REFEREED ARTICLE

Overcoming Barriers to Anti-Bullying Interventions

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Abstract

The negative effects of bullying in school are substantial, yet educators trying to intervene face significant barriers. Such obstacles include ineffective intervention techniques and perceptual bias that gets in the way of recognizing bullying. Promising ways to overcome these barriers include the following strategies: using intervention methods that focus of facilitating empathy and problem solving, implementing regular awareness raising activities for educators and students about how to recognize bullying and how to intervene, and employing a school-team approach that informs and supports educators in their anti-bullying efforts.

The need to intervene effectively when bullying occurs in school remains a pressing concern for teachers and counsellors, even after school divisions and governments around the globe have spent years targeting the bullying problem with increasing amounts of attention and resources (Benn-Frenette, 2019). Research into the effects of bullying has made clear that failure to intervene results in negative costs to students in terms of mental health and academic success (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). It may be surprising, however, to learn that there are significant barriers to successful anti-bullying interventions (Rigby, 2014). A closer examination of the negative effects of bullying and the obstacles that get in the way of anti-bullying efforts will make clear the frustrating situation educators find themselves in when trying to intervene; however, an examination of strategies aimed at overcoming these barriers will provide promising solutions.

Obstacles to Anti-Bullying Interventions

Obstacles to successful antibullying interventions include problematic intervention strategies (Rigby, 2014) and failure to recognize bullying when it is occurring (Anderson, 2011), but before we look more closely at these barriers it is important to realize what is at stake if interventions fail, by examining what research has established about the substantial negative effects to victims and bullies (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). For victims of physical or emotional bullying, the repercussions of the abuse can be serious during their years in school (Rigby, 2014). Victims are more likely than non-victims to experience problems with school attendance, academic performance, increased depression, and heightened anxiety (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). These effects can last well into adulthood; for example, the experience of running into former peers can send adults into a state of panic because of bullying experienced in their youth (Benn-Frenette, 2019). There is even some indication that bullying others puts the perpetrators at an elevated risk of experiencing mental illness and engaging in unlawful behaviour later in life (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Clearly, the repercussions of ineffective anti-bullying interventions are disturbing and the pressure on educational professionals to get things right is immense.

Unfortunately, evidence suggests that certain commonly used intervention methods, known as "authoritarian punitive strategies," are not the most successful (Wachs et al., 2019, pp. 645-646). These methods punish bullying behaviour in ways that range in severity, from scolding, warning, calling parents, or assigning detention all the way to suspending or expelling. While there is some short-term success associated with these methods because the fear of punishment temporarily curtails the bullying, these techniques lack supportive elements crucial to long-lasting success—such as encouraging empathy for the victim, and engaging bullies in finding solutions. Support for this conclusion is found in the results of a recent German study

that examined how students perceive the success of different anti-bullying interventions (Wachs et al., 2019). The researchers analysed data from questionnaires completed by 1,996 teenaged students, and the results indicated that students also view punitive anti-bullying measures as having less long-term success than more supportive techniques. Indeed, a convincing case can be made that a major barrier to intervention success involves educators choosing strategies that are commonly accepted but not the most effective.

Another significant obstacle to reducing bullying through intervention presents itself when educators fail to recognize bullying when it occurs (Anderson, 2011). Without recognition, there is no hope of successful intervention. A study from 2000 was met with surprise when it reported that interventions by teachers occurred in just 14% of bullying incidents in the classroom (Craig et al., 2000, as cited in Anderson, 2011, p. 120). Subsequent research has reinforced this troubling finding and confirmed that there is still an awareness gap among educational professionals about the level of bullying in their schools (Anderson, 2011). For example, in a more recent study 30% of all student-described bullying instances were said to have occurred in the presence of teachers who did not seem to notice, and one-sixth of all student-described cases involved teachers noticing the behaviour but not intervening (Wachs et al., 2019, pp. 658-659). This lack of recognition and action on the part of educators—the majority of whom are well intentioned—may be rooted in personal childhood experiences that have coloured their perspectives and have led to different ideas about what constitutes bullying and what requires intervention (Anderson, 2011). Whatever the reason for a teacher's perceived indifference, a lack of concern can be interpreted as approving of the bullying, which can ultimately encourage the harmful behaviour and discourage victims from seeking help (Wachs et al., 2019). Moreover, if a teacher seems uninterested in stepping in to help, student bystanders are also deterred from intervening (Ploeg et al., 2017). Because of barriers posed by this perceptual bias (Anderson, 2011), and ineffective intervention strategies (Rigby, 2014), educators find themselves in the frustrating position of wanting to change bullying behaviour, but lacking the proper tools and perspective to do so.

Overcoming Anti-Bullying Barriers

Fortunately, there is reason to hope that strategic and perceptual barriers may be overcome by using empathy-fostering intervention strategies and awareness-raising activities, but to achieve long-term success it is important to first develop school-based teams responsible for implementing and maintaining anti-bullying strategies (Anderson, 2011). These teams would support educators who are often struggling to find the time, motivation, knowledge, and techniques to consistently combat instances of bullying (Sainio et al., 2020). Anti-bullying programs have been found to work best when there is a team of at least three people who train and assist other staff in the strategies the school decides to use, and who are committed to raising awareness amongst all school staff, students, and parents about what bullying is and the anti-bullying intervention methods being used (Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012). Many teachers have shared concerns about feeling a lack of support from administration and colleagues and a lack of consistency in efforts to combat bullying (Cunningham et al., 2016). Indeed, a dedicated school team promises to resolve some of these concerns by regularly communicating with teachers, raising awareness of anti-bullying programing in the school, providing encouragement, and training staff in the use of effective strategies.

When deciding on effective anti-bullying intervention techniques that foster empathy and problem solving rather than prioritizing punishment, the "Restorative" model provides a good guidepost (Brewster-Mercury, 2019, para. 5). Currently, it is being widely used in schools in parts of Nova Scotia with very positive results. When a bullying situation occurs and those involved are viewed to be ready, bullies and victims participate in a calm discussion circle where educators make sure each participant is able to talk about what happened and listen to the views and feelings of the other participants. Through guided discussion, it is hoped that the

following results will be achieved: bullies will gain an understanding of how their victims feel, both victims and bullies will feel like they have been heard and are valued, both will start to develop a sense of connection to each other, and both will come up with a resolution to the situation. Some clarifications should be made regarding what happens before and after the circle discussion process. Although not specifically mentioned in the example from Nova Scotia, but in line with most serious anti-bullying efforts, educators will first need to meet individually with bullies and victims in order to determine what has happened, decide whether they are ready to meet, and explain the circle process (Garandeau et al., 2016). Similarly, any method that seeks to end bullying should require educators to continue to monitor the situation by meeting again with those involved to make sure the situation has been resolved (Victoria State Government, 2018). It should be noted that, even with the restorative approach, there still will be times when the discussion circle does not work or consequences such as suspensions may be used, but the primary focus of this method is on fostering communication, empathy, connection, and problem solving (Brewster-Mercury, 2019). By striving to follow these intervention guidelines, educators can avoid the problematic aspects of the more traditional punitive-based models.

Finally, it is time to focus on overcoming problems posed by perceptual bias that can lead teachers to overlook instances of bullying, and to examine how the regular use of awareness-raising activities provides a promising way to tackle these barriers (Anderson, 2011). One way of raising the awareness of teachers involves regularly incorporating into staff meetings short activities designed to challenge long-held assumptions about what constitutes bullying and how it can be stopped. Sample activities include discussing troublesome myths such as the following: being bullied helps children become strong and independent adults; victims will not be bullied once they develop better interpersonal skills; and, when compared to physical forms of bullying, social and relational forms are not anything to worry about. Staff would be encouraged to reflect on whether they agree with each statement and to discuss their reasons. Ultimately, it is hoped that a light will be shone on these unjustified beliefs and it will become more difficult for staff to let such biases lead them to overlook bullying (Anderson, 2011). Moreover, it is hoped that those coordinating the activity will gain insight into areas where more staff education is needed so that they can plan better for future awareness-raising activities.

At the same time as awareness-raising initiatives are used to help school staff overcome biased perspectives, students also should participate in awareness-raising activities in order to learn more about bullying and appropriate bystander behaviour, so that they too can help respond to cases of bullying that educators inevitably may miss (Salmivalli, 2014). To this end, educators need to set a clear anti-bullying tone in the classroom and make sure they also engage students in discussions about what constitutes bullying, why it needs to stop, and the positive role that bystanders can play when bullying occurs. Initially, students may feel that it is fine for them to stand by silently observing as bullying takes place; however, they need to be made aware that not expressing disapproval when witnessing bullying can be interpreted by the bully as approval, and ultimately reinforce the bully's behaviour. Because bullies seek the approval of their classmates, student bystanders clearly have the power to make a change by speaking up and supporting the victim (Salmivalli, 2014). Some examples of teacher-guided classroom activities that can empower students to speak up include brainstorming tasks in which students think of positive things they can do when they witness bullying, and role-playing activities in which students act out bullying situations and the best ways to respond. Clearly, there is much work for educators to do in order to encourage effective bystander behaviour. While it is true that curriculum demands and the day-to-day stresses of teaching may leave teachers feeling overwhelmed when it comes to anti-bullying initiatives (Cunningham et al., 2016), it is hoped that the previously discussed school team approach can provide much-needed support for teachers as they learn more effective anti-bullying intervention techniques, commit to challenge their own preconceived notions of what constitutes bullying, and seek to raise the awareness of their students.

Conclusion

Bullying is not on the decline, and there is still an urgent need for educators to step in and put an end to the behaviour when it happens at school (Ploeg et al., 2017). Failure on this front means that the bullying continues, effectively putting victims at higher risk for mental illness, diminished academic performance, and dwindling attendance (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Unfortunately, anti-bullying interventions are too often unsuccessful due to problems with intervention strategies (Wachs et al., 2019) and perceptual barriers (Anderson, 2011). However, there is reason to believe that these problems can be solved by establishing school teams that guide and encourage educators (Sainio et al., 2020) as they strive to use intervention strategies that encourage empathy and problem solving (Brewster-Mercury, 2019), engage in self-reflection about personal blind-spots that may prevent them from recognizing bullying (Anderson, 2011), and seek to empower students to speak up and support victims (Salmivalli, 2014). Hopefully, with the right tools, mindset, and support, educators can overcome barriers to successful anti-bullying interventions.

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