

Part 6

Research Education

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Burke's Dramatism Framework: A Lens to Analyse Bullying

Abstract

Bullying is rife in schools across the world, which has emotional, educational as well as financial implications. Research suggests that the way in which bystanders, and in particular adults, react to such incidents is pivotal in curbing this problem. While a dearth of research focuses on the victims as well as the perpetrators of bullying, one should not ignore how different interactions between role-players influence the situation. The purpose of the paper is to explore the extent to which Burke's Dramatism framework can be used as a lens to gain insight into how role-players respond to bullying incidences, and how this contributes to the drama. I use a series of email discussions with the mother of a bullied child as a case study.

Keywords: school violence, victimisation, case study, bystanders, child abuse

Introduction

Around the world, learners are bullied. Bullying differs from other forms of violence in that the harm done to the other is intentional, repetitive and the result of a power imbalance between those who engage in such acts, and those targeted. Bullying can take various forms, including physical, psychological and verbal attacks; it can have a sexual nature and occur directly or in cyberspace (Gutt & Randa, 2016). Bullying has unfortunate consequences for both victims and perpetrators. Victims feel isolated and rejected, their self-esteem is affected, and it can lead to depression and suicide attempts (Esbensen & Carson, 2009). Perpetrators often develop into disagreeable adults who might engage in criminal activities (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Sigurdson et al. (2015) found that both victims and perpetrators have a higher chance to experience mental health problems in adulthood. Role players in schools thus need to acknowledge the problem, truly understand the phenomenon and be committed to implement strategies to curb this problem. The Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (n.d.) found that the cost benefits of preventing bullying are at a health care level (possible medical costs for mental problems), an educational level (retaining children to complete school) as well as a societal level (children have a better chance of becoming productive citizens when they complete school).

Statement of the problem

Many strategies exist to counter bullying, for instance the Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme (Hazelden Publishing, 2016) and in some countries, such efforts are paying off. A longitudinal study in Italy over eight years found a downward trend in occurrences. Vieno et al. (2015) claim that this might be the result of purposeful engagements with the problem, increasing awareness, and an understanding that it is a broad-ranging issue of concern to both the schooling system and public health. Similarly, a cross-sectional comparative study of data from 1996 to 2011 in Nordic countries showed a decline in bullying reported in the survey. The differences were however only statistically significant in Denmark, while Iceland did not show a decline. Still, the study showed that close to 20% of parents overall indicated that their children are being bullied at school, with immigrant learners being bullied significantly more than their peers (Bjereld et al., 2014).

These studies are however, not without flaws. Vieno et al. (2015) admit that although the Italian statistics show a decrease in bullying activities, it cannot be ruled out that respondents referred to other types of bullying (e.g. cyber-bullying) not measured by the instrument. The study conducted in Nordic countries was based on parents' responses, and again, the authors pointed out that this result could either be indicative of a real decline, or that bullying "has moved to arenas where the parents are less aware" (Bjereld et al., 2014, p. 596). A study in Romania comparing data from 2006 with that of 2010, indeed shows an increase in the prevalence of bullying amongst 11-15 year olds (Cosma & Baban, 2013).

In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education has issued a number of documents aimed at preventing bullying and most schools have an anti-bullying policy. Many schools spend a significant part of their budget on security services and equipment to monitor the safety situation. Still, the regularity with which the media as well as researchers report cases of bullying, suggest that the problem persists (Jacobs & De Wet, 2014) although much about the problem is known.

Many studies focus on the characteristics of victims (Bjereld et al., 2014), on the effect on the victims and perpetrators (Sigurdson et al., 2015), and on the effectiveness of programmes to prevent it (Vahedi et al., 2016). Others look at the crucial role of bystanders showing empathy (Polanin et al., 2012). Horton (2016) however argues that in primarily highlighting and labelling the roles of the individuals involved the wider contexts become obscured. As important as the roles of the individuals are, a need exists for a theory that simultaneously looks at the individuals in the dramas that plays itself out, and at the factors that set up the scene for such dramas.

A variety of explanations underpinned by different theoretical positions exist identifying genetic, biological and/or neuro-psychological attributes of individuals as the foundation of the problem. An example is Bjereld et al. (2014) who link learners with Attention Deficit Disorder with bullying incidences. While I do not dispute that certain characteristics in individuals make them more prone to aggression, I reject the notion of individuals as products of mere genetics, unable to make decisions and choices regarding their behaviour. There is substantial support for the ecological model to understand bullying that allows the exploration of the relationships between bullying behaviour and a variety of attributes such as

biological factors as well as social structures (see Hornby, 2016). However, it does not focus on the way in which role-players make sense of bullying, interpret situations and respond to it. Thus, in order to make sense of bullying, in this paper I explore Burke's Dramatism framework (Burke, 1969) as a means to account for the interplay between different role-players, and the environment, towards understanding the phenomenon.

Burke's Dramatism

Burke's Dramatism theory enables us to reflect on human behaviour and the motives for bullying (Krauss, 2006). Burke (1969, p. xv) proposes a pentad of terms to help us explain what people are doing and why they are doing it. The five aspects he investigates are *scene*, *purpose*, *agency*, *agent* and *act*.

When exploring the *act of bullying*, different types can be studied while the term *scenes* refers to different contexts in schools and communities. This model adds an important dimension to research on bullying as it also considers the *purpose* or motives of the actors or agents involved as well as the methods and props (*agency*). It also permits multiple interacting factors, role-players, events and processes to be studied. It lets the focus move from one actor to the other and the interactions between different actors. It allows for ambiguity and inconsistencies and acknowledges that no two things or situations are alike (Burke, 1969).

Burke (1969) explains that the five principles must not be seen in isolation but rather in relation to the each other, in what he calls "ratios". The most significant ratios are the "scene-act" ratio, and the "agent-scene" ratio. Järvinen and Miller (2014) explain that these ratios provide a logic to connect events, places and people into a particular social reality. This opens up possibilities to uncover "multiple truths" (Fox, 2002, p. 371) and various perspectives.

In relation to bullying, Dramatism provides us with a means to view the school ground, classroom, sport field, etc. as stages on which a drama is played out, complete with actors (antagonists, protagonists and minor actors), setting, purpose and plot. The ratios also make us aware of the ways in which different elements influence and intensify each other during acts of bullying (Fox, 2002).

While Krauss (2006) suggests that Burke's Dramatism model could serve as a grand theory for violent behaviour in schools, I do not intend to pursue or reject this claim in this paper. I intend to use it as a framework to gain insight into the dynamics of bullying in schools, and specifically to analyse the written narration of a mother on episodes of bullying that her son experienced.

Empirical investigation

In order to explore to what extent Burke's Dramatism can provide insight into incidents of bullying at schools, I follow a narrative research approach to explore the written text of Susan, the mother of John (pseudonyms used), a primary school learner from a small town who had contacted me for advice. Susan gave permission for the content of her emails to be used for research purposes. I translated it and Susan checked that the translations was accurate.

I do not claim that the narration reflects a variety of viewpoints or a bigger truth, rather as text which as Burke (1966, p. 45) explains, is a "selection of reality". The

mother selected what to share, and what not to share, and I infer the positions of others, where required, based on the text only. In the discussion below, I will provide extracts from Susan's report, and apply Burke's pentad to interpret it. After completion of the draft paper, I sent it to Susan for a member-check where she had the opportunity to assess the accuracy of the interpretations (Merriam, 2009).

The drama

The different *actors* (John, the teacher, the principal, other learners, and Susan) indeed represent different stake-holders in schooling system. The *scene* is the school itself, with different sets like the classroom, the boys' bathroom, the principal's office and the school yard; spaces commonly found at schools.

Susan wrote:

John was the smallest in his class. Larger boys in the class teased him by holding stuff beyond his reach, tapping him on the head, and making remarks about his genitals in the bathroom. A boy once urinated on his foot.

The *acts* of bullying (teasing, laughing, urinating on his foot) are similar to what plays itself out in many schools (Jacobs & De Wet, 2014). John reported the incidences to the teacher as is recommended in anti-bullying programme (Polanin et al., 2012).

John told a teacher about this, but the response was that he should stop telling tales, stop being a "sissie" and learn to stand his ground.

Vahedi et al. (2016) emphasises the need for teachers to have comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of bullying, and how to respond to incidents of bullying. Adults at school should be empathetic about incidences of bullying (Gutt & Randa, 2016), and teachers, by virtue of their profession should take care of all the children under their tuition (Botha et al., 2015). This teacher's reaction however, suggest a lack of understanding, indifference, or that she views bullying as normal.

He reacted to this by starting to tease other learners and playing tricks on them. He frequently got into trouble for this at school, and his school work deteriorated drastically.

The snowballing dynamics of negative reactions by the different actors strengthened the feeling of otherness in John, and left him powerless. The teacher seemingly joined the crowd on stage, taking sides against John, who consequently became a popular target:

Once, a teacher caught John chewing gum. Although a number of learners in the class were chewing gum, the teacher decided to make an example of John, by forcing him to rub the gum in his hair. The other learners laughed, but John was in tears.

The audience experienced this as a comedy, while in John's life, a tragedy unfolded. Susan, realised that her child was suffering, and contacted me for advice. I recommended that she should go to the principal, expecting the principal to act as a diligent *pater familias*, to give advice or to intervene towards a positive outcome for all learners. The principal however showed a lack of understanding of the dynamics of victimisation, and took a position that was both defensive (in terms of the responsibility of the school) and judgemental (in terms of John and Susan):

The principal was not really interested in what I had to say. She told me that John was, for instance, caught putting a frog into another child's sport shoes. The more I tried to explain that negative behaviour by others elicits this response in John, the less interested she was. The next day, the principal called all the grade 7 learners to assembly, told them to stop any bullying behaviour and to stop running to their parents with stories.

The principal could afterwards claim that she did take steps to address the problem by warning the learners not to engage in such acts. Yet she countered this by the message that they should not tell their parents about it.

This closing scene was, for both John and Susan, disheartening.

John became more and more subdued. His school work continued to deteriorate. He did not want to go to school or to any activity at the school. One day, he saw children tripping and roughing up his little brother. He lost his temper, and viciously attacked the children, using a knuckle duster. He was put in detention until the end of the year, and was barred from taking part in extramural school activities.

Discussion

If asked, the children who targeted John would most probably claim they were just having fun, or that most of the acts were accidental. The teacher would undoubtedly explain that the children were warned numerous times not to chew gum, and that she herself did not rub the chewing gum into John's hair. Treating John with contempt could even earn her some popularity amongst those who were targeting John.

While Salmivalli (2010) suggests that children who engage in bullying behaviour seek power and status amongst their peers, Chau and Castellanos (2015) argue that gaining popularity gives individuals the power to bully others. The various actors would point out that John is indeed the problem in all of this and that carrying a knuckle duster to school proves intent. The mother would be sketched as interfering with the running of the school and being overprotective. Yet, Belmore (2016) highlights that it is important for parents to be aware of what is happening in their children's lives and should play a significant role in intervening when necessary.

John clearly struggled to fit in, and his motive for pranking and teasing the others was most probably a combination of trying to blend in while also revenging himself.

Reflecting on the interplay between *scene* and *act* as well as *scene* and *actors*, the context of this school seemingly allowed people to act in socially unacceptable ways. When the teacher did not acknowledge that it is offensive to urinate on somebody else's foot, or even worse, forced John to rub chewing gum into his own hair, it set the scene for more undesirable behaviour.

Furthermore, when actions like these are condoned, but other pranks (like a frog in a shoe) are condemned, inconsistencies come to the fore, and the message is clearly interpreted by John (and also the other learners) that he stands alone against the rest of the school (both staff members and peers). In this drama he is casted as the antagonist who should be excluded. This resonates with Heinemann notion of mobbing: "something that is done by the group to someone who does not fit in" (Horton, 2016, p. 210).

Changing the script

A myriad of recommendations addressing bullying exists, and in the context of the study, addressing the scene-actor dynamics is essential. Scholarly literature suggests that in schools where there are structure and support, and a deep understanding of the phenomenon of bullying, less victimisation occurs (Vahedi et al., 2016). Children need to be taught to be kind and considerate towards each other. Parents and teachers need to adopt autonomy-supported approaches when educating children. Roth, Kanat-Maymon and Bibi (2011, p. 655) explain that “autonomy-supportive contexts involve acknowledgement of the child’s feelings, taking the child’s perspective, providing rationale, allowing choice, and minimizing pressure”.

Conclusion

Burke indeed provides us with a framework to critically look at the scripts of the bullying dramas as they unfold. Bullying is intentional and repetitive harm to a targeted person and that can only happen if the context allows it. While some learners are popular, others are not. Teachers and school managers need to be knowledgeable about bullying but they also have to nurture a different mind-set about the problem unlike the players in the drama discussed in this case study. A better understanding of how a scene is set up to either include or exclude, the nature of the dynamics among the lead actors, not casting them as protagonists and antagonists, and a varied script for actors in supporting roles, can indeed lead to a more positive final scene.

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