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**Beyond Bullying in Primary Schools:  
Theory, Instrumentation, and Intervention**

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**Abstract**

Bullying in the school has been universally recognized as damaging to the physical, psychological, social, and academic development of children. Anti-bullying interventions should therefore start early in the primary school. A well-designed anti-bullying program should be underpinned by theory, tested through rigorous evaluation methodology with strong instrumentation, and implemented by teachers who share a sense of ownership by providing input to the activities and materials for the intervention. The present study demonstrates how theory, instrumentation, and intervention should be intertwined for a strong intervention program that can be incorporated in the Australian primary school curriculum. Through research and development procedures, intervention materials were developed through the joint effort of researchers and teachers, the activities were designed to be compatible with the key learning areas of primary education and adaptable to the diversity of student abilities, and the teachers implemented the program in their classes after being trained by the researchers. Future development of effective anti-bullying interventions should attempt to cascade the positive effects of teacher professional development by strengthening mentoring processes whereby more experienced teachers can share their knowledge and skills with less experienced teachers

Evidence that children as young as pre-school age engage in bullying behaviours is a clear concern for society. Although there is research support for bullying to peak during high school, it is now more widely accepted that bullying appears before high school. Research has shown victimisation to be as high as 40% for primary school students (Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Kartstadt, 2000). Hence attempts to stop bullying should start early in the primary school.

All around the world, experts on bullying are attempting to find the keys to reduce bullying in our schools. One of the key components to preventing bullying is to understand

how bullying develops so that a prevention can be put in place. A theoretical underpinning is crucial to effectively prevent bullying. However, although theory suggests that the best possible response to bullying is a whole-school approach and holistic approaches have been found to be the most successful approaches to date, only marginal results have been demonstrated (Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004). It appears that for anti-bullying interventions to be successful, there needs to be a combination of a well integrated design based on theory and previous research, a program that includes all aspects of prevention (i.e. student level, peer level, parent level, and staff level impacts), appropriate instrumentation to provide accurate assessments of intervention effects, and systematic implementation of the intervention as part of the school curriculum.

This paper aims to introduce a new anti-bullying program for primary schools which is based on evidence in research and theory. This program is called *Beyond Bullying in Primary Schools*, which is based on the *Beyond Bullying in Secondary Schools Program* developed by the Centre for Educational Research which was shown empirically to be one of the few high school interventions in the world to actually reduce bullying (Parada, 2006). This paper is designed to present the theoretical underpinning of the program and introduce the ways in which an interplay between theory, practice, and research makes it possible for a holistic approach to go beyond bullying in our schools.

### **What Leads a Student to Bully Others?**

Not only do many aspects of human life lead someone to bully, these aspects are interconnected in such a way that no one single cause of bullying can be found. It is often an interaction of multiple risk factors (or protective factors) which lead (or protect) someone from bullying others or being bullied. Orpinas and Horne (2006) offer two important considerations when exploring the causes of behaviour. They suggest:

- Causes are not causes in themselves, but rather risk factors (or protective factors for not being involved). No single identified cause will lead a student to bully. Rather, there may be a higher chance that a student will be involved in the presence of that so called 'risk factor'; and
- One risk factor alone may influence a person to be involved. However, it is the accumulation of various 'risk factors' that are stronger predictors to outcome behaviours.

Some factors may play a greater role than others and these may influence individuals differently. For example, students may place a greater emphasis on their peer group. In a group which is high on bullying others, these in-group members may be influenced by their peers more than they would be by their family members. However, if a student perceives the values of their family to be more important than the values of their peers, they will not be as influenced by peer group pressure to bully. In this way, although there is a risk factor for students to bully because of the influence of their peers, if they hold a stronger value system against bullying, which is reinforced by their parents, this may prevent them from taking on the bullying behaviour exhibited by their peers. From a social perspective, the factors which may lead a student to bully include:

- The school climate;
- The home environment;
- Peer group influence; and
- Individual characteristics.

These factors may influence both the bully and the bullied and should be attended to in a holistic anti-bullying program. Each factor is described below.

### ***The School Climate***

Schools are created as socialising and educating institutions which are based on hierarchical relations (Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). Within the school environment, Roland and Galloway (2002) stress that it is the work of classroom management and social structure together that contribute significantly to school bullying and that these issues need to be addressed clearly within a whole-school approach for anti-bullying intervention to be effective. In a study of 99 teachers and 2002 students they found that classroom management had a direct impact as well as an indirect impact via social structure on the prevalence of bullying. This important finding demonstrates the influential role of the teacher in the management of student social dynamics. The concept of a positive school climate underlies the theoretical framework for school responsibility. Interventions that draw on key concepts of the school and classroom environment as a factor for bullying focus on interventions that change the school climate.

### ***The Home Environment***

Like the school climate, the home environment may also foster authoritarian styles that contribute to bullying. For example, Connolly and O'Moore (2003) used the Family Relations Test and found that bullies tended to have more ambivalent perceptions of their relationship with family members whereas controls displayed positive relations with family members. In a study reflecting child and parental perceptions of family functioning and child-rearing practices, Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij, and Van Oost, (2002) found children who were classified as bullies perceived significantly less family cohesiveness, expressiveness, organisation, control, social orientation and personal relationship, and more conflict in the family than children classified as victims, bully/victims, and those not involved. A fundamental difficulty of any anti-bullying intervention, although particularly important for younger children, is gaining parental support and then transforming this support into parental involvement. While involvement can only be decided by the parent, the school does have influence on the probability of participation. If parents trust the school, they can trust that their involvement will make a difference in their child's life. Gaining support from parents requires positive school-parent and teacher-parent relations. Parents have the ability to effectively help manage their children control anti-social behaviours, help their children perceive bullying as inappropriate, help their children acquire positive peer interaction skills, and encourage their children to assist the school in addressing bullying (Craven & Parada, 2002). By working together with their children's teachers, there are better chances of minimizing undesirable behaviours.

### ***Peer Group Influence***

Peer group influence is particularly strong in the absence of adults. Atlas and Pepler (1998) suggest one of the reasons that bullying survives is due to incidents of bullying being removed from the eyes of adults. What allows bullying to thrive in secrecy is that students who bully others do not want to get into trouble, and students who are bullied by others do not want the bullying to worsen, which they often consider a likely outcome if they report bullying. Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, and Kaukiainen (1996) have suggested that participation in bullying behaviours involves a sense of enjoyment by the perpetrators and also by their peers. Bullying usually involves most peers in the class or peer group who are either actively involved or passively aware of the bullying process. Peers have the capacity to:

- Encourage the bully (actively or passively);

- Ignore the bullying incident;
- Help the target; or
- Fail to discourage the bullying behaviour.

This is evident in observational research by Atlas and Pepler (1998) who explored the prevalence of peer involvement in bullying. In a video based analysis, Atlas and Pepler monitored primary school students in classroom and playground settings, and found 85% of bullying incidents occurred with the involvement of peers. Bandura (1973) has explained that behaviour will be continued, mimicked, or modelled if reinforced, or if behaviour escapes punishment. Students who bully other students, or are involved in bullying incidents may believe this behaviour is acceptable. In support of this concept, Atlas and Pepler further found that bullying tended to be reinforced when it escaped punishment, when there were bystanders encouraging the act of bullying, or when the bystanders failed to discourage bullying behaviours. Bullies may continue bullying in an attempt to gain further reinforcement or non-punishment from their peers or adults. Hence previous research suggests that peer bystanders contribute to the dynamic of bullying by reinforcing the behaviour, failing to punish the perpetrator, and failing to protect the victim. One of the most important steps to preventing bullying is to empower students to become active positive bystanders. That is, to increase the capacity of students to cease reinforcing bullying behaviours, and to enhance their effort to stop the bullying by helping both the person bullying and the person being bullied.

### ***Individual Characteristics***

If bullying is positively reinforced by the peer group and perceived by individuals to improve their position in the social hierarchy of the school, categorisation then of oneself into a group that is of high status and exclusive is likely to enhance one's sense of popularity. When they bully, they may expect positive social outcomes, which may thus lead them to feel good about themselves and perceive themselves to be quite popular, increasing their self-concept and perception of themselves. In this way, some students may feel more comfortable organising their self-perceptions around their strength, power, and social status as opposed to socially accepted forms of performance, competence, and prosocial skills.

School bullying researchers are in agreement that attitudes may induce aggressive behaviour (McConville & Cornell, 2003; Nesdale & Scarlett, 2004). Andreou, Vlachou, and Didaskalou, (2005) suggest attitudes are related to bullying others and being bullied in that aggressive attitudes may activate aggressive behaviours via environmental cues which would normally not be ignited for children with non-aggressive attitudes. Activities which enhance students' understanding of what bullying is and debunk the myths about bullying can achieve impressive changes in attitude, and an increased removal from involvement or support of bullying.

For victims of bullying behaviour, individual characteristics are often believed to be the strongest risk factor. In order for bullying to occur, a target may be identified by the bully to be vulnerable (Sheras, 2002). It is important for us to understand why some children and not others become targeted more severely. In general, there are speculations that targets are in some way different to other students. Things such as wearing glasses, weighing more than their peers, coming from another country, or having a disability have been mentioned as some of the potential reasons for being bullied (Sheras, 2002). In essence, vulnerability refers to having less power in some form. For example being physically smaller, not having so many friends to back them up, being anxious about responding to verbal attacks, or having a low sense of self-worth all render the victim vulnerable. The person bullying will look for some indication that will allow them to know that they will win, that they will have power over that

person, and to show off that power in the peer group. Nevertheless, the concept of vulnerability should in no way condone the behaviour of the person bullying, nor should the victim be blamed for a bullying incident.

However, having a vulnerable side (or risk factor for being bullied) does not mean a student will be bullied. For example, a student who is small but has many friends will be less likely to be bullied. Students who have not got many friends but look like they can hold their own in a fight may also not be vulnerable to bullying. Building resiliency skills, increasing student's involvement as positive social bystanders, and increasing student's sense of self-worth are three key prevention methods all students can use to decrease risk factors to being bullied. Hence by effectively addressing these risk factors, intervention with a holistic approach are likely to result in positive effects on anti-bullying behaviours and attitudes.

### Theoretical Underpinning

The Beyond Bullying in Primary School (BB) program is developed with consideration of the various factors described above. Bullying is essentially a social phenomenon which develops through the complex interplay of risk and protective factors. Therefore, the BB program attempts to address each of these factors. Unfortunately no single factor will stop bullying. Interventions that seek to change one aspect of the developmental pattern of bullying (e.g., focus on individual intervention) fail to account for all types of students who bully, and can hardly create real change within the school environment. Table 1 highlights individual intervention techniques and the issues associated with concentrated efforts. Alone, these interventions are able to achieve only marginal results in preventing bullying. Together, they make a combined attempt to prevent bullying and integrate all members of the school community to be involved. To date, the most effective approaches to prevent bullying in schools have been whole-school approaches (Salmivalli, 2001). Whole-school approaches that have even one aspect of prevention missing (e.g., lack of parental support for young children), fail to deal with bullying comprehensively. Hence whole-school approaches should integrate all aspects of concentrated efforts, and go beyond purely preventing bullying. It is a comprehensive model that addresses all levels of various factors that will bring about real long-lasting effects.

**Table 1.** *Concentrated Efforts and How they Fail Alone*

<b>Concentrated Efforts</b>	<b>Why They are Important</b>	<b>Why They Fail Alone</b>
<b>School Prevention</b> Interventions run at the school level with policy implementation	Provide expectations of behaviour for all students and ways of managing behaviour which is universal for the school.	This enforces authority and fails to effectively prevent bullying within the peer group.
<b>Family Cohesiveness</b> Family focused interventions for parents	Family influence does not stop at students own behaviour, but in their ability to stop reinforcing antisocial behaviour amongst peers. Parental involvement is important for student behaviour and action, as well as providing their child with support.	Individually this blames parents for bullying yet takes no responsibility for the school and peer environment.
<b>Peer Participation</b> Peers involved in	Important for creating reinforcement change in students, where students are	Fails to effectively support students and makes students responsible for

preventing bullying	able to reinforce positive behaviours and stop reinforcing hurtful behaviours.	dealing with all issues of antisocial behaviour (including persistent behaviours).
<b>Individual Attention or Victim Focused</b> Focused intervention for bullies and victims	This is important for providing support to students who are persistently involved in bullying or being bullied. Counselling and referral can work well here.	Blames the victim and stereotypes students as involved. This singles out students and encourages peers to label them as bullies or victims. Labelling then creates a pattern of behaviour for that student which they cannot break.

### *An Ecological Model*

The focus of the BB program with a whole-school intervention approach is based in part on the influence of the school system on child behaviours, and offers specific ways to deal with these issues effectively within the school climate and classroom. In order to create a safer school environment, this intervention aims to educate teachers on the warning signs, what bullying is, what causes bullying, the consequences of bullying, and how schools can appropriately manage these behaviours within their classroom as well as in the playground.

The BB program however does not stop at the school level. Students become responsible for their own behaviour, parents are advised to support their children and encourage them to prevent bullying, and the community is also invited to take part to help raise awareness. At the school level, in order to actively prevent bullying within schools the underlying mechanisms that drive bullying must be understood. The implementation of the BB whole-school approach is therefore based on an ecological model that employs a whole-school approach.

An ecological model (see Orpinas & Horne, 2006) is a comprehensive model that takes all levels of influence into account on a student's behaviour. Every level is expected to have some influence on student behaviour (refer to Figure 1) although the magnitude of effects may vary among different levels. It is also important to note that lower levels in the model do not necessarily have smaller effects. In reality lower levels in the model can have relatively greater influences. For example, students can be introduced to more educated decisions such that their decisions and attitudes can have a huge impact on their own behaviours. The level of influence cannot be underestimated in terms of the degree of potential change in students.



**Figure 1.** Intervention levels of impact

### ***Keys to Success: Theory-based Implementation***

The key factors to a successful and sustainable whole-school BB program rests upon the link between theory and program implementation. Hence the BB program has the following characteristics that are consistent with the ecological model described above:

- The use of **community** resources and the creation and implementation of an anti-bullying policy;
- A **school** climate which fosters support, empowerment, and the promotion and reinforcement of pro-social behaviours, positive self-concepts, positive peer relationships, and zero reinforcement and tolerance of bullying behaviours;
- Proactive, vigilant, and committed **teachers** that address all bullying issues seriously within the classroom, school, and playground; actively manage student behaviour, and simultaneously reinforce prosocial behaviours;
- Encouragement of **parental** support of students and the wider school community, with an aim towards parental participation; and
- **Student** education, empowerment, and action to have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be committed to positively address and prevent bullying;

### **Successful Implementation**

Guided by the theoretical framework and operational model, the Beyond Bullying program takes five key steps to implement.

#### ***Step 1: Making Plans***

The first stage sets the pace for the intervention. This begins with teachers making a commitment to decrease bullying and implement the BB intervention actively within their school. This involves collaboration between teachers and researchers from the university. By making full use of the expertise from the community and academics, plans for implementation and materials for teaching and learning activities are all underpinned by theory and evidence-based to ensure success. Data are collected and analysed for each school before the

intervention to ascertain the nature of bullying within each school to inform school policy development. The interplay between practice and research has provided the teachers with clear guidelines to follow. A strong sense of ownership was also established by asking teachers to provide input to the curriculum design. Teachers attended a one-day in-service in which they provided feedback regarding activities to be taught in class, the scope and sequence of program delivery, and feedback regarding supplementary materials such as brochures which would be sent to parents and read with students and posters in the classroom.

### ***Step 2: School Policy Development***

A school policy was developed. School behaviour management plans were revised and amended according to new school anti-bullying policy, as well as any specific school results about bullying. The new school bully policy was formally integrated into classroom activities and launched around the school (with information distributed to parents about the policy via school newsletters, etc).

### ***Step 3: Intervention Implementation***

The intervention was implemented and students completed activities over an 8-week period. A parent information evening was held. A parent brochure and a parent-child booklet about bullying were distributed. Teachers actively implemented the school's policy in relation to behaviour management, reinforcing positive self-concept and pro-social behaviour. Students also completed 8 weeks worth of activities in the classroom accompanied by a new and animated *Beyond Bullying* DVD, activity cards and activity book. Teachers were provided with all the necessary materials and audio-visual aids including a teacher's manual with all necessary details. Teachers also continued their education of how to manage student behaviour with in-service programs offered to schools.

### ***Step 4: Sustaining***

Schools continued to apply strategies to create a more consistent school ethos to decrease bullying by continuing to implement the school policy, and educating new staff, students, and parents of the school's anti-bullying policy and strategies. Data were collected to evaluate the long-term impact of the intervention.

### ***Step 5: Attaining and Sustaining Positive School Climate***

A more positive school climate with zero tolerance for bullying is achieved and sustained.

In sum, the *Beyond Bullying in Primary Schools* program is based on a whole-school approach to addressing bullying such that teachers, parents, and students all have vital roles in the implementation of the program (see Figure 2). A fundamental key to the program's success is the ongoing commitment of schools to vigilantly implement the policy and establish and maintain a highly visible positive school climate that promotes positive peer interactions and zero reinforcement and tolerance of bullying behaviours. An effective whole-school anti-bullying approach creates a school-wide anti-bullying policy and educates teachers, students, and parents on all aspects of addressing and preventing bullying.

## **The Interplay of Theory, Intervention, and Research**

The success of a large-scale innovative intervention program often relies on the interplay of theory, intervention, and research. Strong intervention effects can be found only if (a) the intervention is strong enough to make a difference, (b) that measurement of change is appropriate and accurate, and (c) the research design is strong enough to detect intervention effects. Hence the research component of the study should be consistent with the theory and address the various levels involved in the ecological model of implementation.

Consistent with the conceptual framework and the aims of the study, a multicohort-multioccasion experimental design (Marsh, Parada, Craven, & Finger, 2004; Ellis, Marsh &



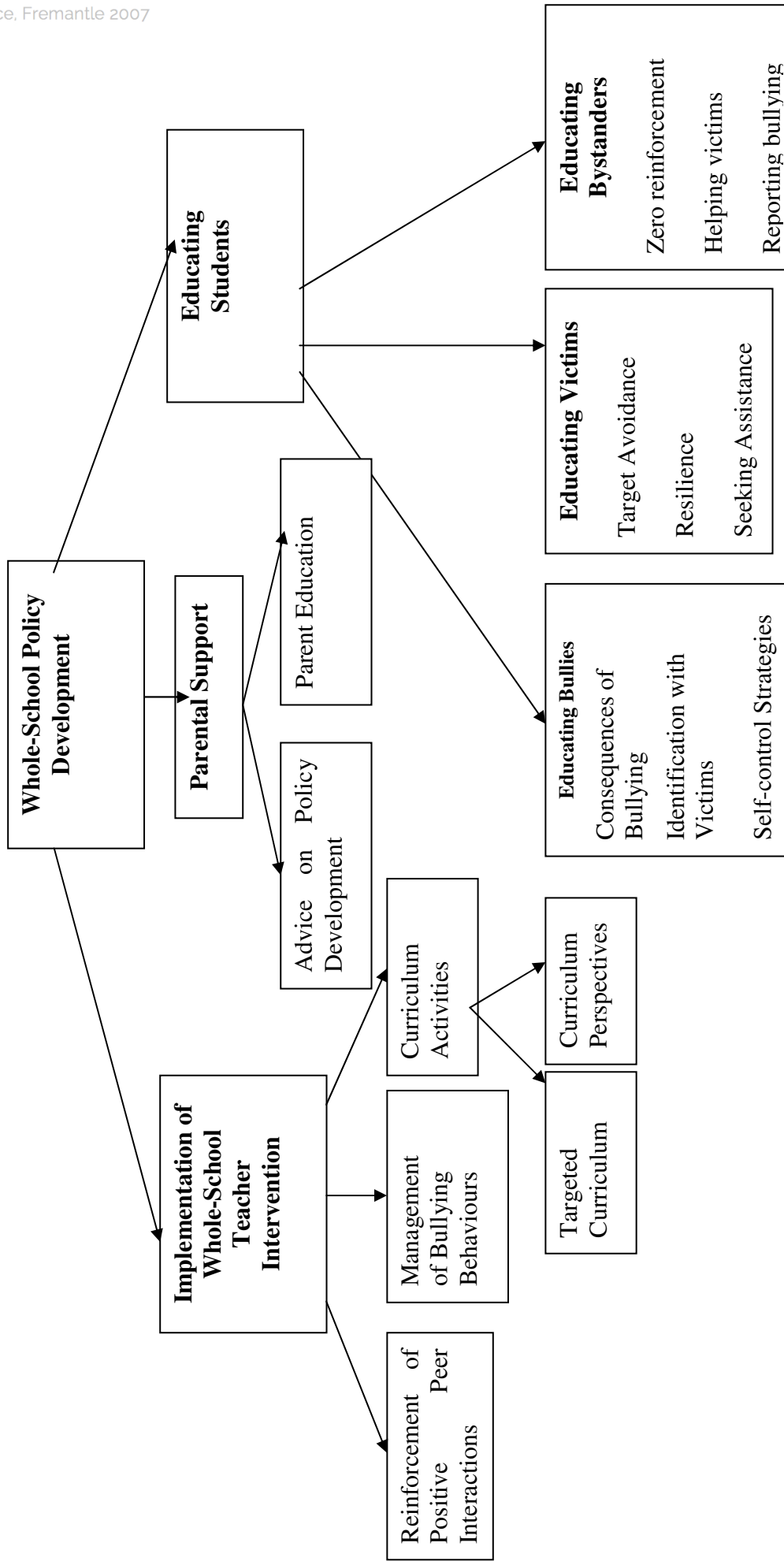
Craven, 2004; also see Guay, Marsh & Boivin, 2003; Marsh, Craven & Debus, 1998; Marsh, Martin & Hau, 2006) is currently being used to assess the impact of the BB primary program. A total of 32 classrooms in 8 experimental schools are involved. This research design allowed both cross-sectional and longitudinal comparisons. Baseline (pre-intervention) data provided a basis for rigorously evaluating psychometric properties of a range of new measures. These measures were adapted from the successfully implemented *Beyond Bullying in Secondary Schools* program. This suite of instruments measures pro-social behaviours, mental health, wellbeing, and school functioning. The research aims to evaluate the differential effects of the intervention on bullies, victims, and the general student population who establish the school ethos.

To evaluate the intervention effects, we will use structural equation models of multiwave-multivariable longitudinal data to test reciprocal effects models of causal ordering among bully variables and other outcome variables (see Marsh, et.al., 2004; also see Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2005). Intervention results based on the multicohort-multicassion design, because of the nature of the longitudinal design and the logic of the whole-school intervention, will be based on multilevel (hierarchical) models of growth over time of each student and to determine the extent to which the effects vary across the 6 schools and 32 classrooms (see Ellis, et. al., 2004). In essence, our purpose is to demonstrate how theory, instrumentation, and intervention should be intertwined for a strong intervention program that can be incorporated in the Australian primary school curriculum.

### Summary

Following the success of the *Beyond Bullying in Secondary Schools* program, the present BB program for primary schools was designed with strong theoretical underpinnings. The in progress research evaluating the impact of this program involves an interplay of theory, instrumentation, and intervention. In this paper the theoretical underpinnings of the BB intervention presented and the salient features of the intervention components presented.

Figure 2. The Beyond Bullying: Primary Programme



**Positive school climate and zero reinforcement and tolerance of bullying**

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