South African Journal of Education

Vol 29:405-425

Non-physical bullying: exploring the perspectives of Grade 5 girls

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Research into bullying has generated an awareness of many aspects of this phenomenon: it has shown a distinction between various types of bullying and how these are delineated by gender. It has also shown a scarcity of research on bullying amongst girls, a phenomenon which is rife. We report on a qualitative study, which explored and described the nature of bullying amongst girls, in order to make the invisible problem more visible and to make recommendations for intervention and prevention. In this interpretive study we explored bullying amongst girls by using the perspectives of Grade 5 girls in a parochial school in the Western Cape. Data were generated through the use of semi-structured group interviews. We argue that there is no single solution to the problem. Each situation seems to require a unique set of rules, a unique understanding. This is supported by the main finding, namely, some girls have innate characteristics that help maintain bullying while others have characteristics that protect them from bullying. The environment also plays a large part in either maintaining bullying or protecting girls from bullying. The implication is that intervention and preventative strategies need to be based on these personal and contextual factors in order to effect change.

Keywords: bioecological theory; bullying; personal factors; relational bullying; social factors

Introducing the study

> ***What do you do*** *in a situation if someone says to you … like passes on a note and they pass it to you and you're in their gang, like the popular gang?* ***What do you do*** *if it like says something mean like about one of your friends? Like it used to be your 'bestest' friend and secretly it still is.* ***What must you do*** *in this situation*? (Direct quote of a participant)

It is estimated that worldwide up to 50% of children are faced with the complex social dilemma of bullying in schools, as either perpetrators or victims (Dooboy & Clay, 2008). Different friendship groups, meanness, notes, secrets, rumours, peer pressure and choices are often what girls have to cope with beside the pressures of academic achievement. Due to the subtle nature of indirect bullying, it often goes unnoticed in schools. The motivation for this study was therefore to determine the understanding girls have of bullying in order to help them answer the question posed in the quote — "What do you do?"

International recognition for research on bullying came in 1982 with the suicides of three boys in Norway (Olweus, 1993:1-2). It was assumed that their suicides were the end result of being bullied. This encouraged the Norwegian authorities to recognise the dire consequences of bullying. Interna-

tionally, research has been done in Europe, Australia, Asia and North America (Dooboy & Clay, 2008; Carney & Merrell, 2001). Historically, most of the research focused on direct bullying, including physical and verbal aggression. The involvement of girls in bullying and the nature and role of indirect bullying was only recognised recently (Dooboy & Clay, 2008). In South Africa, research on bullying has been completed by, amongst others, De Wet (2005a; 2005b; 2005c), Greeff (2004), Greeff and Grobler (2008), Neser, Ovens, Van der Merwe, Morodi and Ladikos (2003), MacDonald and Swart (2004), Thayser (2001) and Townsend, Flisher, Chikobvu, Lombard and King (2008). However, all research, both internationally and locally, has focused largely on bullying amongst boys or bullying in general. For the most part girls were excluded from research. The research that did focus on girls in South Africa considered the long-term effects of bullying amongst adult women (Thayser, 2001). This lack of research into the perspectives of girls involved in the cycle of bullying prompted our study.

With the research of bullying came the discussion of the adverse short- and long-term effects that school bullying can have on all the role players, providing further motivation for this study (Limber, 2007; Dake, Price, Telljohan & Funk, 2004; Crick, Bigbee & Howes, 1996; Seals & Young, 2003; Carney, 2000; Green, 2007). Literature raised questions of mental health concerns, like depression, anxiety, loneliness and low self-esteem, which often lead to self-destructive behaviour like suicidal ideation (Dake *et al.*, 2004; Holt, Finkelhor & Kantor, 2007). Other consequences of mental concerns are diminished social interaction and poorer academic performance (Dake *et al.*, 2004; Crick *et al.*, 1996; Seals & Young, 2003; Carney, 2000; Holt *et al.*, 2007). Children who are frequently exposed to bullying also report more somatic concerns such as headaches and stomach aches. In addition, there are feelings amongst victims of bullying that the abuse will never end (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Owens, Slee & Shute, 2000). The effects of bullying on all children, including the child that exhibits bullying behaviour, therefore cannot be ignored.

What is bullying?

Various attempts have been made to define bullying. Recent literature (Dooboy & Clay, 2008; Leff, 2007; Besag, 2006; Rigby, 2002) quotes the Scandinavian researcher Daniel Olweus, who is considered the pioneer researcher on bullying, in an attempt to define the term. Olweus (1993) uses the term 'mobbing', which translates as a large group of people involved in harassment. He also speaks of negative action in terms of verbal or physical abuse, the use of gestures or the exclusion from peer groups. He highlights the aggressive component of bullying and includes the idea of the persistent imbalance of power or strength between the victim and the bully. Rigby (2002) also mentions the idea of the unjust use of power, but includes the aspect of a repeated desire to hurt. Rigby points out that the aggressor experiences a feeling of enjoyment while the victim has a sense of oppression. Furthermore, he makes a distinc-

tion between malign and non-malign bullying. The former is defined as "bullying which is deliberate, intended to hurt and gratifying to the successful bully" (Rigby, 2002:49), while the latter is the belief on the part of the victim, rather than the reality of the bully, that the hurt was intentional. The latest research emphasises that bullying is a group phenomenon. Children may play a variety of roles including that of aggressor, victim, observer, defender (Limber, 2007), and bully-victim (Holt *et al.*, 2007).

Björqvist (2001), Cairns and Cairns (1994) and Grotpeter and Crick (1996) speak of three types of bullying: direct physical, direct verbal, and indirect relational or social bullying. Due to its overt nature, direct physical bullying is visible. However, indirect relational or social bullying is covert, thereby rendering it invisible. Literature highlights the fact that although this latter type of bullying is predominantly prevalent among girls (Xie, Swift, Cairns & Cairns, 2002), boys can also experience it. The goal of this type of bullying is often to damage the victim's reputation and relationships. Nevertheless, because of its covert nature it has thrived in schools. This type of bullying is also seen as more damaging in terms of the consequences including feelings of depression, low self-worth, loneliness, anxiety and severe difficulties with social relationships in adulthood (Sharp, Thompson & Arora, 2000).

Our research looked at covert bullying and included the following: gossiping and spreading rumours, social exclusion, alienation and isolation, non-verbal behaviour like facial expressions and bodily gestures, writing notes about someone and passing them to a third party, disruption and/or the withdrawal of friendships, cyber-bullying and behaviour where harm is indirectly achieved (Green, 2007). The research was guided by the following research question:

> What are the perspectives of Grade 5 girls on non-physical bullying and how can their perspectives be utilised for the recognition, intervention and prevention of this phenomenon?

The aim of the research was therefore to explore the perspectives of Grade 5 girls with regard to the nature of non-physical bullying amongst girls, in order to assist them, as well as teachers, in recognising this type of bullying from their perspective. The relevance of this aim was that "increasing our understanding of the view of pupils and adults is key to developing effective interventions" (Del Barrio 1999, in Mishna, 2004:235). According to the research, girls were doubtful as to the effectiveness of pupil-generated strategies. They spoke of using "humour, ignoring a taunt, retaliating verbally or physically and avoiding instigators" (Horowitz, Vessey, Carlson, Bradley, Montoya, McCullough & Joyce, 2004:171). However, these strategies did not prevent feelings of "helplessness and the desire to involve adults" (Gamliel, Hoover, Daughtry & Imbra, 2003:417).

Theoretical framework

Bullying is a complex phenomenon and according to many researchers it is best understood as a result of an interaction between an individual and his

or her social system (Limber, 2007; Leff, 2007; Holt *et al.*, 2007). The theoretical framework for the research and the research design was therefore based on the social context perspective, which uses the tenets of constructivism and the bioecological theory. Common to both theories is the idea that individuals are shaped by and are active shapers of their social context (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2001).

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological approach lends an understanding of the dynamic relationship between an individual's development (including biological development, inter- and intra-psychological development and behaviour) and the integrated, multiple social contexts or systems referred to in his model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). His model speaks of the interaction (particularly proximal interactions)[1] of four dimensions, namely, person factors, process factors, contexts and time, which are used for conceptualising the integrated developmental system and for designing research (Lerner, 2005; Leff, 2007). Person factors involve the temperament, emotional or behavioural characteristics of for example the child and parent or the personality of the bully or victim, while process factors refer to the dynamic interaction one may find in peer groups, families or within schools and therefore between the child and the context. The context or systems would include families, peers, teachers, schools and communities. The aspect of time is relevant because the previous three factors change over time due to the maturation of the child and change in the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Lerner, 2005; Donald *et al.*, 2001). The developmental level of the participants was therefore also a significant consideration in this study (see the reference to Erikson's stages in the section on participant selection).

Bronfenbrenner places child development within four interrelated nested systems, namely, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem, all of which interact with the chronosystem (Donald *et al.*, 2001). In Bronfenbrenner's most recent work he describes the microsystem as

> a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interactions with, and activity in, the immediate environment (Lerner, 2005:xvii).

The activities and relationships involve the most important proximal interactions and include microsystems such as the family, teachers, school and peer groups (Berry & Hardman, 1998; Donald *et al.*, 2001). The bioecological theory describes the biopsychosocial person as the "centre of gravity" in the theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, in Lerner, 2005:xvi), which was of particular importance in this study. The mesosystem refers to the manner in which these microsystems relate to each other. It is important to remember that in a bioecological approach, influence is not one-directional. This implies that the microsystems are being influenced, but also influence other systems within the bullying cycle. Sullivan, Cleary and Sullivan (2004) call this the "ripple effect". They use the metaphor of a stone being thrown into water, with

the point of entry being the bullying act and the resultant ripples representing the effects this act has on various role players, in other words microsystems. The role players are the bully, the victim, the bystander, the parents, others at school and the wider community. Although the child is not directly involved in the exosystem (e.g. the parents' workplace, the media, the school board and the school's bullying policy), changes in this system could affect his or her development. The overarching system surrounding the other systems is the macrosystem. It includes the cultural and ideological values of society, politics and policies. It also reflects the shared assumptions of how things should be done and how systems should interact on the other levels. These systems are named in order of increasing distance from the individual. When designing prevention and intervention strategies, it should be kept in mind that change in one part of any of the systems affects that system and all the systems as a whole (Berry & Hardman, 1998). A diagrammatic representation of the bioecological approach combined with Sullivan's 'ripple effect' can be seen in Figure 1.

Research design and methodology

Our ontological assumptions are informed by both the bioecological approach and Constructivism. Accordingly we believe that human beings are active agents in their development which is restricted in two ways: the position of the systems of which they are part and their personal characteristics and development (including protective and maintaining factors). Both emphasise the importance of context and the epistemological assumption that knowledge is not passively received, but actively constructed, based on the experiences of an individual. People are therefore constantly making meaning of their lives within their social context. When faced with a new experience or new information they are continuously comparing it to and reflecting on their own experience. A constructivist approach emphasises the active role of people in "constructing and defining their own social realities" (Giles & Heyman, 2005: 107). This belief informed our choice of research approach and design.

Much of the research done in the field of bullying has been quantitative in nature, which does not give us an "insight into the actual feelings of children and adolescents involved in peer conflicts" (Owens *et al.*, 2000:364). We conducted a qualitative study anchored in Interpretivism. As qualitative researchers we were interested in understanding how the girls made sense of and experienced bullying (Merriam, 1998:6). The research therefore constituted an attempt to add a human dimension to the research databank on bullying. From an empathetic observer status we looked at subjective reality using interactional, interpretive methods (TerreBlanche, Durrheim & Painter, 1999). We made use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups as discussed below.

Setting

As qualitative research has a strong orientation to everyday events and/or the everyday knowledge of those under investigation, the data generation, and

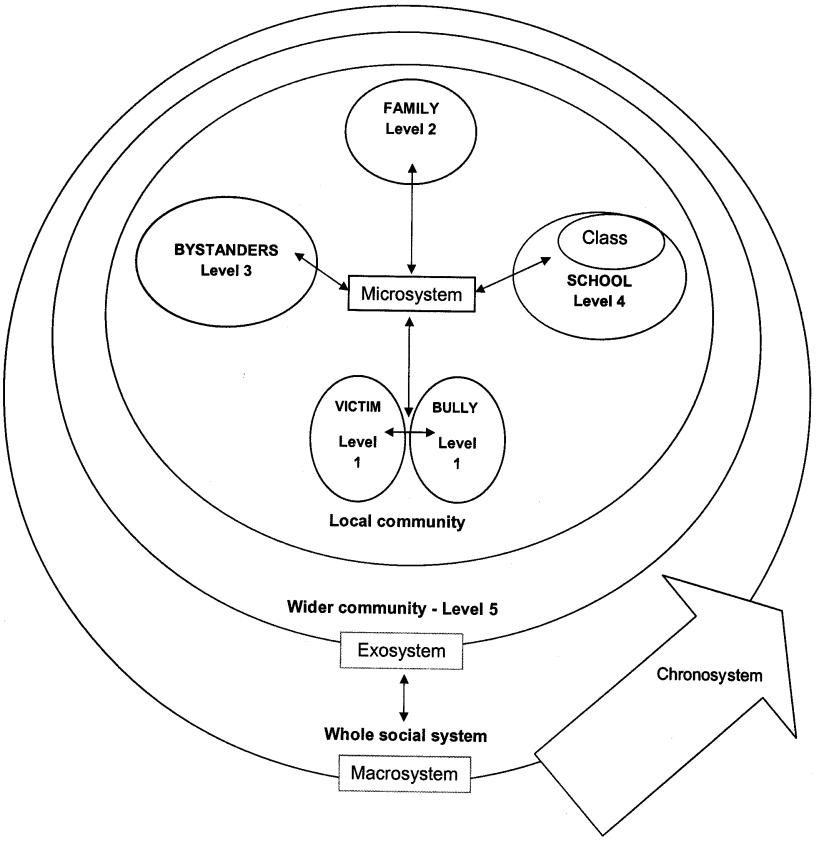

Figure 1 The bioecological approach and the ripple effect of bullying

analytical and interpretive procedures are bound to the notion of contextuality (Flick, Von Kardorff & Steinke, 2004). This investigation was conducted within the setting of a parochial school in the Western Cape province. The school was chosen since the staff had expressed a need for this type of research and because the range of grades extends from classes for three-year-olds to Grade 11. Despite this wide range of ages, the school remains small in relation to many other schools in South Africa, as there are no more than 27 pupils in a class. This provided a broad range of ages from which to consider different developmental factors. Moreover, because of the small classes there is a close relationship between the staff members and the pupils.

Selection of participants

"[P]otential participants in research that targets reform of systems known to be inefficient, if not unjust, are likely to be highly vulnerable" (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008:491). It is therefore important that researchers "proceed with extreme attention to ethical considerations at every stage of the research process" (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008:490). The ethical issues that we had to consider and manage carefully included issues of power (such as the role of teachers, the influence of the researcher on the collection of data and the developmental status of the participants), ethical clearance by the research institution, permission from the school, the written informed consent of parents and assent of participants, confidentiality and anonymity and the social responsibility of the researcher (Leff, 2007).

After considering the literature and discussions with teachers at the school, Grade 5 girls (11–12 years old) were chosen as this appeared to be the age at which non-physical or indirect bullying amongst girls became more prevalent (Österman *et al.*, in French, Jansen & Pidada, 2002; Lagerspetz *et al.*, in Olafsen & Viemerö, 2000). Woolfolk (2007:67) mentions that "Erikson saw development as a passage through a series of stages, each with its particular goals, concerns, accomplishments, and dangers". Accordingly, two of Erikson's psychosocial stages of development were considered for the participants in question: middle-school-age and early adolescence (Hook, Watts & Cockcroft, 2002:266). During the middle-school-age, the significant adult in the pupil's life starts to lose his/her power to influence the child. The peer group starts exerting more influence, applying norms of acceptance and rejection. As pupils become aware of these norms, they also experience the pressure to conform. As pupils' sensitivity to their social environment is heightened, they learn to act in ways which are acceptable for the norms of their group (Newman & Newman, 2002:154). Similarly, during the early adolescence stage "the adolescent's peer group appears to have the most intense influence on his [her] self evaluation" (Newman & Newman, 2002:210). Both stages were considered as the ages of the participants in this study ranged between 10½ and 12 years. They therefore fell into the transitional[2] period between middle-school-age and early adolescence.

After receiving written parental consent and participant assent for 18 Grade 5 girls who were willing to participate, they were split into smaller focus groups. These participants had the opportunity to discuss any concerns regarding the project with a person not related to the project and could withdraw at any time. It was regarded as an appropriate interpretive research strategy to use focus groups (Mertens, 2005) as it allowed access to an interactive experience of individuals (TerreBlanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006; Mertens, 2005). This interactive group format offered distinct advantages for the generation of rich, in-depth data. Firstly, it offered rapport between the interviewer and participants, and amongst the participants. Secondly, it provided support, which promoted greater candour and thirdly, it encouraged participants to form opinions through interaction with the other participating girls (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996).

The girls were divided into three groups of five, six and seven members,

respectively. Each group was asked to provide pseudonyms of their own choice to assist with the anonymity of the transcriptions. They decided on the following names: the Powder Puff Girls, the Giggle Gals and the Chicks Next Door.

The interview sessions

Mertens (2005:387) points out that "… qualitative researchers tend to favour semi-structured or unstructured … interview formats" as the goal is to establish a human-to-human relationship with participants in order to understand their perspectives. We therefore aimed at developing a relationship both in and with the groups and generating data about bullying in the process. Inspired by Kvale (1996:37) who argues that "… if we regard knowing not as having an essence but as a right to believe, we may see conversation as the ultimate context within which knowledge is understood", we aimed at establishing a conversational style, which helped to create rapport with them. An interview guide served as a basic checklist which ensured that the researcher covered all the necessary themes during the semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2003). This guide covered the following, amongst other things: what bullying is, how girls bully, how they perceive bullying, and how bullying is dealt with. There were four different interview sessions per focus group, each using a different prompt and an interview guide based on the prompt. The reason for this was the need to elicit a variety of responses and to attempt thorough coverage of the subject matter. The prompts used included a vignette, collage, song, and photographs.

First session — *The vignette*

In order to facilitate discussion a vignette adapted from Owens *et al.* (2001) was used. The vignette was read to the participants who were then asked questions based on the reading. The main points they raised during the discussion of the reading was then generalised to their own experiences. The vignette helped to focus discussion. The participants were also given an incident report to use between focus group sessions in order to jot down recollections of events or new experiences of bullying. These reports were posted to the researchers in a special gift bag placed in classes.

Second Session — *The collage*

The second session started with a creative activity. The participants were asked to make a collage of what they considered bullying to be. Each participant was asked to choose a preferred activity from the given list: writing poetry, drawing, finding and cutting pictures out of magazines, and artistically writing words which describe bullying. When they had completed their tasks, a collage was compiled from what they had created. They then explained their pictures, poems, words or drawings to the rest of the group and answered a few questions from an interview guide.

Third Session — *The song*

The prompt for the third session was a song called 'Ugly', sung by a group

called the Sugababes. The words were handed to each participant and they sang along while listening to the CD recording of the song. The ideas in the song were then used to elicit their own personal experiences.

Fourth Session — *The photographs*

In the final interview session the focus groups were presented with 15 different photographs which had been taken on the school premises. These photographs were based on previous discussions of areas they had mentioned in connection with bullying incidents at the school. They were then asked to choose a photograph they could relate to bullying, and to write down their thoughts about their choice on paper. These thoughts were read out to the group.

Data analysis

With the permission of the participants, the interviews were tape recorded. They were then transcribed verbatim and the text analysed after each session (Merriam, 2002). The 'constant comparative' method used for the analysis of the data in this study was introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and refined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) (in Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:126). We first coded and unitised the data, and then grouped the units in categories. Categories that overlapped were collapsed into a larger category or subdivided. The focus of the analysis was the Grade 5 girls' perspectives on the nature of non-physical bullying amongst girls. We collected and analysed data until the categories were saturated.

Our measures to ensure trustworthiness included the use of multiple sources and methods of data to make sure that the findings were strong and grounded (Merriam, 1998). We also provided a trail of evidence and a rich, thick description of the data. We built a trusting, open relationship with the participants over a period of time to facilitate the collection of rich verbal data. In addition, the congruency of the merging findings and the tentative interpretations were discussed with peers.

Findings and discussion

The final categories created during data analysis that focused on their perspectives were: bullying techniques, personal and social maintaining factors, personal and social protective factors and results of bullying. A model was developed to integrate and display the findings with person, process and context factors (according to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory) in order to answer the research question which referred to the perspectives of Grade 5 girls. A diagrammatic representation of the model can be seen in Figure 2. Each of these factors will be discussed in terms of the findings.

Process factors

Process factors, which focus on answering the question "How?" included the non-physical bullying techniques used or experienced by these girls, their

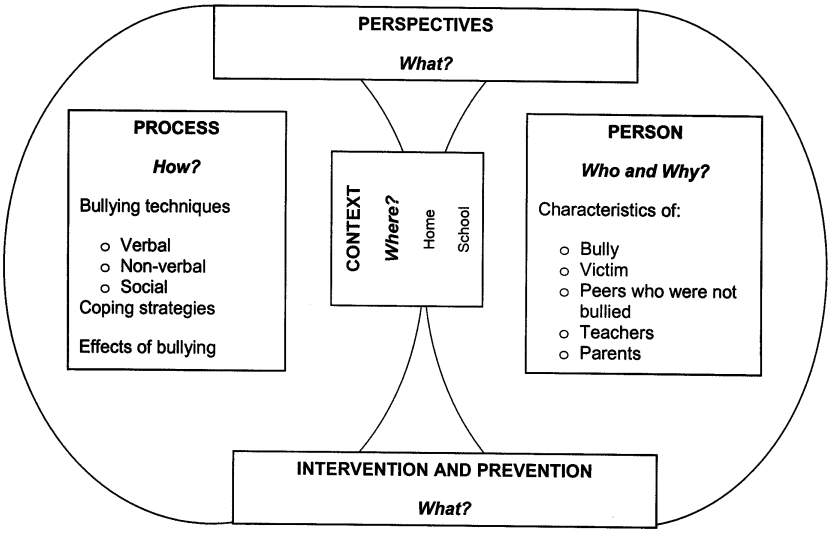

Figure 2 Diagrammatic representation of the proposed integration between perspectives, factors and intervention and prevention

coping strategies and the effects of bullying. The bullying techniques used by these girls can be categorised as verbal, non-verbal or social. If the responses of the focus groups in terms of bullying techniques were to be summarised, one would have two types of bullying with an intent to hurt: intentional and unintentional. Both categories include verbal abuse, the use of gestures, social abuse and the idea of power. According to the participants in the research, verbal bullying included girls being targeted through rumours, gossiping, ridicule and saying nasty things. They experienced this orally, or via notes, Mix-IT, unidentifiable e-mail, text messaging or Facebook, making bullying possible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. One type of rumour that was mentioned often was a group of friends being told that one of the girls in their circle did not really like them. The hurt feelings that resulted from this rumour would get the 'culprit' ousted from the group. One of the participants gave the following example of gossiping: After one of her friends had visited her home, she went back to school with negative reports in order to boost her own position in the group. Being laughed at for inconsequential mistakes was the most common incident of ridicule mentioned by the participants. Saying nasty things was often done in retaliation to someone who was nasty to you. The aim would then be to have a better comeback, an even nastier response. This is illustrated by the following extract:

Maybe this bully is calling you names and you can think of something

more humiliating or maybe threatening or something like her parents had a divorce and you're like 'Ah, you don't have a dad'.

The focus groups also spoke of non-verbal bullying like the use of body language and gestures to express their disdain for someone. Examples mentioned by participants include rolling eyes, facial expression and hand-signals that demonstrate dislike.

Social bullying was described in terms of social exclusion, revealing secrets, and hurting someone unintentionally. This was non-physical bullying which largely has to do with relationships amongst peers and the concept of power. Participants indicated that if bullying were to be rated in terms of which caused the most hurt, or which type of bullying they feared the most, social exclusion was mentioned most frequently. The participants discussed how girls at times were unaware of the negative repercussions of their actions. These findings about the types of bullying concur with the findings of Besag (2006), Neser *et al.* (2003) and Rigby (2002; 2004).

Exclusion appeared to be the main form of bullying. It involved leaving people out of birthday parties, ignoring 'old' friends when new friends joined the group and excluding others when the class was told to form groups for group discussions and group projects. At times, the exclusion would be done subtly, while at other times it was blatant. One could therefore assume that, because exclusion was mentioned as a threat so frequently, this could be one of the greatest fears of these girls in Grade 5. This could be due to their age and the developmental phase in which they found themselves, as mentioned previously. During this developmental stage, it is generally accepted that the power of the peer group increases as the power of the care-giver decreases. The need for friendship is therefore emphasised by a need for belonging to a certain group, which has an influence on her sense of self (Newman & Newman, 2002).

Coping strategies are described as strategies used to deal with bullying, but also to bullying as a strategy (Archer, 2001; Carney & Merrell, 2001). Archer (2001) describes it as the deviant aggressive behaviour pupils use to cope with their social environment. According to Carney and Merrell (2001) children often learnt this maladaptive coping style from their parents. In their research, Gamliel *et al.* (2003) identified the following as coping strategies employed by their participants: avoiding or ignoring the bully, rational or calm confrontation, verbal retaliation and cathartic expression. The coping strategies the participants spoke of were strategies they used to cope with bullying. They spoke of either maladaptive or functional coping styles. The maladaptive strategies (or maintaining factors) that they mentioned included hurting themselves or others, taking revenge for a hurt caused and bullying in turn, developing physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches and copying negative coping styles of parents (e.g. becoming aggressive). Positive coping strategies (or protective factors) included writing about feelings, physical exercise, physically hitting something that was not harmful to themselves or others, crying to help release pent-up emotions and being able to speak to someone, even if it was a pet. One of the participants chose to write a poem

based on a photograph she had chosen during one of the group sessions to illustrate her perception of bullying (see Figure 3).

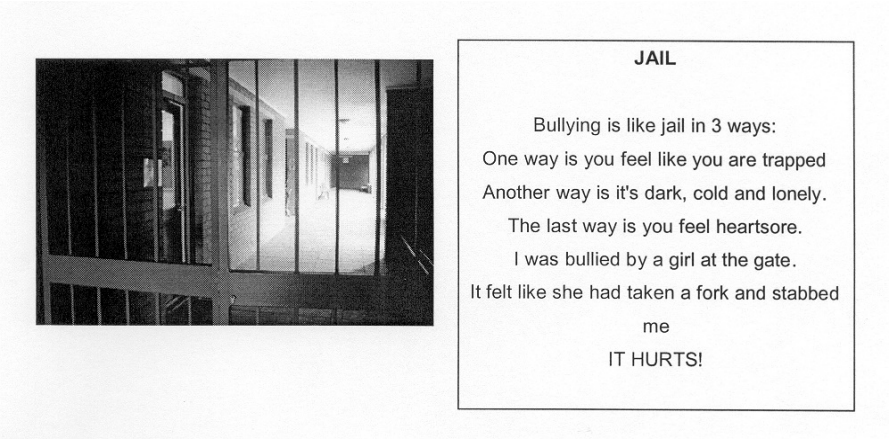

Figure 3 Photograph of an identified area of bullying at the school and the poem based on it

The effects of bullying that they mentioned were many and varied. Short-term effects were being made to feel insignificant, feeling hurt, being embarrassed and fearful, feeling irritated, being made to feel powerless and wishing that one was not alive. To illustrate this, one participant expressed her sense of powerlessness in a collage (Figure 4) and then subsequently stated: "Sometimes when a girl bullies you, it feels like you actually are the boxing bag because they can just hit you as many times and you can't hit them back".

These painful psychological effects confirm the findings of Owens *et al.* (2000:367) and Neser *et al.* (2003) namely, that bullying evokes feelings of embarrassment, anger, worry, fear, humiliation, loneliness, self-consciousness, betrayal and sadness. When referring to long-term effects the participants spoke of having terrible recurring memories of bullying occurrences. One described it as a "stuck record" that played itself over and over again in her head. This supports research by Sharp *et al.* (2000) who spoke of memories of bullying incidents surfacing repeatedly as one of the most common negative reactions to bullying.

Person factors

Person factors include both interpersonal and intrapersonal factors and attempt to answer the "Who?" and "Why?" questions. In this study the factors included the role players in the bullying experience, their personal characteristics and personal protective and maintaining factors. The role players identified by these participants were bullies, victims, peers who were not bullied, teachers and parents (referring to the most proximal interactions).

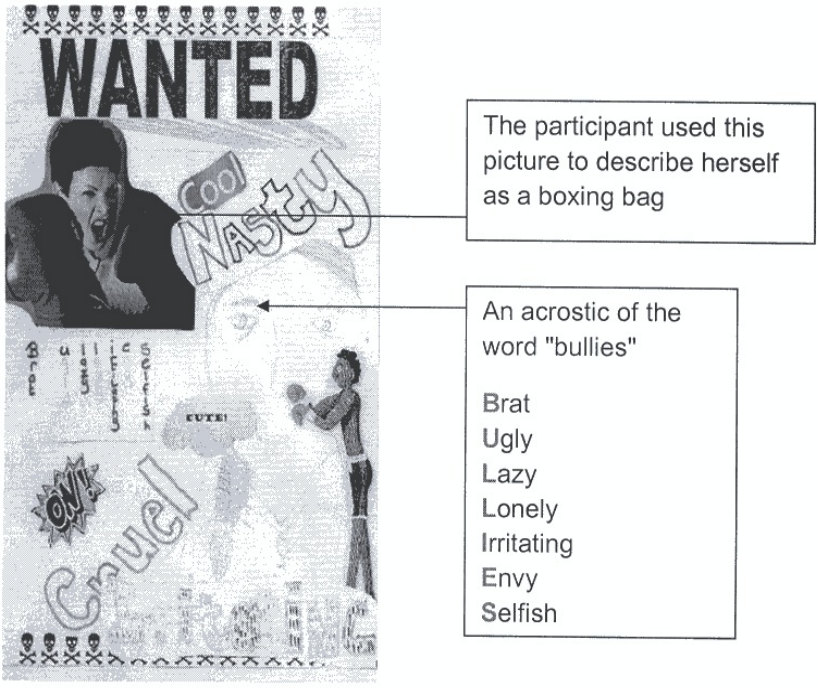

Figure 4 A metaphor used by one of the participants when explaining her picture's use in a collage was that of a boxing bag

They also spoke of "those who watched" (the bystanders) and who would either lend support to the victim or laugh at her — in the latter case supporting the bully. The participants associated the roles of bully and victim with certain characteristics: whereas bullies were attributed with bossiness, overconfidence and slyness, victims were called soft, sad, withdrawn and shy. Physical attributes of victims were also mentioned as a factor that contributed towards targeting girls. These physical attributes ranged from being considered too fat, or too thin, to the colour of a victim's hair. One's physical attributes therefore led to the potential for victimization and maintaining the bullying. These sentiments were echoed in a focus group:

> Sometimes people judge the book by its cover. They look at someone and they say, "Yo you're ugly, your hairstyle's ridiculous, or you're fat, you're too tall or you're too short, or your freckles are horrible" or something and it actually really hurts inside.

Characteristics of children who were not bullied were also mentioned as a probable means of protection. The protective factors mentioned by the parti-

cipants included positive coping strategies like crying or writing about emotions in one's diary, having self-confidence and courage and being able to feel empathy. The participants explained that people who displayed self-confidence and courage were people who stood up for themselves and others and did not allow others to be on their own at break time. They did, however, add that doing this was often a daunting experience and the fact that it was not easy made it so noble. Often girls were "too scared" to stand up to someone and would instead employ another method of ridding themselves of the problem. Salmivalli, Kauklainen and Lagerspetz (1999) link courage to self-esteem that is high and healthy. Another protective factor that was mentioned was the ability to forgive. However, it was difficult to forgive because of the pain and the fact that "friends" could take advantage.

The idea of teachers as a source of help and therefore a protective factor was discussed. The participants reported that although they greatly desired the support teachers could give, it would be even more helpful if teachers understood non-physical bullying. If teachers are to provide their fullest possible support, they should be able to recognise and manage bullying behaviour both on the playground and in the classroom. It also requires an understanding that by the time the child has complained to the teacher, other avenues have already been tried unsuccessfully. The participants specifically emphasised that it was important for teachers and parents to be capable of listening and responding effectively to children in this regard. This endorses Cowie and Olafsson's (2000) view that the teaching of active listening skills is vital in anti-bullying support programmes. The significant findings of a study by Nation, Vienno, Perkins and Santinello (2008) suggest that children in this age group who are disempowered by teachers may either compensate by bullying peers or become a victim.

Parents were also seen as a source of help, but their effectiveness was often regarded as limited. Parents who were over-intrusive or authoritarian were considered less effective. Over-intrusive parents were therefore seen as those who disempowered their children and were often the source of their lack of self-confidence and self-efficacy. However, parents who listened and offered various types of solutions were considered the most effective, most supportive and most empowering, thereby serving as a protective factor. Leff (2007) found that girls seemed to benefit most from parental social support in curbing the internalising effects of bullying.

Contextual factors

Carr (2006:54) explains contextual maintaining factors in the following way:

> While personal characteristics may pre-dispose youngsters to develop psychological problems and maintain them once they emerge, a variety of contextual factors also make youngsters vulnerable to developing psychological difficulties and play a significant role in perpetuating such problems.

In this study, the contextual factors mentioned by the participants included social factors, family factors and school factors which relate to the systems

(peer, family and school) in Bronfenbrenner's theory. Some factors maintained bullying whilst others served as protective factors. The maintaining social factors included having a boyfriend as prerequisite to belonging to a group, and different group structures and group dynamics that create dominance hierarchies. Family factors included proximal interactions that referred to the role of communication between children and parents, parenting styles and parents' influence as role models. These factors can be either maintaining or protective.

Although some participants mentioned that the size of the school supported an anti-bullying atmosphere many felt that there was a hierarchy at this school. This brings group dynamics and social structure into the picture. Dominance hierarchy is considered one of the instrumental goals of aggressive pupils (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996). According to the participants, social hierarchy supported the formation of cliques and the culture of bullying. They felt that the attitudes of staff, parents and peers also contributed to the culture of bullying and that this was an area where intervention was required. We concur with Dupper and Meyer-Adams (2002:356) that each school has a culture that embodies its values, norms and beliefs. Therefore, in order to change the culture of bullying at a school, school personnel would have to become instrumental in creating intervention and prevention strategies.

Interpretation and recommendations

Recent studies, including that of Totura, MacKinnon-Lewis, Gesten, Gadd, Divine, Dunham and Kamboukos (2008), argue that pupils should be consulted as primary informants of their experiences and suggestions for support and structures to assist their well-being. The purpose of this exploratory study was to listen to the voices of girls, thereby making invisible bullying more visible. The findings confirm patterns in international literature on bullying amongst girls. This is supported by the main finding, namely, that some girls have innate characteristics which help maintain bullying while others have characteristics which protect them from bullying. The environment also plays a large part in either maintaining bullying or protecting girls from bullying. The implication of the findings is that identification, preventative and intervention strategies need to be based on these personal and contextual factors in order to effect change. We support Olweus (1993), Dooboy and Clay (2008) and Limber (2007) who argue that schools will only see large reductions in bullying when intervention is in place at three levels, namely, individual, class, and whole school levels. These levels relate to the multiple social contexts as mentioned by Bronfenbrenner. The interventions call for the unequivocal involvement of adults. Furthermore, with regard to the specific study, consciousness of gender differences and the damaging effects of indirect bullying on girls should be raised in school communities (Galen & Underwood, 1997:598; Dooboy & Clay, 2008).

Based on the findings of this study and the literature, we suggest that the different role players should be dealt with as individuals within a context. One needs to determine the characteristics of the child that bullies or is being

bullied, as this aids intervention. For example, if the victim is submissive, one would work on "self-esteem, assertiveness and confidence" (Carney & Merrell, 2001:372). With a provocative victim, the emphasis would be on social skills training, reduction of aggressive behaviour and the use of assertive problem-solving strategies (Carney & Merrell, 2001). Intervention with passive bullying would include building self-confidence, forming healthy peer relationships and learning to say no when placed in uncomfortable situations. With a bully who is actively aggressive, intervention "tends to combine implementation of firm rules/expectations and consequences with praise from authority figures for appropriate interaction" (Carney & Merrell, 2001:374).

Traditionally bullying was regarded as an everyday part of social development. Intervention strategies focused on the punishment or rehabilitation of the bully, including conflict resolution and problem-solving strategies. Interventions for victims on the other hand focused on social skills training and coping strategies. However, these approaches alone seemed to be ineffective (Green, 2007). Currently, the most successful prevention and intervention programmes are those based on comprehensive whole school approaches that require teachers, parents and pupils to work together to create a climate where every member of the school community is valued and free to learn (Leff, 2007). Therefore school systems, policies and procedures must reflect an awareness of the different forms and functions of bullying, including indirect bullying, so that both the adults and the pupils in the system take prevention and intervention seriously. The subtle and covert nature of indirect bullying amongst girls should thus not be dismissed as 'growing pains'. If left, it sends a message of tacit acceptance and can create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

One type of programme, which is based on the tenets outlined in Olweus's approach, is called The Whole School Response Program (Dooboy & Clay, 2008; Carney & Merrell, 2001:374). It focuses intervention at three levels: crisis management, intervention strategies, and preventative responses. This type of intervention aims at creating a school culture that values and respects all members of the school community and in which bullying is consequently unacceptable. A school climate plays a critical role in the everyday performance and attitudes of its school community and how this community can "work together as a team to build a strong, positive culture in their school's environment. A school's culture and climate are important because we know that they significantly affect and influence students' behavior and learning" (Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002:356).

The knowledge that peers and friendships are central to the lives of learners — particularly to those in the intermediate school phase — can be utilised to benefit the positive culture of schools. As Cowie and Olafsson (2000: 80) point out, "... one effective way of tapping the potential resource of the peer group comes from training selected young people in peer support". These pupils are taught the "basic skills of active listening, empathy, problem-solving and supportiveness" (Cowie & Olafsson 2000:80). These skills could be emphasised in the Life Orientation learning area but modelled and required

across the curriculum. Age-appropriate methods of stimulating class discussions should be utilised using the ideas of data generation employed in this research. In this way the values of the school become a living entity and not just a paragraph written in the teachers' manual.

Consciousness raising should enable one to remove the aspect of unintentional bullying. The assumption is that girls who are aware of what kind of behaviour is regarded as bullying behaviour will be unable to hurt unintentionally. Consciousness raising would not only be aimed at the learners, but at the staff and parents as well.

This study showed that adult intervention was most desired, yet appeared unattainable at this point. The assumption behind increasing the awareness of adults in this context is that the greater their awareness, the more empathic they will be towards girls who are enduring bullying. Consciousness raising could include becoming informed about the different types of bullying and the consequences of bullying. Teachers must also know how to accommodate gender differences in interventions (Totura *et al.*, 2008). A significant finding of these authors, for example, suggests that socially skilled girls develop covert aggressive methods that escape the attention of teachers. These girls may increase and refine their bullying strategies when supervision and monitoring are increased. They may be popular amongst peers, which could reinforce their subtle methods and antipathy against adult interventions. Totura *et al.* (2008) suggest that interventions, where teachers coach pupils in dealing with bullying, are therefore more effective. Craig, Henderson and Murphy (2000:16) state that

> ... teacher training programmes need to educate [student teachers] about the diversity of behaviours that constitute bullying and the long-term effects of experiencing these behaviours in order to increase teacher awareness and perceived seriousness of the problems.

This training, which could be extended to parents, could include problem-solving skills so that teachers and parents are good role models for pupils. Parents and teachers can also be made aware of parenting styles[3] in order that they may realise which style is more supportive of their children's emotional and psychological health. Intrusive, coercive parenting styles and low warmth and support place girls at risk for internalising difficulties and victimisation (Totura *et al.*, 2008) whereas parental social support is a protective factor for girls (Leff, 2007).

Conclusion

This study reflects findings which mostly concur with international literature. It has contributed to the meagre knowledge base with regard to bullying amongst girls and, more specifically, to bullying amongst Grade 5 girls in South Africa. The results of this study can contribute to the understanding of the problems faced by girls in this age cohort. The methods used to generate data can also be used by teachers to develop an understanding of the experiences and recommendations of girls in other schools. However, one of the limitations of the study is that the nature of bullying is context-specific.

There is no single solution. Each situation seems to require a unique set of rules, a unique understanding. So although the results of this study can be used to help families, teachers and psychologists in this field to better understand bullying of this nature and to assist with the formulation of intervention and prevention strategies, every context has to be analysed carefully. Most importantly, this research can hopefully enable the participants to make a positive difference in their lives and the lives of others. Mertens and Ginsberg (2008:488) speak of research participants experiencing

> a 'mental awakening' when they are asked by the researcher to respond to questions and, in that process, they may become aware of feelings, beliefs, or values of which they were previously unaware. The research may, then, leave the participants with richer self-insights and make a positive contribution to their well-being.

This 'mental awakening' was voiced by one of the participants in the final interview:

> I think maybe a few people in this room might commit to try and not bully others because we've learnt all of this and we know how it feels because it's happened to us, and I think most of us are going to commit to try and not bully others.

Notes

1. Interactions that are close and usually continuous, for shaping lasting aspects of development. In this research we identified interactions with peers, teachers, and parents.
2. Times of transition are normally regarded as turbulent times and are therefore another factor to consider together with the phenomenon of bullying.
3. The four parenting styles are: authoritative, permissive, autocratic and unengaged.

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