Schools Texts about Peer Bullying

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Convention of Human Rights, the Swedish Occupational and Safety Act, the Swedish School Law, Curriculums and other texts provide Swedish students safe learning conditions. In spite of these guarantees, peer bullying is considered to be the most serious and urgent problem in Swedish schools (Nordiska Ministerrådet, 2003; Skolverket, 2003). Although Sweden together with the other Scandinavian countries is considered to be world leading to prevent and take measures against peer bullying the rate of victims in Swedish schools are estimated to be between 6 -15 percent and around 100,000 pupils are involved in intimidations as perpetrators, victims or both (Olweus, 1998). Some investigations have shown a hopeful improvement, others status quo and some that the school climate and peer bullying has became more frequent and violent. Figures differ due to different definitions of what peer bullying is regarded to be and methods of investigation.

From case studies (Larsson, 2000) we know that some victims have to make a “Golgata walk” from the first to the last day during nine years of compulsory school and they have to use all their strength to gather courage to meet the torment of next day, next week or next semester. Even in Sweden with less then 900 000 students attending compulsory basic schools peer bullying has resulted in probably life-long psycho-social injuries, in last resort suicide and some school incidents with weapons has also occurred. Peer bullying and harassment,
humiliation, violation, social ostracism and exclusion by classmates are common school experiences encountered worldwide (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). If no improvement will take place we could expect that Swedish schools will join the statistics shown in Columbine High School Shooting (2002).

In Sweden municipalities, school districts and local schools are by School Law coerced to establish programs, methods or action plans to prevent and take measures against peer bullying. Grave shortcomings have been noticed in school politicians’, school leaders’ and teacher’s lack of engagement to act against these disparities (Skolverket 2003, 2001). Neglect to act properly and professionally admit victims to sue the municipality for its omission. A few bullying cases have been taken into court and as a rule the municipality argues that the school has acted compassionately and responsibly even if no strong sanctions has been taken for those students who violate the policy against bullying. Most cases have ended with a secret settlement agreement. A new legislation proposal will increase the responsibility for the municipality and raise the claim for damages.

My research about The Schools´ Texts against Peer Bullying (Forsman, 2003) is constructed upon school action plans or similar against peer bullying. The aim of my study is to describe, analyze and interpret what is expressed in these texts. What are the connections to decrees and intentions in conventions, laws, regulations and other documents that frame and will be the basis for school activities against peer bullying? Is and if so, in what extent is research about bullying used in the texts? Do schools use experts and organisations to improve their work against peer bullying? The analysis and interpretation follow a hermeneutic approach.

Norrbotten County, located on both sides of the Artic Circle, Sweden, has a population of 250 000 inhabitants divided in 14 municipalities with 3000 to 70 000 people. Size of schools differs between around 20 students to more than 700 and includes urban as well as rural schools. The total number of students in compulsory school (grade 1-9) is around 20 000. The research material is documents from these municipalities, school districts and local schools and consists of texts against peer bullying, totally 42 documents. The municipalities’ texts to prevent and take measures against peer bullying are the base and give the guidelines for the schools’ activities.

My results show that there is a great spreading in quantity as well as in quality in the texts. They could have a range from a few lines to more than forty pages with detailed manuals. A few texts, against stipulations, have not even mentioned the word bullying. In Sweden there is a number of action plans against bullying. The most used are The Olweus Programme, The Pikas GB Method and Ljungstroms Farstamodel (Olweus, 1998; Pikas, 1998; Ljungstrom, 1989) and the others could be considered as mixtures of these above. Some municipalities, school districts and local schools have just more or less plagiarized one of established programmes and could therefore be considered as useful tools while others are too compressed to be good manuals in the work against bullying. Most documents stress on having so called mobbing-teams but compared with norwegian schools working with the Olweus programme where the anti-bullying team could have 11 days of education this is an exception in Swedish schools. All texts refer to the international conventions and legislation but the fact that the Occupational and Safety Act also includes pupils is not noticed. The linking up with research is almost totally neglected in all texts and the theoretical ground is missing as a whole. The opportunity to use organisations as Save the Children, Friends, FMM (Union against Bullying)
and other who are engaged in the work of anti-peer bullying has obviously not been seen as an option to help the school to deal with bullying.

All documents should involve follow up measures and be evaluated every second year. In my study it was common that some plans was not evaluated within many years. As noticed in the OECD-conference in Stavanger, Norway, September 2004, there is also in my study finings of confusion and unreliability in the definition of peer bullying. The amount of peer bullying is also very unreliable because the report obligation does not function at least in the upper north of Sweden. This unsatisfactory registration of cases of peer bullying might explain the number of only 24 reports between year 2000 and 2002 from schools to municipality school administration. During the same period the highest authority Skolverket received 21 reports from the municipalities in Norrbotten. There is no doubt that there are a great number of unrecorded cases which mean that that the necessary basis of measures against bullying does not exist.

Data from my investigation originate from year 2000 and 2002. In my occupation as lecturer and researcher at the Department of Educational Sciences, Luleå University of Technology, Sweden, I have field data from students that show that still little if nothing has been done in schools to improve the competence to take measures to prevent and act against harassment, victimization, intimidation, ostracism, social exclusion and other expressions of violence in school. The legislation proposal about better opportunities for victims to sue a municipality for neglecting to take measures would probably even decrease the quality of education in small municipalities, creating a big gape in the school budget. In order to minimize costs many municipalities employ non-legitimated teachers who rarely have any education to handle peer bullying.

In the field of research I think it is necessary to have a general definition of what peer bullying is and to work more cross-scientific (Eriksson, B, Lindberg, O, Flygare, E, & Danebäck, K., 2002). Regarding school actitivies as a mirror of society, the influence of political attitudes in society (Arendt, 1964; Billig, 1995) and a cross-cultural perspective (Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano & Slee, 1999) must be taken in greater consideration, not just to explain and understand peer bullying but to change circumstances that create an unhealthy climate in schools.

Institutions that are responsible for teacher training must give their students a better theoretical base and at least make them familiar with theories of crisis and conflicts (Cullberg, 1972; Einarsen, Raknes, Mathiesen & Hellesöy, 1998; Utas-Carlsson, 2002), attribution (Skinner, 1995), personality and social theory and development (Pervin & John, 1997; Hare, 1993; Byron & Byron, 2003), coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and communication. Municipalities must put more effort in competence raising measures for all staff and the Swedish highest school authority, Skolverket, have to better support, follow up and evaluate the work against bullying in municipalities, school districts and local schools.
References


