REFEREED ARTICLE

Middle Years Bullying: Theories and Solutions

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Abstract

Bullying in middle school can be understood through the lens of the evolutionary theory. This theory views bullying behaviours as aspects of a drive for power and status, dark facets of charisma and leadership. In this light, we seek to channel these natural instincts into more positive outlets, giving "bullies" – and all students – more and broader opportunities to hold power and status within the school that do not come at the expense of others; the Meaningful Roles intervention is part of this solution strategy.

Middle Years Bullying: Theories and Solutions

Bullying in the middle school years is a multifaceted problem that has existed historically over many cultural contexts. To address this problem today within a K-12 school – specifically in a school of approximately 180 students north of Thompson, Manitoba – the first step will be to find a definition of bullying. A research-backed explanation for the causes of bullying must be adopted, including an understanding of the motivations, both conscious and unconscious, for bullying behaviours. The intervention itself in bullying situations may also have adverse effects for the victim, as labeling occurs. Bullying can lead directly or indirectly to the death of the target; sometimes the bullied are straightforwardly urged to commit suicide, but more often bullying causes suicide indirectly through "feelings of powerlessness and helplessness" (Volk et al., 2016, p. 169); this powerlessness can also spread to the parents. Strategies in line with the evolutionary approach for dismantling bullying in the middle school years will be explored. Commonly used strategies that have been proven ineffective are zero tolerance and empathy training, and the debunking of these methods will lead into a discussion of evolutionary-based approaches that have proven effectiveness. Also, building resiliency in bullying victims will be investigated as part of the solution.

The first step in identifying anti-bullying strategies that work is to find a working definition of bullying. An effective definition must take into consideration the social forces at play, including "racism, ableism, sexism, and homophobia" (Meyer, 2014, p. 214), and must be based upon an understanding of how individuals and groups of humans vie for dominance, prehistorically, historically, and in modern times. Bullying behaviours are ways the dominant individual or group operates to achieve and preserve advantages in "reputation, reproduction . . . and social or material resources" (Farrell and Dane, 2019, p. 1). Farrell and Dane based their definition on studies by researchers Volk et al. (2012) and Volk et al. (2014). This cluster of studies viewed bullying as having an evolutionary basis, whereby bullying is identified as an adaptive behaviour (as opposed to maladaptive); effective bullying techniques would have enabled "the bullies" in prehistoric times to achieve and maintain dominance and survive in times of scarce resources. In other words, bullying is viewed an "adaptive social strategy" (Ellis et al., 2015, p. 12).

"Reputation" and "resources" (Volk et al., 2014, pp. 329, 330) are two motivations for bullying. "Reproduction" (Volk et al., 2014, p. 331) is another motivation for bullying: the dominant male demonstrates more favorable attributes than the dominated, which can make the male more attractive in heterosexual unions; this also holds true for the female bully to a lesser extent. Similar power structures can likely be identified in competitions for homosexual partnerships; however, this is complicated by a level of stigma still associated with

homosexuality, especially in school-age students. It is important to reiterate that the bully may or may not be aware of his or her motivations.

The bullying process as it plays out in school usually results in the labeling of the bully and the victim (Farrell and Dane, 2019), and even this labeling itself is part of the negative socialization process; The labeling only increases the relative social distance between the bully and victim since being identified as a victim lowers social status even further. The fact that calling out the bullies can and does increase their status is part of this complicated social dilemma, and is connected to a feeling of powerlessness in the victims.

The feeling of powerlessness can also spread to the parents of the bullying victim. Parents of a bullied student expect that a meeting with the principal and teachers will have a positive effect on the situation, but the opposite usually occurs: things get even worse for the bullied child, and the relationship between the family and the school become even more fractured (Hein, 2014). An understanding of the evolutionary perspective can help to alleviate these feelings.

The evolutionary perspective on bullying is a theory that seems to explain the bullying within the specific case study school identified in the introduction. Adopting the evolutionary approach is problematic in the sense that it adds more weight to the argument that bullies are behaving in natural ways and that perhaps the bullied are partly to blame, that the bullied are "too sensitive" (Hein, 2014, p. 308), and that the bullies are simply jockeying for limited resources in the school setting (such as teacher attention). However, it seems only logical that the evolutionary perspective has merit, and that strategies that actually work in alleviating bullying situations can come from the adoption of this framework.

There are many strategies that help to alleviate bullying, and some that should hypothetically be effective in the middle years of a K-12 school, specifically a Canadian school north of Thompson, Manitoba. In Manitoba, zero tolerance initiatives to stamp out bullying have been used widely, and even if this strategy is not utilized, it is usually part of the conversation at the administrative level. (The zero tolerance strategy, as its name implies, usually means that the bully is identified and removed from the school for a period of time.) However, the zero tolerance approach has been proven ineffective (Ellis et al., 2015), because simply removing the bully from the school does not stop the social benefits of bullying from existing. Likewise, empathy training has some effect, but only in children in grade 7 and lower, and the effect is "modest," and "we cannot yet confidently rely on [empathy-based] anti-bullying programs for grades 8 and above" (Yeager et al., 2015). While increasing empathy, even to a small degree, can only be a good thing, this approach does not address the social benefits of bullying. Researchers have shown that lack of empathy is not really the problem in bullies anyway. "Callous empathy" is what exists in bullies; that is, they know what their victim is feeling and simply do not care because it does not outweigh the social benefits (Ellis et al., 2015, p. 3). Thus, while empathy training is not harmful, neither does it appear to be a useful component in an anti-bullying campaign.

The Meaningful Roles intervention is based on the evolutionary approach. It addresses the social benefits of bullying directly, by providing other avenues for all students in the school to receive social recognition, and gives opportunities for status enhancement. Jobs programs within the school are key: students take on positions such as homework monitor or captain. Another key element is the partnering of bullies in these roles with "highly competent students . . . who are neither bullies nor victims" (Ellis et al., 2015, p. 7) so that there is a positive role model for the bullies to follow. Perhaps the most crucial element is that "the identified bullies do not even know that they have been identified and targeted in the intervention" (Ellis et al., 2015, p. 7); publicly identifying the bullies and the bullied is not part of this intervention.

The roles assigned to students in the Meaningful Roles intervention must actually be meaningful. The jobs must be viewed as high-status jobs that are important to the functioning of the classroom and the school; otherwise, the intervention will be ineffective and likely even counterproductive (Ellis et al., 2015). One caveat to the Meaningful Roles approach is that

popular bullies tend to be resistant to the approach (Veenstra, 2017). Current stereotypes of bullies as oafish, socially inept thugs are incorrect (Marini & Volk, 2017, p. 104), and understanding that popular children can be bullies is part of the mindset shift that is necessary to effectively tackle the problem.

A second component to the Meaningful Roles intervention is the use of "praise notes" (Ellis et al., 2015, p. 6). These are notes written by peers to each other. They may be signed or unsigned, and they reinforce "prosocial" and "achievement-related behaviors" (Ellis et al., 2015, p. 6). The praise notes fit with the evolutionary approach because they offer more constructive ways for students to achieve and maintain social status. Peer praise notes were proven effective by Teerlink et al. (2017) when they used them to reduce negative behaviours, including bullying. Significantly, students in grades 4 to 6 were assigned roles of "peer praisers" (Teerlink et al., 2017, p. 124), which also fits well with the Meaningful Roles approach.

While there is strong support for the Meaningful Roles approach, it has also been proven to build resiliency in all students, particularly in students who have been identified as victims of bullying. (It is important to reiterate that it is counterproductive to identify and label the bullied publicly as such.) Moore and Woodcock (2017) investigated the resilience-based approach to bullying as an alternative to current anti-bullying strategies. They identified a cluster of characteristics associated with resiliency, including "hardiness, optimism, competence, self-esteem, social-skills, achievement, and absence of pathology in the face of adversity" (Moore & Woodcock, p. 69). (These characteristics were identified as protecting students against bullying, and they are also positive characteristics that can make life easier and more rewarding, so it seems unlikely that a program that fosters these traits could interfere with a Meaningful Roles agenda.) Students with higher levels of resilience felt less distressed with regards to bullying, students with higher levels of emotional reactivity exhibited more bullying behaviour as compared to peers, and younger students demonstrated higher levels of resilience as compared to older students. Part of resiliency training should provide students "meaningful opportunities to embrace hardship and then rise up and overcome" (Hinduja, n.d., A New Direction section, para. 1). Resiliency seems to complement the Meaningful Roles strategy, but no investigation into the pairing of these specific strategies has yet occurred, perhaps due to the newness of the Meaningful Roles approach.

In conclusion, the Meaningful Roles intervention offers strategies that may alleviate bullying in the northern Manitoba school of Leaf Rapids Education Centre. The next step will be to introduce the teachers and administration to the evolutionary approach to bullying, and to the Meaningful Roles intervention and the power of peer praise notes. Incidentally, some use of peer praise notes has already started in the fall of the 2019-2020 school year, so the gulf that the administration and staff need to traverse together may not be that great. When teachers and administration are unified and have a high degree of psychological ownership of an anti-bullying strategy, and when the principal is on board and leading the initiative, it makes sense that the chance of eradicating bullying will be greatly increased (Li et al., 2017, p. 18). This strategy that focuses on positive traits in both bullies and victims, and backed by a unified faculty, could be the solution.

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