

Taking Fear out of Schools International Policy and Research Conference on School Bullying and Violence.

Stavanger, Norway, 6-7 September, 2004.

Conference Summary and Implications for International Collaboration.

A Personal View by David Galloway

Note. This summary is based on two short addresses to the conference, one before the final Panel discussion, and the second immediately after. I have tried to summarise key points arising from papers presented to the conference and the subsequent discussions. I have also tried to identify some of the questions arising from the papers and discussions. I was invited to be controversial, and hope that I haven't overdone it! Inevitably, the result is a highly selective, personal view. To those who feel, justifiably, aggrieved that I have failed to represent their contribution, I apologise unreservedly.

A learning climate. Taking fear out of schools implies taking the fear out of learning. We cannot talk about removing fear from schools, nor from learning, without talking about the climate in which learning takes place. A successful conference has a climate that creates opportunities for lasting collaboration between members. It also maximises opportunities to learn from each other's experience. Three things have combined to create an impressively favourable climate for learning at this conference. First, it took place in Norway, the country that has done more, for the size of its population, if not overall, than any other to put school bullying and violence (SBV) and indeed other social aspects of schooling on the international agenda. The presence of Prime Minister Kjell Bondevik, Minister of Education Kristin Clemet, and Deputy Minister Helge Ole Bergesen were testimony to the priority the national government gives to SBV. Their addresses were detailed, comprehensive and constructive and gave the conference the best possible start. Second, we had a rich academic and professional program, covering major issues in policy and research internationally, national policies and local policies. It was a demanding program, requiring – and receiving – intense concentration. That was made much easier by my third point: the social and cultural programs. How better to start a conference on SBV than with children presenting their work? This, together with the music and the dinner at Flor and Fjaere, created an ideal learning climate.

Overall impression. Peter Smith's masterly overview showed how much has been achieved since the seminal work in Norway, starting in the 1970s and continuing today. He also identified some of the gaps in knowledge, not least the need for more reliable measures of SBV. But the gaps should not obscure what has been achieved. We now know much more about the nature and extent of SBV. As Christina Salmivalli told us, we also know much more about its long term effects, and as Erling

Roland showed, we are starting to get a better picture of the characteristics of schools and classes in which there is a low level of SBV. Above all, SBV is on the agenda in many, if not all, countries of the OECD. Not all member countries have national policies but there is evidence in all countries of teachers and researchers addressing the problem.

Nevertheless I believe that policy and research on bullying may be approaching a turning point. If it can build on, or develop from, what has already been achieved it could have a profound influence on the quality of children's lives at school by improving not only how schools affect children's social development, but also how schools affect their intellectual development. In contrast, if policy and research on SBV fail to develop from what has already been achieved, I fear that it may fade, and eventually fizzle out over the next five to ten years. There are two reasons: first, no area of educational policy and practice is static; if it does not develop, it fades. Second, as numerous delegates pointed out, teachers face innumerable pressures; if policy and research on SBV cannot incorporate some of these pressures, it will be replaced by them.

In the following sections I explain how the discussions in the conference led me to this view.

The importance of rigorous research and evaluation. A disturbing number of anti bullying programmes have been shown to be counter-productive: they actually make the problem worse. As Dan Olweus and Debra Pepler each pointed out, nothing could better indicate the need for rigorous evaluation. But research is also needed for other reasons. We know that some interventions reduce bullying, but not for how long they are sustainable once the program finishes. Nor do we know enough about how far a reduction in bullying generalises to other aspects of problem behaviour. And although we know that some programs are successful in reducing SBV, more work is needed to show why they are more successful in some schools than in others. Similarly, we know that there are significant differences between schools, and within schools between classes, but we still need to unravel the school and classroom factors responsible for these differences.

In an important contribution, Minister of Education and Research Kristin Clemet argued that there is no contradiction between high academic performance and education that promotes social skills. That is surely correct. We need a better understanding of how a program to reduce SBV may also enhance educational progress.

Some issues arising from discussions. An important area of discussion, and disagreement, was whether policy and research on bullying should broaden their focus. From Spain, Isabel Fernandez and Ortega Ruiz used the concept of "*convivencia*" (coexistence,) to argue that it should. From Dublin, Mona O'Moore argued that the focus should move towards all forms of abusive behaviour, not just bullying. In contrast other speakers were concerned that if we broaden the focus, we may fail to address bullying. Dan Olweus argued that bullying can be a way in, with successful programs leading to improvements in other aspects of school life.

To me, it seems that the arguments for broadening the focus are both theoretical and practical. At a theoretical level, SBV does not occur in isolation from other problem behaviours, from talking out of turn in the classroom to a wide range of much more serious internalising and externalising disorders. More important, the social and academic domains are not separate but inter-linked. As Sandra Dean pointed out, we need to look after the social *and* academic environment.

The practical reasons for broadening the focus reflect the demands on teachers. Deborah Price showed us the range of social programs for which her section of the US Department of Education is responsible. As Keith Sullivan argued, schools are busy places and if we concentrate too strongly on bullying we may miss the bigger picture. Worse, schools are expected by governments and local communities to take a wide range of new initiatives on board. If they once start thinking in terms of: “bullying this year, truancy next year, race awareness the year after”, it may be ten years or more before they get back to bullying.

A dialogue with teachers. A journalist from the Times Educational Supplement in London referred to “the lack of a cogent awareness of ramifications for teachers” among delegates to the conference. If valid – and I think it was – this was a most serious criticism, deserving more discussion than the conference was able to give it. It applies as much to policy makers as to researchers, though for different reasons. Policy makers do not always appreciate the wider implications for teachers’ time and priorities; at worst, producing a policy, (or worse, requiring school principals to produce one,) is a cynical way of fending off criticism. Researchers are often preoccupied with the details of their research, and are simply unaware of the other pressures on teachers. Several delegates pointed out that this is aggravated by the academic and professional background of many researchers in SBV being in psychology or criminology rather than in education and teaching.

To move forward, more direct communication is needed between policy makers, researchers and, most importantly, teachers. That does not mean a process of persuasion. It means a process of mutual learning in which details of intervention to reduce SBV are influenced at national level by politically determined priorities for the country’s schools and at school level by teachers’ professional experience. Such a process would include:

School effectiveness, requiring a dialogue at national level. A nation’s investment in schools has to be evaluated against its own criteria for school effectiveness. The criteria will vary from country to country but there should be agreement on two things: (a) schools exist to enhance pupils’ social development as well as their intellectual development; (b) these are interlinked – schools are social communities in which learning takes place.

School improvement and educational change, requiring a dialogue at regional and/or school level. The best schools are constantly seeking to improve, but improvement requires change and change is stressful. The schools which most need to change are often those in which resistance to change is greatest. Nowhere is this more true than of bullying. Hence, we need a better understanding of the process and complexity of change.

Children's learning, requiring a dialogue at school level. In one country represented at the conference, politicians and educators seem to believe that children learn because teachers "deliver" the curriculum. As a way of understanding learning, the delivery metaphor is vacuous at best and destructive at worst. Certainly, children can learn from what they are taught, though as every teacher knows, teaching does not ensure learning. (And as Dan Olweus pointed out, the message against bullying should be explicit and direct.) However, they also learn from *how* the curriculum is taught and from *how* the teacher reacts to problems such as bullying. Erling Roland reminded us that that requires the teacher to be confident in her or his own authority.

Pedagogy, requiring a dialogue at classroom level. Pedagogy is much more than teaching methods. It refers to the way that teachers organise the curriculum, how they create opportunities for children to learn and how they interact with children. Better than anything else it illustrates the futility of fragmentation. There is something illogical about seeking to create a social climate in which peer pressure minimises SBV, and in which children are able to seek adult help when incidents occur, without also creating opportunities for them to talk with their teachers about their other experiences at school, including the curriculum and assessment.

Issues arising from final Panel discussion.

Policy and political will. Papers at the conference revealed a wide range of national policies. Some countries have articulated policies on SBV at national level while others see this as a matter for individual schools or regional boards. Without a clear lead from policy makers it is hard for teachers or researchers to give priority to reducing SBV. The active involvement of policy makers is necessary but, for two reasons, in itself it is not sufficient. First, writing a policy on bullying is not difficult, either for a Ministry of Education official or for a school principal. For the Ministry to implement the policy requires political will. Some countries have an impressive looking policy but lack the political will to implement it. Second, political will to reduce bullying must be consistent with political will in other areas of education, for example raising standards of literacy and numeracy. If teachers realise that failure to raise academic standards will be disastrous for their school, while failure to reduce bullying will quite likely remain undetected, it is not hard to see which will have a higher priority.

A challenge for international collaborative research? I have already mentioned the concern about programs that turn out to be counter-productive. But the best programs can only be effective when: (a) teachers are able and willing to implement them, *and* (b) the program becomes incorporated into the teachers' day to day professional practice, and thus continues after the end of formal implementation. As Heinz-Werner Poelchau said, there is a limit to how much teachers can take on board. Several speakers suggested that a new international network, probably co-ordinated from Norway, should support teachers and researchers by:

- Providing a forum for collection and analysis of information
- Exploring methodologies and procedures for more reliable and valid measurements at different age levels
- Identifying what works and, as important, what does not work, thus helping teachers and policy makers to avoid re-inventing the wheel

- Elucidating the conditions for successful implementation of a range of different programs.

A role for the OECD? The OECD has a distinguished record in international collaborative research. This work includes countries not represented at the conference, such as Japan and Korea. So far the OECD's work in education has focussed on pupils' educational progress. Yet few other organisations have member countries with the expertise to produce a real advance in knowledge and understanding of the school's role in enhancing pupils' social capital. Specifically, the new international network mentioned above could:

- Explore the links between reduction in bullying, improvements in other aspects of behaviour at school and pupils' educational progress. (Minimising SBV is likely to be a pre-requisite for good educational progress, but is unlikely to be enough on its own.)
- Promote technical advances in program design and evaluation, including development of reliable and valid measures.
- Conduct international comparisons, including trials and evaluations of different programs in different countries.
- Conduct meta-analyses that provide robust information for policy makers and teachers.

Conclusion. I suggested at the beginning that research on SBV may be approaching a turning point. By building on the impressive achievements of the last 15-20 years it could develop in ways that affect children's lives by improving the quality of social experience in schools *and* the quality of learning in schools. International organisations are crucial in providing a lead.

For each of us as individuals, however, the next step may not be so clear. Six years ago I attended the ceremony at which medical and veterinary students at Edinburgh University received their degrees. The Vice Chancellor, Sir Stuart Sutherland, ended his speech of congratulations with the challenge: "Graduates of Edinburgh, go out and change the world"! Setting aside my insider knowledge that many of these students needed to recover from two weeks of solid partying and celebration before setting out to change the world, I did wonder where they should begin. But for each of us at this conference it is much easier. If we can each take away *one* idea, and use it in our capacity as policy maker, teacher or researcher to help schools in their work to reduce SBV, we will have made a good start.

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