En/counters with disablist school violence: experiences of young people with dwarfism in the United Kingdom

Antonios Ktenidis
Lecturer in Special Educational Needs, Disability and Inclusion, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT
This paper explores the first-hand accounts of disablist school violence experienced by young people with dwarfism during their secondary education in the United Kingdom. A narrative, qualitative methodology was utilised, which turned nineteen young people with dwarfism into the storytellers of their schooling experiences. Drawing together a post-structuralist approach to bullying and Critical Disability Studies, it presents and discusses stories of physical, cultural and systemic violence they experienced, as well as their resistance to it. In doing so, it challenges dominant discourses around disability and school violence, including the representation of disabled young people as ‘passive victims’ of school violence or disability being the trigger of such violence. Finally, it provides a sociological analysis of such violence, shifting the focus from the individualistic blame to the cultural, institutional and systemic underpinnings of such violence and the role of disablism in its perpetuation.

Introduction
This paper explores the multifaceted violence 19 young people (between the ages of 11 and 30 years old) with dwarfism encountered in secondary schools in the UK, drawing on their first-hand accounts. It highlights the different forms of school violence they encountered, namely physical, cultural and systemic, and their acts of resistance to it. Dwarfism is an impairment characterised by a stature of 4 feet and 10 inches (147 centimetres) or below and a medical condition (Adelson 2005). There are different types of dwarfism, with the most common one being achondroplasia. Dwarfism is often not considered a disability (Shakespeare, Thompson, and Wright 2010), which has implications on policy and at a school level, in terms of what funding for reasonable adjustments is made available for children and young people with dwarfism at schools, for instance.

Various terms have been used to refer to people with dwarfism, namely little people, people with restricted growth, short-statured people, and dwarfs, with these terms being adopted by charities non-profit organisations across the United Kingdom e.g. Restricted Growth Association UK (RGA UK), Dwarf Sports Association UK (DSA UK), Little People UK (LPUK), Little People of Ireland (LLI), Short-Statucred Scotland (SSS), as well as across
the globe, e.g., Little People of America (LPA), Little People of Canada (LPC), Short-Statured People of Australia (SSPA). Each term carries its own history and connotations. For instance, the term dwarf refers to a mythical creature that worked in the mines, indicating the mystical social construction of dwarfism as an identity (Kruse 2003). This perception generated mixed attitudes towards dwarf people, who were either highly valued because of being considered to be close to God, or they were objectified and discriminated against as evil creatures and ill-omens (Adelson 2005). On the other hand, Little People is the preferred term in the United States of America and was introduced by the association Little People of America. However, the term has been critiqued for being used to also describe children and, therefore, perpetuating the infantilisation of people with dwarfism (Pritchard 2016). Following Pritchard (2021b), the term used in this paper is ‘person/people with dwarfism’, which was also the term most participants were comfortable with.

There are less than 6,000 people with dwarfism (Shakespeare, Wright, and Thompson 2007) in the UK, and approximately 250,000 people with achondroplasia in the world (Pauli 2019). Despite this small number, Shakespeare, Thompson, and Wright (2010: 20) point out a ‘cultural fascination with dwarfs’, with ‘the dominant cultural image of the dwarf is of a happy, outgoing and entertaining person, usually male’. Such representations shape the attitudes of non-disabled people towards people with dwarfism (Pritchard 2017), with the latter becoming the subjects of hostile attitudes and violence, such as staring, teasing, being physically lifted (cf. Ellis 2018). Moreover, many cases of children and young people with dwarfism becoming the targets of bullying at schools have been reported on the news, although Rebecca Cockley, a disability rights activist and a little person herself, warns about the commodification of such experiences by non-disabled people and the impact it has on the Little People community.

Disabled young people, including those with dwarfism, remain ‘at risk’ of bullying during schooling, both in the United Kingdom (UK) (Chatzitheohari, Parsons, and Platt 2016; Jones et al. 2012) and across the globe (Rose and Espelage 2012; Swearer and Hymel 2015), despite extensive research on the underlying roots of bullying (Horton 2016; Thornberg 2015) and the (in)effectiveness of anti-bullying policies (Smith et al. 2012). A lack of social skills, social capital, communication skills and behavioural difficulties among disabled young people are often centred as the main predictors of bullying (Hebron, Humphrey, and Oldfield 2015). This deficit perspective, as Ralph, Capewell, and Bonnett (2016: 226) argue, results in the perpetrators being ‘excused, because there is something at “fault” within the disabled person’.

Bullying is often narrowly defined as ‘anti-social behaviour where one student wields power over another, usually because of physical size, and that such behaviour must be stopped’. (Walton 2011: 131). Furthermore, bullying is usually reduced to physical and/or verbal violence (Formby 2015), ignoring other forms of violence, and is understood in adult-centric terms, meaning that children's and young people's understandings of bullying are often dismissed (Duncan 2013). This dominant discourse of bullying, characterised as an individual, pathological model of bullying (Duncan 2013), perpetuates a culture of individualistic blame instead of paying attention to the cultural, social, systemic and institutional factors that permit it to occur (Walton 2011). Similarly, the focus on individual ‘vulnerability’ conceals the social and structural dimensions of such violence (Hollomotz 2013). Due to how bullying has traditionally been understood and the implications this dominant discourse has, this paper makes use of this term when it cites the work of authors who have
used it. However, the author’s preferred term is ‘school violence,’ which is more encompassing in terms of not only considering violence (physical or verbal) exercised from one student on another, but also others forms of violence and the causes of such violence, which go far beyond the individual (Henry 2000).

According to Horton and Forsberg (2015: 7), ‘this lack of theoretical discussion of the social, institutional, and societal factors involved in bullying is surprising when one considers that school bullying is not a particularly new phenomenon.’ Sociological approaches have developed to address this concern, drawing on a range of theories, including symbolic interactionism (Forsberg and Thornberg 2016), stigma theory (Earnshaw et al. 2018; Thornberg 2015), critical theory (Walton 2005), poststructuralism (Bansel et al. 2009; Kousholt and Fisker 2015) and many more. The school as an institution and a structure has been analysed from a critical educational perspective as a context which facilitates bullying behaviours (Horton 2018), even allowing them to flourish (Duncan 2013).

To analyse the experiences of school violence as recounted by the young people with dwarfism, this article brings together Critical Disability Studies (Goodley et al. 2017) and a poststructuralist approach to bullying (Walton 2005) to reconsider the nexus between school violence and disability and signify the role of disablism in the perpetuation of such violence (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2011). The next section provides a snapshot of the theoretical undercarriage of this article, followed by a discussion of the methodology of this research. Stories of physical, cultural and systemic violence and acts of resistance are then presented. Finally, the implications of these findings in terms of how we understand disablism school violence, the strengths and limitations of the theoretical approach taken, and recommendations for future research are considered.

**Poststructuralist and critical disability studies approaches to school violence**

A poststructuralist theoretical framework, drawing predominantly on Foucault’s work, has been developed as an alternative to the dominant discourse surrounding bullying to look at the social, institutional and societal factors contributing to school violence. From a poststructuralist perspective, bullying is understood as ‘a construction embedded in discursive practice that arises from a network or system of institutional, historical, social, and political relations’ (Walton 2005: 61). This definition pays attention to how societal norms are embedded in the school structure and how they fuel bullying behaviour: ‘Seen as violence against difference, bullying can be reconsidered as an expression of power mediated by constructs of social difference and as a mechanism of social control (Walton 2011: 140). Poststructuralist scholars suggest that a Foucauldian analysis of bullying can illuminate the connection of bullying with the constructions of normality and dysfunction, and therefore, move the scope of research ‘beyond the understanding of bullying as the behaviour of dysfunctional children’ (Walton 2005; Kousholt and Fisker 2015: 595).

Furthermore, poststructuralist scholars are critical of the simplistic, a theoretical understanding of power and power relation in mainstream school bullying research. In particular, it is argued that power is discussed in individualistic terms, as a capacity that certain individuals possess and which they use to abuse other individuals who do not have it (Horton 2016; Walton 2005). Instead, adopting a Foucauldian understanding of power (Bansel et al. 2009) means that power relations cease to be conceived as ‘fixed and determined by differences in psychological or physical strength,’ but are considered ‘unstable, shifting and thus
open to contestation (Horton 2016: 210). The power asymmetry (or power imbalance) needs to be understood as ‘situated and relational’ and not as ‘personal and located in individuals’ (Thornberg 2018: 145).

Such power asymmetries have to do with students’ social positioning in relation to ‘wider societal norms regarding race, gender, sexuality, ability, size, bodily shape, social class and so on’ (Horton 2016: 211). As Walton (2011: 141) argues, however, ‘some prominent researchers on bullying consider and acknowledge difference in fuelling bullying behaviour, but not deeply enough’. Whilst bullying based on certain identities, such as sex and gender (Ringrose 2008; Ringrose and Renold 2010), sexuality (homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying) (Formby 2015; Marston 2015), race (racist bullying) (Myers and Bhopal 2017; Qureshi 2013) and body size (Morales, Grineski, and Collins 2019) has been analysed sociologically, sociological research pertinent to school violence against disabled young people (disablist school violence) is limited, especially from a disabled young people’s perspective.

As Chatzitheochari, Parsons, and Platt (2016: 696) note,

The majority of existing research is embedded in medical rather than social models of disability, failing to consider negative representations of disability as ‘difference’ and the potential role of school processes in facilitating the conditions within which bullying of disabled children is likely to occur.

Critical Disability Studies (hereinafter referred to as CDS) question medicalised, deficit understandings of disability (Goodley et al. 2017) and offer a theoretical framework which enables an understanding of the role of disablism in the (re)production of school violence against disabled students (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2011). Disablism is defined as ‘a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional wellbeing’ (Thomas 2007: 73).

Disablist violence, such as disability hate crime, has been researched extensively from a CDS perspective (cf. Birch 2018; Emerson and Roulstone 2014; Thorneycroft and Asquith 2015). CDS are critical of approaches that pathologise the disabled person as exhibiting violent behaviour or as provoking violence against them (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2011). As Watts and Erevelles (2004: 292) claim,

school violence does not occur as a result of the aberrant behaviors of a few “violent” students. Rather, we attribute the incidence of school violence to systemic causes that lie in the oppressive conditions meted out to students oppressively marked by race, class, gender, and disability. More specifically, we argue that school violence is not psychological phenomenon but stems from oppressive material conditions that shape both identity and social practices.

Like the poststructuralist approach to bullying, CDS turn attention to the material, structural, systemic and cultural conditions that result in such violence. Liasidou and Ioannidou (2020) combined CDS and a stigma-based perspective on bullying to explore teachers’ insights into disablist bullying. The authors explored how the discourse of disability as difference is perpetuated by teachers and ‘lived’ by disabled students, a discourse which position disabled young people as ‘abnormal’, which result in them experiencing bullying. Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2011) also examined the violence experienced by disabled children and their families, drawing on first-hand accounts. The authors discussed the
multi-faceted nature of violence disabled children encounter and their analysis considered ‘the role of social relationships, institutions and culture in the constitution of violence’ (ibid.: 604). They concluded that ‘the violence experienced by disabled children and their families says more about the dominant culture of disablism than it does of the acts of a few seemingly irrational, unreasonable, mean or violent individuals’ (ibid.: 602). CDS is thus essential for challenging how disability is understood and discussed within the bullying discourse (as a deficit or as a ‘trigger’ of violence) as well as for considering what the roots of disablism school violence are; that is, shifting the responsibility for such violence from disability and the disabled person to the social, institutional and cultural underpinnings of such violence.

Bringing together these two perspectives—a poststructuralist approach to bullying and Critical Disability Studies—enables a critical analysis of disablism school violence against disabled young people, an analysis which does not pathologise or hold accountable exclusively the individuals involved, but instead explores how schools perpetuate the violence of disablism.

Methodology

The stories presented and analysed in this article were generated as part of my doctoral research, which was carried out between 2017 and 2019. The research explored the secondary schooling experiences of young people with dwarfism in the UK. School violence was a theme that featured in those stories. The research adopted a qualitative, narrative approach to explore participants’ experiences of school violence (Thornberg 2011) through ‘small stories’ (Georgakopoulou 2015). Here, ‘small stories’ refer to story length and those with a focus on the mundane facets of lived experience (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008). As Georgakopoulou (2015: 63) has argued, ‘small stories research has been effective in bringing to the fore silenced, untold, devalued, and discarded stories in numerous institutional or research‐regulated contexts’.

The research aimed to recruit participants between the ages of eleven and thirty years old, with a diagnosis of dwarfism, and who were still in secondary schools or who had already completed their secondary education. The choice of this age group meant the latter group (those who had already graduated) would provide me with their retrospective narratives, meaning that they reflected back on what secondary education was like for them and how they made sense of it later on in their lives. On the other hand, the former group (those who were still in secondary schools) discussed the experiences that they were having at the time when they were still in secondary education and how they made sense of those.

For access to and recruitment of participants, I contacted on Facebook Messenger and via email the charities and associations of people with dwarfism in the UK, namely Restricted Growth Association UK, Short Statured Scotland, Little People UK, Little People of Ireland, Dwarfs Sport Association UK, and Walking with Giants. The initial communication was to ask them to advertise the research on their social media pages and communicate it to their members, therefore, these associations were acting as gatekeepers. Out of the six associations, four shared or permitted me to share the relevant materials on their Facebook pages. The online advertisement of my research on the Facebook pages of the charities and the groups did not result in potential participants contacting me (with a few exceptions). Considering the mockery and violence people with dwarfism experience online by non-disabled people (Pritchard 2021b), this scepticism towards the research was absolutely justified.
Recruitment was complicated, partly due to my positionality as a non-disabled (I do not have a diagnosis of dwarfism) researcher. In particular, in order to become a member of certain charities or groups, one needs to either have dwarfism or to have a family member with dwarfism. As I did not meet these eligibility criteria, my access to potential participants who were members of those charities was not feasible. However, there were a few charities which offered 'associate membership', allowing people without dwarfism but with an interest in it to become members. I immediately became members of those associations, which held annual meetings that I was able to attend. This proved to be the most effective approach to recruitment. During those meetings, I had the opportunity to discuss my research in further detail with potential participants, respond to any questions they had, and elaborate on the significance of the research and the impact I intended it to have. Snowball sampling (Bryman 2015) also occurred, with one participant introducing others.

Nineteen participants opted to participate in the research, including 9 teenagers and 10 adults. The demographics of participants are presented in Table 1.

The table above illustrates some demographic information about the participants, without covering all aspects, e.g. type of impairment, socio-economic background, and race/ethnicity. This is to protect the participants’ anonymity and confidentiality. As many participants are members of the associations that facilitated the recruitment process, certain information, such as their dwarfism condition, could make them easily identifiable (Pritchard 2021a).

Participants were provided with a range of options to share their stories rather than the researcher imposing one mode of data generation. This methodological choice was in line with inclusive disability research (Manning 2010) in terms of letting participants exercise their agency, deciding how they would like and felt most comfortable with to communicate their stories. Sixteen participants opted for ‘oral storytelling’, which involved participating in a narrative semi-structured interview and which took place either in person or online via Skype. Interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. Three participants chose to share their stories in a written form (email interviews) or digitally (two teenage participants shared via a private weblog) and one participant created a visual story.

### Table 1. Participants’ demographics.

| Pseudonym | Age | Sex   |
|-----------|-----|-------|
| Mary      | 16  | Female|
| John      | 15  | Male  |
| Louise    | 16  | Female|
| Rania     | 17  | Female|
| Lynn      | 12  | Female|
| George    | 12  | Male  |
| Harry     | 15  | Male  |
| Angela    | 13  | Female|
| Christine | 13  | Female|
| Rachael   | 29  | Female|
| Paul      | 26  | Male  |
| Nick      | 30  | Male  |
| Michael   | 29  | Male  |
| Alice     | 23  | Female|
| Ryan      | 29  | Male  |
| Bill      | 29  | Male  |
| Nathan    | 27  | Male  |
| Patricia  | 30  | Female|
| Aphrodite | 19  | Female|
Ethical approval was granted by the university I did my doctoral research at. The research adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC 2015) and British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018). All adult participants provided informed consent and, in the case of the teenagers, their parents gave informed consent first and then the young people’s consent was sought and gained. The teenagers were also reminded that it should be their own decision if they wanted to be involved or not (Skelton 2008). Moreover, in the case of teenage participants, a chaperone—most often their mother—was always present during the interviews. Furthermore, all participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the research and anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. I also informed the participants that I would strive to secure confidentiality, while following Shakespeare, Thompson, and Wright (2010) advice by explaining that it could be compromised considering that this is a specific impairment group where many people know each other due to the common spaces that they share e.g. associations and hospitals.

Data were stored in an encrypted file on a password protected laptop in line with the ESRC’s (2015) guidelines and it would be retained for 3 years and then get deleted. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012). Thematic analysis included six stages, namely familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of potential themes, defining and naming the themes, and the production of the final report (Braun and Clarke 2012). The final themes were organised as such: (a) physical violence, (b) cultural violence, (c) systemic violence and (d) resistance.

Findings and discussion: stories of school violence

The stories offered below illustrate graphically school violence experienced by young people with dwarfism, particularly considering forms of violence that often remain silenced or unacknowledged, such as systemic violence. Moreover, the young people’s acts of resistance towards such violence is discussed. Walton (2015) refers to narratives of bullying as ‘difficult knowledge’ and Tholander, Lindberg, and Svensson (2020: 372) propose that ‘the difficult knowledge concerns both sides of the podium, the narrator as well as the audience’. Like Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2013), I acknowledge the dangers of (re)telling potentially traumatizing stories that may feed voyeuristic interest in tragic stories of disability, objectify embodied experiences of oppression, and contribute to victimising and pathologising young people with dwarfism. While these concerns are very real in terms of such stories turning into the object of sensationalism, they also hold a disruptive potential: these stories illuminate the multifaceted violence disabled young people experience at school and have the potential to challenge the ways bullying, disability and the relationship between the two have been discussed so far. It is with the permission of the participants that I proceed with caution.

Stories of physical violence

According to Giles and Heyman (2005), boys tend to deal with more direct bullying (physical violence), whereas girls usually experience relational bullying (verbal violence). However, as Horton (2019: 403) warns, the reduction of gender to a question of sex roles ‘fails to adequately account for the power relations involved and the ways in which masculinist norms are enforced or resisted’. Horton (2019) draws attention to the relationship between
gender performativity and bullying rather than simply essentialising sex differences (Ringrose and Renold 2010). This is important to consider when reading the stories of the male, adult participants. For instance, Bill shared that:

The physical abuse was generally pushing and shoving or being target practice for the footballers. [...] Physical bullying would consist of being picked up (physically) and ran with, pushed into lockers and rubbed on the head.

Bill reported various forms of physical violence, all of which contributed to the objectification of his body (Horton 2019). His male peers demonstrated their perceived entitlement to use his body as a platform to assert hegemonic masculinity through violence by subordinating Bill to a less-than-human state, treating him as ‘some-thing’ to be touched and held. This aligns with research by Haegele and Maher (2021), who examined male autistic youth’s experiences of bullying in physical education and argued that physical violence is a means through which traditional masculinity is performed. Actions of objectification and feelings of entitlement such as these are not new phenomena and need to be understood as biproducts of a disabling culture, because they position non-disabled people as having ownership over the bodies and actions of disabled people.

Similar experiences of physical violence were shared by Paul, who provided various snapshots of them:

Paul: I remember from the first year one particular person that had a particular problem with me. And I got quite bullied by him, quite a bit. [...] We had problem where this guy was continually hitting me [...] he continually punched me and after a couple of minutes of it I didn't know what to do.

This physical violence was constant and occurred in different spaces:

Paul: It was only the third year in secondary school. There wasn't anyone around at that particular point. He got me into a place where there wasn't many people around. It wasn't a place, it wasn't, kind of lunch time, kind of outside. This guy went outside at lunch, tried to beat me there, as kids do play around. But then he particularly hunted me out and punched me like mad, so I was beaten at that particular point.

Paul’s bullying was persistent and often visible to other young people, as it occurred in open spaces. Arguably, witnesses to acts of physical violence are complicit bystanders, doing more to legitimise rather than disrupt disablist behaviours. Playgrounds have been reported as places in which disabled young people experience bullying most frequently (Haegele and Maher 2021; Holt, Bowlby, and Lea 2017), mainly because there is less adult surveillance (Holt 2007). The same has been said about school corridors and changing facilities (Haegele and Maher 2021). Paradoxically, research by Haegele and Maher (2021) also found that some autistic young people were more able to develop relationships and friendships with their peers in these spaces, away from the gaze of adults.

Nonetheless, the easy way to read these stories would have been to attribute such violent behaviour to the specific individuals: aggressive bullies and passive or provocative victims (Rose et al. 2011). However, according to Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2011), the underlying cause for such violence is disablism. When the dominant cultural representations of people with dwarfism depict them as less than human, as objects to be ridiculed, then such violence is unsurprising (Pritchard 2017). The role of culture in the perpetuation of violence is unpicked next.
**Stories of cultural violence**

Ellis (2018), Pritchard (2019) and Shakespeare, Thompson, and Wright (2010) researched the relationship between the cultural representations of people with dwarfism and experiences of everyday violence in public spaces, such as name calling and being picked up physically without one’s consent. Unlike male participants who were mostly the targets of physical violence, most female participants reported experiencing predominantly cultural violence, such as name calling and teasing. Rachael and Patricia shared the following stories:

Rachael: I remember the Snow White and the seven dwarfs song, heigh ho dwarf song.

Patricia: Sometimes, they would sing like ‘heigh ho’ to me, you know what I mean, like heigh ho, heigh ho, kind of like from panto and stuff like that.

Dominant cultural representations of people with dwarfism, such as pantomime, were drawn upon to tease the students with dwarfism. As Shakespeare, Thompson, and Wright (2010) argue, the role of cultural representations in the case of people with dwarfism matter even more, since they constitute one of the central means through which people with dwarfism become known to people without dwarfism. Goodley and Lawthom (2013) (use the term ‘cultural disavowal’ to describe how disabled bodies appear as appealing and appalling at the same time, as the object of fear and fascination. Referring to the disabled child specifically, Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2011: 614) propose that the ‘disabled child is culturally disavowed: potentially ignored or condensed into a caricature (ibid.: 45): a monstrous/fascinating object to be gazed at and/or ignored’. This was the case with the participants, who were turned into caricatures by their peers and were treated as novelties.

Another form of cultural violence was the use of the derogative term ‘midget’, which has been condemned by all the associations of people with dwarfism in the UK (and elsewhere e.g. Little People of USA). This term emerged from the freak show era to designate (and degrade) people with proportionate dwarfism (Adelson 2005; Pritchard 2019). Many participants referred to being called that and other names:

Lynn: She’s called me ‘shortie’. I’ve had that. I’ve had, I’ve had, oh, when she said, I know this is so rude. I don’t know where she got it from. She said ‘midget’ to me. [...] I had shortie, shortie, she’s little shortie (singing voice) and I get, I am like, I actually wanted to hide myself.

Rania: So, I’ve had stuff around me shortie. In streets you got like dwarf, midget. [...] It is an offensive word, with a history that is used for a certain category of people. It is offensive. It is just as offensive.

Such encounters with cultural violence were daily and are in line with findings from other studies (Ellis 2018; Pritchard 2019). As Cockley (2020: n.p.) argues,

The dwarfism community’s SPECIFIC history with the “entertainment” industry adds distinct nuance to this conversation which makes it different than kids with disabilities other than dwarfism. We have centuries of transactional power dynamics between us and the averages. We have vaudeville (including forced breeding). We have Oz. We have Santa. We have Oompa Loompas. We have Game of Thrones. We have TLC.

Cultural violence is also legitimised when it is represented as acceptable in the public sphere. For instance, Jimmy Carr, a British comedian, stated on his TV show, under the guise of a joke: ‘Is a dwarf an abortion that made it?’ This joke triggered the reaction of
many associations of people with dwarfism and disabled activists. For instance, Eugene Grant’s (2019), an activist with dwarfism, used Twitter as a mechanism of cultural production and representation to challenge the disablist discourse underpinning Carr’s so-called ‘joke’. Grant’s (2019) response encapsulated a number of crucial points. First, the daily occurrence of violence in the life of people with dwarfism, which is regularly questioned by non-disabled people. Second, the relationship between disabling cultural representations and ‘disability hate speech’ against people with dwarfism (cf Pritchard 2019). Finally, the repercussions such violence has on people with dwarfism, including how they navigate public spaces and where they feel un/safe (Pritchard 2016).

Stories of systemic violence

Besides the physical and cultural violence, participants were further exposed to ‘systemic violence’; that is, how ‘the very workings of systems ensure that possible antecedents of real violence are never addressed’ (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2011: 611). Schools have policies and procedures in place to deal with bullying, such as the disclosure of a bullying incident to a staff member and the latter’s intervention (Black, Weinles, and Washington 2010). Christine’s story illustrates how such procedures were reinforced by staff members in her school:

Christine: I had this horrible teaching assistant and we went to this room with this girl, Emma. And we have to play like this bullying board game, so like it’s a board game. And it was said like: ‘If a bully shouted at your friend, what would you do and everything?’ Em, so this girl was saying: ‘Oh, I’ll go and tell the teacher and everything’. And then, when I said what I would do—I said that I would shout back at them and say just like: ‘Go away and everything and leave my friend’—I got told off. And she said that I shouldn't talk back to them and I shouldn't be horrible to them. But I would stick up for myself. And then she was saying I should go and tell a teacher and everything, which is ridiculous. So I am not gonna just sit there and let them shout at me or my friend.

Using a board game, the teaching assistant had to confirm that both students held the ‘right’ knowledge on how to react to bullying. Although the use of the board game could be considered ‘child-friendly’, it could be equally argued that it may be perceived as infantilising, that is the young people were spoken down to. While Emma performed ‘docility’ by saying what the teaching assistant considered right, Christine resisted. Instead, she exhibited her agency by providing the ‘wrong’ answer. Immediately, the teaching assistant felt the need to correct the unruly subject. The assistant’s reaction was illustrative of how ‘educational professionals must act in such ways to fit the rigidity of systemic rituals’ (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2011: 610). Often, young people like Christine are instructed what to do by those in power rather than listened to (Side and Johnson 2014). Christine made clear that ‘disclosing’ a bullying incident was not a neutral or automatic option, but it required a relationship of trust with the adult to whom the incident would be disclosed. Trust is a core element in the process of disclosing such incidents (Cortes and Kochenderfer-Ladd 2014; Yablon 2010). As Maunder and Tattersall (2010) and DeLara (2012) suggest, students might disclose such information only to staff members that seem more approachable compared to others.

While disclosure is often described in many anti-bullying policies as the first and essential step toward illimitation of such behaviours (Black, Weinles, and Washington 2010),
participants in my research mentioned that disclosure did not always result in any form of intervention on behalf of the adults to whom the incident was disclosed:

Nick: Em, I told the teachers and they didn't do anything. I told the staff in the playground, so it might have been teaching assistants or any teachers, and they didn't do anything.

This is in line with the findings from other studies, in which teachers did not intervene in bullying incidents (Crothers, Kolbert, and Barker 2006; Kokko and Pörhölä 2009), leaving the bullied individual with the impression that they were tolerant of it (Dedousis-Wallace and Shute 2009; Novick and Isaacs 2010) and making them question the value of disclosure (Bjereld, Daneback, and Mishna 2021). The lack of intervention from teachers could be partly explained by the lack of training and confidence in dealing with disablist bullying incidents (Purdy and Mc Guckin 2014, 2015) but that purview may do more to absolve them of responsibility and thus let them off the hook.

Christine described the procedure followed at her school:

Christine: We have something called ‘The House Office’, where you go, cause we have different houses in the school. You go and like you tell what happened. And then they get you to write down a statement and then, just about what happened. And then. they don't do anything after that.

This pile of written statements was illustrative of what Walton (2015: 27) referred to as the ‘administrative disregard in the guise of concern’, meaning that schools appeared to be concerned about such incidents, but took no action. Here, it could be argued that inaction is disablist and contributes towards legitimising—perhaps unintentionally—bullying behaviours. What the above accounts demonstrate is how systemic violence functions as a vicious circle whereby the very means put forward to eliminate bullying were also part of the problem of bullying. Returning to Christine’s performance of acting in an unruly manner, one can see why this strategy of disclosing was not adopted by her (and other young people), as it made no difference (Bjereld, Daneback, and Mishna 2021). Partly, this led to participants engaging in other forms of resistance, not always approved by the school.

Stories of resistance

As the formal procedures schools had in place proved ineffective in the elimination of bullying, participants opted for other ways to counteract the violence they experienced. These were moments of resistance, with resistance here being understood in its Foucauldian sense:

[We find] a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial. (Foucault 1981: 95)

Various resisting strategies were adopted by the participants. For instance, Paul decided to fight back those who bullied him physically:

Paul: I remember at the time I’d beat him at the same time to try and get him off, because he was punching me like mad.[…]I remember being, going to a meeting about it, because they’d obviously seen it, teachers had. I remember we both got the blame for that, because I obviously hit back at the same time. But it’s quite a challenge, because I was being picked on all the time because of being disabled.
Fighting back has been found to be a common strategy male young people adopt to counteract bullying (Black, Weinles, and Washington 2010). Nevertheless, this strategy is contested. On the one hand, fighting back is a form of resistance that schools do not approve of (Camodeca and Goossens 2005), with the individuals being disciplined for misbehaving. On the other hand, Sercombe and Donnelly (2013: 498) proposed that ‘hitting back involves the reassertion of agency, and the reclaiming of a place in the social system, even if still a subordinate place’. By hitting back, Paul demonstrated his agency, even from a subordinate place resulting from his social positioning (Thornberg 2018).

In hindsight, Paul also expressed his ambivalence about whether this was an appropriate strategy to counteract violence:

Paul: I understand that's probably wrong to fight back, but you know, it was hard at the time, you know, as a kid. [...] It’s a hard one, because, obviously, you know, they said that because I fought back, I was equally liable as he was. At that particular point, as a kid, you don't know what else to do.

Paul attributed his ‘reaction’ to his age (‘as a kid’), since, from an adult perspective now, he could see that this might have been a wrong choice. This aligns with findings showing the differences between the preferred responses between children and adults (Black, Weinles, and Washington 2010). However, Paul’s last sentence also indicated that he felt at the time that fighting back was the only solution, as other strategies e.g. disclosing to an adult, had not worked before.

Interestingly, Christine mentioned how she used to speak back to her bullies, a strategy referred to as ‘assertiveness’ (Camodeca and Goossens 2005):

Christine: I've got used to having arguments with girls like that, I just, I have really good come backs. So that's like I defend myself a lot. I am not just gonna sit there and just let them talk about me or anything. I am gonna say stuff back.

These findings are supported by research conducted by Craig, Pepler, and Blais (2007), who suggest that boys tend to engage in more ‘confrontational’ strategies, whereas girls adopted ‘relational strategies’, indicating the gendered differences in resistance. It is worth noting here that Paul’s and Christine’s choice of strategies was their ‘last resort’ (Tholander, Lindberg, and Svensson 2020: 373), because other strategies they had opted for before, such as disclosing incidents to an adult, did not prove effective.

Nonetheless, their resistance resulted in both being disciplined by staff members. Paul was blamed for hitting back and Christine was told off for speaking back. This might have been the outcome of zero tolerance policies to bullying, which, as Walton (2005a: 108) argues, ‘often punish the child who is forced to act in self-defence against bullies, especially in the absence of intervention from adults’. Participants found themselves in a vicious circle of violence, in which no matter how they tried to resist it—disclose, fight or speak back—, it never ceased to occur. These narratives point out how disablist violence pervades schools, with disabled young people having to endure it and not seeing a way out.

Besides speaking or fighting back, some participants chose the strategy of ‘joking’ (Black, Weinles, and Washington 2010; Craig, Pepler, and Blais 2007) to cease the violence. Bill and Rachael shared accordingly:
Bill: As a teenager in secondary school, from years 8–9, I became a class clown to make people laugh for the approval of extinguishing bullying that I suffered from people in years above.

Rachael: But I think there was probably a time when I was trying to own it and be more sort of, yeah, yeah, whatever, you know, and maybe think about. I think I'd probably say things like 'midget' or make jokes about my size to sort of own it and kind of not let other people bother me with it.

The above strategies have been reported by young people with dwarfism in previous research and have been described in the literature as 'coping strategies' (Rott 2013; Schanke and Thorsen 2014). Young people with dwarfism joked around their disability as a means to be perceived as 'acceptant' of their condition and, hence, unaffected by the derogative comments of others. However, one needs to consider the emotional labour required to perform such resistance, which built on either turning themselves into the subject of ridicule (acting as the class clown) or by re-claiming discourses which had been used to dehumanise them in the first place e.g. the use of the term 'midget'.

Furthermore, many participants discussed how their friends reacted when a peer had attempted to bully them. For instance, Patricia and Angela shared the following stories:

Patricia: Em, so yeah, I did have a few like nastiness, but it was quite good, because I had a good friend background. Em, as soon as my friends saw them doing this kind of thing, they would say: 'Em, excuse me, stop doing that', that kind of thing. So, they kind of almost spoke on my behalf. Em, because I did feel, it was quite difficult, cause like, I didn't wanna tell them off and go away, but I just wanted to say it like: 'It's not right you saying this'. Because I think I had younger cousins and things like that, I know that children find it curious and then might not know necessarily how to react to it, em, kind of thing. So I was like: 'Right, this is actually wrong'. But my friends were just so good, they would be like: 'Leave her alone, she's our friend' (giggle), stuff like this, so.

Angela: So, if someone is staring. They kind of like stand in front, not stand in front of me, but kind like stand in front of their vision and glare at them. And I am like: 'Ok, let's go'.

Patricia’s and Angela’s friends protected them from their peers’ hostile attitudes—staring, name calling, teasing—by speaking back and by blocking the staring with their bodies respectively. Both stories were indicative of community building, where each member cared for each other. Patricia felt that her friends took over to an extent ('they kind of almost spoke on my behalf') and her approach would have been slightly different to theirs due to the exposure she had to her younger relatives’ curiosity, which made her more sympathetic to such attitudes. This did not mean, however, that Patricia was any less grateful to her friends for their support ('but my friends were just so good'). In Angela’s case, while it was her friends that returned the stare, she was the one to ‘have the last word’.

These stories demonstrated how friendship was a major mean through which the participants counteracted violence. Not only did the participants’ friends fight back such violence in various ways e.g. telling others off, but the participants also had agency over their friends’ conduct, meaning that they were the ones to decide what the final course of action should be. While friendship has been discussed as a strategy for counteracting bullying for non-disabled children (Kendrick, Jutengren, and Stattin 2012), this has not been the case as extensively for disabled young people (for exceptions: Bourke and Burgman 2010; Worth 2013). The lack of friendships, often attributed to social deficits of disabled students, has been put forward as a reason that disabled students get bullied more frequently compared
to their non-disabled peers (Espelage, Rose, and Polanin 2015). These stories then serve as a counter-narrative to such deficit discourses by acknowledging how friendship was crucial in the fight of school violence.

Conclusions

The findings of this study highlighted the multifaceted violence—physical, cultural and systemic—young people with dwarfism encounter in secondary schools, as well as how they resist it. The participants’ stories challenge the dominant discourse of bullying in numerous ways, which has implications for how disablist school violence is (to be) understood. Firstly, in opposition to this dominant discourse, which represents disabled young people as ‘provocative victims’ of the violence against them (Shea and Wiener 2003), these stories shift the focus from disability as a problem and a trigger of violence to the violence of disablism (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2011), as manifested in schools. In particular, light was shed on the social, cultural and institutional underpinnings of such violence, indicating that schools and culture play a major role in the production and reproduction of it. As Kousholt and Fisker (2015: 600) argue, ‘to overcome bullying demands changes in our society, in our understandings of normality and non-normality and in the way the school as an institutional setting is organised as part of broader societal structures’.

Secondly, within the dominant discourse, disabled young people are represented as ‘passive victims’ of school violence (Rose, Espelage, and Monda-Amaya 2009). However, participants’ stories depicted disabled young people as agentic subjects who engaged in acts of resistance against such violence. Nevertheless, participants found themselves trapped in the vicious circle of school violence, as the proposed strategies of schools to eliminate bullying proved to be ineffective and their attempts to use other strategies resulted in them getting disciplined. It is also worth noting that this study abstained from using the binary bully-victim to describe the participants, a term that they also did not use to describe themselves. This binary, often adopted in bullying research, has its implications, including:

(a) obscure the individual variation and possible sub groups of ‘bullies’ and ‘victims’, (b) risk labelling, pathologising, and stigmatising certain pupils, (c) risk portraying a rather static picture of the social dynamics of bullying and peer group processes, and (d) draw the attention away from broader contextual factors such as school culture, discursive practices, social identities, gender norms, racism, disability discrimination, heteronormativity, body discrimination and other hegemonies. (Thornberg 2018: 155)

Thirdly, unlike previous studies (cf Espelage, Rose, and Polanin 2015), which attribute the experiences of school violence of disabled young people to a lack of friendship associated with a range of deficits e.g. social skills, the participants of this study indicated how friendship was a central mean to resisting the school violence against them.

Overall, these stories hold a disruptive potential, as they challenge the ways bullying, disability and the relationship between the two has been understood and discussed so far. These accounts speak back to discourses that pathologise and hold accountable disabled young people for the violence against them (Ralph, Capewell, and Bonnett 2016). The violence they deal with is not because of their disability (which is often understood in medicalised terms), but due to the violence of disablism (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2011), which is perpetuated in the context of school, where disability is (still) understood as a deficit.
However, a limitation of this study is that it focuses predominantly on one identity—dwarfism—and it does not consider meticulously its intersections with other identities, such as sex, gender, social class, race, ethnicity, which also impact on school violence. For instance, Morales, Grineski, and Collins (2019) used an intersectional framework to examine the role of body size, weight specifically, and gender in children’s experiences of school bullying, proposing that an intersectional understanding of bulling is essential. Future research on disablist school violence should engage with an intersectional framework to consider the intersections of disabilism, ableism, heteronormativity, racism, etc., and how these are pertinent to school violence.

Another limitation of this paper is that it did not report the psycho-emotional toll disablist school violence had on disabled young people. Although this was a theme that came up within the participants’ stories, it was beyond the scope of this paper. However, future research should engage more with disabled children’s and young people’s views of school violence, which often differ from the adults’ (e.g. parents and teachers) ones (Purdy and McGuckin 2015; Zablotsky et al. 2012), and further avoid prescribing a-priori (often adult-centric) definitions of bullying (Thornberg and Delby 2019). It should also encourage sensitive discussions, including the toll school violence has on their psycho-emotional well-being and how schools are also part of the problem.

Finally, this study contributes both to the poststructuralist scholarship on bullying and Critical Disability Studies. On the one hand, poststructuralist approaches have been utilised to consider the discourses and power dynamics based on a range of identities involved in school violence, but disability has not drawn as much attention. On the other hand, CDS have explored disability hate crime extensively, but less attention has been paid to disablist school violence in particular. Hence, this paper makes an original contribution by bringing these two theoretical frameworks together to explore and provide nuanced understandings of disablist school violence.

**Note**

1. Rebecca Cockley is based on the USA and the term she uses in her writing is Little People.

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