Bullying at School

A threat to Pupils Health, Learning and Development

Arne Forsman

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 1960´s the debate on bullying in schools and research into it started

(Heineman, 1972). The Swedish term for bullying, *mobbning*, is derived from the Latin phrase *mobile* vulgus, meaning 'the easily moveable crowd'. It was thus established that bullying is a group phenomenon. Heineman 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. Lagerman and Stenberg (2001), Ljungström (1997), Staff (1997), Roland (1996) and *Friends* and *Tillsammans* ('Together') are further examples of people and organisations that have developed anti-bullying models, programmes and methods. The approaches 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 (Fonagy, 2005). Gill and Eriksson's study of reports to the recently established *Ombudsman 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 intrastructural 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 (Marklund, 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-Axelsson & Thylefors, 1999; Thylefors, 1999), in religious organisations and in sports (Friends, 2007). If schools are mirrors of

society, a harsher climate and more violence may be expected among pupils (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2006).

What is bullying?

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 pupils' care services of schools and what 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 liable, to the police authority for further investigation. Bullying may be active and physical like kicking and hitting a person, or passive in the form of exclusion. It may also be actively, deliberately mental through "psyching", often verbal or passive through silence, pretending the victim does not exist, mimicry and gestures. The criteria of continuity, systematic behaviour, some form of violence and unequal treatment to the detriment of the victim should be present. The concepts of stalking and penalising have been added to the discourse on bullying. Stalking is not leaving the victim alone in order to create a feeling of constant insecurity and fear, if nothing else. Penalising involves justly or unjustly accusing a person of something that will have to be replaced or compensated for. For girls this might imply having to pay with sexual services. One difference between bullying and harassing somebody is that the harassment may be a single occurrence. In his questionnaire Olweus says "…once a week or more often". Bullying is systematic, performed in the same way or at the same place and time. Boys most often bully directly physically with kicks and punches (Olweus, 1998). Girls bully more subtly through spreading rumours, verbal allusions, gestures and mimicry or by ostracising somebody (Wrethander Bliding, 2007; Besag, 2006). The power relation does not necessarily have to be based on the bully's physical superiority, however, but may be a matter of the group's oppression of a single individual. Many victims are so downtrodden and have such low self-reliance that they are unable to defend themselves and avoid the violations, which they might have done if they had only had 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).

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 power (Forsman, 2003). Besag (2006) found that girls' subtle bullying may cause more severe health effects than boys' more direct manifestations. If there is no opportunity for recovery, further violations may result in a total breakdown in the form of burnout, or in diagnostic terms, exhaustion depression. The rehabilitation may take several years and require high therapeutic qualifications (Krauklis & Schenström, 2002). The experience of being bullied may be compared to a walk along the path to Golgotha (Rannelid, 1997), where the victim has been violated and tormented from the first to the last day in an obligatory nine-year school. The consequences of the trauma involve a grave crisis with lifelong negative physical, mental and socially disabling effects (Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Cullberg, 1973). Bullied persons suffer from depressive states with suicidal tendencies six times more often than the normal population (BRIS, 2006). Every year a couple of pupils choose to take their own lives as a last desperate resort. Other may take a dreadful revenge on their tormentors as well as on teachers who participated in or did not protect them from the abuse. Such acts of violence have been committed in the USA, Russia, Australia, Canada, Germany and France. The most well-known case is the Columbine High School Shooting, where the perpetrators harboured hatred for the school and the community that they felt had ostracised and discriminated against them (Hasday, 2002). Up until 7 November 2007, when eight people were murdered at the school in Jokela outside Helsinki, the Nordic countries had been spared from school massacres. Perpetrators also fall within the danger zone of negative psychosocial development. As adults they are found disproportionately more often in social and criminal records as assailants and maltreaters (Olweus, 1998). Einarsen et al. (1998) made a connection between school bullying and subsequent bullying of adults.

Men (Einarsen et al., 1998) and adolescent boys (Pikas, 1998) often denied that bullying had taken place if the perpetrator was a woman. Berlin and Enqvist (1998) showed that there are enormous social costs caused by sick leave, rehabilitation, nursing and early retirement. An unhealthy working climate is very expensive for employers. According to Hallberg and Strandmark (2004), bullying is a public health problem that may cause the victims to enter into a spirit of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975), in particular if they have had previous experiences of being harassed. Just as in the case of women who suffer domestic violence, the victims of 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 bullying. Olweus is of the opinion that victims of bullying are anxious by nature and that being overprotected by their parents is therefore perceived as another violation. Violence connected to bullying has become more aggravated and elaborate (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2006). Mobile phones 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 Bris (BRIS, 2006) states that 1,100 conversations and e-mails indicated that many young people had a problematic virtual existence. Child psychiatry has warned against ignoring and making light of observed lack of empathic ability in children. Where pupils murdered schoolmates and teachers, there were as a rule signals that something serious was going to happen. Yet people in the surroundings did not react until it was too late. Since nobody becomes a bully from one day to the next, Levander's, Adler's, Gefvert's and Turinger's (2007) research concerning early signals of personality disturbances must be taken more seriously. Children who do not get help to handle their lack of empathic ability before their early teens risk developing psychopathoid traits that will become difficult to treat later on (Hare, 1993).

Pettersson (1997) showed that preschool children and younger children know what is right and wrong and what consequences their actions will have. But already among these small children there are those who consciously hurt others without feeling any remorse or guilt about their behaviour. TV productions 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 gives the impression that the violence is legitimate and serves a good cause as well as seeming to like the activity, the watcher's threshold will be lowered. Entertainment violence can weaken the barriers and lead to latent aggressions developing into real violence (Bandura, 1973). Individuals with feelings of exclusion, insufficiency and inferiority can imitate or identify themselves with the role character and ultimately act in the same way later on. The most serious consequence of entertainment violence is its blunting effect. When an unacceptable attitude is allowed to pass without protest and harassment becomes an everyday occurrence, the watcher will get used to it and become indifferent to the suffering of the injured person (Olsson, 1998). The frequently escalating bul-

lying, or as Arendt (1988; 1963) said, evil, becomes a banality that nobody reflects on or cares about any more (Billig, 1995). The real face of bullying is sometimes hard to discover. There may be an *éminence grise* who stealthily controls her/his classmates and dictates the relationships in the class. Often the teacher does not detect the "brain" behind the harassment 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 surroundings may be manipulated for a long time. Sympathisers in the class may unconsciously run errands for the éminence grise. They can lend themselves to actions against the victim that many years later, with hindsight, they will have difficulty understanding or explaining (Gardell, 1992; Forsman, 2003).

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 annual inquiry Personligt ('Personal') (Pitetidningen, 2007) in Piteå showed that bullying in primary and secondary schools is a big problem. The belief that it will decrease with rising age and maturity is probably no longer accurate. Fors (2002) and Björk (1999) studied and slanted the research on school bullying towards a power perspective. Fors calls the bully a tormentor who, with the aid of power, quickly breaks down the health of the victim. Björk showed 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 rules in order to suit her/his intentions. Kamperin (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 sociocultural perspective in their research. Wrethander and Bliding (2007) regard bullying in a group of children "… as an expression and a consequence of children's interaction to create relationships and social order in a group" (preface) and focus on a wider social whole in order to better understand the

social life of schools. Menckel and Witkowska (2002) investigated language use among upper secondary pupils. La Flamme and Menckel (2001) conducted research from a public health perspective with its long-term negative consequences for children's health. Elheim (2002) related school bullying to a children's rights perspective, and Frånberg's (2003) study has an educational professional perspective. No single study covers all aspects of the bullying discourse, and a future more interdisciplinary approach should yield a more valid picture of the problems of bullying and its inherent mechanisms.

Documents

The activities of schools are regulated by a number of conventions, laws and ordinances. *The UN Declaration of Children's Rights* states that all children have the right to education and to protection against violence. *The Education Act* (SFS, 1997) regulates what is permitted and prohibited respectively in the activities of schools. Like the Education Act, *the National Board on Occupational Safety and Health's Code of Statutes* and *the Working Environment Act* (AFS, 1999:6) are intended to guarantee all children a safe and secure working environment. *The Social Welfare Act* (SOL) is a complement to both the Education Act and the Working Environment Act. *The Curriculum for the Compulsory School System* (Lpo, 94/98) states in greater detail the guidelines for school tuition. Every municipality, school management area and individual school is bound by law to set up a bullying prevention document. On 1 April 2006 the Government passed a new law, *the Child and Pupil Protection Act,* generally called the Equality of Treatment Act, which tightens up the responsibility of schools to guarantee the pupils safe and secure learning conditions. No pupil must be discriminated against because of gender, ethnicity, religion or other creed, sexual disposition or disability (Report of the Government Committee 2005/2006: UbU4). Every school is bound by law to set up an equality of treatment plan, which will eventually replace earlier plans, models and methods for preventing and taking measures against bullying. The municipalities' boards for children and education or the equivalent authorities are responsible for following up and evaluating the work of schools against all forms of violation. An Ombudsman for Children and Pupils with its own authority has been established for the purpose of protecting children's and pupils' interests. According to the Equality of Treatment Act, this authority is to take legal action against schools that have not tried and exhausted all possibilities of remedying discrimination against pupils. Actionable omission will result in damages. A number of cases have been tried in court and some municipalities have been sentenced to pay damages due to insufficient action. The cases

of 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 Olweus's (1998) programme 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 working with Olweus's method are to have an eleven-day course for all their staff. Olweus's evidence-based data from hundreds of thousands of pupils showed that the use of his programme against bullying (Olweus, 1996) and his *Teacher Handbook* (Olweus, 1999) led to a decrease in 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 Olweus's questionnaire and measure programme. Earlier results have also been confirmed where the programme has been followed according to instructions (Frey, 2005). *Pikas's Gemensamt-Bekymmermetoden* ('the Common Worry Method') (1998) 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 the bullying. In the optimal solution, everybody will have gained a better insight into and greater respect and tolerance for other people's "doings". It is not a matter of looking for scapegoats but of making everybody take their responsibility for changing and improving a bad situation. *Ljungström's Farsta Method* (1989) is an effective and at the same time controversial method. Bullying is to be stopped through forceful and immediate intervention, which is not negotiable. In the talks, the suspects are not told what the teachers know, and since pupils do not want to be caught lying, the picture of the incident is usually informative and real. In the subsequent treatment work, the victim of bullying, the bully/bullies and others 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 bullies 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 parents may be kept uninformed for quite some time if the interventions do not work immediately. Lagerman and Stenberg (2001) base their *Österholm Model* on the methodology 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's and Sörensen Valand's *Zero Programme* (2003) is based on zero tolerance of bullying. Together with parents and supported by experts, schools work actively for a year to implement the programme. The programme contains idea booklets, action plans, films and a manual for parents (Roland, 1996). The purposeful and systematic 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 consisted 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, *Den onda dagen* ('The Evil Day') (Hildefors et al., 2004) was introduced as study circle material. In all three schools different methods of preventing and taking measures against bullying were studied, and research into, theories of and explanatory models for bullying were discussed. The schools' anti-bullying programmes were evaluated and complemented. The staff were helped to work out the schools' equality of treatment plans, which were made vital instruments in the schools' everyday life. The consultant 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 bullying had a very great effect on the pupils' ideas and attitudes. Implementations and models for conflict solution were accounted 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 comforts the pupil when he discovers his classmates' deceit. 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 placed on their and the victim's experiences of the incident. Having realised the extent and the gravity of their action, they are noticeably regretful. The conversation concludes by informing them that they will be under special observation during the next few weeks. The follow-up takes place three weeks later with individual talks with all those involved. The talks and the class teacher's and the teachers on break duty's observations show that all pupils are now invited to take part in the games during breaks and that the atmosphere in the class has improved. Great importance is attached to encouraging and supporting 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 conflict documentation is concluded and filed.
(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 recommended to get into contact with a child psychiatrist and 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 a great deal of interest. Lectures have been given in schools 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 Sevättijärvi School in Finland and the R and D work with snow arranged by the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi. Special attention was paid to the coarse language used in another school.

"Just as I came out of the staff room, I heard it... "You whore, 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 same class further down the corridor. I just felt myself getting violently angry and barely managed to restrain myself from laying hands on the boy when I more or less ran up to him. "Do you know that you are insulting Lena, and I never want to hear you say that again," I nearly shouted. I must also have looked very angry, because I noticed that Kent got afraid of my facial expression. "What are you talking about?" he said, and I ordered him to go to his classroom and wait for me there. Nils had moved aside a little and was looking almost uncomprehending. I went up to the girls. "I will talk to Kent and he will have to apologise to you for this. But you should not have to put up with being called things like that. But why don't you say that you will not tolerate this kind of thing?" "We have given up, you know," said Lena."
(A member of the anti-bullying team.)

Research in the ArctiChildren project

In 2004, 283 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 (Brottsförebyggande 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 intervene even if they thought that they ought to help the bullied person (Olsson, 1998). 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 (Hasday, 2002), the perpetrator was often a bitter and rancorous "lone wolf" or had a like-minded, ostracised 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 Desirability* (Pervin & John, 1997). More than every fourth pupil thought that the teachers were not doing enough to prevent bullying. This figure must be questioned, however, since a great deal of work done by teachers to sort out a bullying situation is conducted without other pupils knowing about it. In a follow-up to research done on seventh-year pupils only marginal improvements were observed apart from slightly fewer pupils stating that they were being bullied. It was interesting to note that some pupils had themselves written on the questionnaire, "*…I was bullied before…*" This 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*.

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