Social work intervention to address the phenomenon of bullying amongst learners in the school setting: A literature review

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Bullying incidents amongst learners are realities that have made, and continue to make news headlines internationally, and South Africa is not immune to such incidents. The phenomenon of bullying not only affects the bully and the victim, but also the school, parents, and communities in general. In this paper, the researcher highlights factors that may be associated with bullying amongst learners in the school setting. The ecosystems perspective is also discussed as the theoretical framework for the paper. The last step describes how the social worker can address the bullying phenomenon using different methods of practice. The researcher relies on the literature review method, and his practical experience as a social worker having previously worked with several learners. This paper concludes with relevant recommendations.

Keywords: bullying; learners; parents; school; social work intervention; teachers

Introduction and Background

Bullying incidents amongst learners continue to make news headlines both internationally and locally (Baadjies, 2015; Brandt, 2017; Singh, 2017). Bullying is a behaviour by an individual or group that intentionally hurts others either physically or emotionally, usually over an extended period of time (Harris & White, 2013:45). According to Pierson and Thomas (2010:59), "bullying can include name-calling, text-messaging, communication via the internet and social networking sites, racist and sexually motivated abuse, aggression and extortion of money or property, as well as actual violence." The Children's Act 38 of 2005 regards "bullying by another child" as a form of abuse (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2006:16). When the researcher was a learner in high school, he observed that those learners most likely to be victims of bullying were those who were in Grade Eight. This was because they were still new in the school, and as such, became easy targets for bullies. They were mainly bullied for the purpose of stealing their money and/or their lunch boxes.

In Mathaba's (2014:91) study in KwaZulu-Natal province, 63% of the participants mentioned that they had observed some learners being bullied. South Africa is not the only country that is affected by the phenomenon of bullying amongst learners in the school environment. For instance, Gutuza and Mapolisa (2015:1168) indicate that amongst the schools in the Nyanga District of Zimbabwe, bullying/fighting was the most reported cases of behaviour requiring discipline, accounting for 25% of cases. In Egypt, boys (54.0%) were more likely to be bullied than were girls (52.5%) (Celedonia, Wilson, El Gammal & Hagras, 2013:6). In Washington, the prevalence of bullying was 34.6% for children aged six to nine years, and 32.4% for those who were aged 10 to 13 years (Bauer, Herrenkohl, Lozano, Rivara, Hill & Hawkins, 2006:5).

In an investigation of the phenomenon of bullying in both girls and boys in secondary schools of Portugal, Silva, Pereira, Mendonça, Nunes and De Oliveira (2013), gender analysis indicates victimisation and aggression that boys and girls are both victims and aggressors, and there are significant differences in involvement in bullying between genders and the roles played. When considering different types of bullying, boys are often more likely than girls to be victims of bullying, although significant differences were found in physical aggression. When focusing on South Africa, Statistics South Africa (2015:54) indicates that in 2014, the percentage of girls (70, 3%) who reported being bullied in urban formal and rural formal areas was higher than the percentage of boys (66,6%) who were bullied. When a comparison is made between statistics from 2009 and 2014, figures reveal that in 2014, more girls were bullied in urban formal schools than they were in 2009, resulting in an increase of 14,7 percent. Similarly, the percentage of bullied boys increased by 10,0% during the same period (Statistics South Africa, 2015:54).

Bullying is often the precursor of violence in schools (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2014:166). Nthate (2017:14) adds that "[b]ullying is one of the causes of violent crime in schools, and it constitutes a significant challenge for school safety and directly undermines the creation of an enabling school environment that supports personal growth and development." It was reported that at Parow West Primary School in Cape Town, a 13 year-old victim required surgery for facial injuries that he sustained during an attack by a fellow pupil (Brandt, 2017). Bullying incidents have elements of gender-based violence, for instance, a video filmed on school premises believed to be situated in KwaZulu-Natal, depicts a male learner violently assaulting a female learner (Mngandi & Tandwa, 2017). Based on the above statements, it can be inferred that bullying most often appears to be noticed when it takes the form of physical violence.

Bullying undeniably affects the victim, where for example, Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) found that learners who are victims of bullying bunk classes and can end up dropping out of school. According to Thomson (2005), bullying goes right to the core of a child's being, and it is a behaviour that can ruin the child's chances

of enjoying their time at school, and prevent them from obtaining the qualifications required for careers of their choice. In Cape Town, a 17 year-old schoolgirl hanged herself after being bullied by a gang of girls at her school (Baadjies, 2015). Learners who are victims of bullying feel compelled to join gangs or risk being bullied with threats and physical assault should they refuse to associate with the gangs (Magidi, Schenk & Erasmus, 2016). The situation is exacerbated when a victim of bullying is unable to report the incident to the educators at schools or to their caregivers or parents at home. Findings of a study conducted by Jacobs (2006) revealed that the bullied victims felt threatened and were afraid to report the bullying to adults because this might result in further harm being inflicted by the bully. In support of this view, De Wet (2005:718) found that 33% of the victims of bullying did not report the incidents to either their parents/caregivers, their educators, or even to other learners. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2017:19), "Bullying appears to be more likely to occur in places such as toilets, changing rooms, corridors and other locations where children and adolescents are less easily seen or supervised by teachers and other school staff."

It is not only the victim who feels the effects of bullying; the perpetrator may also be negatively affected by their bullying behaviour. To ensure that this message was clearly relayed to bullies, the Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for the Department of Basic Education in the Gauteng Province, Mr Panyaza Lesufi categorically stated that anyone who intends to bully and harm other learners will be removed from the school (Pijoos, 2017), and such removal from the school may be temporary or permanent. The researcher is of the view that being permanently removed from school will undoubtedly affect the nature or type of work that a person accused of bullying might expect to secure in the future. In cases where bullying results in assault, the perpetrators may be criminally charged. The implication of being arrested and found guilty is that the person will have a criminal record, which may deny him access to future opportunities, such as being employed in government and private sectors.

Against this background, this paper argues that bullying as a phenomenon amongst learners in the school setting is a social issue and therefore concerns the social worker. Social workers are relevant and important professionals to help implement the anti-bullying policies and programmes within a school setting. In support of this notion, Smith (2016:7290) asserts that poor discipline and bullying amongst learners can be fully addressed by the social worker. The social worker can render services to both the bully and victim. For instance, the actions of a bully may

result in the assault of others, and this results in the bully becoming a child in conflict with the law. As such, the bullying child would require social work services. Additionally, the social worker needs to render victim empowerment services to the victim of bullying. Bullying is a problem that cannot be addressed or dealt with in isolation. Therefore, the social worker who is operational in the school setting needs to work towards preventing and addressing bullying via educational and empowerment services, by engaging school educators, learners, parents, and external stakeholders. Kelly (2009:39) asserts that social workers who are operational in the school setting act as a link between the home, the community, and the school. However, there are implications for resources that will require that the Department of Basic Education and the South African government make funding available to schools so that they can appoint school social workers and provide them with the necessary resources to carry out their mandate. Financial resources are not only required in South Africa, but elsewhere in the world, where public schools don't have the benefit of dedicated social workers. Makhubele (2008) notes that in South Africa, school social workers are usually only employed in private schools that are able to afford their services. A previous Minister of the Department of Social Development, Dr Zola Skweyiya, noted the challenge of appointing social workers in South Africa, and stated that "it was difficult convincing government to prioritize the services rendered by social worker in the same way as they do with nurses and educators" (Khumalo, 2009:7).

The central questions of this study are: "which factors can be associated with bullying incidents amongst learners?"; and "what is the social work intervention in addressing the bullying phenolmenon amongst learners in the school setting?"

Methodology
This study adopts a desktop literature review as a methodology. Literature has been sourced from academic journals, books, news reports (DuBois & Miley, 2014:245; Fouché & Delport, 2005:127), and the author's experiential knowledge on the domain. The author undertook an electronic search of published literature using Google Scholar, Google, Journal Storage and Medline, relying heavily on the Web of Science. Examples of search terms used include bullying, violence, school learners, social work intervention, parents, and school learner bullying.

Observations and Discussion
Factors associated with bullying activities
Peer pressure
Learners spend most of their time in the school environment, and as such, make friends and become part of groups. The implication is that learners easily learn the bullying behaviour from

their peers. Peers apply peer pressure, and that makes it difficult for adolescents to try to modify their antisocial behaviour once they have started to engage in it (Bezuidenhout, 2013:116). In order to feel like they belong to their peer group, learners sometimes feel pressurised to display almost behavioural characteristics that are common in their peer group, and bullying is no exception. This state of affairs can be explained by the ecosystem perspective that considers the interaction between individuals and the environment. Therefore, since learners have peers in the school environment, it is easier for them to be influenced by their peers. According to Singh (2017), children who lack a sense of right and wrong, and lack awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, may choose to bully others to increase their popularity or to gain validation from their peers, which is harmful. The bully may count on a small group of followers who are inclined to help the bully to bully others, or the bully may order these followers to bully a victim. Thus, the bully shares the act of bullying with others, or transfers acts of bullying to their followers (Neto, 2005).

Use of alcohol and other drugs

It is an undisputable fact that learners are using alcohol and other drugs. According to Makhubele (2008:80), learners in rural areas have been reported attending class while smelling of alcohol. Masilo (2012) is of the view that learners who use alcohol and drugs are increasingly likely to display the antisocial behaviours of stealing and violence. In this paper, the researcher argues that there is a relationship between bullying and the use of alcohol and other drugs by learners. For example, the bullying behaviour might be for the purpose of acquiring money from the victim in order to buy alcohol and drugs, or, while under the influence of substances, learners might feel brave enough to bully others and commit acts of violence against their targeted victims. Regrettably, the victims of bullying end up using alcohol and other drugs as a way of dealing with the phenomenon of bullying. For instance, Earnshaw, Elliott, Reisner, Mrug, Windle, Emery, Peskin and Schuster's study (2017) concluded that youth who experienced more frequent peer victimisation in the fifth grade were more likely to use substances in the tenth grade, showing that experiences of peer victimisation in early adolescence may have a lasting impact, by affecting substance use behaviours during mid- to late adolescence. The concern that arises from this behaviour is that since bullying takes place in the school environment, victims of bullying may be attending school under the influence of alcohol, or they may be taking alcohol to school, and both of these acts contravene the school rules, and will result in school authorities taking action against these learners. The implication for social work practice is that in order to cultivate harmony between the learners and their environment as suggested in the ecosystem perspective, there must be interventions that seek to contribute to the learning environment that will exclude bullying, and incidences of alcohol and other stimulants.

Domestic violence

The child imitates violent behaviour learned in the home if he is from a family that experiences domestic violence. As a way of trying to cope with the home situation, the child may be aggressive, not only to other learners, but also towards teachers at school. Thomson (2005:14) states that many bullies come from abusive homes, and the only way that they know to interact and relate to others is through put-downs and physical violence. In a study that aimed at investigating the relationship between bullying and children who were exposed to domestic violence, Baldry (2003:718) found that exposure to interparental physical violence and direct bullying were significantly associated, especially for girls. Girls who have been exposed to their fathers' violence against their mothers, and those exposed to their mothers' violence against their fathers were among the most likely to bully others, compared to girls who had not been exposed to any interparental violence. This finding can be attributed to an undisputable argument advanced by the ecosystem perspective that the interaction between people and their environment shapes their social behaviour. Unfortunately in this instance, children have learned a behaviour from their parents, a behaviour that is socially unacceptable.

Poverty

Children from poverty-stricken families are likely to devise different means of fending for themselves. As a way of addressing the phenomenon of poverty, the bully might rely on the victim, for example, taking their lunch box, or instructing the victim to request or steal money from home. In a study conducted in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa focusing on poverty as a source of behavioural problems, Wadesango, Chabaya, Rembe and Muhuro (2011) found that one of the learners used violent behaviour to appropriate lunchboxes from other learners. In another study, Jacobs (2006:45) found that it is not always only money that is taken from victims, but often victims' clothes were taken away by those children bullying them. Engaging in violence to steal from others in an attempt to overcome the hurdles of poverty results in these children displaying a behaviour that is uncontrollable and in conflict or inconsistent with the schools' rules and the country's laws. Thus, Section 150 of the Children's Act of 2005 (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2006) rightfully describes children such as

these as being in need of care and protection. Owing to the fact that these children's bullying of others infringes on the rights of other children to learn in a violent-free school environment, there is undoubtedly the need for a social work intervention in the form of a case work strategy to help these children, with the primary aim of assisting them to change their socially unacceptable behaviour.

Theoretical Framework
Ecosystem perspective
According to Greene (2008:199), the ecological perspective is an approach to social work practice that addresses the complex transactions between people and their environments. The ecosystem perspective is relevant in unpacking the subject of bullying. Through this perspective, the author demonstrates how bullying affects all the involved parties, which are the school, the bully, the victim, all parents, and the communities in which the bullying happens.

There is a Setswana proverb that says "*kgomo mogobeng e wetswa ke namane*," literally meaning that children place their parents in situations of conflict. Based on this notion and Setlalentoa's (2009:38) assertion that "any problem that affects an individual member of the family system, also affects others in the social environment," it is argued that parents of children who have been bullied may seek revenge on behalf of their children, and this will result in them becoming embroiled in conflict with the law. In support of this view, Fengu (2018) reports that a parent whose child was a victim of bullying at school approached a court of law in the Free State province of South Africa, with the purpose of obtaining a protection order against his son's school bullies. This case undoubtedly shows that bullying incidents not only affect the victims, but also their families. Furthermore, this is a clear signal that parents will do anything in their power to ensure that they protect their children against bullies. Additionally, parents of both the victim and the perpetrator of bullying could experience strained relations due to their children's behaviour.

The school is directly affected by bullying because bullying incidents often take place in the school environment. It is obvious that teaching and learning is likely to be affected, since there are some learners who do not respect teachers and may bully other learners in the presence of their teachers during class lessons. In cases where the victim of bullying decides to drop out of school, the overall school performance becomes affected, as schools are assessed according to their learners' performance and the number of registered learners. The schools will also experience a high rate of absenteeism by learners who may feel that being absent will protect them from being bullied. Schools that are characterised by high incidents of

bullying and violence amongst learners are likely to have a low intake of learners because parents may decide to enrol their children at other schools.

Learners are part of communities, and as such, victims of bullying may decide to address their problems outside the school parameters. This could be through association with gangsters, whereby the victim's gangster could attack the bully, and if this type of behaviour is not adequately addressed, the incidents of violence by gangsters will escalate in communities.

Social work intervention
According to Zastrow (2017:90), social workers are knowledgeable about evidence-based interventions to achieve the goals of clients and constituencies, including individuals, families, groups, organisations, and communities. For the purpose of this paper and article constraints, the researcher will only provide pointers on how social workers might address the phenomenon of bullying in the school setting. When social workers leave universities they have current knowledge of different intervention methods. Thus, Mthethwa (2016:49) believes that "the need to continuously update the knowledge base of social work is an indispensable part of social work practice. This therefore calls for a constant interaction between social work educators and practitioners with a view to sharing current knowledge and latest practice developments." Different methods of practice are used in social work interventions, including case work, group work, community work, and research.

Case work
The case work method of social work allows the social worker to engage the clients on a one-on-one (face-to-face) intervention. According to Zastrow (2017:69), through case work, social workers can help individuals to "resolve personal and social problems." Through this method, the social worker can render counselling and victim empowerment services to the victims of bullying. During the intervention process, the ecosystem perspective is important in guiding and helping social workers to comprehensively understand how bullying affects the victims and the perpetrators of the incident. Du Preez and Grobler (2009:58) argue that the victims of bullying may develop aggressive tendencies if they are not assisted, which could result in victims becoming bullies themselves. The social worker could engage in individual sessions with a learner that is bullying other learners, and this would be for the purpose of assisting the learner to change their behaviour. It is important to make the learner aware that bullying others is unacceptable, since it infringes their rights to study within a learning environment that is conducive to learning, and this type of behaviour has dire consequences that could result in the bully being expelled from the school or

criminally charged. Through one-on-one engage-ment with learners that bully others, the social worker should be able to establish and address the root causes behind the bullying behaviour. It is likely that learners who bully other learners will continue to do so if they are not made aware of their unacceptable behaviour and if necessary intervention measures are not implemented by social workers. The social worker could extend further services by facilitating the victim-bully mediation process. This is important, because bullying tends to be an escalating behaviour; it starts with minor incidents involving undesirable conduct, which, if left unchecked progresses to more serious behaviours (Center for Justice and Crime Prevention & Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2012:19). The mediation process will also serve the purpose of ameliorating future fears that the victim may have about the learner who is carrying out the bullying activities. In some or all of the sessions, the parents and teachers may be invited to participate in finding solutions to the problems.

Group work
Lindsay and Orton (2014:1) assert that group work is one method of social work that aims, in an informed way, through purposeful group ex-periences, to help individuals and groups to meet individual and group needs, and to influence and change personal, group, organisational, and comm-unity problems. According to Schatz (2009:83), social group work plays a major role in building deeply meaningful and growth-filled opportunities for group members. According to Furman, Bender and Rowan (2016:5), and Toseland and Rivas (2017:36), there are different disciplines in social work practice, namely educational, support, socialisation, growth, therapy, and self-help groups that the social worker can use to prevent and address social problems. Even though at this stage, the researcher could not locate a social group work developed model, strategy, or programme specific-ally aimed at addressing bullying amongst learners, different authors have developed and implemented programmes with school learners with the intention of addressing the identified social problems or needs. For example, "These areas include pre-ventative group work for Human Immuno-deficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) in high school learners (Sito, 2004), teenage pregnancy prevention (Masilo, 2018), and life skills for early adolescent AIDS orphans (Motepe, 2005)." Therefore the researcher submits that social workers can use group work as a method of intervention among school learners. For the purpose of addressing the problem of bullying using the group work method, the social worker might choose to utilise the following types of groups.

Socialisation group
According to Zastrow (2017:72), this type of group serves the objective of steering members' attitudes and behaviours in a more socially acceptable direction. The belief is that group members have a deficit of some sort in social skills (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012:99). In his study conducted in Mafikeng, North West Province, Idemudia (2013:5215) found low self-esteem to be highly associated with bullying behaviour among learners. It is important to note that learners who display bullying behaviour towards other learners, lack inter-personal skills. Therefore, the social worker's main task is to educate those learners who are regarded as bullying perpetrators, and to help them develop new socially acceptable behaviours and skills. In order to achieve this purpose, life skills education, such as conflict resolution, critical thinking, self-awareness, and problem solving would be appropriate. The social worker should adopt the "remedial model" as the basis for restoring or rehabilitating learners, by guiding them away from their bullying behaviour (Toseland & Rivas, 2017:65).

Support groups
Support groups serve a particular goal, which is described by Toseland and Rivas (2017:36), as fostering mutual aid to help members cope with stressful life events, and to revitalise and enhance members' coping abilities so that they can adapt effectively to cope with future, stressful life events. For the purpose of empowering the victims of bullying, the social worker would need to conduct support group sessions. The common impacts on victims of bullying are that their social functioning is affected, and they are sometimes unable to cope well in the school environment, whereupon their academic performance is affected. Support groups are facilitated by social workers in order to bring hope, to encourage new coping mechanisms, and to allow a strengths-based sharing of issues, concerns, and problems amongst victims of bullying (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012:99).

Educational group
According to Zastrow (2015:376), "an educational group is a group of people who are interested in becoming educated on a certain topic." Literature reveals that children sometimes do not report bullying incidents to their parents. Social workers should encourage parents to participate in educational groups in order to educate them about the phenomenon of bullying. Learners can also be educated on the subject of bullying through educational social group work sessions.

Community work
Weyers (2011:28) defines community work as a method of social work that consists of different

processes and a social worker's helping acts that are targeted at the community system, as well as its sub-systems, and certain external systems, with the purpose of bringing about the required social change. One of the advantages of using the community work method is that the social worker is able to reach a larger number of people. The social worker should take the school as a functional community and regard learners as its members. This is imperative, since bullying incidents occur in the school environment as a community, and learners need to be targeted for interventions. For the purposes of intervention, the school social worker will need to operate from the ecosystem perspective, which emphasises the importance of looking at the people in their environments. Community education is a way of delivering information to learners for the purpose of making them aware of the impact of bullying on other learners, and the consequences for those learners who perpetrate incidents of bullying. Learners should also be educated about the socially acceptable behaviours and what should they do when they are bullied or when witnessing incidences of bullying, for example, they need to report bullying to the educators at schools and parents at home. This education could be provided to learners during the school assembly sessions or during the life orientation class sessions. Additionally, community education on bullying could also be provided on the "Anti-Bullying Day," which is on the 4th of May every year.

In order for the social worker to intervene in the school as a community, various professional roles must be adopted. Advocacy is an essential approach to working in a community. Thus, one of the social worker's critical roles when dealing with an oppressed or abused group, such as victims of bullying, is the role of an advocate, which has been borrowed from the legal profession (Zastrow, 2017). This role allows the social worker to act on behalf of their clients. The social worker advocates that the plight of the victims of bullying be adequately addressed by the school authorities and also encourages the involvement of the victims and bullies' parents.

Research Method in Social Work
Research builds a theoretical base that informs social workers' understanding of human behaviour and the social environment (DuBois & Miley, 2014:245). Therefore, the social worker working in the school setting ought to use research to understand the phenomenon of bullying. Different types of research could be used, for instance, intervention research to develop and implement programmes, and use the evaluation research to evaluate the effectiveness of implemented programmes that address bullying. Tymms (2017:154) states that intervention research

presumes that the world can, at least partially, be understood in terms of cause and effect, as it seeks to find casual relationships and in doing so it can test hypotheses, help refine theories, and assist in evaluating potential policy changes. Through intervention research, the school social worker intervenes to address the phenomenon of bullying with a view to assess the impact of that intervention. The outcomes of the assessment of the intervention will empirically inform the social worker as to whether or not the intervention has been effective, what the challenges might be, what else needs to be done in terms of adapting the intervention programme, whether to request further assistance and resources from the school authorities, or whether or not the need to continue with the intervention programme exists.

Financial Implications
The proposed social work intervention in respect of the phenomenon of bullying has implications for schools' economic resources, since the researcher has observed that it appears that there aren't any social workers currently employed in South African public schools. The point of departure is for the South African National Treasury Department to provide funding to the Department of Basic Education so that social workers can be appointed in South African schools. Such funding could cater for, amongst others, school social workers' salaries and transport. Given the current global economic challenges, and acknowledging that South Africa as an emerging economy is not immune to economic challenges, it appears that the appointment of school social workers may not currently be possible. For instance, during the 2017 medium-term budget policy statement speech, the Minister of Finance, Mr Malusi Gigaba, indicated that the Department had to revise economic growth projections downwards from 1.3 percent as tabled at the time of the budget to 0.7 percent for 2017 (Gigaba, 2017:6). In those instances where it is not possible for the Department of Basic Education to appoint school social workers due to budget constraints, Masilo (2018:vii) recommends that there should be engagement between the National Departments of Social Development and Basic Education regarding the possibility of attaching social workers to schools, so that they can render services to the learners.

Recommendations
- The Department of Basic Education in South Africa should consider appointing school social workers in all provinces to prevent and address problems experienced by learners;
- several causes of bullying, such as poverty, needs attention from the relevant government Departments for the purpose of intervention;
- the Department of Social Development should implement crime prevention programmes to school

learners in order to address bullying and gender-based violence;

- the Department of Social Development should also establish and strengthen programmes that aim at addressing alcohol and drug use amongst learners;
- parents should prioritise their children's education by being actively involved in their children's lives, for example, by attending parents' meetings and making regular school visits to ask teachers how their children behave and perform academically;
- school safety committees should be established and strengthened in all schools so that problems can be prevented and addressed at an early stage;
- social workers should consider conducting team-building activities with the learners as one way of preventing bullying; and
- parents and teachers should be educated continuously on the subject of bullying, so that they are able to identify signs of bullying in learners.

Note

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