REFEREED ARTICLE

Bullied at School: Improving the Odds for Our Children

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Abstract

For many students, bullying is a daily struggle. It can undermine their self-esteem and the ability to succeed academically and socially. Educators have an opportunity to reverse this situation and to support students' attainment of successful life outcomes through classroom and school interventions. Supporting student development of social and emotional skills, and establishing a collaborative support network of classroom teachers, school staff, families and community members can mitigate the effects of bullying, prevent further incidents from occurring, and create a supportive community of learners that can sustain personal growth of all students.

Schools, often espoused as institutions of learning, personal achievement, and self-discovery, for many students are places of adversity marred by a long shadow cast by bullying. The damaging effects of this behaviour have a lasting impact on its victims and perpetrators, undermining the development of individuals and entrenching social dissonance. Educators have developed and implemented strategies that mitigate the effects of bullying and foster a school climate that considerably reduces these behaviours.

Risk Factors

Personal characteristics can put many students at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of bullying, making it difficult for them to transcend these roles. Often, classrooms in the same school exhibit variability of bullying behaviours despite the school-wide initiatives. Mounting public pressure has ignited political will to address bullying in our schools directly. Governments around the world recognize the need to combat this type of behaviour and to protect the well-being of our children. Many Canadian and international jurisdictions have codified anti-bullying measures into law (Schott, 2014). Educators are on the front lines of this issue and are tasked with fostering social cohesion, and establishing an environment that nurtures student development and will prevent and successfully address bullying.

While definitions of bullying vary to some degree, there appears to be a consensus that bullying is a pronounced imbalance of power between the bully and the victim, and is used by the perpetrator to achieve personal goals (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Bullying can involve extreme violence or a more subtle play on the victim's emotions. Perpetrators physically, verbally, or emotionally target the victims by employing various means to hurt or to humiliate (Soares Salgado et al., 2020). Some researchers point to personal characteristics playing a central role in this behaviour, while others argue that it is primarily a result of social interactions (Schott, 2014). Likely, personal traits intertwine with social environments that allow bullying to occur. For some children, protective personal characteristics help to mitigate the effects of bullying. For others, vulnerabilities cause them to experience lasting damage and a continual loop of victimization. Consequently, it is necessary to determine what learning environment encourages positive interactions, strengthens relationships, and fosters pro-social behaviours and attitudes of the students.

The highest prevalence of bullying occurs in schools (Niejenhuis et al., 2020). In North America, 1/4 to 1/3 of all school-age children are bullied, with 15% of those experiencing cyberbullying (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017, p. 241). Up to 10% of students engage in bullying behaviour (Downes & Cefai, 2016, p. 22). These behaviours peak in junior high schools and subside by the end of high school (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Boys tend to engage in

physical bullying, while girls exhibit more emotional forms. The alarmingly high rates of bullying in schools underscore the urgency for educators to address this issue in order to provide a safe learning environment for students (Benn-Frenette, 2019).

Low empathy, a sense of entitlement, and a dislike of authority figures are common traits in bullies (Menesini and Salmivalli, 2017). These students can also be very perceptive of social cues and social opportunities (Menesini and Salmivalli, 2017). Bullying behaviour often affords them a rise in social status. Positive social reinforcement of this behaviour strengthens their motivation and perpetuates bullying. Although bullies may not be highly regarded by other students, they are often seen as being socially popular and "cool" by their peers (Menesini and Salmivalli, 2017, p. 245). The pursuit of social status and a lack of empathy allow bullies to victimize their peers without much regard for their actions or the consequences.

Victims of school bullying often encounter bullying in various aspects of their lives. Many of these children exhibit personality traits that can make them targets for bullying (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). These include not being able to fit in with their peer group, displaying insecurities, and acting submissive or timid. They may internalize social conflicts, often blaming themselves, and can view setbacks or mistakes as a reflection of their personality flaws. For some, supportive family and positive relationships with other children protect them from becoming victims of bullying (Downes & Cefai, 2016). Vulnerable children, such as those with special needs, immigrants, minority groups, and students who are socially isolated, are especially likely to be victimized (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Social isolation and a lack of confidence can predispose children to become victims of bullying which, in turn, can make them retreat further from their peer group and become increasingly insecure.

The effects of bullying on a child can be severe. Damaging psychological and physical consequences can last a lifetime, markedly increasing mental health problems and undermining academic, social, and economic attainment (Fischer & Bilz, 2019). Victims of bullying are also more likely to experience social isolation (Soares Salgado et al., 2020). These children can develop an increasingly negative self-view and become more prone to attributing conflicts and setbacks to personal shortcomings (Schott, 2014). The effects of bullying create a vicious cycle whereby bullying causes victims to develop deep-seated self-doubt that predisposes them to become more vulnerable to subsequent bullying (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017).

The perpetrators of bullying become more likely to exhibit future criminal behaviour and negative psychological effects. These students are more inclined to externalize the cause of interpersonal conflicts and, as a result, are less likely to engage in self-reflection which can undermine their attainment of personal goals (Niejenhuis et al., 2020). They often attribute conflicts and personal failures to external causes, neglecting to recognize aspects of social interactions that are within their control. This becomes disempowering and can limit the bullies' emotional growth and attainment of self-efficacy (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017).

Instances of bullying can vary significantly between classrooms in the same school. The classroom environment and teacher characteristics appear to be important determinants of bullying (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Hierarchical classrooms, with a small group of popular students, are much more likely to give rise to bullying behaviours. Student-teacher interactions and the classroom climate can foster social bonds, promote an appreciation of individual differences, and support students' exploration of their strengths, or they can encourage divisiveness and promote bullying (Schott, 2014).

The corrosive nature of bullying decays the social fabric of our schools and our communities. It undermines children's ability to feel safe, and it can limit their development and derail their ability to achieve self-efficacy (Schott, 2014). The frequency with which bullying occurs in schools requires educators to examine the key factors that produce and sustain bullying behaviours, such as personality traits of bullies and the victims, effects that bullying has on the victims and perpetrators, and to differentiate between classrooms that are successful at combating bullying and those that are not. Educators' ability to establish a pedagogy that

addresses these questions will not only frame the immediate classroom experiences of students but will impact their life outcomes.

Effective Interventions

The considerable repercussions of bullying on students' well-being and their future development necessitate a school environment that supports positive social interactions and relationship building among students. This can minimize the likelihood of bullying occurring and can protect children who might otherwise become victims, perpetrators, or observers of this behaviour (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). The most effective anti-bullying strategies unify classroom interventions with a comprehensive, long-term, school-wide program while establishing collaboration and ongoing communication with families and the school community (Downes & Carmel, 2016). While broad classroom or whole-school interventions are effective for most students, some require a more individualized approach. At each level, the success of the school-based anti-bullying strategies is predicated on the ability of educators to ascertain and skillfully implement interventions that are well-suited for the unique needs of their student population.

A wide variety of anti-bullying interventions have been developed and successfully implemented by educators (Low & Van Ryzin, 2014). An approach favouring rewards and punishments dominates school policies (Rigby, 2010). The perpetrators of bullying are punished to extinguish the undesirable behaviour and to send a clear message to students that these behaviours will not be tolerated. This approach is grounded in the work of I. Pavlov on classical conditioning, as well as B. F. Skinner and other behaviourist theorists (Rigby, 2010). Unfortunately, it has limited long-term success. This may be attributed to the lack of opportunities for the development of social skills for bullies and victims, and inadequate possibilities for perpetrators of bullying to internalize reason for exhibiting more positive behaviours. While effective at reducing bullying behaviours in the short-term, a more comprehensive strategy may be needed to create a lasting impact.

More recently, student-centered approaches have gained acceptance. They focus on the co-development of strategies with students, providing them ownership of this process, and encouraging their emotional and social development (Rigby, 2010). These methods include "mediation, restorative justice, support group, and Method of Shared Concern," as well as many others (Rigby, 2010, p. 69). While these strategies provide many opportunities for emotional growth, acquiring social skills, and developing intrinsic motivation for pro-social behaviours, they can have limited success with younger students who lack self-awareness. With them, a more teacher-directed approach is often more successful.

Student-centred bullying interventions aim to replace punitive, reactive strategies with proactive methods that directly involve students in their emotional and social development (Rigby, 2010). Successfully teaching genuine empathy and an appreciation for other people may require educators to forgo the traditional approach of punishing the offender and forcing compliance. A student who never had an opportunity to make authentic decisions about the school climate and to experience the benefits of a positive social environment is limited in the ability to grow emotionally.

Each of the abovementioned school-based strategies can foster a positive school climate and establish social norms that are supportive of the diversity in a school (Doumas & Midgett, 2019). To determine the most appropriate approach to use with students, educators need to understand their student population as well as the benefits and limitations of each intervention. Most often, a multi-layered strategy that combines numerous methods is required to address school bullying (Rigby, 2010).

Classroom strategies are often the most effective bullying interventions (Yoon & Bauman, 2014). When bullying occurs, it is critical for teachers to condemn it explicitly and to enforce appropriate consequences (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Students' perceptions of the teacher's

response to bullying significantly influence the likelihood of bullying occurring (Fischer & Bilz, 2019). How readily and successfully a teacher addresses bullying is an important determinant of students' views of the school climate and the likelihood of bullying and other disruptive and antisocial behaviours occurring (Yoon & Bauman, 2014).

Teachers can harness the support of their students by involving them in a collaborative development of anti-bullying strategies. Establishing an authentic positive environment and providing ownership of the classroom community to the students demonstrate the teacher's respect and value of students' opinions and their contributions to the group. It gives students an opportunity to build social bonds by learning and exhibiting positive social skills. This fosters social norms that are appreciative of the diversity in the classroom (Rigby, 2010). For students who may become victims of bullying, this allows them to feel in control of the situation and to foster much-needed social connections (Whitted & Dupper, 2005).

The opportunity to determine classroom norms creates an awareness and a buy-in of the behaviour expectations by the students (Schott, 2014). It is also important for teachers to educate students on specific strategies that prevent and address bullying, such as informing the teacher and "speaking up" when it is safe to do so (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017, p. 249). In classrooms where children support one another, bullying is far less likely to occur. This disincentivizes bullying, making it socially disadvantageous for the bully, eliminating the main motivating factor (Schott, 2014). For perpetrators, the value of being part of this social group can outweigh any desired outcomes that may have been achieved through bullying (Rigby, 2010). Coupled with school-wide strategies, a classroom-based approach can create a shift in the social environment of the student population.

An anonymous survey of the students about bullying provides a good starting point for school-wide anti-bullying initiatives. This information should be used to develop policies that address student concerns (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Policies that reflect school needs should target specific problem areas. For example, a policy may reinforce behaviours in "less structured settings" such as lunchrooms and the school playground (Nickerson, 2019, p. 20). Consistent implementation of these policies is necessary to achieve meaningful results through an ongoing collaboration between the administrators and staff (Nese et al., 2014).

When developing an anti-bullying approach, schools can draw on the combined experience of their educators and the multitude of research-based programs and methods that have been successfully implemented by teachers throughout the world. Numerous commercially available school-wide anti-bullying programs provide rich reference resources, including PBIS, Social-emotional Learning (casel.org), Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, KiVa, and Early Childhood Friendship Project (Morgan, 2012). These programs have been associated with a significant reduction in bullying behaviours and with a marked increase in student-reported perceptions of school safety (Nickerson, 2019).

To use the available resources and establish the necessary supports for students, schools should enlist families and the larger school community in the school anti-bullying initiatives (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Schools need to ensure that parents and community members can voice their concerns and are invited to participate in the ongoing work that is being done at the school level. Collaboration with parents not only provides a broader perspective on the bullying problem, but it offers an opportunity for parents to feel invested in the anti-bullying work undertaken by the school.

Enlisting families and other community members in school-based anti-bullying programs helps to establish inclusive social norms by communicating to students broad support for pro-social behaviours. Community support for school anti-bullying initiatives creates greater awareness and can provide long-term, sustainable development of a positive social climate (Rigby, 2010). Additionally, community involvement can enhance the individualized supports that are being provided for some students. For example, a conference involving students, parents, and educators from the school can show bullies the true impact of their actions and is

more likely to make them remorseful (Rigby, 2010). This can also help the victims to recognize the extensive support network that is available to them, mitigating feelings of social isolation.

For victims, bullies, or observers who require interventions beyond those offered by the broad, classroom-based, or school-wide programs, educators may need to provide one-on-one or small group guidance (Rigby, 2010). Working with a small group offers the advantage of sharing experiences and strategies, and can help students to feel supported by their peers. At times, teachers, counsellors, or other adults in the school may need to work with individual students on developing the necessary social and personal skills (Doumas & Midgett, 2019).

Work with a student may focus on having the child acknowledge their strengths and work through various bullying scenarios (Rigby, 2010). Collaboratively, student and educator would come up with strategies that they believe would be successful. Throughout this process, students are given ownership and are in control of its outcomes. For victims or potential victims of bullying, assertiveness training, teaching social skills, and providing leadership opportunities reduce the risk of victimization (Schott, 2014). Teaching students how not to react to provocations from bullies can also help them to extinguish bullying behaviours (Rigby, 2010). Learning to cultivate and maintain authentic friendships provides additional protection from bullying (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). For students who might engage in bullying, it is important to focus on building empathy, teaching them to resolve conflicts positively, and becoming more appreciative of individual differences (Nickerson, 2019).

An effective implementation of anti-bullying strategies hinges on educators' ability to implement interventions at the classroom, school, and community levels. The external resources that support student development must be developed in conjunction with the internal resources of the students. Establishing a clear roadmap for preventing and addressing bullying is paramount to creating a transformative shift in school culture, and ultimately produce an internalization of pro-social behaviours by students.

Conclusion

The prolific images of students humiliated online, beaten, teased, or tormented in other ways by their peers at school do not have to become a reality. School bullying is not an inevitability. Effective interventions can establish schools as places for growth, development, and discovery and provide children with a sense of belonging. Educators can successfully mitigate the effects of bullying and create an environment that nurtures the emotional and mental development of our students, producing a long-lasting impact on their quality of life.

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