EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF PEER GROUPS IN THE UNFOLDING OF BULLYING IN A PRIVATE BOARDING SCHOOL IN BOTSWANA.

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Abstract

This study investigated and discussed findings of a qualitative study of students, aged between 15 and 17. These research participants were randomly selected. The study mainly focused on factors that fuelled a bully to persistently carryout the activity. The Theoretical perspectives used to guide this study was the Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977) which stated that aggression and violence are learned responses, and the perpetrators of aggression and violence in bullying have learnt from witnessing it in school. Questionnaires were used as research instrument for this particular study. The study found out that the pressure to conform to their peer groups coerced them to do anything to pass the loyalty test. This perceived pressure influenced many students to persistently bully, even to the extent of initiating others to bully. The study recommended that schools should intensify school-based bullying prevention and intervention programs and equip teachers with effective intervention ways.

1. Introduction

It is a common belief that children will thrive if educated amongst better schoolmates, and this belief guides many parents in their choice of school (Mapesa, 2013). Schools are viewed as a dynamic human system dedicated to the nurturing of mutual growth and understanding between peers (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2007). Furthermore, schools have always been recognized as institutions for transmission of skills, attitudes, values and knowledge to the students. Schools play a significant role in developing students to learn how to relate with fellow students, and live harmoniously with others (Seeley, Tombari, Bernnett, & Dunkle, 2009).

Parents send their children to boarding schools with the belief that it is a place where their children would be safe and secure as well as being treated with respect (Papworth, 2014). However, the reality seems to be that only a few students harmoniously live with their colleagues without being bullied in the school (Hutchinson, 2012). Studies noted that interpersonal relationships among boarders is gradually being threatened by bullying (Besag, 2006) as boarders engage in overt and physical aggression that leads to self-assertion (Monyamane & Keletsositse, 2021). Bullying in schools has become common and it has become a major cause for concern because of its adverse effects on victims (Craig & Pepler, 1999).

1.1.1   Understanding Peer Group

A peer group consists of individuals within ages that are close and the school serves as a primary setting for the membership of peer groups (Olalekan, 2016). On one hand, Bernard (2008) described a peer group as having members or individuals bound together by common purpose, goals, interests and motivations. Peer groups provide a sense of security and they help adolescents to build a sense of identity by not allowing teenagers to be themselves (Monyamane & Keletsositse, 2021).

One important driver of bullying relates to peer influence, that is, the tendency of adolescents to adjust their attitudes and behaviour to those of their close friends and peers (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010). Rubin, Bukowski and Parker (2007) posited that peer groups persuade individual members to adopt group values, beliefs, goals and to participate in the same activities. Salmivalli (2010) asserted that peer groups directly challenge individual members to comply with existing norms. Hence, members are inclined to take risks. Peer group members believed that risky behaviour increase their standing in the eyes of their peers and assured their acceptance in the group (Monyamane & Keletsositse, 2021). Furthermore, peer groups are among the most influential social structures affecting adolescent behaviour. Research has shown that peer-influenced decisions have long-lasting consequences.

1.1.2.   What is Bullying?

Bullying is a subtype of aggressive behaviour, in which an individual or a group of individuals repeatedly attacks, humiliates, and/or excludes a relatively powerless person (Salmivalli, 2010). Bullying is recognized as a group phenomenon, occurring in a social context in which various factors serve to promote, maintain, or suppress such behaviour (Olweus, 2001). It is also systematic in that it unfolds in a set of social contexts like the dyad, the peer group and the school environment (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010). Bullying is characterized by repeated acts of aggression that are perpetrated by one or more individuals against a victim who has difficulties or is unable to defend him- or herself (Doehne, Grudherr, & Schafer, 2017). It comprises of verbal attacks (e.g. name calling, threats), physical behaviours (e.g. hitting, kicking, damaging victim's property), and relational/social aggression (e.g. social exclusion, rumour spreading) up to the most recent forms of attacks through Internet and new technologies (also referred to as cyberbullying) (Olweus, 2001).

1.2.   Background to the study

There are invariably few studies carried to investigate the influence of peer groups in bullying especially in the boarding schools in Botswana. Some researchers seem to agree that for most adolescent behaviours some degree of peer influence exists (Christakis & Fowler, 2007). Some researchers focused on psychological problems and consequences of bullying and used various methods to establish the role of peer group influence (Faris & Ennett, 2012). Contrary, other researchers reinforced the role of peers in a very direct sense, finding that multiple adolescents often perpetrated bullying and other related forms of aggression simultaneously (Salmivalli, 2010). Some researchers suggested that aggression is a strategic, purposeful behavior employed by "normal" adolescents to gain status (Pelligrini and Long, 2002).

Certain types of bullying occur more frequently than others. Making fun of other students is usually the most common form of bullying (Wang, Iannotti and Nansel, 2009), while the incidents of physical bullying and cyberbullying are at peak among middle-school students but declines with students age. Whereas, verbal and relational bullying remain frequent among upper secondary students (Williams and Guerra, 2007). In many schools, verbal and psychological bullying occur frequently. On average across secondary schools, students are frequently made fun of, are

oftentimes the object of nasty rumours in school, and in most cases are deliberately left out of things (Williams & Guerra, 2007). Physical bullying is probably the most obvious kind of violence in schools, and educators tend to perceive physical bullying as more serious than verbal and relational bullying (Rivara and Le Menestrel, 2016). Across secondary schools, students hit or push each other while others have their belongings destroyed or taken away by their peers (Rivara & Le Menestrel, 2016).

1.3. Statement of the problem

In the recent years, the prevalence of bullying behaviour among adolescents in secondary schools has skyrocketed at an alarming rate, hence has reached unprecedented levels. The school Administrations are overwhelmed with bullying cases, more especially because it is the less strong students who fall victims. The scanty research in the area of peer group pressure and bullying behaviour suggested that bullying is highly influenced by peer group pressure. Despite the fact that secondary boarding schools exercise control over who reside in school and there are specific rules and regulations that govern activities as well as leisure time, bullying still occurs at an alarming rate in these schools. Therefore, it appears that these rules and regulations fail to curb bullying behaviour hence rendering them ineffective and inefficient.

Therefore, there is need to look into the magnitude of peer group influence, especially the group norms that bind members to conform to no matter what. Studies have highlighted that the need to be recognised by peers and to be part of a peer group is very significant to adolescents is reason enough to be a bully (Gini, 2006). Furthermore, some students approve of bullying behaviour to enhance their status with peers and to demonstrate their social position (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). Thus, bullying to an adolescent means achieving dominance, enhanced social status and power (Gini, 2006).

It is towards this view that this study intends to ascertain the correlation between peer group and bullying in a private boarding secondary school in Botswana.

1.4. Research questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:
- How does bullying unfold in a peer group?
- What role do the bystanders play in a bullying episode?

1.5. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to examine how bullying unfolds in peer groups in private boarding secondary schools.

1.6. Significance of the study

This study would immensely benefit the student community, as it would provide them with more information that would assist them to desist from wrong company. This study would teach them to be selective when choosing friends. Further, findings would enlighten teachers with ideas on how peer group and bullying behaviour relate and aid them with dynamics that would encourage students to lean towards good behaviour. The Ministry of Basic Education would gain more indices that would modify education policies to bring about positive change in adaptive behaviour.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977). The theory stated that behavior is determined by the persons thought processes, the environment and the behavior itself. According to Bandura (2006), role models do not only affect behaviours but also led to the development of thoughts and emotions that shape behaviour. Others learnt the violent attitudes and behavior of ringleaders in a peer group through imitation (Pelligrini and Long, 2002). Furthermore, this theory revealed that aggression and violence are learned responses (Bandura, 2006). That is the reason perpetrators of aggression and violence in bullying have learnt from witnessing it in school (Salmivalli, 2010). Hence, in a secondary school setting, students' model observed behaviour, which they have acquired over time with their interactions within peer groups (Salmivalli, 2010), have a far reaching effect in the future.

Bandura (1977) identified three conditions that influence the likelihood of modelling. Firstly, students are more likely to imitate a model when the model is a powerful figure or the model is rewarded rather than punished for the behaviour, and the model shares similar characteristics with them. Secondly, peers who are present during a bullying episode have the opportunity to observe a powerful figure, in this case, is the bully. Thirdly, bullies are seldom punished for their aggressive behaviour. Given these conditions, bullies influence peers to become involved in bullying as active participants.

During the bullying episode, peers actively and passively reinforce the aggressive behaviours of bullies through their attention and engagement (Salmivalli, 2010). Studies revealed that when bullies engage in aggressive behaviours they attract the attention of peers who came to observe the episode, therefore they indirectly influence the behaviour of peers (Craig & Pepler, 1999). Pepler et al (2010) posited that when bullies are not sanctioned for their aggressive actions, they model for peers, that aggression can be performed without fear of consequences. Thus, bystanders are more likely to act out these impulses after witnessing a successful act of aggression by a powerful peer (Pepler et al., 2010). Therefore, this theory is relevant to this study as it forms the basis for investigating how bullying unfolds in peer groups.

2.2. Literature review

Schools serve as primary setting for the membership of peer group. Peer group members may be in the same class, same sex and their close interaction is of equals (Olalekan, 2016). It is generally observed that peer groups have a lot of influence on students' behaviour. This is seen from the role played by the peer group in the life and learning of a child, it is believed that students feel more comfortable and relaxed among fellow students (Olalekan, 2016). The attractiveness of the group, the nature of conformity demanded by the group and the morals of the group determine whether a group is likely to have positive or negative impact on members' behaviour (Salmivalli, 2010). If the atmosphere of the group is warm, understanding and supportive, the group influence would most likely be positive. A hostile atmosphere, constant frustration and frequent conflicts produce a negative impact on the member's growth and behaviour.

2.2.1. Influence power and peer group influence

Adolescents are constantly exposed to peer influence and they are well aware that they influence each other. The influence and power of peer groups are significant in human development, and these peer groups are fundamental, emergent microsocial structure in a child's ecological system (Rodkin, 2004). Thus, the peer group become a particularly salient influence in secondary schools.

According to Rodkin (2004), peer groups could influence personal identity to the extent that the individual autonomy and personality are affected. Taiwo (2004) revealed that students strive to abide with the ethics of the group they take membership with, because rejection by the group might have negative effects on them.

Hence, the influence of peer groups in the complex phenomenon of bullying is significant. Gini (2006) highlighted that bullying is an aspect of peer group process and these processes are identified by the role played by various members of the group. There is some evidence that adolescents appear to be more influenced by what peers in their current friendship group do than by their own previous behaviour (Burns, Maycock, Cross, & Brown, 2008). Peer groups provided power, attention, and status to group members who promoted the groups' well-being, which for some translated to aggressive behaviour (Bukowski, 2003). Status, leadership, and aggression have been found to be associated with some peer group leaders being forceful, strong, and assertive, with a larger coercive or aggressive component than other students (Bukowski, 2003). Some students who bully others, have been found to experience high social status among peers even though their classmates avoided their company where possible (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). Juvonen et al. (2003) argued that adolescents with status-oriented friends are likely to be aggressive even if they care less about their own status. This would happen because individuals overestimate, and subsequently conform to, attitudes and behavioural norms of groups to which they belong (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). According to Salmivalli (2010), the desire to remain in good standing led adolescents to engage in behaviours they would not otherwise thought of earlier on.

Imbalance of power could be derived from physical strength, social status in the group, or from group size (e.g. a group targeting a single person) (Salmivalli, 2010). Power could also be achieved through knowing a person's vulnerabilities (e.g. appearance, learning problem, family situation, personal characteristics) and using this knowledge to harm him or her (Salmivalli, 2010). During adolescence, peer groups become stratified and issues of acceptance and popularity become increasingly important (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). Some researchers indicated that toughness and aggressiveness are important status considerations for boys, while appearance is a central determinant of social status among girls (Espelage, 2002). Other researchers believed that the pressure to gain peer acceptance and status might be related to an increase in teasing and bullying. This behaviour might be intended to demonstrate superiority over other students for boys and girls, through either name-calling or ridiculing (Espelage, 2002).

2.2.2. Bystanders and bullying

Peers are usually spectators of bullying and they would take on different participant roles. Bystanders are characterized as standing around and watching fights without helping the victim. They enjoyed watching fights, often encouraging the bully (Espelage, 2002). A bullying episode consists of youths who are actively involved in intentionally harming a peer who cannot easily defend him- or herself, a youth who tries to defend their bullied peer, and a youth who does not recognize the incident or who ignores it (Salmivalli, 2010).

The physical or psychological abuse generally occurs in the presence of peers, who play a critical role in strengthening, maintaining or ending the bullying behaviours (Pepler, Craig & O'Connell, 2010). According to Olweus (2001), the importance of bystander reaction is crucial because of their potential impact on students who bully, on the targets of harassment and on each other. Pepler, Craig and O'Connell (2010) revealed that having others join in the bullying or getting even subtle

positive feedback by verbal or nonverbal cues (e.g. smiling, laughing) is rewarding for those who are doing the bullying, whereas challenging the bully's power by taking sides with the victim provides negative feedback for them. Overall, bystanders reactions during bullying episode might either contribute to the problem or help solve it (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010).

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach for its realistic investigation. Age, gender, bully/victim factors were considered essential criteria in the selection of participants. The study used 25 participants, 15 girls and 10 boys who were willing to speak out their bullying experiences. To achieve the intentions of this study, school disciplinary records, interviews and a questionnaire were used to derive the recurrence of bullying episodes, how help was sought by bystanders or victims and where bullying mostly took place. Other questions were also asked to understand their affiliation to peer groups, if they feel left out when they are not part of a peer group as well as the criteria for choosing or joining peer groups.

This study adopted Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) Thematic Analysis Model on the procedure of qualitative data examination and clarification. The researchers identified and pinpointed similar expressions with bullying episodes, power differential episodes, and bullying episode with spectators. The examination of students' views and experiences brought about two (2) emergent themes, which are; influential power of peer groups, and bystanders' role in a bullying episode.

4. Findings and discussion
4.1.1. Influential power of peer group

Responses from the majority of the participants invariably expressed a worrying wave of random bullying episodes perpetrated by peer group members. Participants blamed the need to belong, acceptance and enhancing the status of the group as the main perpetrators for bullying. For both male and female participants, there was a consensus that they joined peer groups mainly to have a sense of acceptance and above all to gain popularity. Participants further admitted that in peer group members would do whatever it takes to ensure their acceptance and that they are highly esteemed by their group.

The majority of the participants confided that there is a lot of pressure to conform to group norms. This, according to the participants, accounted for many bullying incidents in the halls of residence. Furthermore, participants reported that the test of loyalty to the group is to go out and 'pick on someone'. Responses pointed out that there was no other reason to tease, push and shove, beat, or spread rumours, other than to complete the initiation requirements as new members. Whereas, for old members bullying is done to prove loyalty to the group. Participants confessed that they at times they hated bullying and had wished for a better alternative especially when they were commanded to bully their old friends. Both male and female participants admitted that they went ahead with bullying out of desperation to belong or to be esteemed by their group. Overall, participants reiterated that peer groups have no regard for others except for personal gain, that is, to maintain inclusion, to confirm their belonging to the group, and for reputational purposes only.

Responses revealed that most bullying episodes took place in the halls of residence especially when the boarding master has taken a boarding student to the hospital. Male participants cried out that bullies know that it would take the boarding master ages to return. These male participants pointed

out that upon arrival the boarding master does not take rounds, hence it made it easier for most bullying episodes to go unnoticed. Seven out of ten male participants wished for the boarding master to take rounds after lights off, as he would pick on the sobbing and/or groaning from the victims of bullying. One male participant reported to have a permanent scar on his belly from electric iron's hot steam, which he earned from refusing to iron the senior student's uniform. This particular participant lamented that though the bully was suspended, the remaining members of his peer group terrorised him. He reported that every day he was pushed, slapped and kicked as he was blamed for the suspension of their friend.

4.1.1.2. Bystanders' role in a bullying episode

Participants asserted that they know that bullying was wrong and wished intervene during bullying episodes, but for their own safety they always chose to stay away. Some participants said that they turned a blind eye just for acceptance within their peer group. Further, participants reported that they whole-heartedly disliked bullying. Majority of participants, both male and female lamented that bullying puts them in a dilemma as social beings as they helplessly watched their acquaintances terrorised. Participants cried of lack of strength and power to intervene as individuals.

Female participants mostly expressed a feeling of worry and shame as they stood by watching their former friends pushed and shoved. These female participants lamented that this bullying episodes are done in their presence to pressurise their conformity to the group. Boys revealed that they chose the role of bystanders in fear of becoming the next victim, hence they often opted to cheer the bully. On one hand, male participants also expressed that they felt for the victim but they could not show it, all they could do was hide behind the pretence of watching a hilarious episode.

Participants alluded that bullies in their peer groups are very skilled at manipulating members to do whatever they are asked to do, whether good or bad. Both male and female participants consented that no one ever tried to stand against bullies or even to report bullying incidents to the school management for fear of victimization. Female participants revealed that they faithfully obeyed every command, from watching a bullying episode to witnessing vandalising of roommates property. All participants concurred to the notion that being a member of a peer group was discipleship in the making. Participants revealed that they moved and did everything as a group, and they have the power to challenge anyone who overstepped their mark.

All female participants mentioned that the common bullying incidents that they witnessed and even took part in were spreading bad rumours, passing mockery jokes and standing in the way of the victim. Female responses revealed that they witnessed targeted students being 'laughed out loudly' whenever they passed by. Furthermore, responses highlighted that in worst cases, participants either saw or knew who poured water in the victim's bed but they would not reveal when asked. Most female participants expressed a remorseful gesture but declared that they would not dare to intervene or report culprits to the matron.

Whereas for male participants, bullies manipulated members in a bid to achieve dominance over the group and gain more control in the residential house. Male participants revealed that witnessing a bullying episode in the absence of the boarding master attracted a life threatening warning. All male participants cried of emotional abuse as they felt like they fail their roommates. Further, participants lamented that even when the victim has been injured they would not report or raise a finger to the perpetrator. Overall, participants expressed a concern that most serious bulling

incidents go unreported, and this has caused devastating psychological effects on them - they live in fear.

5. Conclusion

This study examined and discussed factors considered by members of a peer group and bystanders when watching or taking part in a bullying episode and the subsequent actions they opt to take. From the responses, this study discovered that the need to belong, to confirm belonging, maintain inclusion, be highly esteemed by others in the peer group were considered when deciding what action to take. For bystanders not affiliated to any peer group only one-thing matters, their own safety. Findings revealed that students are conscious of the pressure to conform to group norms, and this influenced them to do whatever it takes to pass the loyalty test. This perceived pressure to conform influenced many students to be persistent bullies or to initiate others to bully.

The findings of this study confirmed that peers are substantially involved in bullying whether as active participants or as bystanders and are unwilling to act pro-socially. These findings are consistent with the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) which propounded that peers actively or passively reinforce the aggressive behaviour of bullies during a bullying episode. Peers who observe bullying in action are forced by the circumstance to either cheer or withdraw silently but with a heavy heart knowing that they cannot report the incident. In most cases, bullies go unpunished for their behaviour hence to peers a bully becomes a powerful figure to identify with or be actively involved in their bullying episodes (Salmivalli, 2010). This study therefore, discovered that the recurrences of bullying are many due to not sanctioning the aggressive behaviours around school and in the boarding houses. In addition, persistent cases of bullying are powered by the status it is afforded as well as failure to report its incidents. Overall, these findings further fortify the prominence of peer groups and the powerful force of peer groups (Gini, 2006).

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended:
- The school should provide regular teacher education about the nature and characteristic traits of bullies and victims.
- Teachers to be equipped with effective intervention ways from dealing with grudges to addressing a rumour.
- The school management to intensify school-based bullying prevention and intervention programs and make them long-lasting.
- The school should revise and evaluate its disciplinary methods and apply corporal punishment or suspensions within warm framework.
- Disciplinary committees should mobilise bystanders and enhance their awareness, empathy and self-efficacy to support victimised peers.
- The Ministry of Basic Education should consider anti-bullying policy as one of the measures to curb bullying in schools.
- Furthermore, the ministry should provide guidance with regard to the most effective intervention programmes.

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