

Sabbatical Report

How Can Schools Effectively Reduce Bullying?

This report is provided in 3 parts and is a reflective examination of my own school and 4 others. My focus is on the types of responses to school bullying and which of these responses create the most effective long term changes in behaviour.

Part 1 of this report defines bullying and includes the relationship between bullying, violence, abuse and the use of technology. In Part 2, I look at how schools respond to this problem by asking them a series of questions. In Part 3, I offer a conclusion and some recommendations based on what I have seen.

Part 1

Overview and Defining Bullying

As a school principal I have a responsibility to my school community to provide a safe physical and emotional environment in which my students can grow and learn. Such an environment is not always easy to create and is impacted on by a number of factors including:

- Parental support
- The arrival of students from outside the school culture who see bullying as a reasonable way to act
- Staff experience and consistency
- School policies/vision/core values
- Resources
- Students' social skills
- Family environment
- Whether students' basic needs are being met

Some of these factors may be seen as outside the control of the school - namely family environment and possibly parents' attitude to their child's schooling.

It is important for schools to have a common understanding of the terms bullying, violence, and abuse. These definitions provide a good starting point on which schools can base their whole - school policies in relation to student safety from others.

Types of Bullying

Verbal - Name-calling, Teasing, Threatening

Name-calling and teasing are forms of verbal bullying.

When someone kicks or punches us it hurts us on the outside, while when someone teases us or calls us names, it hurts us on the inside. In many classrooms teasing and name-calling are the most common forms of bullying. Unfortunately, because they don't leave scratches or bruises and often happen when there are no adults around, they can go unnoticed by parents or teachers.

Threatening is another form of verbal bullying. When someone threatens someone else, they say they are going to do something hurtful, even though they may never do it. They may threaten that they are going to hurt someone physically, take their belongings or spread personal information or rumours about them.

Being threatened can be very frightening for children. It's the uncertainty that plays on their fear. The victims are always afraid the person is going to carry out their threats, but they often don't know when or where this may happen. They start each day worrying about something that may or may not happen.

Exclusion

Exclusion, or leaving someone out, is another form of bullying. This is when a person or group of people won't let someone play with them, join a group activity or will invite everyone to come to a party or take part in a game except for one person. This must be deliberate for it to be considered bullying.

All children (and adults) like to fit in, have friends and feel accepted. When we exclude someone we make them feel unwanted and alone.

Physical

Some students not only tease others or exclude others, they can also be physically abusive. Kicking, punching, pinching or pushing are all forms of physical bullying. It is never okay to hurt someone physically, even if they have hurt you.

Being physically bullied is incredibly scary for a victim and puts them at great risk. Many children have been seriously injured by physical bullying. Often, the students doing this end up hurting victims more than they mean to.

Cyber-bullying

Cyber-bullying is bullying that takes place on the internet or with cell phones. It can take the form of many of the above forms of bullying. e.g. name-calling or

teasing, exclusion or threatening. The only difference is instead of happening face-to-face, it takes place on-line via websites, chat-rooms or text-messaging. The cyber-bully may send the victim threatening emails, take pictures or videos of them and post them on-line, (Facebook or Myspace) or say hurtful things about the victim in a chat-room.

While all forms of bullying are very hurtful and embarrassing for the victim, cyber-bullying can be especially painful because it can reach such a high number of people quickly and with little effort. Once something is put on a website or in a chat-room it becomes public. This means that anyone can see it, anywhere in the world.

Students who bully on-line will often be more extreme in their comments than they would be face-to-face, because they can't see the victim. Unfortunately this ability to "hide" from the victim has meant that many students, who would never bully someone in person, have started bullying on-line.

The effects of cyber-bullying are devastating and destructive. There have been many examples of students taking their own lives as a result of this kind of bullying.

Part 2

Focus of Research

For the purposes of this report I am focusing on bullying, while recognising that this can include other definitions of violence. Not all forms of aggression are acts of bullying, however they all need to be dealt with because of the possibility of harm to a child.

As a principal I am obviously keen to create a safe school environment and this requires all members of my school community to take ownership of this. By whole school, I am referring to my entire teaching staff, support staff, students, board of trustees, parents and caregivers, maintenance staff and in fact anybody who visits or plays any part in the life of the school.

I believe it is important that bullying is viewed as a whole school issue, as it helps shape the values which lead to behaviours across the entire school. Involvement of the wider school community means a more effective whole school policy and hopefully a greater reduction in bullying behaviours. By having the school community on board, it means a greater commitment by everybody to not only acknowledge that there can be a problem, but to also allow a wider range of whole school solutions.

A large component of this approach is the modelling that is carried out between;

- teachers and other teachers
- teachers and students

- students and other students
- teachers and parents
- students and parents
- parent and parents

The following models of approaches to bullying have been observed in my visits to 4 schools. One of these schools was in London and this school won an award for the way they handled bullying.

Research Questions

These were intended as triggers for further discussion, but each school was asked the same questions. The questions were:

1. How do you identify bullies at your school?
2. What do you do to help the bully?
3. What do you do to help the victim?
4. Do you know how effective your interventions have been? If so how?
5. Is there anything else you think I would benefit from knowing about your school on this topic? This could include any specific things you do to reduce the incidence of bullying at your school.

Response Analysis

- 1) How do you identify bullies at your school?

While there were a range of responses across the research schools, one of the recurring themes that emerged was involvement of both staff and students in the process. Responses below indicate schools got their information from a range of school sources:

Whanau meetings are held weekly. This is so everyone in the school is fully informed about who the children are at risk.

Panui - whole staff meeting every Friday - children of concern are identified.

Children encourage children to let an adult know if they are being bullied. We think it is vital that we have a climate where students think it is acceptable to tell if someone is being hurt. This can be either the victim or someone who has observed someone being a victim.

More recently we have peer mediators in the playground. This seems to have made a significant difference in determining who the bullies are in the school.

An important part of the identification process would appear to be the follow up - and this is done as swiftly as possible:

The principal receives a copy of the minutes and follows up with individual children. I like to do this personally. Bullying is a serious matter and needs to be dealt with at the highest level.

Children of concern are identified and I follow up with the individuals.

This is followed up immediately, either by me or the classroom teacher.

In another response a principal identifies potential bullies even earlier. This happens during the enrolment process:

I also try to meet with every new parent enrolling their child and ask specifically if there are any behaviour issues I need to be aware of. This is to get on top of things early. If I get a feeling that the child might have some issues, I speak to them personally about how this is a fresh start and that they need to take this opportunity. I keep an eye on him or her, having the odd chat to see how things are going for them. I find it makes a real difference, showing them that you have an interest in them.

The importance of identification within a school environment is critical to success.

In another school involved in my research, an even greater emphasis was placed on the 'culture of the school':

Because we use Choice Theory, all the children know that bullying will not help you get what you want. Every child knows intimidation is not used in this school. We promote a climate where it is cool to tell.

2) What do you do to help the bully?

This question highlighted a range of strategies and conditions for the identified bully. Most schools recognised the importance of 'helping' the bully as opposed to just punishment. There was a sense that the bully is given the opportunity to be heard and if necessary may be involved in a two way discussion as shown by the comments below:

Children involved in incidents and who have been blamed for it, are treated fairly. They are given the opportunity to share their opinions about what has happened. Unless you do this you run the risk of alienating them. Once that happens, you have lost any chance to change them.

In another response the bully is encouraged to actively reflect on their behaviour:

For most incidents, I sit and discuss with the child what happened and what they could have done better, or what they could do to prevent what has happened.

Bullies were given opportunities to make changes within a fair and just environment:

Consistent and fair consequences are really important. Often bullies feel like they are the victim, or are being victimised by staff, so it's important that they are given a fair hearing. It is my experience that parents often think their bullying child is the one being bullied. Collection of facts in a fair and reasonable way is essential to earning the respect of these parents.

This is reinforced in the setting of acceptable behaviour through:

Clear boundaries and guidelines about what we expect in terms of behaviour.

As a principal, I try to make sure all my staff treat both bullies and victims with respect. To do this we need to be absolutely sure about the rules within the school and specifically what constitutes bullying.

Whole school approaches that supported the bully were identified, as were classroom programmes. These included:

- *Circle Time*
- *Personal and Social Health Education*
- *Anger Management*
- *The Learning Support Unit*
- *The Connecting Room (counselling room for those who are upset or who need time out or help to resolve issues)*

The severity of the bullying also saw parents and whanau involved, while one school removed the whole concept of punishment when stating:

There are no punishments or consequences. We want the student to help themselves by coming to the realisation that bullying does not make them feel better.

This particular school uses William Glasser's Choice Theory, which focuses on helping children to realise that personal rewards will be greater if they behave appropriately. By rewards we are talking about intrinsic (feeling good about yourself) as opposed to extrinsic (being given certificates etc for the behaviour).

3) What do you do to help the victim?

For the schools used in my research, the major emphasis was on safety first. This was usually followed up by listening to the victim and in some cases they were involved in meeting with the bully. Follow up of the victim's continued safety was also seen as an important part of the process:

I then touch base with them each day for a week or so to see if they are okay. When students are going through a rough patch they often break a number of rules in a short period of time.

One school saw the bully as needing to take responsibility for helping the victim. Other schools contacted parents immediately. Once again a whole school approach is evident in this response:

Telling is promoted within the school. The climate in the school is one where students must be encouraged to tell.

All of the schools were seen to be promoting a culture of trust, whereby when victims or witnesses of violence or bullying do speak up, they know they will be listened to. At the centre of this approach is the fact that teachers take seriously all incidents reported to them and respond appropriately.

Education about bullying was seen as an integral part of the response to bullying programme. For some schools this was done at a whole school and class level.

4) Do you know how effective your interventions have been? If so how?

Once again there was a range of responses as to the actual data collected. Some of the other methods used included:

- *Incidents recorded in an exercise book*
- *The connecting room book allows us to track how many students have been in there*
- *Teacher observations while on duty*
- *A teacher who checks the behaviour book, looks and reports any trends*
- *Data on in-school suspensions is kept and checked regularly*
- *We are required to report to our local borough once a year. This report must include the number of bullying incidents and how we have dealt with these. It also requires us to report on how effective we have been (English school).*

- *BOT meetings - minuted*

It was generally accepted that keeping tabs on bullying becomes part of the normal overview of whole school behaviour systems with teachers keeping anecdotal material through observations:

We haven't had a school fight in 2 years. That says something about what we are doing.

All of the schools had school wide anti -bullying policies that were reviewed as part of their self review process. However it was difficult to gauge if a specific programme was more effective than any other, because no schools kept data that compared one year to the next.

5). Is there anything else you think I would benefit from knowing about your school on this topic? This could include any specific things you do to reduce the incidents of bullying at your school.

One school was very upfront in appointing new staff by acknowledging:

At my school, staff know before they are appointed that this is a school that has students with demanding behaviour. If they don't consider they have strength in this area, then we make it plain they should consider another school.

One could argue they are being very honest about the nature of their student population and as a result of these comments ensure that they get teachers who know what they are coming in to.

Zero tolerance was mentioned, as was consistency in classroom management and teachers modelling positive behaviour. One school saw appropriate behaviour as being normalised through:

There are no rewards at our school. It is much more powerful if the rewards are intrinsic i.e. they come from within for the child.

Part 3

Summary

Bullying is a problem that all schools face. It is simply not realistic or honest for a school to say otherwise. What is important is how we go about reducing the number of events and what we do to help children who are bullies or being bullied.

Recent media releases have stated that New Zealand has a far greater problem than most other western countries. I'm not sure this is true. It may well be that children in New Zealand are more comfortable talking about the problem. It may also be that they are confusing bullying with day to day disagreements between

children. It is certainly not my observation in 30 years of teaching, that the level of bullying has increased.

I think there is a lot to be said for Williams Glasser's Choice Theory. In this he says that the behaviour of children (and adults) is reliant on whether or not they are having their basic needs met. He says that a child who misbehaves generally does so because they are lacking in one of their five basic needs. These needs are: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun. His answer to helping a bully would be to find out which need is not being met and ensure that it is.

One area that I have seen develop however, is the concept of "cyber bullying." While this is not generally a problem at my school, we certainly do see the effects of this in our dealings with children and parents. It's particularly difficult to do anything about because it's very easy to hide.

In my opinion the schools I visited are doing wonderfully well keeping the children in their care safe. This is not an easy task given the complexity of the issue and the difficulty of dealing with parents who can be very emotional about the issue. Parents of children who are being bullied can often want vengeance and parents of bullies are often in denial. In the face of this I think most schools do a fine job.

Recommendations

To finish I would like to offer recommendations for any person who may consider reading this report. The points below are only my opinions and may not work for everyone. I am more than happy to discuss any of these with anyone who may have an interest.

I have come to the conclusion that schools will effectively reduce the amount of bullying they have if they can do the following:

- model appropriate relationships at all levels . This goes for everyone at a school, including students, teachers, parents, support staff, school visitors etc. Students are quick to pick up that it is acceptable to use bullying to control others if they see adults doing this with each other, or with other students. An example of this is, when a teacher belittles a student on a daily basis you will often find that same student being belittled by the other children in the class. In short a school, where all relationships are based on respect, will be much more effective in this area.
- establish a climate where it is acceptable for students to tell if they are being bullied, or if someone they know is being bullied. When this happens it makes it very hard for the bully to hide. Many bullies rely on others keeping them from being caught. This gives them power. Take that away and they will stop.
- make every attempt to ensure consistency when dealing with bullies and victims. Bullies are far more likely to listen to teachers who give them a fair

hearing. They are also far more likely to behave if they think there will be fair and consistent consequences if they behave inappropriately. Victims also like to see that the person who has been repeatedly hurting them is being dealt with.

- clearly define in a school what bullying is. This needs to be conveyed to the students and to the parents. It is very easy for people to be confused in this area. Confusion leads to a lack of trust. The only way to do this is to spend time as a school community defining what a bully is and what the processes are for dealing with them. Policies in this area need to be worked through thoroughly with parents, students and teachers and be understood by all.
- get students to recognise that they will get more from life if they treat people with respect, than they will if they bully others. I think there is a place for rewards for students for behaving well, but I also acknowledge that the ultimate goal is to get children to behave because the rewards come from within. This provides them with lifelong skills and most importantly they are not reliant on others.
- keep both short and long term data. While this report was primarily concerned with bullying, it is sometimes difficult to remove bullying from other types of behaviour. The first and most obvious issue is that you can't say with any certainty if you are making a difference with the programmes that are being run if you don't have data to refer to. This problem is compounded more when schools are struggling with a high number of behaviour incidents. It can be difficult for them to pinpoint where the major problems are if they have a number of issues happening at once. Good data offers answers that can't be seen when people are under stress.
- keep people informed. Not just the parents of the victim, or the bully, but both. Schools that work with these parents and win them over will be more effective. You are not going to change the behaviour of a bully if the parent is at home telling the child the school is wrongly accusing them.

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