Preventing School Bullying: Identification and Intervention Strategies Involving Bystanders

*Zopito Marini, Marnie McWhinnie
and Monique Lacharite*

Introduction

An effective prevention strategy must start with a clear understanding of the behaviour involved; in the case of bullying some of the latest research provides a good starting point. Recent studies have demonstrated that bullying or "the abuse of physical and psychological power for the purpose of intentionally and repeatedly creating a negative atmosphere of severe anxiety, intimidation and chronic fear in victims" (Marini, Spear & Bombay, 1999, p. 33) is one of the most pervasive and serious socioeducational problems facing students (Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Olweus, 2001; Rigby, 2002). Studies suggest that bullying behaviours have a much earlier onset than previously thought, the number of students affected is rather high (10% to 15% report being often victimized), the range of behaviours involved can be quite severe, and the consequences are long lasting (Craig, Pepler & Atlas, 2000; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Loeber & Hay, 1997; Olweus, 2001; Smith, Cowie, Olafsson & Liefhoghe, 2002). With the acknowledgement that bullying is "commonplace" in school settings and a serious problem for many students, issues related to possible prevention, have become the focus of attention.

Over the last three decades there has been a great deal of research in this area, suggesting that bullying behaviours are much more heterogeneous than originally thought. In fact, the general research on aggression (Tremblay, 2000) and the more specific investigation of bullying has demonstrated that children who participate in bullying (as bullies, victims and bystanders) are quite diverse in nature, resisting any simplified attempt at characterizing them. This heterogeneity presents both theoretical challenges (in identifying causal mechanisms) and practical challenges (in terms of the ability to develop effective intervention strategies). Researchers and practitioners alike have suggested that the heterogeneity needs to be examined through the use of a variety of paradigms in order to gain a better understanding of this very complex phenomenon.

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Over the last few years, we have identified variations amongst the types of bullying behaviours as well as variations in the characteristics of bullies, victims and bystanders. As a result, we have developed a bullying identification model that captures the mul-

tidimensional nature of peer aggression (Marini, 1997; Marini, et al., 1999; Marini, Fairbairn & Zuber, 2001).

The Multidimensional Bullying Identification Model (MBIM)

The model is a comprehensive approach consisting of three components, focusing on five characteristics, four types and three protagonists of bullying.

1. Characteristics of Bullying:

Although there are several general distinguishing characteristics of bullying behaviours, five of them are important to emphasize, namely:

- The power differential between the victim and the victimizer,
- The repeated pattern of aggression,
- The intention to harm,
- The creation of intimidation and fear, and
- The secretive nature of bullying behaviours.

2. Types of Bullying:

There are also four specific types/outcomes of bullying that can be identified by focusing on two general conceptual continua. One of the dimensions can be labelled as the direct to indirect continuum and is related to the modes/means of carrying out the attacks. Direct bullying is usually characterized by open aggression, while indirect bullying involves covert and secretive forms of attack (Crick, 1996; Rigby, 2002; Smith & Sharp, 1994). The second continuum describes different types/outcomes of aggression and varies along the dimensions of physical and psychological forms of aggression.

The four distinct types of bullying are:

- i. Physical,
- ii. Cognitive,

Figure 1: The Multidimensional Bullying Identification Model

Modes/Means of Attack	Types/Outcomes of Aggression	
	Physical	Psychological
	Direct	Cognitive
	Indirect	Emotional
	Physical <i>shoving, punching, kicking</i>	Cognitive <i>teasing, insulting, threatening</i>
	Social <i>involving groups or gangs</i> <i>daring and instigating attacks</i>	Emotional <i>spreading rumours, excluding, ostracizing</i>

(adapted from: Marini, Fairbarin & Zuber, 2001)

- iii. Social, and
- iv. Emotional.

The four types of bullying are illustrated in Figure 1.

3. Participants:

In terms of major protagonists, three are highlighted by the present model, namely:

- Bullies,
- Victims, and
- Bystanders.

Bullies tend to exert their "power" in a large number of domains, including, physical strength, social influence, and emotional intimidation. In fact, bullies tend to pick on those who do not have the physical, cognitive, social and emotional resources necessary to oppose them (Marini et al, 2001; Verdugo & Bermejo, 1997). For their part, victims tend to find themselves in "powerless" situations where their voices are not heard and their points of view are not valued. The powerlessness can be seen in concrete terms in the victims' lack of physical and psychological strength, social isolation,

insecurity, and loneliness (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Hazler, 1996; Olweus, 2001). There is an emerging group of students that are both bullies and victims, they are of great concern to school personnel. The third group of participants includes the bystanders, who make up by far the largest group of students in a bullying situation, and have the highest potential to become mobilized in an intervention program (Cowie, 2000; Marini, Bombay, Hobin, Winn & Dumyn, 2000; McWhinnie & Marini, 2003; Salmivalli, 2001).

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The Multidimensional Bullying Identification Model highlights the five distinguishing characteristics of bullying, the four different types of bullying and the three major participants. This comprehensive framework is intended to provide a detailed and integrated description of this complex be-

haviour. In addition to providing concrete approaches to identification of the various bullying behaviours, the model also provides ways of intervening with more specific and targeted preventative strategies.

Identification Strategies Involving Four Sampling Components

Using the model described above as a guide, it should be possible to expand the range of behaviours to consider when developing an identification strategy. Any strategies must describe the behaviours in question in very concrete terms. For example, it may not be especially informative to ask students how often they are bullied, because the answer will depend on the students' own working definition, which tends to be based on both conceptions and mis-conceptions of what constitute the behaviours. Given the increased media exposure of the topic the term bullying may have acquired a much broader definition than it warrants. In other words, there is a real danger that bullying is expanded to include all acts of aggression. Therefore, it is advisable to describe the behaviours that a particular school is concerned about and interested in sampling in very concrete terms.

Types of Bullying and Possible Questions

Specific questions can be asked that focus on each of the four quadrants. This ensures that sampling does not focus more on one type of bullying at the expenses of the others. Here are some possible identification questions. (Figure 2)

Emerging New Forms of Bullying

Teachers and school administrators need to be vigilant for new and emerging forms of bullying. One of the newer forms of peer

Figure 2: Bullying Identification Questions

Type of Bullying	Questions
Physical	How often have you pushed and shoved someone?
Cognitive	How often have you been teased and ridiculed?
Social	How often has a group of students picked on you?
Emotional	How often have you spread rumours and untrue stories?

harassment can be labeled “e-bullying” (Marini et al., 2001). This particular form of bullying involves the use of e-mails, web sites and text-based phone messages to threaten the victims or spread rumours about them. For instance, the web is being used increasingly to post damaging messages or images directly or indirectly related to the victim. The power of e-bullying to spread miss-information quickly to a large number of people is of great concern, since it can cause a tremendous amount of anxiety and fear in the victims. A combination of unclear laws and the high level of resources needed to identify the perpetrators of this type of bullying poses new and more serious challenges for school personnel and police.

Some bullying behaviours may be similar across elementary and secondary schools, others may be more predominant in one or the other. For instance, high school students are more likely to engage in gender-focused bullying, where issues related to “sexuality” tend to be used with powerful and, in most cases, devastating results. Furthermore, depending on the particular context of a school and its neighbourhood, bullying can sometimes manifest itself in the form of intolerance of differences, such as ethnic background, social economic status, intellectual ability, and sexual orientation.

The Time-Frame Related to the Bullying Experience:

It is advisable to have a specific time-frame for students to report their experience of bullying. While the time-frame you set will depend on the purpose of your observation, a frame of one year or six months is recommended. In some cases a school term may be used. The advantage of using such a time-frame is that it will allow comparisons to be made between your results and those of the extensive available research, since most published studies use similar approaches.

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The Frequency of Bullying

If we take one year as a time-frame, then you could present students with a number of options. One strategy is to use a five-point liker type scale, ranging from never to every day. Therefore, a scale would look like this:

- never,
- a few times a year,
- a few times a month,
- a few times a week, and
- every day.

The Role of the Three Protagonists

Similar questions should be used to sample the experience of the three major protagonists, namely, bullies, victims, and bystanders. In other words, the questions proposed above can be asked from three different perspectives. For example, the questions regarding the different types of bullying can be repeated in three separate sections of a questionnaire, regarding bullies (e.g., How often have *you done* these acts during the last school year?); victims (e.g., How often have these acts been *done to you* during the last school year?); and bystanders (e.g., How often have *you seen* these acts performed during the last school year?).

Reporting Mechanism

Depending on the needs and particular concerns of the school, specific questions could be asked regarding the different forms of e-bullying, the use of weapons on school property, the extent of sexual harassment, and the degree of safety students feel at school. In addition, in establishing a reporting mechanism, it is advisable to complement the students' own report of their bullying experience with information from other sources, such as teachers' reports and independent observations (Pellegrini, 2001).

A reporting mechanism has to be clearly outlined and trusted by all the participants. For example, if a school community decides that there will be an annual questionnaire distributed to students, parents, and teachers where they can report their experience of bullying, and confidentiality is assured. Then, it is very important that all participants can report their concern without fear that their answers might be identified.

Interventions Involving Bystanders

Once a school community has a good understanding of the extent and types of bullying students experience in their school, decisions can be made as to possible intervention. Of course, the difficulty with any form of intervention is deciding who should receive intervention and what form that intervention should take (Kazdin & Kendall, 1998). Given the complexity of the factors involved in bullying, as well as the heterogeneity of the population involved, it seems that a broad-based system-wide approach has more potential to be effective than a narrowly-focused approach (Olweus, 2001). In fact, to be effective, prevention has to include everyone involved. For example, if it is aimed only at one protagonist, such as the bully or the victim, an intervention is not likely to be successful. Instead, what is needed is an approach that involves everyone, including; the bully, the victim, and the bystanders (Marini et al., 2000; Salmivalli, 2001). Given the systemic and pervasive nature of bullying behaviour, the broad-based Public Health Model, could be adopted as a guide in the development of bullying prevention programs. That is, bullying can be thought of as a public health issue, necessitating a broad-based public health response. While it is outside the scope of the present paper to discuss the details of the application of the Public Health Model to the prevention of bullying (a more extensive treatment of these issues can be found in another publication; see Marini et al., 2000), or the role of the bullies or victims, for the remainder of this paper, we will focus on the bystanders, who have recently proven to be an important component in any intervention strategies (Olweus, 2001;

McWhinnie & Marini, 2003; Salmivalli, 2001).

The Critical Role of the Bystanders

While research has shown that about 85% of bullying episodes involve bystanders, relatively little is known about this group of students (Marini et al., 2001; Olweus, 2001; Salmivalli, 2001). At the theoretical level, there is a need to understand better the social cognitive mechanisms and behavioural patterns of these protagonists, and at the practical level there is a need to mobilize effectively this group by developing successful intervention programs. For example, Olweus (2001) reported that bystanders can play a variety of roles, identified by different levels of involvement, ranging from supporters of the bully, to disengaged onlookers, to defenders of the victims.

In a recent study involving students from grades three and five, McWhinnie (2002) reported that the majority of the participants have been bystanders to bullying incidents. In terms of intervention, when asked about the potential actions that a bystander could take, it was found that getting adult help was the most reported "intended" intervention strategy, followed by telling the bully to stop. However, as Pepler and Craig (1995) suggested there is usually a "gap" between "intentions" and "actions." Hence, the predominant focus of an intervention strategy should be on reducing this gap by empowering bystanders to intervene in bullying situation. For instance, students need to be able to identify bullying situations and have the knowledge and skills available to enact on a variety of intervention strategies that take into consideration the different roles students play and the specifics of the bullying context (see Hawkins, Pepler

& Craig, 2001; O'Connell, Pepler & Craig, 1999; Olweus, 2001; Salmivalli, 1999, 2001).

Here are some possible intervention strategies involving bystanders

1. Sensitize students of the importance of not providing an audience for bullies by teaching them not to "stand-by" scenes of bullying, but instead to "walk-away"
2. Build students' confidence so that they can walk-away from bullying incidents and involve an adult as soon as possible
3. Provide opportunities to rehearse empowering strategies so that students have the confidence to intervene in a safe and effective manner, predominantly by practicing verbal commands such as yelling GO AWAY or STOP! or making a disapproving remarks
4. Teach empathy and friendship building skills
5. Encourage the development of a civil school community
6. Increase supervision on the playground, with particular focus on the "disengaged students"
7. Foster a school climate where everyone is involved in some games and activities
8. Enlist the cooperation of parents in spreading the message that everyone is responsible for the creation of safe school where every student can learn
9. When ever possible, use the curriculum as a vehicle to raise awareness, understanding and skill level by reflecting and discussing appropriate books and plays

10. Adults (i.e., teachers and parents) need to provide good role models of involvement and caring to reinforce the message of "effective engagement."

The school environment should reduce the opportunities for bullying to take place through effective identification strategies, as well as reduce the physical and social rewards for participating in bullying.

Conclusion

According to Olweus (2001), in order for anti-bullying intervention to be successful, there has to be a restructuring of the social environment of the school where students can feel that their intervention is valued. Schools need to focus on changing both the "opportunity structures" and the "reward structures." In other words, the school environment should reduce the opportunities for bullying to take place through effective identification strategies, as well as reduce the physical and social rewards for participating in bullying. This is where the bystanders can play a large role. In the past, bystanders have been overlooked as influential "players" in the bullying drama; it is time that anti-bullying programs include strategies specifically tailored for bystanders to intervene in a safe and effective way.

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