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CYBERBULLYING KNOWLEDGE AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES: PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATORS IN A JOHANNESBURG SECONDARY SCHOOL, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Many educational institutions are using technology-enhanced learning especially after COVID-19. Studies have shown that increased access to technological tools is a precursor to incidents of cyberbullying. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, the study explored educators' knowledge and intervention strategies regarding cyberbullying in a secondary school located in Johannesburg, South Africa. A qualitative descriptive research design was used. A sample of eight educators working in the school were recruited using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using one-on-one interviews. Thematic analysis method was used to analyse the data. Findings revealed that the educators had sufficient knowledge of cyberbullying and how it affected learners. The study further revealed that the school had put in place interventions to prevent and manage cases of cyberbullying amongst learners, which included the use of grade controllers to monitor and report cases of cyberbullying to educators. However, interventions were found to be ineffective due to parental disengagement and learners not reporting cases of cyberbullying to the educators. Recommendations for the prevention and management of cyberbullying cases and future research are provided.

Key words: cyberbullying, knowledge, education, learners, secondary school, South Africa

Background

Globally, cyberbullying has become one of the leading forms of bullying in the workplace, schools and on the playing fields (Hamm et al., 2015; MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010; Selkie, Fales, & Moreno, 2016). Heiman and Olenik-Shemesh (2015) describe cyberbullying as a 'negative activity aimed at deliberate and repeated harm through the use of a variety of electronic media'. Nocentini et al (2010) further describe cyberbullying as consisting of three distinct characteristics: anonymity, flaming and public vs. private. Anonymity is when the bully conceal their real identity behind an electronic device (e.g. a cellphone) in order to ridicule, harass and intimidate other people anonymously. Flaming occurs when the perpetrator knows the victim and chooses to ridicule them publicly to gain popularity or 'likes' from observers. The public vs. private characteristic of cyberbullying occurs when the bully uses public or private forums, for example a webpage or email to victimize other people, with the intention of shaming or causing harm to the person. Eden, Heiman and Olenik-Shemesh (2013) pointed out that incidences of cyberbullying often occurs in online 'chat rooms', small text messaging (SMS), email and voting booths. Menesini and Nocentini (2009) state that the aspects of conventional bullying such as power imbalance, intentionality and repetition is evident in most cases of cyberbullying. Power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim is another characteristic of cyberbullying, as it increases the likelihood of the severity of the bullying (i.e., physical, verbal, social and cyberbullying).

Literatures show that cyberbullying has devastating effects on victims (Hamm et al., 2015; Nixon, 2014). In particular, Obrien and Moules (2010) found a strong positive correlation between cyberbullying and depression, anxiety and self-harming behaviours among participants. Similarly, a multi-country study conducted by Wright et al (2015) in China, India and Japan found that some of the teenagers who experienced cyberbullying reported low levels of peer attachments, self-esteem and confidence. Recent literature show the emergence of COVID-19 and the lockdown imposed by countries to curb the spread of the virus also meant activities such as work and learning moved to online spaces where there is increased vulnerability to cyberbullying (Barlett, Simmers, Roth, & Gentile, 2021; Shin & Choi, 2021; Utemissova, Danna, & Nikolaevna, 2021).

Over the years, there have been evidence suggesting cyberbullying is emerging in educational institutions (Cantone et al., 2015). A study undertaken in Malawi schools discovered half of the learners who participated in the study were being bullied by their peers (Kubwalo, Muula, Siziya, Pasupulati, & Rudatsikira, 2013). The learners who were being bullied resorted to detrimental strategies such as substance abuse and isolating themselves from their peers in the school. Similarly, Farhangpour et al (2019) reported 52% of Grade 8's in a Cape Town school were being bullied, while 36.3% of learners in grade 8 and 11 in a Durban school were found to be suffering from the after effects of cyberbullying. The majority of

learners in schools are poorly equipped to defend themselves from cyberbullies. Similarly, studies have also found educators to be lacking the necessary knowledge and skills to intervene (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Tustin, Zulu, & Basson, 2014).

In 2019, South Africa did not have any laws/policies specific to e-safety and cyberbullying to help schools prevent and manage cases of cyberbullying amongst learners. Instead, educators had to rely on the ubiquitous South African School Act No. 84 of 1996 and Children's Act No. 38 of 2005 to address learner-related conflicts in schools. The School Act 84 of 1996 lists a set of rules for learner behaviour and discipline through mutual respect. The Act further outlines how learner misbehaviour must be dealt with using the Act and the school code of conduct. Furthermore, the Children's Act 38 of 2005 focuses on the protection of children against abuse, neglect, maltreatment and promotes the best interest of the child (Walsh, 2010). Any form of bullying is regarded as abuse and although these Acts are not explicit about steps to be taken by educators when confronted with cases of cyberbullying, they remain reliable and valuable legal instruments to discipline perpetuators of this type of abuse.

In light of the prevalence of cyberbullying in school settings, the researchers sought to explore educators' knowledge of cyberbullying and the intervention strategies they have put in place in response to incidences of bullying. It was anticipated that these findings will help inform other educators and social services workers about this form of bullying and encourage them to develop context-specific interventions strategies to deal with the problem.

Theoretical framework

The research was guided by the Social Ecological Theory. Urie Bronfenbrenner founded the theory in 1970 to further the understanding of the dynamic interrelations among various personal and environmental factors (Glanz, Rimer, and Viswanath, 2015). The theory understands that people are in the centre of a broader system and their interaction with the systems shapes their behaviour (Härkönen, 2001). These systems are 1) microsystem, 2) mesosystem, 3) exosystem and 4) macrosystem (see Figure 1). In the context of the research, the child/learner is located within these systems. These systems are significant in understanding the prevalence of socio-economic issues such as bullying, domestic violence, substance abuse etc.

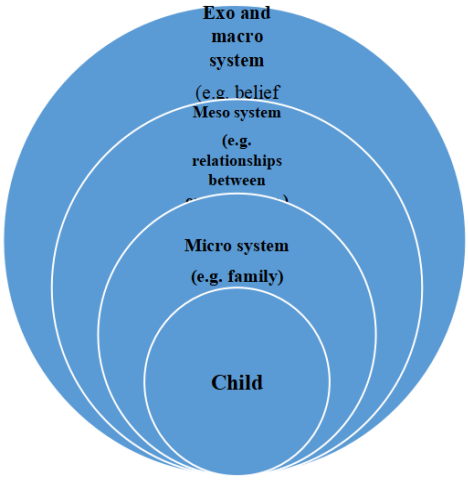


Figure 1: Social Ecological Theory of child development adapted from Glanz, Rimer, and Viswanath (2015)

A child's microsystem involves the relationship that children form with their caregivers, educators and friends (Ryan, 2001). Studies have shown children's development is influenced by significant others such as caregivers, educators and friends, and the influence can be positive or detrimental to their development (Lee, 2011). The mesosystem is the connection between two or more microsystems (Ryan, 2001). When a child enters the schooling system, the child becomes the primary link between their family and school (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Lee, 2011). In support of their education, caregivers often need to communicate with educators and vice versa about the child progress in school. Studies have shown lack of parental involvement in children's education contributes to children's poor academic performance and mischievous behaviours such as bullying (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Lee, 2011; Patton, Hong, Williams, & Allen-Meares, 2013).

The exosystem is the environment that the child is not directly located but they have indirect interaction with (Lee, 2011; Ryan, 2001). A caregiver's occupation may have detrimental effect on a child, particularly when the caregiver is regularly

absent due to long working hours. Consequently, a child who report limited parental or caregiver supervision may be tempted to engage in cyberbullying. Lastly, the macrosystem focuses on dominant cultural belief systems and norms that the child is exposed to or learn from the community (Patton et al., 2013). Children who come from a violent neighbourhood tend to display similar behaviours when interacting with peers. The Social Ecological Theory enabled the researchers to unpack educators knowledge of cyberbullying, factors contributing to the increase in cyberbullying cases (e.g. poor monitoring of children's cellphones) and interventions strategies put in place to curb this form of bullying (e.g. limiting access to cellphones).

Research methods

Research approach

We made use of a qualitative approach to explore the extent of secondary (FET) educators' knowledge of cyberbullying as well as their intervention strategies. Aspers and Corte (2019) described qualitative research as a method based upon the need to understand the experiences and perceptions of participants regarding a particular phenomenon (Aspers & Corte, 2019). This approach was suitable to the focus of this study as it created an opportunity for the researchers to engage at a deeper level with each of the educators about their experiences, knowledge and perceptions of cyberbullying in a school setting, and what they doing to prevent and manage this unpleasant social issue.

Study setting, population and sample

Over the years, studies have reported positive correlation between access to technology and cyberbullying (Bochaver & Khlomov, 2014; Heirman & Walrave, 2008). The participants were recruited from a private secondary school located in Johannesburg, South Africa. This was one of the opulent schools and there was wide embracement of technology in education. Therefore, the school served as a rich case study to explore educators' knowledge of cyberbullying and intervention strategies. Purposive sampling technique was used to recruit eight experienced secondary (FET) educators to share their insights on cyberbullying (see Table 1). Etikan and Bala (2017) describe purposive sampling as a technique that allows researchers to select participants based on the desired characteristics (e.g. age and work experience).

Table 1: participant race, age and teaching experience

Category	Sub-category	No. of participants
Race	Black	5
	White	2
	Indian	1
Age	25 – 39 years	5
	50 - 54 years	3
Teaching experience (years)	4 - 8 years	4
	9 - 24 years	5
Teaching experience at a secondary school setting	4 - 9 years	5
	9 - 14 years	3

Data collection and analysis method

We collected data using semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The interview questions explored the educators' experiences and perceptions of cyberbullying, contributing factors and interventions they have put in place to respond to cases of cyberbullying. The interviews were conducted in English, with each interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded with each participant's consent. To analyse the data, the researchers made use of thematic analysis method as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The audio files were transcribed verbatim, the researchers then coded transcripts line-by-line to identify emergent themes in line with the study objectives (see Table 2).

Findings

Table 2: Study objectives and emergent themes

Study objectives	Themes
1. To explore educators' understandings of cyberbullying among learners.	• Cyberbullying is an online event; • Asynchronous and anonymous communication creates disinhibition; • Cyberbullying causes harm.
2. To identify educators' strategies aimed at preventing and managing cyberbullying.	• Grade controllers; • Evidence collection; • Disciplinary processes and monitoring systems.
3. To identify the challenges educators faces in implementing the strategies to curb cyberbullying.	• Lack of parental involvement; • Monitoring and tracking cyberbullying; • Fear of reprisal.

To explore educators' understandings of cyberbullying among learners

Three themes emerged from this objective:
a) cyberbullying as an online event,
b) asynchronous and anonymous communication creates disinhibition and
c) cyberbullying causes harm.

Cyberbullying as an online event

The majority of the educators agreed that cyberbullying occurs through online communication medium such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. This theme was captured when the educators said:

> *"So, the idea is that cyber-bullying is around bullying a student through the use of internet, messaging or technology over computers, Wi-Fi, that kind of thing"* (Educator 7).

Over the years, the advancement of computer technology in South Africa mean that many people have gained access to these communication platforms. This explains why this type of bullying is occurring in almost all the communication platforms as alluded by the educators. There were some educators who highlighted there is a distance between the cyberbully and the one being bullied.

Asynchronous and anonymous communication creates disinhibition

Cyberbullying happens at a distance where there is a screen instead of face-to-face or direct human interaction. The lack of direct engagement creates disinhibition, which encourages the bully to continue with the abuse, harassment and intimidation of the other person. In addition, anonymity often means that he or she is less likely to be identified and held accountable. This theme was captured when the educators said:

> *"It's not the full contact. You are not seeing the person. You know kids are embolden in their private space to be harmful. So, I think the soft approach of it. The way access of doing it"* (educator 2).

and

> "*Cyberbullying is the protection of a screen. So instead of a shield in front of you, people use the distance that even social media, for example, can create"* (Educator 3).

Furthermore, Educator 3 argued the cyberbullies uses technological device such as a cellphone to anonymously initiate contact with their victims and harass them. As a result, the bullies feel protected while they interact with their victims.

> *"People can log on with pseudo accounts or ghost accounts and create a lot of havoc without having to be held accountable"* (Educator 3).

It is evident cyberbullying is worsened by the asynchronous and anonymous communication between perpetrators and victims. The perpetrators find the courage to initiate and continue with the abuse of their victims due to the perceived absence of accountability created by online interaction. Other educators mentioned some bullies created pseudo online accounts to bully their victims.

Cyberbullying causes harm

The educators agreed that cyberbullying is harmful as it often involves the use of insensitive and vulgar language, which could have detrimental effects on victims' mental health. The intention of the cyberbully is to hurt and humiliate their victims.

> *"It [*cyberbullying*] is any kind of behaviour, whether it's something written down, something posted, that causes emotional or psychological harm to the person at whom the message is intended"* (Educator 5).

Other educators elaborated that cyberbullying is worse than physical bullying as this type of bullying leave victims with emotional scars, and unless the victim speaks out it is difficult to know that they are being bullied and in need of support.

> *"The harmful nature of it* [cyberbullying] *is probably worse than the physical bullying – in my experience" (*Educator 2).

In the next section of the paper, we highlight some of the steps taken by the educators to respond to cases of bullying the school.

To identify educators' strategies aimed at preventing and managing cyberbullying

In relation to this objective, four themes emerged: (1) evidence collection, (2) disciplinary processes, (3) Grade Controllers and (4) monitoring systems.

Intervention strategy: evidence collection

Before the perpetrator can be charged, educators are expected to collect evidence for use. The evidence gathered is used to charge and initiate disciplinary process against the perpetrator of the abuse.

> *"Typically, what happens in a case of cyberbullying, is there has to be evidence. That is always key because a child can come to us and say: "Ah, I was bullied", but where is the evidence of it? We cannot go to somebody and say, "You bullied this child" if there is no evidence of it"* (Educator 7).

However, the educators contended it is not always possible to gather information about bullying, as it often occurs in a private space such as personal communication over the phone. Furthermore, the victim in the 'complaint-registering phase' may be asked to provide the evidence. The evidence could take different forms, if the bullying occurred in a platform such as on Facebook where he or she may have to provide screenshot of the offensive communication.

> *"They (complainant) need to keep a 'screenshot' or thread of the conversation or what's happening on Facebook"* (Educator 7).

The collected evidence is then able to be used as part of disciplinary hearing that will be initiated following a formal complaint/investigation.

Intervention strategy: disciplinary processes

The school has established a committee that handles learner related conduct, cases of bullying are also handled by the committee. Once evidence of the bullying has been collected, a disciplinary process is initiated by the school. This theme was captured when the educators said:

> *"We have a committee that deals with learners' discipline. We have a gentleman who deals with boys' discipline and a lady who deals with girls' discipline"* (Educator 7).

There are procedures to be followed after a learner had laid a complaint of bullying. The procedure entails calling in the affected learners (i.e. the learner alleged to be the bully and the alleged victim) to give their statement/affidavit of the incident. The parties can also be interviewed further to gather additional information about the alleged incident.

> *"So, we have a formal procedure to go through that. You call the learner in. You get the story. You call the witnesses, you call the bully. You get evidence, and then you make a decision"* (Educator 5).

The school also acknowledges bullying can result in emotional hurt on the victims. Therefore, measures have been put in place to provide emotional support to victims.

> *"The disciplinary process is open on both sides. It also considers the emotional needs of the victim as well as the bully"* (Educator 2).

The school had employed an educational psychologist to provide psychosocial support to learners. The study did not establish the role of the psychologist in the prevention and management of cyberbullying in the school.

Furthermore, it is also important to highlight that the school has also made efforts to prevent the occurrence of learners' misconduct by appointing Grade Controllers. The role of Grade Controllers is to report learner related issues to educators timeously.

Intervention strategy: Grade Controllers and monitoring systems

The Grade Controllers are learners appointed in each grade to monitor learning-related challenges in the classroom. Learners experiencing any discomfort such as bullying are encouraged to report to the Grade Controllers who ensure their issues are communicated to relevant educators for assistance.

"The grade controllers intervention does go a long way, because of their closeness and relationship with other learners unlike when it's a teacher they have to report their case to" (Educator 6).

The educators are of the view that learners are more open about their learning-related challenges to the Grade Controllers.

"when a learner is reluctant to give you any details, for example - they won't give you names, they won't give dates, they won't provide any evidence – that is when I hand over to the Grade Controllers for intervention" (Educator 3).

The Grade Controllers have been empowered by the school management to help the school find solutions to learning issues, especially in cases were the Grade Controllers can negotiate with learners and find solution without educators' involvement.

"You know we have got processes on how to deal with all these things, so to some effect we get involved and other times we don't get involved – for some cases I receive I report it to the relevant grade controller so they can take effective action" (Educator 2).

However, the study was not able to establish if the Grade Controllers received training to effectively detect and manage cases of cyberbullying in the classroom. Without dedicated training and support the Grade Controllers may find it difficult to mediate between victims and perpetrators of this form of bullying.

Furthermore, to stop cyberbullying from occurring, educators are part of learners' WhatsApp groups. Learners in the schools are members of various groups (i.e sport and subject related groups). Educator's role in the groups is to moderate learners' behaviour and improve accountability when something goes wrong.

"We have now implemented a rule, any WhatsApp group that has a school name, has to have a educator on it. Because we cannot be held responsible for something we can't control" (Educator 7).

"…. if there is there is a group of whatever (e.g. soccer boys), and they are WhatsApping each other and it gets out of hand, but there is no educator on that group, how can we be held accountable? We have made a rule now to try and combat that; that if there is any group that has the school name on it, it has to have an educator in there to moderate participant's behaviour" (Educator 7).

Many learners have access to social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, it is commendable that the school has found a way to participate in these platforms with the primary goal of moderating learner's interactions. In next section of the paper, we identify the challenges educators faces in implementing these strategies to curb cyberbullying in the school.

To identify the challenges educators faces in implementing the strategies to curb cyberbullying

Three themes emerged in relation to the challenges educators face when implementing the strategies intended to curb cyberbullying in the school: (1) Lack of collaborative relationship between school and parents, (2) monitoring and tracking of cyberbullying and (3) fear of reprisal.

Challenge 1: Lack of collaborative relationship between school and parents

Some educators complained that parents do not want to work with educators to prevent and manage cyberbullying in the school. The educators were concerned parents expect them to be responsible for all areas of their children's conduct.

"It is not our job to parent other people's children. We can provide a safe learning space for them, which I think we do. We will take steps to help children if they are feeling fearful or alone or bullied. We can be help in those contexts, but I don't feel that we are here to replace a parent. At some point a parent has to parent. I think in many cases we are dealing with the consequences of parents not parenting effectively" (Educator 7).

Some of the educators were also concerned that parents defend their children when found to be mischievous thus making it difficult for educators to enforce the school disciplinary rules.

"It does become difficult when parents are unreasonable in their demands and willing to take a bit of responsibility and accountability from their side" (Participant 2).

"When there is a case of bullying, the school phones the parent and says this is what your child has done... in some cases the parent immediately takes their child side… I think that parents are more trying to be mates, friends or fitting in with their children rather than teaching and disciplining them (Educator 6).

"[If] the parents aren't prepared to work with us and check their children's phones every day, it is not going to be monitored or managed… they are absent parents. You know, they don't care" (Educator 4).

The educators felt the school environment and home environment are not working together which places great strain on the educators as pseudo-parents (*in loco parentis*) and which decreases the effectiveness of the interventions they have put in

place to curb cyberbullying.

> *"With cyberbullying, learners would say 'this is my private social media account. It didn't happen at school'. As an educator what do you if the bullying occurs outside school hours? This gives you an idea of how the school sometimes doesn't know how to judge the boundary between what happens at school and what happens at home" (Educator 5).*

Challenge 2: monitoring and tracking cyberbullying

The educators further explained that it is difficult to monitor and track incidences of cyberbullying in the school, since keeping close eye on learners' interactions can be regarded as invasion of their privacy.

> *"Cases are better managed when there is a physical contact, things that are said over WhatsApp or Instagram or which happened at home, there is less we can do. We would need to get a police search warrant from Police in order to search the phone. There are so many limitations"* (Educator 3).

The educators explained that they do not have the powers to request to search learners' cellphones, let alone monitor their private/personal social media accounts. It is easier to identify cases of physical abuse as the victim will normally present with physical markings to show abuse took place.

> *"The physical abuse you can monitor because the kid will come back and say you know he/she has hit me again, but cyber bullying is – I feel it's like – to a certain extent not controllable"* (Educator 2).

The educators expressed the point that parents do not want to collaborate with the school in identifying and preventing cases of cyberbullying. They felt parents are unfairly delegating part of their parental responsibility, which is to instil discipline, onto them as educators.

Challenge 3: fear of reprisal

Some educators explained some learners in the school do not report cases of cyberbullying as they do not want to get themselves or others in trouble.

> *"They don't like being whistle blowers. They don't like being snitches at all"* (Educator 5).
> *"Learners are reluctant to give the details of bullying, they typically don't want to get involved. They will tell you the outcome of something which is "some of the girls have been saying mean things about me" and then you go "Well, how did that happen?" and they go "Mmmm". They want you to deal with the results not the methodology"* (Educator 3).

The educators explained that learners believe if they report their experience of cyberbullying to educators or be a witness, it may put them in a place of danger with the bully.

> *"I think it is a bit of a 'catch-22' situation because if they report it, that means we have to go to the perpetrator. The perpetrator is going to know who reported it. So, it is a lot to do with "I'm protecting myself" rather than "we aren't doing our job properly". They don't want to come forward because they are fearful. Some kids are strong enough, they come and talk to us about it"* (Educator 7).

It was evident learners' unwillingness to report cases of cyberbullying to educators or Grade Controllers make it difficult for the school to identify and respond to incidences of cyberbullying in the school. In the next section, the researchers discuss the findings in relation to literature.

Discussion

The study explored educator's knowledge of cyberbullying among school learners and the intervention strategies they have put in place to curb this problem. Educators were found to be knowledgeable about the manifestation of cyberbullying and the effects it has on victims. This finding is collaborated by literature, a study in Eastern Cape primary and secondary schools found educators to have sufficient knowledge of cyberbullying, particularly how it occurs (Cilliers & Chinyamurindi, 2020). However, some of the educators felt less is being done to elevate the discussions about cyberbullying as one of the issues affecting teaching and learning in schools. Education researchers argues cases of cyberbullying should be addressed timeously due to the detrimental effects it has on victims. Learners who are victims of cyberbullying report poor grades, low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts (Mabvurira & Machimbidza, 2022). In the current study, we found educators to be appreciative of knowing about the effects of cyberbullying on learner's education and taking steps to remedy the problem.

Educators sought more proactive measures to manage cases of cyberbullying. However, the invisible nature of cyberbullying occurrence made it difficult for educators to timeously identify and address cases. In 2020, of the 58.93 million population in South Africa, 22 million people were active on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp (Talkwalker, 2020). As a result of the increasing access to social media platforms, instant /near real-time communication is one button click away for many people. Unfortunately, some people as shown by available literature, use social media networking to spread hatred, abuse and harm other users. Furthermore, our participants reported because this type of abuse occurs in closed spaces and often after school hours, it is near impossible for them to track and discipline the perpetrators.

The lack of collaborative between the school and parents was seen as contributing to the spike in incidences of cyberbullying. Parental involvement can help reduce the chance of a child being bullied (Mason, 2008). For example – parents/ caregivers can use blocking or filtering software to enable them to monitor how their children interact with others on social media. On the contrary, Hoff and Mitchell (2009) explains some parents may not be aware about the prevalence of cyberbullying in schools, as their children hide their experiences due to the fear of losing their privileges (e.g. cellphone) or fear their parents will learn about their own online activities/behaviours. Furthermore, Rachoene and Oyedemi (2015) recommend children should take steps to avoid being bullied by disassociating themselves from known bullies or completely closing their social media accounts to minimise chances of cyberbullied (Rachoene & Oyedemi, 2015).

Moreover, learners were reported to be not complementing educators' efforts in addressing cyberbullying. The learners were less interested in reporting or being a witness to a bullying incident. Literature show learners are less likely to report cases of bullying because of educator's inaction when presented with information about bullying incidents (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Tustin, Zulu, & Basson, 2014). Learners who are witnesses to bullying incidents also do not want to serve as witnesses in disciplinary committees due to the fear of being a target post the meeting. Hoff and Mitchell (2009) study found 65.35% of learners interviewed did not report cases of cyberbullying to school administrators as they believed the abuse would stop on its own without doing anything about it. Ngidi and Moletsane (2018) argue the lack of action by educators when presented with information about bullying could have detrimental effect on victim's mental health and education outcomes. This implies educators need to take proactive steps when presented with cases of cyberbullying to protect both the victim and witness.

The introduction of Grade Controllers enabled victims of bullying to share learning challenges including experiences with cyberbullying with the designated Grade Controllers. Available literature acknowledge learners do not play an active role in the identification and prevention of cyberbullying cases (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Tustin, Zulu, & Basson, 2014). Instead, educators have the responsibility of managing incidences of cyberbullying. However, our findings clearly show that learners (through Graded Controllers) are better positioned to detect and report cases of cyberbullying, particularly when learners are reluctant to report the cases to their educators.

COVID-19 had detrimental effects on the education sector, at the height of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, many schools had to pause learning and later invested in information technologies to teach remotely. However, the diversion to online teaching and learning also meant learners spend most of their time online, thus creating potential spike in the number of cyberbullying incidences (Barlett et al., 2021; Utemissova et al., 2021). In lights of these developments, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) needs to equip educators with relevant knowledge and skills to tackle cyberbullying beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

The study concluded that cyberbullying is a critical challenge that affects school leaners. Despite educators being aware of its existence, interventions to prevent this form of bullying are difficult to implement, as there is lack of cooperation from parents and learners. There is a need for all stakeholders (educators, parents, victims and perpetrators) to be actively involved in the identification, prevention, support and management of this learning issue.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for the learners, educators, parents and government to deal with cyberbullying. Firstly, there is need for the perpetrators of this type of bullying to be made aware of its effect on the victims. This can be achieved through educator and learner-led workshops, where the consequences of cyberbullying on the victim (e.g. effect on mental health) and bully (e.g. possible expulsion from school) are highlighted. Secondly, there is an urgent need to ensure educators are properly equipped with relevant knowledge and skills to deal with any form of bullying in schools.

The South African Department of Basic Education need to consider making available a short course that will cover the issues dominant in schools (e.g. bullying, substance abuse and teenage pregnancy) and guide educators on appropriate intervention strategies when confronted with the issues. Thirdly, all role players (e.g. caregivers, educators and school management) need to take an active role in addressing this problem at the different levels of society. For example, parents will need to ensure their children do not use their cellphones to victimise or harass other children. There should also be regular engagements between parents and educators to discuss challenges and successes relating to their interventions. Studies have shown regular discussion between these parties about internet safety is beneficial in fostering learning, improving educational outcomes and address unhealthy social media conduct amongst learners (Axford et al., 2015; Kolbert, Schultz, & Crothers, 2014).

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