Wellbeing in the School Yard – a photovoice study

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Abstract

High school yard is a complex place with a multitude of interactions. These interactions can create positive or negative experiences for school yard users who are primarily students and teachers. Students spend most of their non–class time in the school yard participating predominantly in three activity categories: engaging in social interactions, undertaking physical activities (play/games/sports), and attending to physiological needs (eating, drinking, resting etc). Teachers’ work in the school yard during non-teaching times is perceived as predominantly supervisory. The school yard, as well as being a source of positive interactions, can contain friction and conflict. Most research on school yard focuses on the experiences of students rather than the experiences and perceptions of teachers. Astor, Meyer and Behre (1999), in their research on school yard violence, indicated that the interactions between school staff, students, locations and times need further explorations.

In this two-stage study we were interested in finding out how different sites in the school yard are perceived by students and teachers. A sample of Yr 8 and Yr 11 students in three high schools and Year 6/7 students in one primary school in South Australia participated as researchers in stage 1 of this study – the photovoice study. The main interest of our study was, ‘to project a vision of their (students’) lives that might educate others, especially power brokers and policy makers to better understand the realities of their condition’ (Booth and Booth 2003 p. 432). Students took photographs of places in the school yard where they do and don’t feel “OK”. In the second stage of the study, these photographs were used to elicit teachers’ (N=132) written perceptions of the photographed places and of what happens in these places. Teachers’ responses were analysed in terms of teachers’ perceptions of these places as being ‘OK’ or ‘not OK’ for students and for teachers. Teacher perceptions of their professional roles in these places were also examined.
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Introduction

The present study is one in a series of investigations into the wellbeing of school communities conducted by a group of researchers as part of ARC Linkage Project.

In our discussions with partner schools, school yard often surfaces as an area that can be a source of interactions and events with potential to impact positively or negatively on wellbeing of school community members. What happens in the yard can influence what happens in the classroom. What happens in the yard affects students, teachers on yard duty and other staff members who need to deal with consequences of events in the yard. The effects of the school yard events have the potential to influence the wellbeing of all school community members: students, teachers, parents, school leadership and other school staff members.

In this project we define school yard as all non-teaching areas in non-lesson time.

Such places have been referred to in the literature as “‘undefined’ and potentially violence-prone school subcontexts (e.g. hallways, cafeterias, playgrounds).” (Behre, Astor et al. 2001) or ‘unowned places and times’ (Astor, Meyer et al. 1999)

School yard is a space that is frequently used by various members of school community be it during lessons or in the non-lesson time. Little information is available about the school yard and about the interactions between school community
members that take place there in non-lesson times. Such interactions can affect the wellbeing of school community members, mainly students and staff.

Positive interactions between students strengthen their friendships and generally positively influence student wellbeing (academic, emotional and physical). The positive interactions result in strengthening relationships between teachers and students that then may positively influence students’ learning outcomes and teachers’ work satisfaction. Negative interactions between students in the yard frequently result in bullying, harassment and violence. Reports about bullying, harassment and school violence and bullying are frequently connected with school yard (e.g., Astor and et al. 1996; Behre, Astor et al. 2001, Blatchford, 1989; Slee, 1995; Whitney and Smith, 1994). Such negative student interactions can have a negative effect on teacher wellbeing. These events can have long reaching effects that not only influence individuals but also affect social and educational context for other school community members.

Teacher wellbeing is of great importance for the proper functioning of the educational establishment. Very little research is available that explores the interactions and roles of teachers in the school yard. Even less information is available about wellbeing of teachers when they engage in yard duty or are using school yard in a non-formal way (e.g., walking past or through yard areas).

Aim

This study was designed with aim to document specific locations that are ok or not ok for school yard users, specifically for students and for school staff members (predominantly teachers). The second aim of this study was to document teachers’

roles in the school yard. Third aim of this study was document what happens in the ‘OK’ and “not OK” places in the school yard. The study was conducted with a view to inform policy and practice.

Method:

In the present study we used photovoice as research method with photography used as a medium of ‘accessing other people’s worlds and making those worlds accessible to others’ (Booth & Booth, 2003, p.431).

Different names are used in literature for such form of research ranging from ‘image-based research’ (Prosser, 1998), to visual methods (Banks, 2001) or visural methodologies’ (Rose, 2001). Prosser and Schwartz, (1998), Punch (1998) and Morrow (2001) indicate the increase of the use of photography for data collection. Large body of research in a variety of areas and contexts exists and indicates the effectiveness of this methodology (e.g., Wang, 2003; Wang & Pies, 2004; Wilson, Dasho et al. 2007).

Fielding and Bragg (2003) indicate the great value of including students in the process of research of educational issues not only as source of information but also as co-researchers and active agents for purposeful change. In the present study the voice (photovoice) of student researchers is instrumental in provoking discussion on the subject of school community members wellbeing.
Phase 1: PHOTOVOICE - STUDENT AS A RESEARCHER

A sample of Year 8 and Year 11 students in three public high schools, and Year 6/7 students in one primary school participated in phase one of this study. To have a view that would be representative we aimed to have a voice of students representing a range of social groups such as are reported in literature (e.g., bullies, loners, popular kids, ‘bitches with attitude’, Emos, nerds, Goths, average kids, ‘jocks’). At each school a staff member nominated one student who was generally perceived as belonging to one of the groups. Each of these students was asked to volunteer in this study as student researcher.

Each student researcher was then asked to think of a place at school where he or she feels “OK” and one place at school where she or he does not feel “OK” and was asked to complete two sentences describing these places: (1) “The place were I feel OK at school is ..’; and (2) ‘The place were I don’t feel OK at school is ..’. Each student was asked to mark these places on the aerial map of the school and to take a photograph of the indicated places adhering to the condition that no people should be captured in the photographs. The next step incorporated the involvement of other students. Student researchers were asked to approach another student whom they knew very well and to conduct an interview with this student gathering the other student’s views (without influencing them) through the same process, i.e., completing sentences, marking the sites on the map, and taking photographs.

In the next step, in each of schools student researchers working as a group were asked to select six photographs from the pool of photographs they all collected (approximately 60). Students needed to select three photographs that represented the

places where they feel OK at school and three of the places where they don’t feel OK. Students had full autonomy in the process of negotiating the selection outcome. The whole process was facilitated by school staff member (teacher or councilor or principal).

Phase 2: PHOTOVOICE - TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS

Individual school photographs (6) selected by students were taken to a meeting with school staff at each school. We asked teachers to look at the six photographs presented in approximately six minute intervals via Power Point slides. We asked to write about each of these places and to describe their role in these places. Teachers were not told which places where considered by students as “OK” and “not OK”.

In a photovoice the frequently asked question to elicit reflection on the photographs is ‘what is really happening here?’ (Wang, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1994). This is what we wanted to find out.

Discussion

The first inspection of the photographs taken by students brought a surprise as we noticed that there were no specific differences between the ‘OK’ and the ‘not OK’ places. For example, similar looking benches located in a similar looking setting were nominated one as a place where students feel ‘OK’ and the other as a place where students don’t feel ‘OK’. Likewise sport/activity/playground areas including sections of oval were seen as ‘OK’ or ‘not OK’ places. Similar places were perceived by students differently in terms of student wellbeing.
We then examined teachers’ responses using three broad categories: (1) teachers’ role in the yard places; (2) teachers perceptions of places for student wellbeing; and (3) teachers perceptions of places for teacher wellbeing. We looked at positive and negative aspects within these categories.

We found that different teachers perceive same place differently. This could be due to different roles that teachers have in these places or different experiences that teachers had in these places.

The examples of teacher responses presented in Figure 1 illustrate different perceptions. These responses highlight that what is OK for some is not necessarily OK for others.
PLACE A

Teacher 9: ‘It often has rubbish scattered around – **not my favourite part of the school.**’

Teacher 2: ‘**I like this area** – students move – have lunch, socialise in the area.’

PLACE B

Teacher 5: ‘**Fights** often occur.’

Teacher 7 ‘**No real problems here.**’

PLACE C

Teacher 4: ‘On the whole, students appear to **enjoy** this area.’

Teacher 3: ‘**Not a good place** for yr 8 kids!’

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**Figure 1**

*Different perceptions of same places*

Teachers’ responses in relation to Place A (Figure 1) represent teachers’ perception about how the place is for teacher. Teacher responses in relation to Place B (Figure 1) are concerned with wellbeing of students but at the same time they illustrate implications for teachers. The third pair of responses, in relation to Place C (Figure 1) illustrates the territorial nature of the school yard which influences interactions between students, this in turn has implications for teachers who are in these place at critical times. The three pairs of responses introduce the level of complexity that is encountered when addressing the dynamic nature of school yard through multiple perspectives of its users.
Teachers participating in this study indicated a variety of positive and negative interactions and situations that can influence student wellbeing. Table 1 contains descriptors used by teachers in relation to the nature of yard places in which students may feel ‘OK’ or may feel not ‘OK’.

Table 1.

Positive and negative interactions in yard places

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>negative</th>
<th>positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• intimidating</td>
<td>• socialise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• outsiders</td>
<td>• hang out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• poor behaviours</td>
<td>• play games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• territorial</td>
<td>• eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• threatening area</td>
<td>• relax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• fear</td>
<td>• play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘problems’</td>
<td>• happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• infusion of emotions at times</td>
<td>• chat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• bullying and harassment</td>
<td>• busy positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• fights</td>
<td>• congregate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• pushing and shoving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• physical injury</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• unpleasant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• not OK for some students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is equally clear how the positive interactions can influence positively student wellbeing and how negative interactions, that students experience in the school yard, such as those listed in Table 1, can affect student wellbeing in a negative way. Environmental psychology links physical and social environment with violence (e.g., Fisher & Nasar, 1992; Magargee, 1977) but more school context specific studies are needed. A wide range of academic, emotional and behavioural difficulties is linked with bullying and harassment that affect both offenders and their victims (Leff et al.,

2003). These difficulties can be detrimental to student wellbeing. Although there is a growing body of research and interventions addressing bullying, Piotrowski and Hoot (2008) indicate the need to address bullying outside the classroom.

The negative interactions such as those listed in table 1 that make school yard places into places where students, or some students, don’t feel OK can make these places into areas where teachers don’t feel OK. This has been reported by teachers in this study.
Teacher A: “I feel that this is an unsafe area, an occupational hazard, I always avoid it as the walking space is narrow and congested with energetic and boisterous boys.”

Teacher B: “Very intimidating walking past.”

Teacher C: “I go there reluctantly because it is usually confrontational.

Teacher D: “I never have to go there, thank goodness!!”

Teacher E: “Can be threatening for staff at times.”

Teacher F: “It can be a bit hazardous with balls flying about.”

In the era when education systems face issues of teacher retention (Pillay, Goddard, et al. 2005) the wellbeing of teachers needs to be considered with due diligence. If teachers are faced frequently with experiences that are detrimental to their wellbeing their stress level raises considerable which, if experienced for long time, can lead to the ‘teacher burnout’ – a phenomenon well researched and reported in the literature (e.g. Pillay, H., R. Goddard, et al. 2005; Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003; Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2007).

In responding to posed questions teachers also commented on the positive aspects of yard and yard duty as it gives them the opportunity to chat or play/kick a ball with students, chat with other teachers, interact with nature which can have relaxing and restorative effects. Examples of teachers’ responses are presented in Figure 3.
Teacher G: “I also enjoy duties in this area because of the trees, plants.”

Teacher H: “Walk around the oval for exercise and conversation (with another teacher).”

Teacher I: “I have done yard duties there and have had pleasant times chatting to students.”

Teacher J: “Generally a pleasant work place to be in.”

*Figure 3*

*Positive aspects of yard and yard duty- teachers’ views*

The roles of teachers in the school yard can be seen in terms of a dichotomy of formal (e.g. teacher on yard duty) and informal (e.g. teacher walking through yard areas from place A to place B). It seems that this dichotomy influences teachers’ responses regarding their role in the ‘OK’ and ‘not OK’ places.

Table 2 shows categories of roles that were identified by teachers. There are very few differences between the roles and tasks that teachers report.

Table 2.

**Teachers’ roles in “OK” and “not OK” places.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“OK” places</th>
<th>“not OK” places</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yard duty</td>
<td>yard duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monitoring</td>
<td>monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching</td>
<td>teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interact with students</td>
<td>interact with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keep peace</td>
<td>keep peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>move students on</td>
<td>move students on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>patrol</td>
<td>patrol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cleaning rubbish</td>
<td>cleaning rubbish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>duty of care</td>
<td>duty of care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don’t go there</td>
<td>don’t go there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no role</td>
<td>no role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>walk past</td>
<td>walk past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoid the area</td>
<td>avoid the area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>call admin</td>
<td>call admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dealing with outsiders / evict</td>
<td>dealing with outsiders / evict</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ‘no role’, ‘walk past’ responses (Table 2) can be perceived in view of Behre et al. (2001) comment that ‘teachers may not perceive themselves as professionally responsible when students are somewhere else in the school or en route to another location’, (p11). These comments may reflect the distinction between the formal and informal role in the school yard places. It may be even conceivable that, like students, teachers perceive certain boundaries and territories in the school yard and school yard responsibilities. Therefore, interfering in a non – critical situation in school yard may be perceived as encroaching on someone else’s yard duty territory.

When teachers report avoiding a school yard area this should be considered a reason for alarm as the message stemming from such report indicates that teacher emotional or physical wellbeing is at risk in such places. This in conjunction with teachers’ comments such as “[It’s] awful to do yard duty there.” (Teacher P) may point to teachers’ emotional exhaustion, which is the most predictive dimension of teacher burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Maslach et al., 1996). Burnout is conceptualized as resulting from long-term occupational stress, particularly among human service workers, including teachers (Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003) and the fact that teaching is a stressful occupation is acknowledged by many researchers (e.g. Friedman 2000; Howard and Johnson, 2004).

The emotional exhaustion can also be caused by the negative aspects of the roles that impact on teacher wellbeing, for example when teachers frequently encounter disrespect or confrontations in response to actions and/or instructions given to students in relation to inappropriate behaviour. Large and not clearly visible, thus difficult to supervise yard duty areas, inappropriate and dangerous student
behaviours, have also been mentioned and can be seen as contributing factors that can negatively influence teacher wellbeing. The comments presented in Figure 4 represent such situations.

Teacher R: “Hard area to supervise as student run to the opposite side of the building when teacher is near.”
Teacher S: “Mostly I have been involved in breaking up fights and other unsavoury student behaviours around this area.”
Teacher V: “A hard area to police.”

**Figure 4**

*Negative aspects of yard and yard duty- teachers views*

The difficulty of the situation reported by Teacher R in Figure 4 was also reported by Astor et al (1996) in relation to school violence. They found that violence at schools takes place at usually undefined public space (such as dining areas, corridors) at times when teachers were not present and around the school building.

There are also positive aspects of the roles that impact on teacher and student wellbeing through positive rapports that are built between teachers and students through the interactions that take place in the school yard (see Figure 5). DECS stresses that positive relationships are paramount (DECS Learner Wellbeing Framework)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher T: “I walk past and say ‘Hi’.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher U: “I kick a ball with students”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher V: “I talk to students when on yard duty.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher W: “I supervise this area, I know all the kids here really well.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5**

*Positive aspects of yard and yard duty- teachers views*

We want to hear students voice and teachers’ voice but the difficulty lies with the voice not being a single voice. There are multiple voices, bodies in space and place, physical or administrative structures that influence the wellbeing of school yard users with the confluence of individual and situational variables.

School yard is a complex place with complex interactions where one teacher is responsible sometimes for hundred students spread out over a large and sometimes not clearly visible area, as opposed to class time where each teacher has 30 something students in her or his care. The interplay of layers of social dynamics make school yard a challenging yet fascinating area of research with its hot spots, territories and multifaceted interactions.

School yard seems to be one of key areas that influence the quality of relationships between students and teachers. The events and interactions that take place in the yard have a great potential for rippling effect that touches all areas of school life. In this descriptive study we wanted to report teachers’ perceptions of school yard in relation to student and teacher wellbeing. This is done with view for improvement of school yard experiences for all its users as assessing the climate of school yard may have

various implications such as for prevention of bullying or prevention of teacher burnout. Making school yard interactions better for students and teachers is of great importance as such improvement can lead to increased job satisfaction for teachers, thus increasing the potential for teacher retention (Pillay, H., et al., 2005). Such outcomes can also improve or strengthen positive relationships between teachers and students, and among students which clearly leads to improvement of school ethos (Klein, 2003).

References:


