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Invitation

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The ArctiChildren Project: *Interreg Kolarctic III A The Development and Research Project of Psychosocial Well-being among Youth and Children in the Arctic*

Preventing and taking Measures against Peer Bullying

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Introduction

Peer Bullying is a world wide problem (Juvonen & Graham 2001; Smith, Morita; Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano & Slee, 2000) and is in Sweden considered to be the school's biggest problem (Skolverket, 2003). Grave shortcomings have been noticed in teachers, school leaders, school politician's attitudes and competence to prevent and take measures against peer bullying. Even the highest authority in school, Skolverket, has not fulfilled its obligations to ensure students safe learning conditions (Forsman, 2003). From time to time, shocking cases of violations in school have been unmasked, mostly by media, and one common concern has been to find and hold the authorities responsible for neglecting and not intervening in obvious cases of peer bullying. The consequences of a new legislation that stresses the school's responsibility in peer harassment and make it possible for victims to claim damages for their suffering have not yet been tested.

Peer bullying threaten the most fundamental values a democratic society is built on. It could cause

the victims severe and life-long injuries and will in some cases result in suicide as a last solution for those subjected to violations by peers in school. More and more reports of school shootings show that victims also will take a dreadful revenge on the perpetrators and even on teachers who they accuse did not intervene against the harassments, in some cases were considered to be perpetrators.

Research world wide (Smith et al, 2000) estimate that between 3-20 percent of students are involved in peer bullying, either as victims, perpetrator or both. Figures differ because of different definitions and research methods. Some researchers have found a decrease in peer bullying with growing age and maturity, others not. At least in Sweden there are signs that peer bullying is more frequent in higher grades in school than estimated before. More evidently however are Swedish reports about a harder and more violent climate in school with physical and psychological expressions of sexual, cultural and racist intimidations. Actual data about frequencies and kind of peer bullying could be gathered ten years ago. My opinion is that newer research will find a trend of increase in rate and violence in peer bullying in school.

The most well-known researcher is Dan Olweus and his anti-bullying program is used all over the world (Olweus, 1991). In his research he has found out that the implementation of the program could decrease peer bullying between 40-60 percent and as an extra bonus will give a more positive psycho-social climate in the schools involved.

The ArctiChildren-project

Since 2004 and to 2006 *University of Technology, Luleå, Sweden* is, together with *Finnmarksvidda College, Alta, North Norway*, *Lapin Yliopisto, Rovaniemi, Finland* and *Murmansk State Pedagogical University, Murmansk, Russia* involved in an EU-project, *The ArctiChildren-project*. The project is a research and development project and its aim is to develop new methods to increase the psychosocial wellbeing among children and youth in the Arctic (The Barents Area). In each country one "ordinary school" and one Sami school are chosen to participate in the project.

The participating countries arrange annual conferences with different themes. This year Sweden was host for the conference *Sharing good Practice* where all countries presented their work so far. The steering group meet two times per semester and the correspondence between the countries is very frequent. All countries are just now working with an application of extending the project, as a first stage for two more years. Our annual chairman's reports have received good credits from the European Union.

As a researcher and psychologist with my roots in child psychiatry my task has been to work together with the staff and the bullying team in the schools to make research and find methods to prevent and take measures against peer bullying.

The Sami school in the village of Jokkmokk, located north of the Arctic Circle, just has a few students and will only participate in the development program. My task in *Jokkmokk Sami School* have been on a consulting basis, meeting staff and parents and giving lectures about the nature of peer bullying, about once a months. An academic course of 7,5 ECTS in conflict treatment is planned. The staff has started a study circle reading literature about peer bullying.

The local school in town of Luleå with around 300 students in grade 6-8 (grade 9 had to be excluded because of no follow-up possibilities) has been a research unit. About once a month I meet the bullying team in the school, super visioning and act as a member in a study circle about

peer bullying. A lot of our discussions have dealt with crisis intervention because peer bullying must be considered as a great crisis.

As a researcher in peer bullying I have been lecturing as well to comprehensive school students and university students as to teachers and parents involved in the project. My competence has also been used in Finland and Russia where I have met university students, teachers and project participants in the two countries. Within in the project I am now working to develop and translate to a Finnish and a Russian version of the *Olweus Questionnaire* and the *Teachers Guide* for administrating the program (in the Russian language there is no clear concept for peer bullying).

In month of May 2004 I administered the Olweus Questionnaire to 278 students in grade 6 to 8. In month of October I administered a second questionnaire to grade 7 students, former grade 6. The analysis of data for my second investigation is still not published.

In the 2004 investigation by Olweus Questionnaire main results were as follows:

- ☐ Nearly nine of ten students in all grades "like school good or very good".
- ☐ Six students have no peer and all of them are bullied. Another nine have just one pal and five of them were victims of peer bullying.
- ☐ Ten percent of the students have been victims of peer bullying "2 or 3 times a month or more often". About another four percent reported that they had been bullied earlier (than six months) but not now. These students wrote on own initiative these notes in the questionnaire.
- ☐ Ten percent reported that they had bullied others.
- ☐ The result shows that peer bullying is a group phenomena.
- ☐ Boys bullies more than girls, boys bullies both sexes and places and forms of peer bullying differs.
- ☐ Every sixth student (16%) "feel or think" that the victim deserves the intimidations and the same amount do not feel any special empathy for the victim's plights.
- ☐ Almost ten percent would be able to take part in peer bullying towards somebody they do not like. The number of participating in this kind of harassments increases with age.
- ☐ 40 percent say they have not seen any kind of peer bullying and as many would not interfere if they noticed harassments, although they think they should do that.
- ☐ More than ten percent are "often or very afraid to be bullied of other students in the school". The number increases with age.
- ☐ The students consider that four of ten teachers have done "little or nothing" or "quite

little" to prevent and take measures against peer bullying in the class.

The result above could also be supported by, among other investigations, a municipality investigation in town of Luleå from year 2002 where a sample of students, from pre-school to adult vocational education answered a questionnaire and participated in interviews about peer bullying and the psycho-social conditions in school. In upper secondary school, with student between 16 to 18 years, the peer bullying problem was most obvious. More than one student in every class was afraid to go to school.

Of course many of these results above could be questioned. Others are clear support and evidence of earlier research validity. What could be questioned is the number of perpetrators and bullies. The figure is probably too low because of the concept of social desirability and that even young boys deny being bullied by girls (Einarsen, S., Raknes, B.I., Mathiesen, S.B., & Hellsøy, O.H., 1998). It could also be a use of defence mechanisms or an expression of the concept of "banal bullying" which among other Arendt (1964) has written about, when as many as 40 percent say "...they have not seen any kind of peer bullying". From my experience I know that students are not aware of all the work many teachers do, "out of the record" at least to take measures against peer bullying.

There is a lot to do at local level, for instance in institutions for teacher training. In Sweden year 2005 no guarantee is given that teachers to come will have a single lesson about the nature and the mechanisms behind peer bullying and how to prevent and take measures against this probably increasing problem in school.

Finally, my pessimistic conclusion will be:

- ☐ as long as we accept and not question the great amount of soap-operas where the winner will be the best bully we will have peer bullying in school
- ☐ as long as we accept leaders and politicians in societies and countries to violate international conventions and human rights and that they without any consequences execute torture and genocide, we will have peer bullying in school
- ☐ as long as we do not clean the "staircase of intimidations and violations" from the top, we will have peer bullying in school

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