equipping learners with the knowledge and skills to respond to bullying.

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