

## Perceived School Climate Factors of Bullying Among Gweru Urban High School Adolescents : Indicators for Intervention

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### Abstract

*The aim of the study was to investigate on school climate factors of bullying among Gweru urban High school adolescents. A survey design, premised on quantitative and qualitative paradigms, was used. Stratified random sampling was used to select 2 of the 6 day- and 2 of the 7 day-boarding schools. Purposive sampling was used to select 1 class from each school, giving 76 female and 84 male students (mean age 16). A Questionnaire was self-administered, and for close-ended questions, median values of students' responses were calculated, and the data was also subjected to Spearman's rho correlational computations among the factors. Thematic analysis was used with data obtained from open-ended questions. Main findings were that students perceived factors of bullying as being comprised of a negative teaching-learning process, poor social interactions, and a negative general school tone. It was concluded that dysfunctional school climate factors promoted bullying in complex interactive ways. However, other confounding variables could explain why some students exposed to such factors, did not bully while others, not exposed, bullied. Thus, the study's findings could only have permitted probable factors rather than undisputed ones. Recommendations made included that anti-bullying program-designers could address the factors in both their individual capacities and in combination, as changes in one could likely influence changes in others.*

**Key words** : School climate, factors, bullying, adolescents, Gweru Urban.

### Introduction

Bullying is the most pervasive form of aggression in schools and as such has attracted much international attention (Greene, 2006). According to Spriggs *et. al.* (2007), large scale world-wide surveys show high prevalence of bullying in many schools across the globe. Though the rates differ from country to country, studies in various nations show that a growing percentage of students are being bullied every day. Justice for Children Trust (2009), cited by Manguvo *et. al.* (2011), states that the bullying phenomenon is also widespread in Zimbabwean schools.

According to Skogsberg (2012), bullying, once thought of as simply a rite of passage and as relatively harmless, is now known to have detrimental effects on all students, be they bullies themselves, victims, bully-victims, by-standers or onlookers, and the uninvolved. In addition to students' loss of sense of security, the teaching-learning process is not spared hence students, parents and education practitioners

are all concerned. In view of these dire consequences, an agenda for promoting peace in schools was given in a 1990 address by Deutsch, the first President of Peace Psychology of the American Psychological Association (Greene, 2006).

However, in Keating's (2009) view, school bullying does not usually go away on its own and its eradication is not any time soon, hence the need for anti-bullying intervention programs. The author adds that rather than being proactive, most school interventions are punitive by only targeting bullies, and only becoming reactive to critical incidents. For intervention programs to be more effective, Swearer *et. al.* (2010) suggest that they must target school climate factors that are research-based and not use a one-solution-fits-all approach since each school has a unique and dynamic system peculiar to its set up. Thus, according to Olweus (2004), the initial step to intervening is the use of research to identify the factors that promote and sustain school bullying.

Skogsberg (2012) also stresses that effective intervention programs are informed by factors perceived by students as the ones causing bullying. This is because, more than any other under-reported safety school problem, is bullying, which is perpetrated in the presence of and is known more by students than by school authorities. Hence the author calls for a participatory action research approach that involves students and as such, the current researcher had students as participants.

It is against the given background that the study aimed to investigate school climate factors of bullying as perceived by Gweru urban High school adolescents. Knowledge of such factors could play a decisive role in the designing and implementation of effective anti-bullying programs. Thus, the researcher's objectives were to:

- Identify teaching-learning aspects that promoted bullying in High schools.
- Determine social interactions that promoted bullying among High school adolescents.
- Examine general school tone factors of bullying among High school adolescents.

### **Review of Literature**

According to Santrock (2006), adolescents are individuals who are in a transitional period from puberty to early adulthood, and aged about 12 to 21 years. The transition is marked by various physical developmental changes that impact on adolescents' cognitive, emotional, moral, and psychosocial development. About the bullying behaviour, Zimbardo (1985) points out that the most influential of these is cognitive development, which is the mental-processing of environmental

stimuli and involves memory, reasoning and decision-making. In Piaget's cognitive theory, adolescents are in the final and formal operations stage, which is witnessed by increased abstract thought processes, sophisticated organization of facts and events, and consideration of problems from several vantage points. However, the still developing brain's frontal lobes render them vulnerable to poor judgements and decision-making (Santrock, 2006).

Black and Louw (2010) point out that bullying is at its peak in early- and middle-adolescence as individuals in late adolescence will have attained some maturity. The individuals get involved in risk-taking behaviours, which are perceived as potentially-rewarding. Such behaviours are especially common in peer-group settings, which activate additional brain circuitry that processes rewards in form of the mere presence of peers. With several developmental changes occurring in adolescence, Santrock (2006) calls it a period of storm-and-stress.

Espelage (2010) defines bullying as an intentional, unprovoked and repetitive act of aggression in which there is a real or a perceived imbalance of power between stronger individuals, the bullies, and weaker individuals, the victims, who cannot properly defend themselves. The author describes various forms of bullying : Physical bullying is unwanted, harmful and intentional body contact and includes hitting, kicking, punching, shoving, slapping, strangling, and use of weapons; Verbal bullying involves slanderous statements/accusations that cause undue emotional stress, and include dare insults, name-calling, threats, use of derogatory terms, playing with the victim's name with evil intentions, verbal provocation, and negative comments about the victims' looks, clothes and/or body; Social bullying is what Aluede (2011) also refers to as relational bullying, which involves instigating negative personal interactions of victims with others. Included is gossiping, spreading malicious rumors, intentionally isolating victims from a group, getting others to gang up on them, and ignoring them on purpose or giving them the silent treatment; Cyber bullying has gone digital (Bauman, 2007) as it involves verbal, relational or social bullying accomplished using information and communication technologies, that is, electronic or wireless media. Used are emails, cellphones and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal web sites, social networking sites, such as face book, to support deliberate, repeated and hostile behaviour. Methods used include flaming, harassment, denigration, masquerading, outing and trickery, social exclusion, cyber threats and cyber stalking. Yamasaki and Nishidi (2009) view cyber bullying as having more serious effects than other forms of bullying because it has power of the written word, it cannot be escaped as it happens any time in and out of school, and includes those who cannot bully face-to-face;

Instrumental bullying involves bullies demanding victims' personal resources, such as stationery and lunch, or demanding that the victim gives up a seat, which the

bully prefers to have. Victims are also made to perform tasks for bullies, such as making their beds, doing their laundry and polishing their shoes (Strabstein, 2009); According to Skogsberg(2012), sexual harassment is repeated exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual propositioning, and sexual abuse involving unwanted physical contact; Lastly, is inductive bullying, which involves all other forms of bullying and is targeted at students who are new/freshmen to a school or class. Transition to High school and fitting in provide a context for inductive bullying as there are several peer and power dynamics. Hazing is a painfully embarrassing initiation ritual, which Oldenburg (2014) says is regarded by most school cultures as a normal toughening process. Zindi (1994) adds that a new student, in a boarding school, can be harassed, has their food-trunk ransacked, and is sent on various errands most of which are demeaning and unnecessary.

According to Eisenberg and Aalsma (2005), by virtue of their ages, most adolescents are still in school. Thus, the school is typically the largest and most important socialization institution for them thereby making it the primary context for bullying. The authors give possible explanations why adolescents are likely to engage in bullying : Regarding teen stress, McNeely and Blanchard (2009) posit that human bodies respond to stressors by activating the nervous and endocrine systems resulting with a physical response that kicks off much quickly in adolescents than in adults. This is because part of the brain that calmly assesses danger and calls off stress responses, the prefrontal cortex, is still developing in adolescents.

In Strabstein's (2009) view, adolescents bully to maintain in-group uniqueness, social identity and status. This is because they form cliques and belong to different crowds based on their activities, interests, music, clothing, and their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. By their nature, such groups are bound to differ in their socio-economic and popularity status, which often creates aggression-victimisation-based dynamics. As such, adolescents bully social out-groups that are similar to their own in-group as a result of threatened distinctiveness; According to Pellegrini (2002), bullying is also used to enhance and maintain a particular social order inside in-groups. When an in-group member is considered to have become too popular and is perceived to be causing an imbalance inside the group, other members might start spreading malicious rumors about that member so as to diminish his/her status.

Bullying is also used by adolescents to achieve specific goals, such as to demonstrate superiority. Though morally competent, adolescents tend to behave immorally as they often lack moral compassion, tend to engage in a kind of cold cognition, and have a good theory of mind and an average social intelligence, both of which are some of the skills that enable them to achieve their desired goals (Skogsberg, 2012). In addition, Olweus (2004) views adolescents as being at risk of psychological



adjustment problems and that, in comparison to all other groups involved in bullying, bully-victims are the worst off regarding such problems. Hence bully-victims choose bully assistants and re-enforcers as seeing others being victimized is a buffer against their own problems. According to Bonds and Stoker (2009), adolescents' developmental changes and tasks, increase their struggle with identity, with the power of the group and group-think, and the task of sorting out issues of adult authority. In this regard, adolescents face the challenge to learn to appropriately use power to maintain their own identity and beliefs in the context of the group.

Other explanations of why adolescents bully are that they want to : Impress peers; Feel big bullying others because they were once bullied; Retaliate for being punished at school; Have power and control over others; Impose their own laws and social norms since they often consider existing ones unfair and unacceptable; Challenge authorities and oppose established social controls that they feel are oppressive, and experiment new violent behaviours using the school environment for practice (Boyle, 2005). With all these potential causes for adolescents to bully, Swearer *et al.* (2010) argue that this makes school institutions have a significant effect on bullying as they concentrate large numbers of adolescents in one place for long periods of time.

To successfully address the problem of school bullying, interventions must be theory-based (Manguvo *et al.* 2011). In this respect, Swearer *et al.* (2010) describe bullying as a socio-ecological behavioural problem that is a function of the dynamic interaction between individual bullies' characteristics, and their family, peers, the school and community environment. It is in this regard that the school climate, as one of the socio-ecological factors of bullying, formed the basis of the current study. Thus, the researcher studied the bullying phenomenon using the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) socio-ecological model. According to Keating (2009), this model emphasizes that environmental factors are major players in the development and behaviour of individuals, whose socio-ecological niche is the place or role they occupy or play in their environment with reference to : Where and with whom they live; How they relate to those they live with; How and what they do where they live. In summary, the model describes how individuals fit in their environmental niches, such as the school niche.

Bronfenbrenner's theory places adolescent development and bullying behaviour within 5 interrelated and nested systems, which can be represented with circles, and are named in the order of their increasing distance from the individual adolescent, who is at the center of the innermost circle. The micro-system is the small immediate environment the adolescent lives in on a daily basis. It involves their temperament, daily roles, activities and personal interactions with family,

peers, their community and their school. Second is the meso-system, which refers to how micro-systems interact and influence each other within the bullying cycle. For example, parenting styles in the micro-system can be influenced by an adolescent's peers, by their school's expectations, and by communication between their parents and the school.

Thirdly is the exo-system, which is comprised of people and places adolescents may not actively and directly interact with but which affect their behaviour. Examples are parents' workplaces, the mass media, siblings' friends, neighborhoods, and schools' governing bodies. The macro-system surrounds the first three systems in an overarching manner, and included in this system are ideological and cultural values, policies, politics and society, all of which impact on bullying. Lastly, is the chrono-system', which is the largest and remotest things or people to adolescents, which greatly influence behaviour. Involved are transactions or events over the course of their life, social and historical circumstances, and environmental changes.

Thus, to fully understand bullying as a school micro-violence, it is best to consider the interconnections between the adolescent and the 5 influential systems. However, the scope of the current study could not address all the 5 systems as it only focused on the school micro-system.

According to Petrie (2014), bullying can be driven and sustained by the school climate, which refers to the overall quality and character of school life, including teaching-learning practices, organizational structures, interpersonal relationships, norms and values. Peterson and Skiba (2000) are of the view that students' bullying behaviour is influenced by their perceptions and reflections of feelings they have regarding their school climate. According to Thapa et. al. (2013), dimensions essential to a valid school climate measurement are traditionally in five domains namely: Order, safety and discipline; Academic outcomes; Social environment regarding student-student, student-teacher and teacher-teacher relationships; School facilities; And school connectedness. In addition, Zullia et. al. (2011) give four more dimensions, that is : Academic support; Schools' physical environment; Perceived exclusion or privilege; Academic satisfaction. Hymel et. al. (2005) comment that of all these domains, the student-teacher relationship domain is mostly correlated to all others including connectedness to others: A lack of connectedness and belonging increases risk of self-defeating behaviours.

In Campbell's (2005) view, a positive school climate is likely to motivate students to achieve academically and make them less likely to engage in antisocial behaviour, and students perceive such a climate as existing when they : Feel comfortable, valued and accepted as evidenced by support, mutual respect, trust,

and enjoyment of peer and teacher relationships; Like and feel connected or affiliated with their school; Partake in formulating school rules, which are fairly and consistently enforced; Sense high levels of empathy and expectations from teachers, who display friendliness, which supports academic achievement; Experience high school satisfaction; Have sound relationships with teachers, who also display effective classroom management skills and discipline, which should not be too severe. Bradshaw and Johnson (2011) posit that these aspects exert informal controls on behaviour as students inhibit deviant behaviour, are non-defiant, non-oppositional, are prosocial and uphold school rules. However, Bonds and Stoker (2009) comment that the potential of schools, to use these aspects in promoting positive behaviour, is largely untapped, and that in their absence, students have attention problems, are defiant, antisocial, oppositional, and apt to break school rules, and expect others to follow suit.

Swearer *et. al.* (2010) give other characteristics of school climates that promote bullying as including : Over-crowding, hence the scramble for resources, unclear behavioural regulations, authoritarian treatment, and highly competitive activities at the expense of co-operative learning; An uncaring/disorganised environment, with unkempt and ill-maintained property and structures, poorly-marked boundaries with broken or non-existent fences or walls, scattered broken furniture, all of which yield antisocial behaviour that matches the eye-sore environment; Close proximity to noisy recreational facilities such as beer halls, stadia and night clubs.

### Methodology

A descriptive survey, premised on quantitative and qualitative approaches, was used. The study was a survey as data was collected from a large number of students who were in geographically-spaced out schools. It was quantitative in that close-ended questions yielded numerical data, which was analysed using descriptive statistics and was subjected to Spearman's rho correlation computations. It was also qualitative in that open-ended questions explored how students themselves understood school climate factors they perceived as contributing to bullying : Data yielded was presented as narratives and analysed using thematic analysis. The 2 approaches complemented each other as is explained by Blake and Louw (2010), who say that although quantitative data provides a lot of critical information, it does not give participants an opportunity to give their own understanding of the problem under study in their own voices.

Students in 13 Gweru urban High schools, of which 6 were day- and 7 were day-boarding schools, were targeted. They were (fe)males in Forms 1 to 6 and aged 13 to 20 years. They were targeted based on 2 assumptions : Firstly, it was assumed

that students' perceptions of their school climate had a bearing on whether or not they engaged in bullying. This is because, in Blum and Libbey's (2004) view, social-cognitive theorists' believe that people react to life experiences as they perceive them to be, regardless of whether their perceptions are accurate or not; It was also assumed that students knew more about bullying than school authorities did. This is explained by Greene (2006), who says that school bullying almost always occurs in hidden places, out of sight of school authorities, and where there is an audience of other students.

Stratified random sampling was used to select 2 day-schools and 2 day-boarding schools to ensure each type of school was represented. Purposive sampling was then used to select a class from each school's Forms 2, 3 and 4 as Santrock (2006) posits that middle adolescence has the age group mostly involved in bullying. Selected classes had 76 girls and 84 boys aged 15 to 17.

The selected classes were identified with the help of school Heads, who used records of classes known to predominantly have the most bullying problems. This selection was based on Espelage's (2010) view that classes with students who have behavioural, emotional and learning problems have the most bullies, victims, bully-victims, by-standers or on-lookers and the uninvolved, all of who witness the when, where, why and how bullying occurs.

A questionnaire comprised of 3 sections, was used. Section A items were on students' demographic data. On the other hand Sections B and C respectively had close-ended and open-ended questions on potential school climate factors of bullying as guided by literature. For Section B, each question item had possible responses on a 4-point ordinal-rating scale ranging from strongly agree=1, agree=2, disagree=3 to strongly disagree=4. The close-ended questions had the advantage, to the researcher, of easy coding and interpretation of data. However, the questions did not probe students for any further explanations, expansions or emphasis of their responses. In attempting to minimise this problem, the researcher used open-ended questions. It was hoped that responses to these questions enriched collected data by providing additional information and clarifications of students' responses thus, giving a more holistic context of their perceptions of school climate factors of bullying.

Aspects regarded in data collection procedures were ethical considerations, pre-testing the questionnaire, and conducting the main study. For ethical considerations, permission to conduct the study in schools was sought from the Midlands Provincial Education Director, the Gweru urban District Education Officer and from Heads of selected schools. In obtaining informed consent, school Heads and selected classes were fully informed about the purpose of the study

and how the students would be involved to enable them to decide on whether or not to participate. The Heads acted in *loco-parentis* and granted consent for participation of students, who were also informed that they were free to withdraw their participation at any point of data collection, and that should they withdraw, the data collected from them would be destroyed. This also ensured voluntary participation. Anonymity was guaranteed by ensuring the students that their identity was safe-guarded as no names were required on the questionnaire. Lastly, in observing confidentiality, students were ascertained that no information they gave would be disclosed without their consent. Observation of these ethics could have helped to elicit genuine responses from the participating students.

Before students responded to the questionnaire, the researcher drew their attention to the definition of the term "bullying" to ensure that the researcher and students shared a common knowledge and understanding of the behaviour, and to avoid confusing it with the normal daily conflicts among students.

Pre-testing was conducted to ascertain validity and reliability of the questionnaire. It involved 5 randomly-selected students from a purposively selected class at a day-boarding school, which was not part of the sample.

In collecting data for the main study, the researcher visited selected schools on dates and during regular lesson times, which had previously been agreed on with school Heads. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires, which were collected soon after being completed, and this ensured a 100% response rate.

## Results and Discussion

### Teaching-Learning Factors

Findings were that students perceived teachers' academic expectations of them as too high, and that teachers held with low regard their academic ability. This implies that students' problems with school work could have resulted with frustration that caused them to engage in bullying. In support of these findings are Hymel *et. al.* (2005) who refer to the strain theory, which argues that school frustrates students whose behavior does not conform with teachers' expectations resulting with students feeling strain associated with failure, which causes rebellion vented out on bully victims. Thus, bullying is rife in schools/classes with a mismatch between high expectations for achievement and low students' ability. In further support, Manguvo *et. al.* (2001) give a 2009 Japanese study, which revealed that students placed under pressure to academically achieve, described such an atmosphere as hell, with 65% of the sampled 1 200 students reporting feeling pressured, tired and hedged-in. There were also reported feelings of unhappiness,

despair and frustration, all of which made schools breeding grounds for bullying as troubled students took out their frustrations on their peers, who served as scapegoats. It was concluded that while having high academic expectations was a protective factor that should keep students focused on school work and reduce bullying, it appeared excessive expectations could fuel it. It was also concluded that holding students' academic ability with low regard almost always resulted with a self-fulfilling prophecy as students re-directed their energies from school work to bullying.

Students perceived that there was a scramble for some school resources, and this could have created an opportunity for students to bully others so as to acquire the best of what was available. It could have been because of the students' accumulative negative perceptions of the teaching-learning process that they viewed their classes as lacking a real learning spirit. In support of these findings, Swearer *et. al.* (2010) say that inadequate resources could imply failure by schools to provide enough resources. Or it could also imply overcrowding, which can also mean a high teacher-student ratio that in turn implies lack of individual attention to students and inadequate control of students, all of which are possible causes of bullying. Bonds and Stoker (2009) also point out that teachers with good classroom management skills create a real learning spirit though, at times, they are overwhelmed by large enrolments in their schools.

Two main themes emerged from the open-ended question requiring students to describe aspects, of a typical teaching-learning day in the school, which could instigate bullying. Most students perceived a positive teaching-learning process as illustrated by two of the students who said :

*"This school has an open-door policy to parents/guardians who wish to know about how their children are doing. There's also strict time-keeping with an alarm system which alerts students and teachers on the beginning and end-of-day times, lessons and other extra-curricular activities. With the help of prefects and teachers-on-duty, things run efficiently"*

*"Teachers assign adequate exercises, homework and tests, which they mark and return on time. I feel rewarded for my effort and I am motivated to learn."*

This could imply that schools had some protective factors that prevented bullying. In support of these findings is de Fruitos (2013) who refers to 2 such factors : Firstly, that parental involvement in schools minimizes bullying as students are aware that school authorities and parents collaborate in monitoring their behaviour. This is unlike a situation whereby parents are unaware of their children's behavior at school and the school does not engage the parents. Secondly, students who

perceive themselves as being constructively occupied at school, have no reason to behave antisocially.

However, some students had negative perceptions of their schools' teaching-learning process as reiterated by two students who said :

*"Most students' academic performance is affected by my school and classroom's close proximity to the main road. There is often irritating background noise and it's very easy to lose track of the subject matter and we end up just daydreaming and attending school because we have to."*

*"Our classes are big and teachers take time to know us by name and there is no way they can effectively personally reprimand us for bad behaviour or give us individual attention by way of remedial work. So, students misbehave by taking advantage of remaining anonymous in the crowd and any students who lag behind in grasping concepts just drift along and yet we are expected to do well."*

According to de Fruitos (2013), students' behavior is affected by their schools' geographical location such as being too close to noisy and/or polluted residential or other areas that are not conducive to learning or that draw students' attention. Thus, a school's larger environment also shapes its internal organization, which in turn affects students' behaviour. In addition, large classes make it difficult for teachers to control and effectively monitor students.

### **Social Factors**

Findings were that bullies were provided with and enjoyed an audience from bystanders, who did not protect or assist victims at bullying episodes. These findings are supported by Hymel et. al. (2005) who cite 2008 Nigerian observational studies in Benin : Results indicated that although 85 to 88% peers were present in most bullying situations, they seldom, 11 to 25% of the time, intervened on behalf of the victims; Peers reportedly just watched, while others joined in the bullying. In a related study, Olweus (2004) established that peers were involved in 85% of bullying episodes, by providing attention or joining in, and that standing around and watching or laughing was also found to encourage, sustain and prolong the bullying. However, the study also showed that some by-standers did not want to intervene for fear of also being victimized.

In further support of the findings, Blake and Louw (2010) point out that as bullying gets more relational in adolescence, it becomes more difficult for peers to intervene. This is because the bullying is perpetrated within the normal patterns of social interactions and peers are likely to display moral disengagement by dehumanizing

the victim as deserving the detrimental acts. By-standers are also less likely to intervene if they perceive their school climate as being negative.

Students' perceptions were that they disliked and disrespected one another. However, this was against the background that teachers were perceived as good adult behaviour role models, a situation which could have curbed bullying. In explaining these findings, Petrie (2014) comments that sometimes teachers take the role of bullies in their relationships with students and among themselves, thereby instilling negative attitudes to schoolwork and to their relationships with them. Swearer *et. al.* (2010) add that students attending schools with high rates of animosity and conflict show increased oppositional, attention and conduct problems.

Findings were that students perceived teachers as not trusting them. In explaining these findings, Campbell (2005) says that lack of trust instills negative behaviour in students as they sense that they are doing something wrong, which warrants the mistrust. According to Oldenburg (2014), anti-bullying intervention programs should, therefore, examine and address interpersonal relationships in schools, especially those of teachers, as students usually take cues from witnessing teachers' interactions in determining if peers are likable or not.

Regarding the open-ended question requiring students' descriptions of their perceptions of student-student, student-teacher and teacher-teacher interpersonal relationships, one main negative theme emerged : Students indicated that besides poor student-student relationships, some student-teacher and teacher-teacher relationships were also negative. This is illustrated by two students who said :

*"Some teachers' written comments, in our assigned work, are not at all constructive. Instead of being shown where and how I went wrong so that I learn, I'm told to use the stuff between my 2 ears."*

*"At assembly, the school Head sometimes addresses issues such as punctuality of both students and teachers. She can tell students to report to her any teachers who come late for lessons, who leave early or who bunk sports, and she says this in a nasty manner that undermines our teachers : It sounds like she owns the school and the teachers, and looks like she pays their salaries. Students laugh and somehow this strips teachers of any respect from students."*

According to Oredern and Oloyede (2007), students model interpersonal relationships they observe in their school. Teachers' management of students' written work is an occasion for feedback, which has to be well explained, corrected and reviewed as it impacts on students' achievement. In this regard, negative interactions reflect teachers' negative characteristics which contribute to students' lack of attention in class, to their negative attitude to teachers and to schoolwork,



all of which can make students engage in bullying. All in all, social interactions have been found to be a hidden curriculum that greatly impacts on school bullying.

### School Tone Factors

Findings were that students perceived school rules as being unfairly and inconsistently enforced and that they were treated too severely. Bradshaw and Johnson (2011) concur by saying that students can bully others as a sign of rebelling against school authorities for what they perceive as being unfair and differential enforcement of discipline. The opposite is likely to motivate students to behave well though disciplinary measures should not be used too severely/excessively as this could instill bullying. Also, in explaining the effects of severe discipline, Espelage (2010) posits that a typical school environment, characterized by an emphasis of school rules, control and firm discipline, often conflicts with adolescents' developmental needs of autonomy and opportunities to demonstrate their competence as this can undermine positive affiliation with school and academic engagement, which results in bullying.

Students' perceptions of the absence of supervision, outside classroom times, possibly created opportunities for bullying. According to Blake and Louw (2010), adolescents make calculated moves, prior to engaging in bullying, by ensuring that there are no deterrents, in terms of the timing and the place, of which unsupervised times and places create opportunities for bullying. In addition, de Fruitos (2013) points out that the architecture of the building areas of some schools is such that supervision and vigilance by school authorities is minimal, a situation which promotes bullying. Such unstructured times and areas include school buses, over week-ends in dormitories which house students from a wide array of backgrounds and who must be compatible enough to live with and share resources with individuals they would otherwise not tolerate under different circumstances. About the question on students' descriptions of what made some schools prone to bullying, the main theme that emerged was that it was the type of school, which impacted on the type of students enrolled. This is illustrated by what one student said :

*"Day-boarding schools are less prone to bullying as most students are selected into Forms 1 and 5 based on their respective Grade 7 and "O" Level results. However, missionary day-boarding schools sometimes also select based on students' religious orientation or denominations, and such schools are usually strict on behavior. On the other hand, state-owned day- schools do not select students hence their enrolment includes low-achievers who may also have little interest in school-work."*

Consistent with these findings is de Fruitos (2013) who argues that the behavior of students is partly determined by different school ownership types in that private,

grant-aided, independent and semi-private schools are less likely to have serious bullying problems as such schools exercise a strict selection entrance criteria. Thus, being open or selective is a powerful predictor of bullying as is witnessed in public or state-owned schools which admit a high proportion of students with academic and behavior problems.

According to Campbell (2005), school climate factors of bullying usually exist in clusters and not in isolation. In this regard, data from the questionnaire's Section B close-ended questions was subjected to Spearman's rho correlations computations. Results showed that a number of potential factors of bullying were positively correlated to various degrees and in various interactive ways. Such correlations could imply that some factors consolidated one another in promoting bullying. There was a moderate positive correlation between students' perceptions of lack of a real learning spirit with 3 other factors, namely : Lack of respect for one another, which could have emanated from perceived unfair and inconsistent enforcement of school rules and from lack of supervision of students outside classrooms, which in turn also had a very strong positive correlation with perceived lack of respect for one another.

A strong positive correlation, between perceived presence of good adult behaviour role models in schools, and schools being well kempt and commanding respect, could have curbed bullying.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on research objectives, it was concluded that teaching-learning environments, which demanded academic achievement perceived by students as too high, in which ability was held with low regard, which had inadequate resources, had large classes and schools in disturbing geographical locations, instilled bullying. Secondly, negative (in)formal, oral and/or written social interactions, at various levels in the school were also perceived as promoting bullying. Lastly, schools that enticed bullying were those perceived by students as having poor general tones as indicated by unfair and inconsistent enforcement of rules, severe/harsh treatment of students, as having unsupervised out of classroom times, and government day-schools that were enforced to enroll students without any selection entrance criteria.

The overall conclusion was that dysfunctional school climate factors, in their individual and in their interacting capacities, promoted bullying among Gweru urban High school adolescents. However, the identified factors may only have been probable ones as Campbell (2005) gives the mystery that only a small fraction of students exposed to such factors become bullies, yet others not exposed to them

at all, bully: This implies that there could be other potential confounding variables, which could not be considered within the scope of this study.

Based on the given findings, the researcher suggested some recommendations. It was recommended that school authorities could take into cognizance the identified students' perceived school climate factors of bullying so as to address the problem. It was also recommended that anti-bullying program designers could pay attention to the unique climate of each school so as to effectively address bullying as each school has characteristics peculiar to it. Lastly, further research could be conducted based on teachers' and parents' perceptions of the causes of school bullying, and on other possible socio-ecological confounding variables, besides the school climate. Such variables include influence of bullies' individual characteristics, their peers, family climates and communities they reside in. This could enable a more holistic approach to addressing the problem of bullying in High schools.

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