

# What can schools do about cases of bullying?

Ken Rigby\*

*University of South Australia, Australia*

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Reports from schoolchildren across a range of countries indicate that interventions by teachers in cases of bullying are commonly unsuccessful, especially with older students. This article provides a brief description and critical examination of six major intervention strategies employed in schools and points to the need for better training of teachers in this area and the development of judgement about which methods to employ in particular cases.

*Keywords: bullying; schools; teachers; interventions; teacher training*

## Introduction

School bullying is a problem that seemingly will not go away. We may seek to console ourselves with some recent findings that anti-bullying programmes in schools are having beneficent effects. For instance, Farrington and Ttofi (2009) in a major meta-analysis of their effectiveness in reducing the prevalence of bullying in schools have claimed that 17 out of 44 anti-bullying programmes have led to significant reductions in reported prevalence. They further note that such programmes have overall produced reductions of around 20%. Consistent with this claim, there is now evidence from studies in 35 sites in countries and Europe and North America at which bullying prevalence among school children has been monitored over the last 15 years that bullying in schools is mostly reducing over time (Rigby & Smith, 2011). Yet the reductions, although statistically significant, have been modest in size. The problem of school bullying remains serious.

Bullying has been defined in general terms as the systematic abuse of power (Rigby, 2002). It presupposes an imbalance of power in which the perpetrator(s) repeatedly engage in aggressive behaviour intended to hurt or threaten a targeted

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\*School of Education, University of South Australia, Hawke Research Institute, Underdale, S.A., Australia, 5032. Email: Kenneth.Rigby@unisa.edu.au

person or persons. The behaviour may be overt, as in face-to-face physical assaults and verbal abuse, or covert, as in deliberate and sustained exclusion, rumour-spreading and the use of cyber technology to upset someone. Assessments of its prevalence have varied according to the methodology employed, the age and gender of the respondents and the location of the inquiry. Based on survey results in 22 countries, Cook *et al.* (2010) have reported that approximately 18% of schoolchildren are bullied on a weekly basis. The serious psychological harm experienced by many of the victims has been documented in numerous studies (Rigby, 2003).

In this paper I shall be concerned primarily with methods of intervention that can occur when cases of bullying have been identified. This is not intended to detract from the important work that is being undertaken to make bullying less likely to take place through the use of proactive measures and peer-support activities. Typically, anti-bullying programmes include both preventive measures and measures that are to be taken when cases of bullying occur. For example, the most widely employed anti-bullying programme designed by Olweus (1993) and employed in many countries contains both preventive features, such as classroom meetings to discuss rules of interpersonal behaviour, and reactive features, such as the use of sanctions when rules are broken. Because anti-bullying programmes typically contain diverse elements, it is difficult to discover the specific contribution of each. They often appear complementary; for instance, proactive work in schools including the development of an agreed anti-bullying policy, rigorous monitoring of student behaviour and the inclusion of education about bullying in the school curriculum and peer-support activities may all help to reduce the number of cases of bullying that need to be addressed by teachers and enable the school to apply resources more intensively to solve the cases that arise.

Unfortunately, the evidence is that interventions quite often are ineffective in stopping the bullying once it has occurred. Studies based upon the responses of students who have gone to teachers for help when they have been bullied have produced fairly consistent results.

### **Studies of the effectiveness of teacher interventions**

The earliest study provided by Smith and Shu (2000) was based upon responses to questionnaires of a sample of 2308 students in England aged 10–14 years. Questions included how often they had been bullied during the preceding 6 months, whether they had told a teacher about it and what was the outcome. Some 12.2% indicated that they had been bullied; of these, 35% reported that they had told a teacher about it. Some 49.7% of the teachers did not know the bullying was taking place; a further 9.1% knew but had done nothing. According to the students, in only 26.6% of cases did the bullying stop; for 28.7% of cases, the bullying got less. Nothing changed for 28.3% of these students and for 16.4% thing got worse. Thus, for almost one-half of the students, telling a teacher had not improved their situation.

A study conducted in Australia provided comparable results (Rigby & Barnes, 2002). Respondents consisted of 33,236 students aged 8–18 years who provided information about how often they had been bullied at school, whom (if anyone) they had told and with what result. In this study, 46% reported having been bullied during their school careers. Among the younger students (8–12 years old), 38% reported having told a teacher; among older students (13–18 years old) it was 24%. Approximately 57% of the bullied respondents reported that things had not improved after telling (among these were 8% who reported that things had got worse). Notably, outcomes were more positive for the younger students who told a teacher (55% reported some improvement); for older students, 44%. Again it was clear that the chances of being helped by a teacher were not high.

A more recent study on this issue was conducted in Holland with a sample of 2766 Dutch students aged 9–11 years from 32 schools (Fekkes *et al.*, 2005). They reported that approximately 16% of the students were being bullied ‘on a regular basis’. A somewhat larger proportion of respondents (53%) than in the previous studies reported that they had told a teacher about it. Some 28.1% indicated that the bullying had decreased when the teacher had tried to help them; a slightly higher proportion (29%) indicated that things had either stayed the same (19.5%) or got worse (9.5%).

In my experience as an educational consultant in Australia I find that students are invariably advised by the school staff to tell a teacher if they are being bullied. As indicated above, many students tend not to do so. They are more likely to tell their friends or their parents (Smith & Shu, 2000; Rigby & Barnes, 2002). Students, especially older ones, generally express little or no confidence in the capacity or motivation of teachers to stop the bullying (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003). In the light of such reported outcomes, this is not surprising.

### **How teachers respond to cases of bullying**

Teachers employ a variety of approaches in addressing cases of bullying, some punitive and some non-punitive (Rigby, 2010a). However, there is currently no evidence of the extent to which alternative approaches are adopted and under what circumstances they are applied. We must therefore base estimates on the results of existing surveys on what teachers *say* they would do when cases of bullying occur, bearing in mind that in actual situations teachers may act in a different way.

Surveys have been conducted in a number of countries to estimate how staff in schools respond to cases of bullying. In an online survey accessed by school staff around the world the following scenario was presented:

A 12-year-old student is being repeatedly teased and called unpleasant names by another, more powerful, student who has successfully persuaded other students to avoid the targeted person as much as possible. As a result, the victim of this behaviour is feeling angry, miserable, and often isolated. (See Bauman *et al.*, 2008, p. 839)

This scenario may be categorised as involving a moderate level of severity and to contain elements of both direct and indirect bullying. Respondents were asked to indicate how they would respond to this case in each of 24 stipulated ways. Among staff personnel in the USA ( $n = 715$ ) only 5% of respondents indicated that they would ignore what had been happening or let the students 'sort it out' (Bauman *et al.*, 2008). This result reflects a high level of acceptance among staff that some action should be taken. The most endorsed action was to discipline the bully. Some 72% of respondents agreed that they 'would make sure that the bully was suitably punished' and 18% indicated that they were 'unsure'. In some areas there was considerable division. For example, 36% agreed that the victim should be told to 'stand up to the bully' and 40% disagreed. Similar differences were found over whether parents should be forced to accept responsibility for the bully's behaviour and take steps to stop it and whether students should be co-opted to help suggest how the situation could be improved.

Using the same questionnaire, similar results were obtained with samples of school staff in Australia (Rigby & Bauman, 2007). Translations of the questionnaire were administered in Finland (Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011) and in Germany and Austria (Strohmeier *et al.*, 2011). The conclusions drawn from these surveys are that: very few teachers are now prepared to ignore cases of bullying; taking a strong disciplinary approach is the most favoured approach; and staff in schools are divided or uncertain about alternative or supplementary steps that could be taken.

Some research has noted that how a teacher responds to a case of bullying depends upon a variety of factors. These include the nature of the bullying; for instance, whether the bullying is overt or alternatively indirect, as in deliberate and sustained exclusion. According to Bauman and Del Rio (2005), teachers are more inclined to take action of some kind when the bullying is direct and physical. There are further factors that appear relevant but have not been investigated. These include: whether a group of students are involved as perpetrators or supporters of the bullying; whether the victim has acted provocatively; whether the perpetrator has subsequently acted in a genuinely remorseful way; and whether those involved are amenable to discuss with a mediator how the conflict can best be resolved. What actions are taken by teachers are clearly influenced by their level of awareness of different approaches and skill in applying them.

### **Major intervention methods**

An examination of publications describing interventions to address cases of school bullying suggests that there are six major approaches being employed in schools (Rigby, 2010a).

#### *The traditional disciplinary approach*

As noted above, what may be called the traditional disciplinary approach is employed by school staff in various countries as the most appropriate way of

dealing with most, if not all, forms of bullying. Essentially, it seeks to prevent bullying from continuing by imposing sanctions or punishments on the offender. It also 'sends a message' to other students about what will happen to them if they engage in bullying. The best known proponent of this approach is Olweus (1993). His version of this approach is supplemented by a number of proactive procedures, including classroom discussions to ascertain what rules students think should govern their behaviour with peers. The effectiveness of the Olweus programme in reducing the number of cases of bullying has been impressive in applications reported by Olweus himself in Norway, but has been much less successful elsewhere; for instance, in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany; Flanders, Belgium; and the Southeastern United States (see Smith *et al.*, 2004).

This approach may deter some students from bullying, but it can also result in students continuing to bully in covert and less detectable ways that are at least equally hurtful to those they bully. Generally, it requires a high degree of surveillance, which is often impossible or difficult to maintain. In cases of very violent or criminal behaviour, or in cases for which counselling approaches prove unsuccessful, this approach is more readily justified. Although this approach is commonly used as part of anti-bullying programmes, especially in the United States, published accounts of its effectiveness focusing upon *actual cases* that have been treated in this way are generally lacking. An exception is an account of a study of the effects of an intervention procedure that employed both sanctions and rewards in seeking to reduce the anti-social behaviour of three students who had been observed bullying others (Ross & Horner, 2009). Each was observed and assessed over a number of sessions before and after the intervention. Significant reductions in aggressive behaviour were reported for each student. However, in this study bullying *per se* was not measured. Further studies of this approach focusing specifically on bullying behaviour are needed.

### *Strengthening the victim*

This approach aims at assisting the victim in coping more effectively when he or she is being bullied. Students who are being targeted are advised or trained to become less vulnerable; for example, by learning to act more assertively. One technique victims may be taught is known as fogging (MacNeill, 2009; Rigby, 2010a). This involves acknowledging that the bully may actually believe the negative things he or she is saying and refusing to be disturbed or intimidated. Clearly this approach may involve a considerable investment of time in coaching children who are being victimised to respond effectively. Judgements as to when it is feasible to teach students to acquire the required skills are not always easy to make, as decisions will depend on the perceived capacity of the victim to learn how to acquire the necessary skills and the situation or circumstances in which he or she is being bullied. It is generally assumed that this approach is appropriate in cases of one-to-one verbal bullying in which there is not a large imbalance of power. Available evidence on whether teaching 'fogging' skills can help to reduce the prevalence of

children being bullied is limited to one study in which children in mainstream classes with language difficulties were instructed in the use of the technique (Savage, 2005). No overall reductions in their being bullied were reported. Further studies to discover under what conditions the method may be effective are needed.

### *Mediation*

Students in conflict may be invited to work with a trained teacher or peer-mediator, to find a mutually acceptable way of resolving their problem. This approach requires a readiness of the parties involved in the bullying to agree to meet and seek a solution through the assistance of a neutral practitioner (Cowie & Smith, 2010). Commonly the practitioner is a student who has been trained in mediation. Importantly, a solution is never imposed but is brought about through guided negotiation. Its application, however, is severely limited to cases in which both the bully and victim are genuinely interested in mediation and the practitioner can remain neutral. Often those who bully are not motivated to seek mediation and it is difficult to remain neutral when the bullying is seen as completely unjustified, as it normally is. Mediation has been shown to be effective in resolving conflicts in which there is little or no imbalance of power between people in dispute. For instance, Johnson *et al.* (1992) reported a greater than 50% success rate when the method was used in selected American elementary schools. However, its use in cases of bullying, which typically involve a substantial imbalance of power, has been notably less successful. In a year-long longitudinal study at an all-girls secondary school in England where peer counsellors were active, there was no evidence that the level of school bullying had been reduced (Houlston & Smith, 2010). There were nevertheless significant improvements in the social self-esteem of the students who had been trained as peer counsellors at the school. The use of peer mediation may also assist in bringing about a reduction in bullying in so far as it promotes an ethos in a school in which students learn to adopt a rational problem-solving approach to countering bullying.

### *Restorative practice*

This approach involves getting the ‘offender’ to reflect upon his or her unacceptable behaviour, experience a sense of remorse and act to restore a damaged relationship with both the victim and the school community. Its application may take place at a meeting with the bully and the victim or at a community conference attended by those involved in the bullying plus significant others such as parents. It has also been used to resolve problems of bullying involving a group or class of students. Necessary elements in its success include the prior existence—or subsequent emergence—of remorse on the part of the offender and the readiness of the victim and others to accept the offender’s apology and restorative action. Although successful treatments of school bullying using restorative practices are sometimes reported (see Morrison, 2007), evidence confirming its overall effectiveness in

reducing the prevalence of bullying in schools is notably lacking (see evaluative reports provided by the Youth Justice Board, United Kingdom [2004] and by Sherman and Strang [2007]). In recent years this practice has been adopted in many schools; for example, in North America and Australia.

#### *The support group method*

This was developed and introduced in England by Maines and Robinson (1992) and was known originally as the ‘no-blame approach.’ It is a non-punitive approach in which students who have been identified as bullying someone are confronted at a group meeting with vivid evidence of the victim’s distress derived from a previous interview with the victim. Those present at the meeting also include a number of students who have been selected because they are expected to be supportive of the victim. The victim is not present. It is impressed upon everyone that they have a responsibility to improve the situation. Each student is required to say what he or she will do to make matters better for the victim. The outcome is carefully monitored. This approach is seen as appropriate for non-violent, non-criminal forms of bullying. It does not, however, take into account any provocation that may have occurred to precipitate the bullying and the need, in some cases, for changes in behaviour on the part of both parties. Evaluations of this approach have been summarised by the users of this method (see Robinson & Maines, 2008). For example, Young and Holdorf (2003) reported that 11 out of 12 cases they assessed after employing a minor variant of the approach proposed by Robinson and Maines were treated successfully. According to Smith *et al.* (2007) a survey of 59 schools in England indicated an average rating of ‘very satisfactory’ with this method.

#### *The method of shared concern*

This is also a non-punitive approach and is intended for working with groups of students who are suspected of non-criminal forms of bullying. Devised and developed by the Swedish psychologist Pikas (2002), it first involves a one-to-one meeting with individuals suspected of the bullying someone. The practitioner shares a concern for the plight of the victim and invites suggestions as to how the situation can be improved. Next the victim is interviewed. At this meeting the practitioner explores the victim’s perspective on events and seeks to discover whether he/she has, in some way, behaved provocatively. According to Solberg and Olweus (2003), this occurs about 20% of the time. Further meetings are then held with each of the suspected bullies to discover what progress has been made. When sufficient progress has been confirmed, a meeting is held with the suspected bullies as a group to plan how the problem can be finally resolved. They are then joined by the victim to negotiate an agreed solution. Although this approach can be time-consuming, outcomes have been reported as overwhelmingly positive (Smith & Sharp, 1994; Rigby & Griffiths, 2010) and it is uniquely appropriate for dealing

with cases of group bullying in which the victim has behaved provocatively. The method has been incorporated into successful anti-bullying programmes in England, Australia, Finland and Spain (see Smith *et al.*, 2004).

## Discussion

Interventions to address cases of bullying are commonly only partially successful. This should encourage us to look more closely at the kinds of interventions that are being employed and how successful they are. Currently there are six major intervention methods. These have been identified as: the traditional disciplinary approach; strengthening the victim; mediation; restorative practices; the support group method; and the method of shared concern. Evidence regarding the effectiveness of each is sparse, but there are indications that under some conditions each may be applied successfully. More work is clearly needed in determining when and how they can be used most effectively.

Regardless of which method is employed, it is generally assumed that anti-bullying programmes are more effective when they are supported by a whole-school approach. Farrington and Ttofi (2009) have claimed that schools with a 'whole-school approach' are more effective in reducing bullying than those without. It is not clear, however, whether a whole-school approach has differential effects, depending on what intervention methods or combinations of methods are adopted. Especially, it is not clear what kind of proactive measures can lead to particular intervention methods being optimally effective. There are some reasonable expectations that particular intervention methods are likely to be more effective when steps are taken by a school to provide certain instructions to all students and/or involve them in activities that can lead to the development of particular skills and attitudes. For example, the use of the traditional disciplinary approach involving the systematic application of rewards and punishments is considered to be more effective when students are informed and continually reminded of what actions are acceptable or unacceptable in their interpersonal relations (Ross & Horner, 2009). Further, classroom discussions to elicit views on what rules *should* govern the way people treat others are thought to increase the likelihood of disciplinary actions for infractions of school rules being effective (Olweus, 1993).

It was noted earlier that school staff are often divided over what methods should be employed in addressing cases of bullying. This is particularly evident when non-traditional or non-punitive forms of intervention are discussed. Divisions among staff may seriously jeopardise the success of some intervention methods. For example, to be optimally effective, restorative practices are commonly seen as requiring both staff and community support (Thorsborne & Vinegrad, 2006). Where the use of sanctions to punish 'offenders' is seen by many staff members as the *only* acceptable approach, conversations with students to help them to understand the consequences of their actions as a means to restoring damaged relationships may be seen as unnecessary and misguided (Sherman & Strang, 2007). Some intervention methods appear more likely to be effective when

students have been helped to acquire the capacity to work empathically and constructively with their peers. This is especially so for approaches that involve students in problem-solving method, such as the support group method and the method of shared concern. Peer mediation appears more likely to be effective in helping students to resolve conflict when the practitioners have been appropriately trained (see Cowie & Sharp, 1996) and classroom exercises have been undertaken to help students to develop appropriate skills and pro-social attitudes. To this end, the promotion of cooperative learning (Aronson, 2005) and the use of Circle Time (Bellhouse, 2009) can make important contributions.

The choice of approach would also appear to depend upon the nature of the case of bullying. Attention needs to be given to such factors as the severity of the bullying, whether there is group involvement, whether the students in conflict are amenable to mediation, whether the 'offender' is remorseful and whether the victim has behaved provocatively. As yet, little attention has been paid to the conditions in which particular methods are more likely to be successful. Future research into the effectiveness of interventions will need to take a range of situational factors into account. This could greatly help to guide teachers in the selection of methods of intervention in particular cases.

### **Some implications for teacher education**

What is conspicuously lacking or under-resourced is the training of teachers and counsellors in dealing with cases of bullying and assisting them in making an appropriate and effective choice of methods. As noted above, most students who are bullied do not come to teachers for help; and those who do, commonly report that doing so did not result in any improvement. Meanwhile schools continue to exhort students to tell if they are being bullied. Understandably, many students think it is wiser to keep it to themselves or to tell somebody else, usually their friends, if they have any, for many do not (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003).

Recognition of the inadequacy of training to address bullying in pre-service training is not new (Nicolaidis *et al.*, 2002). Unfortunately very little has been done about it. This may in part be due to a lack of knowledge of how cases of bullying can be addressed or a belief that teachers will learn how to do so 'on the job.' Evidently they are not doing so. Based on survey results from Rigby and Bauman (2010), it does not appear that the failure to deal with cases adequately springs from apathy or a non-recognition of the problem. What is evident is that teachers are often unaware of the options that exist for tackling cases of bullying, and are divided over what is the best way of dealing with particular cases.

Fortunately there is an increasing amount of information becoming available about the resources that can help to inform teachers regarding the nature and application of the different methods of intervention. These resources include authoritative writings on particular approaches; for example, on the use of sanctions in more traditional approaches (Olweus, 1993); mediation (Cremin, 2007; Cowie & Smith, 2010), restorative practices (Thorsborne & Vinegrad, 2006, Morisson, 2007), the

support group method (Robinson & Maines, 2008) and the method of shared concern (Griffiths, 2001; Pikas, 2002; Rigby, 2010b, 2011; Rigby & Griffiths, 2010, 2011). An instructional training DVD on the method of shared concern is available through Readymade Productions (2007). A detailed comparison of the major approaches has been provided by Renn *et al.* (2009) and Rigby (2010a).

Finally, it must be emphasised that particular methods of intervention are implemented in the wider context what the school is doing proactively as well as reactively. Examples of how this can be done may be found in the highly successful anti-bullying programmes devised and implemented in Spain (Ortega *et al.*, 2004) and in Finland (Salmivalli *et al.*, 2004).

Here are some suggestions about what could be incorporated into teacher education programmes to improve the capacity of teachers to deal more effectively with cases of bullying:

- (1) Knowledge of the range of intervention methods currently being promoted and implemented in some schools, together with an examination of their rationale and available evidence regarding their effectiveness.
- (2) An examination of the appropriateness of the choice of particular kinds of intervention methods for addressing different kinds of bullying cases.
- (3) A consideration of factors that may render the application of methods of intervention in given situations more likely to succeed, such as the adoption by a school of the 'whole-school approach' and the acquisition by members of the school community of relevant knowledge, values, attitudes and social skills.
- (4) Information concerning the availability of resources that can assist schools in the development of knowledge and skills pertaining to the methods
- (5) The encouragement of teachers to systematically evaluate their interventions in cases of bullying by carefully monitoring outcomes.

## Conclusions

In summary, it is evident from reports received from school children that teacher interventions in cases of bullying are often unsuccessful and they are more likely to seek help from friends or parents. Surveys indicate that teachers are generally inclined to adopt one method of intervention, the traditional disciplinary approach, and are often divided in their judgements of the appropriateness of other methods. Currently six basic methods of intervention are being advocated and adopted in some schools around the world. Evidence of their effectiveness is, however, limited. Arguably, interventions can be more successful if they are combined with a whole-school approach that bolsters support for the use of particular methods and promotes the development of relevant knowledge, social skills and attitudes among students. Teachers need to become more acquainted with alternative methods of intervention and their distinctive rationales, and encouraged to explore the appropriateness of their application in relation to different kinds of cases of bullying.

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