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Youth as Participatory Action Researchers: Exploring How to Make School a More Enabling Space¹

M.S. Mathikithela

COMBER

North-West University

maite.mathikithela2@gmail.com

L. Wood

COMBER

North-West University

Lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

Schools should be enabling spaces that nurture the holistic development of learners. However, in under-resourced communities in South Africa this is not always the case because learners, already vulnerable due to the effects of poverty, are exposed to added stressors within the school gates. We explored how engaging vulnerable learners in a rural high school in a youth participatory action research (YPAR) process could enable them to take action to make their school a more enabling space. This article reports on the data generated by the participants during the first cycle of the YPAR, which was to inform the planning of future advocacy through answering the question: "How do youth perceive the current school climate?" The three themes that emerged indicate that the climate in the school was not conducive to creating a physical, emotional, or social space for learners to attain positive outcomes. This first cycle enabled the participating youth to develop an evidence base on which to ground further action and the tools to do so. Although not without its tensions, we conclude that YPAR is a powerful pathway to develop the agency of learners, enabling them to transform from vulnerable victims into advocates with the ability to influence positive transformation in themselves, their peers, and the climate of their school.

Keywords: learner support, resilience, school improvement, visual methods, vulnerability, youth participatory action research

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Introduction

Schools should be enabling spaces for learners to flourish in a safe, nurturing environment where they feel they belong (Reiss & White, 2013). However, in the South African context, this is not always the case due to a variety of sociohistorical structural factors. Many children have been rendered vulnerable by the intersectionality of multiple stressors stemming from, and contributing to, increased poverty (Fearon et al., 2017), ill health and disease (Paradies, 2016), and parental alcohol abuse and neglect (Meinck, Cluver, Boyes, & Ndhlovu, 2015). Education is a critical factor in determining the future of children living in deprivation (Ogina, 2010). Although a means to disrupt the cycle of poverty in which they are trapped (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012), the under-resourced state of schools in socioeconomically challenged communities contributes to, rather than addresses, the problem (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit, & van Deventer, 2016). Many schools, especially in rural areas, are faced with a dearth of infrastructure: overcrowded classrooms; inadequate resources for teaching, learning, and extra-mural activities; a lack of basic services such as clean water and sanitation; and insufficient access to social welfare services (Maringe & Moletsane, 2015). In such settings, teachers struggle to provide the socioemotional support to ensure learners not only survive, but also thrive despite the adversity they face (Setlhare & Wood, 2019). Many learners living in these contexts have to work after school hours to contribute to the support of their families, or miss school on occasion to carry out family duties their parents cannot perform due to absence or illness (Skovdal, 2010). These added responsibilities negatively affect their ability to attend, or to concentrate at school (Branson, Hofmeyr, & Lam, 2014). Eventually, their academic performance suffers, which can trigger other negative effects such as internalising or aggressive behaviours, depression, substance abuse, or school drop out (Dolly & Walters, 2013).

The future of society is increasingly dependent upon young people being resilient enough to learn and adapt to different requirements and demands in a constantly changing world. From a socioecological view of resilience (Ungar, Connelly, Liebenberg, & Theron, 2017), the onus falls on adults in the environment to provide the child with access to protective resources to buffer risk. In communities characterised by poverty and adversity, many parents and adults are not able to provide such support (La Placa & Corlyon, 2016), and may even contribute to the risk factors facing the child (Flouri, Midouhas, Joshi, & Tzavidis, 2015). Although the expectation that the teacher provides psychosocial support to children deemed to be at risk is contested in literature (Campbell et al. 2016), for these children, teachers are often the only adults available who could do so. However, teachers too, have become increasingly demotivated and stressed by working in such socioeconomically challenged environments (Jensen, 2009)—with negative consequences for themselves and, ultimately, for their learners.

Many schools have thus become disabling, unsafe, and stigmatising spaces for children; they feel unwelcome and disconnected from the school (Sharp, Penner, Marais, & Skinner, 2018). As a teacher in such a school, the lead author has personal experience of how these circumstances negatively affect learners. Given that there is little hope of positive support from social structures in the near future, we felt compelled to take action to somehow improve the situation.

This article explains how we (a teacher-researcher and a university researcher) engaged learners in a youth participatory action research (YPAR) process in a rural high school where Author 1 teaches, to explore how they could be involved in making the school a more enabling space for learners. Because it was a long and complex process, this article only reports on the data generated during the first cycle

of the YPAR, which was to determine what action was needed to make the school a more enabling space by answering the question, "How do youth perceive the current school climate?" We begin by justifying our choice of YPAR as methodology, followed by a discussion of the socioecological resilience theory that underpinned our interpretation of the findings. We then explain the methods followed to generate data, before presenting a discussion of the themes that emerged. Although YPAR as a methodology is not without its challenges, it can develop the resilience of learners, enabling them to shift from being victims of a faulty educational system to being advocates for change with the ability to influence positive transformation in themselves, their peers, and the climate of their school.

Youth Participatory Action Research

Youth participatory action research creates opportunities for youth and adults to work together to develop a research agenda to bring about change in their circumstances, and influence policies on issues that impact directly on their lives (Ozer & Douglas, 2015). YPAR has increasingly been used by researchers in schools to develop youth advocacy by working collaboratively through cycles of action and reflection to identify issues, generate and analyse data, and disseminate findings to bring about change in their social environments (Kohfeldt, Chhun, Grace, & Langhout, 2011; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). YPAR is grounded in an emancipatory paradigm, aimed at producing knowledge to benefit oppressed groups (Barnes, 2014). Youth participants engage in ongoing dialogue with their peers and the adult researchers, learning how to become self-reflective and critical thinkers (Smith, Beck, Bernstein, & Dashtguard, 2014). The process is also educative because it enables youth participants to improve their planning, research, communication, teamwork, and leadership skills (Akom, Shah, Nakai, & Cruz, 2016). YPAR as a form of critical pedagogy has a political intent because youth learn how to challenge oppressive systems (Voight & Velez, 2018) to influence policy on a micro level. YPAR has been found to enable young people to increase their resilience, giving them the confidence to believe in their capabilities and to perceive themselves as agents of change in their school (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fox & Fine, 2013). In this study, the voices of the youth participants were accentuated, with the teacher-researcher guiding them to analyse their unsupportive school environment and navigate towards solutions to make it a more welcoming space.

Given that YPAR is a collaborative and participatory process, the adult researcher assumes the role of facilitator, observer, and reporter of the participant group—her primary role being to provide guidance with regard to the research principles and process (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). As facilitator, the adult is also responsible for building participants' confidence and independence by listening to and validating their inputs (Wood, 2019). Although YPAR is an emerging methodology, research to date has demonstrated its value for developing the voice and agency of youth and for equipping them with lifelong skills of value beyond the project (Anyon, Kennedy, Durbahn, & Jenson, 2018). However, given that YPAR sets out to change and challenge existing structures, it can be interpreted by those in power as a threat, leading them to either ignore or ridicule the ideas of the youth (Kohfeldt et al., 2011). They may also try to impose barriers to youth activity to generate and disseminate data (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014), or, as we feared, try to victimise the youth participants in an effort to stop the project. Thus, it is essential that the adult researcher monitors the process carefully for any adverse outcomes so that immediate action can be taken to prevent harm to the participants. Nonetheless, the benefits of YPAR for developing the resilience of youth seem to outweigh the challenges.

Developing Resilience Through YPAR

The concept of resilience is broadly defined as the ability to bounce back from difficult experiences (Price, Mansfield, & McConney, 2012). Our understanding is anchored in Ungar's more specific definition of resilience as the strength to navigate towards psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain well-being (Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & van de Vijver, 2013). The

role of adults in this process is to ensure that such resources are made available and are accessible to youth in a culturally meaningful way (Theron, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015). The school should be a site of care and support (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2011), and parents and teachers, who form part of the social ecology, have responsibility for promoting healthy behaviour and successful learning by providing learners with opportunities for growth and development (Mampane, Ebersöhn, Cherrington, & Moen, 2014). Literature has identified seven protective factors that the social ecology should provide to help children to increase their resilience (Cameron, Ungar, & Liebenberg, 2007), as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Factors that enable resilient coping in children (adapted from Cameron et al., 2007).

1. Access to material resources	Availability of financial, medical, educational, and basic human needs such as food, clothing and shelter, as well as employment opportunities
2. Access to supportive relationships	Presence of a supportive relationship network within the family, community, school, work colleagues, mentors
3. Development of a desirable personal identity	Awareness of life purpose, personal strengths and weaknesses, aspirations and beliefs, values, spiritual and religious identification, good self-esteem
4. Experience of power and control	Sense of self-reliance and internal locus of control, sense of agency to effect positive change in social and physical environments, and access to health promoting resources
5. Adherence to cultural traditions	Knowledge of, and ability and opportunity to adhere to, cultural practices, values, and beliefs
6. Experience of social justice	Formation of a meaningful role in a community, which brings with it acceptance and social justice
7. Experience of a sense of cohesion with others	Ability to balance personal interests with responsibility to community and to greater good, feeling of being part of something larger than oneself, engaging appropriately with others according to cultural and community expectations—without losing own sense of identity

From a socioecological perspective of resilience, young people can learn to be co-facilitators of their own resilience as they take action to negotiate for protective resources within their environment (Munford & Sanders, 2015). The skills they develop as a result of participation in a process such as YPAR become protective factors to buffer the negative psychological, social, and physical effects of living in contexts of poverty (Simmel, 2007). However, because the youth challenge existing systems and policies through YPAR, it is vital that the adult facilitator is able to act as a buffer to protect them from any negative reactions the findings may elicit.

Method

This article reports on the findings of the first cycle of action and reflection of a YPAR project that aimed to explore how vulnerable youth could take action to make their school a more enabling space. Figure 1 presents an overview of the cycles that emerged from the study.

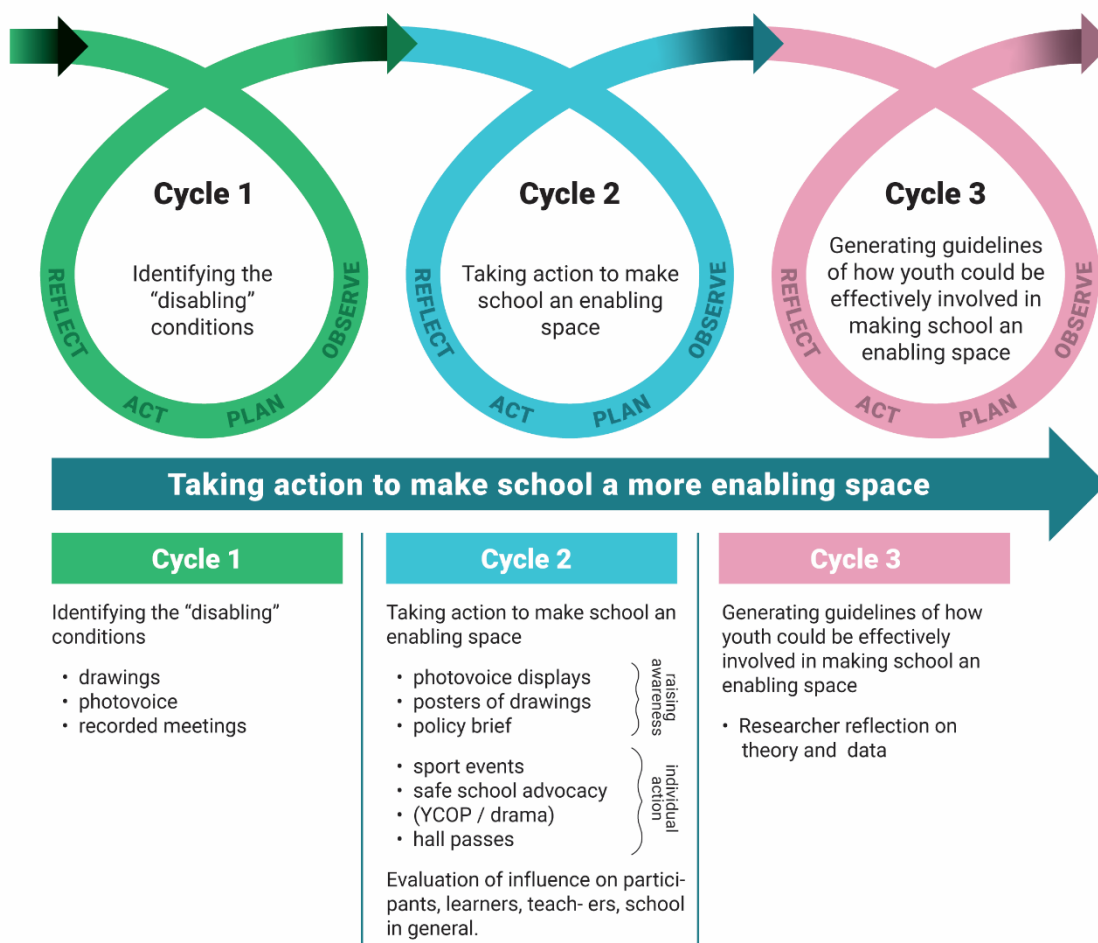


Figure 1: Overview of YPAR project

In this first cycle, the youth participants identified the factors in the school environment that were impacting negatively on their experience of school—to provide evidence to guide their further action towards positive change. The lead author is a teacher in a rural secondary school in Limpopo, where most of the learners can be classified as vulnerable because they live in poverty-stricken communities characterised by food insecurity and lack of basic services. The enrolment at the start of the school year hovers around 950, but as many as 150 learners drop out by the end of each year. There are only 14 classrooms and, at the start of the project, only two functioning toilets, which were in a poor condition. A shortage of water is a major problem at school. Due to the poverty experienced by learners and their families, the school has been categorised as Quintile 1, which means that it is a no-fee school and its learners should have access to the national school feeding programme. Of the total learners in 2016, about one third were single or double orphans, just under a quarter were acting in loco parentis, and fewer than 50% lived with at least one biological parent, thus, they could be classified as vulnerable on several levels (McAra & McVie, 2016). As teacher-researcher, the lead author worked via the teacher liaison officer (TLO) to explain the project and recruit learners from Grade 11, whom the TLO identified as being able to communicate well and showed leadership potential. She identified 20 learners who were invited to participate and 14 of them (seven male, seven female, aged 16–19 years) committed to taking part. In this first cycle, data were generated through the visual methods of photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) and drawings (Theron, Mitchell, Smith, & Stuart, 2011), supplemented by transcribed recordings of weekly project group meetings and the teacher-researcher's observations of the process recorded in her reflective diary (Vinjamuri, Warde, & Kolb, 2017).

The first few meetings were dedicated to building relationships among the participants, including the teacher-researcher, to enable them to collaboratively decide on the name of the project group (Leihlo la Baswa—The Eye of the Youth), ground rules for team functioning, what their objectives would be, and how they would go about attaining them. After each session, the teacher-researcher checked with the group that they understood what was expected of them before the next session, and gave them space to share their feelings about the session: what they were learning, what they were unsure of, and what resources they needed to enable them to carry out their plans. Once the teacher-researcher was sure that all participants understood the process of YPAR, she moved onto facilitating discussion about how they perceived the school climate and space, and how they could generate data to illustrate their perceptions and feelings. The participants decided to use photovoice and drawings, after being presented with different options by the teacher-researcher. They made drawings and took photographs in response to the prompt: "Take photos (make a drawing) of objects and places you would like to change in the school to make it nicer place to be." They gave each visual artefact a caption and wrote a short narrative explaining it. They first did the drawings and then discussed them in the group before thematically analysing them and composing posters on each theme. In the next sessions, they followed a similar process with the photovoice, and decided on specific photographs and narratives to form an exhibition to display to the other learners, teachers, and school management. To aid with analysis of the visual images and narratives, the teacher-researcher provided them with the questions devised by Wang and Burris (1997), which make up the acronym, SHOWeD—what do you **See** in this picture? what is really **H**appening? how does it affect **O**ur lives? **W**hy is it happening? what can we **D**o about it?

Trustworthiness was increased by process validity (ensuring problems were framed and addressed in a way that permits ongoing learning of the participants), outcome validity (reflecting on the extent to which the actions led to the desired outcomes), democratic validity (ensuring participation of all involved), catalytic validity (how did the research change the participants' understanding and future behaviour?), and dialogic validity (the participants had opportunity to collaboratively create new knowledge) as described by Herr & Anderson (2005).

The research was granted ethical clearance by the university in question, attesting to the fact that it adhered to stringent ethical principles regarding informed, voluntary assent of participants and consent of parents, protection of identity of subjects in the photovoice images and narratives, and the minimisation of power relations by using an independent teacher to recruit participants. Measures were also taken to ensure there was sufficient support available for any of the youth who were deemed to have been traumatised or otherwise negatively affected by participation in the project.

Presentation of Themes

Participants identified three themes around areas that they felt were impacting negatively on their health, dignity, safety, sense of belonging and motivation to learn. Below, we report on the themes, supported by verbatim quotations and the visual artefacts generated by the participants. We also discuss each theme in relation to resilience theory.

Theme 1: Poor Infrastructure

Theme 1 concerns the physical environment that learners perceived to have a negative impact on their physical and emotional health, as well as their motivation to learn. Participants said they were stressed by having to use dirty and unsafe toilets that smelt bad, and which they blamed for increasing their vulnerability to sinus and asthma attacks:

I often get attacked by asthma especially during summer season as the smell gets intensified. (P2)

The unsanitary conditions also meant that some participants were unwilling to eat the food provided by the school, and so they went hungry:

We do not eat food from the feeding scheme because flies from the open toilets and bins kept with leftovers waste the food. (P4)

The photographs in Figure 2 indicate the unsanitary conditions the participants had to endure.

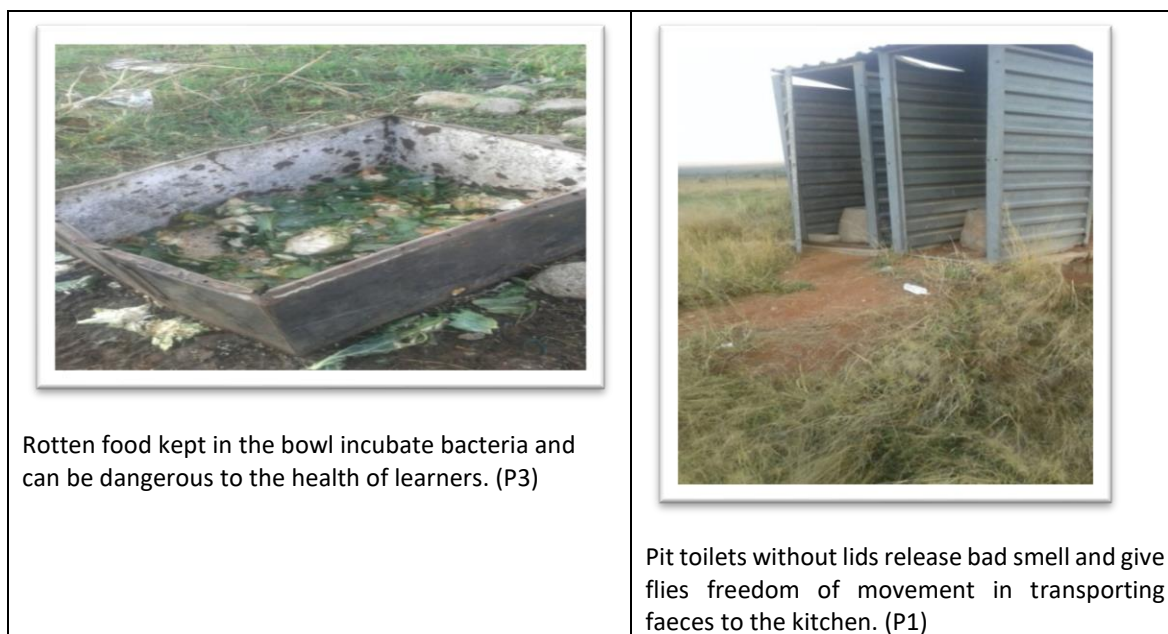


Figure 2: “Health hazards” (P1, P3)

The state of the toilets also robbed the learners of their dignity because the dilapidated conditions meant many preferred to urinate outside. For girls, especially during menstruation, it was even worse because they could not change themselves in private because the doors were broken and could not close (see Figure 3):

We hide behind the toilets to relieve ourselves but it is stressful because other learners and people passing on the street can see us. (P5)

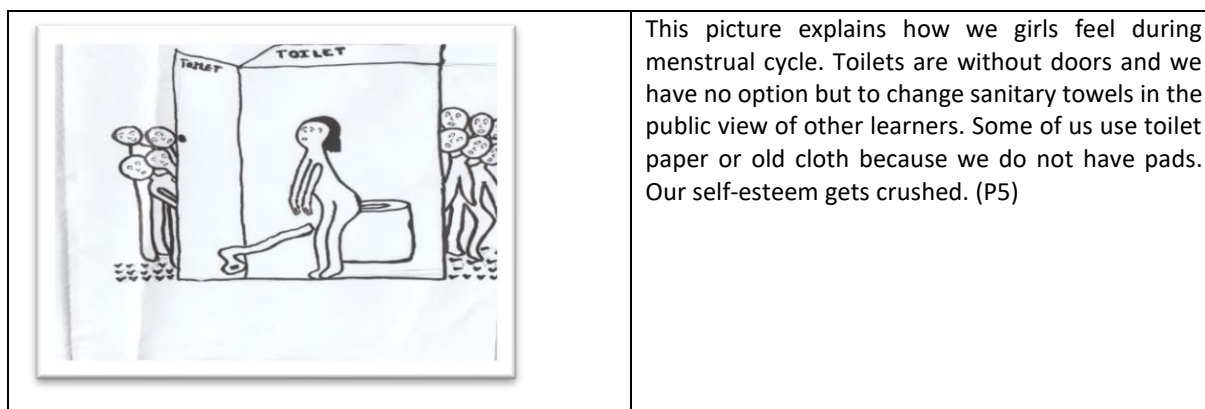


Figure 3: “What can I be proud of?” (P4)

We lose dignity because other learners make funny jokes about our plight if they see girls using toilet paper or a piece of cloth for menstruation and it leaves us with emotional scar. (P2)

It's horrible and embarrassing especially if the periods come unexpectedly when we are already at school. The thought of going to the toilet which actually exposes and shames us makes me sick. (P8)

Girls felt "tortured, shamed, and deprived of their privacy" (P4) because their basic need to go to the bathroom caused them so much embarrassment, shame, and pain. It became impossible for them to be on the school premises for the whole day, which led to absenteeism:

Many girls fake illnesses during menstruation so that we can be released earlier because it is difficult to change pads in a toilet where urine stagnates on the floor and toilet seat. (P2)

Toilets are dirty, there is no water to wash our hands, the gates are locked but we spend many hours at school. The solution is to stay at home if we have running stomach or menstruating. (P11)

They said the dirty appearance of the school grounds made them feel ashamed of their school. They extrapolated this to mean that teachers and management, who allowed such a state to exist, did not care about them or their futures (Figure 4).

	<p>Littering and roaming animals make the school unsightly. We feel ashamed to be associated with the school. Our school is like a ghost town and it feels like teachers do not take our ambitions seriously. (P4)</p>
 <p>We feel demeaned when people visit our school. (P8)</p>	 <p>We are frustrated and disheartened by the school surrounding. (P9)</p>

Figure 4: "We are ashamed of our school"(P6)

Participants also feared for their safety due to the unsafe pit latrines, the broken furniture that littered the playground, used as weapons by some learners, and the snakes that had infested certain areas. The lack of furniture in classrooms, which meant they had to share desks, negatively affected their motivation and ability to learn (Figure 5).

 <p>Our safety is meaningless to the teachers because a learner can slip and fall into the pit while playing. (P12)</p> <p>A learner can be pushed into the pit by bullies. (P7)</p>	 <p>We feel terrorised by snakes, because once we see it we think of it even during lessons. (P13)</p>
 <p>I can't take it anymore" [P13]</p>	<p>Hunger, thirst, and the pressure to defecate distract us and force us to find ways to escape. (P10)</p>

Figure 5: "We fear for our lives" (P1)

Few, if any, of the protective factors listed in Table 1 were in place at this school. It is clear that the social ecology was failing the learners in providing access to material resources because the youth were facing chronic stressors (Masten, 2014) on a daily basis. Learners were loath to use the toilet facilities, felt that the food was not prepared in a sanitary way, and could not access enough water to drink or to wash their hands. Apart from the health risks, these issues also impacted negatively on the formation of a desirable personal identity given that they were stripped of their dignity and self-esteem. The learners interpreted these conditions to mean that the school management and teachers did not care about their welfare, and so they felt they also lacked access to supportive relationships. The data generated by the learners made it clear that the current state of the infrastructure in this school made it a risk factor for the development of negative health and psychological outcomes, rather than being a place where they could be nurtured and supported.

Theme 2: Lack of Sports Opportunities

Learners felt deprived of the opportunity to take part in sports (which, they said, contributed to the anti-social behaviour of some learners) negatively affected their development of a desirable personal identity, hindered them from developing a sense of pride and belonging in the school (sense of social cohesion with others), and affected their ability to concentrate in class. Although there was time allocated to sports on the timetable, there were no facilities or equipment and so there was no organised sport or physical education. This led to learners loitering on the school premises, engaging in less healthy activities:

On Wednesdays, learners use time for sports for different activities like playing cards, smoking, and boys hanging out with girls behind the classrooms. (P2)

More disconcerting, was that participants claimed teachers were encouraging learners to smoke and even frequent taverns to dance for their amusement (Figure 6). These girls were under the impression that their behaviour was acceptable because the teachers who watched them appeared to condone and encourage it. Although we were shocked by this finding, the participants said that it was something that everyone knew about.

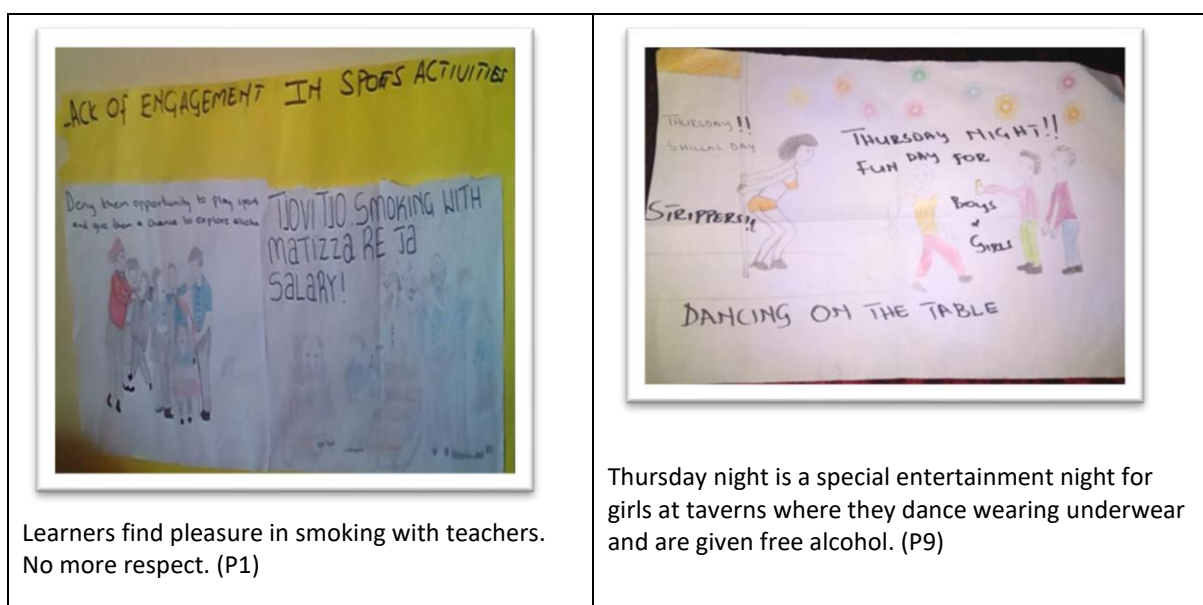


Figure 6: "We long to play sports but no one takes our ambition seriously" (P6)

The participants thus felt that the adults, who were supposed to provide them with support, were actually encouraging them to indulge in unhealthy behaviours. This experience negatively affected their sense of belonging and self-worth. Teachers were perceived to be insensitive to their needs and, instead, forced them to come to school early and leave late with the hope of improving results; but this just meant that learners felt overwhelmed and often fell asleep in class. Although this theme indicated that some teachers were encouraging risky behaviour, this was only the tip of the iceberg—as the next theme revealed.

Theme 3: Poor Social and Emotional Climate of the School

As expected, given the findings in the first two themes, the social and emotional climate of the school was a concern. Learners mentioned that most of them were from poor families, or their parents were either sick or no longer alive. They said that school was supposed to be a safe haven for all learners, especially those who lacked parental care and support; but it had become a place of rejection and

emotional and physical abuse (see Figure 7). Again, teachers were portrayed as causing emotional distress, rather than being a source of support. Teachers were also still using corporal punishment, despite it being against education policy. Such emotional climates engender fear, which impedes learning (LeDoux & Phelps, 2008):

There is no difference between being at home where your mother is lying helpless on the bed and in the school where the teacher will torment you about things you do not have control over, them like being poor. (P5)

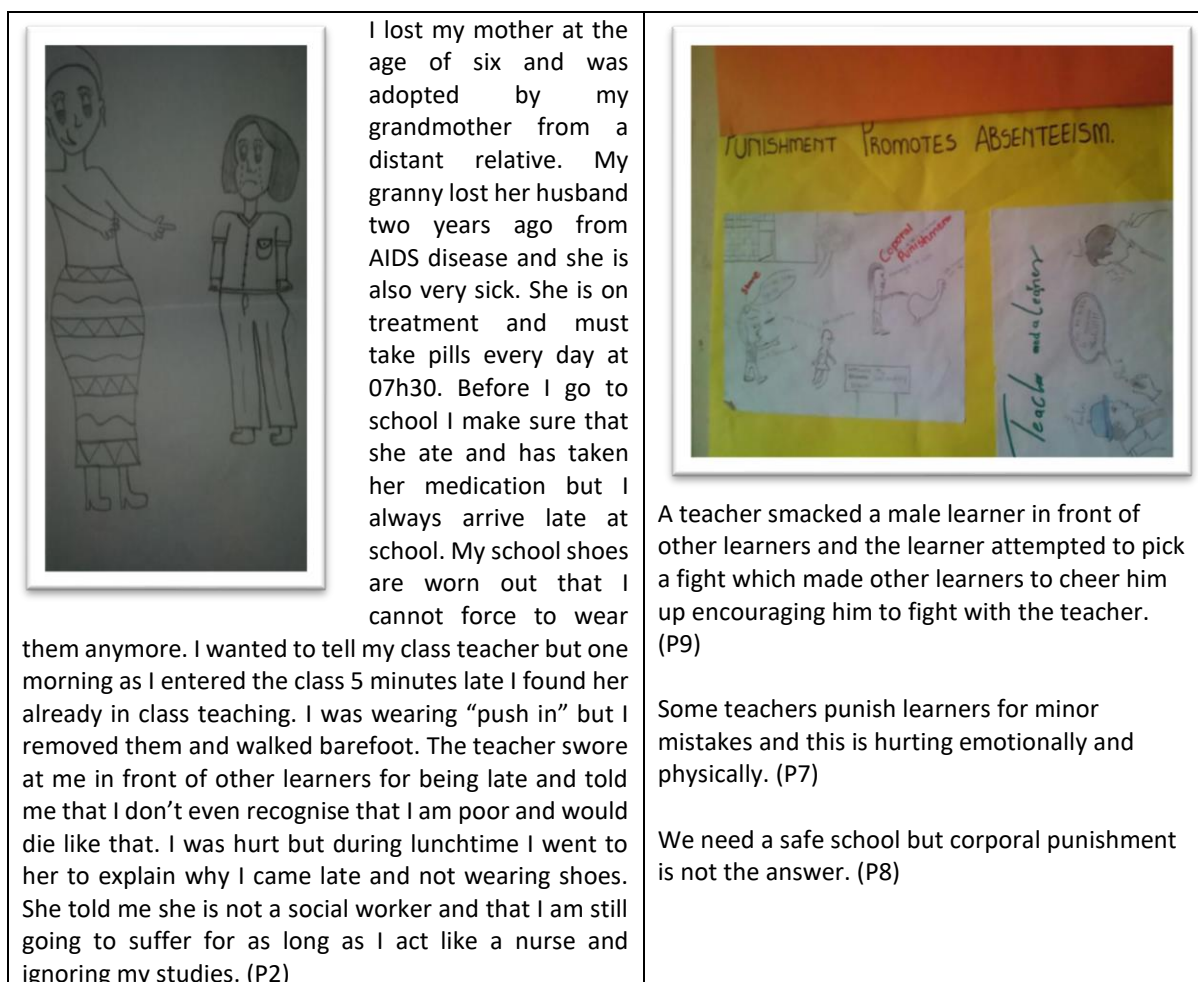


Figure 7: "We need your help, not your ridicule" (P5)

Stigma and discrimination were rife at school, which affected learners' emotional well-being, making them feel inferior and ostracised. This is an indication that at least five of the resilience enhancing needs listed in Table 1 were not being met (e.g., 2,3,4,6,7). Teachers made up names for learners, highlighting their poor academic performance, physical appearance, physical ailments, or social problems:

Some girls are called night shift workers because they are teenage mothers and are unable to attend morning lessons as they must first take children to preschool before they come to school. (P7)

Some teachers call learners who are not doing well "Code 14," meaning that they are abnormal. (P10)

All teachers in South Africa are required to practise inclusive education (Department of Education, 2001) but, clearly, some teachers at this school were doing the opposite by making learners feel ridiculed, stigmatised, and excluded. This behaviour even extended to learners who were known to be HIV positive, as indicated in Figure 8.

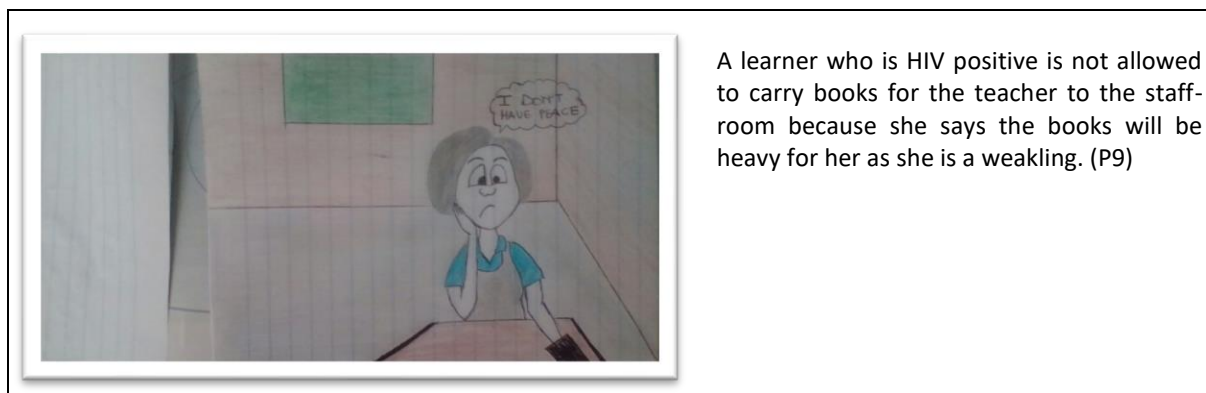
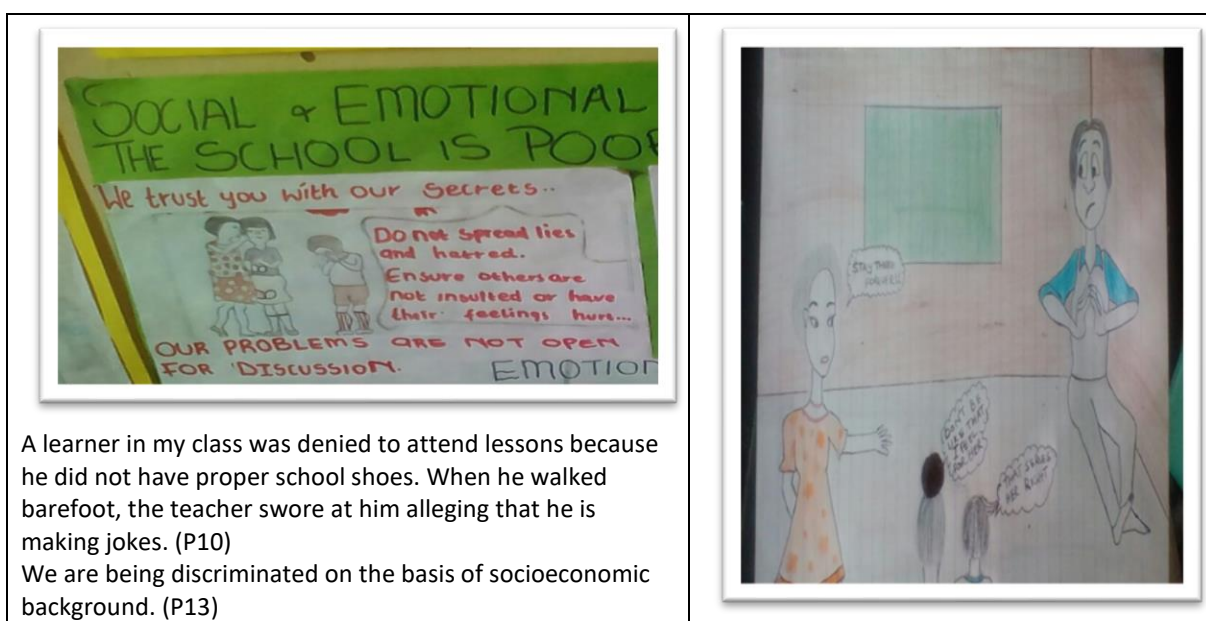


Figure 8: “People with HIV/AIDS should be helped, embraced, and not dismissed” (P9)

Some learners confided in teachers, but these same teachers referred to their problems in class in front of their peers (Figure 9). Participants clearly wanted to be able to confide in teachers because, as some of them said, the school was the only place where they could find comfort.



A learner in my class was denied to attend lessons because he did not have proper school shoes. When he walked barefoot, the teacher swore at him alleging that he is making jokes. (P10)

We are being discriminated on the basis of socioeconomic background. (P13)

Figure 9: “We plead for your support and not rejection” (P8)

There were also complaints that teachers gave preferential treatment to the best performing learners:

We are not given equal opportunities. If books are few, good performing learners are given first and the rest of us will share one book, being four. (P14)

Teachers ignored the resilience that children showed in the efforts they made to come to school and, instead, concentrated on their failure to adhere to school rules:

We walk 7 km daily in the bushes to school. The school gates are locked at 07h30 and the periods start at 08h00. Most of us from that village arrive at 07h50 because we wait for each other as it is not safe to walk alone in the bush. Teachers lock us out until lunch and we miss tests and lessons. (P7)

I think teachers don't want us to attend school here anymore because they always say hurtful things about us. (P2)

Teachers who practised discrimination also provided ways for learners to vicariously learn similar behaviour (Turner, Reynolds, Lee, Subasic, & Bromhead, 2018). Bullying was a problem, but teachers failed to deal with it (Figure 10).

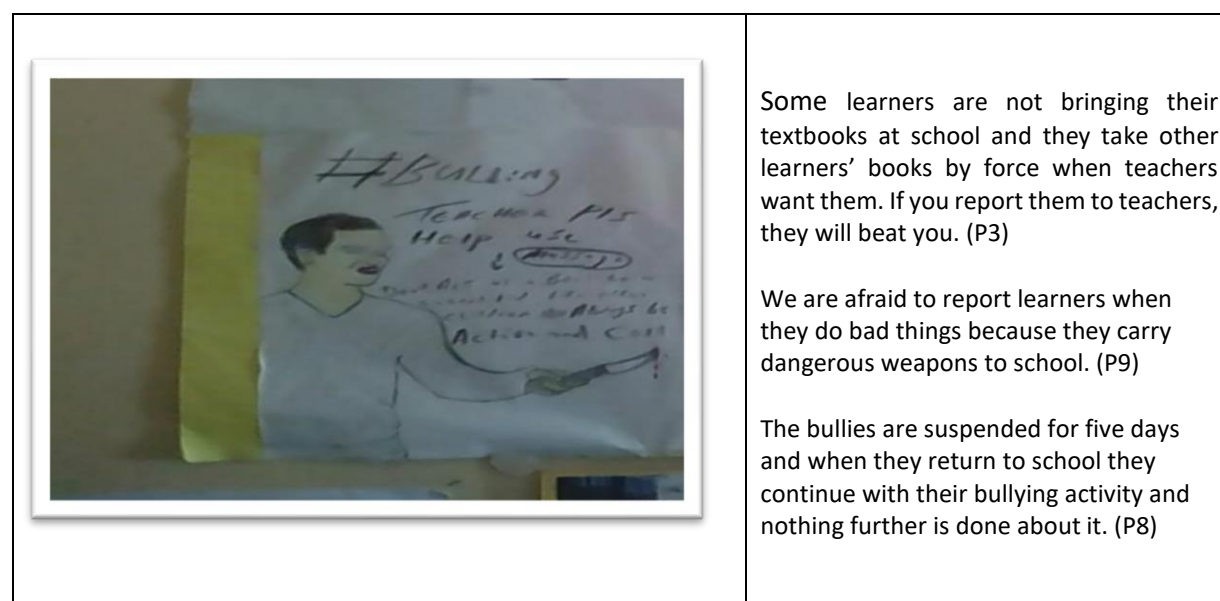


Figure 10: “Help us eliminate bullying” (P9)

Children who are exposed to violent and non-supportive climates will find it hard to flourish (Turner, Shattuck, Finkelhor, & Hamby, 2017), may be at risk for internalising disorders such as depression (Evensen, Lyngstad, Melkevik, & Mykletun, 2016), or perpetuate similar negative behaviour towards others (Bandura & Walters, 1977).

The most alarming finding for us was the allegation of sexual misconduct by teachers. The participants maintained that learners from poor families and those who had lost their parents to death were especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation by teachers. These learners were willing to have sex with teachers for material reasons, but such behaviour by teachers had far-reaching repercussions for relations with learners and between learners:

Many girls fall in love with teachers with the hope to have a better life since their parents are struggling financially. (P10)

Some teachers have multiple affairs within the schoolyard and this causes conflicts between girls. (P1)

It was reported that some learners benefitted from the relationship by obtaining the memorandum before tests or being given a second chance to rewrite tests if they did not do well. Such favouritism broke the trust between learners and teachers, which had a damaging effect on learner desire to work hard.

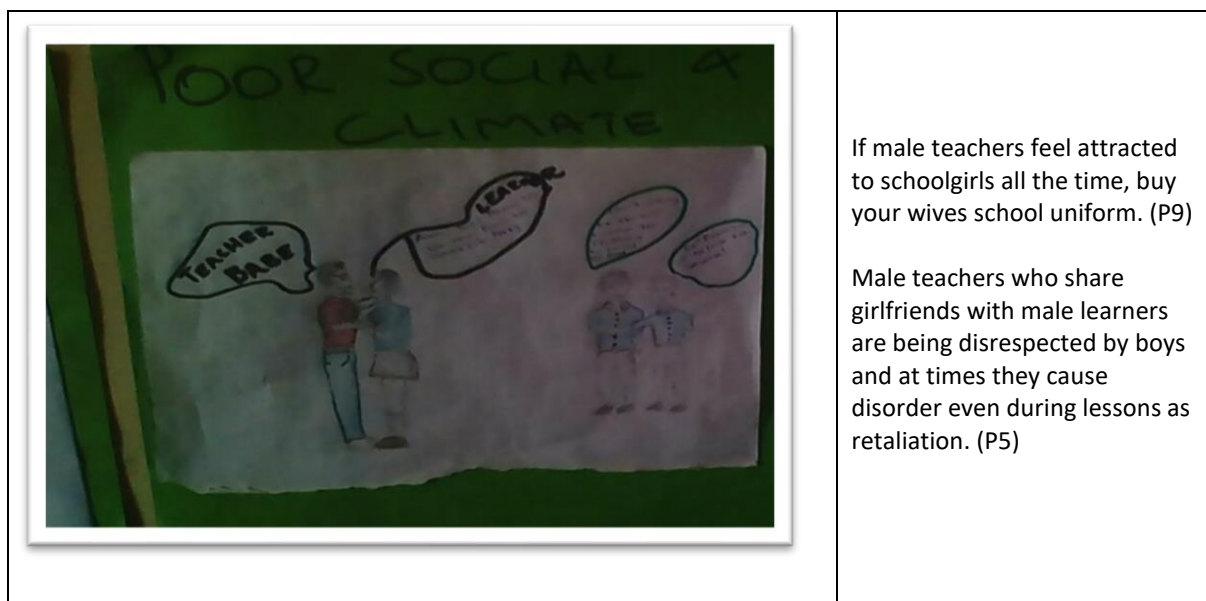


Figure 11 “Help us attain our goals and not to destroy our future” (P8)

This theme made it clear that the social ecology, which was supposed to meet the needs of learners to enhance resilience, was, in fact, the cause of much of their distress (Figure 11).

Discussion

Before the project, learners in the school under study had no recourse to report their grievances. Learners found other ways of exerting power and control over their lives through relationships with teachers, smoking, bullying, and joining gangs. They did not have a sense of belonging to the school and, generally, their self-worth was low. Unfortunately, the story told by participants in this project is not a unique one. Schools in the less privileged areas of South Africa are often sites of discrimination, where learners who face adversity may be emotionally bullied (Graham, 2016) by both teachers and peers (Moletsane, 2013). Because learners who come from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot afford the material possessions that the (relatively) more privileged learners take for granted, they are subjected to insults, name calling, and teasing by their peers. Teachers also inflict pain through derogatory remarks (Deacon & Stephney, 2007), and impose harsh punishments when learners fail to meet their expectations. Inappropriate relationships between teachers and learners are also a common occurrence, and one that is underreported.

The school space thus becomes a source of stress, where learners are exposed to stigma, psychosocial distress, lack of care, and pressure to conform to requirements such as having the correct uniform and other equipment (Heberle & Carter, 2015). Although the government has introduced no-fee schools (Department of Basic Education, 2007), children are still unable to afford all the other financial demands of schooling. The money families receive from social grants is not enough to put bread on the table, buy clothes, and pay for electricity much less the additional resources needed at school, like money for field trips. Failure to have resources such as scientific calculators and files for different subjects typecasts such learners as problematic by teachers (Howard et al., 2006). Due to the unreliable provision of services such as water and firewood, not to mention instances of corruption, the National School Nutrition Programme often does not function well enough to provide for hungry learners who may have little access to food outside the school. When they fall asleep in the classroom due to hunger, teachers shout at them rather than exploring the reasons for their lack of attention (Chitiyo, Changara, & Chitiyo, 2010).

Schools can also be dangerous places where children are subjected to abuse in the form of rape and sexual harassment. Reports in various newspapers indicate that sexual abuse is a problem that occurs at an alarming rate in schools, and children who are orphaned or neglected are often the easiest targets (Reintjies, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010). A KwaZulu-Natal newspaper (Mkhize, 2012) reported that 382 children, most of whom were from disadvantaged backgrounds, were abused by educators in that province alone. However, sexual abuse often goes unreported, especially in rural areas (South African Council of Educators, 2017). In other cases, children enter into sexual relations with teachers because they benefit materially from the relationships (Stoebenau, Heise, Wamoyi, & Bobrova, 2016). The fact that they agree to the relationship does not excuse the behaviour of the teacher.

Learners who live in difficult circumstances see school as an escape from their adversity at home (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). Victimisation, discrimination, stigmatisation, violence, and sexual exploitation by teachers, as revealed in this study, inflict more psychological and emotional pain and decrease learners' chances of learning how to develop the strength to deal with the adversity they face from being born into a socially disadvantaged situation. Rather than being a protective factor, attendance at the school in this study actually represented a risk factor on many levels because it failed to provide a safe, healthy, and inclusive environment for the children. The YPAR project was an attempt by the teacher-researcher and the youth to bring this lack of support to the attention of the social ecological representatives (teachers, management, school governing body) who should take responsibility for facilitating a positive social and emotional climate in the school (Theron, Cockcroft, & Wood, 2017). The YPAR project helped the youth participants to assert their rights and so gain a sense of power and agency to effect positive change, thus contributing to meeting the needs that foster resilient coping (see Table 1).

Conclusions

Although the picture painted through the visual artefacts is grim, the captions of the photos and drawings indicate a "plea" by participants for help from their social ecologies to change the situation. Through displaying their visual artefacts to their fellow learners, teachers and school governing body (which included parents), the participants were able to be taken seriously and to advocate for action. Representatives of the participants shared their visual exhibition with the school governing body (SGB), which resulted in the latter securing extra portable toilets from the Department of Basic Education as an interim measure, and to apply for permanent toilets to be built. They also commissioned community workteams clean the school on a regular basis. They began to look at the problem of learner support by taking steps to create a school-based support team, which was previously non-existent. The research findings presented by the participants could be seen to have shamed the SGB into action. This is the beauty of visual methods: the artefacts used to identify problems act as catalysts for change when they are displayed to a wider audience.

This first cycle of the YPAR project helped the youth participants to assert their rights and so gain some sense of power and a sense of agency to effect positive change, thus contributing to their resilience. It enabled youth to identify and raise awareness about issues that were negatively impacting on their wellbeing at school, and to develop resources to use in further cycles of action and advocacy for change. The process also created challenges for the participants, who initially faced teasing from peers and threats of victimisation from teachers, and for the adult facilitator who had to walk a fine line between assisting the youth to reveal negative practices while also keeping her colleagues and management supportive of the project. On reflection, we think that if we had framed, more positively, the prompt for the visual methods by asking them to identify what they did like about the school as well as what they did not like, the data might have been seen as less of a threat by the other stakeholders in the school.

The cycle reported on here was only the beginning of a gradual process of change that enabled the participants to take further actions towards making their school a more enabling space, reported on in another publication . The findings of this first cycle not only add to the body of evidence pointing to the urgent need to address the highlighted problems in our educational system, but also provide a potentially powerful pathway for learners to be involved in improving their own holistic wellbeing and resilience through learning to become advocates for change.

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