

Victims of educator-targeted bullying: a qualitative study

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I report on findings emanating from in-depth personal interviews with victims of educator-targeted bullying (ETB). Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the narratives. The findings indicate that the victims of ETB were exposed repeatedly over time to verbal, non-verbal, psychological, and physical abuse during and after school hours. ETB had a negative influence on the victims' private lives, as well as on teaching and on learning. Lastly, I found that ETB may lead to a breakdown of relations between victims and the bullies' parents and the members of the community in which schools are situated.

Keywords: bullying; content analysis; ecological theory; educators; South Africa

Introduction

Numerous studies have been carried out to evaluate the problem of learners who bully other learners. Although the victimisation of educators by their learners has long been recognised as a problem, it had rarely been researched and reported on previous to the 1990s (*cf.* Tremlow, Fonagy, Sacco & Brethour, 2006:189; Pervin & Turner, 1998). Studies on issues of educator-targeted bullying (ETB) have looked predominantly at the problem from the perspective of the educators (and thus, the victims) (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Benefield, 2004; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Terry, 1998). James, Lawlor, Courtney, Flynn, Henry and Murphy's (2008) study give the learners' (possible perpetrators) perspective on the topic. All the above researchers used surveys to collect their data.

The seriousness of the problem is highlighted by the following research results: The majority (91%) of educators from a co-educational London inner-city school indicated that at some time in their teaching careers they had suffered from ETB (Pervin & Turner, 1998). Terry (1998) found that 56.4% of the 101 respondents were bullied by their learners during the term preceding his study. In James *et al.*'s (2008) study 28.2% of the participants acknowledged that they bullied their educators. In a study on school violence in Taiwan 30.1% of the participants reported involving in at least one aggressive act against their educators during the year preceding the survey (Chen & Astor, 2009). A study based on large scale surveys in the USA (Astor, Meyer, Benbenishty, Marachi & Rosemond, 2005) found that between 1992 and 1996 the annual average rate of victimisation (combining theft and physical violence) for educators was 76 incidents per 1,000 educators. In line with international findings De Wet and Jacobs's (2006) study on ETB in the Free State and the Eastern Cape revealed that 79.7% of the educators who took part in their survey were exposed to some or other form of bullying during their

teaching careers. The plight of South African victims of ETB is exacerbated by learners' disrespect towards them, high levels of community and school violence, continual and rapid change, economic uncertainty, unrealistic expectations and general feeling of disempowerment (Burton, 2001).

ETB is aggression directed against those who should be sources of learners' social, cognitive and emotional well-being and who should ensure their safety. Researchers (Chen & Astor, 2009; Khoury-Kassabri, Astor & Benbenishty, 2009; Pervin & Turner, 1998) concur that teaching and learning cannot take place in a school milieu where those who are supposed to lead, supervise and act as role models (educators) are targeted by those whom they are supposed to lead, supervise and protect (learners).

Against the background of the foregoing identified deficiencies in ETB research, the main gist of this study is to describe specific acts of ETB, provide qualitative information on the risk factors for these negative acts, provide insight into the influence of ETB on the victims, their schools and the society in which they work and present victims' proposals on how to fight this scourge. This article will focus on two research questions:

- What is the nature of ETB?
- What is the influence of ETB on the victims' private and professional lives?¹

What is ETB?

Olweus (1994:9) defines bullying as follows: "a student is being bullied or victimised when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions by one or more students". Olweus (1994:82) explains the term negative action as follows: "a negative action is when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another". Bullying is characterised by the following: (1) It is aggressive behaviour or intentional "harm doing" (2) which is carried out "repeatedly and over time" (3) in an interpersonal relationship characterised by an imbalance of power (Rigby, 2004:288). Olweus (2000:11) also mentions that bullying behaviour often occurs without apparent provocation. The aforesaid is confirmed by Guerin and Hennessy (2005:23): "the classical view of bullying is that an individual or group repeatedly and deliberately picks on another individual who is blameless and has done nothing to provoke the attack". Matsui (2005) defines ETB as "threats of physical assault, verbal abuse, racial and sexual slurs, repeated intimidation, disrespectful behaviour, vandalism of personal belongings and persistent class disruption". Table 1 gives insight into what researchers perceive as the different "negative actions" that constitute ETB.

For the purposes of this study, ETB is defined as aggressive behaviour in which there is an imbalance of power between the aggressor (learner/s) and the educator. The aggressive acts are deliberate and repeated and aim to harm the victim physically, emotionally, socially and/or professionally. Acts of bullying may be verbal, non-verbal, physical, sexual, racial and/or electronic. Bullying can be viewed along a continuum of seriousness (adapted from James *et al.*, 2008; Rigby, 2004; Olweus, 1994).

Table 1 Surveys on ETB

Study	Where	Respondents	Items in the questionnaires
Pervin & Turner (1998)	England	Educators	Verbal abuse, physical abuse, ignoring you, making comments about you to other learners, damaging your room or property
Terry (1998)	England	Educators	Verbal abuse, deliberate and repetitive insolence, unacceptable name-calling, deliberate and repetitive non-cooperation, physical threats, theft of belongings
Benefield (2006)	New Zealand	Educators	Verbal abuse, significant public challenging to authority as teacher, verbal intimidation, i.e. threats, verbal sexual harassment, written or electronic bullying
De Wet & Jacobs (2006)	South Africa	Educators	Damaging classrooms, damaging private property, physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual comments, spreading rumours, ignored, bullied into giving up things
James <i>et al.</i> (2008)	USA	Learners	Ignore them, called them names, spread rumours about them, took their belongings, threatened, physical harm, names about race and background, unwanted sexual advances

Research methodology

Research design

This study followed a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive research design. Qualitative research can be used to provide understanding of a specific phenomenon. According to Bless, Higson-Smith and Kagee (2006), exploratory studies are a way of finding out what is happening, seeking new insights, asking questions and assessing phenomena in a new light. The aim of this study was exploratory as it aimed to gain new insights into ETB. The study furthermore aimed at providing a description of the educators' experiences (Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2009; Bless *et al.*, 2006). The research was undertaken within an interpretative framework with its emphasis on experience and interpretation. Interpretive research is concerned with meaning and it seeks to understand people's definitions and understanding of situations. Henning (2004) emphasises that the interpretive paradigm does not concern itself with the search for broadly applicable laws and rules, but rather seeks to produce descriptive analysis that emphasises deep, interpretive understanding of social phenomena.

Sampling of participants and ethical considerations

The topic discussed here is sensitive. Snowball sampling was therefore em-

ployed requiring educators and colleagues to recommend educators who they believed to have experienced ETB (*cf.* Nieuwenhuis, 2007; Patton, 2002). Educators who expressed an interest in participating in the research project were contacted beforehand. The aim of the study was explained to them.

As expected, educators were afraid of possible disclosure. However, several safeguards seemed to alleviate most of their fears and thus promoted trust. The ethical principles that guided the study, namely, confidentiality of the findings and protection of their identities, were explained to the educators (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007). Educators were informed, as recommended by Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2007), that the entire database (i.e. digital voice recorders, typed transcripts, field notes, and other related materials) would be destroyed upon completion of the analysis. The researcher also indicated that most identifiers — except where necessary to highlight an argument — would be removed from any materials used in any presentation of the findings.² Notwithstanding the foregoing safeguards, three educators who were referred to the researcher by colleagues as possible interviewees were not willing to grant interviews. All of them cited fear of being identified and the consequent intimidation and/or victimisation as reasons for their refusal.

Despite the sensitivity of the topic, mutual trust and rapport were established. Participants spoke freely and in detail about their abusive experiences, despite the disturbing nature of some of these. This may, according to Patton (2002), firstly be attributed to the interviewer's sincere respect, empathy and interest in the people being interviewed. Meaningful questions were asked and the researcher listened attentively to their answers. Secondly, the study held special significance for the participants. As painful as some of the interviews were, they believed that the problem of ETB should be made public. The interviews were conducted in the safety of the participants' homes, or if they preferred, in the home of a friend. This added to their sense of comfort, security and trust. Interviews lasting between 45 minutes and two hours were conducted with each of the participants. A few months after the interviews were conducted two of the participants told me during informal telephonic conversations of the escalation of incidence of ETB directed at them.

Interviews were conducted until definite themes became evident and the information became saturated (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). In total, three educators, two HODs, and two school principals participated in the study. The sample consisted of male ($n = 3$) and female ($n = 4$) participants from rural ($n = 3$) and urban ($n = 4$) school locations. Primary ($n = 3$) and secondary ($n = 4$) educators, HODs and principals participated. The average years in the teaching profession for the participants was 27.29 years ($SD = 6.34$). The mean age of the participants was 50.86 years ($SD = 6.71$).

Data collection

Data collection was by means of in-depth personal interviews. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Reflective field notes were

taken for the sake of triangulation.

The participants were provided with the following tentative interview schedule during the preliminary discussions:

- What is your experience of ETB?
- What do you think are the reasons for ETB?
- What is the influence of ETB on your professional and/or private life?
- What can be done to prevent ETB?

Some participants preferred semi-structured interviews, while others chose a more informal, open-ended conversation. Their preferences were respected. By making use of techniques such as clarification, paraphrasing and summarising, as well as minimal verbal and non-verbal responses, a context was created in which participants could speak freely and openly. The researcher endeavoured to balance rapport with the participants, with neutrality of the content, by asking neutral questions (*cf.* interview schedule).

Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the transcribed interviews. Henning's (2005) guidelines were used to reduce, condense and group the content of the interviews. A coding frame was drawn up, also providing for verbatim reporting where applicable. The researcher used preset codes (*a priori coding*) that she had identified whilst doing the literature review for this study (also *cf.* interview questions). She worked through all her data and coded them. Related codes were thereafter organised into preset categories. These preset categories were also identified whilst doing the literature review. After she had completed her categorisation, she re-read the transcriptions to check whether she had captured all the important insights that had emerged from the data. From the categories, patterns and themes which could also be linked to the research questions and sub-questions were identified and described. The identification of emergent themes allowed the information to be analysed and related to the literature. The researcher used an independent qualitative researcher to do an independent re-coding of some of the data in order to determine whether the same themes became evident and could be confirmed. Consensus discussions between the researcher and the independent expert were held in order to determine the final findings of the research.

Validation

Validation within an interpretive approach to qualitative research is marked by a focus on the importance of the researcher, as well as on the interpretations that are temporal, located, and always open to re-interpretation (Creswell, 2007). The following two validation strategies were used:

- Data (interview transcripts and reflective field notes) and investigator triangulation (the independent expert and the researcher read and coded the transcripts and took part in consensus discussions) were used to strengthen the study.
- Rich, thick descriptions allow readers to make decisions regarding transferability. The detailed descriptions in this article may enable the readers

to transfer information to other settings and thus determine whether the findings can be transferred.

Theoretical framework

The socio-ecological model is a theoretical framework that can be used to examine the multiple effects and interrelatedness of social elements in an environment. There are several adaptations of the socio-ecological model. However, the initial and most utilised version is Uri Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979:3) stated that "the ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls". A three-level ecology model was used to represent the complexity of the risk factors, as well as for the influence of ETB on the victims, their work and their social environment. The first level identifies biological and personal factors that influence how individuals behave and thus increase their likelihood of becoming victims or perpetrators of bullying: demographic characteristics, personality disorders, and a history of experiencing, witnessing or engaging in bullying behaviour. The second level focuses on the organisational or institutional factors that shape or structure the environment within which the individual exists and in which interpersonal relations occur. These aspects can be rules, policies, and acceptable behaviour within more formal organisations (e.g. schools). The third level looks at the broad societal factors that help to create a climate in which bullying is encouraged or inhibited: the responsiveness of the criminal justice system and/or trade unions, social and cultural norms regarding gender roles, the social acceptability of bullying and violence and political instability (*cf.* Petersen, 2010). ETB may likewise have a negative influence on the well-being of the victims (first level), the organisation (teaching and learning milieu) (second level), and home-/community-school relations (third level).

Findings

The nature of ETB

Several of the participants described incidence of verbal (e.g. "*he started shouting at me*" and "*he swore at me*") and non-verbal ("*he made vulgar signs*" and "*she laughed at me*") abuse. The following message, which was painted on the classroom door of one of the participants and whose room was also trashed, exemplifies the cruel and inflammatory nature of some of the incidence of verbal ETB: "*Life is a bitch and so are you*". After the message was painted over, the next challenging message was written on the door: "*What do you think of me now?*"

A number of participants were victims of emotional abuse. A 58-year-old HOD described in detail how a group of Grade 12 girls succeed in making his life a "*living hell*" through their negative demeanour. They constantly disrupt his classes, chatting with one another or back chatting and/or ignoring him. According to him, they continue to mock him until he loses his temper, stops teaching and orders them to leave his classroom. This disregard of learners

for their educators and the practice of mocking and humiliating their educators is emphasised by the following quotations:

When I ordered him to pick up the water bottle, he refused, turned his back on me and walked away.

They do their utmost to ridicule me and if I lose my temper, they laugh at me.

Participants received threats of violence (e.g. “I don’t know if the gun was loaded”, and “he told me he was going to stab me”). Some of the participants perceived these threats to be life threatening (“I feared for my life”). Educators had objects thrown at them while they were writing on the blackboard; they were slapped in the face and chased around the school building. Both the principals who took part in the study described how they were forcibly held captive and attacked in their offices. One mentioned that her hands were tied behind her back. Grade 11 learners threatened to kill her child if she did not succumb to their demands. Educators’ classrooms were trashed with water and/or spray-painted and their cars were scratched and the tyres slashed.

Victims were also targeted after hours. The participants referred to, among other things, bullies who told them that they would “get” them or “waited” for them “in the street” and learners who “waited for me [a principal] at street corners”. Mention was also made of learners throwing stones and eggs at the educators’ homes, trashing their private property and defacing it with graffiti. A female educator talked about an older learner who drove aggressively and purposely cut in front of her, thus intimidating her.

The following quotation exemplifies the stance of participants that ETB is often all-encompassing:

They waited for me at street corners, armed with stones. They threatened me and said I should watch my back. One of the learner’s brothers attacked me in my office.

While some bullies openly defy and bully their educators (confronting and mocking educators in front of their principals, educators and other learners), others do it anonymously (acts of vandalism committed at night, over weekends or during school holidays).

The foregoing exposition has shown that educators were exposed repeatedly over time to verbal, non-verbal, psychological and physical abuse during and after school hours. What may superficially be seen as innocent acts of horseplay is perceived by the victims of ETB as malicious acts to disempower them as professionals and human beings. The interrelationship between the acts of bullying and the influence of bullying on their victims’ personal and professional well-being will be addressed in the subsequent discussions.

Influence of ETB

An analysis of the verbatim responses of the participants revealed that in accordance with Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological systems theory, the influence of ETB may be found on the micro- (victims’ personal lives), meso- (institutional level), and macro- (societal level) systems levels.

Theme 1: The influence of ETB on victims' personal lives

The ensuing findings emanating from the data will reveal that ETB results in victims showing symptoms of psychological distress, presenting classical responses of shame, lacking in assertiveness, feeling guilty, and being unable to control their anger.

Participants said that they suffered from, among other things, headaches, sleep deprivation, eating disorders, stress and burnout. There is also evidence that the participants present classic responses to shame, namely, feelings of powerlessness (*"I feel so small ... so helpless"*), self-repulsion (*"I'm doing the cowardly thing"*), embarrassment (*"they deprive me of my dignity"*), a lack of self-esteem (*"maybe I'm not a good teacher"*) and withdrawal from others (*"I don't go to the staff room"*) (Lewis, 2004). The feeling of powerlessness is also illustrated in the victims' inability control their anger and their lack of assertiveness.

An educator who suffered as a result of ETB said that he purposely ignores misbehaviour by his bullies. Another educator added that she is afraid that they will slash the tyres of her car. A female participant who was bullied by a boy whom she caught smoking in the school yard, acknowledges that the victimisation negatively influences her ability to act assertively. A few days after the boy started harassing her, she saw two girls smoking: *"I immediately thought: What should I do? Should I speak to them or should I ignore them and turn a blind eye?"* A participant who received official warnings for allegedly *"manhandling"* learners whom he disciplined decided to ignore their ridicule and misconduct. This made him susceptible to criticism by his principal (for not being able to stand up against his bullies' ridicule and for not disciplining the bullies who wilfully disrupt his classes).

It seems furthermore that some victims are filled with guilt. A participant mentioned that her bully was expelled after a disciplinary hearing. Instead of taking pride in her ability to act assertively, she said *"I feel terrible ... I ruined the boy's life"*. Participants' inability to control their tempers and lash out at their bullies (after being subjected by prolonged harassment), left them emotionally drained. Moreover, these emotional outbursts make them open to criticism from colleagues, ridicule by learners and disciplinary action by management.

Despite their negative experiences, several participants believe that the majority of their learners still respect them. A HOD said that some of his learners cleaned and painted his classroom during the school holidays *"as a birthday present"*. Another participant described how some of her learners begged her to continue teaching them during their further education and training phase.

Theme 2: The influence of ETB on the institution (teaching and learning) (meso-system level)

The following discussion will show that ETB not only influences the victims as professional people, but may also lead to the disintegration of teaching and learning.

Data extracted from the interviews reveal that ETB may lead to mediocrity (*"I've lost the will to go all-out"*), a lack of enthusiasm (*"it makes one not to want to go to work"*) for their profession and their learners, disciplinary problems in classrooms (*"I try to turn a blind eye when children misbehave"*) and in the school yard (a participant who initially decided to ignore two learners who were smoking), as well as the disintegration of teaching and learning (agitated participants send misbehaving learners out of their classrooms).

Several participants pointed out that their estimation of the teaching profession has changed as a result of their own negative experiences (*"Children deprive you of your dignity and your pride as a teacher"* and *"I'm disillusioned with the profession"*). It seems furthermore as if victims are questioning their own professional abilities as a result of their victimisation. An HOD who has been teaching for more than thirty years said: *"Maybe I'm not a good teacher, maybe I should have done something else with my life, oh well!"* There are however participants who believe in themselves despite their negative experiences and maintain that they are competent educators (*"I know I'm a good teacher"*) who enjoy the respect and loyalty of their learners.

ETB negatively influenced the career prospects of the victims as their reputation diminished in the eyes of their learners, colleagues and principals. Victims were, for example, criticised by their principals and senior staff for turning a blind eye to misbehaving bullies; they received official reprimands for manhandling bullies and were ridiculed by learners whom they were not able to discipline. A senior male educator, who mentioned that learners often ignored him in an attempt to irritate him, described for example how two girls giggled and chatted *"right under my nose"* while he was teaching. He reprimanded them for littering and insubordination. Two days later he received an official warning for pushing one of them, in spite of his denying touching the girl. He was warned by his principal for threatening to do bodily harm to another learner. Although this participant acknowledges that he is easily irritated, he argues that some learners purposely annoy him, and if he loses his temper they report him and bring him into disrepute with the principal. The participant thus believes that his bullies use a third party, such as their parents (who laid the charges against him) and his principal (who served him with an official warning) to bully him. Bullies, who attempt to destroy their victims' professional lives, are also illustrated by the recollection of a participant who described how he was bullied by a group of boys when he started his teaching career. However, when he retaliated, he was reported to the principal for being *"unfair"* and *"manhandling"* them.

Some of the older participants said that they cannot wait to retire (e.g. *"I try to turn a blind eye when children misbehave ... I'm retiring in two years' time"*). Two of the participants had the following to say:

At one stage I felt very helpless and I left the school after two months — even though I did not have another job.

I had to leave that school because it was not safe to stay there.

The two above quoted relatively young school principals (both in their forties) relocated after being held captive, and their own and loved ones' lives were

threatened. Another participant decided to move in permanently with her life partner; consequently, she resigned. All the other victims are still teaching at the schools where they were victimised. None of the participants, with the exception of the woman who resigned for personal reasons, left the profession.

ETB furthermore led to the disintegration of collegiality, as well as tension between members of staff (participants criticised their colleagues' lack of work ethics and flawed disciplinary practices; they also mentioned that they do not get any support from colleagues. Two of the participants mentioned colleagues' insinuations that they brought the victimisation on themselves because they were "*too strict*"). Victims of ETB thus often feel isolated and unsupported.

Theme 3: The influence of ETB on the interaction between the victims and society (macro level)

Schools are social structures and are situated in specific societies. Several participants made mention of the negative attitude of parents towards educators; therefore, reporting incidence of ETB to parents was a waste of time. On the contrary, bullies '*used*' their parents to bully educators by laying complaints against educators who lashed out at their misbehaving offspring. Gang activities in the community as a whole often spilled over into the schools and gang members were '*used*' to bully educators. ETB consequently led to the disintegration of the school-home/community relationship.

Discussion

Findings from this study validate the researcher's working definition of ETB. Educators were repeatedly subjected to aggressive behaviour. The educators, who were suppose to be the mentors and leaders were belittled and disempowered by their tormentors. The aggressive acts against the educators were deliberate and repeated. The bullies used verbal, non-verbal, physical and electronic means to harm the victim physically, emotionally, socially and/or professionally. This study has shown that there is a fine line between learner misbehaviour (disciplinary problems) (*cf.* Wolhuter & Steyn, 2003) and ETB. Participants described how learners used disruptive behaviour and insubordination (laughed at them, ignored direct orders, turned their backs on their educators) to bully them. Disruptive behaviour and insubordination thus develop into ETB if the misbehaving learners are wilfully challenging the educators' authority in order to disempower them. Consistent with findings by Rigby (2004), ETB can be viewed along a continuum of seriousness, with most acts being of low severity, such as teasing and back chatting and some less commonly perpetrated acts of extreme severity, such as the slapping of educators or holding them captive in their offices.

A finding from the current study, namely, that educators are often the victims of verbal abuse (e.g. "*Life is a bitch and so are you*") is in line with other studies on ETB. De Wet & Jacobs (2006) found for example that 48.4% of the respondents were verbally abused by their learners. In another study (James *et al.*, 2008) 65% of the learner respondents indicated that they called

their educators names. Findings from the current study pertaining to the vandalism of educators property (e.g. trashing of an educator's classroom and defacing of educators' homes with graffiti) are confirmed by the following statistics: 9.5% of Benefield's (2004) and 21.8% of De Wet and Jacobs's (2006) participants indicated that their property was damaged by learners. Educators who took part in Pervin and Turner's (1998) and De Wet and Jacobs's (2006) studies indicated that they were physically abused by their learners (15% and 14.3%, respectively). This is in line with findings from the current study: participants narrated for example that they were slapped in their faces and forcibly held captive.

Findings on the manifestations of psychological distress among the victims of ETB (headaches, sleep deprivation, stress and burnout) are supported by Smith and Brain (2000). Findings by Smith and Brain (2000), namely, that low self-esteem is one of the particular outcomes of bullying, are echoed in the current study: participants doubted their own professional abilities and lacked assertiveness.

The negative influence of school violence on the victims' further career paths (e.g. the two principals who relocated to other schools; participants mentioned that they were literally counting the days/years until their retirement) is illustrated by two international studies. All six participants of Smith and Smith's (2006) study relocated from violence ridden inner-city schools in the USA to suburban or rural schools. Chen and Astor (2009) found that victims of school violence in Taiwan who feared for their personal safety tended to leave the profession. It should however be mentioned that none of the educators who took part in this study left the profession as a direct result of ETB.

Findings from the current study are consistent with other studies that emphasise the negative influence of ETB on teaching and learning (James *et al.*, 2008; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Pervin & Turner, 1998). Victims of ETB lowered their expectations and turned a blind eye to misbehaviour. Dealing with bullying behaviour often took up valuable teaching time. In some cases it even resulted in the suspension of classes — when the victim lost his/her temper and stopped teaching.

The relative defencelessness of the victims of ETB as a result of the imbalance of power implies that the victims rely on others to intervene (Smith & Brain, 2000). Unfortunately, the opposite seems to have happened with the participants: colleagues and management were detached and some suggested that the victims were responsible for their own plight. Perpetrators even '*used*' their parents and principals to reprimand victims who lashed out at them after being relentlessly mocked and/or ignored. This may lead to a collapse of trust and communication between the victims, management and parents.

Some methodological concerns about this study should be expressed. The participants were exposed to ETB. The findings thus emanate from targeted educators' own perceptions of being victims of bullying; therefore, listening to the other side of the story, i.e. of the perpetrators, is essential. Therefore, in future research, it would be pertinent to study the perspective of the bullies.

Unfortunately, it may be difficult, or nearly impossible, to find voluntary participants who would accept the label of: 'a learner who bullies his/her educators'. The anonymity of a survey design with learner respondents (*cf.* James *et al.*, 2008) should therefore be considered in order to expand knowledge on ETB in a South African context. Typical of the nature of qualitative research, the study was limited to a relatively small sample of participants and it is not intended that the findings be generalised. The intention is to make role-players aware of bullying amongst educators. The study is not replicable in its exact form, but it is hoped that the issues raised will be able to inform practice.

Conclusion

An acknowledgement of the existence of ETB in schools, a better understanding of what constitutes ETB and an acceptance by all role-players that such abuse is not merely the symptoms of bad teaching and/or the inability to discipline misbehaving learners, but the outcome of individual, institutional and community circumstances, making it necessary to fight ETB. A group, consisting of learners, educators, school management and the school governing body should be set up to investigate ETB. Victims of ETB should be made to feel that their problems are being taken seriously. A whole-school programme that is adapted to the needs of the individual school and involves the entire school community needs to be developed, implemented and monitored.

Notes

1. The risk factors of ETB and the victims' suggestions on how to combat ETB are reported in a follow-up article.
2. In the absence of an institutional ethics committee I discussed the topic in-depth with colleagues from the departments of Psychology and Philosophy before embarking on the study.

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