

**SCHOOL-BASED VIOLENCE AND PEACE:  
IMPROVING LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION  
AMONG ADULT SURVIVORS OF SCHOOL  
BULLYING**

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**Abstract**

*Promoting equity and egalitarian society is very vital for enhancing human development, and one of the most powerful instruments for this purpose is education, which boosts people's self-confidence, equips them for their future; to act responsibly in making better choices and relevant contributions in their society.*

*Evidence exists of considerable problems with bullying and bullied children in secondary schools that undermine these efforts as a result of their long-lasting effects for the victims, which include hindrance in learning and advantages of higher education in their survivors. The psychological damage and pain caused by bullying can become almost indelible and affect one's future. This article using 40 undergraduate students of Michael Okpara university of Agriculture, Umudike and 112 students from two secondary schools, (Nigeria), examines the effects of secondary school bullying on their tertiary education, and the effectiveness of peer-mediation as early intervention. The sample was purposively selected from four colleges in the university. The study indicates that bullying experienced in secondary school could adversely affect the self-esteem and performance of the survivors at tertiary education level and importance of earlier intervention to improve learning.*

**Key Words:** School bullying, peer-mediation, survivor, intervention, communal empowerment, social bonding, modeling behavior.

**INTRODUCTION**

School bullying is any action against a learner (psychological or physical) and perpetuated by his/her peers or by anyone associated with his/her place of learning, resulting to keeping the learner uncomfortable or humiliated. Such psychological or physical violence forms a pattern of coercive and

controlling behaviour on the victims, which may have a long-time effect in them if not addressed earlier enough.

Evidence exists of considerable problems with bullying and bullied children in secondary schools. What has not been considered enough is how these acts of bullying can cause long-lasting effects for the victims. This paper using 40 undergraduate students of Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Nigeria, examines the effects of such menace on their tertiary education, and the effectiveness of early intervention. This research explores the situation and finds ways to address the causes and evaluate peer-mediation interventions in order to reduce school violence in the form of bullying in schools to create safe environment for learning and development. My earlier conference presentation on this serious issue at 10<sup>th</sup> University of KwaZulu-Natal (2016) offered opportunity of informing the academic audience about this my study, stimulated discourses on it. The inputs received at the conference helped to improve the study.

## **CONSEQUENCES OF SCHOOL BULLYING**

Nncube et al. (2015) postulate that conflict and violence in school context emanates from diverse foundations that encompass a variety of performers, which can be reflected in many forms with many consequences. For, example, intimidation is cultured outside school, but propagated in schools, and in most cases the school does not attend to it. In addition, Burton (2008) highlighted that conflict and violence in schools impact negatively on the process of acquiring knowledge. It creates an environment of anxiety and suspicion, where children develop inaccurate perceptions of individuality and self-confidence. These need to be addressed so as to build schools that are safe and conducive to personal development for both students and teachers.

In his research, Van der Merwe (2009) found out that “conflicts and violence in the school context has increased and those related to bullying are in greater intensity, and sometimes leading to fatal incidences like death. Studying the Zimbabwe’s case, (Chikwiri and Lemmer, 2014) point out that conflict that results in violence has become alarming in Zimbabwean schools. When this type of violence is not

checked, school violence is reinforced. In Nigeria, there have been series of tortures and victimization of children by their peers in the name of punishment without the perpetrators being made to face the law. This condition is unsafe not only for schools but also for the society. The Bureau of Market Research (2012: 3) affirms that the gravity of the effects of school violence among youth who were exposed to violence expresses feelings of unhappiness as well as despair. In addition, Chabangu (2014) concludes that the impact primarily affects the youth's emotional growth and it is estimated that such adverse feelings could add to the young people being caught up in a nasty cycle of investigation and failing to manage emotionally in the school setting and in the society at large.

Adolescents between the ages of 10 and 16 are at high risk for exposure to violent and abusive incidents (Xiaoxiao Chen et al. 2023) and bullying is one of such incidents. Apart from the immediate physical consequences of exposure to abuse (vide: disability, injury and death), there are economic, social and particularly psychological consequences. Children growing up under these or similar conditions are reported to exhibit high prevalence of abusive-related psychological

symptoms, difficulties in behavioural and anti-social disorders. Arias and Johnson (2013) in their study discovered that “the child abuse continues to occur among significant number of children with negative consequences for survivors’ physical and mental health”. They explored healing with ten female survivors of child-sexual abuse and focused on a theoretical model for spiritual healing. The commonest type of bullying is general name calling, spreading rumours about one, verbal attacks, to more serious acts like hitting with fist or pulling one’s hair, slapping, kicking, pushing, grabbing, threatening with or attacking someone with any type of weapon. The psychological damage and pain caused by bullying can become almost indelible and affect ones future.

#### **FIELD RESEARCH:**

As an academic staff of Michael Okpara university of Agriculture, Umudike, having witnessed some students who reported anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem as result of bullies they suffered in secondary school and how these continued to affect them, the researcher decided to examine the effects of such menace on students’ tertiary education and the effective intervention to curtail such occurrences and

bring improvement. For this article, the 152 participants were purposively selected from two secondary schools (St John Seminary Nsude and Federal Government College Enugu) and 40 students of one university (Michael Okpara University of Agriculature, Umudike). Questionnaire (see **appendix 1**) and oral interview were used. There were unimaginable torture and brutality reported by the secondary school students as taking place in the name of bullying. The most common victims are the junior students as display of power and superiority. There are also imposition of punishments and enslavement of young students by their seniors.

#### **FINDINGS FROM THE PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES:**

1. All the students studied saw bullying as a big problem but also as a usual thing in their schools.
2. The practice is obtained more among the boarding students than the non-resident students.
3. The law seem to have been very silent (at least in application) about the situation while only 10% of parents of those interviewed have fought against it on their own.

4. Only 8<sup>th</sup> of the sample or 20% (negligent few) of the sample have received early intervention or assistance through school counseling units of their schools that helped their situation.
5. School dropouts: Five of those interviewed mentioned of their colleagues who dropped out of schools, while many changed to other schools.
6. Most effective and positive intervention witnessed by those interviewed was school peer-mediation.

I want to use selected cases to discover how early intervention and proper management resulted in improvement of the condition of the victims and the most effective method used. From the conducted interview, proper and timely management led to reversing negative emotions and depressive states for higher academic achievements. Lack of assistance and mismanagement made situation far worse, resulting in chronic low-grade and depression became sad experiences of the victims studied. Two reported cases are

- a. Through the timely intervention of parents, a child being bullied and who was in a state of dropping out from secondary due to such harsh environment, was saved. This

child was withdrawn from that hostile environment and made to continue in another school, which is friendly and has responsible supervision and effective school counseling. By the end of the first year in that new school, his interest and skill were identified and helped to become one of the top skilled students in music, especially playing music instruments. He has high prospects for successful higher education, having been spurred by the friendly environment.

b stagnated third year student of Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike suffered demotion to second year class. Fortunately, he received proper counseling that helped him pick up his studies with interest to improve greatly. Following the responses of the participants and points raised about peer-mediation as helpful method for the experience, this study went further to study the effectiveness of peer-mediation as early intervention to address school bullying.

### **EFFECTIVENESS OF PEER MEDIATION AS EARLY INTERVENTION: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

According to Abramson and Roberts (2011), peer mediation “is a structured method of conflict resolution in

which the trained neutral fellow-student assists other students in the dispute by listening to their concerns and helping them negotiate”. They also see it as a restorative manner of conflict resolution between persons where a neutral third party from one’s peer group attends to the persons in conflict while the persons in conflict negotiate a mutual agreement. Students themselves are active in the conflict resolution process which strengthens the student’s internal locus of control and develops their individualization. This students’ involvement in conflict resolution helps students to be in a better position to understand conflict and how to constructively resolve it. Hence, they are in a better position to solve or to avoid those conflicts that result in violence.

Peer-mediation seems to be a successful restorative justice method to manage violence in elementary and secondary schools. Peer mediation provides a unique opportunity for diverse students to use communication, human relations and problem-solving skills in a real life setting (Robinson 2008). Hence, Musariwa (2017) confirms that effective peer-mediation groups help to create a safe and welcoming school environment, improves interpersonal and inter-group relationships thereby reducing school conflict and violence

especially when it is used as part of the school violence prevention plan.

Peer mediation “fosters self-regulation, self-esteem and self-discipline in students” (Another positive outcome of this type of training is the ability of the trained students to transfer mediation skills to a variety of settings including peers, family and neighborhood conflicts. So, this helps students become better problem-solvers and responsible citizens. Musariwa (2016) observed that if conflict resolution skills are given by peers, students are most likely to accept them due to group influence, social learning and communal empowerment. Power is only created in relationships. Haugaard (2008: 99) also sees power, not just as “series of individually chosen acts, but also, most importantly, by the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups and practices of institutions, which may indeed be manifested by individual inaction”.

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process of enhancing one’s or a group’s ability to have or do something. Communal empowerment is a collective social process of creating a community, achieving better control of the environment, and decision making in which groups or

communities participate. It also includes organisational processes and structures that enhance member participation and improve organizational effectiveness for goal achievement (Zimmerman (2000). Such processes lead to positive outcome such as social cohesion, social bonding, sense of community life, community building, coalition building, group support, community engagement, and involvement in and control of a situation in the community. Empowerment is believed to be sharing of power from one person or group to another, which could be by delegation of authority or participatory decision-making. Hence, the essence of peer mediation in empowering the students to adopt better behavior.

More advantages of peer mediation stems from its positive effect on students who engage in aggressive behaviour who appear to have limited knowledge and social skills on how to resolve conflicts in a constructive manner. Whiteside et al (2006: 19) confirms that “peer mediation programmes are based on the foundation of applied conflict resolution and such programmes have helped to empower students to share responsibility for creating a safe and secure school environment. Mayorgar (2010) confirms that conflict resolution programmes that include peer mediation have contributed

effectively to resolving students' disputes brought to teacher's and administrators' attention, success in reducing suspensions and discipline referrals in schools, and improving the school climate. Peer mediation programmes "are effective in teaching students how to control anger, develop appropriate assertiveness, skills, and learn problem-solving skills, communication skills and inter-personal skills" (Johnson and Grayson 2005: 500). Once students learn how to control anger, they are they are less likely to display aggressive behavior to their peers and their teachers.

Peer-mediation confirms the postulations of the social learning theory and theory of change. Bandura (1999) claims that "much of our behaviour is learned by observing other people and modelling our behaviour after theirs Bandura (1999) claims that "much of our behaviour is learned by observing other people and modelling our behaviour after theirs." Behaviour is learned through not only the direct experience of reinforcement but also through the observation of the reinforcement obtained by others (vicarious reinforcement) and self-enrichment-self-observation, self-evaluation and feelings such as pride, satisfaction and guilt." A child does not develop or learn in a vacuum but in a complex web of relationships at different levels. The environment that

surrounds the child starting from home, to school, the community up to cultural values and laws affect the development of the child. Children learn through their interactions and experiences with their family schoolmates, teachers and the outside world.

Reed et al. (2010) cited in Mohamed-Katerere (2014) argue that "social learning is a collaborative learning process between actors in a network (including communities) to develop new understanding, improve a situation and take collective action." Mohamed-Katerere (2014) further argues that social learning can facilitate the sharing of knowledge about environmental change as well as about the social factors relevant to conflict, in particular, vulnerability. A culture of peace can be learnt by learners after being taught skills on how to resolve conflicts respectfully and non-violently. By engaging in discussions, dialogue and negotiations, learners develop their capacity to build a culture of peace. With teachers continually encouraging such behaviour, non-violence can become a way of life for both teachers and learners (UNESCO 2017). On the other hand, the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace (A/RES/53/243) recognized that democracy and peace cannot be imposed from above but must grow from the bottom up. This could be possible as the Programme focused on children

from an early age ensuring that they benefited from an education that would enable them to resolve disputes peacefully with respect for human dignity, tolerance and non-discrimination.

Peace education is central to UNESCO’s mandate as demonstrated by the preamble of its Constitution that reads, “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.” UNESCO defines peace education as, “a set of values, attitudes, models of behaviour, and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations” (UNESCO). Therefore, for UNESCO, peace education was at the heart of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World Adams (2005) uses the terms “culture of peace” and “culture of non-violence” and identifies eight features of a culture of peace that correspond to the eight features of a culture of violence and argued that non-violence is a necessary aspect of a culture of peace. The comparison is at the Table below.

**Table 1: Culture of Violence vs Culture of Non-violence**

<b>Culture of war and violence</b>	<b>Culture of peace and non-violence</b>
Belief in power that involves the use of force	Belief in dialogue to resolution of conflict
Having enemies	Tolerance, solidarity, understanding
Authoritarian governance	Democratic participation
Secrecy and propaganda	Free flow of information
Armament	Disarmament
Exploitation of people	Human rights
Exploitation of nature	Sustainable development
Male domination	Equality of women and men

*Source: Adams 2005*

According to Patra and Mete (2015:2) “peace education is a process of acquiring values and knowledge and developing attitudes and skills to live in harmony with oneself and others”. In the school set up, peace education is about helping learners understand how to transform conflicts and this is reinforced by people treating each other positively in the classrooms,



playground, families and the wider communities. Peace education promotes knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that are needed to bring about behavioural change that will enable children to prevent conflict and violence. Hence, “peace education aims at offering opportunities to develop skills and knowledge required to practice conflict resolution, communication and co-operation regarding issues of peace, violence conflict and injustice” (Harber and Sakade 2009: 23). Hence Peer-mediation is very effective system of peace education.

### **RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION**

Bullying can cause physical and psychological damage to victims. Learners who are chronic victims of bullying experience more physical and psychological damage than their peers and tend not to outgrow their roles as victims. The chronic victims of bullying have an increased risk of depression, low self-esteem and other health problems including schizophrenia and death. As observed from the participants, Ganga’s (2018) view, that bullying can cause learner victims to be hopeless, fearful, depressed and less involved in school work, is confirmed. As victims grow older and perpetrators leave the school, victims may

also become perpetrators leading to a culture and cycle of violence at school (Ganga 2018).

Without good and timely management, self-esteem of the victims of school bullying could take a dive, making their energy to plummet and their characteristic enthusiasm needed to excel in academic work could retreat into mental hibernation. The result is that every day molehills turn into insurmountable mountains as their ability to cope with things and people is lowered. While mismanagement can make a bad situation worse, effective mood management and timely intervention limit frequency, duration and intensity of depression. Policy to eradicate or check school bullying should be a welcome measure as a fight against other type of violence, for students’ effective performance. Violence keeps children out of school and denies them opportunities of bettering their lives and working their way out of poverty. In the view of Pinheiro (2006:153), “violence in schools perpetuates the cycle of poverty which can lead to more violence”.

This study proved that bullying experienced in secondary school could adversely affect the self-esteem and performance of the victims at tertiary education level, the

effectiveness of peer-mediation and suggests how to deal with such menace much earlier to improve learning in the following ways.

1. As exposure to violence, crime, and abusive treatment have serious consequences on child development, physicians and policymakers need to know the kinds of exposure that occur at various developmental stages and implement good plan for prevention and intervention. The counseling units have to be maintained in every school and children shall be given the opportunity to speak out on their problems and experiences affecting their learning while they are in secondary schools and higher institutions. This is important because bullying is similar to torture.
2. There should be national law addressing school bullying, since it is similar to torture and abuse of others' rights of freedom and happy living.
3. Parent-teacher interaction and cooperation for child training should be strengthened and made more relevant.
4. For the adult survivors, counseling and psycho-therapy are needed to improve their performance in future studies.
5. Peer-mediation is very effective system of peace education which aims at offering opportunities to develop skills and knowledge required to practice conflict resolution, communication and co-operation regarding issues of peace, violence conflict and injustice. This practice has proved to be an important early intervention to schooling.
6. The researcher further recommends that more researches with wider coverage and larger samples on this issue be carried out in Nigeria to enable the policy makers address the serious problem, for more peaceful school environment and vibrant society.

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## APPENDIX 1

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### QUESTIONNAIRE

***We are investigating the impact of school bullying on higher education performance of those who suffered such abuses during their secondary school periods. If you are pleased to give your opinions, kindly supply them below, and if you need to express your opinion further, do so overleaf.***

**Your**

**Institution:**.....**College/**

**Dept.**.....

**Level:**.....**Sex:**.....**Age:**.....[Married / Single]Tick

There were certain actions or treatments from peers or other persons in your place of learning (in secondary school days) that kept you uncomfortable or unhappy while you were there. Please, give your opinion on such actions.

1. Which type of bad treatment did you suffer in secondary school (**underline them and mention other ones not listed below**)

Name calling that you disliked; Spreading rumours about you; Verbal attacks; Hitting with fist; Pushing or pulling you; Slapping; Kicking; Verbal threats; Threats with weapon, Sexual harassment; Rape; Hitting you with any type of weapon..

2. How often was such attacks or treatment? [Frequent], [Once]; [From time to time]. You may explain better overleaf.

3. By whom and how often was such attacks or treatment?

.....

Why were you treated like that?

.....(Please explain).....

.....

4. At what level of your study in secondary school did you receive such treatments?.....

5. How did bullying or such bad treatment affect your secondary school education? [I found myself bullying others] ;[ kept me sad and withdrawn]; [No effect at all]; [Low grade and poor performance]; Others

[.....]

6. When in secondary school did you finally get free from such treatment? [class.....]; [I experienced till I graduated];

7. To whom did you report your problem of bullying at your secondary school?

8. Who helped you get over such bad treatment? [colleagues and peer group]; [Parents]; [School authority]. Explain how you were helped by this/these [Counselling] [Therapy];

[.....]...[.....].....

.....  
.....

What effect did bullying have in your performance after secondary school?

.....  
.....

10. What effect did bullying in secondary school have in you in higher education)? [Poor academic work]; [anti-social]; [could no longer be in your best academic form] ; [I hate myself]; [I am still seeking revenge somehow]; [Poor innovation] Any other?.....

.....

**About another victim**

11. Have you noticed someone that suffered bullying?.....

At where? .....

12. What happened to him or her? Dropped out; Poor performance; Injury (which type), Death;

Other?.....

Explain more and how the situation was

handled.....

.....

.....

.....

**SUGGEST REMEDIES -**

13. Which do you suggest (**indicate Yes or No**). **Feel free to write additional comments**

A. National law addressing school bullying .....(B) Parent-teacher intervention..... (Mention type).

C. Psycho-therapy ..... (D)..... Other measures

E. How has peer group intervention (peer-mediation) particularly helped you or another person you know get over school bullying?