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Bullying in school toilets: Experiences of secondary school learners in a South African township

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This article reports on a qualitative study that explored bullying in the learner toilets of a township secondary school in South Africa and the reasons for its persistence in this particular school. The exploratory study used focus group discussions to collect data to address the research question. Newman's 'defensible space' framework, which stipulates that the design of an area, as well as its physical settings, can facilitate violence, informs data analysis. In the study, learners experienced toilets as the most dangerous areas inside their school, reporting that they encountered a lot of bullying in these spaces. In particular, bullying in the school toilets was characterised by violence, including physical and sexual assaults, as well as criminal activity (mostly muggings) and threats of violence. According to learners, the toilets and what happened within them were removed and hidden from the teachers' view and supervision, leaving the victims at the mercy of the bullies and perpetrators of violence. Informed by these findings, we conclude that because of their physical design and location within the school, which made it difficult to exercise any supervisory duties or to enforce security measures and protect learners, the toilets in this school remained indefensible spaces.

Keywords: bullying; gender-based violence; school-based bullying; school geography; school toilets; school violence

Introduction

Violence and the threat of violence against learners in schools remains a concern globally (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Moore, Jones & Broadbent, 2008; Ward, Van der Merwe & Dawes, 2011). There is also recognition among scholars that such violence is often a result of bullying among learners (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Hemphill, Heerde and Gomo (2014:3) define school-based bullying as "a systematic abuse of power in a relationship formed at school characterised by:

1. aggressive acts directed (by one or more individuals) toward victims that a reasonable person would avoid;
2. acts which usually occur repeatedly over a period of time; and
3. acts in which there is an actual or perceived power imbalance between perpetrators and victims, with victims often being unable to defend themselves effectively from perpetrators."

Bullying may include name-calling and teasing and may escalate to threats of violence and eventually to actual acts of violence, including physical and sexual assault (Liang, Flisher & Lombard, 2007; Moore et al., 2008).

In South Africa, evidence that bullying is widespread has emerged in research and, more dramatically, in popular media and newspapers. For example, De Wet (2007:191) highlights some of these articles, reporting that:

... a ten-year-old Pretoria boy is fighting for his life after he was hanged in the school's bathroom by his schoolmates ... [In another article] a father alleges that his sixteen-year-old daughter was repeatedly sexually and physically abused by three girls in her school's hostel. According to the father, these girls forced his daughter to drink liquid bleach. She died.

Research has also found that school-based bullying and related violence are pervasive (Burnett, 1998; Gevers & Flisher, 2011). According to the 2015 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) Report, in South Africa, "close to one in five learners (17%) experienced bullying on a weekly basis" (Reddy, Visser, Winnaar, Arends, Juan, Prinsloo & Isdale, 2016:13). The impacts of bullying on the victim, in particular, but also on the bully and those around them, are dire. For example, such bullying has been found to result in long-term psychological and physical harm for the victim. In particular, young people's social and cognitive development are negatively impacted, where learners study in fear, concentration is impaired, and schooling outcomes are compromised (Gevers & Flisher, 2011; Mncube & Steinmann, 2014). In some instances, bullying has led to the death of the victim, sometimes at the hands of bullies, but often through suicide. In terms of learning, according to the 2015 TIMSS Report:

On average, learners who have almost never experienced bullying scored 68 points more for mathematics and 97 points more for science than learners who were bullied on a weekly basis (Reddy et al., 2016:13).

Furthermore, the report argues that "[a] stable environment in which teachers and learners feel safe and where poor discipline does not occur is strongly associated with high performance" (Reddy et al., 2016:13).

With the negative psychological, physical and educational impacts of bullying well documented, why does it persist? From her analysis, De Wet (2007) concludes that what the evidence suggests is that schools and teachers are failing to prevent bullying and provide safety and protection for all learners in and around their premises, often with devastating results. Such failure is in spite of the expectation that while the child is in

school, teachers act *in loco parentis*, and therefore, have a legal, and arguably, a moral duty to provide safety for children in schools. In particular, the South African Council for Educators (SACE) *Code of Professional Ethics* mandates teachers to take “reasonable steps to ensure the safety of the learner” (SACE, 2017:4).

While research on school-based bullying is abundant, studies that examine its geographies in school (i.e., spaces that expose learners to most bullying and violence within the school), are scarce. In particular, studies that identify and examine school toilets as sites of bullying, are limited. Such studies include one by De Wet (2005) which found that learners, particularly girls, often use toilet walls to name-call other learners, for example, calling them ‘thieves,’ ‘sluts,’ and outing their relationships. In an MA thesis, Chabalala (2011) reports on a study conducted by the National Education Department and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), which found that in seven out of the nine South African provinces, both girls’ and boys’ toilets were identified to be the most dangerous places in schools. According to the findings, it is in bathrooms where boys and sometimes girls threaten and intimidate girls and weaker boys. As Chabalala observes, bullies choose the toilets because they largely stay unsupervised by teachers and other adults, and therefore, are ideal to use for bullying and victimising others.

Furthermore, there are few studies that examine the role of teachers in witnessing and addressing bullying. Exceptions include De Wet’s (2006, 2007) studies conducted among Free State teachers, in which she investigated their “recognition of bullying, their reactions to incidences of bullying, and their perceptions of the effectiveness of a number of bullying prevention strategies” (De Wet, 2007:191). The study found that teachers’ understandings of bullying and what it entails often differed from those of learners. With the recognition of the legal and professional duty of teachers, and their responsibility towards learners, scholars have argued that the involvement of teachers is key to preventing and addressing bullying in schools (De Wet & Jacobs, 2013).

This article sought to investigate learners’ experiences of bullying in a township school outside Durban. In this article, we report on and analyse learners’ perspectives on the place of toilets as sites of bullying and violence in the school.

Theoretical Framework

Analysis in this study is informed by Newman’s (1973) ‘defensible space’ theory. Newman asserted that there must be something that renders certain areas prone to crime. In his view, the physical designs of certain areas are key in helping us

understand why they attract more criminal activity than others. Within this framework, relevant questions include: why are some public spaces, and toilets in particular, more prone to violence? What are the connections between bullying and school toilets? To what extent can we think spatially about school-based bullying?

Newman’s principal assumption is that perpetrators act deliberately in selecting spaces that offer rewards and a low risk of getting caught (Cisneros, 1995). Therefore, to deter any form of assault, spaces clearly ought to convey a message that those who enter with ill intent will be identified and will have difficulty escaping. The defensible space theory suggests that the risk of violence occurring in a particular space is determined largely by the physical layout of that space and the sort of hidden curriculum it conveys about the extent to which such violence is tolerated or punished. The framework is founded on three core elements, namely: territoriality (that defensible spaces provide residents and users with a system that allows them to control their areas); natural surveillance (that the capacity of physical design provides surveillance opportunities for residents); and image (that the appearance of a space creates an image of the area that symbolises the lifestyle of its users).

Informed by this framework, Reynald and Elffers (2009:28) describe a defensible space as “a system through which crime can be prevented by increasing the opportunities for residents to control and defend their space against crime [and violence], while simultaneously eliminating physical characteristics that attract offenders.” Consequently, defensible spaces are such that their design is open to a constant stream of potential witnesses and where private territory is clearly demarcated, physically and symbolically (Mawby, 1977). In defensible spaces, would-be-offenders are discouraged by witnesses’ ability to witness and act on the offences. Such defensible spaces are enhanced by features such as good lighting, as well as the removal of visual barriers such as high solid walls and shrubs that create hiding places (Mawby, 1977).

In contrast, when an area is isolated, dilapidated and/or neglected “it becomes negatively differentiated from surrounding areas, making it vulnerable to [violent] activity” (Reynald & Elffers, 2009:30). Public toilets are common areas that, while they are for public use, remain private due to individualised cubicles and the deliberate privacy the building offers as a whole. Public toilets in this regard offer opportune spaces for violence because, for offenders, they are familiar, yet isolated and indefensible. In this article, using this framework, we examine learners’ experiences of bullying in and around the toilets in one township secondary school. In particular, we

examine the extent to and ways in which the design and location of the toilets within the school offer few surveillance opportunities, thereby increasing the opportunity for bullying and other forms of violence.

Research Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study was located within the critical paradigm, with its focus on empowering participants to critique their situation (i.e., school toilet-based bullying and its impact on learners) and to imagine alternatives towards changing it (Taylor & Medina, 2013). It was conducted in Siyaphambili Secondary School (a pseudonym) in the Inanda, Ntuzuma and Kwamashu (INK) townships, about 25km north of Durban, South Africa. Siyaphambili is built in the centre of the INK townships and attracts learners from these communities. The school is classified as a Quintile Two, no-fee-paying school, which enrolls learners from low-income households. Before the commencement of the study, written permission to conduct the research was granted by the relevant institutions, including the school's management.

The study used availability sampling to recruit 12 female and 12 male learners, ranging from 14 to 17 years (mean age = 16) from the school. All the participants were from households across all three INK townships. We obtained informed consent from the participant learners' caregivers and consent or assent from the learners themselves. To collect data to address the research question, focus group discussions (FGDs), each lasting around one and a half hours, were conducted with the 24 participants. We divided the 24 participants into four smaller groups, each containing six participants. We chose FGDs to understand how the participants "consider an experience, idea, or event ... [and how they] think, feel, or act regarding" bullying in and around their school (Freitas, Oliveira, Jenkins & Popjoy, 1998:1–2). These discussions, conducted in isiZulu (the home language of the participants), were recorded, transcribed verbatim and thereafter translated into English. To maximise accuracy of the translations and minimise the participants' perspectives being 'lost in translation,' the first author, who grew up in the area and speaks isiZulu, listened to the audiotapes, and read and re-read the transcripts and their translations for accuracy. Further, our choice of a qualitative exploratory research design was informed by our desire to pose open-ended questions and to enable the participants "to respond in their own words ... [and to] evoke responses that are meaningful and culturally salient ... [as well as] rich and explanatory in nature" (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005:4). To analyse the data, we used thematic analysis. As defined by Braun and Clarke (2006:81), "[t]hematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting

patterns (themes) within data." It minimally organises and describes a data set in (rich) detail and interprets various aspects of the research topic.

Findings: Participants' Experiences of Bullying

The findings from this study confirm that school toilets are areas where bullying occurs. The learners described incidences of victimisation, which sometimes became violent in nature. The findings suggest that bullying in the school toilets was largely due to the architecture and location of these spaces, which tend to isolate them from the rest of the school and its security systems, including from adult spaces such as teachers' staffrooms and the principal's office. The toilets in this school comprised a single building under one roof, and served the entire learner population. The building was divided by a common wall into two sections, one serving boys and the other serving girls. The entrances were concealed with solid brick walls. Each space contained a communal hand-wash area, fitted with sinks and taps that, at the time of our data collection, were not functioning; and four individual toilet cubicles, the doors to which were either broken or not able to be locked. The facility was 500 metres away from the teachers' staff rooms, and behind the classrooms so that teachers could not see them from their common sitting area. The toilets did not have electricity, and instead, relied on natural light.

The FGDs were organised around one key question: what are learners' experiences of bullying in the school toilets? Our thematic analysis of the FGDs yielded five themes discussed in the subsections below: school toilets as places of danger; school toilets as spaces for gendered violence; criminal activity in and around school toilets; school toilets as sites of community violence; and school-based bullying goes unpunished.

School Toilets as Places of Danger

Participants in this study reported that while the school had elements of 'fun,' more often it was an unsafe place, with the toilets being cited as the most dangerous spaces inside the school. According to them, bullying, which is often characterised or followed by violence, was rife in the toilets. For example, a Grade Nine girl described her experiences thus:

Sometimes the school is fun, but it is mostly dangerous. Just like this week I was not feeling well and the teacher asked me to go get myself water. As I was washing my face in the toilet a boy came in and tried to bully me, but the cleaning lady came in at that time and told him to leave me alone. The boy said he was just playing with me, and the lady told him that he can't play with a girl like that. So he left me.

Describing the toilets and the school as 'dangerous' spaces highlights the enormous burden that bullying placed on these learners. Without proper

security measures, learners faced a number of threats inside toilets. For this girl, the school's cleaning lady came into the toilet at the right time and prevented what could have been an attack on her. Another girl was also 'rescued,' from a group of boys who were attacking her, by a boy who was passing by the female toilet:

Last year, when I first arrived here at the school, when I was passing by the toilet, someone pulled me into the toilet and said they were initiating me. There were other guys with him. Luckily a guy came passing and asked those guys to let me go and they did.

While these girls escaped without further harm, in many instances learners were not as lucky. According to participants, perpetrators of assaults often worked in groups, making it difficult for individuals to defend themselves or avoid the violence. One Grade 10 boy explained:

It is not easy to fight back either because they always outnumber you in the toilet and they beat you up. I have never even tried to fight back; I will never try.

The participants agreed that attempting to resist an assault angered the perpetrators and led to more serious attacks. A Grade Nine boy, who fought back when a group of boys tried to attack him, reported that his attackers waited for him outside school and continued to assault him.

It's not easy to fight back because I don't stay in this community, I stay far from the school. So when they beat and mugged me [in the toilet] and I fought back, they caught up with me after school and they beat me up. So yes, I am really scared of those toilets.

Since this incident, the learner reported that he has remained fearful of entering the school toilet or walking alone in and outside the school.

School Toilets as Spaces for Gendered Violence

Participants in the study often identified acts of violence, including gendered violence (e.g. sexual harassment, groping and rape) as forms of bullying in and around the toilets. Since toilets are private places and often without witnesses, and since the toilets in this school are hidden from the view of the teachers and other school personnel, bullying went unchecked, and victims unprotected. According to the participants, perpetrators of such violence in the school toilets included both male and female learners. They reported being exposed to violence by same sex and opposite sex learners (i.e., where boys attacked girls and other boys, and girls attacked other girls). To illustrate, two Grade Nine girls described how older girls harassed younger ones, using violence or threats of violence to incite fear. One described how, when she was in Grade Eight, a "girl came to me and harassed me and wanted to force me to love her, but I told her that I don't do girls." The second elaborated:

They bunk classes and wait for any person that goes to the toilet. Even girls do it. They harass us

in the toilets. The ones in Grade 12 harass us and tell us they want to date us. One of them found me in the toilet and asked me out, and I told her that I don't do those things and I don't date girls, and then she said she will find me at the gate after school.

Likewise, younger boys reported being sexually assaulted by older male learners inside toilets. The groping of buttocks was among the most common type of assault reported by the participants. As one Grade Eight boy reported: "*There are older guys who have groped my buttocks. I told them I don't like that, but they don't stop.*" Objecting to these acts of violence was commonly greeted with more violence by the perpetrators.

Girls reported being held against their will inside toilets and having parts of their bodies touched by male peers, including reports of boys' forcefully closing girls' eyes and choking them. A Grade 10 girl recalled an incident where two male learners came from behind her while she was in the toilet, demanding money. One boy covered her eyes while the other fondled her breasts:

Guys came from behind me and covered my mouth and choked me. One of them put his hand on my breast. He's in my class, he's a boy. I asked what he was doing and he said he wants R1 (US\$ 0.08). I told him that I don't have it. So the one behind me closed my eyes again and another one unbuttoned my shirt. When he grabbed my breast again I punched him in the face. Luckily a girl from Grade 11A came in and told them that she can see them and I went to tell the teacher. They told her that they were playing with me because we are in the same class.

South African studies on sexual violence have consistently found that the victims usually know their attackers (Meinck, Cluver, Boyes & Loening-Voysey, 2016). Our findings in this study suggest that perpetrators were classmates or someone the victim knew from school. However, with the poor security at the school, and as the learners reported, there was also the potential for the perpetrator to be someone from outside the school. For example, participants reported instances where they found strangers who were not learners using the toilets. One boy encountered a potential perpetrator with a gun inside the school toilet:

I was on my way to the toilet one time and I found someone who is not a student with a gun ... I was so afraid, because it was a real gun, but I just used the toilet and walked out again without saying a word. He took the gun and added bullets to it and placed [it] in his pocket, and left as well.

Whether these outsiders were responsible for bullying in and around the toilets was not made clear in this study. What was clear was that they posed a threat to the security of both girls and boys at the school.

Criminal Activity in and Around School Toilets

According to the participants in this study, bullying often took the form of, or occurred in tandem with,

acts of crime in and around the school toilets. For example, participants reported incidents of robbery in the school toilets. While female participants reported fearing being mugged in the toilets, boys reported actual incidences where they were victims of crimes perpetrated by individuals or gangs, with weapons often used to instil fear or hurt the victim. One Grade 10 boy described his fear when confronted with a gun:

Everything happens in the toilets. Like when you walk in, you find them and they close you in and mug you and do whatever they want. It is worse when they have a gun, you can't even move when there is a gun.

According to the participants, thieves commonly demand and/or take money from learners, including pocket money for lunch, as well as items such as school bags, shoes, books and belts. A Grade Nine boy described how in the previous year he and a friend were mugged of their school bags and a R20 note (US \$1.61) in the school toilet. He explained:

Toilets are unsafe. We feel unsafe. People do horrible things in toilets, so they are not safe places. When I had started school I was with another friend. They took my backpack and my friend was robbed of his R20.

Another Grade Nine boy reported being held at knife-point and the perpetrator demanding money:

I walked into the toilet and relieved myself, when I was about to walk out a boy I didn't recognise pointed a knife at me and demanded that I give him money. Luckily I had already spent all the money I carried that day. So he frisked me and he didn't find any money.

Threats of violence were also reported, commonly when the perpetrator wanted to silence the victim from reporting, or if the victim knew the perpetrator/s. Threats ranged from perpetrators telling their victims they would "catch" them after school, to threats of bodily harm. Some participants were made to pay money to the perpetrators to avoid further attacks. A Grade 10 boy recalled an incident where he was asked to pay for his safety:

I have been threatened in the toilet. I left the classroom and went to the toilet. When I walked in there were guys inside and I accidentally stepped on one of them. I apologised but they said I needed to pay. So they frisked me and luckily I didn't have money. They searched every part of my body even my shoes and told me that if I ever tell anyone they will 'show me.' So I have never told anyone until today.

The danger in toilets is heightened by the presence and use of drugs and weapons. Participants reported toilets to be spaces where cigarettes (which are forbidden among learners in the school), cannabis, alcohol and other drugs were either hidden, used, traded or collected. Cannabis usage was described as a popular activity inside the toilets as well as in other areas around the school. This drug, alongside cigarettes, was generally sold or hidden in the school toilets. Learners who did not use substances, including space-muffins (muffins

baked with cannabis inside), were described as being in danger of violence if they interrupted the users or traders in the toilets. Threats of violence or actual violence to deter the reporting of illegal substances was common, as a Grade 10 boy explained:

I was in the toilet when another guy was caught by the principal with marijuana. I was not aware that he was busy selling the stuff. I just saw the principal grabbing the both of us and I had to explain that I was just in the toilet to relieve myself, because even my zip was still open. So I told the principal that I don't know this guy. So they had a fight with the principal and physically fought, but the guy was eventually arrested; but he is out of prison now.

Disturbingly, the encounter between the principal and the perpetrator ended up in a fist fight. The violent outburst from the offending learner suggests that even school officials are at risk of violence when they catch perpetrators or attempt to confiscate illegal substances. As such, it seems that school toilets have become designated areas for violence and crime where even school officials cannot safely intervene. This is because, as one learner explained, "*Sometimes they hold you with a weapon, a knife. So it is not easy to ask for help.*"

Describing the extent of criminal activity in the school toilets, particularly drug-related crimes, a Grade Eight boy lamented:

It really hurts me. I was also attacked in the morning. I was in the toilet and I found this one guy, he is well known, crime is what he is known for. He is known for being a thug and he is proud of it. So when I walked into the toilet and found him, he pulled out a gun and placed it on the floor and he tucked in his shirt. I was really shocked at seeing the gun, I couldn't even continue with what I wanted to do at the toilet. Even now I am still scared of going to the toilet.

The use of weapons, particularly knives and guns was highlighted as a common occurrence in school toilets, where perpetrators of violence used these weapons to scare their victims. For fear of harm, participants found it difficult and risky to shout for help; they feared that attracting the attention of school officials or other learners would heighten their vulnerability. Again, the distance between the staff room and principal's office and the toilets contributes to this silencing. A Grade Nine girl explained:

It is not easy to scream or shout for help because they scare you with something [a weapon] and toilets are far and nobody will hear you. It is never just one person doing this. They push you into the far dark corner of the toilet where nobody will see you and they close you inside.

What strongly emerged from the participants was their sense of fear and hopelessness, compounded by the fact that they leave violent communities in the morning only to spend hours in an equally violent school. Some of the school-based perpetrators of violence were linked to criminal

activities in their communities. At school, they used toilets as their area of choice for committing crimes and acts of bullying against their peers, usually with the aid of weapons.

The poor security in the school, including an illegal opening in the fence, facilitated uncontrolled access to the school premises by outsiders. The security guard at the gate was an elderly man whose job was to open the gate and register those who come through it. A Grade 10 boy explained:

The security at the gate is just a puppet. He just opens the gate. He doesn't search you, so anyone can walk in with a weapon. There are even illegal openings on the fence behind the school and people walk in. Nobody searches you in this school.

Participants reported that the guard was more concerned about learners who arrived late than with their security on the premises.

School Toilets as Sites of Community Violence

According to the participants, violence that starts in the toilets often spills into the rest of the school, as well as into the community. Typically, perpetrators were said to get angry when their victims retaliated or resisted. At this defiance, perpetrators waited for their victims outside the school gates, usually after school, and continued with further physical assault.

The violence that continued outside the school was reportedly perpetrated by a gang of learners who sometimes called on their peers from the community. As one girl reported, "*It is not just one person. It is a lot of people from inside and outside the school. They make our lives a living hell. It is not safe.*" A boy elaborated:

For me, I walked into the toilet with a friend and we found them inside. There were five of them. We fought back and they left us alone. But after school we found they were waiting for us at the gate and they beat us up, they slapped us and kicked us until I was on the ground. Their feet were all over our bodies. The community just looked on and didn't help. They are also scared.

A second boy agreed, adding:

There was this one I found inside the toilet and he tried to mug me, so I slapped his face and he left me. He came back after school with his friends and they beat me. Even teachers do not intervene.

The participants reported that the violence outside the school was more vicious and, as such, often resulted in serious physical injury.

School-Based Bullying Goes Unpunished

The participants in this study reported that new learners and those in lower grades were at risk of initiation ceremonies inside the toilets, which included being forced to pay bullies a fee in order to use the toilet and/or to 'sacrifice' their school bags, calculators, school books, etcetera, in order to avoid victimisation. Participants used such terms as "a living hell" and "scary" among others to describe their experiences of bullying at the school, particularly in the school's toilets. One of the girls

stated:

I find school boring. Not that I hate it, but because all these things that happen hurt me. These people are feared even by teachers so we are not safe. School is really boring for me.

Picking up on the hopelessness victims often feel, the girls in this study reported that their protests against violence, particularly gender-based violence, were often trivialised by the perpetrators, and the girls who protest labelled as lacking a sense of humour. Often, when perpetrators were asked to stop, explanations such as "I was joking" or "I was playing with you" were used to excuse themselves of culpability. For example, a Grade Nine girl recalled an incident where a boy from her class, who regularly harassed her in the classroom, would often follow her to the toilets and continue the harassment:

For me, one of them is in my class and he stays in my community, so he usually comes and pulls up my skirt and says he wants to see the colour of my underwear. So this one time he came when I was in the toilet so he came and grabbed my buttocks and I screamed, so he said he is playing with me. The other time in class he was busy pulling and unbuttoning my skirt and the teacher walked in but she didn't say anything. Teachers are scared.

Significantly, learners reported that often, when the incidents were reported to teachers, no action was taken. As reports of fear of the toilets emerged, some participants reported that they avoided toilets in order to remain safe:

Grade Eight learners in this group must be careful in the toilets because they will still face this a lot. They must be really afraid. They will even take their backpacks just to initiate them. Teachers won't do anything if you report. Those thugs will just meet you after school and beat you up.

Participants were concerned about their teachers' absence around toilets. For them, it appeared as though teachers were not concerned about the safety of learners. One explanation was that the teachers were also scared of the bullies. As a result, they did not offer much assistance to the victims of bullying in the school. Instead, they turned a blind-eye to incidents of bullying in the school. A Grade Nine boy lamented:

Teachers do not come this side [the toilet]. So if they are not always here, things happen and nobody can see what is happening that side.

According to the participants, the school's (i.e., teachers') inaction further contributed to their vulnerability to bullying in and around the school toilets. Obviously, this has serious consequences, largely for the victims, but also for the perpetrators, with their health and educational outcomes highly compromised by the trauma and violence they are exposed to on a daily basis.

Discussion

The findings reported in this article echo available literature, which suggests that school toilets are

often sites of bullying. In this school, with perpetrators often using weapons to intimidate their victims, such bullying often led to violence. Substance abuse and drug trading in and around the school toilets further heightened the potential for bullying and violence in these spaces. With teachers reportedly afraid, unable or unwilling to confront the perpetrators and protect the victims, the bullying went unchecked in the toilets. Notably, the school geography, together with the architecture and location of the toilets away from the main school building and teachers' staff room, meant that bullying, and the violence that accompanied it, went unnoticed and that the victims remained largely unprotected. In essence, due to their design and location, the school toilets were largely spaces offering little defense (Newman, 1973), and therefore, the bullies acted with impunity. They deliberately chose to operate in and around the school toilets, because they saw them as unprotected, and understood their chances of being caught and punished as minimal (Cisnero, 1995).

Our findings therefore, suggest that in order to address bullying, and the violence that occurs in and around the learner toilets, the school must think spatially. This means that the design of the school, and the architecture and location of the toilets in particular, must reflect 'zero tolerance' towards bullying and violence among learners and that perpetrators of such acts would be caught and censured. For example, moving the location of the toilets closer to the main building, changing the entrances so that they face the teachers' staff room, installing lights and adding some windows and other security or surveillance measures would not only make any acts of bullying visible to the teachers and make perpetrators feel unwelcome, but would also increase potential victims' sense of security.

Conclusion

This article reports on an exploratory case study focusing on bullying in and around learner toilets in one township secondary school near Durban. While the findings are based on a single school and on perspectives of a small group of learners, they offer a glimpse into the nature of toilet-based bullying, and the violence that often accompanies it, as well as its impacts on the victims. The findings have implications; first, for how this school and others similar to it, might change their architecture and that of the toilets to build a more secure environment, and, in Newman's terms, a more defensible space for both learners and teachers. Second, with media reports of bullying and its dire consequences for victims, including serious injury and suicides seemingly on the increase in recent years, further research is needed to understand the extent, nature and effects of bullying in the schooling system, and the role that toilets and their

architecture play in such violence. Further, as teachers play a vital role in the safety of children in schools, further studies are needed that examine their understandings and perspectives of the problem and their role in addressing it. Only when we understand these issues better will we be able to develop sustainable solutions for the eradication of bullying in schools and its violent impact on victims and their health and educational outcomes.

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