

The Bullying Culture in High Schools

Dorothy Lenthall (dotl@iprimus.com.au)
Seton Catholic College, Western Australia 6156

Abstract

In response to evidence that bullying in schools persists in the presence of bystanders, this study sought to add to the existing knowledge about its reinforcing effects. The objectives of the study were to investigate non-intervention in bullying incidents by Year 8 high school students. The research was a multi-dimensional investigation of the emotional, cognitive and behavioural factors from the bystander's perspective. In-depth and group interviews, participant observation, case studies and the input of a focus group of teachers formed the data collection. Students in Year 8 were chosen because this age group experiences the onset of adolescence where difficulties can readily arise, making them the most susceptible to bullying. (Pellegrini et al, 1999). Some of the students arrived at high school quite well educated about bullying, but what they *said* they would do in bullying situations did not translate into their actual behaviour.

Introducing Year 8s to the New School Culture

The culture of the new school quickly establishes itself among the new, incoming Year 8 students. In their heightened state of anxiety, students will adhere to the norm more readily, and in an atmosphere of fear, they do not question or challenge the prevailing culture. Although most students said they would intervene in bullying incidents, very few actually took any action at all, even to report it anonymously. It became clear that the vast majority of school community members accepted aggressive behaviour unquestioningly, as if it were inevitable.

Taking Responsibility

The issue of bystander intervention has been under researched and only recently have schools focused on enlisting the involvement of bystanders to prevent bullying. Since Latane and Darley's (1970) well known research into the bystander effect, there has been little investigation into why people do not take action in aggressive incidents. This study sought to answer the question of why bystanders did not take responsibility to counter bullying in the school.

The Year 8 students receive information on the school's policy on bullying at their Induction Camp, which occurs within the first three weeks of

their first term. It is made very clear that there are a number of steps they could take towards reducing bullying, and that it is not necessarily expected that they intervene directly in bullying incidents. Possibilities are suggested such as speaking to any of the teachers, or members of the Pastoral Care team. The anonymous Anti-Bullying email system, with its icon on every student computer in the school is carefully explained.

In spite of this, the students resisted taking responsibility for intervening, claiming variously that it was not their job, that it was none of their business, that it would be stupid to because that would be asking for trouble, "and you could end up being a victim yourself". A major fear was being embarrassed at making a mistake and the two people fighting could be friends just mucking around.

Is That Bullying? Critical to the effectiveness of any anti-bullying policy is the clarification of behaviours that represent bullying. Many programmes define actual bullying behaviours but do not address the circumstances under which bullying may take place. This is a fundamental flaw in many otherwise excellent programmes. No amount of education will prompt students to take action if they do not define the behaviour as bullying in the first place.

Interviewees said they would not intervene in bullying for fear of making a mistake. That is, they did not want to defend a person if they had done something to deserve it. They perceived this as justice, albeit a little rough, and that the so called victim should be abandoned to receive whatever retribution s/he "deserved". Students did not view this as bullying, and avoided responsibility for stopping it if they did not know what had happened to start the fight. They erred on the side of inaction. Once again, the risk of being "wrong" and being rejected by the group overrode the desire to help.

The Importance of Staff Responses

In this school's culture, both staff and students normalized bullying as if it were innate behaviour. What was particularly disturbing were the views of some of the staff, who made such observations as, "it's been going on since the beginning of time – you're never going to change it", and "if you get involved, you only make it worse for the victim". While the latter reflects their recognition that adult intervention can indeed make things worse for the

victim, it also was evidence of their resistance to making any change. This staff had received some professional development training which outlined the benefits of the No Blame Approach (Maines and Robinson, 1992). In some despair, I realized that changing the acceptance of violence within this culture was not going to be easy if the staff were reluctant to embrace change.

One incident, however, provides evidence that aggressive behaviour does not have to be accepted. A male teacher at the school, "Charles", held this view. When I asked him to send a Year 8 boy to me who was being bullied in class. Charles became quite stern and said, "Not in *my* class, he isn't – no-one is," a statement I later found out to be true through the grateful reports of many a victim.

Teachers urgently need professional training to enlighten them to the importance of their role in countering bullying. Their responses to bullying were much more important than might be imagined. The teachers in this school were surprised at how sensitive the students were to their reactions to bullying.

Staff members were inadvertently teaching these new students that bullying was part of the culture, and that they were somehow deficient to not realize this. The meanings that students made of the teachers' inappropriate responses to reports of bullying were interesting. If a teacher gave even slightly disapproving verbal or nonverbal messages such as asking a question about what part the informant had played in the incident, students translated these into criticisms of them not being aware of the culture. Even very subtle responses such as a frown, or a slight pause before the teacher spoke were all translated by the students as disapproval of them for reporting aggressive behaviour. They quickly absorbed these messages, resolved never to report bullying again and so the violent culture was perpetuated.

Students were angry that staff did so little to counter bullying. Their view was that teachers did not care that they were being bullied, that they did not know what to do or that they had simply given up trying to prevent it. They drew these meanings from times when teachers took no notice of often quite violent behaviour. One boy was repeatedly subjected to obscene insults in a class. When he eventually defended himself by shouting at his antagonists, he was sent outside. Later, the teacher said she thought they were all friends because so much laughter surrounded the behaviour. In other instances, teachers were far too ready to accept bullies' claims that they were just mucking around.

The worst situation for students was when teachers *did* intervene, but took inappropriate action such as punishing the bully, which usually caused renewed and more forceful attacks from the bully and his/her supporters, as soon as the teacher's back was turned.

It is important to raise awareness of teachers regarding the effects of their acceptance of aggressive behaviours. At this school, staff members were shocked to realize that they were actually supporting bullying by their apparent complacency. In fact, staff members were not complacent, but bewildered by the intensity and frequency of bullying. Although they had received some information on how to deal with bullying, they did not perceive that there was the promotion and ongoing support from the administration that is essential to create a non violent culture. It is essential for teachers to stop *reacting* to bullying and violence and to become much more proactive and preventative in their approach.

Bystanders as the Controllers of Bullying Behaviour

The Code of Silence

The biggest protection for bullying was the code of silence that surrounds the behaviour. It had already been well known that bystanders do not intervene, or even report bullying because they fear being bullied themselves for doing so (Rigby, 1996). However, this study found that this was only one of their fears. The influence of the school culture, particularly the fear of being excluded from it, was the most important factor in determining their responses to bullying.

They were very afraid of being embarrassed if they mistook "mucking around" for bullying. Their fear was that they would be rejected for not "reading" the culture accurately. This, of course, reinforced the bullies to claim that they were "just mucking around" when accosted by teachers, or the occasional brave peer.

It is well accepted in many countries that being called a "dobber", as we call it in Australia, is a much-avoided label in schools around the world. However, if fear of being caught reporting bullying is the reason for non-intervention, then why would students not report bullying *anonymously*? This question revealed some unexpected information.

Interviewees did not report bullying because they did not want to take responsibility, maintaining that it was not their business, that it was the teachers' job to stop bullying. They said they did not care enough anyway and they categorised victims, saying that they *would* care enough to report bullying, but only if the victim were a friend or sibling. Others said that the victims might deserve it, although it was taken for granted that one protected one's friend or sibling, no matter what they had done to "deserve" it. Excitement, the need to belong to the popular group, a self-image of being tough and a negative attitude towards being a "goody-two-shoes" all were strong deterrents to taking action.

On Minding One's Own Business Bystanders claimed that they did not intervene because they feared being told to mind their own business. They maintained that it only became their business when the victim was a friend or sibling. The bully therefore enjoyed the protection afforded by a culture which upheld minding your own business as an expectation because this maintains the fear of being accused of "sticking your nose in" – a cardinal offence.

Recognising the protection of bullying that silence provides, some interviewees suggested the public exposure of bullying. This could be achieved, they said, by talking about it more in the school, at assemblies and House meetings.

Victims' Loyalty to the Bully Even the victims themselves maintain the silence through "loyalty" to the bully. As one Year 8 interviewee said, "The victim says it's (bullying) just mucking around to stay in with the crowd and the fear of being bullied themselves." One boy, victimized relentlessly by his peers, excused himself from class to see me to complain about his "mates" getting into trouble on his behalf. He wasn't even angry with them, maintaining a fierce loyalty for his antagonists. One wonders how much humiliation he would have endured before he would consider them non-mates.

A tragic example of this was a thirteen year old Japanese boy who was robbed by his group over time, of \$U.S.8,000, was kicked, punched and had his face pushed into a river when he tried to refuse them money. Eventually, he committed suicide, yet when his father had suspected bullying, he had presented a "close friends" façade and passed off the bullying as just horseplay.

It is very difficult to get victims to leave their group, even when there are other groups willing to befriend them, possibly because they believe that control is in the hands of powerful others (Mynard et al, 2000).

Being Tough Students felt that now they were in high school, they had to be tough, and deal with their own problems. Both boys and girls had the expectation that they were on their own and could not expect assistance from staff. This was more than simply a fear of their peers finding out that they had reported bullying. They had high self-expectations, involving their self-image as being independent and capable of managing difficult situations.

Bystanders as an Audience There are a number of motivating factors contributing to aggressive behaviour. The study found that the thrill of watching aggression also served to control the bullies, putting them under pressure to perform to please their "audience". When viewed from the bully's point of view, one has to question who is the victim these situations. One girl said she had

become the class clown, bullying every day to provide laughs for her classmates. She felt she had to keep up the act because that was what was expected of her. Her classmates even booed her one day, when, after being in considerable trouble, she deprived them of their entertainment and sat quietly in class. The tension this girl felt at the risk of being left out of the crowd was more than she could bear. She felt their rejection keenly and, wanting to get into their good books again, resumed bullying at lunch time with a vengeance. She called another girl names – "boong" (a derogatory, racist term for Aboriginals), "slut" and so on. Then she threw large, hard nuts from the eucalyptus trees at her, all the while being cheered on by a gathering crowd delighted bystanders.

This girl experienced inner tension because she admitted that she did not *really* want to hurt anyone but she felt obliged to maintain her class clown image as it seemed the only way to please her friends. Her conscience was the clear loser in this struggle as there was not much she would not do to become an admired part of the group again. She said she felt a lot better afterwards because she had now reclaimed her high status among her peers. Her peers also felt better because she had returned to her rightful place in the fold. Every one was happy.

Recognising the protection of bullying that silence provides, some interviewees suggested the public exposure of bullying. Their ideas were often confronting, perhaps reflecting a hidden anger for bullies. They included naming the bully and describing the offence in front of peers, or even the whole school. Less controversial proposals were discussions in various settings in the school, at assemblies and House meetings; involving students in the effort to reduce bullying; having students on duty wearing distinctive clothing during breaks and making bullies more accountable for the damage they cause.

Bystanders Inflammation Aggression

Bystanders often encourage violence and accelerate it so that minor incidents become serious. One interviewee, Aaron, said this:

People know what's right in their head, but it's like they've forgotten when it comes to one of those situations. They want to see the result.

Taking pleasure in the violent culture, the thrill of watching bullying is thus a strong deterrent to bystander intervention. I wrote in my field notes of a group of Year 9 boys circling a Year 8 boy, pushing, kicking and punching him and calling him unimaginably insulting names:

One of the Year 9 boys spotted Chris and nudged one of his friends, grinning. The other boy looked around and quickly

called the others' attention to the small Year 8 boy. This was obviously a source of some exciting entertainment, and they turned toward Chris with interest.

When his grandmother once picked him up, they jeered to Chris that she was fat and ugly. She subsequently could not understand why he chose to catch three buses home rather than take a lift with her. When he stood away from them at the bus stop, he was told off by an older student for standing in the wrong area. He could not win. This child, whose daily life was filled with fear, *still* chose silence over getting some help to stop them. The expectation that males should be completely independent and the fear of ridicule if he showed he needed help, made him feel reluctant to talk to anyone about being bullied. When we finally did intervene, the bullies gave their reason for picking on him as being that he was the only Year 8 student on the bus.

In some instances, the bully leads the bystanders, but even so, the bystanders play an enormous part in perpetuating and adding to aggressive behaviour. They give the bully power, against which the victim is rendered powerless. When bullies name-call, the recipients of their insults have to endure the taunts of the supportive bystanders, which serve to elevate the bullies to immense levels of power. No-one admits to having seen bullying and the whole group galvanizes towards the bully, protecting him or her against teachers who are trying to find out what is happening.

Gender Differences in Bullying Behaviour

Boys Bullying The idealised type of masculinity occupies a dominant position within schools (Hage, 1998), and gives rise to bullying of not only girls, but also other boys who do not fit the stereotype. These behaviours were the accepted constructs of masculinity in the school which placed the position of others in relation to the dominant male. For example, only very brave boys took part in drama because they were ridiculed. This dominant group determines the school culture and (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). This stereotypical masculinity is given a significance in the school beyond what the numbers of boys who practise it would suggest. They take over the playground and physically intimidate other students and some teachers. It presents a powerful icon and students must position themselves either with it or against it. It encapsulates many of the problems of hegemonic masculinity and schooling, creating a culture which is conducive to bullying (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Walker, (1988) found the same culture of masculinity prevailed in a high school in Sydney,

...a culture of youthful self-congratulatory 'Aussie' masculinity, which highlighted

standing up for oneself and one's mates, against authority or anything else; physical, especially sporting, prowess; and daring or exciting escapades. (p.3)

At the school, the use of homophobic terms, denoting "otherness" (Askew & Ross, 1988), was a way of controlling male behaviour by making male students eager to distance themselves from anyone being called a "faggot" or a "poof". To be associated with weakness, as these terms imply was something to be avoided by boys - and girls did not like to be thought of as "weak" either. Boys fear homophobia and this has been shown to greatly affect male behaviour (Plummer, 2001). These terms were paired with anything which placed them in opposition to the stereotype of masculinity - even being academic. Homophobia affected the boys at the school in that it made them conform to the prevailing stereotyped, "acceptable" male behaviour.

This ideology placed non-violent boys, who may be sensitive, creative and not physically strong in a difficult position, unable to share their counter-cultural values and fears with anyone. The need to be seen as "tough" was also part of the girls' culture. It was a need shared by both boys and girls at the school, but boys particularly avoided being thought of as afraid to fight physically. A Kids Help Line survey (2003) highlighted the pressure boys feel to conform to this stereotype. Boys between the ages of ten and fourteen were the least likely to talk about their feelings, usually because they were afraid of being teased or laughed at. Displaying any show of emotions positions boys as weak and feminine and inferior to the more highly valued dominant masculinity (Askew & Ross, 1988; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). In the survey, many of the boys expressed the wish to be able to freely talk about their feelings, as they thought girls do. They were of the opinion that such restrictions placed on masculine behaviour led to a build up of emotional pressure that often resulted in suicide.

Lillico (2001) predicts that until boys are able to express their masculinity in a variety of ways, other than just the macho display of male behaviour, boys will continue to be the major bullies. In this study, boys were found to have limited avenues of expressing their feelings. Common answers to the question of how they felt in when bullied were limited to "bad" or "not good". Even when pressed, they simply did not have the vocabulary to describe their emotions.

Mac An Ghaill (1994) draws attention to the longevity of the "macho culture" by citing Willis's 1977 study, which found the same masculine stereotype existed then. For example, the male students at that time considered mental activities to

be feminine, thus inferior. Prevailing interests were being tough and looking after your mates.

With alarming rates of domestic and street violence, male high-risk behaviour and suicide, it is time that teachers and whole school communities draw these constructs into their consciousness and work towards deconstructing the hegemonic masculinity and thus reducing the dominance of these students. Without addressing these institutionalised, aggressive attitudes, any attempts to introduce anti-bullying programmes would seem to be futile. Unless challenged, these behaviours marginalise anyone in the school community who does not fit this narrow, violent stereotype.

Girls' Bullying Girls' bullying has traditionally been minimalised because of the subtlety of the strategies of aggression girls use, and the tendency for staff to dismiss their aggression as "just girls being bitchy". Because girls are under pressure to always be nice, they have to disguise their aggression, making it relatively invisible and making the perpetrator harder to detect (Simmons, 2002). Nevertheless, its invisibility does not mean it is any less damaging. Simmons makes this clear in her description of the way girls' bullying works:

This is the world I want the reader to enter. It is where, beneath a chorus of voices, one girl glares at another, then smiles silently at her friend. The next day a ringleader passes around a secret petition asking girls to outline the reasons they hate the targeted girl. The day after that, the outcast sits silently next to the boys in class, head lowered, shoulders slumped forward. The damage is neat and quiet, the perpetrator and victim invisible. (p.4)

Girls engage in indirect forms of bullying behaviour to destroy reputations, or harm the self-esteem of victims (Besag, 1989). Girls manipulate relationships within the group to gain power, setting up situations to foster lack of trust, fear and insecurity (Gilligan et al, 1990; Besag 2002). Female interviewees reported that girls bullied by creating insecurity among the group of friends. They said it was often unclear who was in the group and who could be trusted. The heightened tension seemed to provide a challenge and was magnetic, attracting girls to the group. Girls reported struggles for power through rumours being spread to damage rivals' reputations, entrapment, secrets being told and promises broken. These invisible forms of bullying are extremely hard to detect. Additionally, when they are detected, the receivers of this emotional aggression often do not want any action taken because that would threaten their tenuous position within the group.

Girls have better social skills than boys at school, so these subtle strategies of aggression are usually the repertoire of girls in schools. However, when boys enter adulthood, they, too are expected to be

nice, so their aggression also needs to be disguised. As they acquire better social skills they also employ subtle, aggressive techniques (Bjorkvist et al, 1992)

A Lack of Empathy

Another reason for students not reporting bullying anonymously was that they simply did not care enough. Within the school's bullying culture, it was alright to be surrounded by verbal and physical aggression, as long as it was happening to someone else, and they could avoid it themselves. In-depth interviewing did reveal, however, that they did not like bullying. Students agreed that there was a lack of empathy, but thought that an empathic school culture could be achieved by teaching empathy, especially through role-plays.

Countering Bullying

Adults in a school community can achieve a great deal to counter bullying. However, the potential to make a real change lies with the students. Students respond more readily to the opinions of their peers. With this in mind, Salmivalli et al (1996) cite a role-play which requires five players – the bully, the victim, the defender, the reinforcer and the outsider. In the first role play, the players support the bully. Then the role-play is reversed and they support the victim. This role play is a powerful way to show the role of the bystanders in controlling what actually happens in the playground. The swing of power can just as easily be towards the victim, thus rejecting and controlling the bully's aggressive behaviour.

This exercise is conducted with Year 11 Peer Support Leaders, so that they can teach it to their Year 8 groups. The leaders found it very effective, as the power struggle is felt even in role-play. It illustrates well how power is given to people by bystanders.

Victim empowerment helps the victim to gain confidence, become independent and resist bullying. Some programmes teach the victims how to answer bullies to disarm and confuse them, thus reducing their power. This is an area where more research is urgently needed.

The No Blame Approach (Maines & Robinson, 1992) needs to be adopted by all staff members when dealing with bullying. Most students, given the opportunity to reflect on their aggression without blame, are remorseful.

Anti-bullying now need to go several steps further - past the obvious, into the minds of students, who are, after all, the experts - and address those more subtle factors that act as barriers to bystander intervention.

Critical to the creation of a non-violent, peaceful culture is the visible involvement of the whole

school community. The perception of students in this study was that they had no support from the principal, teachers, non-teaching staff and entire student body.

Information based anti-bullying policies will be ineffective unless students are motivated to intervene. It is crucial that programmes now address the emotional deterrents of fear, embarrassment, group affiliation, excitement and apathy. Future policies need to examine the culture of the school, which dictates the behavioural code for incoming Year 8 students.

Why We Should Bother

There are millions of children in schools suffering from the effects of bullying – the victims, bystanders and bullies. Children will take their experiences with them into adulthood and perpetuate them. Victims suffer from post-traumatic stress (Mynard et al, 2000), have reduced academic performance (Smith and Sharp, 1994) and many suffer long-term psychological and physiological distress (Janson, 2000).

The perception in communities may be that bullying is a *school* problem, but it is much more than this. School bullies grow up to be adult bullies, one in four male bullies can expect to have a criminal record by the age of thirty and is likely to have convictions for violent crime, be abusive to their wives and children and have children who bully (Eron et al, 1987). In other words, the bully suffers as well as the victim. Some bullies endure the pain of remorse:

Some guys think teasing makes them happy but in the end they're going to look back and say, 'What have I done?'

(Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2001, p.124). Boys who persistently bullied others in adolescence are more likely to be involved in anti-social behaviour and physical violence by their early twenties and they may pass their behaviour on to the next generation (Olweus, 1992). Aggressive fathers who bullied in school were more likely to have sons who are bullies at school (Farrington, 1993).

Bystanders experience stress when confronted with bullying. Clearly, schools are an excellent training ground for adult bullying behaviour and the acceptance of a violent culture as normal.

Our communities worldwide are suffering from domineering, aggressive and bullying behaviour and it is the task of schools to urgently address this problem. By putting their whole school community culture under the magnifying glass, committing to make changes and enlisting the free advice of world experts, schools *can* create cultures of peace, where students tap bullies on the shoulder and say, "Excuse me, we don't do bullying at our school".

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