GIRL BULLYING: AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR OF SECONDARY SCHOOL GIRLS

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ABSTRACT

Most schools have some kind of problem with bullying. Bullying means to repeatedly harm a person psychologically, physically and/or emotionally. Power and aggression play an important role in bullying – bullies feel they can use power aggressively in different forms to gain something from the peer group or from the victim. Both girls and boys engage in bullying behaviour, but with some evident differences. Boys often use more direct physical assaults and threats, whereas girls often use more indirect methods such as exclusion from a group or the spreading of rumours about another person. The aim of social aggression in girls is often to gain status, social position or to negotiate power. But how does a girl develop into a bully? Bullying behaviour cannot be ignored by parents and teachers, because the victims of bullying often report physical and mental health problems. They may for instance develop self-esteem problems and in some cases may even contemplate suicide. The future of the bully is also at stake, because such a person could turn out to be an abuser in his/her adult years. This article focuses on the trends and challenges associated with aggressive behaviour among girls in secondary schools. The specific aims of the study are to study the profile of the female bully, evaluate the possible causes of aggressive behaviour among girls in secondary schools and to make recommendations as to the handling and prevention of such behaviour. The researchers studied the problem from the Family Systems and Attachment approaches. The context of the bully often determines certain aggressive behaviour and the way in which the victim responds is also dependent on her context. The parents, school and society all play a role in destructive behaviour and the prevention thereof. Data for this study were collected by means of document analysis and questionnaires. Respondents answered open-ended questions indicating their experiences in schools regarding aggressive behaviour.

Keywords: aggressive behaviour, bullying, contextual influences, family systems, attachment theory

INTRODUCTION

A BBC News (2008) online article, "Attack Schoolgirl Wants to Return," reports that a 12-year old girl's face was slashed by another girl and 30 stitches were required to

close the wounds. While this was not the girl's first encounter with her assailant, this particular attack was believed to be motivated by the victim's intervention in a bullying situation the previous day (Harlin, 2008:336).

Today's children are exposed to a lot of violence through the media, at home, and in school. "Some children live in countries at war, while others survive in neighbourhoods where street gangs prevail" (Harlin, 2008:336). Not even schools are safe havens anymore.

Young people are exposed to violence on a daily basis. "Song lyrics and music videos give covert messages about the acceptability of aggression… while newspapers [television and radio] regularly carry stories of overt crimes" (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003:16).

In this article the authors will give an overview of aggressive behaviour, especially amongst girls, but with the emphasis of bullying behaviour as part of aggressive behaviour.

Dan Olweus was one of the first researchers to do extensive work on bullying in the 1970s. Since then an extensive amount of research has been done, most probably because bullying has become increasingly problematic, especially in schools (Rigby, 2008:2). Rigby (2008:2–3), is of the contention that the main reason for the attention bullying is getting, is the emphasis in most parts of the world on basic human rights and the stance against discrimination and marginalisation.

"Bullying has caught the attention ... because a number of school shooters had a history of being bullied. Although it is true that some victims of bullying turn aggressors, others become withdrawn, truant, and eventually drop out of school" (Sciarra, 2004:352).

According to Olweus, Limber and Mihalic (Sciarra, 2004), there are different kinds of bullying. Bullying behaviour could be physical (hitting, kicking, pushing, choking) or verbal (name-calling, teasing, threatening, spreading of rumours, etcetera). Both are direct forms of bullying. Indirect forms of bullying could be obscene gestures, making faces or isolating an individual from a group, which often happens between girls.

It is not easy to define bullying, seeing that there are various forms of bullying. Lee (2004:13) mentions certain features that would summarise the various definitions that exist:
- Intent (deliberate, wilful, conscious, premeditated, predetermined)
- Hurt (pain, stress, fright, upset, loneliness)
- Repetition (more than once, again and again, persistent)
- Duration (over a period of time, longstanding)
- Power (pressure, strength)
- Provocation (called for, invited)

Sharp and Sharp (1994 in Suckling & Temple, 2002) define bullying in the vein of the above as a form of aggressive behaviour that is both hurtful and deliberate. It can be persistent and could continue for extended periods of time. It is difficult for those

being bullied to defend themselves. Underlying most bullying behaviour is the abuse of power and the need to intimidate and dominate.

This article focuses on the trends and challenges associated with aggressive behaviour among girls in secondary schools. The Systems and Attachment Theories were used in this investigation. The specific aims are to describe the profile of the female bully, evaluate the possible causes of aggressive behaviour among girls in secondary schools and to make recommendations as to the handling and prevention of such behaviour. An extensive literature study has been done. A pilot study was also done as part of the study. Data were collected by means of document analysis, interviews and questionnaires. Respondents answered closed and open-ended questions indicating the extent of their experience regarding aggressive behaviour and bullying of secondary school girls.

AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR IN GIRLS

According to reports in Europe, Canada, the USA and South Africa (Bredenkamp, 2007), adolescent violence is becoming the greatest challenge for police, law-courts and politicians. Violent activities such as beating of classmates, mobbing, robbery and stealing in schools, blackmail, vandalism, violence in families, street gangs and killings on school grounds are a growing problem for educationists. In the past these violent activities were mainly associated with boys, but today teachers, youth workers and learners report regular instances of bullying behaviour among girls (Leach & Mitchell, 2006).

The terms *violence, aggression* and *bullying* are often used interchangeably in literature. However, there are differences between these concepts. Violence usually indicates the use of force or power against oneself, somebody else, a group or the community and it usually results in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation. "The concept aggression does not preclude physical acts of hostility, but it generally refers to less extreme intentional behaviours that may cause psychological or physical harm to others ... Hitting, pushing, isolating a peer on purpose, and name-calling all constitute examples of aggressive behaviours. Bullying may be considered a subset of aggression" (Orpinas & Horne, 2006:13–4).

Aggressive and violent behaviour in secondary school girls can be observed in their acting out behaviour in their environment, in interactions in school, as well as in relationships these girls have with peers, family members and with themselves. According to research in the United States of America more than 80% of learners either observed or experienced some type of bullying in their schools (Isernhagen and Harris, 2003). Olweus (1999 in Lee, 2004) views bullying and violence as subcategories of aggressive behaviour. Certain forms of bullying can be violent, while other forms cause emotional and psychological damage.

CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR IN GIRLS

THE FAMILY

Families are considered systems because they are made up of interrelated elements or individuals (family members), they exhibit coherent behaviours, they have regular interactions, and they are interdependent on one another. All these qualities create a specific structure that functions as a system in a specific ecology or environment (Morgaine, 2001).

Family systems use messages and rules to shape members. Messages and rules are relationship agreements that prescribe and limit a family member's behaviour over time. These messages and rules are rarely, if ever, explicit or written down. They give power; they induce guilt; they control or limit behaviours; and they perpetuate themselves and reproduce. Most messages and rules can be stated in one or a few words, for example, *More is good*, *Be responsible*, and *Be Perfect* (Morgaine, 2001). Every family system contains a number of small groups usually made up of 2–3 people such as the father/mother relationship, mother/infant relationship, father/daughter relationship or sibling relations. Relationships between these people are known as subsystems, coalitions or alliances. Each subsystem has its own rules, boundaries and unique characteristics (Nieto, 2004).

Systems theory explains the complex interactions of members of a family, describing the family as a whole and in terms of the subsystems. Conflict in one subsystem of the family affects all the other subsystems and thus the entire family. When a learner shows aggressive behaviour in school, psychologists and counsellors see this as a symptom of a dysfunctional relationship within the family unit.

Orpinas and Horne (2006; Sciarra, 2004) discuss the following risk factors in families which could influence aggressive behaviour:
i) Common parental practices – Parents with good parental skills will try to show love, talk to their children, discuss values with them, have fun with their children, meet their friends, show an interest in school work, etcetera. Some parents, however, are ill-prepared for the job of parenting. They have not been raised in favourable conditions themselves and may possess limited social skills. Economic problems may hamper the parent from making time to build a good relationship with his/her child. "When parents develop a poor relationship with their children, do not communicate well with them, and do not set limits or supervise whom they spend time with and where they are, children are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors" (p44). Aggressive behaviour increases as relationships with parents decline. Parents of bullies often have a problem showing warmth and care. They often use an authoritarian parenting style and are not supportive of their children. Lack of supervision, a permissive parenting style and unmonitored exposure to peer groups might also lead to high-risk behaviour.

ii) Prevalence of violence within the family – Parental or child abuse, partner violence, corporal punishment or abusive discipline are all risk factors for children's levels of aggression. "Children who observe violence between their

parents or between their parents and other children learn how to be aggressive, and they learn that violence is the best – or at least their family's way to manage conflict" (p45). Violence destroys trust between children and their parents and because of the weak bond between them, these children might develop anti-social behaviour.

iii) Neglect – The less nurturing and caring parents are, the less likely that children will identify with them. These children are often very aggressive.

A child learns from her/his first attachment with caregivers and parents how it feels to be in a secure or insecure relationship and environment. Attachment is the deep and long lasting emotional connection established between a child and caregiver in the first few years of life. According to Levy (2000), attachment has an influence on every component of the human condition – mind, body, emotions, relationships and values. Levy says it is not something parents do to their children, but it is much rather created in an ongoing relationship between the two parties. According to Levy (p9–10), poor attachment can derive from the following:

- parent/caregiver behaviour such as abuse, neglect, depression or other psychological disorders;
- child behaviour such as a difficult temperament, pre-maturity, foetal alcohol syndrome; or
- environmental contributions such as poverty, violent home/community environment.

Several researchers (Bowlby, 1989; Ainsworth, 1973; Levy, 2000) state that secure attachment provides for the establishment of a moral framework that involves empathy, compassion and conscience. According to them, if there is a secure relationship with caregivers it forms a primary protective basis against later violent and antisocial patterns in cognition, behaviour and interaction.

An infant of less than six months can already discriminate between facial expressions such as happiness, anger or sadness of the caregiver. Although infants only show primary emotions during the first year, their experiences and emotional capabilities are very important for social development (Shaffer, 2005).

Home climate is about the emotional and physical environments in which a child grows up (Nieto, 2004). Emotional quality is related to trust and security of family members. To understand the emotional quality of a family is to understand the climate in the family. Knowledge about the individual family member will include background and environment, thus the whole system that the individual comes from.

SOCIETY

Our society tolerates increasing levels of violence, whether public or domestic. Violence and aggression have become part of everyday life for most people, whether they experience it first hand at home, in their communities or in the media. "Many families are exposed to crime, domestic violence and media overload and often feel unsupported as they witness the deterioration of social systems (neighbourhoods,

extended families, communities and religious practices), which once supported them …" (Suckling & Temple, 2002:8). Values can be influenced by such social changes. Exposure to constant violence result in children becoming desensitised to violence and aggression. It becomes the norm. Bullying is regarded as violence. It is part of aggressive behaviour, whether physical, verbal, blatant or subtle (Suckling & Temple, 2002).

"Living in an unsafe community with high levels of aggression provides opportunities for learning new aggressive behaviors, reinforcing existing negative behaviors, and joining delinquent groups" (Orpinas & Horne, 2006:51). The presence of crime, gangs and poverty might increase aggressive behaviour. The availability of drugs and fire arms might also be a factor in violent behaviour and discrimination of all kinds might increase aggressive behaviour (Sciarra, 2006).

The media can also have an important influence on negative behaviour. Violence is prevalent in movies, magazines, on television and in song lyrics. Children search the internet and are exposed to violence. Psychologists are of the contention that repeated exposure to violence may change individuals' attitudes and normal emotional response towards violence and might even teach aggressive behaviours, because it seems the only solution in many situations (Orpinas & Horne, 2006).

Bullying often occurs as a result of the social environment and not necessarily because of individual psychological make-up. Bullying is often found in group settings and, as such, requires collective responsibility (Suckling & Temple, 2002). Interventions for dysfunctional families and societal problems are usually beyond the services schools provide for, but the teacher in the classroom can do much to support learners and encourage parents to become involved in school activities and their child's academic development.

SCHOOL

Schools are pressured into providing stable structures with community values such as co-operation and responsibility, because parents do not want to get involved. Bullying is not something created by schools – at best schools import it from their own communities and at worst they allow it to flourish by not giving it the attention it deserves (Suckling & Temple, 2002).

In most schools there are groups of children who show anti-social behaviour. Collectively these children enjoy dominating others. They are disliked by some children and admired by others. These bullies often develop an in-group mentality that leads them to feel superior to others. They often ridicule out-groups and show intolerance with children who are different from them whether because of ethnicity, gender, social class, disability, sexual orientation or religious affiliation. They like to exercise power (Rigby, 2008).

Unfortunately schools often provide an environment conducive to bullying, because of inadequate supervision, especially during break times and after formal school hours (Sciarra, 2004). Problems often occur in hallways, bathrooms and on playgrounds (Orpinas & Horne, 2006).

"Risk factors that are unique to the school environment include teachers' lack of classroom management skills, poor teaching abilities, low expectations of student success, and an inefficient discipline system" (Orpinas & Horne, 2006:47).

Teachers' attitudes towards learners also have an influence on their behaviour. Aggressive and bullying behaviour by adults towards learners could create a negative school environment and teachers become role models of the behaviour they try to prevent (Orpinas & Horne, 2006). When teachers show little interest in learners, poorer academic achievement often is the result, there is a low bonding with the school, truancy is prevalent and learners drop out of school easily. There is often an increase in school vandalism and aggression (Orpinas & Horne, 2006; Sciarra, 2004). When asked why some girls are never involved with relational aggression (girl bullying), one middle school girl commented, "'Because they know they are fine the way they are …'. If girls can find healthy ways to explore and become comfortable with who they are they will be free to have positive, supportive relationships with one another" (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003).

FRIENDS/PEERS

There are differences in relationship building between boys and girls. The same-sex friendships of boys/men are less intimate and supportive than those of girls/women. "Among children and younger adolescents, friendships are almost exclusively same-sex, whereas in adolescence, girls generally become involved in cross-sex relationships at an earlier age than boys ..." (Young & Sweeting, 2004:528). According to Vail (2002), the covert acts of aggression seen by girls, such as gossiping, name-calling and excluding, affect school climate and school culture, as well as the academic performance and sense of self-worth.

Girls are engaged in the developmental process of identity formation at an earlier stage than boys. They often reject their families in favour of friends. The desire for peer approval and acceptance can motivate young women to act in healthy or hurtful ways, either as individuals or in groups. Harmful behaviour can be a consequence of "... low self-esteem, jockeying for position on the social ladder, lack of understanding, or pursuit of drama and excitement" (Dellasega, 2005:33).

During early adolescence (11–14 years) parents become less important in a girl's life and friends take their place. Acceptance from the peer group becomes increasingly important. Girls are concerned with "acceptance from same-sex peers and will conform to group norms for dress, music, and hobbies …" (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003:16).

Middle adolescence (15–17 years) is marked by even stronger ties to a peer group, because of the need for independence and identity formation. They start thinking about academic, social and vocational goals and see themselves as part of a community (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003).

By late adolescence (17–19 years) girls are independent and show greater self-reliance and more concern for others. Peers are seen more as a resource where opinions can be sought (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003).

Adolescents have to increasingly solve problems of ego identity and independence versus dependence. They pull away from parents and family emotionally and communicatively. Their peer relations intensify. Peers are seen as allies. It is vital for social and psychological development, as well as adjustment. Self-exploration, integration of logic and emotions and intimate self-disclosure are important at this stage of development (Canary, Cupach & Messman, 1995).

The group/s that adolescents belong to, influence/s the way they react towards peers and others in their life world. Peers provide the norms. Peer groups are normally friendship groups, because of shared interests. Sometimes associations are loose and casual, but other times it could become intense, especially with girl groups. Sometimes the tight unit formed is called a clique or if intentions seem more sinister, they are called a gang (Rigby, 2008).

Although peer pressure to conform is stronger during the adolescent years, the school is composed of several subgroups or cliques and children can choose where they want to belong and with whom they identify. Children are more likely to choose a group on the basis of personal disposition that are strongly influenced by parents and upbringing. Warm, caring parents will mostly have children who will establish positive close relationships with peers (Orpinas & Horne, 2006).

During adolescence, girls learn whom they can trust. They learn the basics of intimate relationships. If a girl learns to manipulate and hurt others in same-sex friendships, she will most likely use the same behaviour with her boyfriends. The girl who is victimised might accept victimisation as the norm and might stay in unhealthy, abusive relationships (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Vail, 2002).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to get an in-depth understanding of the profile of the female bully, a qualitative research approach was used in the pilot study. Further research should still be conducted to come to more reliable findings.

SAMPLE

Students in their final year of Honours B Ed (Inclusive Education) were requested to give questionnaires with open- and closed-ended questions about different aspects of girl bullying to girls in Grades 6-12. Students – most of them practising as teachers – were asked to identify and approach a girl or girls who showed behaviour as described in the questionnaire. The respondents could be either a bully or a victim or an observer of bullying behaviour. Completion of the questionnaire was voluntary. Respondents were ensured of confidentiality of their answers.

Interviews were also conducted with an educational psychologist (Interviewee 1) and a Life Orientation teacher and social worker (Interviewee 2). The interviews conducted were semi-structured interviews to gain more knowledge about an adult perspective on the problem of bullying.

This was a preliminary project to detect the limitations of the questionnaire and improve on a final questionnaire regarding the problem of girl bullying.

MEASURING INSTRUMENT AND ANALYSIS

Data were obtained through questionnaires and personal interviews by using 13 semi-structured and open-ended questions. Selection of rural and urban schools as teaching sites ensured rich and poor resources in the sample. This indicates that the sampling of participants and school sites gave maximum variation. The interviewees were directly involved with girls in Grade 6-12.

A questionnaire was developed which provided mostly qualitative data. The quantitative data were more biographical in nature. Each questionnaire/interview began with a promise of confidentiality. The participants were asked about their position in the family and number of children in the family. They were asked if they have ever been bullied by other girls(s). The feelings experienced as a bully, a victim or an observer were also indicated as well as reasons why one girl would bully another. Their ideas about the increase in the occurrence of girl bullying and possible support structures were asked.

Tape recorders were used to capture data during the interviews. Data were transcribed and analysed. Broad themes were extracted in line with the questionnaires.

The interviews and questionnaires with the literature study were used for triangulation in order to ensure the study's trustworthiness. This study is, however, an ongoing process, because it is only preliminary in nature.

The ethical measures to which the researchers adhered included informed consent from school principals, teachers and participants at the relevant schools. Trustworthiness was established by using different tactics as ways to guard against biases in findings. The researchers were disciplined in their subjectivity as they refrained from being biased through continuous self-monitoring throughout all phases of the research process. This determined that the results were a function solely of the participants' data and not a reflection of the biases and motivations of the researchers. The research project involved three researchers.

This research project is still in the first phase, and the researchers expect to receive more completed questionnaires.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Our findings reflect on the society, peers, school and family. They are all interdependent role players in the life of the girl bully. Each role player impacts on the

other. Keeping the formal statement of the problem in mind, the first questions that had to be answered were the effects and seriousness of girl bullying.

FAMILY

The way children are brought up and their domestic circumstances play a major role in how they handle conflict and bullying at school. When parents are not involved with what their children do, it might lead to either becoming bullies or victims (Orpinas & Horne, 2006) (for example - *"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 (Interviewee 1).*

Sometimes parents are over-involved and would actually encourage their children to fight back, even physically if needs be for example *"She has parents that want her to take control"*.

SOCIETY

As stated previously in the literature study, the context from which the girl comes might influence her in becoming a bully or victim (Sciarra, 2006). Girls from disadvantaged backgrounds might be more incline to bullying as seen in the following quotation from a girl in an urban school: *"Social problems that challenge her, e.g. from poor background"*. Some girls might feel more superior and would expect other girls to obey their ruling*: "Some girls feel that they are more equal"*.

SCHOOL

If supervision at schools is inadequate and no rules exist to combat bullying behaviour, it will happen in all kinds of ways (Sciarra, 2004). According to Interviewee 2, *"girls bully mostly verbally and via SMS. They swear, they will gossip about hair, teeth, figures and sex"*.

The ways schools deal with the problem are reflected in the answers of some of the respondents:
  – *Report to principal (7 respondents))*
  – *They (the teachers) will talk to the bully (7 respondents)*
  – *Call parents of the bully*

PEERS

The peer group has an important influence on bullying behaviour, because of the need to fit into a group in adolescence (Dellasega, 2005). Characteristics that adolescents themselves contribute to bullies would be:
  – *Her friends see this as being strong*

- *Attractive, to laugh and fight others*
- *Popular with age group (8 respondents)*
- *Heavy built, normal built*
- *To apply force to others*
- *Bossy person*
- *Not intelligent, unhappy (3 respondents)*
- *Intelligent (1 respondent) – she thinks she can do anything to anybody, because she is intelligent*

Interviewee 2 makes the following remarks:
"The physical appearance of girls became very important, they want to be perfect; they change their figures on facebook to be perfect and are in competition to see how many so-called friends they can add on their facebook list".

According to Interviewee 1 *"girls will spread rumours that are not true to give somebody a bad name, they are very subtle. It is sometimes top achievers who are bullies and it is difficult to identify them. It is also sometimes girls with "issues" who want to hurt others to make their own pain better".*

THE GIRL BULLY

The way the girl bully is described in literature, is reiterated in the answers from respondents.

The ways that bullying happens when girls bully each other is described as follows by adolescents who completed the questionnaires:
- *Physical: kicking someone*
- *Unwanted sexual touching*
- *Somebody older than you intimidates you*
- *Teasing you*
- *Two persons are fighting for money*
- *Arguing for stationery*
- *See herself better*
- *Spreading rumours (7 respondents)*
- *Name calling (6 respondents)*
- *Taking belongings/money/games from others*
- *Beating others*
- *Treating others badly*
- *Being laughed at (6 respondents)*
- *Humiliation by nasty sms*
- *Cell phone (mixit) (4 respondents)*

According to both interviewees, girls bully mostly verbally, via SMS and mixit. They swear, they will gossip about hair, teeth, figures and sex.

Reasons for children to become bullies according to literature might include the following (Lee, 2004:38-39):
1. *a desire for power, dominance over others and control*

2   *a desire for social prestige that results from bullying, including seeking compensation for their own inadequacies as they crave social influence ...*
3   *their home environment and upbringing which may include parent(s) permitting aggressive behaviour of the child towards peers and siblings, a lack of warmth and emotional attachment to parents (especially mother), unclear boundaries about behaviour or the use of aggressive behaviour by the parents*
4   *a mixture of the above*

Bullying might also occur because of the following reasons (Suckling & Temple, 2002; Rigby, 2008):

- bullied by others
- need for money, possessions or favours
– inability to distinguish between aggressive and assertive behaviour
- need for love and attention
- loneliness or lack of confidence
– boredom
- revenge
- fun
- a disruptive family life
- limited social and interpersonal skills
- school does not take bullying seriously
- closeness to a specific group

Sex differences in bullying are greater in respect to "... *form* rather than *amount* of bullying: boys engage in physical, and girls engage in verbal and 'indirect' or 'relational' ... aggression ..." (Young & Sweeting, 2004:527). "Boys generally act out their aggression physically – typically by hitting, shoving, or kicking. Girls tend to utilize subtler expressions ... – gossiping, group exclusion and rumor spreading" (Fanger, 2007:45).

Female bullying is often called relational aggression. Girls use relationships rather than fists to hurt other girls. Rumours, name calling, cliques, shunning, etcetera are weapons used by girls against each other in everyday life (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Fanger, 2007).

Bullying, harassment, victimisation, meanness and relational aggression are all expressions used to describe negative behaviour of girls towards each other. The term relational aggression was coined by Nicki Crick to describe the use of relationships to harm others. This behaviour could be subtle or could escalate to extreme proportions. It exists on a continuum of mild to extreme (Dellasega & Nixon, 2007).

Girls form identities through relationships with others. Relational aggression mostly happens, because of some underlying fear and insecurity. The aggressor wants to stay on 'top' without revealing her weaknesses and the victim lacks confidence to stand up for herself and may accept the harassment, because she thinks she deserves it (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003).

"Adolescent and preadolescent girls wield enormous power over their peers. Their weapons – gossiping, name-calling, excluding – may not give other girls black eyes or bloody lips, but they can be as harmful as physical intimidation, violence, and racial slurs. These frequently covert acts of aggression also affect school climate and culture, as well as the girls' grades and sense of self-worth" (Vail, 2002:8). Girl bullies do not show outward aggression, but use other people as vehicles for their anger and aggression. Overt aggression is not considered feminine. Girls are socialised to be sweet and kind and nurturing, therefore aggression is being expressed in devious, backhanded ways. They would try to hurt another person by setting up a situation where they cannot be discovered or blamed; where they need not take the responsibility. "Being taught that you can't compete openly, to smile when you're mad, causes anger to fester and become toxic" (Vail, 2002:11-12).

The girls on the 'top' of the ladder are often ruthless in their rules. They tell the others whom they can befriend, what they can wear and how they should act (Vail, 2002).

Relational bullying that mostly happens between girls seems to be the most traumatic kind of bullying to most people. However, this kind of bullying is often ignored by adults, because of the covert nature thereof (Rigby, 2008).

The feelings that girls experience when being bullied are described in the following words:
- *Humiliated (8 respondents)*
- *Sad (4 respondents)*
- *Cross (5 respondents)*
- *Annoyed (3 respondents)*

A few recommendations will now be discussed that will enable teachers, parents and peers to support victims of bullying. In this way the researchers want to open up the problem, focus attention of adults on the problem and prepare learners (girl bullies) to handle conflict better and other learners (victims) to become more empowered.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the respondents indicated that they observed bullying (14 out of 15). The majority of the respondents indicated that girl bullying was becoming more frequent (12 out of 15), and that the importance of cell phones to spread rumours was significant.

A whole-school approach is necessary to combat bullying – all partners and stakeholders should contribute to possible solutions to the problem (Lee, 2004). Parents, teachers and learners need to participate in finding solutions to the problem.

SCHOOL

The school should provide opportunities for parent involvement in the child's school activities. Parents can discuss their beliefs about their children, what they want for their children, and how they support their children's development with the school.

Once a positive parent/teacher relationship has been established, the teacher can facilitate events such as group discussions. These discussions will help teachers learn how they can best support the individual learner and facilitate families to support their children. An additional benefit is that families often value personal discussions more than passive listening to a lecture on good parenting or letters from the teacher.

Teachers should endeavour to create a classroom climate of safety, positive feedback and guidelines for a healthy school environment. Even if home environments do not offer safety and security, learners need to feel that school is a safe place to be.

"Tackling bullying through the curriculum provides students [learners] with a systematic approach. When teachers deal with the issue using a variety of teaching/learning styles, students [learners] can begin to examine, investigate and understand their own attitude and behaviour towards bullying. The process invites students to develop, practise and implement their own solutions to the problem and take responsibility for those" (Suckling & Temple, 2002:15; Lee, 2004). The teacher could use content, as well as extra-curricular programmes to develop life skills such as tolerance, responsibility and acceptable behaviour. The hidden curriculum also plays a major role. Teachers' attitudes, values, beliefs and handling of relationships with learners, parents and colleagues, influence learners in their classrooms (Suckling & Temple, 2002). It is very important that a timetable exists for playground supervision, because bullying often happens where adult supervision is inadequate.

LEARNERS

Learners can also contribute to solutions to bullying. Debates in the classroom are important. A buddy system where students [learners] support and look out for each other could be introduced. A welcoming committee for new students could assist new learners with problems adapting to their new environment. Peer mediation could be very successful, because adolescents often feel more comfortable talking about problems with their peers (Suckling & Temple, 2002).

PARENTS

Parents have a big responsibility with regard to bullying. The parent of the bully could help his/her child as follows (Suckling & Temple, 2002):
- Listen carefully to the child.
- If anger is the cause of it all, teach other ways of handling anger – time out; counting till ten; bouncing a ball; hitting a pillow; going for a run.
- Teach the child that she must be able to accept 'no' at times.
- Teach the child that there is a difference between assertive and aggressive behaviour.
- Teach the child that there always are consequences to behaviour.
- Work in partnership with the school.
- Let the child know that her behaviour is unacceptable, but he/she as a person is still cared for.
- Get professional help

The parent of the victim could help in the following ways (Suckling & Temple, 2002):

- Listen to the child.
- Share with the child that nobody deserves to be bullied.
- With the permission of the child you can speak to the teacher/principal
- Advise the child to leave expensive items at home.
- Role-model and coach the child in developing confident body language.
- Teach the child assertive behaviour.
- Positive self-talk and visualisation could be of help.
- The use of 'I' messages are very important for assertiveness.
- Find new activities outside the school system for your child if your child is a victim of bullying. Find a new social environment (Mulder, 2009).
- Get professional help

CONCLUSION

We focused on the trends and challenges associated with aggressive behaviour among girls in secondary schools. The specific aims of the study were to study the profile of the female bully, evaluate the possible causes of aggressive behaviour among girls in secondary schools and to make recommendations as to the handling and prevention of such behaviour.

While the context in which the bully operates often determines certain aggressive behaviour, the way the victim responds is also dependent on her context.

The question was asked as to how a girl develops into a bully. The parents, school and society all play a role in destructive behaviour and should all play a role in the prevention thereof.

Communities should be alert towards the prevalence of violence in society as observing violence contributes to more violent behaviour. A whole-school approach is necessary to combat bullying and contribute to possible solutions to the problem.

Opportunities for parent involvement in the child's school activities are essential. Parents can discuss their beliefs about their children, what they want for their children, and how they support their children's development. The parents' role should never be underestimated and they can become partners by empowering themselves with knowledge.

Learners can also contribute to the solution of bullying: Debates in the classroom are important. A buddy system, where students support and look out for each other could be introduced.

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