

Bullying: A Whole School Approach

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ABSTRACT Bullying is a serious problem in South African schools. The present study proposes a whole school approach where parents, teachers and educational psychologists are involved in creating a healthy positive environment for child development. This research was a phenomenological, descriptive, qualitative study. It started with a literature review of the most important aspects of the study. The empirical study consisted of an open question about how the different participants in the study, namely teachers, parents and an educational psychologist, deal with the issue of bullying in schools to see whether a whole school approach was appropriate to deal with the problem. The participants were purposively selected from three schools. Interviews were conducted with one open ended question using an interview schedule with probes. The responses were transcribed and categories and sub themes were identified through open coding. The research findings indicate that teachers and parents needed more information and training in dealing with bullying. Workshops, training and guidance from educational psychologists could be options. Educational psychologists could contribute to school policy and the code of conduct of the school. It is suggested that stakeholders in the school context should work together in curbing the problem of bullying. By supporting each other stakeholders could make a difference in the lives of bullies and victims of bullying, not just in the present, but also in their lives as adults.

INTRODUCTION

“Every child has the right to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation” (The Constitution of the RSA section 28(1)(d)). But does this actually happen in South African schools? Reports in the media suggest the opposite – there are regular cases in schools of violence, abuse, humiliation and maltreatment (de Wet 2007: 191). The above question can also be asked in the more global context, because bullying is rife world-wide.

In the research on which this article is based the emphasis was on bullying as a form of school violence, which poses a serious threat to healthy child development (Smokowski and Kopasz 2005: 101). Bullying should be curbed, because it could have dire consequences for the psychological well-being of the child. In this article a whole school approach is proposed where all stakeholders are involved in creating a healthy, positive context for child development. The focus in this research was on parents, teachers and educational psychologists as stakeholders.

The main aim of the research was to do a literature review on how a whole school approach could assist in containing the problem of bullying internationally, with indications from teachers, parents and educational psychologists in the empirical research of whether a whole school

approach is part of the solution in the South African context. The research question was: *How can a whole school approach help to decrease the incidence of bullying?* The sub questions emphasising the role of particular stakeholders in a whole school approach were:

Could teachers assist in curbing bullying in schools?

What role could parents play in curbing bullying in schools?

What could the role of the educational psychologist be in curbing bullying in schools?

Bullying – Concept Clarification

Bullying is usually defined as a form of aggressive behaviour where one child or a group of children causes harm in some form to another child whom they perceive as weak. A power imbalance exists between the bully and the victim where status or dominance is maintained from the standpoint of the bully. The bullying takes place repeatedly over time. There is a lack of empathy, compassion and shame from the side of the bully (Olweus 1994 in de Wet 2010; Krige et al. 2000; Smokowski and Kopasz 2005; Cenken et al. 2008; McNamee and Mercurio 2008; Crothers and Kolbert 2008; Ball et al. 2008; Swart and Bredekamp 2009).

Bullying may be direct, like kicking or hitting, or indirect, which includes social isolation

and malicious gossiping (Krige et al. 2000; de Wet 2007; Swart and Bredekamp 2009). Physical or direct bullying can range from slight punches on the arm, pushing and shoving to more serious acts like throwing another person down stairs or bashing someone's head against a wall. Verbal abuse is one of the worst forms of direct bullying – it can vary from name-calling and teasing to embarrassing and humiliating another person. Psychological bullying, which is more subtle than direct bullying, can be very harmful since it can isolate and ostracise someone from their peers and friends. The victim gets left out when groups are formed in class, on the sport field or on the playground. The confidence, self-esteem and dignity of the victim are compromised. Sexual harassment, which includes physical and psychological bullying, is humiliating, degrading and demeaning to the victim. A more recent kind of bullying is called cyber bullying – it involves sending harmful, rude or cruel text messages or images using instant messaging, e-mails, or social network sites (Krige et al. 2000; De Wet 2005; Beaty and Alexeyev 2008; Feinberg and Robey 2009).

Fried and Fried (1996 in Krige et al. 2000) identify four factors that contribute to bullying behaviour:

- i) Individual traits – For instance, children who are antisocial, aggressive and defiant often become bullies.
- ii) Family context – Children coming from families with high levels of violence, a lack of clear rules, little discipline or inconsistent discipline, poor supervision and little interest in their children could become bullies.
- iii) Community influences – Children growing up in communities where violence is rife and children are exposed to violent and aggressive behaviour as a means to solve problems could develop patterns of bullying behaviour.
- iv) Cultural factors – Cultural attitudes that are indifferent to violence, sexism and racism influence children's attitudes towards other people.

To help alleviating the contributing factors of bullying a whole school approach could be the answer.

Whole School Approach

Because a whole school approach was emphasised in the research, the Ecological Theory

was used as theoretical framework. This theory emphasises groups of people as interactive systems where the functioning of the whole is dependent on the interaction of all parts of the system. In this case the curbing of bullying is dependent on the interaction between the school, teachers, parents and the educational psychologist (Donald et al. 2010). Donald et al. (2010), Swart and Bredekamp (2009) and de Wet (2010) emphasise that Bronfenbrenner, the father of Ecological Theory, had an important influence in shaping the understanding of how different systems and parts of systems work together in child development. In this article the researcher emphasised the relationship between the parent(s) and the bully or victim, between the teacher and the bully or victim, as well as between the educational psychologist and the child as client in a concerted effort to alleviate the problem of bullying in a whole school approach.

The concept of whole schooling means the development of a school community that includes all staff, learners, parents and other stakeholders in every facet of the school life (Phillipson and Forlin 2011: 2). Bullying is no longer viewed as a dyadic interaction between the perpetrator and the victim, but as a problem situated within the larger social system. If one assumes that bullying is a systemic problem the whole school approach will most probably be the solution (Smith et al. 2005: 741-742). Every stakeholder in the school should work together to make the school and its surroundings a safe zone for everybody in the school. The school and its surroundings should be known as an environment with zero tolerance for bullying of any kind. All adults need to take responsibility to intervene, because they have the authority to act when bullying occurs (McNamee and Mercurio 2008: 373-374). A whole school approach to bullying creates an atmosphere where learners feel safe to report bullying and are assured that adults care enough to respond. It is very important to educate all stakeholders to enable them to act on bullying reports. Three areas that could be included in educating stakeholders in the school as a whole are awareness building, efficacy building and skills building (Raskausas and Modell 2011: 62). Awareness building includes creating an atmosphere sensitive to bullying where respect and care for each other are important. It is important to break the culture of

silence that surrounds bullying. Bullies and victims need help to improve the situation. Efficacy is about the recognition of bullying behaviour and the actions taken to stop it. It starts with an anti-bullying school policy, but also includes the education and training of all stakeholders for the necessary strategies against bullying. Skill building includes individual and institutional responses to reduce bullying. Pro social skills are very important for the victim and the bully – they should for instance learn how to handle the power imbalance in bullying. Many schools introduce anti-bullying programmes such as the Olweus Bullying Program or Steps to Respect: a Bullying Prevention Program. Anti-bullying programmes should refer to the importance of respect, the acceptance of differences and the nurturance of empathy and tolerance in the whole school context (Raskauskas and Modell 2011: 64-66). The crux of the matter is that a whole school approach where all role players get involved will most probably reduce bullying incidents in schools.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

A qualitative research approach was used, because it usually involves multiple realities of a social situation (McMillan and Schumacher 1997: 11). In this research the views of teachers, parents and educational psychologists were taken into consideration. A literature review was used to refine and redefine the research questions, but the literature review was also informed by the emphasis on the whole school approach to bullying and the focus on the role of teachers, parents and educational psychologists. A phenomenological descriptive design guided the research, because of the focussed nature of the research – it became a description of a particular phenomenon, namely bullying, through the eyes of people who experienced it at first hand. A phenomenological study tries to understand specific people's perceptions and perspectives of a phenomenon, relating the findings to an existing body of knowledge, therefore the combination of a literature review with the empirical study (see de Vos et al. 2005: 264).

Selection of Participants

Participants were purposively selected, because they were all stakeholders involved in a whole school approach in combating bullying. The researcher decided beforehand to include only teachers, parents and an educational psychologist in the selection of participants, because those were the adult stakeholders she wanted to concentrate on. Purposeful selection is very important in a qualitative approach using a phenomenological study to get rich information to describe the phenomenon in depth (see de Vos et al. 2005: 329). The researcher needed to get information on how different stakeholders deal with bullying in a concerted effort to curb the problem. Twenty teachers from three schools (two primary schools and one high school) in the vicinity of the researcher (Gauteng province, South Africa) were asked to answer an open ended question on how they deal with bullying, one educational psychologist from one of the schools was interviewed about therapeutic inputs and three parents were interviewed to get an idea of how they assist their children.

Measuring Instrument

The researcher asked one open ended question to the teachers, namely '*How do you as a teacher deal with bullying in your classroom and in the school in general?*' An open ended question requires more than a mere 'yes' or 'no' and do not predetermine the answers (de Vos et al. 2005: 288). The researcher used an interview schedule with some probes in the interviews with the educational psychologist and the parents. The main question to the educational psychologist was: '*How do you deal with bullies and victims in your practice?*' The interview with the parents started with the same kind of open question namely: '*How did you handle the bullying incident your child was involved in?*' because the researcher already knew that their child was either a bully or a victim. The interview schedule helped the researcher to stay focused on the issue at hand (de Vos et al. 2005: 296), namely the whole school approach to bullying with the main purpose of deducing how different stakeholders deal with the problem.

Data Collection and Analysis

To use phenomenology means the researcher goes into the field with a 'strong orienting

framework' of what needs to be studied and how it will be done (de Vos et al. 2005: 264). This research was done with specific open ended questions in mind to hear from participants how they deal with the phenomenon of bullying, so that the findings could culminate in an ultimate open ended question of *'How can a whole school approach help to decrease the incidence of bullying?'* The researcher went to the schools and after speaking to the principal and getting informed consent from all participants, the various participants answered the open ended questions. The interviews with the teachers and the educational psychologist were conducted at the schools in a setting where the participants felt comfortable. The parents were interviewed at the practice of the researcher at one of the schools. The interviews were taped and then transcribed.

The advantage of using mainly one open ended question is that it makes analysis easier, because the study is focussed. The aim of analysis should be to bring order, structure and meaning to the collected data (de Vos et al. 2005: 333). After transcription of the data, it was read for themes and sub themes. Open coding was used to break data into discrete sections comparing the transcriptions of all interviews for similarities and differences (see de Vos et al. 2005: 341).

The transcription, as well as the generation of categories and themes was done manually by the researcher. The researcher tried to select categories of meaning and break those into sub themes for possible inputs from stakeholders to help curb the problem of bullying. The categories and sub themes will be discussed in the section of findings.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained informed consent from school principals, teachers, parents and the educational psychologist. Confidentiality was assured – no names were mentioned anywhere in the report on the findings. It was important that no harm would be done, because the aim of the research was to get solutions to the problem. The participants would get feedback after the findings were written up.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of the findings concentrates on the various stakeholders' input in a whole school approach when dealing with bullying

incidents in the South African context. References to the literature indicate that the South African context does not differ much from the global context with regard to curbing the problem. In the analysis of the data the following categories/themes came to the fore: Knowledge of the bullying phenomenon; Whole school approach and roles of stakeholders; Training to assist in curbing the bullying phenomenon with sub themes under each category which will be discussed in the following section:

Knowledge of the Bullying Phenomenon

Knowledge of Teachers

"Children's experiences in schools are fundamental to their successful transition into adulthood. In school children negotiate and renegotiate their relationships, self-image and independence" (de Wet 2007: 191). Teachers need to assist in the positive development of children. In answering the open ended question on how teachers deal with bullying, one teacher indicated that the first step would be to be *"more attentive to the learners"*, in order to perceive when there are problems. This view agrees with Donald et al.'s (2010: 135) observation that teachers need to understand the group dynamics in their classes to develop sensitivity to what is happening in the different groups in order to identify issues and respond to those issues in an appropriate manner (Donald et al. 2010: 135).

Teachers should be trained to see the signs of bullying and act on those signs. One respondent echoed the views expressed in the literature on why children are bullied: *"Learners who are bullied are often different (shorter, taller, cleverer, more sensitive, more beautiful, more conservative) and therefore one needs to teach them to accept themselves and make peace with themselves"* (author's translation). Another teacher stated that children should be taught *"from a young age that they are worth a lot"*. In being open and sensitive to what is happening in their classes teachers could play a major role in nurturing children to become psychologically healthy individuals. Teachers should thus have knowledge of the learners in their classes, as well as of group dynamics and skills to help bullies and victims.

Knowledge of Educational Psychologists

The educational psychologist should be aware of the different kinds of bullying and the

reasons for bullying to enable them to give therapy. This is indicated in the response of the educational psychologist in the interview: *“Girls will spread rumours that are not true to give somebody a bad name, they are very subtle. ... It is also sometimes girls with ‘issues’ who want to hurt others to make their own pain better.”* The main aim of sending a child for psychological help would be to ease the pain and to learn coping strategies and for that they need knowledge of the kinds of bullying, as well as of therapeutic skills to assist the bully and the victim.

Knowledge of Parents

Many parents who bring their children for therapy indicate that they do not know where the bullying or victim behaviour comes from – they do not know how to recognise problems in their children, nor to help. One mother indicated that there *“were no visible symptoms at home that I thought were important”*, but the child stayed away from school for days with all kinds of excuses. In talking to the child the researcher (educational psychologist) found that she was being ostracised by her peers. She was pushed out of the peer group and sat alone in the library during break times. The child knew that she could change her behaviour by *“coming to school more often and being like everyone else”*, but the mother could not give her child advice. The mother decided that it was the job of the educational psychologist to solve the problem, because she did not have the knowledge.

A boy who was bullied indicated that bullies target *“somebody weaker”*, meaning physically weaker. In discussing the matter with the researcher, the mother commented that she could not understand why her son suddenly suffered from low self-esteem and felt scared, because *“he was always full of self-confidence”*. The mother depended on guidance from the educational psychologist in making life easier for her child.

The mother of a bully brought him to the educational psychologist because he was displaying aggressive behaviour. The child indicated that he became aggressive when other people teased him; consequently he would physically fight with children who gave him problems. This child’s brother presented with the same behaviour a few years later. The father told the boys to defend themselves in a physical way

and they did as instructed, because he modelled the inappropriate behaviour – these children did not get any skills from the parents as to how to handle conflict situations in a constructive way.

Parents seem to be at a loss when they need to recognise bullying behaviour and they do not have the skills to help their child in that kind of a situation.

Whole School Approach and Roles of Stakeholders

Role of Teachers

A school’s failure to deal with bullying allows a hostile environment to interfere with learning; while dealing with the issue will improve school climate, maximise achievements and in general create a happy community (Beaty and Alexeyev 2008: 2). Learners should feel safe in the school. A culture of respect and recognition of human dignity is important. Two of the respondents confirmed this view by concluding that *“children should learn to respect each other”* (author’s translation) and teachers should *“teach learners that everybody is different and unique; through self-respect learners will learn to respect others”* (author’s translation).

“A whole school approach implies an integrated, systematic, proactive and preventative approach confronting bullying on an on-going basis.” (Krige et al. 2000: 18; McNamee and Mercurio 2008: 374). Bullying should be dealt with by all stakeholders. Some teachers suggested that when bullying takes place a meeting should be organised *“with all parties involved; if necessary contact involved parents and arrange with them to attend the meeting”*. In the meeting every person should get *“a fair chance to speak about the problem”*. Bullying incidents should be reported *“to relative authorities”*, action should be taken and outcomes monitored.

Smokowski and Kopasz (2005: 108) argue that a zero tolerance policy with swift and serious consequences for engaging in bullying should be part of the school’s code of conduct. Some responses from teachers on possible consequences for bullying another child were that *“there should be immediate action”* (author’s translation). Another teacher suggested that action could involve *“giving debit marks or another form of punishment”*. Other interventions that were suggested were that *“bullies are*

punished with detention (or exclusion room) and have to visit the school counsellor". The South African schools all have a code of conduct and the consequences of bullying behaviour should be included for parents, children and teachers to take note of.

Role of Educational Psychologist

Educational psychologists have both a preventative and a responsive role to play in schools with regard to bullying. Educational psychologists must raise awareness in the school about the seriousness of bullying. A collaborative approach where teachers and parents are involved in curbing bullying with the help of the educational psychologist is important. One respondent indicated that *"teachers often sent victims and bullies to me to sort out"*. The educational psychologist is also in a good position to help formulate school policy that takes a comprehensive, school wide approach to the prevention of bullying (Smokowski and Kopasz 2005: 107-108).

Role of Parents

The parents' shifting of responsibility emerged from the interviews with the educational psychologists. Parents are often too uninvolved to help their children, as indicated by the educational psychologist who said that *"parents are not involved and sometimes absent from home and children have to play the role of mother and father in some cases. This contributes to tension and aggression."*

Parents are often stressed because of financial, work, marital or personal problems and have poor communication with their children. They are hostile, distant or use extreme practices for discipline, while positive reinforcement of desirable behaviour would be more advantageous to the child's development (Georgiou 2008: 109-110).

Effective communication between family members of bullies or victims is very important. Positive, clear and effective communication is vital for the development of healthy social and personal skills. The communication should be between parents and children, as well as between parents themselves. For instance, parents should be in agreement about disciplinary matters (Cenkseven and Yurtal 2008: 827). However, even those parents with communication skills

still struggle to deal with bullying problems when it concerns their child – either in the capacity of bully or victim. They need assistance from teachers and the educational psychologist at the school.

Training to Assist in Curbing the Bullying Phenomenon

Training for Teachers

In Crothers and Kolbert (2008: 132) educators indicate that they are not adequately trained to provide help in bullying situations, but from the strategies mentioned in response to the open ended question in the research reported here, South African teachers seem to know instinctively how to give assistance to bullies and victims of bullying – maybe because it is a familiar problem in the South African context. For instance, some of the responses about possible intervention strategies were to *"equip learners with skills to handle bullies"*, and specifically *"assertiveness skills"* – *"learners who are bullied should be encouraged to ignore bullies; to turn their backs on the bully and to indicate loudly and clearly that they should stop harassing others"* (author's translation). Teachers should *"help the learner being bullied by discussing how to stand up for oneself and move out of the situation"*. Another teacher indicated that *"bullies should be identified and sent for counselling"* (author's translation). The teacher could *"discuss the problem with the bully and the person bullied"*.

A teacher indicated that teachers should *"talk and discuss it with learners at school or in class, so that they know when they are bullied"*. Smokowski and Kopasz (2005: 108) agree with the respondents by indicating that classes should be engaged in "discussion and activities related to bullying so that students who might otherwise watch passively become empowered to intervene and victims are allowed to have a voice without shame". Activities such as role play, debating, and writing for the school journal could all help in raising consciousness (Krige et al. 2000: 17; Crothers and Kolbert 2008: 133-137).

Training for Educational Psychologists

Educational psychologists need knowledge, awareness and skills to address the issue of

bullying. They are often in an ideal position to detect symptoms and signs of bullying, because children are referred to them for therapy often for other reasons such as academic performance problems, depression and conduct disorders. They could then make parents and teachers aware of the bullying symptoms and guide them on how to deal with this matter (Smokowski and Kopasz 2005: 107-108). The educational psychologist indicates in the interview that “*children often come to me with all kinds of symptoms and then in the end I find that they are being bullied*”.

Training for Parents

The parents should always be included in the solution to the bullying problem in a whole school approach, but it seems from interviews with parents that they feel more helpless than teachers in dealing with the problem. Parents often surrender the responsibility to other stakeholders because they feel inadequate to handle the problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In looking at the responses on the research question and sub questions asked, one can see that a whole school approach is necessary to curb the problem of bullying. Teachers, parents and educational psychologists need to work together to make the school a better and safer place for all learners. The school climate of respect for all should be part of the classroom management strategies of all teachers in the school. It should be an integrated aspect of instruction and curriculum without focussing on authoritarian discipline. Learners should be actively engaged in the whole democratic classroom process. For learners to buy into class rules they should have a say in the setting of the rules (Crothers and Kolbert 2008: 134). School staff should become involved in learners’ problems and create a warm atmosphere with firm boundaries concerning unacceptable behaviour, consistently applying non-hostile and non-violent consequences for the violation of rules. Adults should be authority figures as well as role models (Smokowski and Kopasz 2005: 106).

Awareness-raising campaigns about bullying and its consequences should be part of school and classroom teaching according to

many of the respondents. One respondent said that “*awareness among children about effects of bullying*” is very important. Anti-bullying posters could be produced by the learners and displayed in the school. A ‘bullying box’ could encourage learners to report bullying anonymously. Another option by which to involve the community and parents is a ‘bullying help line’ (Krige et al. 2000: 17; Crothers and Kolbert 2008: 133-137).

Parents should be prepared to handle bullying incidents, because their input in helping their child is of utmost importance. There should be communication between the school and parents, and guidelines on dealing with the problem should be provided. The educational psychologist could also become involved in giving guidance and advice.

Parents have a big responsibility with regard to bullying. Parents of bullies could help their child in the following ways (Suckling and Temple 2002: 63; Krige et al. 2000: 16):

- ♦ Have a frank discussion with the child.
- ♦ Listen carefully to the child.
- ♦ Give as much praise as possible for good behaviour.
- ♦ If anger is the cause of it all, teach other ways of handling anger – e.g. time out; counting till ten; bouncing a ball; hitting a pillow; or going for a run.
- ♦ Participation in sport will be a constructive way of dealing with excess aggression.
- ♦ Teach the child that there is a difference between assertive and aggressive behaviour.
- ♦ Monitor the child’s friends and encourage healthy, positive friendships.
- ♦ Teach the child that there are always consequences to behaviour.
- ♦ Work in partnership with the school.
- ♦ Let the child know that the behaviour is unacceptable, but that he or she is still cared for.
- ♦ Firm disciplinary action is important, but without violence and aggression.
- ♦ Get professional help.

The parents of victims could help in the following ways (Suckling and Temple 2002: 64–65; Krige et al. 2000: 16):

- ♦ Encourage the child to talk about the problem.
- ♦ Listen to the child.
- ♦ Share with the child that nobody deserves to be bullied.

- ♦ If the child struggles to speak about his or her emotions, ask him or her to write a letter, story or poem about it.
- ♦ Ask the child to suggest possible solutions.
- ♦ With the permission of the child the parent can speak to the teacher or principal.
- ♦ Role-model and coach the child in developing confident body language.
- ♦ Teach the child assertive behaviour.
- ♦ It is important for the child to take part in sport or cultural activities to feel part of a group.
- ♦ Get professional help.

The professional help the bully and the victim should get may involve an educational psychologist or a school counsellor.

Therapy for bullying should focus on getting the bully to acknowledge inappropriate actions, develop empathy and do restitution. Behavioural contracts and training in social skills (including assertiveness training), problem-solving skills, and conflict resolution skills may help.

Counselling the victim may consist of expressive therapy where the victim could write, draw, act out or talk about the traumatic incident (Smokowski and Kopasz 2005: 106). Children should learn to use 'I' messages to assert themselves. Social skills such as friendship building are very important. The educational psychologist should work on building the child's self-esteem by identifying his or her personal strengths that will attract potential friends. Children should learn to replace negative statements about themselves with positive, realistic statements (Crothers and Kolbert 2008: 135; Smokowski and Kopasz 2005: 107). Family therapy may also be an option to teach parents the skills to assist their children. The secret to success in dealing with bullying as anti-social behaviour is the inclusion of all stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this article was to answer the question on how a whole school approach could be of assistance in combating bullying. As seen from the literature review and the empirical research a whole school approach where all stakeholders have a positive input is promoted, but in this research the focus was on the role of teachers, parents and educational psychologists. Teachers should be leaders, role models and diplomats in their classrooms. They are in a

position to positively influence childhood social dynamics (De Wet 2005: 53). Social support systems, both at school and at home, are very important for both the victim and the bully. All children need positive emotional support, especially positive involvement from their parents (Barboza et al. 2009: 107). Educational psychologists should give input into school policy and the code of conduct; they should help with guidelines for teachers and parents; and give therapy to bullies and victims.

In conclusion, bullying is a world-wide problem which should be curbed, because no child deserves to be bullied. By working together in a whole school approach, stakeholders can make a difference in the lives of bullies and victims of bullying.

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