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Bullying: The Monster in the Dark

Cloaked in the shadows, violence is all we see but what of the real enemy, what of the cause of this travesty?

South Africa, obsessed with violence, has become consumed with false hope. We think we can make violence go away with policies and procedures but we are failing as the problem still persists. Our obsession is understandable, given the soaring crime rate and the increasing number of violent activities dominating the news headlines. By focusing on the issue of violence alone, we are missing the mark. We experience the effects of violence, become blinded by it and focus all our efforts on these effects. By doing that, all we are really doing is shooting the beast in the foot. We are ignoring the fundamental issue which is the cause of that violence. What steers individuals to become violent? This is difficult to uncover in an uncontrolled environment like society at large. At school level which is more structured and disciplined and thus perhaps easier to monitor more effectively, we can isolate instances of violence, and in many instances attribute it to an underlying root problem, ever present but not given its due attention; this is the problem of bullying.

School violence is an expression of physical or non-physical force against any school member or even damage to school property (vandalism). Bullying is a targeted, more subtle form of school violence. It often occurs outside the eyes of authorities and so it is difficult to attend to. Bullying can manifest itself in various physical and non-physical forms where the physical is typically more prominent amongst males and the non-physical amongst females[1]. The physical can range from the obvious kicking, pushing, shoving, hitting and can be quite violent. There can also be less violent physical bullying such as bumping an individual or touching them inappropriately which can also leave an individual feeling just as violated. Non-physical violence can take the form of emotional/psychological or verbal victimisation, which is more subtle than anything physical, and may be even more damaging. Examples include, teasing, name-calling, abusive comments, spreading rumours, discrimination, threatening and embarrassing gestures or exclusion from activities.

For the victim, the consequences of bullying can be long-lasting and severe. Often these are linked to serious psychological trauma, from low self-esteem and depression to the inability to concentrate at school due to the stress of worrying about one's next 'assault'. The most worrying consequence of bullying is the perpetuation of the bullying cycle[2]. The relationship between violence and bullying is circular. Aspects of bullying may cause violence where for example, bullying may progress from a non-physical level to a physical assault, either by the bully in due course or by the victim in retaliation against the bully's bullying. Bullying can also be a precursor to violent behaviour or vice versa. Violence in society at large could be a factor contributing towards why individuals bully; or, on the other hand, bullying could lead to the bully becoming a violent criminal and contribute towards general social violence.

Research has shown that children who are bullies, are often themselves victims of some form of harassment or victimisation, often being physically, emotionally or sexually abused at home by a parent or an authoritative figure inside or outside the school[3]. These children frequently act out against this form of victimisation in an attempt to regain a sense of power by victimising weaker children just like they (as the weaker party) are being victimised[4]. This suggests that when bullying occurs, the victim of the bully should not be the only one offered assistance; the bullies themselves need counselling and this should be taken into consideration when formulating policies in handling school bullying.

An uncertain terrain

The South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996 provides for the prohibition of violent activities in schools. It does not say how these activities should be prohibited, nor does it prohibit equally harmful activities such as emotional bullying[5]. Of course, we cannot always expect policies to solve all our problems; no one other than ourselves can protect us from ourselves. Professor Kader Asmal, Minister of Education from 1999 to 2004, acknowledged that the installation of metal detectors and security guards was not the ultimate solution to the problems of violence[6]. Indeed, often, perpetrators of bullying do not need harmful objects/tools to harm their victims. They sometimes succeed through their actions and choice of words they use to degrade their victims.

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Now, this is not a policy issue, it would be too ambitious for us to expect our policies to protect learners from one another. Ultimately, we want to breed a nation of responsible young people who can stand-up for themselves. But again, the mere fact that bullying is not acknowledged at governmental level is problematic.

What worsens the problem is that some learners don't seem to view bullying as an issue, denying that it is a problem or thinking that the victim somehow deserved being bullied[7]. Thus, how can we be expected to solve the problem of violence if we don't see bullying (intrinsically linked to violence) as a problem, or if we don't understand what bullying is, because if one understands bullying, they would see it as wrong and never blame it on the victim? Not even teachers seem to understand this. Anderson[8] conducted qualitative research on the impact of bullying on adolescents where through classroom observations, she noticed that bullying, especially the more subtle (non-physical) form, often happen in front of the teachers, and in most instances is never attended to. Anderson deduced that teachers are not adequately equipped to identify and intervene when such problems happen in the classroom[9]. These emotional types of bullying have no evident procedures informing educators how to proceed in such circumstances.

While policy doesn't extend to cover bullying, government has introduced the Signposts for Safe Schools initiative, which is a substantial document developed to guide schools in terms of the type of policies and interventions they should implement in their schools. It provides detailed and clear directions on how to identify bullying. Ways of appropriately addressing the issue are suggested. This could be via the observation of a suspected victim's actions during break, offering them solutions to resolve the problem, and speaking to the learner in private to avoid further intimidation by the bullies[10]. The document also suggests that since educators are often unaware of when bullying occurs, the school could "Appoint monitors to watch for bullying during the times that it is said to take place. Train the monitors in what to look out for and to whom to report it. Make learners aware that stopping bullying is everyone's job – even if you are not a bully or a victim"[11]. These are good, viable suggestions but they do not seem to have been implemented effectively and so the problem persists. Having noted that, we need to also take into consideration that policies do not always mandate practice, it's ultimately up to individuals to make policy work. We cannot always blame our problems on government; we are the ones who need to take matters into our own hands.

Victims of bullies need to be empowered to stand up for themselves but even more powerful would be the implementation of a clear zero-tolerance bullying initiative adopted by learners in our schools. This could also be supported by the implementation of a formal pledge against bullying being signed by learners explicitly declaring 'No to bullying', as well as

to report bullying if they are witness to it. This is a first step towards ensuring that violence in schools, even at the level of bullying, is not normalised.

Changing attitudes

We need to conscientise our learners about bullying. Nourishing such an attitude could also require incorporating anti-bullying more strongly into school ethos in such a way that from as early as foundation phase, learners are taught about all the forms of bullying and are encouraged not to participate in such behaviour. They should be aware that if they feel that they are being victimised in any way or if they see another being victimised, this is not normal or acceptable, and there is someone they can approach to discuss the matter. Above all, victims and witnesses to bullying need assurance that they won't be victimised for exposing bullies. The success of all these initiatives also rests on the shoulders of teachers who should be trained to spot a troubled child and prepared so they can assist that child. School counsellors and psychologists would also be useful but since they are not the ones in the classroom, the teacher needs training to at least identify a distressed child. Teachers can steer their learner to help by being the active link between the psychologist and the learner, if not by being able to assist learners directly themselves.

In addition, no government policies or manuals seem to cover support for the bully. If this is not looked at, one is merely placing a sticky plaster over the problem. The cause of the problem remains, and if the cause is not being addressed, how can we ever hope to stop the cycle of bullying? Once an individual has been identified, suspected or accused of bullying,

punishment should not always be the immediate consequence. Punishment does not address the root of the problem, and does not reduce the potential of future bullying and consequent future victims of that bully's bullying. The cycle of bullying will continue unless the cause of that bully's bullying is addressed. Bullies may need counselling in order to gauge why it is they behave in the manner they do when they target their victim(s). Once they understand why they are doing that, they must be taught other methods to assert their voice, aside from bullying. If they, themselves, are being victimised in some way or the other, then they could be taught ways to stand up for themselves. They could also be offered stronger interventions in the form of an authoritative figure stepping in on behalf of the learner, speaking to their parents and/or the bully's bully (who may or may not be the parent) and suggesting counselling for the family or the bully and his bully. If this is not possible, some active measures need to be taken so that they too can be safe.

Violence and bullying undermine our hard earned democratic rights of safety and education. Our call for focus to be given to bullying is not only driven by the intrinsic correlation between violence and bullying, but by the fact that even if bullying does not lead to violence, it does undermine ones educational processes and ones sense of worth and safety. This paper shows that we too easily ignore bullying and we ignore the bully, we ignore the cause of bullying. If we can deal with it at root level, when children are young and impressionable, shaped by the environment around them, perhaps we can get to the beast at its heart and put in place an even stronger influence to combat future violent tendencies.

NOTES
1   Department of Education (2003).
2   Bully online (undated).
3   Holt, Finkelhor, & Kaufman Kantor (2007).
4   Montrose Primary School (undated).
5   "No person may cause any form of violence or disturbance which can negatively impact on any public school activity" (SASA 84).
6   Department of Education (2003).
7   Jkogarner (undated).
8   (2007)
9   Anderson (2007).
10 Department of Education (2003).
11 Department of Education (2003:10).

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