

Taking Fear Out of Schools: A Report of An International Policy and Research Conference on School Bullying and Violence.

Stavanger University, Norway, 6-7 September 2004

1. School bullying is widespread and damaging - but it is also preventable. Such were the conclusions of this conference, which involved participants from 18 member countries of the OECD and one observer country. These conclusions represent a call for action in school systems across the OECD countries.

2. Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik underlined the importance attached to the issue in Norway. He said that bullying was much more than an irritating feature of school life. Rather, he said, our approach to the problem says something about our fundamental values, for bullying conflicts with the principle that people should treat each other with respect. Tackling bullying was therefore linked to the teaching of values in schools. Bullying is, of course, an issue which needs to be tackled across the lifespan, and he mentioned some Norwegian measures designed to tackle bullying in the workplace. But for him bullying in schools had a particular salience - in Norway children represent 20% of the population but, as in other countries, they are 100% of the future. In short, the bullying of children should be treated with zero tolerance.

3. Why has bullying been overlooked, or even tolerated? One possible answer was given by OECD Director of Education Barry McGaw. He pointed to the lessons learned from the murder of Kitty Genovese in New York City. She was chased over several blocks, repeatedly attacked and then killed. Many people witnessed the attacks, but no-one intervened. Later research, provoked by this shaming event, explored why given many witnesses, individual responsibility is diffused so that sometimes nobody takes action. Schoolyard bullying may have this same quality. For that reason a formal initiative may be necessary to ensure that people do take responsibility to prevent bullying and, indeed, some of the programmes to combat bullying in schools do pay particular attention to the engagement of bystanders.

4. The conference location in Norway was not accidental. Over the last 25 years Norway has been at the heart of a growing worldwide movement aimed at researching and preventing school bullying. Many initiatives have been developed. The aim of the conference was to take stock of what we know, examine what can be done, and look at some options to further international co-operation.

A widespread problem

5. Bullying means different things to different people, and there are different ways of measuring how much bullying takes place (see box 1) but, on most accounts, bullying is depressingly common. Typically around 1 in 10 of young adolescents say that they are repeatedly victimised (see figure).

6. As children enter their early teens, they report less victimisation. Peter Smith of the UK said that this may be because they become physically larger and therefore less vulnerable, and also because they become less likely to perceive relatively minor incidents as bullying. During the conference, it was suggested that, taking account of the way in which bullying develops in children over time, the most cost-effective points of intervention might be either in early childhood, (before patterns of school behaviour become entrenched) and again in early adolescence (when new forms of bullying emerge). However, while

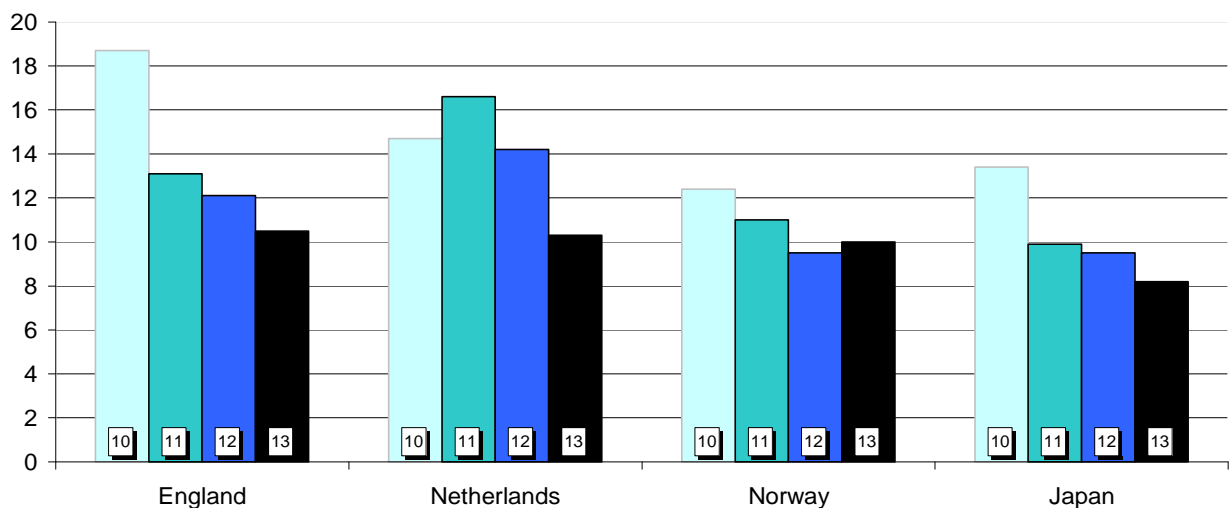
there is much research, there are currently no agreed definitions or measures of bullying, which as speakers noted, would allow for regular monitoring and comparisons over time and place, within or between countries.

Box 1. Definitions and measures of school bullying

Definitions of bullying typically refer to unjust or abusive exercise of power, particularly when it is repeated or systematic. There are grey areas where minor incivilities blur into real bullying and where a minor incivility, if repeated, becomes bullying. Peter Smith pointed to the different forms of bullying, physical attacks, verbal attacks, social exclusion, and institutional measures. One other difficulty with the English term 'bullying' is that it does not translate readily into other languages. For example "*brimer*" in French has somewhat different connotations. Mona O'Moore, in answer to some of these problems, proposed a wider definition for 'abuse' to cover aggression, harassment, bullying and violence.

Bullying is most commonly measured by asking pupils to say whether or not they are bullied. Pupils can also be asked whether they take part in bullying. Other techniques include direct class room observation, and asking students how often they witness other pupils being

Figure 1 Percentage of pupils aged 10 – 13 who say they have been bullied "more than once or twice" in the past six months



Source: Morita, Y. (2001) *Ijime no kokusai hikaku kenkyu* (Cross national comparative study of bullying), Japan, Kaneko Shobo

Damaging effects.

7. In some cases, repeated bullying has led victims to suicide – and well-publicised individual cases have helped to shape public concern over bullying – but most bullying does not have such dramatic consequences. Some sceptics even suggest that adverse experiences at school may help to build resilient adults. Research shows that victims of bullying have problems, including depression, truancy, social isolation, poor health, even suicidal tendencies. However if bullies are attracted to 'weak' victims, such problems might be the cause, rather than the result of bullying. Finnish researcher Christina Salmivalli has investigated this issue, which turns out to be remarkably complicated. Socially withdrawn children, and those with low self-esteem, appear to attract bullying, but, in a vicious circle, bullying also reinforces these characteristics. Conversely, other problems, like depression, appear to be a long term result of bullying. An

added complication is that some victims are also bullies, and this group, it seems, are particularly likely to have a wide range of problems.

8. Of course, bullying may have longer term consequences on bullies as well as victims, perhaps allowing them to feel that other aggressive or anti-social acts are either acceptable or else will simply go unpunished. During the conference presentations from the United States and from Germany emphasized the link between bullying in schools and juvenile crime. As Dan Olweus pointed out, schools may be places where emerging anti-social behaviour, with potentially serious long term consequences, may be tackled at an early stage.

Tackling the problem

9. So how can bullying be prevented? Poor home background is certainly one cause of bullying, but as Norwegian researcher Erling Roland pointed out, such backgrounds can only be changed slowly, and aggressiveness is a relatively stable personality characteristic. It follows that the scope for tackling the home roots of bullying is limited, at least in the short term. In the longer term, today's school children will be parents themselves, so that what goes on in schools now can influence the parental climate for the next generation.

10. Even if some of those who come to school are potential bullies, bullying might be prevented – or at least held in check – by measures taken in schools. Much of the conference was devoted to discussing different programmes and measures of this type. Most anti-bullying initiatives have multiple strands. Typically they aim to raise awareness of the problem of bullying, engaging teachers, pupils and parents, measure the extent of the problem, improve surveillance, deal with bullies and assist victims. Some examples are described in box 2.

11. So do these programmes work? In many cases they seem to. One of the leading developers of anti-bullying programmes, Dan Olweus of Norway, said that the Olweus programme sometimes halved the incidence of school bullying. Others reported lesser, but still useful impacts.

12. But spreading and sharing good practice in the battle against school bullying is a lot more difficult than, say, rolling out a new drug treatment for a disease. Local social and institutional factors have to be taken into account. Rosario Ortega of Spain described how in her own work in Seville, Spain, she had tried to use some of the main features of the Olweus programme but adapt it to the different cultural environment of Spain. Keith Sullivan, describing a programme in New Zealand, emphasized how important it was that local staff took ownership of an initiative – sometimes by moulding it to their requirements. Such ownership may be particularly important given good evidence that the commitment of school staff is itself one of the keys to success, particularly sustained success.

Box 2. Anti-bullying initiatives in schools.

Canada

"*Together We Light the Way*" is a programme that aims to prevent anti-social behaviour in schools in Ontario, Canada. Its overall objective is to create safe and caring learning communities by engaging the community. Municipal officials, business leaders and members of community groups all work in partnership with school staff, students and parents to build resiliency and responsibility in children. Students are taught respect for themselves and for others in their community, so that they learn and grow academically, socially and emotionally. Their communities actively share the responsibility for the children's safety, welfare and education.

Norway

The *Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme* was developed by Dan Olweus in Norway and applied there, in the US, in Iceland and in other countries in modified form. Key elements include a questionnaire survey to identify the extent and form of bullying, effective supervision during recesses, discussion groups involving staff, students and parents, class rules against bullying, serious discussions with bullies and victims, discussions with parents of involved students. Throughout, the working principles include warmth and positive involvement by adults and firm limits on unacceptable behaviour. According to its proponents, evaluations following use of the programme typically report reductions in the level of bullying and violence of 30 – 50%. In addition, the *Zero* programme, developed at Stavanger University College, was piloted at 183 Norwegian schools during the school year 2003-04. Preliminary analyses of results show that schools using Zero for one year reduced the amount of bullying substantially.

Spain

The *SAVE project*, in 5 schools in Seville, Spain emphasizes *convivencia* a Spanish word which connotes a spirit of tolerance, solidarity, fraternity, co-operation, harmony and the resolution of conflict. The project, concerns teachers, students and families and addresses 1) the whole policy level (working within the school climate as a community of *convivencia*); 2) the curricular level (3) and the interpersonal level (working with pupils with social problems -bullying and interpersonal violence- and with pupils at risk). Subsequent evaluation showed some reductions in bullying, but the main positive result was in social relationships – *convivencia*.

United States

In the United States the campaign, *Take a Stand, Lend a Hand: Stop Bullying Now*, supported by a number of Federal Government Departments, is a media campaign designed to increase awareness about the problem of bullying among children aged 9-13. It was developed through consultation education, health, and safety professionals, and people from youth organizations and law enforcement. Input was also sought from a panel of young people aged 9 – 13. The goal is to teach young people that they can and should do everything possible to stop bullying. This campaign addresses three groups involved in bullying—bully, victim and bystander. All materials developed for the campaign were developed with input from the youth expert panel and therefore reflect actual situations, language, and actions characteristic of children in this age group.

Wider contexts

13. As many speakers insisted, the prevention of bullying is typically part of a broader agenda. Here, some differences of approach emerged. Some argued that measures against school bullying need to be sustained in the longer term by the building of social and civic competencies. Others argued pragmatically, that it is difficult to build such competencies, but much more feasible to intervene to reduce the opportunities for bullying. Isabel Fernandez of Spain pointed to the varying perspectives of different actors on what the 'problem' is. From the teachers' perspective, incivility, unruly behaviour and minor crime are seen as bigger problems than bullying. Conversely, others suggested that the bullying of students by teachers can sometimes be a serious problem – and addressing this problem can be subject to a taboo. From

the academic side there was concern that the measures against bullying are unsupported by a coherent body of social theory – that they are, if you like, too narrowly pragmatic.

14. If teachers spend time dealing with bullies, that may mean they spend less time teaching core maths and literacy skills – skills which many schooling systems are testing and emphasizing in attempts to drive up school standards. This creates a tension. As one speaker argued, more engagement of the teaching profession in the development of anti-bullying programmes might help to address such tensions. Norwegian Minister for Education Kristin Clemet said that in Norway there was no contradiction between improving basic standards in literacy and numeracy, on the one hand, and tackling bullying and teaching values, on the other. There is a natural link – cognitive skills are acquired more readily in environments where learners feel secure.

Setting a national framework

15. Given that much depends on local commitment, what can sensibly be done at national level? Often it is at this level that the broad priority attached to combating bullying is set, and a framework for action determined. Common features are apparent. In some countries – for example Norway and Australia – the commitment to tackle bullying is set nationally, but the means of doing so is arrived at locally.

16. In Norway, the Manifesto against Bullying, launched in 2002, and signed by the Prime Minister, commits central government and other agencies – including the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, the National Parents Committee for primary and lower secondary education, the Union of Education and the Ombudsman for Children – to a programme of action against bullying. This includes programmes in schools and kindergartens, measures to raise awareness of the problem, the development of new training materials, and conferences for different actors at local, national and international levels. Minister Kristin Clemet explained that new legislation has also clarified the responsibility of schools to provide a safer working environment for pupils.

17. In Australia the National Safe Schools Framework sets out some national principles for a safe school environment. These cover, among other matters, the school ethos, student welfare, policy issues, education for staff, students and parents, and the management of abuse and victimisation, the provision of support for students, and arrangements for working closely with parents. As a condition of Australian Government funding to schools, school authorities will be required to put the Framework into effect before 1 January 2006.

18. One national role may be to establish standards for monitoring the extent of the problem and the success of prevention efforts. In Norway, the new 'skoleporten.no' website provides quantitative information on Norwegian schools. As part of this exercise, pupils in their seventh, and tenth years of education and those taking foundation courses in upper secondary education are expected to answer questions on school bullying alongside other matters concerned with their welfare, motivation and environment.

Evaluation

19. Speakers suggested that some initiatives, although implemented in good faith, may do more harm than good. Too often, initiatives are launched in the field without proper evaluations. To develop and implement measures against bullying we need to know what works and ideally why it works. But evaluation is not always easy. Typically, pupils are asked how much bullying goes on, and then asked the same question after an anti-bullying programme is in place. But might not the problem be reducing anyway

or might, as one speaker suggested, the pupils just be telling the adults what they know they want to hear? One way of addressing these problems is to look at the “dose-response effect” to see if a more thorough implementation of the programme generates a larger response. According to Dan Olweus, his own programme meets this rigorous test. Other evaluation problems remain. Strikingly, no-one described any evaluations looking at the costs as well as the effectiveness of different programmes.

Conference outcomes

20. The wide variety of approaches to school bullying on display at the conference showed how much scope there is for sharing knowledge and experience between countries. Much sharing of this type is already taking place. The conference heard about the CORE-NET network linking research centres in Australia, Canada, Finland, Ireland, Norway and the USA, about a five country website-based network linking Denmark, Finland, Germany, Portugal and the United Kingdom funded by the EU, (and with plans for expansion to three further countries) and a network linking researchers in German speaking countries.

21. What is needed in addition? Among participants, there was a palpable sense of urgency and enthusiasm for further collaboration. One option would be an international network, with one international co-ordinator, linked to national co-ordinators designated by governments. Such a network would share information on best practice and research, provide a resource to support and encourage policy-makers, practitioners and researchers in participating countries, and offer a platform for co-operation. Many speakers expressed support for a network along these lines. David Galloway, a British researcher, suggested that it would help to remove the risk that fragmented efforts to tackle bullying might simply fizzle out through lack of co-ordination and support. It was suggested that any network should encourage a variety of approaches and that, given the existence of some groupings of countries already, one aim of any network should be to ‘network networks’.

22. Throughout the conference, intellectual rationale was balanced by an appeal to the heart. Children acted out their experience of bullying – a child who is first excluded by the class, and then subsequently embraced. One speaker opened his presentation with a Maori chant, another finished with a poem, while music punctuated the formal presentations. At the end of the event participants visited schools in the Stavanger area to see some anti-bullying programmes in action. When the conference participants boarded their planes for home, they took with them some feeling for an endeavour which is both a moral imperative as well as good policy.

Note: until November 2004 all the conference presentations are available by webcast on <http://www.conventor>.