

Schools without Bullying: Can it Really Happen?

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INTRODUCTION

The negative impact of bullying in our society has been widely recognised in Australia and in other parts of the world. The effect has been to focus the attention of educational systems on school leadership practices that more effectively prevent and manage bullying in schools.

Anti-bullying initiatives in schools are consistent with the current drive within the general community to promote positive mental health and wellbeing in young people and to affirm their right to a safe educational environment free from harm. The prevention of bullying in schools is now correctly recognised as part of the Human Rights movement. All students have a fundamental right to receive an education in a safe school environment in which they are not subjected to ongoing persecution and harassment.

Bullying has been shown to exist in schools in at least 16 countries (Smith & Brain, 2004) and many experts in the field have described bullying as 'normative'. This *doesn't* mean that bullying is either normal or inevitable. What *does* mean is that attempts to bully others are predictable whenever there are opportunities for individuals to gain rewards for using anti-social power over another and such opportunities occur in schools. Schools that do not address the problem of bullying teach students that individuals with more power at the time can dominate and misuse those with less power without fear of consequences or community outrage. This mindset underpins domestic violence, child abuse, hate crimes and road rage

So are schools without bullying ever possible? Bullying will always be a potential threat to student wellbeing in any school but many schools have been able to develop the capacity to swiftly and consistently manage any potential bullying behaviour and ultimately be basically bully-free. The most successful approach to doing so involves investing time and energy to

develop a caring, supportive and pro-social culture and a planned program of effective prevention and management practices.

What is Bullying?

The starting point for any anti-bullying initiatives is a clear definition of what bullying is (and what bullying is not). The following definition incorporates the key criteria identified by most researchers and theorists, namely:

- A specific target
- Harm and distress
- Repetition
- Intention to distress (or deliberateness of actions that harm/distress)
- An imbalance of power

Bullying is when a student (or group) with more power at the time repeatedly and intentionally uses negative words and/or actions against another student that cause distress and create a risk to their wellbeing. Bullying can be physical, verbal, emotional or social and can be carried out in person, through technology or by indirect means.

Bullying can be perceived as both a sub-set of aggression and a sub-set of harassment. It does not refer to a single observable event, but rather to a relational pattern considered over time in which one or more students demonstrate an ongoing pattern of social dominance over another through (often) subtle forms of persecution. A pattern of persecution can quickly become entrenched because students continue to be in contact with each other over time and it is not easy for the recipient to walk away or leave the situation. This pattern is also consolidated by the involvement of other students who take part in the bullying process in small ways, and in schools it is not easy for the recipient to walk away or leave the situation. - A victimised student can live in constant fear of another attack and further humiliation, which maintains the pattern of dominance and persecution.

What Bullying is NOT

It is important that all members of the school community understand not only what bullying IS but also what bullying is NOT. The following negative social situations are not examples of bullying:

- A one-off or random act of nastiness or aggression
- Mutual conflict (although poorly-resolved conflict can evolve into a bullying pattern in some circumstances)
- Simple social non-preference (which is not the same as deliberately attempting to socially exclude someone or damage their social reputation in an ongoing way)

THE VICTORIAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S REVIEW OF ANTI-BULLYING POLICY AND PRACTICE

The aims of this study were to:

- Identify student experiences of and perceptions about bullying within primary and secondary schools
- Identify and analyse effective practices within government schools that contribute to the effective prevention and management of bullying.

Methodology

A total of 9,054 students in Years 2-12 completed surveys about their experiences and perceptions of bullying and safety in their school. Five separate student surveys were developed, recognising the different ages of the students and the changing nature of bullying across the

stages of schooling. The surveys were developed after a thorough review and analysis of survey instruments that had been used in previous research. Unlike most previous research, however, the following definition of bullying was provided in each survey for students (Years 5-12) to refer to:

Bullying is when a student (or group) with more power at the time repeatedly picks on one particular student by saying or doing things to try and hurt their feelings, body, social life, reputation or property. A fight or disagreement between equals isn't bullying.

The surveys were then trialed in one primary and one secondary school, with groups of students at the targeted different Year levels. Refinements were made on the basis of this feedback and the final survey instruments were completed.

Requests to take part in the survey were distributed to a random stratified sample of 10% of all Victorian Government schools. Schools were provided with consent forms to be signed and returned by parents or students prior to their completion of the survey. This process resulted in a reduced return rate, especially for secondary schools. Seventy two schools agreed to participate. Teachers administered the surveys in a group context and 52% of the surveys were returned. Table One (below) provides details of the number of students at each year level.

Table 1: Student Survey Sample

| | Number of Students Who Completed Surveys | | |
|--|--|---------------|----------------|
| | Focus Schools | Other Schools | Total Students |
| Years 2-4* (Primary: Ages 8-10) | 219 | 1377 | 1596 |
| Years 5-6 (Primary: Ages 11-12) | 147 | 1395 | 1542 |
| Years 7-8 (Secondary: Ages 13-14) | 433 | 2753 | 3186 |
| Years 9-10 (Secondary: Ages 15-16) | 413 | 862 | 1275 |
| Years 11-12 (Secondary: Ages 17-18) | 267 | 1188 | 1455 |
| TOTALS | 1479 | 7575 | 9054 |

* Results not reported in this paper

An additional eleven schools (hereafter identified as ‘Focus Schools’) also agreed to administer the survey to their students. These six primary and five secondary schools were selected in consultation with the Department of Education, who based their selection on the outcomes from the *Attitudes to School Survey* (2004). This survey measures students’ perceptions and experiences of school and is completed annually by all students in Years 5-12 attending Victorian government schools. These schools were selected specifically because of their success in creating safe environments according to students’ data. There were many other schools with similar positive results but the selection also took into account the range and diversity of school contexts and communities. The sample of 11 schools included small and large schools in metropolitan, regional and remote locations, with high to low socio-economic status and cultural diversity and coeducational and single sex populations.

One-to-one interviews were also conducted with school leaders in the eleven Focus Schools and focus group interviews were conducted with groups of students (from Prep to Year 12), teachers, parents and leaders.

Survey Results

A two-way ANOVA was used to test for significant differences between focus schools and other schools on students' reported experiences and perceptions about bullying and safety. The results are shown in Table 2 (below).

Table 2: A Comparison of Student Responses (Years 5-12) in Focus Schools and Other Schools to Questions about Bullying and Safety at School

| | School Type | Years 5-6 | Years 7-8 | Years 9-10 | Years 11-12 |
|---|---------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-------------|
| I don't feel safe. I have been bullied at this school this year (ie last ten weeks) and I think it will happen again | Focus Schools | 8% | 9%** | 5%*** | 4% |
| | Other Schools | 9% | 12% | 13% | 6% |
| I feel very safe at this school. I haven't been bullied this year and it hasn't happened to me or anyone I know at this school. | Focus Schools | 49% | 43%** | 49%*** | 60% |
| | Other Schools | 42% | 35% | 31% | 53% |
| There is a lot of bullying in my school at my year level | Focus Schools | 4% | 15%*** | 10%*** | 7%*** |
| | Other Schools | 11% | 21% | 25% | 13% |
| There is no bullying in my Year at school | Focus Schools | 22%** | 9%*** | 11%*** | 17%*** |
| | Other Schools | 12% | 3% | 2% | 7% |
| This is definitely a safe, friendly and caring school where not much bullying happens | Focus Schools | 52%** | 36%*** | 33%*** | 28%*** |
| | Other Schools | 38% | 15% | 10% | 17% |
| Bullying is not much of a problem at this school. It hardly ever happens | Focus Schools | 55%*** | 40%*** | 46%*** | 48%*** |
| | Other Schools | 37% | 19% | 14% | 27% |
| Bullying is a big problem at this school. It happens a lot and my school needs to do more about it | Focus Schools | 6% | 12%*** | 8%*** | 6% |
| | Other Schools | 11% | 22% | 24% | 12% |

*** p<.001 ** p<.01

Table 2 shows that there were significant differences between the focus schools and the other schools, with students from the focus schools reporting higher levels of perceived safety and lower levels of bullying.

Themes in Focus Schools

The data from interviews and focus groups (plus related documentation such as policies, procedures, curriculum materials, posters etc) was collected and analysed using thematic analysis, an exploratory form of content analysis. This form of analysis identifies themes and patterns in a large amount of qualitative data in a relatively systematic fashion that increases accuracy and sensitivity in understanding and interpreting data about people and organisations. (Joffe & Yardley, 2004)

After a preliminary examination of all the data, a number of broad potential categories were identified to help group the data. These were then applied more closely to the data to identify those themes that appeared to be clear and recurrent across several schools. A review of the relevant literature assisted in building a valid argument for choosing each theme. Connections between themes were identified. These themes and connections were then pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of the collective experiences and perceptions of the focus schools. Figure 1 shows the themes that emerged.

Figure 1: Themes that Were Linked to Success in Focus Schools

| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * * Very significant theme * Significant theme ✓ Minor theme | Primary Focus Schools | Secondary Focus Schools |
|--|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Effective leadership | * * | * * |
| Effective whole-school behaviour management | * * | * * |
| Positive student –student relationships | * | * |
| Student wellbeing as a school priority | * | * |
| Peer support systems | ✓ | * |
| Whole school approach to student safety | * | ✓ |
| Culture of teacher collaboration | * | |
| Well-developed extracurricular activities/electives | | * |
| Teaching social skills | * | |
| Teaching values | * | ✓ |
| Anti-bullying components | * | |
| Student leadership and ownership | ✓ | * |
| Effective 'primary to secondary' transition program | | * |
| Positive involvement with parents | * | ✓ |
| Effective 'House' system | | * |
| Structured lunchtime activities | * | ✓ |

The Two Most Significant Themes in Focus Schools

The two strongest themes that emerged in both the primary and secondary case study schools were:

- The importance of an effective leadership team who empowered and worked effectively with key teachers and the whole staff
- A whole-school effective behaviour management program was in place and was working well

Effective School Leadership

In all of the primary focus schools and in four of the secondary focus schools long-term effective leadership was evident. The two remaining secondary schools had either a new or acting principal. The principals (usually as a member of a shared leadership team) had worked with staff to develop (or continue) a whole school vision based around the wellbeing and personal growth of students, had identified key staff members with strong skills in welfare areas and then had empowered these key staff and the rest of the staff to work collaboratively towards achieving their shared vision of schoolwide wellbeing. In some cases, the principal gave staff support through time allowance or through communicating their trust and encouragement. These principals in turn were trusted and perceived by their school community to be leading by their example. As Kam, Greenberg and Walls (2003) found, teachers' enthusiasm for the implementation of any wellbeing program is highly influenced by the active, engaged support and direction provided by the school principal. The result was the development of a committed leadership team who were all moving in the same direction to implement a comprehensive approach to wellbeing and to the development of supportive parent communities.

Once a critical mass of like-minded committed teachers were established, other teachers started to be positively influenced. The principals then began to select like-minded new staff and continued to build in strategies for the maintenance of the school's overall approach.

Effective leadership has been shown in other studies to be an essential component of any successful approach to student wellbeing and the creation of safe schools (eg Sharp & Thompson, 1994; Gager and Elias, 1997; Cross et al., 2004; Smith, Pepler & Rigby, 2004).

Effective Whole School Behaviour Management

All schools had an effective whole school behaviour management system in place but no schools used exactly the same behaviour management approach. Many positive effects appeared to accrue from an effective behaviour management system within a school. These included:

- Fewer students bullying or supporting bullying because their school culture was clear about unacceptable behaviour and provided incentives for acceptable behaviour.
- Teachers reported higher levels of staff satisfaction and morale.
- A lower rate of staff turnover and hence more consistency in managing student behaviour and more personal connectedness. The longer teachers were in the school the more they got to know the students and their families.

Teachers spoke of how they felt more confident about managing their classes because there was a sound and fair system in place. They also reported feeling more confident about implementing new wellbeing initiatives because they didn't have to spend all of their time managing behaviour and didn't have to worry about their students responding negatively. An effective behaviour management system allowed them more time to undertake personal and social learning activities. Many spoke of how they had rediscovered their enjoyment of teaching when they came to the school because of its strong whole-school behaviour management approach. Parents reported that they were keen to enrol their children in a school that was seen to have minimal discipline problems and this had become a source of pride for the teachers and the students.

Roland and Galloway (2002), in their study of Norwegian schools found that less bullying occurred in classrooms where teachers were perceived by students to be competent, demonstrate caring and support to students, to monitor their behavioural and work expectations of their students and to intervene when student behaviour was unacceptable

Other Significant Themes

Two other significant themes were apparent in both primary and secondary focus schools:

- The importance of intentional development of positive student-student relationships
- The importance of making student wellbeing a school priority

Positive Student-student Relationships

All primary and secondary focus schools had actively focused on implementing strategies for developing positive peer relationships across all year levels. Sometimes this was achieved through horizontal integration (e.g. making sure that all year seven students at the year 7 camp worked in teams with many peers who were not in their home room group) or vertical integration (e.g. cross-age productions, sporting teams, clubs etc). Sometimes it was the result of the use of cooperative learning strategies in the classroom. The teachers and schools had a variety of strategies and structures that had helped students to make friends and get to know and work well with each other. All of the schools could be described as having developed a relationship culture.

A growing body of evidence is finding that positive peer relationships are one of the most influential factors in improving school culture and student learning outcomes (Benard, 2004; Battistich, 2001). Students' sense of interconnectedness appears to be critical to their acceptance of their responsibility for the wellbeing of others (Noble, 2006).

Wellbeing as a School Priority

In nearly all of the primary and secondary focus schools there was a clearly stated philosophy that the prerequisite of effective learning was student wellbeing and safety this had influenced the amount of time staff invested in wellbeing directions.

Other significant themes that emerged more strongly in either primary focus schools or in secondary focus schools but not in both to the same extent. These were:

- Peer support systems
- Whole school approach
- Culture of teacher collaboration
- Well-developed extracurricular activities/electives
- Teaching social skills
- Teaching values
- Anti-bullying components
- Student leadership and ownership
- Effective 'primary to secondary' transition program
- Positive involvement with parents
- An effective 'House' system

Peer Support Systems

Peer support systems were linked more strongly to success in secondary focus schools but still had a role to play in primary focus schools. There were a variety of peer support structures in place with most primary schools having a buddy structure of some kind and some having a peer mediation structure. Secondary schools had hybrid structures which were called different things

in different schools. Some of the peer support systems worked extremely well and appeared to have made a strong impact on the culture of the school. However, other peer support structures appeared to have lost some of their direction and impact over time, and many students seemed unaware of their existence or purpose.

A Whole-school Approach to Student Safety

There was a consistency between school documentation, the comments of staff, students, parents and the leadership team and the posters and prompts around the school that confirmed that there was a whole-school approach to student safety and wellbeing in all of the primary focus schools.

Culture of Teacher Collaboration

This theme was only apparent in the primary focus schools. Staff collaboration produced results and when the impact of their collaborative efforts started to show, the teachers felt a strong sense of shared satisfaction. This was further increased when leaders took the trouble to focus on staff wellbeing even in very small ways, such as allocating time for special purposes, providing percolated coffee at morning tea or an outdoor ‘staff retreat.’ area. Many of the teachers spoke of ‘looking after each other’ and how the social connections and support for each other had become very strong.

Well Developed Extracurricular Program/electives

This theme was only apparent in secondary focus schools, with most of them providing a wide range of extracurricular activities and opportunities. Extracurricular activities and electives appeared to have several positive effects:

- They provide both horizontal and vertical integration. Students who are involved in productions, clubs and teams get to work with and form relationships with a wide range of both same-age and cross-age peers. This changes the culture of the school to one of greater friendliness and can result in less bullying of younger students by older students.
- Many extracurricular activities occurred during lunchtimes (e.g. clubs, team practices or try-outs, electives) resulting in fewer disengaged students at lunchtimes for whom bullying could be appealing.
- These activities also allow students to showcase a wider range of abilities than they can within the classroom. This helps to create confidence and respect and contributes further to positive relationships.

A well-developed extracurricular or electives program appears to contribute to a school culture of belonging, respect and positive relationships.

Teaching Social Skills

This was a strong theme mainly in primary focus schools and most had a long-term history of developing student social competencies and successfully embedding them in their behaviour management system, their pedagogy (e.g. cooperative learning and integrated units), their expectations and their structures. Many had incorporated ‘practice opportunities’ as well (e.g. community service work). The importance of social and emotional learning of this kind has been highlighted by many researchers (eg Zins et al.)

Teaching Values

This theme was stronger in the primary focus schools but still apparent in some secondary schools. Teaching focused mostly on the values of Respect, Compassion, Cooperation, and Friendliness. The value that was most often successfully taught to students was that of Respect and it seemed to have quite a strong impact on student behaviour. In schools that focused on teaching and reinforcing the value of Respect many students in the focus groups spontaneously

talked about its importance and gave examples of where and how they saw respect being shown in the school.

Anti-bullying Components

A range of anti-bullying components was used extensively by all of the primary focus schools but only in a limited way by some by secondary focus schools. Some primary focus schools had used anti-bullying curriculum material and posters; some had taught bystander skills; others had taught students to be assertive. Most used whole-school bullying surveys to identify how much bullying was taking place and, in some cases, which students were involved.

Student Leadership and Ownership

This theme was stronger in the secondary focus schools than in the primary focus schools. Many of the secondary schools had found excellent ways to ensure that the students involved in leadership positions within the school had authentic responsibilities and a real voice in many of the activities and decisions in the school. Having many students involved in a variety of leadership roles appeared to develop confidence and, it seemed, more compassion towards others. There was a higher likelihood that student leaders would support isolated or victimised students, and some student leaders were very involved in anti-bullying responsibilities.

Effective 'Primary to Secondary' Transition Programs

The range of excellent transition programs in all but one of the secondary focus schools was very impressive. Secondary schools also spoke of their respect for the significant wellbeing work of many of the feeder primary schools and had worked towards developing effective working partnerships with them. Students spoke enthusiastically of how important these transition programs had been for their development of friendships, their sense of belonging and confidence in starting high school. Camps early in year 7 that involved cooperative group activities were mentioned frequently by students as having helped them to get to know peers. These programs appeared to have also contributed to a positive relationship culture in the school.

Positive Involvement with Parents

All of the primary and some of the secondary focus schools had committed and enthusiastic parent communities who worked in partnership with staff especially on wellbeing and anti-bullying issues. The leadership teams had worked very hard to involve the parents and make them feel welcome. Many parents spoke admiringly of how they were always made to feel welcome, of an 'open door policy' and a 'family feel'. This strong parental support further energised the principals and their staff to continue involving parents and empowered them to maintain their approach.

Effective House System

The secondary focus schools that had an effective house system found that this system supported their behaviour management (through house incentive schemes) and/or helped to develop protective cross-age peer relationships (within each house).

Structured lunchtime activities

This theme was mainly apparent in primary focus schools although one secondary focus school had implemented an effective lunchtime 'clubs' program and another employed a recreation assistant to run activities at lunchtime. Most of the primary focus schools had slowly developed very effective playground supervision techniques as well as a variety of clubs, special classes, formal lessons, student-organised activities etc., during the lunch break. Many of these had similar benefits to those of the extracurricular programs established by many secondary schools.

The activities made lunchtime less 'boring' and kept students enthusiastically occupied and connected to their peers in prosocial pursuits.

THE NATIONAL SAFE SCHOOLS FRAMEWORK (NSSF) BEST PRACTICE GRANTS PROGRAMME

the National Safe Schools Framework is an initiative of the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training (DEST) designed to encourage and assist schools to create safe school environments and address bullying. The six key elements of the National Safe Schools Framework are:

1. School values, ethos, culture, structures and student welfare
2. Establishment of agreed policies, programmes and procedures
3. Provision of education and training to school staff, students and parents
4. Managing incidents of abuse and victimisation
5. Providing support for students
6. Working closely with parents

All Australian schools are now required to report on how they have implemented the NSSF. In 2004.2005 grants were made available to 171 schools under the The National Safe Schools Framework Best Practice Grants Programme. The 171 project schools worked either individually or in clusters and a total of 97 school-based projects designed to prevent or manage bullying were funded and implemented over 18 months.

School were required to report on the implementation and effectiveness of their projects at three points during the 18-month period. They were also required to collect data at the start of their project and again at the end of their project to evaluate the effectiveness of their approaches and programs. Materials were made available to schools for this purpose, with most electing to use bullying audit tools which provided them with quantitative data. However some schools chose to use only focus group interviews or student forums rather than quantitative data.

Thematic analysis (see above) was used to analyse the reports provided by the schools. The following brief summary identifies some of the main themes about project effectiveness that emerged:

- An anti-bullying policy is necessary for shared understanding and clarification of expectations but it needs to be developed collaboratively with the school community

- A whole school approach to developing a safe school is the most effective approach
- Planning for sustainability is essential if anti-bullying and ‘safe school’ programs are to be successfully maintained over time. The major issue that most schools had to confront was staff turnover.
- Customising social and emotional learning programs to suit the school and embedding them in the daily life of the school enhanced their effectiveness
- Involving the local community in ‘safe school’ initiatives can increase their effectiveness and get the anti-bullying across to a wider audience
- Student ownership of anti-bullying and ‘safe school’ curriculum materials and products increases their effectiveness in two ways. Firstly the students who develop and present the materials are more convinced by their own messages and secondly other students appear to have a more positive response to student-developed materials and presentations
- Teacher consistency in responding to bullying situations is vital but it takes time and persistence to achieve consistency
- Restorative Practices and Non-punitive approaches can contribute to the effective management of bullying but are time-consuming, require high levels of teacher skill and elicit negative responses in some parents.
- Early intervention with students who demonstrate anti-social behaviours at an early age can reduce those behaviours in many students
- Parents must be part of any ‘safe school’ initiative but it can be difficult to engage them
- Data collection, especially through bullying audits, is an essential part of any ‘safe school’ initiative as it identifies patterns and helps to confirm improvements
- Opportunities for students to participate in social and emotional learning activities focusing on pro-social values, social skills and resilience skills are an important part of any ‘safe school’ initiative. However user-friendly and engaging resources are necessary. The specific published programmes that were most commonly implemented in this project were (in order) *Bounce Back!* (McGrath & Noble, 2003; Noble & McGrath, 2005) and *You Can Do It!* (Bernard, 1995)

IN CONCLUSION

So can schools without bullying really happen? The answer is yes, but it takes time, culture change and commitment and, above all, strong and optimistic leadership. Bullying cannot be prevented unless school leaders work with their staff to transform the culture of the school from one in which bullying can take hold and thrive to one which is safe, positive, pro-social and caring. The following recommendations about specific approaches and actions flow from the two studies described above:

1. Draft a ‘safe school’ policy, seek feedback from the whole school community and revise it regularly. Refer to McGrath & Noble (2006) for the core components of such a policy.
2. Take a whole-school approach and make safety and wellbeing a clear school priority.
3. Make social and emotional learning (ie pro-social values, social skills, resilience skills and skills needed to support students who are victimised) a particular priority and identify engaging and evidence-based resources. Embed this learning and its practice in the daily life of the school.
4. Build a collaborative staff culture and focus on teacher wellbeing too. Plan well in advance for threats to sustainability such as staff turnover.
5. Build a relationship culture within your school. Develop a collaborative vision for the development and maintenance of positive student–student relationships through a variety of approaches such as the use cooperative learning, peer support systems, cross-age and

same-age extracurricular activities and camps and positive student-teacher and teacher-teacher relationships.

6. Conduct a bullying audit in your school every two years
7. Implement an anti-bullying curriculum and build in student ownership opportunities wherever possible.
8. Be strategic and creative about positive ways to involve parents in 'safe school' initiatives and expect it to be a struggle at first (Greenberg et al., 2003).
9. Establish a 'safe school committee' consisting of teachers, students and parents to plan for lunchtime clubs and activities as well as other 'safe school' initiatives
10. Consider implementing restorative or non-punitive approaches (see McGrath & Noble 2006, for a summary of these approaches). Spend time with staff discussing the advantages and disadvantages for *your* school community.
11. Invest time and money to build capacity by training staff in the skills needed to teach social and emotional skills and to respond firmly, consistently and swiftly to bullying (Diebold et al., 2000).
12. Ensure that everyone in your school community understands that it takes time, persistence, commitment and effort to sustain Safe Schools programs and practices because maintaining and sustaining the momentum of anti-bullying initiatives and sustaining is crucial and needs to be planned for in advance (Elias, 2003; Smith et al., 2004)

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