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Understanding bullying relationally

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In this article, bullying in South African schools is conceptualised regarding both the phenomenon and the leadership style using a relational framework. An instrumental case study nested in social constructivism was applied. I employed semi-structured interviews, including some open-ended questionnaires, based on the same interview questions. Research participants were sampled purposively, after selecting a few schools that were part of a larger research project investigating bullying with the aim of countering this problem. To this end, I sourced data from 12 principals in these schools to inquire into their leadership style, and the possible ways in which a relational stance might assist in combatting this social and educational dilemma in schools. Empirical data revealed that in many cases where the school principals honed values such as care and relational attributes in their daily leadership practices, learners were more likely to respond to the relational and caring practices that they witnessed and experienced. A relational leadership style could assist in countering bullying, setting caring and supportive examples for both teachers and learners, adding much worth to a favourable educational landscape.

Keywords: bullying; educational leadership; ethics of care; instrumental case study; relational leadership

Introducing the Research Phenomenon

One can assume with reasonable certainty that bullying occurs in most schools and that it is "a physically harmful, psychologically damaging and socially isolating experience for those who experience it" (Slee, 2017:9). For any intervention to succeed, the advice by Slee (2017:9) ought to be heeded, that schools should strive towards "well-being, which refers to optimal psychological functioning and experience." Well-being is assumed in relationships, where teachers and school principals exhibit a relational way of being and caring. All human beings, and learners in particular, learn better when experiencing relationality and care, which is lived and modelled by teachers and principals. Such relationality refers to that which binds people together, that which compels people and that which links them. For this reason, anti-bullying interventions in schools require partnerships with the community, parents, teachers, and leadership (Rodkin, Espelage & Hanish, 2015).

Søndergaard (2018:50) offers an appropriate explanation of bullying thus: "Bullying is an intensification of the processes of marginalisation that occur in the context of dynamics of inclusion/exclusion, which shape groups. Bullying happens when physical, social or symbolic exclusion becomes extreme, regardless of whether such exclusion is experienced and/or intended." It is evident from extant research (Smit & Scherman, 2016) that bullying has far-reaching social effects, and that many adults bear the scars of childhood bullying. This view is supported by Brimblecombe, Evans-Lacko, Knapp, King, Takizawa, Maugham and Arseneault (2018:1), who claim that bullying "is associated with mental health problems in childhood, with increasing evidence of persisting negative impacts, and increased mental health service use, into adulthood." Their research reinforces that childhood bullying ought to be prevented, given its long-lasting and pervasive consequences. It is therefore crucial that strong partnerships ought to be shaped to counter it. In response to the call for this special issue to explore, understand, and explain the nature and the extent of bullying in a developing country context, this inquiry focuses specifically on the role of leadership in South African schools and suggests a relational leadership style with an ethics of care to reduce the prevalence of bullying behaviour. Smit and Scherman (2016:1) have presented "a theoretical exposition of relational leadership and an ethics of care as complementary approaches to educational leadership in counteracting bullying at schools." They suggest that relational leadership, as leadership skill and as leadership characteristic, can mitigate bullying in schools and foster values-based behaviour. They proposed "that if school leaders adopt a relational leadership approach and an ethics of care, the overt and covert processes of bullying can be counteracted and that instead, positive behaviours can be modelled, contributing to socially just ways of acting, which exemplify fairness and equality" (Smit & Scherman, 2016:2).

Furthermore, Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) in this regard report that bullying as a social phenomenon is a complicated issue, which is marked by differences in power, and manifests in deliberate acts of harassment and blame levelled at the victim for whichever reason. This inquiry offers a relational frame for dealing with bullying and appropriating the theory of relational leadership by drawing on empirical data from 12 school principals. It is against this background that I pose the key research question for this inquiry, asking how relational leadership in schools and an ethics of care might assist in combating bullying, a social and educational dilemma.

Theoretical Framework: Relational Leadership and Care Ethics for Schools in the Context of Bullying

Relational leadership for schools is slowly edging its way into the educational leadership literature. Scholars such as Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), Ospina and Uhl-Bien (2012), Uhl-Bien (2006, 2007, 2011a, 2011b),

have written extensively on relational leadership, but not many authors have included relational leadership theory in the scholarship of educational leadership. Recent research by Hallinger and Truong (2016:677–690) offers a clear description of relational leadership for "effective leadership in managing relationships, preserving harmony in schools and teacher empowerment, acknowledging that leadership is socially constructed" (Hallinger & Truong, 2016:677). Specifically, Uhl-Bien (2006:654) writes that "relational leadership theory has been defined as an overarching framework for the study of leadership as a social process of influence, and relational leadership and its practice are socially constructed through relational and social processes." A relational leadership style speaks to the quality of relationships that school principals have with staff, learners, parents, and the community. Such relationships form an integral part in schools, because of their effect on the "critical aspect of leadership, the ability to influence others to get things done" (Uhl-Bien, 2007:1305). Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011:1427), in this context, propose relational leadership to be a way of being in the world together with practical wisdom, intersubjectivity, and dialogue. In this regard, they explain that "relational leadership requires a way of engaging with the world in which the leader holds herself/himself as always in relation with, and therefore morally accountable to others and engages in relational dialogue." This assumes an intersubjective view of the world to offer a way of thinking about who the leaders are. It also implies an understanding of the way leaders engage with the world. Relational leadership also involves relational integrity and responsibility. This sense of responsibility, to be responsive, responsible, and accountable to others in the everyday interactions, proposes a moral stance of caring relationships and moral responsibility, which is embedded within relational integrity. This is evident in the way in which principals treat their staff, learners, and the community, recognising their responsibility to act and relate in ethical ways. School leadership that focuses on social processes, rather than on leader actions and behaviours is relational; a position supported by Du Plessis (2017:9). Such social processes are open, contested, and negotiated, and, indeed, relational, as they concern the processes of "being about others and the larger social system" (Uhl-Bien, 2006:664). Accordingly, relational leadership becomes a quality of the educational setting.

Closely aligned to relational leadership is the notion of an ethics of care, which is defined "as the development of an affinity for the world and the people in it, translating moral commitment to action on behalf of others" (Regan & Brooks, 1995:27). Noddings (2010:390) writes "in care theory relation is ontologically basic." The ethics of care share a relational perspective, which assumes that two parties are involved. Leadership through a relational ethic of caring allows principals to listen attentively to others. Given the emphasis on the relation, the cared-for and the carer are responsive to the act of unconditional reciprocity (Noddings, 2010:391). Principals and teachers require a response from the learners. Put differently, caring-for is located in reciprocal relations defined by address and response (Noddings, 2010:392). Noddings (2010) also declares that caring is a virtue of education, and educational leaders ought to support caring relationships, nurturing the growth of learners and staff. Accordingly, schools ideally want learners to be "prepared to care-for those they encounter directly and to care-about the suffering of people at a distance" (Noddings, 2010:394). This can be accomplished through modelling and dialogue, a relational leadership stance that displays care and concern for colleagues and learners. In handling a case of bullying, for example, teachers must show their care for both victim and perpetrator. The victim's safety and well-being are at stake, and the offender's moral development is at risk. Often it is assumed that only the victim ought to be granted the privilege of care, while in fact, both need help. Significant to understand is that in modelling the way in which care is offered to both parties, learners are helped to develop an attitude of care (Noddings, 2010:394). Relational leaders can create opportunities where learners can learn to care. Leadership for competition is often preferred to an atmosphere of collaboration and cooperation, where criticism in competitive spaces can be harsh. Instead, I propose an approach of confirmation in an environment of collaboration, which can be more helpful.

School bullying is severe, and prevalent in many schools. It manifests as social and relational bullying, a humiliating and damaging someone in a social setting, the school, including the playground, the classroom, and the neighbourhood. Bullying displays at the level of relationships, and for any anti-bullying intervention to succeed, it must be implemented at the level of relationships and managed accordingly through relational leadership and an ethics of care. This would involve that schools are safe places with a favourable school climate, and organised, with appropriate levels of school discipline and supervision. Such an educational landscape speaks to a commitment to safety, trust, and care. Noddings (2010:395) illustrates the way in which a competitive stance by a bully can be eased: "In the bullying case, we might say to the bully: I know you wanted to show that you are strong, but that is not the way to do it. You are a better person than that."

Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) with semi-structured interviews with school principals, was chosen to gather empirical data to respond to the research question empirically. A case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) focuses on a single unit for analysis, in this case, a group of school principals, which allows for in-depth examination (Saldaña, 2011:8). Twelve school principals as research participants were purposively selected from the schools that were targeted in the larger research project participating in the Finnish KiVa™ Antibullying Programme in South African schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and school principals responded to the following interview questions:

1. Tell me a little about yourself and what you do;
2. How did you become a school principal?
3. You appear to be a successful leader: what would you ascribe this to?
4. How would you describe your approach to teachers?
5. How would you describe your approach to learners?
6. What are your expectations for your leadership in your school?
7. What do you value in your leadership relationships at school?
8. Research talks about relational leadership: how would you respond to this?
9. Research talks about an ethics of care in leadership: how would you respond to that?
10. How does your power and position in your school impact your ability to lead relationally and with an ethics of care?
11. One of the challenges in schools is learner bullying: tell me a bit how you deal with this challenge.
12. Last question: if you look back on your career as a school principal, what would you do differently, and what advice would you give to our young school principals?

These schools were chosen by convenience, and not based on the level of bullying experiences. Empirical data were analysed for qualitative content (Schreier, 2012) using descriptive, process and in vivo codings. Codes were categorised to theme the data (Bernard, Wutich & Ryan, 2017; Saldaña, 2016; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). These themes were described and discussed using the literature for interpretations. Empirical data transcripts were imported into a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) ATLAS.ti (Friese, 2014) for ease of data management, coding, categorising and segmenting the empirical texts for verbatim citations in the article (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004:105). Ethical clearance by the university was granted, after the research request from the department was approved and individual schools gave permission for the research. Individual consent forms were distributed for research approval. According to Tracy (2010), to ensure rigour and quality of an inquiry, trustworthiness checks are appropriate. These trustworthiness checks included a worthy topic, credibility, significant contribution, ethics and meaning coherence. The subject of the inquiry is timely and relevant given the subtle and potentially devastating consequences of bullying at the level of the individual and the level of society. The data are detailed offering accurate and thick descriptions, ensuring credibility. Given the sensitivity of the topic (Fahie, 2014), ethical measures were adhered to, considering appropriately the concept of relational ethics, which fit comfortably, theoretically and empirically. The inquiry coheres meaningfully, considering that what was set out in the introduction, the theoretical framework, the design and methodology, interconnect with the interpretations of the findings (Klenke, 2008:69).

Findings

Theoretically and morally, the inquiry makes a significant contribution to the scholarship of educational leadership and bullying. The notion of relational leadership in the context of bullying is extended to school leadership, and the phenomenon of bullying is conceptualised from a relational perspective. In this section, I illustrate the research findings, which speak to school leadership in the context of bullying. I offer illustrative quotations from the empirical data to demonstrate significant issues and interpret these in light of relational leadership and an ethics of care. School leaders responded to questions that included, for instance, what do you value in your leadership relationships at school and how does your power and position in your school impact your ability to lead relationally and with an ethics of care? School leaders also responded to the statement "One of the challenges in schools is learner bullying: tell me a bit about how you deal with this challenge."

For this article, I have created three themes from the data that speak directly to the research phenomenon, including:

- bullying, care, and the role of school leadership;
- relationships of school principals with teachers and learners in the context of care; and
- the role of successful relations and care in bullying and educational leadership.

Theme 1: Bullying, Care, and the Role of School Leadership

Bullying is no doubt a real issue in schools. Most principals acknowledge this fact. There is no hard and fast rule on how principals deal with this phenomenon. Some have policies in place, while others respond to bullying by the occurrence. Susan (P12:12–12)[i] acknowledges, "bullying happens everywhere including our school. At our school, we are lucky to have a psychologist who assists us in working with the bullies and the victims. Both sets of learners have issues that make them who they are. Role-play, group therapy, as well as individual therapy is offered to all the learners involved. During June, the school participates in a big

campaign against bullying, involving all the learners. There are marches in and around the school and posters are made and displayed; group work is done involving everyone."

Bruce (P4:48–48) also acknowledges that bullying exists in his school and mentions that he creates a school environment in which bullying does not take place as often. This means teaching, role-modelling and exposing learners to alternatives, more appropriate forms of addressing bullying. If however, bullying does occur, I prioritise this matter and approach the issue as follows:

- separate the victim from the bully (physically);
- fully investigate the case – to determine the background, the frequency, the reason, the trigger and the outcome;
- meet with parents of both children – explain the school's policy of zero tolerance, what transpired, and what action will be taken;
- if necessary, the bully is punished; and
- restore the relationships with respect.

It is evident that Bruce's school has a comprehensive approach to addressing and preventing bullying. Anthony (P6:46–46) supports such proactive actions and shares some of his interventions: "Firstly, we usually identify bullies and get the source of why they do that. Parents are often invited to short meetings with the bullies, where the bullying policies are discussed. We have a committee that is specifically dealing with counselling those who are bullied (victims)."

Fostering empathy, coupled with disciplinary principles, is necessary for a relational and caring leader to deal with bullying effectively. Claire (P7:31–31) suggests in this regard to be "firm yet empathetic. I come across as a disciplinarian because I set appropriate boundaries and expect to engage with learners regarding their behaviour, what it communicates, and how they can regulate their conduct." Susan supports this view (P12:35–35), stating that: "Any leader needs to have an ethic of care in a school. The care is primarily for the learners, where their well-being and safety should be ensured at all times. That is the reason why we have a Wellness Centre to cater for learners with learning barriers, psychological barriers, social barriers, as well as issues in the family. We have workshops to help the parents with parenting problems, and these have been met with a positive response. Then we do cater for the teachers so that if they are happy and validated, they will be more motivated to produce better quality work."

Interestingly, John (P5:36–36) introduces a fascinating idea of restorative justice, which is "an attempt to change the behaviour of errant children using reconciliation." Restorative justice in this context refers to a healing process closely aligned with the notion of reconciliation. Frias-Armentia, Rodríguez-Macías, Corral-Verdugo, Caso-Niebla and García-Arizmendi (2018:39) consider restorative justice as a holistic and humane alternative to punitive measure traditionally used in schools. The aim is to bring affected parties together following an incident, for example, one of bullying, to identify a shared solution for reparation of harm. Claire (P7:45–46) applies a similar concept, "hurtful helpful policy," where bullying has to be reported followed by a mediated process between the bully and bullied. This proves to be successful in the way bullying is dealt with in her school. The school principals in this inquiry did admit that there are bullies in their schools. Such cases are investigated to determine what exactly is pushing the learners to such behaviour. Parents are also consulted, and referrals are made to psychologists, particularly when learners come from a violent background.

Theme 2: Relationships of School Principals with Teachers and Learners in the Context of Care

Leadership is complicated to describe as it extends beyond the acts of the individual; instead, it is a complex interplay of many interacting forces. Scholars such as Lambert, Zimmerman and Gardner (2016:6) frame, for example, "shared leadership as a relational leadership process or phenomenon involving teams or groups that mutually influence one another and collectively share duties and responsibilities. This shared leadership manifests as layered relationships and networked interactions." Peter (P1:56–56) describes shared relationships at his school like this: "Leaders are placed in a position of authority, ensuring that the needs of the organisation are met; uphold good academic standards and meaningful relationships with the community it serves. Intertwined with the caring values of the school, is the ability of the leader to act with empathy and a real understanding of the needs of the people in the organisation." Caring relations do not happen by chance, instead, they require hard work, dedication and commitment to shared values. This points toward an ethics of care that speaks to the leaders' ability to understand what is required to ensure that learners, parents, and staff feel valued and supported in challenging times, and supported, and encouraged in their aspirations. Accordingly, Lambert et al. (2016:6) posit that leadership is evolving into an interdependence of relationships. In understanding relational leadership, school leadership and capacity can be strengthened. Capacity here, then, refers to the principal's ability to work in concert to solve challenging problems of schooling, such as bullying. Schools can unleash innate and often latent leadership capabilities not only in principals, but also in teachers and learners, which is evident from the empirical data. For example, Joseph (P3:128–130) describes his relationship with learners in the following way, "I can tell you, some children know they can come and speak to me." The willingness and invitational stance of Joseph

facilitates trust and a sense of care for learners to share their problems with him. Bruce (P4:44–44) explores this notion of trust and care and explains the association between relational leadership and ethics of care as follows: "I see ethics of care as a deeper manifestation of relational leadership." In his experience, learners respond well when interest and support are expressed and when they feel noticed, and that they belong.

Lambert et al. (2016:64) claim that school leaders "understand that skill building is a dual track: how to teach and how to lead, mirror images of each other." Susan (P12:23–23) reflects on the mirror image of teaching and leading as follows: "I have developed the school's facilities to enhance teaching and learning; so that our learners perform in comparison to the district or provincial norm versus the pass rate per grade; I addressed the quality of our teachers and looked at the turnover of the teachers. I do believe that I am a successful leader as I see our learners leave our school and do especially well in the high schools and the matric results. The teachers who are poached from our school, I consider this to be a positive as it shows the level of our teacher education." This relates closely to servant leadership, demonstrating democratic values and shared decision-making. However, leaders sometimes do need to make decisions at the executive level, which may not always be seen as popular but appropriate for the sake of quality education. Susan (12:23–23) sums it up accordingly: "I do believe that the years of experience and my knowledge of education has assisted me to lead relationally as a principal. I do not believe principals have power, but they have a responsibility to the learners and the teachers to lead with responsibility. Principals have different job descriptions and responsibilities, and their experiences contribute to the way they lead; and the way they care for the human resource at their schools."

Theme 3: The Role of Successful Relations and Care in Bullying and Educational Leadership

If school leaders do not see bullying as a problem and merely part of the cut and thrust of a busy school environment, then the problem will not be tackled appropriately. The empirical data from the selected 12 school principals, however, revealed that all the participants are acutely aware of this issue. The principals are also mindful of the relational nature of bullying, and some were even conscious of the role of ethics in leadership. Empirical data revealed that relational leadership with a strong ethical dimension is required both to see and address the debilitating effects of bullying and to create a school culture free of it.

In this regard Anthony (P6:26–26) suggests: "The only description of an approach to learners is first to have supportive relations with them but strict so that learners see me as working together with them to bring about discipline in our school. We use the assembly to communicate our school values to all learners. Learner leaders are used to talking to me about their needs and the causes of ill-discipline in the school. Also, the school community observes the ethics of leadership and responds accordingly. If leadership shows good ethics, most often the school community will follow suit."

While the ideal would be a school environment free of bullying, the reality of the complexity of this problem is vast, but the intent is clear, school principals wish and strive for a school without bullying. In fact, unethical behaviour, which bullying represents, should have no place in schools. Also, caring relations do not necessarily accomplish everything that must be done in education, but they do provide the foundation for successful pedagogical activities, including listening to learners and gaining their trust. Care relations and trust facilitate cooperative work. Learners' needs and interests can be explored in caring relations, which are essential as a starting point of support (Noddings, 2005:5).

Theo (P8:97–97) explains that as we are human, we must always interpret our ethics accordingly. I do care for my learners and for my teachers, not only when we are at work, but also when we are not at work. I do care about their whole being, their families, and their children. Joseph (P3:116–116) also offers a humbling perspective: "But to a great extent, I am successful not because of myself, I am fortunate of people, the people I am working with and maybe the relationship I foster with them and get along with, things of that nature. This makes me successful, but becoming successful on my own does not happen. I have to work hard, and learners know if they have a problem, they can speak to me." Such cooperative communication is evident in care relations, which rely on collaborate and collective leadership, as Bruce (P4:32–32) points out: "I do not think that successful leadership is attributed to a single aspect, but rather, adapting to the situation. There are times when one is called to step up and lead from the front, there are other times when leadership must be collaborative and participative, and yet other times, when it means allowing others to lead." In each of these circumstances, Bruce ensures that he is present, sincere and deliberate in the task of taking the school forward.

At heart, leadership is about people. Schools are complex organisations. School leaders must always put the children first and build a stable, sincere, and lasting relationship with all stakeholders. The needs of the children and the building of community should be prioritised, and teachers are valuable assets in any school. Relational leaders drive the transformation and development pro-

gramme, facilitate parenting workshops, and interacting with staff at all levels of employment. Social cohesion and social justice are highly valued, and the needs of the students, parents, and staff create opportunities to influence policy and practice. Relational leaders seek consensus and look for collaboration.

Bruce (P4:34–34) fittingly describes his collaboration as follows: "I work hard at getting alongside teachers, being present and leading by example. I do set high standards and communicate these. I find that teachers thrive when leaders pay a genuine interest in what they are doing and being supportive. A large part of my work is mentoring the School Leadership Team. It is all about connecting with them building a sense of common purpose. School principals have role power. However, I work at reducing power hierarchies by building relationships. Being in a position of authority places me in the unique, yet in the highly responsible position, of building relationships that do not exist because of a leader-follow power relationship, but rather because of quality appropriate for inter-personal relationships."

Discussion: Advancing a Relational Framework for Leadership and Bullying for Future Principals

In light of these findings, it is clear that bullying is a serious and real problem in many schools. Mitigating and countering bullying through educational interventions is deemed critical and relational leadership appears to be a responsible choice. It also requires commitment from school leaders to engage in dialogue with learners and teachers, facilitating peaceful and caring processes in mediating between the bully and the bullied (Gellin, 2018:254). Menesini and Salmivalli (2017:240) in this regard claim, "bullying is one of the most common expressions of violence in the peer context." Their research shows that some inquiries on anti-bullying interventions are significant, yet not all interventions lead to positive outcomes. Of significance is that not only does the school programme to combat bullying have to be well developed, but the appropriation of these programmes by leadership also plays a critical role. The disjuncture of a programme as text and a programme implemented in practice remains a reality. To this end, a case is made in this inquiry that school principals who advocate relational leadership and an ethics of care are more likely to not only appropriate intervention programmes, but will also do so with a sense of moral commitment and care. Menesini and Salmivalli (2017:249) in this context illustrate that "the highly effective anti-bullying programme such as the KiVa™ that was developed in Finland, relies on enhancing bystanders' awareness, empathy, and self-efficacy to support victims." This will be done if bullying signals the red flag in schools, and where principals understand the seriousness of this problem.

The moral compass of a school using relational leadership requires the guidance of caring leaders, teachers, and parents. Bullying happens in social relationships, and therefore, it must be dealt with relationally, initiated by the school principal, and adopted by teachers and learners themselves. Social networks and social connections are relationships with constructive and destructive forces, which need to be handled with knowledge, skills, and care (Rodkin, 2011). Some of the principals offer some advice on advancing relational leadership for countering bullying. This process starts with an attitude of reflexivity. John (P5:37–37) says that he should have "started sooner at building a relationship with myself." He suggests, to "make time to be reflexive and for self-reflection. I would have been less harsh on myself, take a few more moments to reflect on the success stories and accept that no person or institution is perfect. My advice to young school principals is to ensure that you understand where you stand philosophically and to allow this belief to drive your decisions and actions and to act with integrity at all times." Tom (P10:72–72) also tells me, "When looking back I realise that I struggled to build the school, most of the things I had to fight for myself as the school principal, there was not enough induction, which I think, if I were to do things differently today, I would introduce an induction programme for school principals. It would be of help to initiate an induction course to assist the new principal with policy matters, issues of finances, and then the issues of curriculum delivery where sometimes there is a bit of confusion; people do not always understand their job description. An induction programme would assist young principals to settle in better, learning what is expected of them." In light of what Tom has said regarding induction programmes for school principals, Uhl-Bien (2006) has a different view, namely that educational leadership programmes as induction programmes are not enough. What is needed instead are programmes that develop leaders with more knowledge about the importance of relationships, and upskilling of the abilities of leaders, recognising "relational sensibilities in everyday life of a leader" (Giles, Bills & Otero, 2015:750).

Correspondingly, Rodkin et al. (2015:316) report in their research that bullying is understood relationally, because bullying is relationally orientted, and therefore it ought to be considered a relational phenomenon, in addition to individual or behavioural characteristics. Also, they write (Rodkin et al., 2015:318) "Bullying is an indicator, the tip of an iceberg, for a larger profile of antisocial problems." They explain that bullying is aggression directed from at least one person to another, where research on bullying might benefit from a more

explicitly relational perspective that includes information about the bully-victim dynamic, bystanders and related social networks. Research would be well served by moving beyond categorical schemes to relational, situational analysis of bullying behaviour. School principals, therefore, need to know "who the bully is and who the victim is, and also who bullies whom?" (Rodkin et al., 2015:319). De Wet (2007) offers some interventions at the level of school, classroom, and the individual and recommends a holistic approach. This inquiry adds to this approach, arguing for an appropriate leadership style and an ethics of care to adopt such interventions, as discussed by De Wet (2007).

Conclusion

Bullying is a social and an educational challenge, a challenge that threatens social justice. In fact, it is a serious and prevalent problem around the world (Orue & Calvete, 2018). This article argues that to counteract and mitigate bullying in schools, a relational leadership approach and an ethics of care ought to be modelled. The reason for this is that modelling care amongst the adults within the school can filter down to learners. Bullying in itself is a destructive act, which operates within relationships of power and abuse, and this has lifelong consequences. School leadership ought to privilege relational aspects of working with bullied victims and the perpetrators and incorporate opinions to encourage a change in this destructive behaviour. School principals can embrace the ideas of others into their decision-making for the good of the school, as opposed to select individuals getting credit. In sum, relational leadership is about facilitating the work of others who share the power and the authority to work collaboratively for substantive change that addresses injustice in schools, including bullying behaviour. Therefore the development of relational sensibilities for school leaders must be foregrounded. Lastly, Noddings (2010) asserts in this context that caring ought to be a principle for making ethical decisions emanating from the point of view that care is fundamental in the lives of human beings. Caring relationships are bound by moral significance. Care theory strives to maintain the ethics of relationships by encouraging the welfare of those giving care and those receiving it. It does this by networking social relations, which is a requisite aspect in alleviating bullying.

Notes

i. Pseudonyms are used throughout:
P12 refers to the 12th participant
12–12 refers to the paragraph line numbers from ATLAS.ti.

ii.

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