

Retribution to restoration: A pastoral response to the role of the faith community in addressing high school bullying behaviour within South African schools

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Abstract

Bullying is a complex phenomenon that affects learners' emotional wellness. It also influences the general social and cultural environment of schools. The behaviour is characterised by intentional intimidation, harm, or the exertion of control over individuals. In schools, the focus tends to be on punishment and sanctions as the primary solution, rather than on intervention and support. Bullying goes beyond individual experiences; it is deeply connected with societal norms, power dynamics, and cultural attitudes. Bullying stands in clear contrast to the Biblical call to love one's neighbour. In pastoral care and counselling, this instruction serves as a guiding principle for helping faith communities identify and challenge harmful relational patterns. The emphasis is on pastoral counselling and advocacy for individuals involved in school bullying. A theological response to school bullying entails offering spiritual and emotional support to both victims and perpetrators. This article uses qualitative literature research from both sociological and pastoral perspectives to propose a restorative pastoral approach to promoting pastoral care and counselling as a theological response to bullying.

Keywords

bullying; pastoral care and counselling; parent-child relationship; symbolic interaction; restoration

Introduction

Drawing on sixteen years of experience in the school environment, including serving on the school's disciplinary board, I (Plaatjes) have observed a clear imbalance in how bullying is addressed. Support initiatives largely focus on victims, while perpetrators are subjected to punitive measures and limited support. The most prevalent method of dealing with individuals who engage in bullying behaviour is the use of punishment, as stated by Roberts (2006:54). From my experience while serving on the school's disciplinary board, sanctions such as demerits or suspensions seldom deterred repeat offenders, who often resume their bullying behaviour when returning to school.

The 2015 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) found that 17% of South African Grade 9 learners experienced bullying on a near-weekly basis (Juan et al. 2018:1), equivalent to approximately five learners in an average class of 30. Additional national studies report similarly high prevalence rates across secondary schools, highlighting the persistent and widespread nature of school-based bullying in South Africa (Juan et al. 2018:2). According to Steyn and Singh (2017:1030), the incidence of violence and bullying in South African schools has escalated significantly. The prevalence of school bullying and violence among learners is escalating, emerging as urgent social concerns. Research initiatives now focus on exploring bullying through social systems (Murray-Harvey et al. 2010:36). This suggests that bullying occurs within a social context and is not merely a result of individual deviant behaviour.

Bullying behaviour contradicts the Biblical principle of loving one another. Doehring (2015:164) advocates that pastors encourage their congregations to love their neighbours as themselves. Pastors can guide faith communities to recognise how prejudice influences their views of others and offer pathways to more compassionate, nurturing relationships. Faith communities have the potential to provide a safe and inclusive environment for all individuals, regardless of their past behaviours. This reflects the inclusive and compassionate approach Jesus demonstrated in his interactions with marginalised, impoverished, and vulnerable individuals. This challenges faith communities to embrace grace, forgiveness, and acceptance, fostering an environment in which all individuals feel valued and supported.

The story of the Prodigal Son illustrates God's forgiveness, grace, and unconditional acceptance. The father acknowledges the rebellious son's remorse and repentance, forgives him, and restores him to the family. Faith communities can unintentionally exclude individuals because of past behaviours, lifestyles, or challenges, rather than offering grace and acceptance to those seeking help. From a practical pastoral perspective faith communities can overlook people's needs when institutional traditions take precedence over pastoral care and counselling for individuals (Royal Commission of Inquiry 2023: ch. 3). Individuals' support and healing are hampered by avoiding conversations and interventions about abuse, bullying, mental health, and social injustices (Hunt 2020:100). Pastoral care and counselling advocates for redemption and exemplifies the dissemination of God's unconditional love, compassion, and forgiveness to all individuals, including those who engage in bullying behaviour.

Phenomenon of bullying

Bullying is a complex social phenomenon that occurs among individuals, their peer groups, and within the broader social context. The basic definition of bullying has three components: repetition, intention, and power imbalance. Bullying happens when individuals are repeatedly exposed to aggressive acts over time. Olweus (1993:9) describes bullying as a form of aggressive behaviour, typically characterised as "behaviour intended to inflict injury or discomfort upon another individual" (see Murray-Harvey *et al.* 2010:59; Olweus & Limber 2010:25; Orpinas & Horn 2010:73; Winnaar *et al.* 2018:1; Brooks & Cohen 2020:8).

From a pastoral perspective, bullying reveals brokenness in people's relationships and a deep wound in their call to love others. It reflects a failure to honour God's image in one another and points to unmet needs, pain, and a loss of dignity both in those who harm and those who are harmed (Dayringer 2012: 49). Faith communities are called to respond not with condemnation, but with truth, care, accountability, and a commitment to restore loving relationships with God and others. Bullying reflects a distortion of the Biblical ideals of mutual care, dignity, respect and justice. From a theological perspective, bullying reflects sin and human brokenness, inflicting harm on both victims and perpetrators. Pastoral care

and counselling promote healing, forgiveness, and restorative practices aimed not just at preventing bullying but also at renewing relationships and restoring wholeness in individuals and communities (Pope 2014: 174).

Types of bullying

Bullying manifests in various forms, each with distinct characteristics and a specific effect on victims and perpetrators (Jankowiak *et al.* 2024:2). Bullying emerges in two interconnected forms: direct and indirect, each intended to exert power and control over the victim. Powell and Ladd (2010:190) differentiate between two types of bullying: direct and indirect. *Direct bullying* encompasses verbal and/or physical abuse, occurring in the victim's presence. Physical abuse involves the intentional infliction of bodily harm on another individual. Lee (2004:2) defines physical bullying as hitting, kicking, and stealing someone's belongings without permission, along with damaging property to undermine the victim (see Rigby 2007:20; Román & Murillo 2011:38). Another type of direct bullying is verbal abuse. It encompasses name-calling, threats, derogatory comments, racial slurs, and impolite remarks.

Indirect bullying, which is also referred to as relational antagonism, is typically associated with bullying behaviour in females (Juan *et al.* 2018:2). *Indirect bullying* has a relational aspect and includes emotional abuse. Indirect or relational bullying encompasses threats, gossip, insults, manipulation, and spreading of rumours (Archer & Coyne 2005:212). Relational bullying manifests in intricate social hierarchies, in which a person's reputation and popularity determine whether they are included or excluded. The intention of the bullying behaviour is to cause emotional distress and to inflict harm. Cyberbullying is when peers are harassed, intimidated, or threatened by means of electronic devices (Yang & Salmivalli 2013:724; Masilo 2018:1). Modern technology has facilitated the escalation of cyberbullying as a widespread form of indirect bullying. Social media, group chats, text messaging, and websites are used to harass, threaten, and demean individuals from a distance.

Bullying, whether physical, verbal, relational, emotional, or cyber, harms people's psyche as well as their spiritual well-being (Evans & Smokowski

2015:399). Physical and verbal bullying undermine an individual's self-worth as being formed in God's image. Relational and indirect bullying damage identity within a community, diminish belonging, trust, and relational agency (Forsberg 2021:930). Bullying behaviour reflects the broader reality of sin and human brokenness, disrupting relational wholeness and distorting the ability to love God, neighbour, and self. In a pastoral context, these wounds require holistic healing focused on dignity, restoration, and community reconciliation, allowing both victims and perpetrators to restore spiritual identity and to re-establish compassionate, just relationships.

Effects of bullying

Individuals who are subjected to bullying often experience psychological distress, which can manifest as depression, anxiety, and isolation. They often struggle with low self-esteem, social anxiety, and body-image issues (Powell & Ladd 2010:195). Childhood bullying can have long-term effects. Victims are at risk of developing anxiety disorders, panic attacks, and depression that can extend into adulthood (Copeland *et al.* 2013:424). Children who engage in bullying have a higher probability of exhibiting behavioural problems, such as violent behaviour, substance use, and criminal activities in adulthood.

For Swearer and Hymel (2015:345), bullying affects the victim, the perpetrator, the school, parents, and society, thereby requiring a contextual pastoral response. Bullying can be viewed in South African contextual theology in light of the legacy of apartheid, persistent poverty, injustice, and normalised violence that influence interpersonal relationships (Coetzee 2004:1). These realities have an impact on how exclusion, power, and belonging are negotiated in school environments. Therefore, bullying is a sign of deeper relational and systemic dysfunction rather than just individual misbehaviour. Restorative justice, which resonates with the African concept of ubuntu, recognises that harm fractures relationships and community connections. Therefore, encouraging faith communities to engage in restoration, reconciliation, and renewed relational belonging. From a pastoral perspective, restorative practices advocate for interventions

that prioritise healing, accountability, and reconciliation over punishment alone.

Parent-child relationship and bullying

The relationship between parents and children is crucial to children's cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioural development. Theoretical frameworks such as attachment theory provide distinctive viewpoints for understanding children's behaviour. Attachment theory

explains how secure or insecure attachments with caregivers can influence children's emotional regulation and their interaction with peers (Bowlby 1969: 177). Chu and Chen (2025:929) explain how parent-child attachment plays a crucial role in understanding the connection between parenting and patterns of bullying. Secure parent-child attachment, characterised by emotional support and acceptance, can reduce the probability of bullying behaviour in children. Children with secure attachment to their caregivers tend to exhibit greater empathy, self-regulation, and positive social skills (Balan *et al.* 2018:562). In contrast, insecure parent-child attachment is characterised by neglect, inconsistent care, or emotional rejection, which in turn is associated with increased rates of bullying behaviour (Murphy *et al.* 2017:1389).

Research based on attachment theory indicates that early relational experiences influence how individuals conceptualise God, participate in spiritual interactions, and pursue divine attachment (Kirkpatrick & Shaver 1990:315). Childhood attachment patterns shape adult religiosity by influencing how individuals relate to God and engage in spiritual relationships. In cases of insecure attachment, individuals may relate to God as a substitute attachment figure, seeking security and care that were disrupted or absent in earlier caregiving relationships. Avoidant attachment occurs when children experience rejection or emotional unavailability from caregivers, causing them to suppress their attachment demands by deactivating the attachment system (Bowlby 1969: 229). Kirkpatrick and Shaver's (1990:315) research indicates that avoidant attachment in childhood is associated with higher levels of adult religiosity, particularly in beliefs about God and the experience of a personal relationship with

God. This suggests that some people turn to God to make up for a lack of parental attachment. Within practical theology, God can be viewed as an attachment figure who offers relational security in situations where early attachment needs were not adequately met, a dynamic that significantly affects patterns of spiritual growth and religious meaning-making.

Pastors frequently encounter individuals whose challenges in trusting God or others stem from early attachment harm. Drawing on Bowlby's (1988:11) attachment theory, pastoral presence, characterised by empathy and consistent availability, can serve as a safe base, providing relational experiences that were inadequate or inconsistent in early childhood. Insecure attachment can cause anxiety, emotional distance, or ambivalence in spiritual life, whereas secure attachment is associated with experiencing God as a trustworthy haven, which promotes spiritual resilience, hope, and openness (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick 2013: 139; Davis & Granqvist 2026:11). Attachment influences how people perceive God, trust others, and engage with faith. Therefore, pastoral care as spiritual formation should focus on promoting secure relationships, positive images of God, a sense of community, and restorative patterns of trust and presence.

While bullying primarily occurs among peers, its roots are often to be found in the family environment (Chu & Chen 2025:928). Family systems theory centres on three core assumptions: relational patterns are learnt and transmitted across generations; these patterns emerge from the behaviours of individuals and the family as a whole; and the family system maintains homeostasis, indicating that any change in one part of the system affects the entire system (Prest & Protinsky 1993:356). Parent-child relationships are fundamental to understanding how family dynamics influence bullying behaviour. Family systems theory highlights that families hold common stories and emotional legacies. Pastoral care and counselling help to reinterpret stories in more positive ways. According to Louw (2010:352) pastoral care as *cura animarum* addresses the whole person, emotionally, spiritually, and relationally within their life context. Pastoral care should focus on individuals within their family and social contexts. Pastoral ministry seeks to mend broken relationships and address family systems influencing people's experiences. Pastoral care (*cura animarum* – cure of souls) refers to a “ministry that is directed not merely to a human being's inner life, but also to the spiritual care of the total person in all

the psycho-physical and psycho-social dimensions (spiritual wholeness)” (Louw 2014:60). Pastoral care, grounded in *cura animarum*, responds to these realities by caring for the whole person, as created in the imago Dei and interconnected in networks of relationships. Pastoral ministry contributes to God’s reconciling work by promoting spiritual wholeness and transforming relational patterns that lead to behaviours like bullying.

Symbolic interaction

Beyond the influence of the parent-child relationship, individuals also connect with others through interactions within society. From a sociological perspective, the theory of symbolic interaction examines the processes by which individuals construct meaning in their relationships and interactions with their environment. People use language and significant symbols in their communication with others (Carter & Fuller 2016:932). Quist-Adade (2019:21) defines symbolic interaction as “a social psychological approach that examines how individuals develop socially through group participation”. Symbolic interaction theory explores how individuals generate meaning through their interactions with each other and their environment. Symbolic interaction emphasises that individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to their experiences through social engagement (Mead 1934:76; Blumer 1969:2). A child can participate in bullying as a means of symbolically asserting power or suppressing vulnerability. Prior experiences with caregivers and peers can influence the bullying behaviour. Understanding bullying within the framework of symbolic interaction allows pastors to identify how language and symbols convey aggression while simultaneously influencing and maintaining power dynamics.

Pastoral engagement should focus on the interaction patterns and shared definitions that perpetuate bullying, rather than only addressing individual characteristics. Bullying should be understood in the context of its social environment, as the perpetrator’s behaviour is shaped by ongoing interaction with others (Salmivalli 2010:112; Swearer & Hymel 2015:345–347; Forsberg 2021:932). Pastoral counselling includes three components: individuals and families, the community, and the tradition that informs Christian identity (Lartey 2003:33).

From a theological perspective, bullying behaviour can be seen as a distortion of the *imago Dei*. Osmer's (2008:4) descriptive-empirical task in practical theology identifies harmful social practices as repetitive patterns of behaviour that undermine human dignity and communal understandings of worth. From an interpretive perspective, these behaviours are deeply rooted in power-laden systems of meaning that make it difficult to recognise the other as a bearer of God's image. According to Lartey's (2003:36) intercultural and relational anthropology, these distortions are exacerbated when human identity is formed through exclusion rather than mutuality, and diversity is wrongfully viewed as a failure. Practical theology suggests that human interactions should embody God's creative and relational purpose by maintaining dignity, especially in vulnerable circumstances, as expressed in theological discussions of community and inherent worth (Bonhoeffer 1954:12; Swinton 2012:176). Responding to bullying requires counter-formative practices that direct social interaction towards justice, recognition, and belonging. This allows faith communities to participate in God's ongoing creative and reconciling work (Brueggemann 2001:39).

Osmer's (2008:35) practical theological framework promotes hermeneutical attentiveness to lived experience through priestly listening. This involves pastors intentionally attending to lived situations and interpreting them within theological frameworks. Meaning is discovered through dialogue that respects the lived experiences of those receiving pastoral care and counselling. The core of this approach is contextual sensitivity, expressed in the inquiry "What is going on?" which guides pastors to recognise that meaning is always embedded in cultural, social, and personal realities. Through integrating narrative attentiveness and contextual awareness, Osmer (2008:36) develops a hermeneutical lens for pastoral care that supports personal identity and expands the understanding of lived experience within theological reflection.

Pastoral hermeneutics emphasises the relational aspect of identification, highlighting that individuals understand themselves through communal discernment in connection to God, scripture, and the broader faith community (Osmer 2008:133). Relational grounding includes a transformative aspect in which the normative task encourages communities to reframe identity in light of prophetic vision, promoting growth, healing, and renewed self-understanding (Osmer 2008:135). These aspects

collectively illustrate how pastoral hermeneutics offers a foundation for identity formation that is both grounded in tradition and receptive to continual transformation. The pragmatic task ensures understanding is rooted in care, justice, and leadership, grounding theological reflection in concrete action (Osmer 2008:246). These tasks illustrate how pastoral hermeneutics integrates reflection and praxis, allowing communities to embody understanding in transforming ways.

Ganzevoort (2009:17) suggests that theology is interwoven with everyday stories and experiences, asserting that “everything is theology, but theology is not everything”. In this context, meaning arises as individuals interpret experiences through religious language, symbols, and practices, situating personal narratives within broader theological perspectives. The narrative approach (Ganzevoort 2012:214) connects people’s stories to narratives about God. For Ganzevoort (2009:23), pastoral care and counselling give attention to people’s stories as they are shaped and interpreted within the Christian tradition. Through compassionate listening and guidance, pastoral care and counselling support individuals in articulating and reinterpreting their life narratives. In doing so, experiences of pain, trauma, or joy are reshaped and understood within a broader theological framework of hope, healing, restoration, and transformation.

Ganzevoort (2012:214) asserts that identity is not a static essence but is perpetually created through interactions with people, with God, and with the cultural narratives that influence human experience. He emphasises that identity is fluid, often shaped by trauma, gender, sexuality, and intercultural diversity, requiring individuals to redefine their sense of self in evolving situations. This perspective suggests that hermeneutics should acknowledge identity as dynamic, permitting transformation and continuous re-narration of the self within nurturing communities. Ganzevoort (2012:215) highlights that pastoral hermeneutics is fundamentally dialogical, where meaning and identity are co-constructed through relationships and continuous interaction. This dialogical approach extends to the communal level, where faith communities, rituals, and practices create the contexts for generating and sustaining theological meaning. Pastoral care and counselling should go beyond individual healing to foster communities of dialogue and mutual recognition, where identity is continuously shaped through relational engagement.

A holistic pastoral care and counselling approach

From a theological perspective, an effective pastoral response to school bullying requires a shift from retribution to restoration, grounded in holistic care rather than mere punitive discipline. Both perpetrators and victims require support and spiritual guidance in addressing bullying situations. A holistic pastoral care and counselling approach focuses on spiritual and emotional support and healing for individuals, families, and communities. Drawing on Clinebell's (2011:21) holistic model of pastoral care and counselling, bullying can be understood as an expression of broken relationships and unmet developmental needs, which call for healing on emotional, relational, spiritual, and social levels. Louw's (2014:67) pastoral anthropology reinforces this restorative perspective, describing bullying as a violation of human dignity and meaning that distorts both the victim's and perpetrator's identities.

Holistic pastoral ministry aims to nurture wholeness in individuals and their relationships. Faith communities as a social system can therefore have a significant influence on people's lives, providing care both to and through faith communities and schools (Louw 2010:352). By facilitating collective support and accountability, holistic pastoral care and counselling can accompany individuals and faith communities on a journey toward wholeness. One of the principal objectives of faith communities is to guide individuals through every stage and aspect of life by empowering them to discover and develop their God-given gifts, to cultivate lifelong learning and compassion (Clinebell 2011:129). Rooted in the Biblical notion of "life in all its fullness" (John 10:10), this spiritually centred approach equates wholeness with abundant life and highlights the transformative potential of faith-based care and counselling. Faith communities can be seen as vibrant "life centres" called to enact holistic ministry. Pastors collaborate with the faith community to design initiatives, programs, worship experiences, and activities that promote reciprocal support and integrated well-being. This communal engagement fosters individual transformation while strengthening the social structures of faith communities, promoting collective resilience and ongoing personal growth. Pastoral counselling aims for transformation at both the individual and community level,

facilitating faith communities to respond to rapidly changing human needs.

According to McClure (2012:55), critical practical theology cautions against retributive systems that perpetuate power and coercion in the name of care. Instead, it advocates for reflexive and participatory pastoral practices that prioritise vulnerability and the voices of those affected. Critical practical theology focuses on caring with people rather than over them, paying attention to power, listening deeply, and working together toward healing and justice. Magezi's (2016:3-6) African contextual pastoral theology relates bullying to community collapse, highlighting shared accountability and community-based care and restoration above individualised resolutions. These perspectives advocate for a pastoral shift from punishment towards restoration that promotes dignity and healing.

Research suggests that a positive school atmosphere, including peer support, adult receptiveness and respect for diversity, can lead to fewer bullying incidents over time (Gage & Prykanowski 2014:260; Thornberg *et al.* 2025:8). Research suggests that supportive school environments promote empathy and minimise moral disengagement, leading to less bullying (Montero-Carretero *et al.*, 2021:6-9). Practical theology understands these findings as more than just behavioural regulation. Instead, nurturing climates are considered formative contexts that uphold human dignity and relational wholeness (Clinebell 2011:21). Psychologically supported social behaviours align with theological perspectives, which hold that bullying should be addressed through restorative networks that preserve the imago Dei and participate in God's reconciling work (Louw 2014:67).

Restorative practices provide systematic approaches to reconciliation, promote empathy, and facilitate behavioural transformation. Perpetrators frequently carry their own wounds of trauma and rejection. This has a significant influence on their coping mechanisms and interaction with others. Both victims and perpetrators need an environment that is conducive to spiritual and emotional healing. A nurturing and supportive faith community can mitigate the effects of bullying and prevent it from escalating.

Role of pastors and faith communities

One role of both pastors and the faith community is to engage people and to provide guidance for their personal and spiritual growth (Gerkin 1997:180). Faith communities can also be a nurturing and supportive environment for young people. Young people need a safe and supportive environment in which to grow and flourish. Faith communities can bear witness to both suffering and hope by creating spaces where pain can be acknowledged and dignity restored. They affirm vulnerability by embracing presence, listening, and shared practices, while also guiding individuals and communities towards healing and restoration.

In South Africa's post-apartheid context of unresolved historical trauma, structural injustice, and pervasive social violence, faith communities are increasingly urged to embody restorative praxis as a form of public theological witness. According to public theology, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, while noteworthy, showed the limitations of juridical reconciliation in the absence of continuous communal practice (Naudé 2003:154). Restorative justice, based on Ubuntu-informed moral anthropology, promotes truth-telling, accountability, and rehabilitation for both victims and perpetrators to facilitate social healing (Ntlapo & White 2022:6). Ecclesial praxis therefore takes centre stage whereby faith communities are called not only to proclaim reconciliation, but also to embody it through practices such as hospitality, lament, pastoral support, and advocacy for justice (Coetzee 2004:6). By opposing both “cheap reconciliation” and retributive violence, such embodied practices allow faith communities to act as moral agents in public life and engage in reconciliation as a continuous, transformational way of life rather than a completed political goal (de Gruchy 2002: 8; 98; 225).

A pastoral response to bullying should transcend mere discipline or policy; it should aim to restore dignity, mend relationships, and foster a community where every individual feels safe and valued. It should include providing support to individuals and communities as they navigate their way to healing and restoration. Faith communities can play a vital role in preventing bullying by providing moral guidance, nurturing empathy, and encouraging inclusion. When pastors and members of the faith community embody kindness, compassion, and respect, it can strengthen

the values essential to preventing bullying. A pastoral response to bullying is grounded in empathy, justice, and the healing love of God for both the victim and the perpetrator of bullying. By providing a safe and sacred space for emotional and spiritual recovery, faith communities enact the Biblical vision of mutual care, mitigating the effects of bullying and interrupting cycles of harm through compassionate, growth-oriented ministry.

Educative counselling

A pastoral response extends beyond pastoral counselling to include formative practices such as pastoral education. Educative counselling supports relational and communal wholeness in faith communities by functioning as a formative and restorative practice. Rather than addressing individual suffering alone, it addresses harm, accountability, and restoration within the life of the faith community (Clinebell 2011:347). Faith communities can use educative counselling to reflect critically on behaviours that have affected community life and implement alternative relational practices based on empathy, responsibility, and mutual dignity (Dames & Dames, 2025:4). This process of spiritual and moral formation promotes the communal virtues that are essential to reconciliation, allowing faith communities to act as a healing and restorative community focused on dignity, accountability, and shared wellbeing (Pembroke 2025:6).

Rather than merely addressing the problem of bullying itself, educative counselling can help individuals develop greater self-awareness and make informed choices (Clinebell 2011:394). Educative counselling is therefore proactive. It helps both children and parents address bullying in a productive way. It promotes a respectful, inclusive environment, rather than taking a reactive stance. Educative counselling can raise awareness and promote a deeper understanding of bullying. Both victims and perpetrators can gain a deeper insight into the emotional and psychological effects of bullying. Individuals can then recognise and understand their emotions more effectively and develop skills for resolving conflicts effectively. Effective communication and social skills can help mitigate misunderstandings that often lead to bullying behaviour.

Community engagement against bullying

Prevention strategies and an effective response to bullying require the coordinated partnership of faith communities, schools, families, and local organisations. As previously shown in this article, bullying is embedded in social, cultural, and systemic contexts and cannot be effectively addressed by punitive measures alone. Community engagement therefore serves as a primary pastoral practice rather than a supplementary intervention. This engagement aligns with Osmer's (2008) fourfold model of practical theology, ensuring practical theological coherence. Osmer's (2008:31) descriptive-empirical task, "What is going on?", characterised by priestly listening, defines community participation as paying attention to lived experience. Structured listening spaces, such as conversation or listening circles, allow learners, their parents, teachers, and pastors to share their experiences of bullying in school, family, and faith contexts. This approach corresponds with the article's phenomenological focus on bullying as a meaningful, lived experience. The interpretive task, "Why is this going on?" (Osmer 2008:79) calls for greater reflection on the social and relational dynamics that maintain bullying behaviour. This level of community engagement enables faith communities and schools to view bullying through lenses of power, identity formation, trauma, and attachment. This is consistent with the article's use of symbolic interaction and attachment theory, which situate bullying in relationship patterns rather than moral deviance alone.

Osmer's (2008:129) normative duty, "What ought to be going on?", requires prophetic discernment. Faith communities offer a theological critique of retributive disciplinary cultures while affirming a restorative vision grounded in human dignity, reconciliation, and justice. The task is consistent with the article's primary shift from retribution to restoration, presenting bullying as a distortion of the *imago Dei* that requires relational healing. Osmer's (2008:175) pragmatic task, "How might we respond?" promotes servant leadership through practical examples. Community-based restorative circles, workshops, and faith community-school partnerships support pastoral commitments by promoting accountability, healing, and prevention through ongoing pastoral engagement.

Conclusion

Transitioning from retribution to restoration represents a significant shift in how bullying is understood and addressed in South African schools. From a pastoral perspective, bullying necessitates healing rather than exclusion, accountability rather than blame, and community restoration rather than individual punishment. Faith communities, rooted in reconciliation and communal care traditions, are well positioned to collaborate with schools to create environments where dignity is respected, harm is addressed, and learners are restored to healthy relationships. This pastoral response provides not only an ethical alternative to punitive discipline, but also a hopeful perspective on transforming hostile school environments into caring communities.

This article contends that addressing school bullying necessitates a significant shift from retributive responses towards restorative practices rooted in spiritually centred, holistic pastoral care. Osmer's paradigm ensures that experiences such as bullying are first addressed through mindful attention to lived experience and then interpreted within broader relational and systemic contexts through practical theological reflection. This holistic approach combines educative counselling with active community engagement, moving beyond punishment toward a restorative response. As a pastoral response, this approach calls the faith community to accompany victims and perpetrators of bullying with compassion, truth, and hope, seeking healing and restoration rather than retribution. Further research should explore how involving families and caregivers in pastoral interventions can support long-term behavioural change and relational healing by addressing bullying as a relational and systemic phenomenon.

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