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**Supporting Teachers Who Witness Student Bullying: (Re)shaping Perceptions
through Peer Coaching in Action Learning**

Abstract:

Purpose –This study explored how peer coaching in action learning meetings stimulated teachers to experience transformational learning through critically reflecting on the perceptions that shaped their beliefs about student bullying.

Design/methodology/approach - We used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand how participating teachers were using peer coaching in the action learning meetings to make sense of their subjective experiences with student bullying.

Findings – We report three themes (power; categories/labels; and diversity/differences) explaining the perceptions that guided participants’ understanding of student bullying, and for each theme we describe how peer coaching enabled the participants to re-shape their interpretation of experiences with student bullying.

Research limitations/implications - This study showed how peer coaching has the potential to empower teachers to devise meaningful action plans to address bullying. Future research using longitudinal quantitative research design could shed more light on the sustainability of those action plans.

Practical implications - Knowledge of teacher perceptions identified in our study can enrich anti-bullying interventions in schools. Furthermore, building a peer coaching action learning community can provide a form of systemic support to help teachers gain resilience in acting against student bullying in schools.

Originality/value - Our study reveals the potential of peer coaching as a transformational learning tool to support teachers when dealing with student bullying.

Introduction

Bullying is a form of typically repeated aggressive behavior or intimidation that causes injury or distress to the individual toward whom it is directed and is characterized by an imbalance of power between the bully/bullies and the victim/victims (Jacobson, 2012). Much of the research and inquiry regarding bullying in schools focuses on the bullies and their victims (Jacobson, 2012); however, some research acknowledges the bystander (Obermann, 2011; Trach, et al., 2010), who is typically framed as other peer students. Teachers, though, are also bystanders and much is expected of them with regard to preventing, intervening, or resolving bullying despite a lack of substantive support for them to do so (Sokol et al., 2016).

It has been reported that teachers' responses to bullying can significantly impact student bullying behavior and other bystanders' willingness to intervene (Hektner and Swenson, 2011). However, teachers are seldom given the support required to be effective in the identification and/or prevention of bullying (Craig et al., 2000; Yoon and Kerber, 2003). Moreover, the kind of support provided by schools focuses more on providing general information about different types of bullying than on building teachers' confidence or reshaping their approach to student bullying through encouraging reflection on related beliefs (Astor et al., 2009; Yoon and Bauman, 2014). Indeed, it is very important to build teachers' awareness about different kinds of bullying, as teachers are reported to be more sensitive towards bullying that involves physical aggression rather than relational bullying that is more subtle and covert (Yoon et al., 2016). "Awareness, however is not simply about increasing knowledge for teachers, but about altering their belief in themselves as individuals who can respond, thus helping to construct a teacher identity that is confident in stopping bullying" (Migliaccio, 2015, p. 85).

Nonetheless, although the extant research indicates that teacher responses to student

1
2
3 bullying is influenced by teachers' attitudes and beliefs about bullying and their previous
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5 encounters with bullying, bullying prevention programs in schools lack a focus on teacher beliefs
6
7 or the underlying perceptions guiding those beliefs (Troop-Gordon and Ladd, 2015; Yoon and
8
9 Bauman, 2014). These programs mostly subscribe to a *rules and sanctions* or *authority-based*
10
11 approach where pro-social behavior is rewarded and bullying is censured (Stephens, 2011),
12
13 leaving little room for teachers to improvise ways to address bullying situations that may not
14
15 respond to standardized punitive measures (Burger et al., 2015). Furthermore, these programs
16
17 mainly view teachers as implementers of prevention programs, but rarely as witnesses or victims
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19 of student bullying in schools (Yoon and Kerber, 2003).
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24 This lack of attention has led to teachers experiencing unmet psychological needs
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26 following acts of student bullying (Galand et al., 2007). The fear and heightened levels of stress
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28 and emotional exhaustion that teachers feel after witnessing student bullying can lead to burnout
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30 and consequently less effective teachers (Daniels et al., 2007). Impaired well-being that results
31
32 from experiences of student bullying in schools is a source of concern in itself, but it is also
33
34 documented as a factor of workplace dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and attrition that hampers
35
36 educational practice (Pierce and Molloy, 1990; van Dick and Wagner, 2001). Astor and his
37
38 colleagues (2009) allude to this need in their call to educators to go beyond awareness of
39
40 bullying interventions to facilitate cultures of warmth, care, and empathy that would address
41
42 these types of barriers to effective teaching (Astor et al., 2009).
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47 To address these gaps, we explored if and how teachers in K-12 schools can be supported
48
49 to identify and transform perceptions shaping their understanding of student bullying and build a
50
51 peer community that can guide them to emotionally cope with their experiences of witnessing
52
53 student bullying in schools. We define perceptions here as frames of reference or meaning
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3 perspectives that represent “the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we
4 filter sense impressions...it provides the context for making meaning within which we choose
5 what and how a sensory experience is to be construed and/or appropriated” (Mezirow, 2000, p.
6 16). Particularly, we were interested to examine the potential of a peer coaching action learning
7 intervention in supporting teachers to critically reflect on the perceptions guiding their
8 understanding of student bullying. The research question that guided our inquiry was: How does
9 peer coaching in the action learning intervention help teachers construct their frame/perspective
10 towards student bullying and consequently their action plans?
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24 **Peer Coaching and Action Learning**

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26 Peer coaching is defined as “a type of helping relationship in which two people of equal status
27 actively participate in helping each other on specific tasks or problems, with a mutual desire to
28 be helpful” (Parker et al., 2008, p. 499). Action learning is defined as:
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31

32
33 an approach to the development of people in organizations which takes the task as the
34 vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and
35 no sober and deliberate action without learning...The method has three main components
36 ---people who accept the responsibility for taking action on a particular issue; problems,
37 or the tasks that people set themselves; and a set of six or so colleagues who support and
38 challenge each other to make progress on problems. (Pedler, 1991, p. xxii-xxiii)
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47 O’Neil and Marsick (2009) compared action learning to the notion of peer mentoring as the
48 “group structure (small diverse group composed of peers), environment and process (high degree
49 mutual trust along with a genuine interest in learning and development)” (O’Neil and Marsick,
50 2009, p.21) of action learning meetings are similar to the features of peer mentoring groups
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3 (Kram & Isabella, 1985). While we see the rationale guiding this comparison, we reason that
4
5 action learning is more akin to peer coaching than mentoring due to its focus on specific tasks
6
7 and problems and due to the short term nature of the interactions (D'Abate et al., 2003). To
8
9 further articulate the similarities between peer coaching and action learning, in Table 1, we note
10
11 how the eight stages of the conceptual Peer Coaching (PC) model (Ladyshefsky and Varey,
12
13 2005) align with Action Learning (AL) (Marsick and O'Neil, 1999).
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16
17 --Table 1 About Here--
18

19 Among the different schools of thought on AL, experiential (McLaughlin and Thorpe,
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21 1993) and critical reflection (O'Neil and Marsick, 1994) models resonate the most with peer
22
23 coaching. The “experiential” school of action learning requires participants to reflect on their
24
25 experience of a complex challenge with support from others, followed by further action, to
26
27 support change instead of repeating previous patterns (Marsick and O'Neil, 1999). The “critical
28
29 reflection” school of action learning goes one step further in requiring the participants to reflect
30
31 on the underlying assumptions and beliefs that they bring to practice regarding the complex
32
33 challenge (O'Neil and Marsick, 1994). The experiential and critical reflective stances of action
34
35 learning parallel the emphasis on integration of reflection and practice in peer coaching (Parker
36
37 et al., 2008). This integration “demands purposeful attention to self” through building
38
39 “awareness of cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects of professional and personal
40
41 dimensions” (p. 491). Peer coaching is a system of reciprocal support that can enable teachers to
42
43 reflect on their current practices and expand their instructional abilities (Charteris and Smardon,
44
45 2014; Zepeda et al., 2013). Most importantly, peer coaching can offer teachers an opportunity to
46
47 co-construct meaning about their work experiences (Jewett and MacPhee, 2012). Similarly,
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49 action learning meetings with their thrust on experiential and critical reflective learning can
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3 empower teachers to challenge each other's assumptions and beliefs on student bullying and
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5 broaden perspectives on what constitutes bullying and how they can intervene.
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8 **Method**

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10 We used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand how participating
11
12 teachers were using peer coaching in the action learning meetings to make sense of their
13
14 subjective experiences with student bullying (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). According to Smith,
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16 Flowers, and Larkin (2009), IPA focuses on "how people make sense of their major life
17
18 experiences" (p.1). They explain that, "the IPA researcher is engaged in a double hermeneutic
19
20 because the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is
21
22 happening to them" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 4). In this study, we used the lens of transformational
23
24 learning stimulated by peer coaching in the action learning meetings (Mezirow, 1991; 2000) to
25
26 interpret participants' accounts of identifying and reshaping perceptions (frames of reference or
27
28 meaning perspectives) that were central to their interpretations of student bullying. In other
29
30 words, we examined how the participants were experiencing transformations to their mental
31
32 schemas of student bullying through engaging in critical self-reflection prompted by peer
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34 coaching in the action learning meetings. Thus, there was an extra level of interpretation as
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36 required in an IPA study, one that requires researchers to analyze how participants make
37
38 meaning out of their experiences (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith, 2011). This study was approved by
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40 the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Drexel University. The authors (referred to as we
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42 throughout the manuscript) did not know any of the participants in this study beforehand, and
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44 interacted with the participants only to the extent necessary for the purpose of the study.
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51 **Background and Context**

52 We conducted this study with teachers from schools (elementary, middle and high) located in
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3 high need areas (i.e., neighbourhoods with residents in lower socio-economic strata) in the U.S.
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5 city of Philadelphia as bullying behaviors are most prevalent in such settings (Sheldon and
6
7 Epstein, 2002). As recalling instances of student bullying can be emotionally charged, the peer
8
9 coaching setting in the action learning meetings helped to create a safe environment for our
10
11 participants, which simultaneously allowed them to engage in critical reflection and create self-
12
13 awareness about the perceptions guiding their beliefs regarding student bullying.
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16 17 **Sampling and Procedure**

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19 The study included three action learning meeting groups. We initially attempted to purposefully
20
21 recruit six teachers interested in discussing a significant challenge with regards to student
22
23 bullying in their classes for each group (Merriam, 2015), because Marsick and Maltbia (2009)
24
25 suggest having at least three and no more than six or seven participants in action learning
26
27 meetings. Including at least three participants can help to enrich the learning process in action
28
29 learning meetings whereas including more than six or seven participants can make the learning
30
31 exchange too lengthy. Although at least six teachers had expressed interest in participating in
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33 each action learning group, the final number of participants included four teachers (all female)
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35 from different urban schools in the first action learning group, two teachers and one counselor
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37 (all female) from a single urban school in the second action learning group, and five teachers
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39 (mixed gender; two male and three female) from different urban schools in the third action
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41 learning group. The teachers were not compensated for participating in the study. While one of
42
43 the participants in the second group was a counselor instead of a teacher, she had significant
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45 experiences of witnessing student bullying and could meaningfully contribute to the action
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47 learning conversations. None of the participants had prior experiences of attending anti-bullying
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49 interventions in their schools. Their schools did not have any anti-bullying interventions in place.
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3 We applied a combination of experiential (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993) and critical
4 reflection (O'Neil and Marsick, 1994) schools of action learning with the participating teachers.
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6 This form of action learning draws heavily from the concept of transformational learning which
7
8 requires participants to reassess how their beliefs are guiding their experiences and act as per the
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10 insights derived from the transformed meaning perspective resulting from reassessment of their
11
12 beliefs (Mezirow, 1991). The participants engaged in two-hour long action learning meetings
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14 occurring at one month intervals, in which one participant took the role of a focal learner to share
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16 an experience of witnessing student bullying and then worked with peer input to identify
17
18 different ways of understanding and addressing the bullying witnessed (Marsick and O'Neil,
19
20 1999). The number of meetings each group had was contingent on the number of participants in
21
22 the group (i.e., four meetings for the first group, three meetings for the second group, and five
23
24 meetings for the third group). We used the Action Learning Conversation (ALC) protocol to
25
26 structure interactions in the action learning meetings. ALCs combine objective, reflective,
27
28 interpretative, and decisional questions to produce a process of peer coaching (Marsick and
29
30 Matlbia, 2009). Objective questions focus on "What is happening?"; Reflective questions centre
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32 on "How am I feeling/reacting?"; Interpretative questions probe on "What does it mean? "What
33
34 are we learning?"; and Decisional questions seek to answer "What do I do?" and "How do I
35
36 respond?" (O'Neil and Marsick, 2009).
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44 When asked these questions, the focal participant did not respond immediately, but took
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46 notes and responded after each set of questions was exhausted. As suggested by Marsick and
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48 Maltbia (2009), we did not use the decisional questions in the first round of action learning
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50 meetings. After each meeting, we allowed the participants a week to reflect on the feedback they
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52 received from being a focal learner in the action learning meeting. By the end of a week, the
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3 participants submitted their one page reflection notes where they explained how they framed
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5 their action plans based on the experience of reflecting on the perceptions shaping their beliefs
6
7 about student bullying. These action plans detailed the class activities they designed or practices
8
9 they devised to address student bullying.
10

11 **Data Collection**

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13 We conducted 12 semi-structured open ended interviews, each lasting 45-60 minutes,
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15 with the teachers and one counselor participating in the action learning meetings in our study
16
17 using the Narrative Assessment Interview (NAI) protocol developed by Angus and Hardtke
18
19 (1994) and modified for use in organizational settings by McCollum and Callahan (2002). The
20
21 NAI was originally developed by Angus and Hardtke (1994) to assess changes in self-image
22
23 through asking interviewees to compare their pre- and post-intervention narratives. In our study,
24
25 we used the NAI to have the participants respond in writing to some open-ended questions (e.g.,
26
27 understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in addressing student bullying, their
28
29 expectations from the peer coaching in action learning meetings) prior to the action learning
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31 intervention. At the end of the intervention (within a week of the last action learning meeting of
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33 their group), participants responded to the same NAI questions again in writing, made
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35 comparisons with their first set of responses, and participated in semi-structured open ended
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37 interviews.
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44 In addition, we used the Visual Explorer picture cards both before and after intervention
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46 during the NAIs. The Visual Explorer includes a set of picture cards with diverse images that
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48 “are global in subject, context, and aesthetics, and range from food to space travel, from birth to
49
50 death, from organization to complexity and chaos....The images invite connection – they provide
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52 metaphors and help carry ideas and insights” (Palus and Horth, 2010, p. 6). This tool is grounded
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3 in research that shows that the images can stimulate effective dialogue and sensemaking of
4 complex events that are difficult to comprehend (Palus and Horth, 2002). We presented a deck of
5 sixty picture cards to the participants spread out on a table both before and after the action
6 learning intervention and asked them to elaborate on their choice of a picture card depicting their
7 perspective on student bullying. In using the picture cards as a tool for reflection, we enabled the
8 participants to engage in presentational knowing, i.e., intuitive grasp of imaginal patterns that
9 may be expressed in stories, artistic forms, and metaphors (Heron, 1992; Kasl and York 2016).
10 As presentational knowing bridges the gap between the direct phenomenological encounter of
11 one's emotional state and mental model of one's emotional state (Heron, 1992), the picture cards
12 empowered the participants in our study to connect with each other's emotions in relation to their
13 experiences of student bullying.
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28 Also, we took detailed field notes while observing the peer coaching in the action
29 learning meetings for all three groups. We triangulated multiple data sources (i.e., action learning
30 meeting field notes, written responses to NAI protocol, reflections on the Visual Explorer picture
31 cards, written action plans, and responses to the semi- structured interviews) to understand how
32 peer coaching in the action learning meetings was enabling the participants to reflect and
33 transform underlying perceptions guiding their beliefs about student bullying. As an "IPA study
34 typically involves a highly intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts produced by a
35 comparatively small number of participants" (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 103), our observation field
36 notes from the action learning meetings (four for first group, three for second group, and five for
37 third group), data from 12 semi-structured interviews, written responses to the NAI protocol,
38 reflections on the Visual Explorer picture cards, and written action plans provided rich data to
39 achieve sufficient conceptual depth in our analysis.
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Data Analysis

Through applying IPA, we aimed to develop higher level abstractions that the teachers themselves did not have access to in regards to the transformations they were experiencing in their perceptions about student bullying through peer coaching in the action learning meetings (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014).

The analysis followed the four-stage process described in Smith and Osborn (2003). First, for each of the 12 participants in our study, we read the interview transcripts independently, multiple times in conjunction with the field notes from the action learning meetings, participants' written responses to NAI protocol, reflections on the Visual Explorer picture cards, and their written action plans. Second, while reviewing the transcripts, we noted exploratory comments in the margins of the transcripts about what seemed significant in what our participants shared. Third, after we completed noting and discussing the exploratory comments in the transcripts, we attempted to identify themes representing participants' perceptions (i.e., frames of reference or meaning perspectives; Mezirow, 2000) shaping their beliefs about student bullying and the way in which peer coaching in the action learning meetings was enabling them to reframe those perceptions. At this stage, we tried to convert the exploratory comments "into concise phrases which aim to capture the essential quality of what was found" (Smith and Osborn, 2007, p. 68). Fourth, after we converted the exploratory comments into themes, we listed them and tried to determine associations between the themes that showed any conceptual similarity so that we could identify superordinate themes. Once we completed analysis on each participant, we established patterns cross-participants and documented the themes in a master table which guided the narrative account presented in the section below.

Findings

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3 In the three sub-sections below, we first explain the three themes (power;
4 categories/labels; and diversity/differences) identified to explain the perceptions guiding
5 participants' understanding of student bullying. Then for each theme, we describe the
6 transformative learning in how the participants re-framed their interpretation of experiences with
7 student bullying through peer coaching in the action learning meetings in our study.
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14 **Re-shaping Power perceptions through Peer Coaching**

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17 Our findings showed that participants often associated their perceptions of power with
18 student bullying. Participants linked bullies' sense of power or victim's lack of power to social
19 connections; they perceived bullying to be a "group thing" where the victim is typically targeted
20 by a group of more powerful perpetrators. Frequently, these "power" brokers rallied against the
21 victim. This perception about bullying being a "group activity" by those with more power over
22 the victim lacking power was also reflected in the picture card chosen by one of the participating
23 teachers. The card showed a picture of beating drums. In interpreting the card, the teacher
24 explained,
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35 *"Bullying is like the beat of drums...it takes many people for it to work."*

36
37 This lens of "power" also guided their approach to addressing bullying. For instance, they tried
38 to understand the social dynamics among the students to grasp why the victim was perceived to
39 be low in power and then tried to break the cliques to disrupt the power play and tried to put
40 disciplinary actions in place that would deter the bullies. However, as the participants shared in
41 the meetings, while this approach was effective in stopping bullying at that point in time, it was
42 not effective in the long term as students would revert back to the bullying pattern. Interestingly,
43 peer coaching in the action learning meetings brought about a transformation in their
44 interpretation of the "power" theme in regards to student bullying. They shared that their
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3 perspective on how power relates to bullying evolved from a *social to individual focus*. In other
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5 words, previously they tried to better understand the social interactions among students to
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7 comprehend why someone had less or more power and how access to power or lack thereof made
8
9 their students bullies or victims of bullying. While this focus on social dynamics enabled them to
10
11 understand the bullies' and the victims' power statuses and structure their approach accordingly,
12
13 it did not allow them a peek into the root causes of their students' lack of or need for power.
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16
17 After engaging in peer coaching in the action learning meetings, participants explained that the
18
19 different perspectives offered by the other participating teachers in this study helped to reflect on
20
21 the value of an individual focus, i.e., understanding why a student was resorting to bullying to gain
22
23 power or if the victim's lack of power can be mitigated by showcasing his/her skills in the class.
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25

26
27 This transformation in participants' thinking was reflected in the choice of a picture card by one
28
29 of the teachers after the peer coaching in the action learning meetings. She chose a card showing
30
31 baby feet and explained:

32
33 *"I chose the baby feet because it represents innocence. Every bully has an underlying*
34
35 *innocence which might have been exploited by abusive family members. It might be that because*
36
37 *abuse at home took away their power, they wanted to get that power back by picking on someone*
38
39 *in class."*

40
41 This understanding then guided the teachers to restructure their approach to bullying.
42
43 They started thinking of class exercises which would allow a positive outlet for the potential and
44
45 current bullies in their class to experience a sense of power and leadership in class. For instance,
46
47 they assigned leadership responsibilities to the students whom they knew had bullying
48
49 tendencies and satisfied their need for power in a positive manner. Further, they tried to level the
50
51 power play among their students by emphasizing the skills of the victim (e.g., academic or sports
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53 skills) so that the perpetrators were aware of the victim's strengths and thought twice before
54
55 belittling him/her.
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3 Unlike those who evolved from a *social focus to an individual focus*, transformation
4
5 experienced by some of the other participants was in the reverse direction. Prior to engaging in
6
7 peer coaching in the action learning meetings, they took special efforts to get to know their
8
9 students' individual backgrounds and home environment as they wanted to understand how their
10
11 students' upbringing could impact their inclination to bully someone in class. One participant gave
12
13 an example of a student who had a severely disruptive home situation and explained how the
14
15 constant turmoil in his personal life made him a very angry child who wanted to bully others to
16
17 feel powerful. However, post the peer coaching in the action learning meetings, these
18
19 participants reflected on how their knowledge of their students' backgrounds was necessary, but
20
21 not sufficient to address bullying instances. One of the participants shared that prior to peer
22
23 coaching in the action learning meetings, she considered each student as an isolated case. While
24
25 knowing if her students experienced disruptive environment at home made her sensitive towards
26
27 understanding their need to feel powerful in class, lack of knowledge of how they were a part of
28
29 her classroom as a bigger picture limited her approach to preventing bullying in class. In her
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31 words:
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37
38 *"I used to isolate a child in my mind...I really didn't care to know their social*
39 *roles....you know how they fit into the larger part of the social structure."*
40

41
42 Awareness of the need for knowledge of how students fit or did not fit in the social power
43
44 structure of the classroom gained through peer coaching in the action learning meetings guided
45
46 this teacher's approach towards addressing student bullying. She noted,
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48

49
50 *"After listening to my peers, I now see, when I am able to see the relationships between*
51 *my students...I can see who's on top of the stratosphere and who's not and that helps me*
52 *understand who I should be elevating, who I should try to make more connected so that they*
53 *don't get bullied...or also knowing if the one who bullies has some high achievers as friends*
54 *helps me recognize their desire to achieve and I can use that to stop their bullying behavior or*
55 *make them use their social control in a positive way."*
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6 Seeing bullying as part of the larger culture in the classroom instead of an isolated occurrence
7
8 helped participants to discover social connections between students as a valuable tool to address
9
10 bullying. One of the teachers articulated this realization after the action learning meetings when
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12 he chose a picture card showing hands grasping each other in a knot and shared that he aspires to
13
14 help students connect with each other in positive ways. To reinforce positive bonds among his
15
16 students, he would continue using readings showing the value of community building and engage
17
18 his students to do anti-bullying campaigns to help build a positive bullying-free culture. He also
19
20 suggested using a role-play skit to help students build both empathy towards others who were
21
22 less skilled and awareness of others' strengths from which they could learn to become better
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24 students.
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28 **Re-shaping Labelling/Categorizing perceptions through Peer Coaching**

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31 It was evident from our findings that participants often associated perceptions of
32
33 labelling/categorizing with bullying when they were uncertain about identifying who was
34
35 actually being bullied. To combat this, they tended to identify certain characteristics and
36
37 behaviors to categorize and label who was most likely to be a bully or a victim. This uncertainty
38
39 with understanding bullying was reflected in one of the picture card descriptions by a teacher
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41 participating in our study,
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45 *“A card of masks shows that bullying can be different to different people....what is*
46 *bullying then?”*
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50 To avoid this uncertainty, participants resorted to using labels. One of the participants
51
52 had assumptions about gendered behaviors that she believed were universal, and that failure to
53
54 adhere to these roles, especially for boys who displayed what she labelled as feminine behaviors,
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3 would result in bullying. As a result, she was hyper-protective of students who presented with
4 non-normative gender behaviors despite feeling constrained by the way she categorized these
5 students. This tension manifested in her communications with bullies, victims, and families
6 because she felt her words were clouded with unintended judgment for the child who did not fit
7 her idea of gender norms. In another example, one participant categorized students as potential
8 bullies if they were physically strong (“macho”), played sports, and had charismatic
9 personalities. She considered physically weaker or smaller students as potential victims at risk of
10 being bullied. The peer coaching in action learning meetings allowed them to openly reflect on
11 this challenge and listen to others’ perspectives on how their inclination to categorize students
12 was limiting their approach to addressing bullying. After the action learning meetings, one
13 participant noted,

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“I feel like I have a need for putting people in categories. Doing this doesn’t allow me to see a person for who they really are and the possible changes that may happen with them....I label people and seldom change that idea of them”.

33 When asked to choose a picture card after the action learning meetings, this participant chose a
34 card showing black and white puzzle pieces. She explained that her choice of this card
35 represented her newly found recognition of her fixation with trying to define the world and the
36 people in it in “black and white” categories. The fact that she was now fully aware of this
37 limitation was a significant leap for her. She experienced a transformation from being limited by
38 the need to use *concrete labels to being aware about the necessity to accept ambiguity* and she
39 credited peer coaching in the action learning meetings for making her a more reflective teacher.

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In her words:

“I liked exposing my ideas and beliefs without realizing I did so during the action learning meetings. Then having peers discuss my ideas and beliefs made me feel naked in a way...And, made me think, now do my students discuss my beliefs and have the same conclusions?”

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5 While the drive to create certainty through labels influenced some teachers to label
6
7 students as bullies or victims, others revealed their realization that their own emotional biases
8
9 were what drove labelling. Participants who categorized students into “bullies’ and “victims”
10
11 due to emotional biases acknowledged that they lacked objectivity because emotions influenced
12
13 their judgement. In one case, a teacher’s anger was directed towards students who repeatedly
14
15 disturbed her class environment, earning them labels as ‘bullies’ and ‘troublemakers’. This
16
17 became her default definition of what a ‘bully’ looked like. The peer coaching in the action
18
19 learning meetings enabled her to see how she was constraining her awareness and possibly
20
21 overlooking students who actually engaged in bullying, but were not the usual troublemakers in
22
23 class. In her words,
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28
29 *“I become frustrated with students’ behaviors and when it comes to bullying, I realized*
30 *that I am more biased towards different students. In a recent bullying situation, I blamed one*
31 *student because he is always getting in trouble, when in reality it is possible the other student*
32 *started it.”*
33
34

35
36 The peer coaching in the action learning meetings helped this teacher realize that she was
37
38 alienating her students by unintentionally fostering a blaming culture in her classroom. After
39
40 participating in the action learning meetings, she noted:
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43 *“My way of thinking has changed a lot...I find myself asking the same questions we asked*
44 *each other in the action learning meetings instead of staying in my bubble...Hearing that other*
45 *teachers had similar things going on makes me think I am not a bad teacher after all and that*
46 *cools me down. I am not as threatening to the students...I don’t say to any student that you are a*
47 *bully, instead I say what you did was bullying”.*
48

49
50 Her shift from trying to identify “bullies” to detecting “bullying behaviors” was a significant
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52 transformation in her approach to addressing student bullying situations. By the virtue of turning
53
54 her focus on *behaviors (i.e., bullying) from person (i.e., bully)*, she had become a more objective
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3 thinker and intervener in bullying situations. Moreover, the sense of community she experienced
4
5 through peer coaching in the action learning meetings made her realize that she is not alone and
6
7 she can ask for help and address bullying situations collectively. When asked to choose a picture
8
9 card after the action learning meetings, she chose a card showing two people rowing a small
10
11 boat. In her words:

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15 *“When I cope I don’t have to be alone and there are others who can help me. It does not*
16 *look easy for the two people in the picture to row the boat against the tide, but they are trying*
17 *together and eventually they will get where they want to go....so eventually the bullying situation*
18 *will improve.”*
19

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21
22 Another teacher participating in our study tended to put students in categories of bullies
23
24 and victims given her inclination of emotionally sympathizing with select students. If a student
25
26 came from a very disturbed or abusive home, she tended to be more sympathetic and did not
27
28 think of them as bullies even if they engaged in behaviors that were consistent with bullying; she
29
30 labelled them as victims. Whereas, if students had an otherwise trouble-free home environment,
31
32 this teacher was particularly vigilant of and reactive to their bullying behaviors. This teacher
33
34 reflected on how she was more sensitive to those who shared their home troubles with her,
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38 *“I am especially empathetic to a particular boy in my class as he has gone through a lot*
39 *at home. It is hard to watch a student deal with something like being made fun of in class...when*
40 *they are dealing with much larger issues like domestic violence at home.”*
41
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44 After participating in peer coaching in the action learning meetings, this teacher began to reframe
45
46 the way she perceived bullying,

47
48 *“I need to realize that many students are probably facing issues in their home lives that*
49 *are making them unhappy and ultimately affecting their behavior in the classroom. Just because*
50 *one student had decided to open up to me does not mean that other students are not facing*
51 *similar struggles. Those students also deserve the same empathy.”*
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55 In labelling bullies and victims to avoid uncertainty or to conform with emotional biases,
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3 participants' action plans of addressing bullying were initially clouded by the tendency to
4 categorize. They reflected on that tendency and on the importance of listening to all parties
5 involved in a bullying situation to understand the "why" and "how" that contributed to more
6 effective action plans. The participants credited peer coaching in the action learning meetings for
7 making them more reflective and improving their listening skills. Besides, participation in peer
8 coaching helped them realize that they need to ask for help from fellow teachers and counselors
9 when necessary and engage with colleagues in devising a collective strategy to address the issue
10 of student bullying.
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21 **Re-shaping Diversity perceptions through Peer Coaching**

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24 Participants often associated their perceptions of "diversity/differences" with student
25 bullying. In other words, differences among the actors involved in bullying were central to the
26 identification of bullying among students. These differences could be in biological characteristics
27 apparent in physical features or values and beliefs associated with culture. Participants shared
28 that if a child looked different or otherwise stood out (e.g., looked older than others, displayed
29 physical or intellectual disability, represented a different ethnicity), they were likely to be targets
30 for bullying. For instance, one participant shared,
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40 *"I have this one student who is physically small and other kids are teasing him...they*
41 *seem to have targeted him and name call him."*
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43 Another participant contemplated,
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45 *"A student in my class has Asperger's syndrome and other kids are often mean to him."*
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48 Such overtly noticeable diversity helped the teachers participating in our study to discern if a
49 child who was visibly different from others was being bullied. In the case of cultural differences
50 in values and beliefs, participants shared examples where students from different national
51 backgrounds, such as immigrant students, were specifically targeted as victims. One participant
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3 explained how different cultural values about girl-boy interaction (e.g., romantic behaviors) led
4
5 to an immigrant girl being targeted as a victim. In another example, a participant described how
6
7 language barriers made some students more vulnerable to bullying. He shared a particular
8
9 incident,

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11
12 *“I really like this student in class as he is curious and interested to learn. But, he is*
13 *afraid to speak up in class because of his accent. Whenever he tries to answer in class, this other*
14 *student calls him out as dumb and then a bunch of other students laugh and he feels very*
15 *embarrassed.”*
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19 The participants further shared that the current political tensions contributed to the likelihood
20
21 that students from certain national or religious backgrounds would be targeted for bullying.
22
23 Those that saw diversity as a driver in bullying, whether through physical or cultural difference,
24
25 originally contended that structure and policy would prevent bullying. They tried to address such
26
27 bullying through instituting structure and discipline in classrooms. This can be seen in the chosen
28
29 picture card showing organized crayons of different colors. The teacher participating in our study
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31 who selected this card noted,
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35 *“The organization of multi-colored crayons represent how order and structure can*
36 *help build respect for diversity thereby enabling different colored crayons to co-exist.”*
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39
40 This teacher leaned heavily on her ability to be “fair” to all students irrespective of their
41
42 differences; the organization of crayons in the picture card represented discipline and structure.
43
44 She took pride in assuming all were equal and hence had blanket rules and consequences for
45
46 everyone regardless of their uniqueness. She believed that standard norms and lack of favoritism
47
48 was the best way to help diverse students co-exist. However, following peer coaching in the
49
50 action learning meetings, she made a significant leap from her approach of being “equal” to
51
52 being “equitable” in her quest of being fair to her diverse students. In her words,
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3 *“At first after a bullying incident, I asked everyone involved what happened and then all*
4 *perpetrators got the same consequences of detention and peer mediation sessionNow, after*
5 *participating in the action learning meetings, I ask them all what happened and then I go*
6 *through with each kid...like I try to understand why they behaved the way they behaved before*
7 *putting them through detention or any other standard consequence. I try to understand the issue*
8 *and how could the child have done something differently and what does each child need and*
9 *need to learn to do things differently.”*
10
11

12 This quote reflects how this teacher’s approach to addressing bullying was transformed from
13 merely establishing organization/structure in her classroom to understanding her students’
14 diverse backgrounds and how their diverse values and upbringing might have led to the bullying
15 situation. With this realization she openly reflected on how her initial assumption about being
16 successful in avoiding bullying in her classrooms by keeping her classes structured was flawed.
17 Through the process of collective reflection through peer coaching, teachers who used to lean on
18 structure to prevent bullying realized that structure and policy alone were not sufficient. In their
19 words,
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30 *“Structure does not help in preventing bullying...structure only helps to prevent bullying*
31 *to come out in the open”.*
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35 Instead, exploring the deeper reasons of “why” a diverse student might have experienced or
36 inflicted bullying is likely to result in more sustainable prevention than behavioral enforcement
37 of standardized punishments. In one participant’s words,
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42 *“Verbalizing my challenges in addressing student bullying and listening to others’ points*
43 *of views in the action learning meetings helped me think differently and see the issues more*
44 *clearly. It made me reflect about how my own Asian American background shapes my values and*
45 *how I had reacted as a child when I heard a different point of view that did not match my values*
46 *or how others reacted towards me because I was different. So, now I try to understand how my*
47 *students’ upbringing might play a role in how they are behaving with kids who are different from*
48 *them.”*
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52 In their action plans and through action learning conversations, participants shared that
53 exercises aimed at teaching students how to appreciate diversity can help. One participant
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3 described an exercise where he encouraged his students to pick teammates who were different
4 instead of simply assigning them teammates from different ethnicities. He explained that
5 assignment of teammates was an imposition of values instead of an empowerment of
6 appreciation. He reflected that imposing the need to appreciate diversity was more likely to
7 antagonize the students against those who were different, which could result in bullying. Another
8 participant shared that she plans to use books to help children understand the value of diversity
9 and use positive behavior reinforcements to facilitate a natural camaraderie among diverse
10 students.
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21 **Discussion and Implications**

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24 Our study is an important step towards re-directing attention to teachers, a population
25 underrepresented in both research and practice on bullying. As evident in our findings, due to
26 participation in peer coaching in the action learning meetings, participants in our study critically
27 reflected on their perceptions (frames of reference or meaning perspectives) that were central to
28 their interpretations of student bullying and experienced transformative learning in three ways:
29 (1) by elaborating their current frames of reference; (2) by learning new frames of reference; and
30 (3) by transforming their views (Mezirow, 2000). For instance, those who perceived social
31 connections to be the primary driver of power in student bullying and used the strategy of
32 moderating social dynamics in the class as a way to break power cliques that might be
33 responsible for bullying, came to appreciate how individual focus (i.e., understanding how a
34 student's individual backgrounds and home environment might be fueling their need to gain
35 power through bullying) could also guide one's framing of power in student bullying. Thus, their
36 frame of reference or perception (e.g., power) concerning student bullying was elaborated in this
37 case. For learning new frames, teachers participating in this study learnt about all three
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3 perceptions (diversity, power, and labels) and the ways in which these perceptions can guide
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5 one's beliefs about student bullying. In regards to transforming views, those who used the
6
7 perceptions of labelling realized that it is wiser to *accept ambiguity* or to focus on the *bullying*
8
9 *behaviour than on the person deemed to be the bully* to avoid categorizing students unfairly.
10
11 And, those who adopted diversity as their frame of reference, experienced a shift from their
12
13 approach of being "*equal*" to being "*equitable*" when it comes to addressing student bullying.
14
15 They realized that standard rules and structure that are the same for all irrespective of their
16
17 backgrounds are not enough to stop bullying. Instead, deep conversations about how one's
18
19 diverse background might predispose one to become a bully or a victim can be helpful. These
20
21 reflections, in turn, impacted teachers' action plans for addressing student bullying in their
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23 classrooms.
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29 The action learning meetings used for peer coaching were seen by participants as a non-
30
31 judgmental reflective space where they could freely share their dilemmas, shortcomings, and
32
33 doubts to get objective feedback from their peers. This intervention is comparable to dialogic
34
35 peer coaching which "is used to describe a process where the teacher participants are situated as
36
37 agentic co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge in peer learning environments" (Charteris
38
39 and Smardon, 2014, p. 112). It focuses on teachers who can benefit from critically reflecting on
40
41 their approach to addressing student bullying through a relational medium that counters the
42
43 instrumentality of prescribed policy and models learner-centered practice (Stronach and Piper,
44
45 2008) with the teacher as learner. These reflections can help improve teacher-student
46
47 relationships which is a critical component of the social-ecological model of bullying put forth
48
49 by Swearer et al. (2010) and relational pedagogy proffered by Crownover and Jones (2016).
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51 Although beneficial, the opportunity of critical reflection is not commonplace in schools where
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3 teachers seldom get time for peer support to think differently about managing their classrooms
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5 (Killeavy and Moloney, 2010). The lack of a reflective approach can limit the likelihood of
6
7 teachers intervening in an appropriate manner in bullying situations (Veenstra et al., 2014). All
8
9 12 participants in our study expressed frustration over how their habitual non-reflective
10
11 responses to student bullying behaviors only worked, at best, to stop bullying at that point in
12
13 time. Students tended to revert to their bullying patterns and the teachers' reactive strategies were
14
15 not sustainable. The experience of peer coaching in the action learning meetings prepared the
16
17 participants of our study to address bullying more sustainably. As the design of our study
18
19 allowed reflection time between the action learning meetings (one month between each action
20
21 learning meeting), they could test the new action plans they prepared following the
22
23 conversations. They shared in the interviews how the new plans were more meaningful in both
24
25 changing student behaviors, and addressing underlying causes that predispose students to
26
27 become bullies or victims. Given that this study was based on teachers from schools located in
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29 an urban area, it would be interesting for future research to explore how teachers from schools in
30
31 affluent, suburban or rural communities respond to peer coaching in action learning meetings.
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38 Additionally, student bullying can vary at different age levels, therefore, future research
39
40 could also explore how effective this design is for teachers at different teaching levels:
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42 elementary, middle, and high school. By developing a peer coaching action learning community,
43
44 teachers can be supported in their own understanding of bullying and in their actions directed
45
46 towards student bullying. It is important to note that a school district needs to be proactive and
47
48 mindful in designing and implementing a peer coaching action learning community because it
49
50 does take time for teachers to engage in such an activity. One idea to bridge the gap between
51
52 teacher preparation and the practice of teaching could be that institutions of higher education
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3 could infuse this model into their teacher education programs so that future teachers are mindful
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5 of student bullying and their perceptions of bullying before they become practicing teachers.
6

7 8 **Conclusion**

9
10 In sum, we want to emphasize that just as victimized students need empathy and support,
11
12 teachers require support for fulfilling many competing roles, including responding effectively to
13
14 student bullying. Teachers often lack confidence in their ability to deal with bullying because
15
16 they are not given adequate support to address their own feelings evoked by bullying and to
17
18 reflect on their perceptions that guide their responses to bullying. Our study identified how peer
19
20 coaching in action learning meetings can stimulate transformational learning for teachers to
21
22 identify and reshape perceptions that are central to their interpretations of student bullying.
23
24 Knowledge of these perceptions can enrich anti-bullying interventions in schools. Furthermore,
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26 building a peer coaching action learning community can be a form of systemic support that
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28 school leadership can advocate to help teachers gain resilience in acting against student bullying
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33 in schools.
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Table 1. Alignment of Peer Coaching with Action Learning

Stages	Peer Coaching (PC)	Action Learning (AL)
Assessment and trust building	Peers assess each other for the compatibility of learning needs.	Peers consider participating in action learning meetings when they are faced with a complex problem or challenge that they can learn from.
Planning	Timing and place for formal peer coaching sessions are agreed to distinguish a commitment to a structured process from an informal program.	Timing and place of action learning meetings are pre-determined to ensure commitment of all those who are participating.
Formalizing process and scope	Learner’s particular needs at present and the scope of the session are determined based on a balance of priority of interests and available time.	Every action learning meeting is approximately of two-hour duration where one of the participant assumes the role of the focal learner as their learning interest is then given priority in that meeting.
Defining purpose and goals	The coach explores with the learner the focus of their learning objective(s) and asks coachee to further define goals and objectives as necessary to achieve clarity.	Participants in action learning meetings help the focal learner define the learning objectives related to the complex problem or challenge.
Clarifying facts and assumptions	The coach asks the coachee to separate assumptions from facts and may in doing so provide alternative and nonevaluative perspectives to assist in objective clarity of actual position	Participants in action learning meetings take a non-judgmental stance to ask questions to the focal learner for the purpose of helping the focal learner separate assumptions from facts.
Exploring possibilities	Conversations move from correctly identifying the issue, event, or dilemma to developing possibilities for solutions. The learner finds their own path out of the learning maze.	Participants in action learning meetings enable the focal learner find their own action plan which they can attempt to implement.
Gaining commitment to actions	Conversation moves to creating verbal commitment to identified actions with clear outcomes.	Participants in action learning meetings enable the focal learner to identify and commit to specific action steps.
Offering support and accountability	Follow-up is structured by the coach to assist in motivation, learning support and ongoing trust-building, reinforcing cycle and reciprocity in learning relationship.	Participants in action learning meetings schedule follow-up meetings to enable the focal learner reflect on the fall outs of their action plans. They rotate being in the focal learner role as that builds trust and reciprocity in the learning relationship.