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**AN INVESTIGATION OF UPPER PRIMARY STUDENTS'
UNDERSTANDING AND USE OF ANTI-BULLYING STRATEGIES**

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ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been an increased awareness of bullying in schools by the media and educational researchers. Research into the nature and complexity of bullying behaviours has led to the development of anti-bullying strategies in schools which have focused on adopting a range of methods, including the 'whole school' approach or a 'shared concern' approach between schools, students and parents/caregivers (Rigby, 1996; Slee & Rigby, 1994).

While schools are seen as ideal sites for the delivery of anti-bullying strategies, little research has been undertaken into students' actualuse of the anti-bullying strategies they have been taught. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate upper primary students' understanding and use of schools' anti-bullying strategies.

A qualitative methodology was used to gather data, which involved students discussing and responding to formal and informal questions, and a video stimulus, in focus group settings.

The responses indicated that students were more likely to use their own anti-bullying strategies rather then those which were formally incorporated

in the schools' anti-bullying procedures. This finding suggests that the school strategies to counter bullying may lack authenticity and relevance for upper primary students.

Other factors that were seen to impact on the effectiveness of the anti-bullying strategies were also linked to the level of teacher support and the influence of the adolescent peer group.

THE ISSUE

This study is linked to the broad issue of bullying which has, until recently, become more generally recognised as a serious problem by communities, both in schools and the workplace, due to growing research and media coverage (Crouch, 2000; Marinos, 2000). This study focuses on school bullying and investigates upper primary students' understanding and use of schools' anti-bullying strategies. Therefore, the research aims to identify the strategies used by upper primary students against bullying, how these strategies compare with those implemented by the schools, the students' understanding of the schools' anti-bullying strategies and the factors which influence students' decision making processes when choosing anti-bullying strategies.

CURRENT RESEARCH

Definition of Bullying

Bullying can be defined as a repetitive behaviour which always involves an imbalance of power and is inflicted either verbally, physically, socially or psychologically (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Griffiths, 1993; Slee, 1998).

There are a range of bullying behaviours which involve the following:

- physical bullying, eg. hitting, kicking
- psychological bullying, eg. threats
- social bullying, eg. spreading rumours, exclusion
- verbal bullying, eg. persistent teasing, name calling

Bullying is also distinct from conflict, harassment and violence, although it may involve all of these, as there is always a less powerful person and a more powerful person or group involved (Rigby, 1997).

It is also important to note that the power exerted in bullying can be either formal or situational (Teo & Waugh, 1997). Examples of formal power include big versus small, old versus young or stronger boys versus girls, whereas examples of situational power include differences in socio-economic groups, cultural groups, gender groups, groups based on physical appearance or teams in sport.

From this understanding of bullying, it is obvious that bullying aims to hurt, ridicule and create an unsafe and unpleasant working environment.

Incidence of Bullying in Schools

From Australian research studies conducted so far, results indicate that at least one child in six is bullied on a weekly basis (Rigby, 1997; Slee & Rigby, 1994). As there has been mounting concern with the issue in recent years, further research has been carried out in other countries as a result. These findings are comparable to Australia.

For example, Illinois has established that approximately 15% of the students surveyed were either bullies or victims of bullying, 6% of students surveyed in Canada admitted bullying others and 12% of students surveyed in Italy were either bullies or victims (Baldry, 2000; Banks, 1997; National Crime Prevention Council, 1997).

In acknowledging the relatively high incidence of bullying in Australia and around the world, there are also considerable age differences in the incidence of bullying. Research by Rigby (1997) revealed that upper primary school children of both sexes are reporting being bullied more often than students in secondary schools. These reports also need to take into account other factors that may lead to high levels of bullying in schools.

Current research suggests that the incidence of bullying tends to be based on varying levels of support within schools (Eslea & Smith, 1998; Griffiths, 1993; Slee & Rigby, 1994). As a consequence, many schools must acknowledge that bullying is prevalent in their school community and take positive actions to build better support networks for students.

From the bullying incidences reported in schools, the most common form of bullying in Australia is that of verbal attacks (see table 1). Statistics from current research also indicate that the different forms of bullying behaviours occur with different frequencies, according to age and gender factors (see table 1) (Tulloch, 1995).

Table 1: Age and gender differences in bullying behaviours (from Rigby, 1997 p. 29).

AGE GROUPS

8 - 12 years 13 - 18 years

Never Sometimes Often Never Sometimes Often

Being Teased

BOYS 50.1 38.0 11.9 52.6 38.8 8.6 GIRLS 52.6 38.8 8.6 58.1 33.5 8.4

Hurtful Names

BOYS 49.7 36.4 13.9 56.0 33.1 10.8

GIRLS 49.6 38.4 12.0 56.7 33.2 10.1

Left Out

BOYS 65.9 26.9 7.3 75.7 18.8 5.5

GIRLS 58.7 32.3 9.0 69.0 24.4 6.6

Threatened

BOYS 71.5 22.7 5.8 74.4 19.8 5.9

GIRLS 84.9 12.6 2.5 87.8 9.7 2.5

Hit/kicked

BOYS 63.5 28.5 8.0 72.4 21.3 6.3

GIRLS 77.2 18.9 3.9 88.5 9.3 2.2

Reporting of Bullying

Children who are bullied frequently often do not tell others, which may suggest that the statistics on the reporting of bullying are not a true indication of how much bullying is occurring in schools. The reason for this can be attributed to children sensing a fear that the bully will retaliate again (Slee, 1998).

Rigby (1997, p. 30) found that '40% of boys surveyed and 25% of girls surveyed did not tell their friends, and even a larger proportion did not tell their mother, father or teacher.' Also, a three month phone-in service for young people to talk about bullying, in the United Kingdom, also found that at least half were reluctant to tell anyone (La Fontaine, 1991).

Characteristics Of Adolescence

Adolescence can be defined simply as being 'a transition from childhood to adulthood, commencing at the onset of puberty' (Cormack, 1991 p. 3). At this stage of a person's development, researchers have also identified a range of social factors which are characteristic of this biological transition period. That is, adolesence is a developmental stage in which the search for personal identity may result in behaviours such as risk-taking and experimentation (Coon, 1992; Cormack, 1991; Harter, 1990).

The peer group is another social factor that may impact both positively and negatively on an adolescent's movement towards personal independance. Hillman (1991, p. 6) states that 'acceptance by peers is profoundly important for psychological well being in adolescence.' Also further studies highlight that the peer group has a profound role and impact on the lives of adolescence, as it offers a sense of belonging and a 'site for identity formation and values clarafication seperate from the home' (Coon, 1992; Cormack, 1991 p. 7; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990).

Therefore, the main characteristics of adolescence, as outlined, may be seen to have a significant impact on the decision making processes students at this age choose to implement when confronted with bullying.

Peer Group Influences

Research into the effects and influences the peer group has over the incidence of bullying, have largely indicated that students are sympathetic towards victims of bullying (Rigby & Slee, 1993; Slee 1998). However further research suggests that there are barriers to the reporting of bullying, in relation to peer groups' attitudes and beliefs. A study by Slee (1998) revealed that the most common barrier for victims, that prevents them from reporting bullying, is that they are 'too scared' to ask for help (see Table 3).

Table 3: Students' opinions regarding what prevents victims from reporting bullying (from: Slee, 1998 p. 210).

Schools	VICTIMS ARE TOO SCARED		NOTHING WILL BE DONE TO STOP IT		VICTIM'S DON'T WANT TO MAKE TROUBLE	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
A	56.5	55.5	12.0	11.9	21.2	23.7
B	54.2	70.3	8.3	6.3	31.9	15.6
C	54.3	55.5	17.1	16.4	20.2	17.3

As a result of this study, it is evident that there are outside influences which impact on a victim's ability to report bullying. The peer group may then be seen as one of these factors.

A study by Rigby (1997) supports this notion, as it revealed that peer pressure has a significant impact on the level of reporting by victims who have been bullied.

Furthermore, bullying behaviours have an adverse effect on the quality of students' peer groups and their close friendships. Studies in bullying and peer relations have found that

aggressive behaviours are linked more consistently with rejection from peers (Hodges et. al. 1999; Rigby, 1997; Rys & Bear, 1997).

Current School Anti-Bullying Strategies

As bullying behaviours among children and adolescents are influenced by a range of factors, such as societal expectations, peers, and the family, researchers have sought to implement anti-bullying strategies that support these findings. Researchers have suggested that intervention programs need to acknowledge the systematic and multidimensional nature of bullying practices (Hyndman & Thorsborne, 1994; Salmivalli et. al. 1998; Slee, 1998).

Many intervention programs have been designed by researchers which recognise the value of working together to solve the issue of bullying. These include the 'whole school approach', the 'spheres of involvement approach' and the 'P.E.A.C.E plan' (Sharp & Smith, 1992; Slee & Rigby, 1994; Tattum & Herbert, 1992).

Evaluations of these interventions have demonstrated that bullying behaviours are reduced when anti-bullying programs are implemented. For example, a study by Olweus (1993) found a 50% or more decline in bullying practices during the two years following the introduction of a whole school approach to the prevention of bullying.

Other anti-bullying programs include the 'peer mediation program,' the 'no blame approach' or the method of 'shared concern' which involve victims consulting with bullies, teachers and peers (Rigby, 1994; Rigby, 1997).

Peer mediation methods have received some positive feedback from schools. For example, in America and New Zealand, research has found that peer mediation programs have led to decreases in self reported aggressive conflict and in general, a shift away from violence (Lane, 1992; Koch, 1988).

Other practices that schools may use include developing school rules, established grievance procedures and personal safety strategies (Griffiths, 1993; Olweus, 1993). Common prevention measures at this level include:

- walking away, or ignoring bullies,
- victims telling bullies how they feel when they are bullied, using 'I' statements, or
- telling a teacher or parent.

Students Initiating Change In Schools

What much of the research hasn't taken into account in previous bullying studies, is students' ideas and opinions about the effectiveness and relevance of the current anti-bullying strategies in schools. According to Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace (1996, p. 9) there is an 'educational pay-off for young people, as well as for their schools', in giving opportunities for students to comment on school structures and issues.

The study conducted by Rudduck et. al. (1996, p. 1) also found that although students viewed teachers as being 'supportive' and 'stimulating', they did not adequately take into account the 'tensions and pressures' of their 'social and personal lives'.

Therefore, as bullying is a social behaviour which results in negative outcomes, this research suggests that schools would benefit greatly if students became more involved in the planning and designing of behaviour management practices.

METHODOLOGY

The following points summarise the qualitative methodology which was used to implement the study:

- schools which had implemented anti-bullying strategies were purposefully sought for the study, being School A and School B,
- School A had implemented a 'peer mediation program' and School B had established an 'action grievance procedure',
- students were purposefully selected for the study, through consultations with teachers and student observations, according to a set of criteria,
- student data was obtained using focus groups in semi-structured interviews, which included a video stimulus and formal and informal questioning,
- each interview was audio-recorded and the data was then sorted, colour coded and analysed for common themes,
- the ethical considerations of the study involved seeking approval for the research from the necessary educational authorities, the students and their parents/caregivers, and
- further procedures were carried out to meet confidentiality requirements, such as changing students' names when transcribing data and encouraging students to not discuss, at length, what they had discussed with other peers.

FINDINGS

Summary Of Findings

Students' Understanding Of Bullying

- Students from both School A and School B had a limited understanding of bullying, as they could only identify two forms of bullying - physical and verbal.
- Students lacked an understanding of the broad range of psychological, social and emotional effects of bullying.
- Students emphasised that bullying may occur because of a person's physical appearance or their cultural background.
- Students largely described 'bullies' as males, who are physically big and powerful and who have poor dress standards.

The Incidence Of Bullying In The Upper Primary Grades

- Students at School A suggested that there were minimal amounts of bullying occurring in their school.
- Students at School B stated that there was a considerable amount of bullying happening in their school.

The Reporting Of Bullying In The Primary Upper Grades

- Students, from both School A and School B, stated that bullying was only reported if it was of a physical nature.

How Students Would Respond To Bullying As A Victim

- The main response from students at School A and School B suggested that they would ignore the bully and walk away.

- Students from School A also indicated that they would negotiate and reach a compromise with the bully.
- Students from School B stated that they would seek assistance from others, if the bullying became worse, or find a different group of friends.
- A smaller number of students stated that they would use physical force against the bully.
- Female students from School A suggested that defence against a bully is dependant on levels of personal strength and courage.

Students' Understanding Of Their Schools' Anti-Bullying Strategies

- The most common response from students at School A and B was that school anti-bullying strategies encourage them to report bullying to a teacher.
- Students from School B understood the processes involved with the 'action grievance procedure'. For example, students stated that their school required them to solve the problem themselves if the bullying wasn't serious, then report it to a teacher if the bullying continued.
- Students from School A had a clear understanding of the processes and strategies involved with the peer mediation program and with more serious bullying offences.

Differences Between The Schools' Anti-Bullying Strategies and What Strategies Students Chose To Use To Resolve Bullying

- Students from School A made no mention of using peer mediators to help them resolve bullying incidents or reporting bullying to teachers, as was the policy of the school.
- Students from School B gave responses which were largely conguent

with their schools' 'action grievance procedure'. However, like School

A students, they were not likely to report bullying to teachers unless the

bullying was violent and sustained.

- Several students from School B indicated that they would use physical force as a means of resolving bullying. This strategy was not supported by the school.

The Factors That Affect Upper Primary Students' Decision Making Processes To Not Report Bullying

- Students from School A and School B indicated that there was a general fear of isolation if they 'dobbed' to teachers, which is linked to peer group factors.
- Students were also conscious and fearful of the bully retaliating if the bullying was reported.
- Students from School B stated that there was a lack of teacher support which impacted on them reporting to teachers.
- Students from both schools suggested that they wanted to retain control of the problem, which is characteristic of early adolescence.

Reporting In The Peer Mediation Program

- Students maintained that peer mediation worked best for the younger grades because they are more likely to report bullying.

- Upper primary students did not seek assistance from peer mediators for the following reasons:

- students felt uncomfortable seeking assistance from their peers,

- students felt they could sort out their own problems, and

- students had a fear of being teased by their peers.

Improvements To The Schools' Anti-Bullying Strategies

The following responses were recommended by students:

- greater teacher support and more positive student/teacher relationships,
- greater parent/teacher communication,
- school bullying awareness programs need to be implemented,
- harsher punishments to be issued by teachers, such as school community service and the removal of student privileges,
- implementing school counselling services, and
- giving the bully and victim an opportunity to work together to resolve their differences.

Improvements To The Peer Mediation Program

- Students from School A suggested that peer mediators need to be older for students to seek assistance from them, which indicated that the program would be more effective in R-12 schools.
- Teachers needed to be more efficient in recognising when a program wasn't working and adapting it to promote greater student use.
- Students, however, also indicated that no real improvements could be made to the peer mediation program as peer group factors operated as more powerful influences over their behaviour.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications For The Peer Mediation Program

These findings suggest that peer mediation programs are problematic for students in the upper primary years. As students in this age group are very much dependent on friendships and having a 'sense of belonging', this impacts significantly on the way in the which the peer mediation program functions (Coon, 1994; Hodges et. al. 1999). As a result, students at this stage of their development need to have the opportunities in school to explore how their values and beliefs have an impact on the incidence of bullying in schools and most importantly of all, the range of negative effects this behaviour may result in for the victims involved.

Although the peer mediation program involves the students resolving bullying incidents between their peers, teachers also play an important role within this process also. In order for this program to be effective, teachers need to support and encourage peer mediators and take on the shared responsibility of offering assistance and guidance to those victims in need.

Overall, for the peer mediation program to be effective in countering bullying, the difficult task of challenging and shifting adolescents' attitudes, norms and beliefs is required before students realise how their thinking impacts on the prevalence of bullying. However, as indicated by the students' responses, this is a significant barrier to cross, so therefore more relevant strategies need to be implemented by schools that are conducive to the needs of adolescence.

Implications For The Action Grievance Procedure

The 'action grievance procedure' included a range of steps for students to follow, depending on the seriousness of the bullying involved.

This study found that the lack of teacher support had a major impact on the effectiveness of the program. As stated by Rigby (1997), in order for bullying to be addressed efficiently in schools a 'whole school approach' is needed, which involves the support of teachers, students and parents. Although the school had endeavoured to develop this team approach, it also highlighted what can occur if one component of this program is lacking support. This may have been the reason for students using other negative means of resolving bullying, such as physical fighting.

As found in School A, students at this age level were also subject to greater negative consequences from their peers if they followed the 'action grievance procedure' in reporting bullying to a teacher. Other research and the students in this study have indicated that the power exerted by the peer group has a significant influence on the reporting of bullying due to fear of being rejected by their peers (Slee, 1998).

Therefore, it can be concluded that for these strategies to be relevant and coherent for adolescent students, changes need to be made that more significantly reflect their developmental needs.

Implications For Further Study

As this study was conducted on a small scale, involving sixteen students, two schools and the assessment of two anti-bullying strategies, it is not possible to draw generalisable conclusions based on quite limited data. As a result, further studies on a larger scale need to be undertaken to confirm or refute the findings of this study.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study suggest that upper primary students' use of anti-bullying strategies in schools is influenced by the stage of their development. Their developing sense of identity, autonomy and independence is consistent with the help-seeking strategies recommended in most school anti-bullying policies.

Other factors also impact on their use of these strategies, like the level of

teacher support, their understanding of bullying and the nature of their schools' anti-bullying strategies. Schools therefore need to be aware of these factors when implementing such anti-bullying strategies, like the peer mediation program and the 'action grievance procedure'. As with current teaching methodologies, lessons need to reflect the learning styles and capabilities of the students. This same process should then be applied when developing anti-bullying strategies.

Future anti-bullying strategies that are developed and adopted by schools and educational researchers, need to firstly focus on why these strategies are being implemented. If they are to prevent and decrease the incidence of bullying, then the school community needs to work together to develop strategies that are authentic and relevant for upper primary students to use. This process also includes seeking the user's opinions and views about what strategies work. Without their critical input, schools may spend considerable amounts of time developing and implementing strategies which will not be used by their intended audience.

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