Bullying:
What do students say?

Janis Carroll-Lind, & Alison Kearney,
Massey University College of Education.

ABSTRACT

Bullying occurs in most schools and happens to students no matter how capable, popular and well-adjusted they are. This paper reports on a study that examines the nature and extent of bullying and explores the context of bullying and school violence in New Zealand schools. Approximately 1370 students from seven primary and three secondary schools participated in the study. Using a survey approach, a questionnaire was designed to examine the prevalence and incidence of different types of bullying; the nature of the actual bullying and where it is most likely to happen; schools' responses to bullying, including the issues of reporting and why students choose not to tell. Results indicate that all of the participating schools reported bullying to a greater or lesser extent. Listening to the voices of students in this study extends understanding of the issues around bullying. The results led to recommendations based on issues of policy, supervision (particularly in the areas identified by the students as being "hot spots") and communication, with an emphasis on reporting and the need to create a culture of "safe telling" to ensure safe emotional learning environments for all students.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is deliberately harmful behaviour, repeated over a period of time, by a person or group, who target a less powerful person as the victim. The hurtful actions can be (1) physical, such as hitting and punching; (2) verbal assaults, such as teasing and name calling; or (3) indirect, such as psychological exclusion from friendship groups or spreading rumours (Demaray & Malecki, 2003).

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Research into the phenomenon of bullying began in the 1970s with a seminal study by Olweus (1972). Subsequent studies have extended his work (Ahmad, Whitney, & Smith, 1991; Besag, 1989; Olweus, 1992, 1993; Smith, 1994; Smith & Ahmad, 1990; Whitney & Smith, 1993). In 1992, building on his earlier research, Olweus conducted a nationwide survey of over 140,000 junior and senior high school pupils from 8 to 16 years. This Norwegian study found that 15% of children self reported involvement in bullying. Of this fifteen percent, 9 to 10% were involved as victims and 5 to 6% as bullies. Similarly, a British study (Smith, 1994; Whitney & Smith, 1993) found that in primary schools up to a quarter of the pupils reported experiences of bullying. Approximately one in every ten cases was persistent. There was less, but more serious bullying in secondary schools, with about one in twenty five suffering persistent bullying.

Early New Zealand studies mirror these international statistics. Kearney (1993), surveyed 300 pupils, aged nine years and over, from primary, intermediate and secondary schools within one provincial city. She found that half of the children reported being either physically or emotionally bullied two to four times a year. Ten percent of the students said that they had been bullied at least once a week. Cram, Doherty, and Pocock's (1995) major survey of nearly 1000 children from primary, intermediate and secondary schools in South Auckland showed an even higher prevalence of bullying than Kearney. Seventy-six percent of children in the South Auckland schools reported being bullied and a similar percentage reported that they have witnessed bullying. Approximately one in ten children reported that they were bullied several times a week during the school term. The frequency of bullying was highest for boys and among those aged 7 to 12 years.

Maxwell and Carroll-Lind (1997) found that within any given year it is likely that at least half of all school children are bullied and 10% are bullied weekly. Keenan's (1995) study found similarly high levels of both physical and emotional bullying in a New Zealand provincial secondary school. Findings from Nash and Harker's (1998) study of 37 secondary schools indicate that some schools jeopardise the safety of their students. The reasons cited were poor relationships between staff and students and the school's failure to prevent bullying. Boys' schools with a large 'working class' intake were particularly vulnerable. Nash and Harker concluded "the bullying that goes on in such schools scars more students than we like to think about" (1998, p. 51).

"RECENT LITERATURE INDICATES THAT BULLYING REMAINS A MAJOR ISSUE FACING SCHOOLS TODAY."

CURRENT RESEARCH

Since Olweus (1972) first highlighted the problem of bullying in schools, research has continued to advance knowledge in this area. Recent literature indicates that bullying remains a major issue facing schools today (for example, Orpinas, Horne & Staniszewski, 2003; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). A large New Zealand study by Adair, Dixon, Moore and Sutherland (2000) revealed that 75% of the 2066 secondary students surveyed stated they had been bullied during that year and 44% had bullied others.

So what is to be done about bullying? A decade ago Besag (1989) identified qualities in schools that promote a culture of non-violence. She suggested strategies to alleviate bullying and to support victims through a positive school climate. Tattum and Tattum (1992) stated that schools have an obligation to provide a safe environment for children and eradicate bullying. They considered that adults within schools should supply positive role models, encourage the development of social skills and provide support for individual children at risk. Qualities such as consistent and fair rules, the recognition and acknowledgment of the impact of bullying, a rapid response to it and responses that minimise the victim's feelings of responsibility are essential elements of effective schools in this country (Maxwell & Carroll-Lind, 1997). Sullivan (2000b) stresses too, that when schools do develop such approaches, where expectations are clearly stated and reinforced and a whole school initiative is developed, bullying is more likely to be dealt with effectively.

"WHERE EXPECTATIONS ARE CLEARLY STATED AND REINFORCED AND A WHOLE SCHOOL INITIATIVE IS DEVELOPED, BULLYING IS MORE LIKELY TO BE DEALT WITH EFFECTIVELY."

Eslea and Smith (1998) also showed that it is possible to reduce the incidence of bullying through the use of whole school anti-bullying policies; curriculum activities; environmental improvements as well as individual work with both bullies and victims. They also cautioned, however, that schools must maintain the momentum of their anti-bullying work as well as continuing to respond to the reporting of bullying by children. Interventions bring about increased awareness of bullying. As stated by Orpinas, Horne and Staniszewski (2003) "bullying prevention programmes are more likely to be incorporated into sustained practice when teachers and administrators have played a key role in the development and implementation of the programme" (p. 441).

The literature underlines the important relationship between bullying and learning because as stated by Massey (1998), cognitive skills are so critical to academic success, self-esteem, coping skills and resilience. According to Cicchetti, Toth, and Lynch (1993) "integration into the peer group, acceptable performance in the classroom, and appropriate motivational orientations for achievement are all part of the task of successful adaptation to school" (p. 54). In a New Zealand report Safe Students in Safe Schools, the Education Review Office (2000) make a policy statement that:

> the educational and social development of students at school is closely linked to their physical and emotional safety. Students cannot learn effectively if they are physically or verbally abused, victims of violence or bullying, or if their school surroundings are unsafe. (p. 1).

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature and extent of bullying and to explore the context of bullying in New Zealand schools. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the prevalence and incidence of bullying?
2. What types of bullying do students experience?
3. Where is bullying most likely to happen at school?
4. How do schools respond to bullying?
5. Do victims of bullying tell anyone and if so, who?

METHOD

Contrary to the more usual method of selecting a research sample, the participating schools in this study all requested their inclusion in the project as a result of interest generated by an article about school bullying written by the researchers. These schools accepted the invitation to enter a collaborative research project to find out about the nature and extent of bullying in their own schools and to be proactive in addressing this critical aspect of school life. In return for an individual analysis of their own school, they understood that the researchers would disseminate a report on the combined results of all the participating schools.

Approximately 1480 male and female students from eight primary and three secondary schools participated in the study during the final school term of 2002. While not a large representative sample of New Zealand schools, nevertheless, the participating schools and their students did reflect a variety of size, socioeconomic status, ages (7-18 year olds), geographical areas (both North and South Island) as well as including both urban and rural schools.

Using a survey approach, Sullivan's (2000a) questionnaire was adapted to examine the prevalence and incidence of different types of bullying; the nature of the actual bullying and where it is most likely to happen; schools' responses to bullying, including the issues of reporting; and why students choose not to tell. All participating schools were invited to make adaptations to the questionnaire to best suit the specific needs of their school. Schools were given the autonomy to add their own questions to the base questionnaire and these were analysed for that specific school's report. Most of the adaptations were made to the questionnaire in light of schools' suggestions to 'fine tune' the wording of the questions. If adaptations were made, they were minor in nature and did not affect the data processing, for example, one school might have used the word cloak bay and another the word, cloak room or locker room. Some schools included the names of areas within their school where bullying possibly could take place. The majority of questions, however, were standardised to all schools. Only the questions that were consistent to all schools have been included in the combined data analysis.

"BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAMMES ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE INCORPORATED INTO SUSTAINED PRACTICE WHEN TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS HAVE PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME."

The questionnaires were administered in the students' natural setting, their classrooms. Schools were given the choice to administer the questionnaire to their students themselves or use the researchers. Only one school asked the researchers to do this and in many instances, principals conducted the questionnaire within their own school.

The questionnaire provided the respondents with the following definition of bullying:

> Bullying can be hitting, kicking, or the use of force in any way. It can be teasing, making rude gestures, name-calling, or leaving you out. Bullying means that these things happened more than once and were done by the same person or persons. Bullying means to hurt either physically or so that you feel very bad.

RESULTS

The individual school results were analysed first and each participating school was given a full report of the findings for their school. The results were then combined to give an overall picture of the nature and extent of bullying in these New Zealand schools. The combined results of the ten schools (1370 students) are presented below.

Prevalence and Incidence

While 37% of students said they had never been bullied, the majority (63%) reported one or more experiences of bullying within the past year.

- 50% were bullied "once in a while";
- 8% were bullied "about once a week"; and
- 5% were bullied "more than once a week".

TABLE 1:
I have been bullied in the following ways within the current year.

TYPE OF BULLYING	NUMBER	% OF CASES
Mean teasing	579	46
Purposely left out	321	33
Rude gestures, mean faces made at me	330	34
Things said to make others dislike me	135	26
Untrue, mean gossip spread about me	332	34
Had my things damaged or stolen	319	26
Hitting, punching, kicking, shoving	507	41
Horribly sworn at	278	27
Nasty racial remarks	155	15
Received nasty letter(s)	99	8
I was threatened	225	23
Offensive sexual suggestions	167	14
Knife, or some kind of weapon*	79	8

Note: The totals of both the frequency and percentage of cases reflect the fact that respondents may have ticked more than one category of bullying.

* Students were not asked to specify weapons, although some responses identified sticks and other similar objects as the type of weapon used.

TABLE 2:
Who did you tell that you were being bullied?

	NUMBER	% OF CASES
Friend	568	79
Parents or guardians	517	38
No-one*	231	17
Duty teacher	177	13
Class teacher	260	19
Other school staff	138	10

* 2 schools did not answer the "told no-one" box.

Reporting Bullying

If victims of bullying told someone about their bullying experiences, they most likely disclosed to their friends. As one student said "I have been threatened not to tell anyone but I told my friend anyway". It seems that teachers are often the last to be told about bullying at school. This finding has implications for the development of effective communication channels within schools.

When asked the question: "If you did not tell anyone about the bullying, why not?" the majority of respondents cited the reasons that it would make it worse or that they didn't want to be a 'nark'. Some indicative explanations include:

- "The only reason I don't tell is because it gets ten times as worse."
- "Because then the people would get in trouble and want to beat you up."
- "Didn't want to be a little nark."
- "I thought it would just make things worse and it would make me soft."
- "I was scared about telling an adult because the person might deny doing it."
- "I didn't tell because they are my friends who I knew for a long time."
- "They would give me another hiding if I told."
- 'I didn't think it was important and my parents might not believe me or do anything about it."
- "Because I was too upset and I didn't want to tell anyone."
- "Some teachers don't do anything about it. If I've been bullied in [name of previous school] my brother's mates come to help."

Most of the bullies came from the same class as the victims, or were of the same age but from a different class. This dispels the long held myth that bullies are the bigger, older student.

TABLE 3:
Who bullied you?

WHERE ARE THE BULLIES FROM?	NUMBER	% OF RESPONDENTS
From my class	457	34
From a different class/same age	283	21
From an older class	250	18
From another school	219	16
From a younger class	152	11

Witnessing Bullying

Fewer students reported witnessing bullying than admitted to experiencing bullying. Table 4 reports the number of students who had witnessed bullying in the year of the survey.

TABLE 4:

Witnessing Bullying
During the current year I have seen bullying happen.

HOW OFTEN	PERCENTAGE
Once in a while	46%
About once a week	20%
More than once a week	20%
Never	14%

Bullying Locations

Students were asked to list the danger spots around the school where they considered most of the bullying to occur. Their comments provided an insight into school life and provided valuable information to the individual schools, in terms of increasing supervision in the locations identified within their own school. However a clear pattern emerged in that the playground was identified (to a lesser or greater degree, depending on the bullying culture within the school) as the main danger spot in all of the participating schools. Furthermore students from every school commented that bullying happened in the locations where there were no teachers. For example: "In the classroom when the teacher is not in the room", "In the playground with no duty teachers around", and "Where the teachers aren't!"

The Role of Teachers

Teachers can make either a positive or negative difference for victims of bullying. Students in this study reported that they were more likely to be bullied in places where teachers weren't, but of more concern is the incidence of reported bullying in the presence of teachers who do nothing to stop it. For example:

> I know this boy who gets bullied at [name of College] and they do it around the teachers but teachers don't do anything about it.

> Teachers need to act on someone they see being bullied in class. Also more staff on duty.

DISCUSSION

Findings indicate that all of the participating schools experienced some degree of bullying and supports previous research that few schools are immune to bullying (for example, Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Furlong, Morrison & Greif, 2003; Sullivan, 2000b). No matter how capable, popular and well-adjusted students are, many of them experience bullying in one form or another. This study, where 63% of the participants said they had been bullied, validates the other studies reporting high rates of bullying within our New Zealand schools.

The results from this study thus led to recommendations based on issues of policy, supervision (particularly in the areas identified by the students as being "hot spots") and communication, with an emphasis on reporting and the need to create a culture of "safe telling", not only by the victims of bullying but also by those who observe the bullying as well.

"STUDENTS NEED TO BE ENCOURAGED TO STAND TALL TOGETHER, TO VOICE THEIR DISAPPROVAL AND TO INTERVENE."

Many students reported that bullying happens in places where teachers are not present. This is in keeping with research which indicates many bullying episodes happen in unstructured contexts such as the playground (Leff, Power, Costigan & Manz, 2003). The quick solution may be to advise schools to increase their supervisory procedures, however that is not the only answer. We know that both the victims and witnesses of bullying are choosing not to tell their teachers, for whatever reason. Perhaps friends and peers hold the key to turning around the culture of bullying. The New Zealand study by Adair, Dixon, Moore and Sutherland (2000) found that when bullying was observed by other students, they were just as likely to ignore it as to take action. With bullying, there are no neutral observers (Sullivan, 2000b). This study adds weight to the work done by Adair et al., (2000) and Sullivan (2000b) by showing that peers are likely to witness bullying incidents that happen at school - therefore they can play a large part in overturning the peer culture of condoning inappropriate behaviour. Based on these findings, we suggest that students need to be encouraged to stand tall together, to voice their disapproval and to intervene. While this may raise the debate regarding just how much responsibility should be given to peers in these circumstances, our recommendation is supported in the literature, for example, Rodkin and Hodges, (2003) see students as the most valuable resource for combating bullying.

Systems could be introduced to raise the likelihood of teachers being informed about the bullying happening at the school. Similarly, when teachers are approachable and willing to act on what they hear, victims of bullying are more likely to disclose their experiences to them. Results from this study indicate that there is a clear link between student belief that teachers are making an effort regarding bullying

and the occurrence of bullying within a school. In this regard, Rodkin and Hodges (2003) suggest that it is teachers who get to know their students and the "peer ecologies" (p. 391) in which they operate who are most successful in reducing the incidence of bullying. Similarly, Demaray and Malecki (2003) write of the importance of social support for both victims and bullies.

National and international literature consistently points to the need for whole school policy and procedures to address issues of bullying (see Olweus, 1993; Sullivan, 2000b). Orpinas, Horne and Staniszewski (2003) provocatively advise "changing the problem by changing the school" (p.431) thus rightly pointing out that the problem of bullying is not one that will be solved by focusing solely on the students themselves.

We believe that even if policies are already written, they need to be communicated clearly to students, teachers and the wider school community. They also need to be regularly reviewed for their effectiveness. Student and parent voices are imperative in this process.

CONCLUSION

The way bullying is handled can make a difference to how it is coped with. Too often bullying is viewed as the 'rough and tumble' of childhood or simply 'as part of growing up'. We entrust our children to our schools for 12-13 years of their lives, therefore schools have a responsibility to provide safe physical and emotional learning environments for their students. Recognising the need to create a safe learning environment is the first step. Uncovering the nature and extent of bullying in schools and taking steps to address issues, particularly through whole school policy is also important. By extending knowledge and understanding of students' experiences of bullying from their perspective, school cultures can be created that prohibit rather than sanction violence.

"TEACHERS WHO GET TO KNOW THEIR STUDENTS AND THE 'PEER ECOLOGIES' IN WHICH THEY OPERATE ARE THE MOST SUCCESSFUL IN REDUCING THE INCIDENCE OF BULLYING."

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Janis Carroll-Lind

Janis is a senior lecturer in inclusive education at Massey University College of Education. She teaches in both pre-service and in-service teacher education for early childhood, primary and secondary programmes. Prior to her current position at Massey, Janis has been a classroom teacher, adjustment class teacher for children with behaviour difficulties and a resource teacher of special needs.
Her current research interests include projects involving children's experiences of violence and bullying; special education policy and provisions; effective practices for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder; school-based action research to improve whole school practices for students with behaviour difficulties; and a national stock-take of identification and provisions for gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools.

Contact at: J.Carroll-Lind@ massey.ac.nz

Alison Kearney

Alison Kearney is a senior lecturer in the Department of Learning and Teaching at Massey University College of Education. As a researcher, she has been involved in a range of projects including the monitoring and evaluation of the policy, Special Education 2000 (1999 – 2001); A 'stock-take' of school provisions for gifted and talented learners in New Zealand schools (2004) and two action research projects aimed at improving practices for students on the Autistic Spectrum, (2003-2004). She is the paper coordinator for a compulsory inclusive education paper that is part of the BEd (tchg) degree at Massey University and also teaches Educational Psychology at graduate level. Prior to taking up her present position at the College of Education, Alison was a primary school teacher; a Guidance and Learning Teacher; and a Resource Teacher, Special Needs.

Contact at: a.c.kearney@massey.ac.nz