This article gives an account of the research, theory and empirical findings of a research and development project lasting nearly five years which took place within the framework of the ArctiChildren Project. In terms of background, bullying is viewed from an educational and societal perspective, in which developments and trends in research are elucidated. The control documents regulating the activities of schools are accounted for and the Equality of Treatment Act is extensively dealt with. The concept of bullying is discussed under its own heading. National and international research on the effects and consequences of bullying are accounted for. The theory section concludes with a survey of various different programmes, models, plans and methods for preventing and dealing with bullying in schools. Under the headings ‘Development Work in the ArctiChildren II Project’ and ‘Research in the ArctiChildren Project’, the work done in the participating schools is reported.

Background

Everybody who has had anything to do with schools will have heard about a pupil that has been bullied. Despite conventions and legislation intended to guarantee a secure learning environment, bullying of pupils is one of the biggest problems in schools. Although Sweden is considered a leading country as regards preventing and taking legal measures against bullying in the compulsory nine-year school system (Forsman, 2006), about 100,000 pupils are estimated to be involved in bullying on a daily basis, as victims, perpetrators, sometimes in both capacities, and as various categories of sympathisers and helpers. In every class there is at least one pupil who is afraid of going to school. This exposure is the biggest threat to pupils’ health, learning and development. The victims are likely to regard the control documents’ commitments to the inviolability of human life and schools’ obligation to protect every pupil from being exposed to acts of cruelty and insults as empty rhetoric. Pupils are to be protected against violence, acts of cruelty and bullying, in that order, which are the three most important factors to come to grips with in schools (Friends, 2006).

In the public debate on education, several ministers for schools and education have stated as a mantra that prevention of bullying is to be given the highest priority. In the 1960s the debate on bullying in schools and research into it started (Heinemann, 1972). The Swedish term for bullying, mobbing, is derived from the Latin phrase mobile vulgus, meaning ‘the easily moveable crowd’. It was thus established that bullying is a group phenomenon. Heinemann was followed by Olweus (1973), best known internationally in the discourse on bullying, and his contemporary Pikas (1975). Both developed ways of preventing and taking measures against bullying in schools. The approach chosen in order to prevent and take measures against bullying are subordinate to the users’ ambitions and the resources available for implementation (Forsman, 2003). Peer bullying in a school is a serious signal that the school as a whole is not working properly. Focusing only on the pupils’ relationships is therefore an insufficient measure (Fonags, 2005). Gill and Eriksson’s study of reports to the recently established Ombudsmen for Children and Pupils showed that more than a third of the bullies were teachers (Gill & Eriksson, 2007). Frånberg (2003) and Skolverket (2002, 1999, 1997) pointed to shortcomings in schools’ ways of preventing and taking measures against harassment of and acts of cruelty against pupils. The highest control authority, the National Agency for Education, also leaves a great deal to be desired in its investigative and follow-up duties (Forsman, 2003). Larsson (2000) showed that teachers’ lack of basic theoretical qualifications in social psychology and education implies an obvious risk of interstructural and infrastructural conflicts and problems being neglected. The problems that they cannot deal with are made into non-events or ‘swept under the carpet’. A new, promising niche in the context of bullying is the method of school reconciliation (Märklund, 1997) intended to teach pupils to solve conflicts in a constructive way. By means of simple and brief educational efforts, pupils learn to solve conflicts constructively in order to be able to proceed without unnecessary obstacles in the form of blocks, tensions or further confrontations. Systematic harassment, acts of cruelty or direct violence are found in all sectors of society (Hallberg & Strandmark, 2004; Eriksson, Lindberg, Flygare & Daneback, 2002; Leymann, 1986), in trade union organisations (Berlin & Enqvist, 1998), in health care (Lennér-Axelson & Thylefors, 1999, Thylefors, 1999), in religious organisations and in sports (Friends, 2007). If schools are mirrors of
The effects and consequences of bullying

A small or subtle but recurring dose of actions violating a person’s integrity over time will drain this person’s reserve and leave her/him self-reliant that she is unable to defend herself and avoid the violations, which they might have done if they had only a little more faith in their own abilities, or if there had been somebody with sufficient moral courage to protest against the abuse (Olsson, 1998).

Bullying at School

Research approaches and research into the bullying discourse

In spite of increasing attention to and insight into the problem, bullying does not seem to be decreasing in schools. An inter-group study from preschool to municipal adult education and in the inter- or intra-school context (Pettersson, 2002) showed that bullying at school towards a powerful perspective. Fors calls the bully a tormentor who, with the aid of power, forces others to do things they do not want to do. In ‘entertainment violence’, there is a pattern-forming effect in the form of model learning. If the perpetrator of an outrage becomes modelled after a certain TV production like Robinson reward scheming and cheating with prizes of up to half a million Swedish crowns. To be fair is more or less a disadvantage in this and similar TV series, many of which are financed by tax money. In ‘entertainment violence’, there is a pattern-forming effect in the form of model learning. If the perpetrator of an outrage becomes identified with the role character and ultimately act in the same way later on. The most serious consequence of bullying, that bullying may be compared to a game. Forsman (2000) also described many bullies’ eminent ability to ‘orchestrate’ scenarios in which the bully is the expert on changing and breaking up the relationship between boys. Bergqvist (2002) used a gender-power perspective in a study of the bullying of schoolboys and schoolgirls, where the bullying boys utilise their physical superiority, chiefly against victims of the same sex. Eriksson et al.’s (2002) point of departure was chiefly in sociology, where like Rigby (2002), they thought that the field of research must be widened to include arenas like barracks, institutions, ships and prisons. Petterson’s (1997) research into preschool children’s way of relating to one another identified children lacking in their empathic ability. Both Hägglund (1996) and Bliding (2002) applied a socio-cultural perspective in their research. Wrethander and Bliding (2002) describe social relationships and social order in a group” (preface) and focus on a wider social whole in order to better understand the real face of bullying is sometimes hard to discover. There may be an éminence grise who stealthily controls her/his classmate and dictates the relationships in the class. Often the teacher does not detect the “brain” behind the bullying and the infringement. If this person functions well socially and verbally and is intellectually well equipped with a good position in the group of mates, her/his bullying may soon think that they deserve to be harassed and maltreated. The often recorded anxiety in victims of bullying and parents’ fear for their exposed children might well be a result of an upbringing that implies that victims are anxious by nature and that being overprotected by their parents is therefore perceived as another violation. Violence connected to bullying has therefore more aggravated and elaborated (Björk 1999, idetid). Mobile phone devices are used to send offensive messages or photos. The Internet with its chats and blogs is a common forum for harassment, threats and pictures taken in sensitive situations. These pictures and texts, often produced without the victim’s knowledge or consent, may remain there permanently and be utilised by unscrupulous people in an improper way. The latest report from Bullets (Denmark, 2006) shows that more than half of the students (57%) who have been bullied in the last year have felt that many young people had a problematic virtual existence. Child psychiatry has warned against ignoring and making light of observed lack of empathy among children. Children with lack of empathy may be regarded as a role signals that something serious was going to happen. Yet people in the surroundings did not react until it was too late. The concept of bullying is vague because there are many different definitions. Some of these are very restrictive, while others are as generally worded as “bullying is when somebody is badly treated” (Staff, 1997, 13). There is still uncertainty about what kind of bullying should be dealt with by the police and how the school should act if it falls under the criminal code, for example unlawful threats, violation of a person’s integrity, assault and battery, etc. and must hence also be reported to the social authorities, and, if the perpetrator is criminally responsible, to the police authorities (Bäck, 2002). 

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bullying dealt with in the media often lead to settlement between the parties, however, as the victims of bullying and their families do not manage to bring an action against the municipalities involved.

Action plans, models, methods and programmes against bullying

The Equality of Treatment Plan (the Child and Pupil Protection Act) by and large replaces earlier anti-bullying documents. The most established plan for preventing and taking measures against bullying is based on zero tolerance of measures. The programme is divided into different steps and targeted at pupils (individual level), teachers (class level) and school management and parents (school level). Norwegian schools who work with Olösve’s method are required to have a daily course for all their staff. Olösve’s evidence-based data from hundreds of thousands of pupils showed that the use of Olösve’s handbook on bullying (Larsen, 1996) led to a decreased bullying by more than half. The method is based on clear rules, follow-up and established sanctions for breaches of rules. Vandalising also decreased and the social climate among staff and pupils improved. The pupils’ attitudes to education and learning became more positive and the effects lasted over time. There is an enormous amount of data from countries that have used Olösve’s questionnaire and measure programme. Earlier results have also been confirmed where the programme has been followed according to instructions (Frey, 2005). Pakhí’s (2005) research on bullying and bullying prevention (Olösve, 1999) is focused on breaking the destructive dynamics in the bullying group through individual and collective talks and making the ambition of creating a favourable class climate a common desired goal. The method is structured into five phases and steps where the end result is to at least put a stop to bullying. In the optimal solution, everybody will have gained a better insight into and greater respect and tolerance for other people’s “doing”. It is not a matter of looking for scapegoats but of making everybody take their responsibility for changing and improving a bad situation. The pupils and the teacher are taught to handle conflicts through exercises. Sympathisers are encouraged to call forth their moral courage to intervene in bullying the next time. When the bullying has ceased, the bul- lies are to be treated as any other pupils. Fors (1993) calls this method fascist because of the power inequality that suspected bullies are confronted with in the interrogation of them, as Fors calls it, conducted by two teachers. Another criticism is the risk that some pupils can be targeted for questioning in case the intervention does not work immediately. Lagerman and Stenberg (2001) base their Österholm Model on the meth- odology of the Farsta Model. The model contains a teacher guide, a theory section, questionnaires, and individual and group exercises. The implementation of the model has led to a reduction of bullying by up to 80%. Roland and Størens Va- lavaara (2003) support the programme (2000) for bullying victims by putting together parents and supported by experts, schools work actively for a year to implement the programme. The programme contains ideals, insights, action plans, manuals and materials (Roland, 1996). The purposeful and sys- tematic work at individual and system level has a preventive effect on bullying.

Development work in the ArctiChildren project

The development work in the three schools involved consist of regular, monthly visits. In addition to lectures and study circles as well as education mainly of pupil welfare and anti- bullying teams, the work concerning bullying was conducted on a consultant basis. In one school, Dennda dage (‘The Evil Day’) (Hildefors et al, 2004) was introduced as study circle material. In all three schools different methods of implement- ing and taking measures against bullying were studied, and research into, theories of and exploratory models for bullying were discussed. The schools’ anti-bullying programmes were taught and implemented. The staff at the schools work out the schools’ equality of treatment plans, which were made vital instruments in the schools’ everyday life. The con- sultant support was regarded as very valuable for the schools’ competence development. Lectures on bullying for pupils and at parents’ meetings were recurrent and appreciated activities. The symbolic value of an external person talking about bul- ling had a very great effect on the pupils’ ideas and attitudes. Implementations and models for conflict solution were ac- counted for and discussed.

During a break, the teacher on break duty sees four pupils in a second- year class hiding after luring another pupil into running an errand. The teacher on break duty directly has individual conversations with all those involved and then reports to the anti- bullying team. In the individual talks with the four pupils, emphasis is put on their and the victim’s experiences of the incident. Having realised the extent and the gravity of their action, they are noticeably respectful. The conversation concludes by informing them that they will be under special observation during the next few weeks. In the teacher’s words: “Let me place this week later in the history of individual talks with all those involved. The talks and the class teacher and the teachers on break don’t show anything that could be a problem in the future and that the atmosphere has improved. Great importance is attached to encouraging and sup- porting conflict solutions and to praising the pupils for their altered attitude and the new good friendship. The matter is considered settled after these talks. The teacher on break duty concludes and files. (A member of the pupil care team)

In one school, a victim of bullying belonged to the category of provoking or provocative victims of bullying (Olweus, 1998; Pikas, 1998). After a great deal of work with classmates, other pupils, the victim and his parents, the latter were recom- mended to visit the anti-bullying centre for help from social authorities. The work on preventing bullying has been presented at both national and international conferences. Outside the participant schools, the project has also attracted great attention from educational and teacher education programmes in Norway, Finland and Russia. One result of the development work is that the organisation Friends visited a school on two occasions in order to educate pupils and staff in their programme (Friends, 2007). Other results are Jokkmokk Sami School’s cooperation with Sevjiarnjávri School in Finland and the R and D work with knowledge from the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi. Special attention was paid to the coarse language used in an- other school.

‘Just as I came out of the stuff room, I heard it... “You whoe, give me a cigarette.” It was Kent in 8B, accompanied by Nils, and he was shouting at Lena, who was standing with Eva from the other side of the room. “Can you imagine that. But why don’t you say that you will not tolerate this kind of thing?” “We have given up, you know,” said Lena. “Den onda dagen” (‘The Evil Day’) (Hildefors et al., 2004) was introduced as study circle material. In all three schools different methods of implement- ing and taking measures against bullying were studied, and research into, theories of and exploratory models for bullying were discussed. The schools’ anti-bullying programmes were taught and implemented. The staff at the schools work out the schools’ equality of treatment plans, which were made vital instruments in the schools’ everyday life. The con- sultant support was regarded as very valuable for the schools’ competence development. Lectures on bullying for pupils and at parents’ meetings were recurrent and appreciated activities. The symbolic value of an external person talking about bul- ling had a very great effect on the pupils’ ideas and attitudes. Implementations and models for conflict solution were ac- counted for and discussed.

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Research in the ArcticChildren project

In 2004, 281 pupils in year classes 6–8, with an even gender distribution, answered Olweus’s (1996) questionnaire. The purpose was to survey the bullying problems in their school. The 278 questionnaires that could be compiled and analysed (Ahonen et al., 2006) showed that 10% of the pupils had been bullied in the last few months and that more than one pupil in every class was afraid of being bullied by classmates. This, together with the fact that more boys now bully and are bullied, is consistent with previous research (Smith et al., 2001).

That the climate in schools is harsh (Brattforsbyggande rådet, 2006; BRIS, 2006) is evident from the findings that every fifth boy could take part in bullying someone they did not like, and that an equally large proportion, in total, thought that it was the victim’s own fault. This attitude is more marked in the higher year classes. The lack of moral courage was confirmed in that only two out of three pupils were prepared to interfere even if they thought that they ought to help the bullied person (Olweus, 1993).

The material showed that more than one pupil in every class had no or only one friend, often a person in the same situation. In several school shootings (Hasdall, 2002), the perpetrator was often a biter and rancorous “lonely wolf” or had a like-minded, or estranged friend. It is interesting to note, however, that in spite of thefts and damage occurring in the school, none of the respondents stated that they had stolen or damaged anything. This data may be explained by the theory of Social Deindividuation (Pervin & John, 1997).

More than every fourth pupil thought that the teachers were not doing enough to prevent bullying. This figure might indicate that the school’s anti-bullying work had started yielding results.

Summary

History, research and daily living conditions in the school show the urgent need for more reliable intentions from politicians, heads of schools, parents and pupils to create sustainable resources to deal with all types of violence in school. Too many pupils are mentally and physically abused in school every day. Competence and further education are two areas that must be strengthened among school staff. To create and keep the municipalities, the school districts’ and the individual schools’ documents for preventing and taking measures against peer bullying as living instruments must be of the highest priority. Although it might be a utopian idea to totally eradicate peer bullying in school, more actions against ostracism and intimidation will have a good effect in the school. The costs of preventing violence and creating good learning conditions in school are less than those of taking care of both the victims and the perpetrators in the future. Among others, Olweus (1973, 1976, 1998, 1999) has shown that peer bullying could be reduced considerably by a properly implemented action programme and one spin-off effect could be a better social climate in school. In Sweden some smaller positive effects in the field of peer bullying have been achieved by the ArctiChildren II Project. The costs of preventing violence and creating good learning conditions in school are less than taking care of both the victims and the perpetrators in the future. Among others Olweus (1973, 1976, 1998, 1999) has shown that peer bullying could be reduced considerably by a properly implemented action programme and one spin-off effect could be a better social climate in school. In Sweden some smaller positive effects in the field of peer bullying has been achieved by the ArctiChildren II Project.

References


Bullying at School


