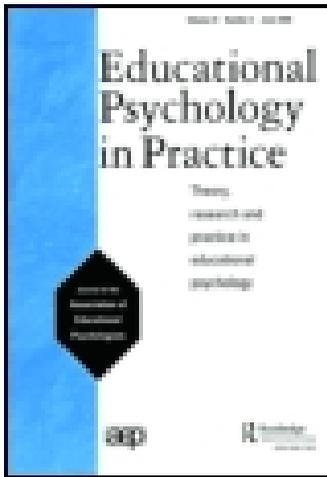


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### How teachers address cases of bullying in schools: a comparison of five reactive approaches

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## How teachers address cases of bullying in schools: a comparison of five reactive approaches

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According to student surveys conducted cross-nationally, a substantial proportion of students continue to be bullied at school after they have sought help from teachers. This article examines a range of strategies that teachers employ in dealing with bully/victim cases. The most commonly used strategy is Direct Sanctions: the imposition of disciplinary sanctions on the person or persons identified as responsible for the bullying. Some other strategies seek to engage students more actively in resolving the problem. These include Restorative Practice, Mediation (including peer mediation), the Support Group Method and the Method of Shared Concern. This article describes and discusses the application of each of the strategies and the extent to which students may become creatively engaged in producing a solution. Available evidence suggests that the use of Direct Sanctions is no more successful than alternative strategies in addressing cases of school bullying and may result in less sustainable outcomes.

**Keywords:** bullying; creative engagement; intervention methods; counselling; schools

### Introduction

Conceived as a ‘systematic abuse of power’ (Smith & Sharp, 1994), bullying in schools has been widely reported as a serious problem in many countries. It is seen as occurring when a more powerful individual or group repeatedly seeks to hurt or intimidate someone who is unable to defend himself or herself adequately. Based upon self-reports of school children aged 11 to 15 years from 35 countries it was estimated that 10.9% were being bullied two or three times a month or more (Due et al., 2009). It is now well established that bully/victim problems at school are reliably associated with symptoms of distress and poor mental health in children, both during the time they attend school and for many years afterwards (Ronning et al., 2009; Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2011).

Attempts to counter bullying in schools typically make use of both proactive and reactive strategies. Currently a major emphasis is being placed upon the use of proactive or preventative strategies, that is, creating or controlling a situation rather than responding to it after it has happened. To this end curriculum activities have been designed to develop social and emotional learning (SEL) on the part of students (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Smith & Low, 2013). Assessments of such programmes have produced inconsistent results. An evaluation of the impact of a Dutch version of SEL in secondary schools in the Netherlands

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reported significant reductions in peer victimisation in the short run but not over a longer period (Gravesteyn, Diekstra, & Petterson, 2013). In England an evaluation of a similar programme to SEL, known as Social Aspects of Emotional Learning (SEAL), was reported as having null effect on behaviour (Humphrey, Lendrum, & Wigelsworth 2010). The authors attributed this failure to a lack of fidelity in the implementation of the programme. Whatever the success or otherwise that proactive strategies may have, it remains true that cases of bullying continue to occur and teachers are expected to address them.

The extent to which students are bullied by peers at school and have sought help from their teacher has been estimated in surveys conducted in England (Smith & Shu, 2000); Australia (Rigby, 1998; Rigby & Barnes, 2002); the Netherlands (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005) and in the United States (Nixon & Davis, 2011). In the surveys conducted in England, Australia and the Netherlands between 45% and 52% indicated that they had been bullied at least once at school. Adopting a different criterion, in the United States it was reported that 22% of students had been bullied twice or more often in the previous month. Of those indicating that they had been bullied, between 30% and 53% had sought help from a teacher. Clearly in each of the countries substantial demands were being made upon teachers to intervene.

Assuming that the teachers sought to resolve the problem about which they had been informed, an estimate of effectiveness can be inferred from the outcomes reported by students. These are summarised in Table 1.

Reported 'positive effects' (the bullying reduced) ranged from 34% to 56%, and 'negative effects' (the bullying got worse) ranged from 8% to 28%. Precise estimates and comparisons cannot be made from these results as there was some variation in the age ranges and in the criteria for defining who were bullied. However, according to the reports of those who have sought help from teachers after being bullied, interventions appear to be successful in reducing bullying at best in little more than half the cases.

Results using an alternative method of assessing outcomes undertaken by teachers have been reported by Thompson and Smith (2011). Based on information obtained from a sample of 285 recorded incident records from 35 schools, it was estimated that bullying stopped after teacher interventions in 67% of cases. This represents a notably higher level of success than that suggested by the reports from students. Alternative explanations for the discrepancy may be suggested. Teachers

Table 1. Outcomes reported by students seeking help from a teacher after being bullied.

Survey	Sample ( <i>N</i> )	Age range (years)	Percentages reporting		
			Reduced	No change	Worsened
Rigby, 1998 (Australia)	33,236	6–18	49	43	8
Smith & Shu, 2000 (England)	3308	10–14	56	28	16
Rigby & Barnes, 2002 (Australia)	543	12–17	42	39	18
Fekkes et al., 2005 (The Netherlands)	2766	9–11	49	34	17
Nixon & Davis, 2011 (USA)	11,893	9–16	34	38	28

may have been selective in the cases they acted upon; students and teachers may have had different perceptions of whether a reduction (or stopping) of the bullying had in fact taken place. A degree of ‘experimenter bias’ may have led to some over-estimation of the effectiveness of the teacher interventions (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1966). It may be concluded that, despite differences in reported ‘success’ from different sources, on many occasions teacher interventions are not successful in either reducing or stopping cases of bullying from continuing. To date little attention has been paid to the different kinds of interventions that are being employed, their nature and relative effectiveness.

### *Aims*

The general aim of this paper is to examine a variety of interventions that are being employed by schools in addressing cases of bullying. These comprise Direct Sanctions, Restorative Practice, Mediation, the Support Group Method and the Method of Shared Concern. Each is described and evaluated, first in terms of the extent to which the method permits a degree of engagement with students in the attempted resolution of a bully/victim problem; and secondly, as far as the quite limited evidence permits, the effectiveness of the interventions in resolving such problems.

Engagement in this context refers to the extent to which students are actively involved in the process of resolving a bully/victim problem. The students may include those identified as the perpetrators or those identified as the targets or other less involved students, for example other class members or bystanders who have witnessed the bullying. For students to be creatively engaged requires they must be provided with the opportunity to think about and influence what is to be done to bring about a resolution to the problem, rather than being coerced into acting in a way that is required of them. The effectiveness of an intervention refers to the reduction or stopping of the bullying following the intervention.

### **Methods of intervention**

#### *Direct sanctions*

Direct sanctions here refer to negative consequences that are imposed upon students who are identified as being responsible for an act or for acts of bullying. According to a national survey of 1378 schools in England, this is the most commonly used strategy in responding to cases of bullying, with 92% of the schools reporting its use (Thompson & Smith, 2011). In some countries and United States these may include physical punishment, but increasingly physical sanctions, such as caning, have become illegal. In England, sanctions employed in schools include verbal reprimands; meetings with parents; temporary removals from class; withdrawal of privileges; school community service; detentions and internal exclusion in a special room; short-term exclusion; and permanent exclusion (Thompson & Smith, 2011, p. 83). The rationale for this approach is that those who bully deserve to be punished and that the sanctions will act as a deterrent to further bullying on the part of the perpetrator(s) and deter others who become aware of what has happened. Clearly this approach does not foster any creative engagement among the students involved in the bullying or between these students and the teacher who applies the sanctions. If the bullying stops it is likely to be because the perpetrators of the bullying dare

not persist. Thompson and Smith report that according to teachers who have used this approach it is successful in stopping the bullying in 62% of cases (see Table 2).

### *Restorative practice*

This approach to dealing with cases of bullying has increased markedly in recent years. According to a large-scale survey of schools in England, some 69% of schools in England sometimes employ this approach. About 20% of cases are handled in this way; a somewhat higher proportion in secondary schools (Thompson & Smith, 2011). Those identified as bullies, often termed ‘offenders’, are required to attend a meeting at which the victim is also present. They are required to listen while the victim describes what has been happening and how he or she has been affected by the treatment. The offender or offenders are required to reflect on what they were thinking about at the time and what they think now. The intention is to raise the bully’s awareness of the harm that has been caused and elicit a sense of remorse or shame. In this frame of mind, the bully is asked what is to be done next. It is expected that the bully will decide to act restoratively, with an apology and possibly some act of reparation. The victim may, or may not, accept such a gesture. Ideally the relationship between the bully and the victim is restored.

This approach permits a degree of creative engagement with students involved in cases of bullying. In some applications other parties may be present, for example when restorative conferences are held, adult stakeholders such as parents may also attend. The bully or bullies are invited to consider what they might do to resolve the problem and for the victim to consider whether any suggestion is acceptable. The offender has some choice in the sort of reparative actions to be adopted. The victim has some choice as to whether to accept the restorative act, though here the practitioner may communicate some expectation that he or she should do so. However, there is likely to be considerable pressure on the bullies to make acceptable suggestions, especially when other people are present and want to see ‘justice done’. What may be absent is any authentic interaction between the bully and the victim. It is not recognised that the victim may have played a significant part in provoking the bullying and arguably this also needs to be acknowledged. Around 20% of children who are bullied may be categorised as provocative victims (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). The bully may at times not unreasonably feel pressured into acting ‘restoratively’, without any real desire to do so. The bully may also be punished. In some applications of restorative practice the use of direct sanctions is not inconsistent with applying ‘consequences’ (Duff, 2003).

Table 2. Percentage success rate in England in stopping the bullying from continuing, according to reports from schools.

Method	Schools		Total
	Primary	Secondary	
Direct sanctions	58 (74)	65 (69)	62 (122)
Restorative practices	68 (24)	77 (86)	73 (110)
Support Group Method	80 (15)	71 (14)	76 (29)

Note. In brackets are the numbers of cases in which the intervention was used. Adapted from Thompson and Smith (2011).

In contrast to direct sanctions some degree of creative engagement is possible. Some scope is provided for the participants to decide how the problem is to be resolved. But there is considerable external pressure for them to provide an acceptable response. The success rate reported by schools of 73% (see Table 2) suggests that this approach appears to be at least as successful, if not more so, than the more coercive approach.

### **Mediation**

Mediation may be practised by either a member of the school staff or a student trained in the method, known as a peer mediator. Students involved in bully/victim problems are invited to take part in a session with a mediator. The mediator asks each student in turn to 'tell their story' and the other to listen without interrupting, and at the end to repeat what has been said and to do so accurately to the satisfaction of the first speaker. The roles are then reversed. Next each is asked to suggest possible ways in which the conflict can be resolved. These are recorded without any discussion. The next stage is to go through the list to discover which of the proposals can be agreed upon. Importantly, the suggested solutions are created by the participants. The students are engaged in the process of finding a mutually acceptable outcome.

This approach generates a high level of creative engagement as students interact with each other with minimum guidance from the practitioner and move towards an agreed solution of their problem. There is a virtual absence of coercion on the part of the practitioner in reaching a solution, at least if the practitioner can remain truly neutral in the process of mediating. Evaluative reports suggest a high level of success in resolving many student conflicts (Johnson, Johnson, & Dudley, 1992). However, there is one important drawback. Conflicts involving bullying, that is, where there is deliberate intent on the part of a more powerful person or persons to harm another, raise special difficulties. Perpetrators typically are not interested in being 'mediated'. They are generally happy with the situation, especially if they are enjoying dominating or exploiting another person and also drawing support from other students, and in particular from their friendship group. Moreover, in cases of bullying, especially severe bullying in which there has been no provocation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a truly neutral mediator. Hence this method is considered of practical value in relatively few cases of actual bullying. Its importance lies in dealing with cases of conflict that might well lead to bullying. Not surprisingly this method is used in relatively few cases and there is no evidence related to how often it is or its success as a method of dealing with actual cases of bullying (Tyrrell, 2002; Smith, Howard, & Thompson, 2007). This leaves a dilemma; a mediated approach does offer the promise of a creative solution, and because a solution is brought about without compulsion it is likely to be lasting. At the same time, few cases of bullying can be handled using this method without introducing an element of compulsion, that is, requiring students in conflict to submit to mediation, in which case it is not true mediation.

### **The Support Group Method**

The proponents of the Support Group Method, as developed by Robinson and Maines (2008), claim that bully/victim problems can be resolved without the high

degree of coercion of the kind that is applied in the direct sanctions method or in the somewhat less coercive method applied in restorative practice. The Support Group Method is seen as particularly applicable to cases in which a number of students are involved in bullying another child, which is often the case. It begins with an interview with the victim. The primary aim is to offer the child support and to gain an accurate picture of what has been happening to the child and especially in what ways the child has been distressed as a consequence. Having been assured that nobody will be punished, the victim is asked to name the perpetrators. Subsequently, a meeting is held with them as a group, together with a number of other students who are expected to be supportive of the victim. The victim is not asked to be present. At the meeting the practitioner shares what is known about the distress being experienced by the victim and emphasises that those present have a responsibility to act to improve the situation. Everyone is required to say what they will do to help. They are told that there will be a further meeting to assess progress. Before leaving, the practitioner encourages them to talk with each other about what they will do. According to Thompson and Smith (2011) about 10% of schools in England employ this approach, rather more in primary schools. Its success rate in stopping bullying (given as 76% in Table 2) is higher than other methods and suggests that it comes nearer than restorative practices in meeting one of the criteria of creative engagement, that is, in successfully reaching its prime objective.

But here again one may identify elements of coerciveness that limit the degree to which the participants may become creatively engaged. Although the students are assured that no-one will be punished, there is a good deal of moral pressure placed upon the ‘bullies’. They are confronted with strong evidence of the hurt that has been experienced by the victim. They are told that they have, individually, a responsibility to act to reduce the harm. Individually they are asked to say what they will do to discharge such a responsibility. At the same time, they are likely to be under pressure from children in the group who are sympathetic to the victim to ‘do the right thing’. Arguably the overall pressure is less than that in restorative practice. The practitioner in this method has made it clear that no punishment is being considered. There is no victim present who can speak up, with the practitioner’s evident support, to increase the sense of guilt or shame the offender may experience. But equally there is no opportunity for the students to interact with the victim. The possibility of creative engagement taking place between the bullies and the victim at the meeting, a central feature of a mediation approach, is wholly absent.

### ***The Method of Shared Concern***

The Method of Shared Concern is a multi-stage strategy devised originally by Anatol Pikas, a Swedish psychologist (Pikas, 2002), and sometimes called the Pikas method. The method, with some minor variations, is being applied in a number of countries, including Sweden, Spain, Scotland, Australia and England. According to Thompson and Smith (2011) it is employed in about 5% of schools in England.

Like the Support Group Method, it is a non-punitive approach for working with groups of students who have been identified as bullying someone. It begins with a series of one-to-one interviews with members of the group who are suspected of engaging in bullying a particular person. At these meetings the practitioner shares a concern for the targeted child, drawing upon what has already been noticed or reported. No accusations are made. The aim at this stage is to gain some acknowledgement from

the suspected bully that there is a child who is having a hard time with peers and is clearly distressed. Once this has been achieved, the question is asked how the interviewee can help to improve the situation. This is different from sharing a concern with a group of children. In a one-to-one situation the interaction can be more intimate. The practitioner is not faced with the task of monitoring how different members of a group are responding.

At a group meeting students may well be motivated to maintain solidarity in defiance of the perceived intentions of the practitioner. In the one-to-one meetings it becomes possible to individualise members of the group, especially if the practitioner is prepared to listen attentively and non-critically to the views expressed by each of the suspected bullies. These may at times be unsympathetic to the target, especially if there has been some degree of provocation. The existentialist Kierkegaard captures the attitude of the ideal listener: 'If real success is to attend the effort to bring a man [or boy] to a definite position, one must first of all take pains to find him where he is and begin there' (Kierkegaard, 1973, pp. 333–334). This is rarely done. The starting point with the bully is typically 'Look, see what you have done wrong. What are you going to do about it?' Kierkegaard goes on:

In order to help another effectively I must understand more than he – yet first of all surely I must understand what he understands. If I do not know that, my greater understanding will be of no help to him. If however, I am disposed to plume myself on my greater understanding it is because I am vain or proud, so that at bottom, instead of benefitting him, I want to be admired. But all true effort to help begins with self-humiliation: the helper must first humble himself under him he would help, and therewith must understand that to help does not mean to be sovereign but to be a servant, that to help does not mean to be ambitious but to be patient, that to help means to endure for the time being the imputation that one is in the wrong and does not understand what the other understands. (Kierkegaard, 1973, pp. 333–334)

Finally the writer turns to the case of someone who is angry and is really 'in the wrong'; the typical bully.

Take the case of a man [or child] who is passionately angry, and let us assume that he really is in the wrong. Unless you can begin with him by making it seem as if it were he that had to instruct you, and unless you can do it in such a way that the angry man, who was too impatient to listen to a word of yours, is glad to discover in you a com-  
plaisant and attentive listener – if you cannot do that, you cannot help him at all. (Kierkegaard, 1973, p 334)

In an in-depth, small-scale, evaluative study conducted in Australia based upon 17 applications of this approach, it was reported that almost invariably the students interviewed indicated that they would help in some way to improve the situation for the victim (Rigby & Griffiths, 2011). Once there is convincing evidence of an improvement in the situation, and especially the safety of the target, a group meeting of all the suspected bullies is held. The purpose of this meeting is to enable these students to plan together how the problem will finally be resolved when they meet again, this time with the targeted child. They have already demonstrated a readiness to help in reducing the distress of the child they have bullied; next they are given the opportunity to decide how the problem is to be resolved. Some preparation of the target is needed. Hence a meeting with the target is held to offer support and to explore the situation from that child's point of view. The possibility is discussed

with the utmost sensitivity as to whether, consciously or unconsciously, the target could have provoked the bullying.

What the suspected bullies say to the victim at the final meeting will depend upon what the group has agreed to say. It may be a simple heartfelt apology or it may be a conditional proposition concerning how they intend to relate to the target henceforth. They may say they will refrain from bullying as long as the target acknowledges that he or she has acted provocatively and desists from doing so. There may then emerge a role for the practitioner as mediator, leading to an agreed solution. But what could almost certainly not have been mediated earlier may now become practicable, that is, after the children have been taken through a series of stages in which their concerns have been taken seriously and some agreed steps have been taken towards resolving the problem.

In terms of the criteria for assessing this approach, it is evident that the Method of Shared Concern does involve a high level of engagement involving the practitioner and the suspected bullies, both at the one-to-one meetings and at the group meetings. External pressure to provide an acceptable solution is minimal, but not entirely absent. The suspected bullies are aware that the meetings will continue until a satisfactory solution is found. Although the process may be time-consuming for some schools, a high level of success has been reported. In the Australian study, 15 of the 17 cases were resolved using this method. This outcome is consistent with other reports; for example Thompson and Smith reported that in England local education authorities rated the method as the most effective that schools employ (Thompson & Smith, 2011, p. 7).

More difficult to quantify are the reactions of the suspected bullies to having taken part in the process. Reported statements made by the students (names altered) during interviews conducted a week after the Australian intervention had concluded suggest that participation was a positive experience and resulted in positive outcomes (Rigby, 2011a):

- I enjoyed the process, as I did not feel as though I was going to be punished for my actions.
- The meetings helped me to stop and think. Looking back I felt bad about bullying.
- John looked happier because we all said nice stuff.
- We stopped giving him a hard time and apologised for our behaviour.
- I think because of these meetings it has improved the friendships Trevor has made.
- It was good, because we are kinder to Jane and not teasing her any more.
- We are going to be finishing Year 7 soon and when we look back on primary school, we want to have happy memories and for Jane to feel OK and us to feel good about ourselves.
- I am happy for myself because I have been helping people and helping him to feel better about himself.

Why the method appears to work so well may be summed up by an old Russian saying: 'All children between the ages of 1 and 100 years adopt an idea if they discover it as their own' (A. Pikas, personal communication, 10 November 2010).

## Limitations

First, in this review reactive intervention strategies have been limited to five major intervention approaches being employed in schools in England, as reported by Thompson and Smith (2011). In that study no data were gathered and presented on what happened over time in cases of bullying when no interventions took place. It is not known how the rate of spontaneous remission compares with the rate of positive outcomes reported after reactive interventions. Further, in presenting results regarding the effectiveness of alternative methods of intervention, that review did not take into account the nature of the cases that were being addressed; for instance, whether the bullying was physical or verbal, severe or relatively mild, and conducted by single individuals or groups. A more controlled study conducted in Finland in which schools were required to use for all cases of bullying either a confronting or non-confronting approach (broadly similar to Direct Sanctions and the Method of Shared Concern respectively) found that the methods did not differ in their degree of success in stopping bullying (Garandau, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli 2014). That study did not, however, take into account the possibility that in practice teachers/counsellors may reasonably consider the nature of a case before selecting and applying a method or a combination of methods, and may therefore lack ecological validity. Clearly more research is needed in this area to determine what methods are more effective and especially under what conditions (Rigby, 2010, 2011b).

## Discussion

This article has focussed on teacher interventions in seeking to reduce bullying once it has taken place. It examines findings relating to the reported effectiveness of such interventions and notes that students who have gone to teachers for help about being bullied report only a moderate level of success in reducing the bullying, although a higher level of effectiveness is claimed by teachers. From these studies it may be concluded that a substantial number of cases of bullying remain unresolved after they have been reported to teachers.

In critiquing the five methods of intervention examined in this article, it was observed that the methods differed notably in the extent to which they enabled a degree of creative engagement between teachers (or school counsellors) and students in the resolution of bully/victim problems. The most commonly used method of intervention, the use of direct sanctions, does not involve any contribution from the 'accused' other than compliance. In such an application of this approach, creative engagement is nil.

An examination of the methods of intervention that do involve such engagement indicates that they do so in varying degrees. As described in this review, Mediation involves the highest degree of engagement and the least coercion. However, its use in schools may be limited to a small minority of students who wish to make use of mediation to resolve a case of bullying. By contrast, Restorative Practice is seen as involving a substantial degree of coercion, whilst enabling the 'offender(s)' to formulate ways in which a resolution (as required by the practitioner) can emerge. Higher degrees of creative engagement can be brought about using the Support Group Method and the Method of Shared Concern, with coercive influence being least evident in the latter.

Currently, findings from the few studies that have shed light on the effectiveness of the different approaches are suggestive rather than definitive. A conservative interpretation of the reported findings is that the most widely used method of intervention, the use of Direct Sanctions, is no more likely than either Restorative Practice or the Support Group Method to lead to a resolution of bully/victim problems. As noted earlier, it is not known whether any of the reactive approaches result in a more positive outcome than would be obtained if no intervention were attempted. Further work is clearly needed to evaluate the effects of reactive strategies (and the absence of the use of any intervention strategy) and to do so in relation to different kinds of bullying. It would also be useful to examine possible interactive effects between the use of particular proactive strategies and the use of particular reactive strategies in addressing cases of bullying. For instance, it may be hypothesised that curriculum activities promoting socio-emotional learning may have not only a direct effect in reducing the prevalence of bullying, but also render more effective interventions that seek to engage students in resolving bully/victim problems. Further, assuming that interventions by teachers do improve the chances of the bullying reducing or stopping, it is not clear which methods of intervention are likely to lead to more sustainable solutions. It seems likely that when outcomes are brought about through a collaborative process in which students are actively engaged, the resolution is more likely to be durable. Further studies in which cases are monitored over an extended period are needed to discover whether this is so.

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