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The geographies of bullying in a secondary school context

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This study, undertaken at a secondary school in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, sought to research bullying – a phenomenon seen globally as a major social problem that has a serious impact on the wellbeing of children and the youth. Participants were eight Grade 10 learners, 4 male and 4 female. The research tradition was a narrative inquiry as the aim was to foreground the participants' stories of the places and spaces of bullying at the school. Data generation involved individual and focus group interviews. Data was analysed using thematic content analysis guided by theoretical concepts from New Childhood Studies and Children's Geographies. The findings indicate that bullying is a serious problem at the school and has a negative impact on the wellbeing of children. Children emerged as social actors who were able to provide insight into the kinds of bullying they experienced and how they constructed 'bullying' as a phenomenon. The study was able to capture the reality of the children's experiences of the complex power-laden spaces and places of bullying at the school. The study shows that bullying is situated in a context and an in-depth analysis of context is necessary to capture the intricacies of the phenomenon.

Keywords: bullying; children's geographies; narrative inquiry; new childhood studies; secondary school; South Africa

Introduction

Finding concrete solutions to decreasing school bullying is imperative given the increasing levels of school violence both internationally and nationally (Da Costa, Xavier, De Souza Andrade, Proietti & Caiaffa., 2015; George, Alias, Khader, Jabbar & Ranjith, 2017; Swart & Bredekamp, 2009; Zuze, Reddy, Juan, Hannan, Visser & Winnaar, 2016). Bullying is a worldwide phenomenon and its continued prevalence is a key concern given that the rights to learning and safety for children are compromised. The statistics surrounding bullying and school violence are alarming. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Report (UNESCO) on school violence and bullying indicates that across the globe, approximately 246 million children are subjected to school violence and bullying every year (UNESCO, 2017). Similar findings are reported by Richardson and Hiu (2016) who add that such high incidences of bullying, although relative to different countries, should indicate that the inability of society to protect the rights of children is a social problem. However, Nguyen, Bradshaw, Townsend and Bass (2017:2) argue that most research into the phenomenon of bullying has focused on "high-income countries neglecting the nearly 90% of the world's young people residing in low and middle income countries." This article therefore attempts to address this gap by contributing to research that explains the various ways in which bullying occurs in an emerging economy like South Africa and the situated response that is needed.

Defining Bullying

Bullying is a complex issue that usually involves two people, but can also include bystanders (Tsang, Hui & Bella, 2011; Wang, Iannotti & Nansel, 2009). To engage with this complexity, the definitions of bullying, the characteristics common to bullying and the intention behind the act need to be understood (Pells, Oganda Portela & Espinoza, 2016; Tustin, Zulu & Basson, 2014). Bullying can be manifested physically through hitting, punching, kicking and destroying property (Jacobs, 2014; Varjas, Henrich & Meyers, 2009). It can be verbal which includes being teased, sworn at, being subject to gossip and labelling, which often results in indirect forms such as excluding someone from peer groups and interactions (Percy-Smith & Matthews, 2001). Bullying always has emotional and psychosocial effects (Townsend, Flisher, Chikobvu, Lombard & King, 2008), which are just as pervasive, and devastating (Santos Pais, 2016; Sullivan, 2000). Despite the various manifestations or forms of bullying, it is essentially an unequal power relationship that has extreme consequences for the less powerful (Bhana, 2012). Scholarly research shows that bullying occurs at all ages, but that the most common period is between late childhood and adolescence (Carney & Merrell, 2001) a period where learners are most vulnerable and where the consequences of being bullied can be quite debilitating (Burton, 2016).

Effects of Bullying

Whilst bullying has widespread effects and differs within various contexts, Santos Pais (2016:iv) argues that "in essence it violates a child's integrity and dignity leaving its victims insecure, anxious, confused, helpless and disempowered," and suggests that victims may be at high risk of experiencing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. There are devastating effects on those who are bullied, the perpetrator and bystanders (Hlophe, Morojele & Motsa, 2017; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). For Brownlee, Martin, Rawana, Harper, Mercier, Neckoway and Friesen (2014) and UNESCO (2017), children who are bullied generally have low self-esteem, have fewer friends, are shy, introverted and marked as 'different.' Bullies on the other hand

tend to be aggressive and angry, lack self-control and compassion, and often play truant and have lower levels of achievement (Brownlee et al., 2014; Dracic, 2009). However, Graham's (2010) study of American youth interestingly revealed that bullies enjoyed a high status in the school, classroom and amongst peers. It is this factor that makes it so difficult to eradicate bullying, for often other children emulate this behaviour. This is compounded by the idea that bullying also constitutes learned behaviour from the home environment (Kester & Mann, 2008). This could in some way explain the predominance of bullying and the difficulty that surrounds attempts to find appropriate strategies.

Bystanders as witness to the bullying also experience feelings of powerlessness, anxiety and distress, as evident in the study by Tsang et al. (2011). This study revealed that bystanders are wracked by feelings of guilt, are unable to concentrate, and they internalise feelings of anger and fear, which ultimately influences their educational achievement (UNESCO, 2017). What all these studies suggest is that schools affected by violence and bullying rather than being safe spaces, instead become spaces where fear is the prevailing factor (UNESCO, 2017).

The Systemic Underpinnings of Bullying

Pells et al. (2016) argue that there is not enough attention paid to the systemic and structural determinants that influence how and why bullying occurs. Looking specifically at systemic factors like poverty and gender inequality, they also point to the far-reaching consequences of stereotypes and norms that surround class, culture, race and socio-economic status at the institutional level of the school, and the manner in which these contribute to marking children as different and 'other' which often results in the promotion of bullying. These findings are similar to those evident in the UNESCO (2017) report that shows the influence of bullying on learners with a multiplicity of vulnerable or marginalised social identities. Schools play a significant role in reinforcing societal norms and expectations resulting in continued exclusion and alienation for learners who require additional support and protection. Using data from the Young Lives longitudinal study of children in India, Ethiopia, Peru and Vietnam, which are all emerging economies, Pells et al. (2016) explore the way in which bullying occurs within contexts steeped in economic, social, cultural and gender inequality, and unequal power relationships. Being unable to afford shoes or clothes, being marked as ethnically and culturally different often resulted in labelling and physically bullying and caused learners from Ethiopia and Vietnam to be absent rather than face these forms of bullying.

Often this also results in victims feeling emotionally disconnected from peers and insecure in a space in which they do not belong. For many, this constant barrage of abuse leads to them making the decision to drop out of school. It is for this reason that De Wet (2005) and Tang (2017) point to the importance of addressing bullying at the institutional level of the school through socialising and educating children against bullying. This would to some extent ensure that schools are safe environments where human rights are protected.

Bullying in the South African Context

What is evident in research in South Africa around bullying is the nexus between wider societal violence and crime and higher levels of bullying within a school. According to Bhana (2015), Mayeza (2015), Reygan (2016) and Zuze et al. (2016), violence and bullying evident in South African schools is often a reflection of the extreme levels of violence to which children are exposed in the communities in which they live. Despite the right to safety protected within the Constitution of South Africa as well as various policies such as the National Education Policy Act, Act 27 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996a) and the South African Schools Act, Act 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996b), South African schools are replete with violence and bullying. Using data from the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Zuze et al. (2016:2) conclude that concerns about school safety in South Africa is "more serious than in other countries," with one in five learners in public schools reported being bullied every week in various ways. Burton (2016) indicates that in Gauteng, bullying incidences could be as high as 34 percent. These statistics are alarming and could account for increased concerns about school safety.

Studies by Bhana (2012), Mayeza (2015), Morojele (2011) and Reygan (2016) reveal the gendered nature of bullying and the extreme emotional, sexual, physical and psychological harm that girls, boys and differently gendered learners experience when failing to comply with the 'correct' gender construction of femininity and masculinity. If anything, schools reinforce gender inequality through the use of patriarchal discourses and norms. Surprisingly, Zuze et al. (2016) found that boys were more likely to be bullied than girls. Looking particularly at the experiences of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community, Reygan (2016:175) points to the extreme levels of violence in South Africa with a murder rate of "more than four and a half times the global average," and possessing the highest incidences of rape in the world. This he links to a society where masculinity is prized and where dominant cultural stereotypes and prejudices of

homosexuality abound. This is confirmed by Bhana (2012), who indicates that South African school cultures are homophobic with Francis and Msibi (2011:162) attributing this thinking to “neo-conservatism and authoritarianism,” which has significant control of normative discourses surrounding acceptable sexuality in wider society, including education. Within education, attempts to combat the bullying and violence experienced by homosexuals is often met with resistance, mostly from teachers, because of refusal to change attitudes. This has major repercussions given that teachers are crucial to the process of transforming schools into safe spaces for all. Failing to do so results in gay and lesbian learners’ safety, often in the form of bullying and violence being denied (Bhana, 2012). Swanson and Anton-Erxleben (2016) question whether in such environments, girls and boys are able to experience a sense of safety, belonging, being, and becoming. What these studies also reveal is the role that teachers play in encouraging bullying and the victimisation of girls and boys who do not comply with expected masculinity and femininity constructions (Morojele, 2011; Swanson & Anton-Erxleben, 2016).

Zuze et al. (2016) argue that school violence and violence in the community are often interwoven. Schools that were found in communities where there were high levels of crime and gang violence also experienced greater instances of bullying. These researchers reported that the link between social economic status and bullying is cause for concern with 50% of learners from poorer environments/schools more than likely being subjected to bullying on a weekly basis. This could be attributed to poorer disciplinary and safety procedures and actions, higher pupil-teacher ratios, bigger schools, and a lack of focus on learning. This often translates into a lack of academic achievement. Whilst Zuze et al. (2016) do acknowledge that bullying does occur in higher income schools, their concern is for the group of learners already in vulnerable positions because of their socio-economic status, coupled with a lack of personal support from the home context and schooling context, while being bullied at school, which all mean that these learners are “consistently worse off” (Zuze et al., 2016:4), and continue to be systematically marginalised.

The Need for Continued Research into Bullying

Despite the “omnipresent nature of bullying” (Hlophe et al., 2017:14) and the prevalence within schools, research within South Africa continues to highlight the need to make bullying more visible in order to “boost action by governments, policy makers, teachers and children themselves in the fight against bullying” (Santos Pais, 2016:x). Devising strategies to educate teachers and learners would be key to the realisation of children’s rights.

This would require critical engagement with the issue of bullying, recognising its systemic influence, and the need to collaborate with a wider group of people in order to disrupt the disempowerment learners currently experience (Bhana, 2012; Francis & Msibi, 2011; Hlophe et al., 2017; Reygan, 2016). The school as a whole needs to position itself firmly against violence and bullying, with teachers understanding and reflecting on their own beliefs and practices and challenging bullying behaviours (Hlophe et al., 2017; Zuze et al., 2016).

In their review of international literature, Patton, Hong, Patel and Kral (2017) have drawn attention to the trend that most empirical studies on bullying are quantitative in nature and deductively examine the prevalence of bullying, risk, and protective factors and negative effects. They contend that there is limited qualitative research that inductively focuses on how children and adolescents experience bullying and victimisation in schooling contexts. Qualitative research, they contend, enables the subjective exploration of participants’ personal experiences, feelings, opinions, motivations, opinions, and inner thoughts. In other words, qualitative research approaches have the potential to provide a more nuanced and situated understanding of the influences and conditions that impact and shape bullying in schools and is the focus of this article. The researchers call for emic approaches and research traditions that listen to the voices of participants, and position them as experts on the issue being investigated.

The qualitative study reported in this article makes a contribution to the rather limited body of research on school bullying undertaken in the countries of the South. This could answer concerns by UNESCO (2017) that stress the need for comprehensive data generation to obtain a picture of the scale and gravity of school bullying and violence. Countries like South Africa with limited financial resources allocated to education, do not prioritise research into school violence and bullying, and there is also a lack of reliable data (UNESCO, 2017), where this study aims to fill in this gap. The research questions framing this article were: what meanings do Grade 10 learners make about the phenomenon of bullying within their schooling context? How do the learners experience the spaces and places of bullying?

Methodology

Taking into account the findings of Patton et al. (2017), this study adopted a qualitative approach. Drawing from the paradigms of New Childhood Studies and Children’s Geographies (Christensen & Prout, 2002; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 1994), the epistemological stance was that children are viewed as individuals in their own right, and as active social beings, who are able to construct and

make meaning of the events and issues in their lives. Andrews and Chen (2006) have stated that the focus of children's geography is about interrogating and deconstructing various spaces and places in schooling contexts. In the study, we conceptualised 'geography' as the space and place of the phenomenon; that is, the spatial dimensions of bullying. We viewed 'place' as the physical spaces such as the classroom, playground; and 'space' as power laden spaces that emerge in relationships and interactions (Van Ingen & Halas, 2006:380). Bullying is situated in context and an in-depth analysis of context is necessary to capture the intricacies of the phenomenon, and how learners experience and interpret it. Participants were made aware that the researcher (first author) was interested in the stories that they had to tell and that they were viewed as experts on the phenomenon of bullying. This approach helped to shift the power dynamics between researcher and participants. In order to gain insight into the complexity of bullying from the participants' perspectives, the multiple data generation techniques of open-ended interviews and focus group discussions were used. An iterative approach was followed, in that participants and the researcher were jointly engaged in the meaning-making through, firstly, the interviews, and then the focus group. A further key issue was that the study was context specific, and the aim was to illuminate participants' experiences, interpretations and meanings in a particular social reality.

A Narrative Approach

As the study was a narrative inquiry, the aim was to capture the reality of the children's life experiences of the spaces and places of bullying. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) explain that through narrative inquiry, experience is studied through the narratives of the participants, and that as individuals, we lead storied lives. Within narrative inquiry stories that are told ought to be educational and thus, our aim was to understand the participants' personal and social experiences of bullying. The positioning of the social and personal is vital to understanding complex subjective experiences of bullying qualitatively. Thus, using narrative inquiry was beneficial, as it provided ways of understanding how South African children in a particular context understand and negotiate bullying.

Sampling

The study was conducted at a high school situated in KwaMashu, Durban, a township characterised by many social ills ranging from high rates of poverty, unemployment levels at approximately 40%, high crime and violence levels, and a low skills base. There is a lack of social infrastructure and recreation facilities for the community (South African Cities Network, Department of National

Treasury, Republic of South Africa & Department of Provincial and Local Government, Republic of South Africa, 2014). The school itself at the time of the research had a learner population of over 1,000. Classes were large and overcrowded with high pupil to teacher ratios, which are all fertile breeding grounds for bullying to occur without detection or fear of reprisal by teachers (Pells et al., 2016). The rationale for conducting the research was that the school has experienced an increase in the number of cases of bullying.

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants who were grade 10 learners as bullying was more evident amongst this group of learners in the school. Thus all 96 Grade 10 learners were invited to participate in the study but specifically those who had personal experiences of being bullied. Forty-three Grade 10 learners completed and submitted consent letters to participate. Thereafter, purposeful random sampling was carried out. Nastasi (1998:3) indicates that purposeful random sampling is about ensuring credibility and not generalisability, particularly when the sample size is "more than one can handle." The researchers therefore made the decision to choose eight learners stratified by gender given that bullying has a gendered dimension. Nastasi (1998) refers to this process as stratified purposeful sampling, and argues that in qualitative research, a researcher may stratify a sample to focus on a characteristic of a particular sub-group of interest. We envisaged that a sample of eight learners would be adequate for a small scale qualitative study, given the time frame available for the study.

Data Production Methods

Data was produced through open-ended interviews and the focus group interview. An open-ended question was used to begin the individual interviews. The question was: *Tell me the story of bullying at your school?* The interview guide covered questions related to participants' understanding of bullying and how it affects learners, as well as how bullying is dealt with at a personal and institutional level. The focus group interviews asked participants to discuss specifically personal experiences of bullying and their negotiation thereof, and also enabled more clarification of issues that arose in the individual interviews. In this way a deeper understanding of the dynamics of bullying was gauged. All interviews and focus group interviews took place at the convenience of the participants and lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. It is important to note that narrative interviews are co-operative and dialogic as the researcher and the participant jointly try to understand and make meanings of lived experience. In so doing, the participants were acknowledged as experts of their everyday realities, the relationship

and interactions that they encountered and the meanings that they attached to it. Through the interviews and focus group discussions, particularised meanings of why bullying occurs and how bullying is thought about and explained by participants was made known.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are crucial in any research project, as these ensure the morality of the research process (Neuman, 1997). These considerations were paramount in researching with children as opposed to about children. Ethical clearance was firstly obtained from the research office of the University of KwaZulu-Natal and from the provincial Department of Education. Consent was also obtained from relevant stakeholders such as the school principal and parents/caregivers. Consent letters to parents were written in isiZulu so as to ensure that parents understood the precise nature of the research. Since the study was located within a theoretical perspective that viewed children as active social agents with independent views (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; James et al., 1998; Mayall, 1994), permission was also sought from participants. Issues of anonymity and confidentiality were ensured at all stages of data production. Participants were also informed that participation was voluntary and their right to refuse to answer questions or to withdraw from the study was made known.

Data Analysis

With the consent from participants, interviews were audio-recorded and translated into English verbatim. Thematic content analysis was employed to analyse data. Nieuwenhuis (2007) explains data analysis to be the comprehensive examination of data in order to make meaning. The organising of data and data reduction was effected by means of identifying topics and categories of meaning across topics inductively. From this process, we were able to identify key themes, sub-themes and patterns. Analysis was guided by the research questions, but also by literature and the conceptual framework that underpinned the study. This was to ensure that we moved beyond “mere description” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:27) to becoming more analytical and critical. The data collection methods ensured the production of rich descriptive data.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Through the use of multiple sources as well as methods of data generation, a degree of trustworthiness and credibility was ensured (Merriam, 1998). Krefting (1991) indicates that four criteria ought to be used to ensure trustworthiness, viz.: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through the various methods of collecting data enabled rich

data to be collected and allowed data to be verified across the different data sets. Transferability is, according to Thomas (2010), difficult to achieve given the small sample. Mertens (2012) argues that this can be achieved through detailed descriptions of participants, methods and contexts. Readers are then able to make judgements as to whether this can be applied to other contexts. Dependability was ensured through the use of pilot interviews, where the same questions were asked by the same researcher (first author) after making the necessary changes. Confirmability was enhanced through the use of member checking. Participants were given the opportunity to confirm data and to make changes if they so desired. Further to this, both the supervisors and members of the masters’ cohort programme served as critical friends, cross-checking analysis and interpretation, as well as data.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, we foreground and discuss two key themes that emerged in the study, namely, making meaning of bullying, and deconstructing its spatial dimensions.

Making Meaning of the Phenomenon of ‘Bullying’

During the interviews, the children gave insight into the kinds of bullying they experienced and how they constructed ‘bullying’ as a phenomenon. Through the stories it was evident that all eight learners experienced a range of bullying enactments that align with the experiences of learners in various contexts internationally (for example, Andrews & Chen, 2006; Beldean-Galea, Jurcău & Țigan, 2010).

The Various Manifestations of Bullying

The narratives below are illustrative of learners’ experiences and interpretations of bullying. Bullying manifested itself through verbal insults, name calling, spreading rumours and physical aggression, such as hitting and beating over sometimes quite arbitrary things. However, despite the arbitrariness for the act of bullying, the effects thereof had wide repercussion emotionally and physically for many of the participants. This concurs with findings in research (e.g. Santos Pais, 2016; UNESCO, 2017).

I experienced bullying where spreading rumours and lies, saying hurtful things like that is bullying. They said “hey you are thin” and [...] they teased and insulted me. They said I am skinny, I am short. They [...] make the person very sad. (Mfanos, male, individual interview)

I have experienced verbal bullying, okay. The learners insult each other. The boys do physical bullying and hit each other. They can fight because another sat on one’s desk. They just fight over something small. (Miss Q, female, individual interview)

However, sometimes bullying was planned, devious and intentional as indicated by Rose and Kim. Rose stated, *“They don’t like to see somebody else happy.”* Kim explained, *“They won’t tell you but will just wait for you at the toilet and follow you to the toilet, then they will sort you out.”* This horizontal violence has resulted in learners of the same social status oppressing and directing their anger towards learners who are seen as being different, like Rose, or towards a new learner, like Kim. This finding concurs with that of Graham (2010), who explained that any kind of constructed non-conformity or dissimilarity from the larger peer group to be one of the factors that predicts victimisation in the bullying phenomenon. These kinds of acts have been documented in studies internationally (e.g. Gini & Pozzoli, 2006; Kester & Mann, 2008; Olweus, 1993). Much of this literature highlights repeated negative acts such as hitting, kicking and pushing, verbal abuse, name calling, and emotional abuse. Learners in the study also referred to the fact that the repetitive nature of bullying makes it all the more inescapable.

Power, Marginalisation and Emotionality

In many contexts, studies have shown that the main intention of bullying is to dominate others, who are weaker or less powerful (Graham, 2010). Learners alluded to the power dynamics implicit in the act of bullying. Kim explained how she was treated as a new learner at the school by other learners who positioned themselves as having greater status.

When I came to the new school and I knew nobody, I will get to my class and sit quietly. I will only greet the person next to me and only talk to them and nobody else. I will continue then after a while, they will say I am proud and they must sort me out because I think I am better. This is simply because I am quiet, and I don’t know anybody to talk to. They then harass me and take my things and do many silly things. (Kim, female, individual interview)

Kim’s experience alludes to peer victimisation and subtle aggression, evident in the threat to “sort her out.” Kim also felt that her quiet nature made her a target for bullies. Her introverted personality caused peers to construct her as “being proud” and having a sense of self-importance. Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008) argue that bullying is a way of creating powerful positions within the peer culture with the aim of disempowering and marginalising those significantly weaker. By engaging in ‘othering,’ creating an ‘us’ and ‘them’ duality, learners with lower status experience exclusion, alienation and subordination. Being new, quiet, and lacking in status, Kim is rendered powerless and defenceless.

All the learners in the study made mention of the emotional forms of bullying, including threatening, teasing, and spreading rumours. Learners in the focus group interviews condemned the

heartless, merciless and cruel nature of bullying. They indicated that it can result in low self-esteem and fear of, and aversion to, school. Thom, a female learner, explained, *“It does disturb me because if somebody calls me names it disturbs me because I keep quiet and wonder why I am like this, you see. It is disturbing.”* Thom has colluded with her own oppression, mostly because she has internalised that there is something inadequate about herself. This “psychological colonization [sic]” (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997:45) results in her being unable to challenge the status quo and she internalises what she cannot express externally resulting in self-blame and hurt.

Many learners referred to the emotional impact of bullying on the bystander. Kim, for example, voiced her constant concern that she might be targeted as a victim in the future. TK explains the emotions he experienced as a witness to acts of bullying.

Ayee, you know it is difficult to see somebody being bullied because you as the spectator feel sorry for the person and you wish you could do something to defend them (TK, male, individual interview).

Dracic (2009) argues that bystanders and witnesses of bullying are affected by the unpleasant atmosphere of fear and humiliation that can have a negative impact on their learning and in the case of TK the uncertainty about how to respond. Whilst he feels sorry he is unable to respond in a more concrete and substantial way for fear of possible repercussion. Andrews and Chen (2006) argue that bullying has many emotional dimensions and consequences for individuals, both inside and outside of immediate encounter spaces. They contend that emotions such as fear and anxiety are part of the tyrannical spaces of bullying (Andrews & Chen, 2006).

During the focus group interview and the individual interviews, stories of sexual harassment against girls emerged, involving unwanted sexual remarks, attention, or physical contact. This is troubling to learners as it is threatening, instils fear, where more powerful but detrimental emotions like hate contributes to their emotional vulnerability. For example, TK explained his observations of bullying at the school, including the experiences of female learners.

I hate this school [...] especially at the (play) ground. They touch you [...] it is fondling somebody. It pains you because you don’t know how you will defend that person. (TK, male, focus group interview)

In Grade Eight there were boys who used to get forward with you and if you refuse to go out with them they threaten that they will hit you. Okay where I was bullied, they were bullying us because they wanted to force you to love them. (Thom, female, individual interview)

Whilst both TK and Thom make no mention of gendered violence, the prevailing norm is that relationships in the school are built on coercion and

force. A sense of helplessness, powerlessness and vulnerability is evident in the narratives of the majority of learners. However, in the narratives of Thom and TK tensions are revealed because they recognised that the behaviour is harmful. Even whilst they are uncertain about how to respond, the recognition of sexual violation as being harmful is in itself an act of agency. Tsu took it further where he actively positioned himself against the bully defying others and using his power as a male to do so. Gendered hierarchies are evident in that the boys were able to challenge the status quo successfully whilst the girls were unable to do so.

Yes, because when you see other learners bully it reaches a stage where you don't like it, especially when they bully the same person over and over. You eventually decide to join in and tell the bully that what they are doing is not right. (Tsu, male, focus group interview)

In contrast to the above narratives, there were a few learners who felt that bullying ought not be “taken seriously.” There were learners in the study who pointed out that bullying may be a form of playfulness and that one should be cautious when labelling behaviour as bullying. In the focus group discussion, certain learners suggested that teasing may not be seen as behaviour that will cause serious harm by the perpetrator, but it may be constructed as harmful by the victim.

There is the danger of bullying becoming normalised behaviour for some learners in this schooling context. In other words, potentially negative behaviours and interactions may become normalised that may have the potential to restrict the agency of others. Miss Q did point to the danger of teasing escalating to bullying if the behaviour gets out of hand. Mr S alluded to the need for agency by the victim as key to addressing bullying.

Deconstructing the Spatial Dimensions of Bullying

Andrews and Chen (2006) state that the focus of children's geography is about interrogating and deconstructing various spaces and places in schooling contexts. The findings show that bullying occurs in many power-laden spaces, and varied places within the schooling context.

Spaces of Vulnerability

Learner narratives illuminated key bullying places in which they felt particularly vulnerable, viz. the playground, during break time and free periods; in the classroom; areas outside the school, such as the taxi rank; and the toilets. Mention was made of a particular 10D classroom. In this class, a bounded power-laden space, certain unspoken rules applied – rules not generated by the school but by the learners themselves. It was a place ‘owned’ by both male and female bullies without fear of sanction from teachers.

A common, less visible bullying space for girls and boys is the toilet area and its immediate vicinity. This was a place free from teacher surveillance, authority and policing. Kim explains:

Verbal and physical bullying takes place at the toilets. There was one boy who was in Grade 10 last year; they had an argument in class. The one stabbed him in the toilet (Kim, female, focus group interview).

Kim's narrative draws attention to the fine line between bullying and violence, and that bullying may be a precursor to serious forms of violence. The toilets are a territory shaped by fear and vulnerability, and where reprisal and revenge are met with physical violence like being stabbed. Thom also reiterated the ‘unspoken rules’ associated with the hierarchical structure of the school grounds, where power dynamics played out. In this space, older more powerful learners harassed and robbed younger learners of their food and money and subjected to verbal abuse and aggression. What was of particular concern was that this space, referred to as “the mountain” was not monitored by staff at the school. Holt, Keyes and Koenig (2011) warn that when adults in the school system ignore bullying, allow silences about bullying to breed, or feel that bullying is just children being children, then higher levels of bullying may be the outcome. It is a space where vulnerable learners, learn their ‘place’ within the school's hierarchy, and it is one that is disempowering.

A further critical concern in narratives was that the school context was unsafe for learners as there was easy access to it by criminal elements from the community and learners from the school itself, who engaged in crime surreptitiously. Learners seem to conflate crime and bullying. They explained how the school fence had been cut through to create an opening for these criminal elements to enter the school. Crime in the community was spilling over into the school and its immediate surroundings, and learners lived in constant fear of attack and harm in these unsafe spaces. School grounds and classrooms were clearly not well monitored by staff at the school. The long assembly on a Friday gave criminals, often drug addicts, a space to commit their crimes. Kruger (2011) found that in South Africa, unique contextual factors such as community violence overflow into the school, shaping schools in negative ways. Exposure to poor role models is detrimental to the health and wellbeing of learners and may fuel bullying behaviours in schools. The need to create safe schools and communities is critical to reducing bullying (Kruger, 2011).

Responses to Bullying: Agency, Tensions, Contradictions

How learners negotiated bullying acts and spaces was a focus of the study. Learners narrated how

they dealt with bullying, and reflected on how bullying could be minimised within their school context. All learners alluded to the fact that there was little support from the home and school. Mfanos stated that he did not discuss his experience of bullying with his family – he chose to maintain a silence as he was afraid of repercussions. UNESCO (2017:11) explains that “social, cultural and gender norms that underpin some forms of school violence and bullying, condone or ignore the problem, and make it difficult to discuss or report school violence and bullying.” The key to change at the school is to put in place reporting mechanisms.

The narratives of many of the children revealed that they believed that retaliation by the victim through violence is one way to negotiate bullying and is appropriate. Rose shared her experience as follows:

Just like me when I was in Grade Eight, another boy made a pass at me and I did not like him. He wanted to hit me because I wouldn't go out with him. He wanted to hit me for that. Another boy from the class went to tell my brother. My brother hit him. (Rose, female, focus group interview)

Rose seemed to justify violence perpetrated by her brother on the perpetrator. Learners retaliating with violence is a grave concern. Research has shown that victims of bullying may retaliate with violence, even though they have been subject to the very act of violence themselves. In the United States of America (USA), it has been found that victims of bullying have committed school shootings to retaliate against their attackers (Daskalopoulou, Igoumenou & Alevizopoulos, 2017). Often, learners feel that the school has failed them by not addressing the bullying problem.

There were learner narratives that reflected some degree of agency to intervene positively, taking on a problem-solving approach to destabilise bullying acts and restore peace, for example, TK below. However, TK seemed to be struggling with whether to support retaliation and retribution for the perpetrator or intervention in positive ways.

I separated them and put each on one side, then there was peace - they were fighting about something small, a desk [...] I saw that to solve the problem I should take the desk to the front – to make space between them so they can talk. I think what I did was right [...] because it was an easy way to restore peace. I think [...] that bullies should be made to feel how it is to be bullied. Maybe we bring them together and bully them one by one and we will see how they feel. (TK, male, focus group interview)

In the focus group interviews, children stressed the fact that the school needed to take a strong stance against bullying to create a safe environment for all learners. Thom alluded to the importance of learner participation in anti-bullying strategies. Thom stated,

I think the learners should have their own meeting at school to talk openly about bullying and the

victims should speak out. The parents should deal with their children because in some cases the teachers have failed (Thom, female, individual interview).

Despite some contradictions, it was evident that the children had constructed various interesting strategies regarding how to address bullying in the school in positive ways. The findings suggest that the involvement of children in planning and implementing interventions at the school may be a valuable strategy. Gini and Pozzoli (2006) suggests that it is important to build the agency and self-efficacy of children to plan actions and develop strategies in the context of bullying intervention programmes. Kester and Mann (2008) assert that the most successful anti-bullying programmes are those that include learners as partners, and where learners are given the space to take leadership. Learners in the study stressed that the school needed to build values that uphold peace, safety, protection of the human rights of all, inclusion and respect for all. Further to this, the learners were of the opinion there was a need for communication and dialogue, noting that the silence around bullying had to end. They stressed that bullies, bystanders and victims needed help and support, and were confident and positive that change was indeed possible. Rose explained,

To the bullies, they should seek help, maybe from psychologists, because they bring it from home. Maybe they grew up with it because they see their parents being abused. They have grown up with it so they get it out on other people. They must seek help. Victims [...] they must report and not be afraid. (Rose, female, focus group interview)

Almost all learners emphasised the need for a partnership between home and school. Graham (2010) states that bullying interventions and strategies must target everyone such as students, parents, and adults in the school. Rose suggested that bullies may have poor role models at home and may come from homes in which violence is common practice. Miss Q above stressed that the home and school should teach tolerance and respect. Mr S raised the important issue of the need for monitoring mechanisms in the school that can address the silences around bullying.

Learners shared their experiences of the complex bystander space. They witnessed bystanders supporting and jeering on bullies who wielded power over other learners. They also witnessed bystanders trying to intervene to stop bullying. Further, learners alluded to the potential of bystanders in intervention programmes to address bullying. Mfanos argued for the need to reclaim *ubuntu*, viz. the philosophy or ethic of a humanistic worldview. A person with *ubuntu* has respect for one's fellow human beings, has a sense of community, and compassion. To humiliate, insult, and diminish others self-esteem is not Ubuntu.

Learners raised the issue that the school culture must protect the human rights of all learners, and their right to a safe learning context. Davis and Davis (2007) assert that in school environments that encourage students to value the human rights of others, the risk of active bystanders supporting bullies in the bullying act is reduced.

Conclusion

The study revealed that bullying happens in the schooling context in pervasive and varied ways very much in line with findings from international studies. However, the nuanced, situated understandings provided by learners themselves of how it unfolds in an emerging economy context is a significant contribution of the study. Learners were unanimous in their view that bullying is a form of aggression that leads to physical and emotional suffering in victims. Bullying occurs in complex, power-laden spaces and places and is for the most part invisible to school management and teachers at the school.

Listening to the voices of learners in this study has important implications for interventions to address bullying in schools in South Africa. These include: the need to address the ‘invisibility’ of bullying; the need for reporting mechanisms; the need for school management and teachers to create spaces for communication and dialogue around the issue of bullying; and addressing bullying as a collaborative endeavour with partnerships between parents, teachers, school management, community members, community organisations. The key to this is the involvement of learners themselves. Furthermore, intervention programmes must target victims, perpetrators and bystanders who are actors in bullying, and aim to create a human rights culture in schools to ensure the protection of the health and wellbeing and safety of all learners.

On reflecting on the findings of our study, we are in agreement with various international researchers that bullying is a public health issue and a public health approach is required to address the problem in schools (for example, Hertz, Donato & Wright, 2013). The reason is that bullying in any form can lead to the risk of poor mental and physical health and social and emotional outcomes, and can have negative and long-lasting effects on the wellbeing of learners. Therefore, in South Africa intervention programmes must target and involve institutions beyond the school and home (such as faith organisations and sports organisations), and focus on building more supportive environments. Such programmes need to be proactive and aim at promoting protective factors and reducing risk factors in children’s lives.

Notes

- i. Participants selected their own pseudonyms to protect their identities.

- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

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