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Reading Partridge's 'The Goblet Club' as an Integral Part of a Secondary School's Anti-bullying Programme

Abstract

Notwithstanding legislation and individual schools' codes of conduct prohibiting bullying, bullying is an escalating problem in South African schools. It seems as if existing anti-bullying policies, programmes and intervention strategies are failing to address the scourge. Bibliotherapy has been identified as a way to strengthen schools' existing anti-bullying programmes. This paper reports on findings from an investigation into the suitability of reading Partridge's *The Goblet Club* during bibliotherapy sessions which form an integral part of a school's anti-bullying programme. The study found that *The Goblet Club* gives an authentic, well-researched portrayal of bullying among boys, as well as teacher-on-learner bullying. The book sheds light on the bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders, types of bullying, and coping strategies employed by the fictional victims of bullying. The reading of Partridge's *The Goblet Club* as part of a school's anti-bullying programme will give learners the opportunity to use the fictional characters' struggles and aggression to gain insight into their own nemeses, different types of bullying, and the effectiveness of coping strategies.

Keywords: adult youth fiction, bibliotherapy, South Africa, teachers as bullies, victimisation

Introduction

Bullying violates the South African child's constitutional right to human dignity, freedom and security of the person, children's rights and the right to education (Laas & Boezaart, 2014). Notwithstanding, the legislative framework provided by the South African constitution, *South African Schools Act* 84 of 1996, the *Children's Act* 38 of 2005, the *Child Justice Act* 75 of 2008, and the protection orders provided by the *Protection from Harassment Act* 17 of 2011, as well as individual schools' codes of conduct prohibiting bullying (Laas & Boezaart, 2014), bullying is an escalating problem in South African schools (Coertze & Bezuidenhout, 2013). It seems as if existing anti-bullying policies, programmes and intervention strategies are failing to address the scourge. There is thus a need for school leadership to look at new or additional cost-effective ways to curb bullying in schools. Flanagan, Vanden Hoek, Shelton, Kelly, Morrison and Young (2013) identify bibliotherapy as an effective, cost-effective way to strengthen a school's anti-bullying programme. Through bibliotherapy, or the use of literature for the purposes of emotional healing and growth, children may learn about bullying and coping strategies through stories of other children's struggles and aggression (Flanagan et al., 2013). Flanagan et al. (2013) write that books that may be used as part of an anti-bullying programme should contain memorable protagonists and attention-grabbing storylines. These books should inform children about aspects of bullying, such as who the role-players are, the different types of bullying, coping

skills that are effective in reducing bullying, and offer solutions that victims will realistically be able to use.

The aim of this paper is to report on an investigation into the suitability of reading Partridge's *The Goblet Club* during bibliotherapy sessions that form an integral part of a secondary school's anti-bullying programme. To attain the aforesaid aim, this study was guided by the following questions:

- How is bullying portrayed in *The Goblet Club*?
- Is the portrayal of bullying in *The Goblet Club* in line with research findings on the topic?
- Can bibliotherapists draw on *The Goblet Club* to help children cope with bullying?
- Can *The Goblet Club* be utilised as part of a school's anti-bullying programme?

Book selection

Building upon the premises that the authors of good young adult fiction (YAF) reach an audience because 'they have placed their fingers on the pulse of adolescents and metaphorically engage them where they live' (Larson & Hoover, 2012, p. 49), this research project focuses on books that have received the M.E.R. prize for YAF during the period 1995 to 2015 (cf. *South African awards for Children's and Youth Adult books*, [sa] for a list of books that have won the award). The researcher read all the books that received the M.E.R. prize for YAF during the period 1995 to 2015. While eleven of the books describe one or more incidents of bullying, only *The Goblet Club* has bullying as a leading theme. I therefore decided to analyse the book's portrayal of bullying in order to evaluate its suitability for inclusion in an anti-bullying programme for secondary schools.

The story

Mark Llewellyn-Bryce, the protagonist in Partridge's (2007) novel is sent to St. Matthew's College for Boys by his parents as 'one more punishment for years of bad behaviour' (Partridge, 2007, back page). This dark novel of betrayal and abuse is set against the background of a boys' only boarding school that accommodates boys who are 'troublesome and disobedient [and] thrown out of other schools' (Partridge, 2007, p. 11). The members of the Goblet Club, Mark, Trent, Vlad and Francis, dedicate themselves to the study of poison. Initially they use poison to rid the school of its rat plague. Later on they use their knowledge of poison to poison the resident bully (John Venter) and murder the headmaster (Solomon Crabtree). While the relationship between Mark and Venter is a recurring subplot, teacher-on-learner bullying is a leading theme in *The Goblet Club*.

The portrayal of bullying in *The Goblet Club*

The role-players: bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders

While research on bullying in schools focuses predominantly on learner-on-learner bullying, *The Goblet Club*'s main focus is on teacher-on-learner bullying.

The ensuing discussion will firstly look at Partridge's (2007) portrayal of teachers as bullies; thereafter, attention will be given to learners as bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders. The story is set against the background of a boys' only school. The only females mentioned in the book are Mark and Francis's mothers. All descriptions of incidents of bullying are those of boys and male teachers bullying boys. Cross gender or female-on-female bullying dynamics could thus not be explored.

Teachers as bullies

The antagonist, Crabtree, seems to be the embodiment of evil. Words such as 'madman' (Partridge, 2007, p. 110), 'evil' (Partridge, 2007, p. 137), 'sadistic' (Partridge, 2007, p. 23) are used to describe the headmaster of St. Matthew's, Crabtree. Crabtree's speeches during assembly were the 'tirade of an egotistical bigot' (Partridge, 2007, p. 42). Francis, one of Mark's friends, said that 'Crabtree thinks he is a priest or something, but he is more like a dictator. I just can't decide who he is more like: he's as tyrannical as Hitler, but as asinine as Napoleon, so maybe he's a bit of both' (Partridge, 2007, p. 61). Crabtree is however not the only bullying teacher. The author describes Woolf, Moolman and Ogilvie's verbal, physical and emotional abusiveness towards the learners in detail (Partridge, 2007). Partridge characterises the St. Matthew's teachers as heartless, abusive, unprincipled, and cowardly individuals who enjoy abusing their power. This characterisation is in line with findings by De Wet (2014, p. 8) on bullying teachers, namely that 'lust for power and lack of empathy [are] key characteristics of the bullying educator'.

Learners as bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders

In the portrayal of learners as bullies Partridge (2007) focuses on Venter and gives the following description of him:

... a stout boy with arms roughly the size of those belonging to a New Zealand rugby player... He had a squashed pink face that clashed horribly with his red hair... Every school has them, those unfortunate kids who find that making other boys lives miserable is the only way they can make sense of their own unhappy lives (Partridge, 2007, p. 14).

Venter is described as a 'bluntly arrogant' (Partridge, 2007, p. 98), but cowardly individual, who left Mark alone if he was with his friends, but 'when I was alone, it was another story altogether' (Partridge, 2007, pp. 54-55).

Partridge's portrayal of Venter as a spineless, unhappy individual supports the myth that bullies are unhappy individuals with low self-esteem. Danielson and LaBonty (2009) and Ma (2001) found that children who bully are more likely to have high self-esteem and suffer less anxiety and insecurity than their peers. Partridge's portrayal of bullies is however, not altogether wrong. Bullies have, as portrayed by Partridge, little empathy for their victims, are aggressive and have a need to dominate others (Danielson & LaBonty, 2009). Some references are made in the book to boys who were bullied by Venter and other (unnamed) bullies (e.g., 'Bullies like Venter were common and they terrorised the weak without constraint' (Partridge, 2007, p. 23)).

Mark and Thomas however, are the only two victims who are identified by name. Of these two, only Thomas can be labelled a 'true' victim. Thomas Newberry, the 16-year-old nephew of Crabtree, who also acted as Crabtree's secretary, was sexually abused by his uncle. It seems as if this abuse was common knowledge among learners. This led to his victimisation. In a letter to Mark Thomas wrote: 'The boys at school laughed at me. They called me 'nancy boy'. I realised that they knew about what was happening to me and that they amused themselves at my expense' (Partridge, 2007, p. 90). Thomas did not retaliate; on the contrary, he became a pitiable recluse. Partridge's characterisation of Thomas is in line with research findings by Ma (2001), namely that victims of bullying have low self-esteem and high social anxiety, are often without friends, lack social skills, and will rarely defend themselves or retaliate.

Sekol and Farrington (2010, p. 1759) found that children who are both bullies and victims in school are 'an especially problematic group' characterised by restlessness, hot-temper, impulsiveness, aggressiveness, hyperactivity and behavioural misconduct. They are mostly disliked by their peers and are more likely than 'pure' victims to be bullied physically. The aforementioned characterisation holds true for Mark, e.g. he head-butted Venter, his only friends were his fellow Goblet Club members, and Mark and Francis acted out their reputation as delinquents and vandalised school property (Partridge, 2007). Mark showed no remorse for his delinquency: 'I don't think I am a bad kid, just misunderstood... I am unapologetic of my wicked ways' (Partridge, 2007, p. 1).

An important group of children who are affected by bullying are those children who are neither victims nor perpetrators, but who see bullying happening to their peers. According to Mestry, Van der Merwe and Squelch (2006, p. 48) bystanders rarely intervene; they can 'idly stand by or look away, afraid to step in for fear of becoming a target themselves or they can actively encourage or join in the bullying'. These findings hold true for the bystanders in *The Goblet Club*: during a physical altercation between Mark and Venter 'there were students all around us as well as prefects, but no one intervened... Fights were commonplace at St. Matthew's, so instead of trying to break us up, they spurred us on' (Partridge, 2007, p. 100). The apathy of bystanders, as depicted in the above citation, is typical during incidence of bullying (Mestry et al., 2006). Yet, two examples of bystanders becoming involved in bullying situations, and siding with the victims, are described in the book. Francis came to Mark's aid when the latter was viciously attacked by Venter (Partridge, 2007). Mark helped Thomas to escape from St. Matthew's, thus giving him an opportunity to escape from his abusive uncle and the verbal humiliation by learners (Partridge, 2007).

Types of bullying

De Wet (2016) distinguishes between three types of bullying, namely verbal (e.g., name-calling, threats, racist and sexist remarks and teasing), physical (e.g., hitting, hair pulling, biting, punching and poking) and nonverbal (imagery and gestures) bullying. De Wet (2016, p. 31) notes that there are also forms of bullying 'that have a specific nature due to among others its purpose or platform', such as emotional, discriminatory and cyber-bullying. This paper will draw attention to one of these specific forms of bullying, namely emotional bullying. Emotional bullying

is anything that causes emotional pain and can include isolating or excluding someone, defamation, humiliation, blackmail, manipulation, intimidation and marginalisation (Coertze & Bezuidenhout, 2013; De Wet, 2016). Attention will firstly be given to the three types of bullying perpetrated by teachers; thereafter, the focus will be on verbal and physical bullying among learners.

Types of bullying perpetrated by teachers

The book abounds in examples of teachers physically abusing their learners. Teachers used their hands or books to hit learners over the head. Learners had to stand for prolonged periods of time during detention. They were even forced to stand outside the class while it was raining (Partridge, 2007). Corporal punishment was not uncommon, with learners often returning from Crabtree's office 'bruised from his belt' (Partridge, 2007, p. 43).

I identified numerous incidences of St. Matthew's teachers verbally abusing the learners. Mr. Woolf told Collins, one of the learners, that 'I think that you are a sad, sad individual who is going to end up making a mockery of himself on street corners for money'. After humiliating Collins, Woolf 'passed onto the next boy and repeated the same exercise, ridiculing him and putting him down. He was an expert' (Partridge, 2007, p. 33). The teachers called the learners all kinds of names, e.g., 'Here you will eat off the floor like the runt that you are' (Partridge, 2007, p. 33); 'what I see before me are the dregs that cannot be washed away' (Partridge, 2007, p. 43); and 'you are the black sheep whom society has cast aside into the wilderness. Thieves and good-for-nothings' (Partridge, 2007, p. 42).

The assumption put forward by Partridge, namely that teachers subject their learners to physical and verbal bullying is supported by De Wet's (2014) study. She found that 55.6% of the teachers who took part in her study characterised teacher-on-learner bullying as verbal abuse. She furthermore found that learners were subjected to physical abuse, especially corporal punishment.

Teachers should act *in loco parentis* towards learners. It can therefore be argued that if teachers forsake their role as caregivers and use their position of power to humiliate learners, they may be guilty of emotional bullying. Woolf treated the learners 'like absolute cretins and he never missed an opportunity to affirm Crabtree's opinion of us: that we were good for nothing criminals who had no future to look forward to' (Partridge, 2007, p. 31). Woolf told Mark that 'no one gives a damn about you here... you are nothing but a little boy who is going to be walked upon and forgotten' (Partridge, 2007, p. 33). After an altercation with Venter, Mark walked around the school with a blue eye for more than a week: 'but I could have been wearing a sombrero for all the attention that my teachers gave me' (Partridge, 2007, p. 56). Through the words of the protagonist, Partridge (2007, p. 43) criticises the teachers of St. Matthew's for a lack of care and an unwillingness to stand up against the abusive headmaster:

More than once, I saw a student returning from Crabtree's office, bruised from his belt, or broken from his words, and still the teachers did nothing, not even offer a word of sympathy to the victim. Crabtree was king in his kingdom, and it seemed to me like no one stood in his way.

Types of bullying perpetrated by learners

A reading of *The Goblet Club* revealed only two types of bullying among the learners, namely verbal and physical bullying. Numerous vivid descriptions of physical altercations between Mark and Venter are found in the book. The following two examples will suffice:

He confronted me as I was coming out of assembly one morning and hit me square in the stomach... I doubled over and concentrated hard not vomiting (Partridge, 2007, p. 56).

As soon as I stepped through the door, [Venter] grabbed my arm and whirled me around to face him. I jerked backwards and threw my book bag into his face, causing him to stumble backwards... This time, I meant to fight back. He lunged at me and I hit him square in the nose with my fist (Partridge, 2007, p. 100).

Contrary to research findings, namely that verbal bullying is more common than physical bullying among children (Coertze & Bezuidenhout, 2013), *The Goblet Club* focuses mainly on physical altercations between Mark and Venter. Only a few examples of verbal bullying among learners were identified. Venter threatened Mark by saying 'I'm going to break your face every single day until even your own mother won't want to look at you' (Partridge, 2007, p. 15). Venter also 'grinned' at Mark 'whenever we passed each other, whether I was with my friends or not' (Partridge, 2007, p. 56). Thomas was often subjected to name-calling ('nancy boy') and scornful laughter (Partridge, 2007, p. 90).

Coping with bullying

Flanagan et al. (2013) has investigated the coping strategies of victims. Coping strategies that are found to be ineffective, have also been found to be the most commonly used strategies, such as retaliation, ignoring and distancing (Flanagan et al., 2013). These ineffective strategies are also the preferred strategies of the victims in *The Goblet Club*: Mark tried to avoid Venter, especially when his friends were not in the vicinity. On one occasion he even ran away. When avoidance failed, Mark also resorted to violence and became a bully-victim (Partridge, 2007). Thomas, who should be seen as a 'true' victim, turned into himself and became a desolate, pathetic figure when he 'realised that nobody was going to help me and something broke inside me; the small shard of hope that remained inside me was gone forever' (Partridge, 2007, p. 90).

Researchers (Flanagan et al., 2013) often recommend that victims of bullying should turn to adults, i.e. parents and/or teachers when they are victimised. With the exception of one teacher – who was forced to resign – all the adults in the book, parents and teachers alike, are portrayed as uncaring individuals. It is therefore understandable that none of the victims of bullying turned to them for help.

Conclusion

In *The Goblet Club* Partridge gives an authentic, well-researched portrayal of bullying amongst boys and teacher-on-learner bullying. A reading of the book gives insight into the possibility of teachers verbally, physically and emotionally abusing those placed in their care. *The Goblet Club* sheds light on the characteristics of boys as bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders. The fictional characters resorted more often to physical than verbal bullying. Coping strategies preferred by the

characters are avoidance and retaliation. The reading of *The Goblet Club* as an integral part of a school's anti-bullying programme will give learners the opportunity to use the fictional characters' struggles and aggression to become aware of their nemeses, whether it is bullying fellow-learners or teachers, as well as the different types of bullying. During bibliotherapy sessions attention can also be given to the feasibility of the coping strategies used by the fictional characters.

The Goblet Club was written to entertain young adults. It is therefore understandable that empirical details would, at times, take the backseat to adventure, intrigue and character development. This should not be seen as a stumbling block to reading *The Goblet Club* as an integral part of a school's anti-bullying programme but rather, as an opportunity to highlight the myths surrounding bullying, the gender dynamics of bullying, different types of bullying, the role of bystanders in the perpetuation of bullying, and alternative, more effective coping strategies, such as assertiveness and problem solving.

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