Bullying: Perspectives on Research and Interventions

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Editor's Note
While reviewing various articles submitted for this issue I thought that there are experts on bullying who are probably not familiar with the Teaching and Learning journal but might be willing to contribute their viewpoint if they were invited to do so. With that premise in mind I contacted Dr. Debra Pepler of the LaMarsh Institute, York University and Dr. Ken Rigby of the University of South Australia. Both are highly respected contributors to the international literature about bullying in schools and communities. Both readily agreed to be part of an on-line interview process.

I posed several questions to Dr. Pepler and Dr. Rigby and invited them to respond to each in a manner that best highlights their research and personal perspectives.

What follows are the questions and responses as they were transcribed. The information they provided is a valuable resource for individuals interested in tackling problems often associated with various aspects of bullying in schools. Included are references to various articles written by the contributors to this manuscript.

Preamble:
It should be understood that not all youngsters bully and, if they do, they are often isolated incidents. Research shows that in most cases, bullying behaviour can be discouraged with appropriate intervention (Craig and Pepler 2000, Chodzinski and Burke 1998). There are however, a small percentage of students who perpetrate most of the bullying episodes. In fact, a variety of research reports suggest that between fifteen and thirty-five percent of students are bullied on a regular basis. According to some, because many bullying incidents are unreported, actual numbers may be much higher. Several studies presented at the American Psychological Association Conference (1999) suggest that as many as seventy to eighty percent of middle school students are involved one way or another in bullying incidents. A recent study by the Families at Work group (2002) reported that two-thirds of young people, approximately sixty-six percent, have been teased, dissed, pushed, shoved, intimidated or harassed in some way. Bullies perpetrate these types of mean-spirited, yet goal-oriented behaviours in order to create a power imbalance between two or more individuals thereby creating opportunity for exposing and exploiting the observed weakness of the victim.

Often bullies victimize the same individual or types of individuals because victim reaction often demonstrates to the bully a certain susceptibility to the intended behaviour and therefore, in a way, encourages the bully to believe that he or she will be successful over repeated attempts. It has been shown that peers may influence the repeat performance of bullying behaviour in that they may unwittingly validate the bully by either not intervening or, in some cases, inciting the bully to additional bullying behaviour incidents through individual and group affirmation.

Bullying behaviour crosses gender, age and ethnicity/cultural boundaries. The frequency of bullying behaviours are often different for boys than girls but that is not to say that boys and girls are less likely to bully in some form or another. Research suggests that all children will most likely encounter a bullying experience sometime during their maturing years. Unfortunately, some will be victimized more than others and some will suffer lifelong tragic consequences. It is with the work of colleagues like Dr. Pepler and Dr. Rigby that bullying behaviour will be understood more fully and, as a result, strategies to assist those who are victimized and those who bully continue to be developed, tested and implemented.

It is a pleasure to be able to introduce Dr. Pepler and Dr. Rigby to our readers in this unique format.

Chodzinski:
I should like to begin by commending both of you for your tremendous contribution to the literature and your influence on current school and community based intervention and prevention practices.

Please describe your current research focus and or project(s). What do you hope will be accomplished specifically in your country with respect to how issues and concerns related to bullying are addressed in the next couple of years?

Pepler:
With my colleagues, Dr. Wendy Craig and Dr. Jennifer Connolly, I am currently working on understanding bullying from a develop-
mental and systemic perspective. From a developmental perspective, we are concerned that children who learn how to acquire power through aggression on the playground may transfer these lessons to sexual harassment, date violence, spouse abuse, child abuse, and elder abuse. We are also interested in bullying from a systemic perspective, that is to examine how bullying unfolds in different relationship contexts and how the behaviours of others, such as teachers and peers, influence bullying. Our research with students in late elementary and high school has supported many of our concerns about bullying. For example, children who bully others are more likely to sexually harass their peers, engage in aggression with a romantic partner, and use substances compared to nonaggressive peers (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000; McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002; Pepler, Craig, Connolly, & Henderson, 2002). To understand bullying from a developmental perspective, we have conducted two longitudinal studies, from which we have just completed data collection. In one study, we started with students in Grades 5, 6, 7, and 8, and followed a subsample of them for seven years, through the end of high school. We have also conducted a three-year longitudinal study in high schools, following students starting in Grades 9, 10 and 11. In this study, we have been investigating the association among bullying, sexual harassment, dating aggression, and exposure to various forms of violent media.

With respect to what I hope will be accomplished in Canada, there is much to say. Again, working collaboratively with Dr. Wendy Craig and Dr. Shelley Hymel, we have received funding from the National Crime Prevention Centre to launch the Canadian Initiative for the Prevention of Bullying (CIPB). The funding is for the first three-year start up period, but we recognize that this is likely to be a 20-year process if it is possible. We are strongly committed to promoting an understanding of bullying and victimization, and the consequences for children and youth. From the foundation of our observational research, we recognize that the problems of bullying are systemic and, therefore, cannot be solved by focusing on individual children who are either aggressive and/or victimized. The change processes must be systemic, starting with adults who are responsible for children, extending to their peer groups, and all settings where children and youth congregate. We envision the changes required to address bullying as being similar to other major social changes that have swept across our country over the past several decades, such as: bans on smoking, reduced drinking and driving, and environmental awareness. We now understand that bullying is a relationship problem in which a person who has power uses that power aggressively to cause distress to another of less power. If we, in Canada, can help children and youth to develop positive power and leadership, we believe that we can provide them with a strong foundation for healthy relationships across the lifespan. To accomplish this goal, we will be working with non-governmental organizations, as well as some branches of government to build four pillars for change: Education and Awareness, Assessment, Intervention, and Policy.

Rigby:
My main focus is on bullying in schools, more recently on the effectiveness of programmes to reduce bullying, alternative explanations for bully/victim problems in schools and bystander behaviour among students. I hope that:

1. the problem will be more widely recognized,
2. that all schools have well-supported and appropriate anti-bullying policies, and
3. schools become familiar with a range of alternative and supplementary methods aimed at preventing as far as possible bullying from occurring and intervening effectively to stop bullying from continuing when it does occur.

Chodzinski:
History records that school related “bullying” is not a new problem. It has occurred and continues to occur within a variety of contexts and opportunities by individuals comprising a broad age range across both genders. New terms such as cyber bullying, group dissing and a variety of complex strategies perpetrated by groups of students designed to ostracize and marginalize certain types of individuals might be classified as new variations on traditional bullying behaviour. Why do you think there is increased emphasis or perhaps I should say “focus” on school and community bullying by researchers, educators, and government agencies over the past decade?

Rigby:
A number of factors seem responsible:

1. A general community growth in recognition of the unacceptability of the systematic abuse of power in interpersonal relations, especially the abuse of power by men over women and the subjugation of the interests of minority racial or ethnic groups to mainstream social groups.

2. The publicizing of the results of systematic research into
bullying, beginning with Olweus in Scandinavia in the 1980s, which has revealed the surprisingly high prevalence of bullying in schools, the harm bullying does to victims of peer victimization and the success of some interventions in reducing the level of bullying in some schools.

3. Public concern over disturbing events that have been attributed to bullying, especially some cases of suicide among victims and some cases of victimized children seeking violent revenge, as at Columbine.

4. The growing recognition that children who are extreme bullies at school are more likely than others as adults to behave anti-socially in the community - unless their habitual behaviour is changed by interventions in schools.

5. Legal actions being taken by parents against schools or Education Departments on the grounds that schools have not adequately protected their child from peer abuse or have not intervened appropriately.

Chodzinski:

Education about bullying and what can be done to address the problem should have high priority in any teacher-education programme. Unfortunately, this tends not to be the case at least in Australia and in the UK, where comparatively little is being done to educate or train teachers in this area.

Do you see a role for Faculties of Education in this regard?

Pepler:

I agree with you that bullying is by no means a new problem. I think that the increased focus on the CIPB, we hope to extend training opportunities to all of those working with children and youth: parents, recreation leaders, guide and scout leaders, sports coaches, camp counsellors, doctors, and many more. We understand bullying as a community problem, rather than a school problem; therefore, children need to be supported in all of the places where they come together and where bullying might occur.

Chodzinski:

Both of you have researched in depth the efficacy of a variety of school-based intervention and prevention programs. In your opinion, what works and what does not?

Rigby:

So far nothing has been shown to work in the sense of completely stopping all bullying in a school. The most substantial reduction, as reported by Olweus in the Bergen area of Norway (but not elsewhere in Norway) was approximately 50%. Other interventions have been less successful; some have had negligible success. The programs that have been applied have typically included:

1. Preventative strategies, for example, providing classroom instruction and activities designed to discourage bullying and also to help children to protect themselves, and

2. Interventive methods. Some of the interventions have emphasized the use of rules and non-physical sanctions; others have emphasized problem-solving approaches, such as mediation and the Method of Shared Concern.

Given the variety of things that are being done in implementing such programs it is difficult to point to a crucial element. Programs emphasizing different ap-
proaches have enjoyed similar levels of "modest" success. Generally, programs have been more successful in reducing the proportion of victims than the proportion of bullies. (Victims are more motivated to learn new ways of behaving!) Also, programs have generally been much more successful with younger than older students. One important factor influencing program effectiveness is the commitment of a school staff to implementing a program agreed upon by the school community.

Chodzinski:
More specifically, what should school principals, teachers and parents do "now" to intervene and prevent bullying in schools?

Rigby:
First, take steps to discover the nature and prevalence of bullying at one's school. This can be done best by using carefully developed anonymous questionnaires.

Second, acquire relevant resources in the form of books, articles, videos, and access to useful websites.

Third, discuss findings from the school survey and also what the resources suggest.

Fourth, develop a well-supported anti-bullying policy (involving students and parents).

Fifth, plan, design and implement lessons/activities that help students to appreciate the problem, acquire relevant social skills and motivate them to counter bullying when they see it.

Sixth, develop effective procedures for dealing with bully/victim incidents.

Pepler:
Dr. Rigby and I are in the advantageous position of having just completed editing, with Dr. Peter Smith, a forthcoming volume entitled, Bullying in Schools: How Successful Can Interventions Be? In this volume, contributors from fourteen countries have generously shared the highlights of successful outcomes, but have also provided rare glimpses of the challenges and disappointments in their well-crafted attempts to reduce problems of bullying among school children. The bottom line is that interventions can be effective in reducing bullying problems at school. Note that I said "reducing" rather than "eliminating" the problems, because in some ways bullying is a natural process that unfolds in children's groups and will always be with us to some extent. The answer to what interventions work and what do not work is complex. The solutions to bullying problems do not come in a box or on a video. They come from the understanding and moment-to-moment actions of caring adults and peers. It is important that school principals, teachers, parents and peers take notice of children's behaviours and interactions, find opportunities to speak to individual children, and intervene to support both the children who bully and those who are victimized. The solutions, however, need to extend well beyond the individual children who are involved in bullying or victimization. Our observational research has repeatedly confirmed that bullying is a peer group process (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig & Pepler, 1997; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). Therefore, it is essential to attend to the peer dynamics in children's groups and to organize social contexts, such as the classroom, to promote positive interactions and to discourage negative interactions among children. The effectiveness of interventions in schools appears to relate directly to the extent to which the principles and teachers are committed to addressing the problem.

Chodzinski:
The term "bullycide" has been coined by some to describe child and adolescent suicide that is directly linked to severe bullying behaviour. Has your research provided you with any insights into this tragic outcome? If so, please elaborate.

Rigby:
My work on the link between being repeatedly bullied at school and suicidal ideation (continually thinking about killing oneself) has convinced me that being severely bullied is a risk factor for actual suicide. Although suicide is generally mutiply determined, there seems little doubt that bullying has been a crucial factor in some children attempting suicide.

Chodzinski:
As a corollary to this question it appears that the severity of bullying incidents have led to some very tragic outcomes even death. Are these types of behaviours, for example, fighting, dangerous intimidation, shootings, group beatings, violent hazings, sport related violence, considered as bullying or should they be considered something else?

Rigby:
Bear in mind that "behaviors" do not define bullying. For example, "fighting" can be between people of equal strength and both parties may decide to fight it out. This is not bullying. Bullying always involves a power imbalance in a situation where one person or group (who are more powerful) wishes to hurt, intimidate or dominate the other in a way that is regarded as unjustifiable.

This last point about what is justified or morally acceptable is often crucial. The "shock and awe" program by a more power-
ful force directed at Iraq was deliberately intimidating. Whether it should be regarded as bullying depends upon whether you think it was justified.

Pepler:

Bullying is a problem of power and aggression. It is a problem that arises when one individual or group of individuals has power over another and uses that power aggressively. There are many “payoffs” to being a bully. Not only does it feel good to have power, but in natural peer group processes it is highly reinforced through peers’ attention and joining in. Without redirection, the children and youth who bully can establish this use of power and aggression as an interactional style, which may become increasingly coercive and aggressive. When you understand bullying as a relationship problem, it is easier to understand the untenable position of victimized children (Pepler, Craig, & O’Connell, 1998). The dynamic processes in bullying serve to increase the power of the child who bullies and to decrease the power of the child who is victimized within that relationship. Therefore, after hundreds of repeated bullying episodes, the bullying child has immense power and control over the victimized child. It is then virtually impossible for the victimized child to extract him or herself from this abusive relationship. Based on interviews with victimized children, I understand that they try to extricate themselves each time the bullying happens. They may try to ignore it, walk away, speak out, or laugh it off; however, none of these strategies has worked to end the problem because the victimized children lack the power to shift the balance and the dominance to stop the bullying. It is difficult to imagine the despair that children must feel after hundreds and hundreds of bullying episodes when they have not been able to find a way to escape the torment.

To answer the second part of your question, we consider all forms of aggression that are carried out from a position of power and directed to a vulnerable person, a form of bullying. Our developmental-systemic research helps us to understand that both the form and the context of bullying change with development. So young children may engage in bullying a classmate on the school playground, middle school children may sexually harass a peer, high school students may learn how to control a romantic partner through dating aggression, gang members may intimidate others through the power of the group, sports teams may try to inculcate new members through abusive hazings rituals, adults in the workplace may humiliate an employee to maintain their position of power and authority. All of these are forms of bullying and we would argue that all are unacceptable. The essential element in all of these forms of antisocial behaviour is the combination of power and aggression.

Chodzinski:

Some would argue that the actions of “chronic bullies” could in many ways be described in terms similar to the way in which certain acts of terrorism are described. The argument is that many of the same behaviours and intentions result in extreme and sometimes deadly outcomes. My first reaction was that the word terrorism is perhaps too strong to describe bullying however when I think of the many cases that come to mind where tragic and very severe outcomes have resulted I find the case for comparison quite compelling. What comments do you have on this perspective?

Should bullies be described as terrorists of a sort?

Rigby:

Although there is a point of similarity – terrorists and bullies wish to intimidate – the differences are very great and if not recognized can lead to muddled thinking and counter-productive action.

Terrorists see themselves as serving a cause greater than themselves – for example, getting the British out of Northern Ireland or removing western influence from Moslem-dominated countries. They are motivated by an ideology or politico-religious creed. Bullies in schools are not driven by a comparable ideology.

There is a great danger that in dwelling upon the bully as some kind of terrorist, we transfer the hatred and fear felt towards terrorists so as to apply to school bullies. In short, we may demonize the school bully, seeing him or her as the quintessence of evil for whom the only response is to destroy him or her. Now while there are certainly psychotic or sociopathic children who appear to most people as evil, the bulk of children who engage in bullying others are not and need to be addressed in another way. This does not mean that bullies should be treated kindly and excused. But it does mean that as far as possible their situations and motives should be understood – and each of them assisted towards adopting a more responsible and constructive approach towards others. This, of course may be difficult – but next to impossible if you begin by demonizing the child as some sort of terrorist.

Pepler:

I strongly believe that it is helpful to focus on the issues of power in relationships and how power can be used aggressively to cause dis-
tress to another. As with many problems that we face, there is a continuum of severity of the problem and a wide distribution in terms of involvement in the problem. I would guess that almost all of us, as children, tried out the experience of using our power aggressively with a vulnerable child. Most of us had the empathy and insight to recognize that this use of power is destructive, therefore, we turned to finding positive forms of leadership and power. At the far end of the distribution, there are very small numbers of children and adults who try to assert their power and obtain status through aggressive means and continue to use this strategy, because the benefits for them appear to outweigh the costs. At its foundation, bullying is about power, status, dominance, and control. In talking to my political science colleagues, I have been surprised to learn that the understanding of the dynamic processes that unfold between two children in bullying can be of some value in trying to understand the difficulties that are unfolding on the world stage.

I would like to offer a caveat about using inflammatory terms such as “terrorism” to describe bullying. Bullying is a natural process that unfolds in children’s groups and requires supportive interventions. I am very concerned about the language that is used in discussing bullying problems. I believe that if it is inflammatory, it can lead to detrimental perspectives and iatrogenic solutions rather than positive ones. Let me give you some examples. Recently in Canada, there have been conferences on bullying with the catch phrases Fear and Loathing and Fears and Jeers in their titles. I am uncomfortable with these depictions of youth and these depictions of the problem. It offers little hope and presents youth in a very dark light.

In truth, the vast majority of young people exhibit healthy interactional styles and are very seldom involved in bullying others. In fact, children are twice as likely to intervene to stop bullying on the school playground than teachers are, and bullying stops within 10 seconds every other time a peer intervenes (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). I have such optimism about the potential of children and youth; perhaps this underlies my discomfort with conference titles such as these. There are also books with titles that suggest aggressive responses to bullying, such as Bully Busters. These titles imply that the appropriate strategy for intervening to stop bullying is to “bully the bully”. Based on the rich understanding from social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), we know that children imitate aggressive models. What is the lesson that children who have bullied take away when they have been “busted”? It is clear: those who have the power get to use it aggressively. There is much work to be done in starting the conversation about bullying problems across the country and around the world. With a deeper understanding of the problem, I am hopeful that teachers, parents, coaches, and others who interact with children and youth will understand why we need to avoid bullying from our own positions of power and instead, intervene to support the healthy relationships of all – those who bully and those who are victimized, as well as those in the groups where bullying unfolds.

Chodzinski:
Recently in various countries there have been several cases brought before school boards charging teachers, school administrators and students with various criminal acts related to bullying in schools.

What are your views about criminalizing bullying?

Do you see court intervention as a viable means of alerting school officials to the seriousness of bullying?

Do you think court intervention will bring about increased emphasis on prevention and is it a means of appropriate justice for the victims?

Pepler:
Again, I find that it is helpful to approach this dilemma from a developmental perspective.

Children and adolescents have not fully achieved the capacity for a complex and comprehensive understanding of their behaviours and the associated consequences. It is the role of society, therefore, to educate children to ensure they develop positive attitudes and behaviours and avoid using their power to bully or harass others. This societal function is the responsibility of parents, teachers, and other adults in the community who are in contact with children and youth. It is also the role of society to protect children from abuse.

Recent research on the negative effects of peer harassment underline the importance of protecting children from abuse perpetrated by peers (cf. Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Again, this societal responsibility falls to parents, teachers, and other adults. The question is as to whether adults in authority should be held criminally liable for not protecting children from bullying is a complex one.

My experience of working in a few of these cases is that, rather than providing an opportunity to protect victimized children, it has the potential to create a further situation of bullying because the legal system in our country is adversarial. I would much rather see change emerge from a growing recognition of the importance
of supporting the development of children's relationship capacity, which forms the foundation for their healthy relationships. This change within the education system and broader community may only come about when we begin to illustrate to educators the academic costs associated with not intervening with an aggressive child and not supporting and protecting a victimized child. As a society, change may only come about as we recognize that the essential economics of the country are grounded in healthy relationships within the workplace, the community, the school, and the home. By preventing and addressing the problems of bullying and victimization in childhood and adolescence, we will contribute to the efforts to build a secure and equitable society.

Chodzinski:
What are your views about criminalizing bullying?

Rigby:
Bullying involving assault and violence constitute crimes already — and appropriately so. Other forms of bullying tend not to lend themselves to being labeled as "crimes". For example, name-calling and exclusion, may be very undesirable and damaging — but cannot reasonably be called crimes, and I do not think a useful purpose can be served by doing so.

Chodzinski:
Do you see court intervention as a viable means of alerting school officials to the seriousness of bullying?

Rigby:
If by "viable" you mean "workable" surely court interventions would lead school officials to think that bullying was a more serious matter. Whether this way of increasing awareness is desirable is another matter. Personally, I think court interventions should be a last resort — and should not be encouraged, except perhaps in rare and exceptional cases.

Chodzinski:
Do you think court intervention will bring about increased emphasis on prevention?

Rigby:
Naturally.

Chodzinski:
Is it a means of appropriate justice for the victims?

Rigby:
It is one means. However, I would discourage parents from seeking legal redress except in extreme circumstances, when all avenues have been explored.

Chodzinski:
I wish to thank you both for participating in this unique collaborative endeavour and sharing your research and thoughts in such a candid manner. Truly, they have provided readers with important and timely comments that help to further explain and understand a critical difficulty facing schools, communities and society as a whole.

It is clear that bullying is a very complex problem for society. It represents a challenge for all those interested in the well being of children, youth and society as a whole to teach, protect and intervene on the part of youngsters wherever and whenever appropriate.

Teachers and coaches in particular have a special duty implied with the parental/guardian trust they are given to be especially vigilant and aware of the signs of bullying and the steps that can be taken to reduce opportunities for bullying behaviour to occur. Parents, teachers and students together share a responsibility to observe, listen, learn and teach but most important, "Tell and intervene" when and if necessary. There is no shame in preventing a bully from acting. And while it is understandable that bullies may be perceived as ill spirited perpetrators and should be treated accordingly there are reasons enough to understand that bullies once were innocent children who learned how to behave in the manner they do. Somehow, somehow, along that infamous line that psychology describes as maturation, meaning achieving the important and varied developmental tasks of growing up, they, those who bully often, learned how to behave in a manner, that in their minds is perceived as appropriate, even if understood to be wrong.

Rudolf Dreikers wrote about goal oriented behaviour and provided guidelines by which caregivers might understand misdirected goal-oriented acts. As a society, we might do well to consider the antecedents of bullying behaviour and understand that unchecked bullying behaviour is one sure way to ensure that some bullies will use violence in ways more serious and with more implications later in life. It is our responsibility as caregivers to not only ensure the safety of our children by understanding and compassion the victim of bullying but to understand and compassion the bully as well. A term I have come to use frequently in counselling and parent teacher workshops is to "defuse and reuse". My challenge to everyone interested in reducing violence and conflict in schools and communities is to observe, intervene and re-channel intentioned, misdirected energy into productive and meaningful behaviour.

It is not an easy task but it is a worthy one. Peaceful places re-
quire peaceful intentions and that is a beginning.

References


This provides copies of information on bullying and links with a large number of sites providing advice to schools, students and parents throughout the world.

Questionnaires on bullying are described in the site described above. They include widely used paper questionnaires The PRQ and the PRAQ. For further information: http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/

Also contact Dr. Barrington Thomas, P.O Box 104, Point Lonsdale, Victoria, Australia. 3225, ph. 03 52582340 or fax 08 52583878.

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Also see commentary in www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/