

Prevention and Intervention of School Bullying: The Irish Experience.

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In the last 15 years there has been a growing realisation that bullying and violence are a significant problem for large numbers of children in schools throughout Europe and the Continents. Finnish research (Salmivalli et al., 1996) has shown that 63% of children play a participant role in bullying, such as bully-victims, defenders, bully s assistants and reinforcers.

If it were not for growing research evidence showing the ill-effects of bullying, we could leave well alone and there would be no need for awareness raising programmes, conferences and websites. However, too many casualties have been recorded among those involved in bullying behaviour during childhood and adolescence. The anger, frustration, humiliation, isolation and despair that is frequently suffered by victims places them at risk of educational apathy and failure as well as nervous breakdown, low self-esteem, depression and suicide (Rigby, 1998; Kaltialo-Heino et al., 1999; O Moore, 2000).

The bully does not escape either. Research has shown that children who bully are also at risk of low self-esteem, depression and suicide ideation, thoughts of suicide being even more severe than in victims. Most at risk are children who both bully others and are also bullied (Kaltialo-Heino et al., 1999; O Moore & Kirkham, 2001; Rigby, 2002). Research has also associated bullying others during childhood with later criminality (Olweus, 1993).

With such adverse effects of bullying in childhood and adolescence as mental and physical ill-health and even death, it goes without saying that there is a need for schools to build a stronger understanding and commitment to shaping a non-violent society.

The past 15 years have seen a growing number of strategies to prevent and counter bullying and violence in schools (Rigby, 2002a). However, as there are few interventions internationally that have been scientifically evaluated, it makes it difficult to recommend any one strategy or model on a large scale. Peer support systems (e.g. cooperative group work, befriending, mentoring, peer mediation and counselling) have all, for example, shown promise and are being taken up by an increasing number of schools throughout Europe and the continents. However, problems have been found most especially to do with boys' reluctance to become peer supporters. Also male victims do not find it easy to make use of support systems (Naylor & Cowie, 2000). The problem of aggression, bullying and violence is complex and multi-faceted, involving

- Personal characteristics of the child
- The dynamics of the family
- The values of the community and wider society

Thus schools will need to take a more comprehensive whole school approach which includes not only the pupils but also the staff (academic and non-academic), and most importantly, the parents and community.

While the author is conscious that this view underpins many anti-bullying initiatives and packs such as that of the Scottish Council for Research in Education and His Majesty Stationary Office, England and Wales, genuine progress will only be made when every effort is made to avoid a mismatch between theory and practice. Little can be gained from introducing children to core values such as respecting the right of others to hold contrary opinions when those in authority do not apply the principles of democratic deliberation. How many children are shouted at daily by adults, whether at home or at school, never given the opportunity of presenting their side of the story? It is only when adults refrain from double standards that they will sound credible when they preach or set standards of behaviour.

To demonstrate that a multi-faceted, whole school approach bears fruit that is palatable, and can be quite easily delivered on a national scale, I will refer to a pilot anti-bullying programme that I conducted in Co. Donegal (North West of Ireland). With funding from the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences, the Donegal programme will form the basis of a national anti-bullying programme starting in Ireland in the New Year. The Donegal programme was based on a Norwegian model (Roland & Munthe, 1997). In essence it included intervention and prevention work at the community, school, classroom and individual levels.

Methodology:

In 1998, 100 national schools in Co. Donegal (N.W. Ireland) were invited to participate in the study. In total 42 schools agreed to be involved. There were only three schools that exceeded 200 pupils. The average class size ranged from 4 to 30, the mean was 18.2 children per class. Eight of the schools had been designated disadvantaged. The socio-economic backgrounds of the pupils varied widely between and within the schools.

Four key elements were included in the Donegal anti-bullying programme:

1. Training of a Network of Professionals: 13 teachers were trained through a programme of workshops and seminars in order to provide training and support for staff, pupils, parents and boards of management in the presentation and countering of bullying in their school communities. The training involved 12 weekends and was undertaken in the Donegal Education Centre and the N.W. Health Promotion Centre in Letterkenny. Well-known experts, both national and international, in the field of school bullying, provided training input (Brendan Byrne (Ireland) Valerie Besag (UK) and Elaine Munthe (Norway).

The elements of the training programme were those which have been highlighted as critical issues for Teacher Training to Counter Bullying and Victimization (O Moore, 2000). Essentially the elements were:

- What is meant by bullying
- The extent
- The signs
- The effects
- The causes
- Preventative strategies
- How to deal with victim/bully problems
- Developing a school policy to counter bullying

Each member of the professional network were given responsibility for approximately three schools. An in-service day was held for all teachers and an after school meeting for parents. These awareness or in-service days, which were organised by the members of the professional network included advice and assistance to schools in developing an anti-bullying policy within the overall framework of the school code of behaviour and discipline.

2. Teachers Resource Pack: Each member of the trained network was given a pack containing information about bullying behaviour, for use in the training that they provided in the participating schools. The emphasis was on the development of a school policy, putting in to practice the recommendations as laid down in the DES National Guidelines on Countering Bullying (1993). There was also a strong emphasis on classroom management, the development of a positive atmosphere in class and school, taking particular care to enhancing self-esteem. If schools can help children develop self-worth, then there will be less of a need for compensatory behaviour. As A.S Neill (1968) stated, All crime, all hate, all wars can be reduced to unhappiness .

Importance was also given to the targeting of school bullies but mindful of using non-coercive management strategies e.g. No Blame Approach (Maines and Robinson, 1992) and the Common Concern Method (Pikas, 1989). Essential also was the cohesiveness and role modelling of teachers in the social interaction and their partnership with parents.

There was also a very strong message that a school policy on bullying can only be effective if everyone within the school community shows respect and tolerance and safeguards the dignity of others. The onus was on the adults in particular to set the climate of dignity, respect and tolerance of individual differences.

3. Parents Information: There was an information leaflet, distributed to parents of participating pupils. It was entitled *Bullying: What Parents Need to Know*. It provided information on the prevalence, types, causes, effects and indicators of bullying behaviours as well as how to deal with alleged or actual incidents of bullying (O Moore, 1999). Key facts were also given as to how parents can help to build up their child's self-esteem in view of the strong relationship that has been found between self-esteem and the bullying behaviour (O Moore and Kirkham(2001).
4. Work with Pupils: The schools with the help of the teachers who had participated in the in-service days led by the network of trainers, undertook to create a climate in the schools / classrooms that did not accept bullying behaviours. The pupils and teachers had access to age-related handbooks and videos, which included ideas for prevention and countering bullying in their schools. Pupils were especially encouraged to provide peer support to children whom they witnessed being bullied and to tell if they themselves were subjected to bullying.

Evaluation

Table 1 Percentage of pupils who reported being bullied during the last school term.				
Been bullied:	<i>Nationwide Study, 1997</i>		<i>Donegal Schools Study, 2001</i>	
	Nationally	Donegal	Before	After
Not at all	68.7	63.4	61.0	69.4
Occasionally (once or twice)	18.6	19.9	19.8	18.3
Moderately (sometimes)	8.4	10.5	12.7	9.3
Frequently (once a week or more)	4.3	6.4	6.3	3.1

The evaluation of the effectiveness of the programme was made on the basis of the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire for the pupils. The teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire designed by Rigby. Pre-testing was conducted (763 pupils in 42 schools) in the Spring / Summer term of 1999 when the training of the professional network was complete. The schools were inducted during the summer term of 1999 and were left to implement the programme during the academic year of 1999-2000. Post-testing (822 pupils in 35 schools) was carried out towards the end of the summer term of 2000.

Results

Level of Victimization: The programme reduced the level of bullying by one fifth. See Table 1. Taking the three categories together, occasional, sometimes and frequent bullying, there was a statistically significant reduction of 21.5% in reports of being victimised in the last term ($p < 0.01$).

When the pupils were asked if they had been bullied in the last five days of the study, a reduction of 46.9% in reports of victimisation was found. (See Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of pupils who reported being bullied in the last five school days before the survey.				
Been bullied:	<i>Nationwide Study, 1997</i>		<i>Donegal Schools Study, 2001</i>	
	Nationally	Donegal	Before	After

Table 4

Percentage of pupils who reported taking part in bullying other pupils in the school in the last five school days before the survey.

Bullied others:	<i>Nationwide Study, 1997</i>		<i>Donegal Schools Study, 2001</i>	
	Nationally	Donegal	Before	After
Not at all	89.3	85.0	85.4	92.9
Once	7.0	9.5	8.8	4.6
Twice	1.9	3.4	3.7	1.5
Three or four times	1.2	1.6	1.8	0.5
Five or more times	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.6

Not at all	82.1	82.9	74.4	86.4
Once	9.1	8.9	11.3	7.2
Twice	4.3	4.5	6.5	3.1
Three or four times	3.0	1.3	5.3	2.1
Five or more times	1.5	2.4	2.5	1.0

Level of Bullying Others:

From Table 4 it can be seen that there was a reduction of 24.0% in reports of having bullied others. In relation to the last five days of the study the reduction was found to be 51.4% (see Table 4).

Level of Teacher Intervention:

One of the goals of an anti-bullying programme would be to have teachers become more vigilant and to intervene when they witness incidents of bullying. If pupils perceive teachers as not intervening it is undoubtedly sending messages that amount to an acceptance of the negative behaviour.

The results from the programme were very encouraging. The level at which teachers tried to put a stop to bullying almost always increased by almost 30%. (See Table 5)

Table 5 Percentage of pupils perception as to how often teachers try to put a stop to when a pupil is bullied at school.				
How often:	<i>Nationwide Study, 1997</i>		<i>Donegal Schools Study, 2001</i>	
	Nationally	Donegal	Before	After
I don't know	40.0	36.8	39.4	34.6
Almost never	7.0	6.6	8.0	7.0
Sometimes	15.0	14.5	17.2	12.8
Almost always	39.0	42.1	35.4	45.6

The Level of Pupil Intervention:

A further goal of an anti-bullying programme is to empower pupils to intervene when they see their peers being bullied. All too often, children like adults turn a blind eye when they are witness to hurtful behaviour by their peers.

Once again, our results were promising. There was an increased readiness of 40% among the peer group to help when there was someone of their own age being bullied.

Table 6 Percentages for pupils reporting what they usually do when they see a pupil of their own age being bullied at school				
Response	<i>Nationwide Study, 1997</i>		<i>Donegal Schools Study, 2001</i>	
	Nationally	Donegal	Before	After
Nothing it s none of my business	14.0	14.6	15.9	9.2
Nothing ,but I think I ought to help	27.0	32.4	22.2	19.2
I try to help her or him in some way	59.0	52.9	61.8	71.4

Willingness to join in bullying a pupil who is not liked:

Another measure of success of an anti-bullying programme is when there is evidence that children can resist joining in bullying a peer that they do not like. In other words, that they can resist reinforcing or assisting a ring leader .

The Donegal study achieved success in this respect. There were 28% more pupils who were unwilling to be a participant in peer abuse.

Readiness to seek help from teachers when bullied:

Much bullying is subtle and direct. Thus it is imperative that teachers are made aware of the incidents. This allows them to address the bullying behaviour, thus giving the children the strong message that their inappropriate behaviour will not be tolerated. In Ireland, as confirmed by the Nationwide Study of School Bullying (O Moore et al., 1997) there is an extraordinary resistance to telling, which gets steadily worse the older the children become (age 8-18, it rose from 53.8% to 92% in 5th year and dipping to 85% in the final year). However, Ireland is not alone in its tradition to discourage victims from telling. Scotland, for example, has a children s rhyme which reinforces the taboo of telling.

Tell-tale tit, your mammy cannae knit,

Your daddy cannae go to bed without a dummy tit .

Table 7 Percentages of bullied pupils reporting being bullied to teachers / form tutors.				
Response:	<i>Nationwide Study, 1997</i>		<i>Donegal Schools Study, 2001</i>	
	Nationally	Donegal	Before	After
No, I haven't told them	65.0	66.2	49.8	50.5
Yes, I have told them	35.0	33.8	50.2	49.5

The implementation of the programme had no positive effect on the reporting of bullying to either teachers (See Table 7) or parents (Table 8) by those who were bullied. Indeed, it would appear from the findings that victims of bullying were less inclined to tell of their victimization after the programme.

Table 8 Percentages of bullied pupils reporting being bullied to people at home.				
Response:	<i>Nationwide Study, 1997</i>		<i>Donegal Schools Study, 2001</i>	
	Nationally	Donegal	Before	After
No, I haven't told them	46.0	40.1	31.6	35.6
Yes, I have told them	54.0	59.9	68.4	64.4

Sadly the results from the intervention programme in Donegal indicated further the considerable resistance that there is to seeking help from teachers or family, supporting earlier research (O Moore et al., 1997; Rigby & Barnes, 2002) Of course, it would be possible to interpret these results as an indication of the increased teacher vigilance or indeed a higher level of assertiveness on the part of pupils as a result of the anti-bullying programme. However, qualitative responses from the pupils reflected that while they understood that they should report bullying, they did not believe it was safe to do so .

This suggests that schools need to take extra care to develop a school policy that has provisions for detecting, reporting and dealing with bullying upon which all staff are agreed and act. In this way, pupils can feel confident in reporting the bullying behaviour that they either witness or experience.

Discussion:

From the results it would appear that the Donegal anti-bullying programme was successful in lowering the incidence of victimisation and bullying. The reduction in the level of victim/bully problems was particularly encouraging in comparison to the more limited outcomes of other world-wide methods and approaches to prevent and counter bullying (Rigby 2002a). Coincidentally in the absence of there being any scientific evidence of the effectiveness of the Norwegian anti-bullying model (Roland & Munthe, 1997), since named Zero , the positive findings of the Donegal project prompted the Norwegian government to promote the Zero programme on a national scale.

The increase in the level of pupils in the present study who reported that their teachers tried to put a stop to bullying was very promising. It indicates as Eslea and Smith (1998) have suggested that pupils are sensitive to the teachers commitment to an anti-bullying initiative. The findings in the present study that pupils are more willing after the intervention to help when someone of their own age is being bullied was also very

promising. The result lends support to the Texas study (Rigby, 2002a) reflecting that it is possible to reduce the level of bystander apathy and promote peer support.

The insignificant level of reporting that was found after the programme was a source of concern. With so much undetected bullying going on it is critical that both teachers and other adults in the school community are told so that they can intervene. This is not to underestimate the role that telling one's peers can have (Rigby & Barnes, 2002). However, the challenge is to find measures that allow children to feel confident in reporting bullying behaviour, irrespective of the participant role that they hold in relation to a bullying incident. To increase the level of reporting, perhaps more attention needs to be given to how bullying behaviour is dealt with. Evidence is available to indicate that children are more inclined to tell if they know that the bullies are not too harshly treated (Maines & Robinson, 1992; Rigby & Barnes, 2002). In correcting inappropriate behaviour children need to see that the dignity of the individual is safeguarded otherwise the victim will suffer guilt at having caused the punishment. However, approaches as the Common Concern Method (Pikas, 1989) and the No Blame Approach (Maines & Robinson, 1992) can be expected to have only limited success so long as adults continue to reinforce the taboo of telling that characterises so many cultures worldwide. Instead every opportunity should be taken by adults and in particular teachers to explode the myths surrounding telling. Telling should cease to carry shame. Indeed, the reverse should be the case. Children should also learn to appreciate that if they do not tell when they are witness to hurt and injury, that they are acting inappropriately and irresponsibly, reflecting in essence poor citizenship. However, as was demonstrated by O Moore & Minton (2003), children need to be made aware of how they can best help when they see their peers being bullied.

Greater attention must also be directed at those who are at risk of bullying. While there are many approaches that can help to modify aggressive behaviour (Huesman, 1994), few can hardly dispute that if children are to learn to resolve conflict in a non-aggressive way, then adults need to correct bullying behaviour in a non-coercive manner. Teaching skills of mediation have been shown by O Moore and McGuire (in press)

to be effective in reducing the level of bullying. To further reinforce that conflict can be resolved in non-aggressive ways, it is to be recommended that all adults in every school community become advocates of mediation, taking every opportunity to demonstrate the skills themselves when conflicts arise. In this way, children can further benefit from role modelling of skills that are so key to prevention and intervention of bullying behaviour, namely to empathise with others, to respect the rights of others and to work together to resolve problems. It must, however, be recognised that in order to curb bullying behaviour in certain children it will be necessary to introduce multiple interventions. This was outside the scope of the present study (although it was included in the initial proposal) but any anti-bullying programme that is to be developed in the future would undoubtedly benefit from supplementing school based interventions with child focused treatment, family focused treatment and community based intervention.

Finally, and in the light of the strong relationship between self-esteem and bullying (O Moore and Kirkham, 2001) to further prevent bullying, it is necessary that no opportunity is lost to enhance a child's sense of self-worth. It is here where teachers, in partnership with parents, hold the key. Research has shown that children with good self-esteem do not get involved with bullying (O Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Salmivalli (1999) has further shown that it is children with the highest self-esteem who can best defend and support children who are subjected to incidents of bullying. Thus schools need to be more sensitive to the role that they can play in shaping self-esteem (O Moore, 2002).

To conclude, it is felt that the positive results achieved in the Donegal anti-bullying project reflect that when schools take a whole school approach to tackling bullying, which is inclusive of parents and the wider school community, they will be rewarded with a significant reduction in serious victim / bully problems. Thus it is to be recommended that schools make every effort to introduce preventative and intervention strategies into the fabric of their school. Wherever schools are not in a position to do this on their own accord, professional assistance should be made available by the relevant educational authorities.

If such action were taken nationally and internationally, society would undoubtedly be rewarded with more confident, empathic, caring, tolerant and non-violent young people.

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