

THE WORK AGAINST PEER BULLYING

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INTRODUCTION

The ArctiChildren project is a development and research project. One purpose is to map psycho-social health conditions among children and youth in the Barents Region. Another aim is to plan and make interventions in the field of health and to evaluate the effects of the measures taken in order to develop new methods to increase the students' psycho-social well-being. The project will enlighten the perspectives of the majority as well as the minority, the latter means the Sámi students in the four countries.

In Sweden one local comprehensive school with grade 6-8 students (from year 2006 grade 1-9) and a Sámi School are involved. Because there are too few students the Sámi School will only participate in the development program.

As a psychologist with roots in child psychiatry and a researcher in the field and discourse of peer bullying my task in the project has mainly been to help the school to decrease peer bullying by working together with the anti-bullying teams as a consultant and as an informer and lecturer for personal, students and parents in the participating schools. *Olweus' Core Program against Bullying and Antisocial Behaviour. A Teacher Handbook* (Olweus, 1999) has been used as one tool for the development work in the schools. *Olweus' Questionnaire against Peer Bullying* (Olweus, 1998) was administered and evaluated for research matters in 2004 in grade 6-8 with a follow-up study with former grade 6 students one year later. The aim of the article below is to present the work in the schools and the analysis and results of the questionnaire from 2004.

BACKGROUND

Peer bullying and harassment are world wide problems in school (Forsman, 2003; Hasday, 2002; Rigby, 2002; Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano & Slee, 2001). In spite of The United Nations` Declarations of Human Rights, The Swedish Law, The School Law, The Work Environment Act and curricula, the existence of peer bullying threatens the foundations our democratic society is built upon.

Protection against student violence, assault and peer bullying are the three most important issues to deal with in school according to Swedish student attitudes today (Friends, 2006). The Ministry of School consider it to be the schools` biggest problem (Skolverket, 2004). In Sweden 2006-05-11 one School Board, for the first time in Swedish school history, decided to close an upper secondary school. The school had failed to create safe learning conditions for the majority and stop damage, carried out by a small number of students.

The municipality, the school district, and the smallest local school are in Sweden by law obliged to establish, follow-up and constantly evaluate their anti-bullying documents in order to prevent and take measures against peer bullying. Grave shortcomings in interest and competence to deal with peer bullying have been noticed among those responsible to guarantee safe learning conditions in school (Forsman, 2003).

The Swedish Government passed in 2006-04-01 a new law that strengthen the obligations of the school to offer students safe learning conditions without discrimination, social ostracism and violations. The Ministry of Schools, a newly installed Ombudsman called the Child- and Student Ombudsman, The Ombudsman for equality (JÄMO), The Ombudsman against ethnical discrimination and others are responsible to check and follow up the intentions of the law. The head of the school will now be obliged to prove that the school has done everything possible to prevent and take measures against peer bullying, harassment and discrimination. Neglect from the school to act properly could result in a considerable, by Swedish standards, claim for damage for the victim (Regeringens Utskottsbetänkande 2005/06: UbU4).

The plight of the vulnerable and victimized, for some like a nine year Golgata walk from the very first to the very last day in the comprehensive school (Rannelid, 1997) could cause life-long disabling injuries. The victims' learning options could be considered totally unacceptable due to the stress and they often suffer from deep depressive disorders (Forsman, 2003). A state of learned helplessness emerges quickly with a total lack of self esteem and victims internalize very soon a negative attribution style where they at the end just have to blame themselves (Pervin & John, 1997). Bullied students do have six times more often suicidal thoughts (BRIS, 2006). Every year some students commit suicide as a final solution to being exposed to peer bullying (Forsman, 2003).

In guarded terms Skolverket (2004) expresses the opinion that peer bullying is declining. A common attitude from the field is that violence in school, on the contrary, has increased. Earlier findings that the frequency of peer bullying decreases by age and maturity (Sharp & Smith, 1994) must also be questioned. Whether victims' anxiety and parents overprotection should be considered as reasons and explanations of peer bullying (Olweus, 1998) or it could rather be an effect of the intimidation (Forsman, 2003) ought to be investigated further. During the last three years there has been a 50 percent increase in reports of peer bullying (BRIS).

Using the metaphor *School is a mirror of the society* we can expect more violence in school because of the number of reported assaults and violence is increasing in society as a whole (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2006). Hallberg and Strandmark (2004), Berlin and Engqvist (1998) and Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen and Hellesøy (1998) report that bullying is a big problem in working life which makes it even more important to put all efforts into an early teaching and guiding of students to relate properly towards each other.

The scientific interest in peer bullying started in the late 60s, first in Sweden, with Heinemann (1972), Olweus (1973), Pikas (1975) and later Leymann (1986) who was most interested in the adult set of clients. Heinemann might be the researcher that most clearly has pointed out peer bullying as a group phenomena. There is an estimated number of 100 000 students or between 3 –

20 percent of students in the Swedish comprehensive school, depending on definitions and different research methods, who are involved in peer bullying as victims, perpetrators or both (Olweus, 1998). Compared with the other three countries in the project, peer bullying, however, is considerably less frequent in Sweden (HBSC, 2004).

The most well-known researcher in the discourse of peer bullying is Olweus. His anti-bullying program is used all over the world. In his massive evidence-based research he has found out that the full implementation of his program could decrease peer bullying between 40 – 60 percent. As an extra bonus it will result in a more positive psycho-social climate in the school (Olweus, 1998, 1999). Olweus stresses that the program must continue over time. Although schools often refer to Olweus anti-bullying program little is seen in their anti-bullying documents how the implementation in their daily work should be executed (Forsman, 2003).

Criteria for definitions of peer bullying must involve imbalance in power to the disadvantage of the victim, an intention to harm, any kind of violence and that the infringements should be systematic and lasting over time. Synonyms to peer bullying are harassment, infringement, intimidation, scapegoat identification, victim, violence, whipping boy and whistle blowing. In Sweden we use the word “mobbing”. In Russia there is no specific word for peer bullying. Racism, ethnical discrimination, sexual harassment and offending language are common expressions of intimidation among Swedish students (Forsman, 2003). Unacceptable behaviour and discriminating language must be dealt with by resolute actions, otherwise peer bullying risks being a banality, not worth bothering.

New ways of harassment have occurred by using cell phones and e-mails sending and publishing discriminating messages and photos. Increasing new phenomena in the discourse of harassments are stalking and the imposition of duties or fines for real or faked accusations on suitable victims.

Hasday (2002) has found relations between so called school shootings and peer bullying where victims take a dreadful revenge on bullies and teachers that have not protected them from intimidation. Sweden has so far been spared from such experiences.

DEVELOPMENT WORK

The development work in the Sámi School

The Sámi School is located north of the Arctic Circle. It is a small 0-6 grade school with around 60 students. Myself I grow up in Sápmi (the Sámi name for their territory) in the verdisystem¹ and have good cultural competence.

My task in the school has been on a consulting basis working with the staff members about once a month for two to three hours. For me it has been important to relate to research and theories as a way raising the professional level in the group. Before the meeting the staff decided what topic or theme should be on the agenda. I have given lectures about peer bullying for the staff as a part of their competence education. In two occasions I have met parents, lecturing about peer bullying and informing them about the project and my task. Both the staff and the parents the problem of peer bullying very seriously and were very much interested in working for improving their Sámi Schools' psycho-social climate.

Although it is a very small school there are conflicts influencing relations and learning. In Sápmi there is a long-lasting debate about the right of reindeer pasture contra the Swedish state as well as between different sítas². The children could therefore inherit the parents' conflicts which could be seen in the relations between class mates from different sítas. Discussing and coping with cultural diversities has often been a frequent theme. The schools' anti-bullying document related very much to the basic values of school and values (Orlenius, 2001) have often been on the agenda during my visits.

Peer bullying is a severe crisis for those affected (Cullberg, 1973) and during the discussions with the staff it has been possible to link the presented cases of suspected and confirmed peer

¹ The verdisystem implies mutual services between settlers and reindeer herding people. Reindeer herding families stayed in settlers' houses during periods in winter. The system came to an end in the 60s when the Sámi people were able to have houses of their own.

² Sita is a Sámi village consisting of several families herding reindeer in a cooperative

bullying to coping theory (Lazarus, 1993). My doctoral thesis (Forsman, 2003) was a useful reference in the discussions about the nature of peer bullying and how to prevent and take measures against harassment and violations in school. The book *Den onda dagen* by Hildefors, Hök, Meister, Molloy and Wahl (2004) has been used in a study circle and has given many good opportunities to deal with inappropriate behaviour in the school. The school will investigate the options to involve drama pedagogies in the anti bullying work in the classes.

The staff is planning an academic course (7,5 ECTS) in conflict treatment and solution. A representative from The Sámi School Board participated in the ArctiChildren Conference *Sharing Good Practice* held in Luleå in 2005. Promising contacts have been taken between the Swedish and Finnish Sámi Schools and there is an interest in establishing some kind of exchange between all Sámi schools involved in the *ArctiChildren Project*.

The development work in the local school

The school with around 400 students in grade 6-9 recruits students from several villages in the fringe areas of the town. This means there are some problems with creating close connections and relations with the families. There are plans to invite the parents to grade meetings where I will inform and discuss the problem on peer bullying. I have given lectures of peer bullying for both personal and students mostly connecting to Pikas` (1998) and Fors` (1995) attitude that the most important is not to find scapegoats but everybody has a responsibility to contribute to a good solution of the problem.

I have mostly worked with the anti-bullying team consisting of three teachers and frequently met the head of the school. During these three years we had planned meetings three to four times each semester. As in the Sámi School I functioned as a consultant and during our meetings the team presented different cases of what is or could be peer bullying which we then discussed. Their model, recently revised, could be described as a mixture of Olweus` (1998), Pikas` (1998) and Ljungströms` (1997) ways to work with peer bullying. Some of the cases involved frequent

contacts with parents and my nine years experience as a family counsellor was very useful. In some discussions we considered to different techniques, for example Banduras' *Guided Model Learning* (Bandura, 1986) as one method for the team to cope both with behaviour of students involved and their parents. Bullies could also be involved in criminality (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2006; Olweus, 1998) and one in the anti-bullying team had good and frequent contact with a specific police representative.

In several cases it was also obvious that the victims of peer bullying could be described as provocative victims (Olweus, 1998; Pikas, 1998). After a lot of work with the group involved, including perpetrators, bystanders and victims one result could be to recommend that the parents of victims as well as bullies contact a Child Guidance Clinic or social authorities.

The head of the school participated in meetings and conferences in Finland 2004 and in Sweden 2005 informing about the benefits of participation in the project in the work to improve the psychosocial climate. An important aim for the schools' management is to make the bullying problem a concern for all students and personal. A lot of effort has been put into raising the courage to take a stand, not only among student bystanders but also among teachers to react and act against harassments (Olsson, 1998).

As in most Swedish schools the general knowledge about peer bullying was moderate. Many reported the appearance of so called inner pictures of potential and real victims of peer bullying from my lectures. They said that they got useful hints and tools to deal with the problem of peer bullying in their work. Here also I introduced the book *Den onda dagen* (Hildefors et al, 2004) together with my doctoral thesis (Forsman, 2003). The head of the school also recommended all personal to read the book.

The staff and the anti-bullying team reported during the years an increasing number of mental disorders among students which they related to higher level of stress and harassment. This seems to be an overall tendency among Swedish students. A common expression of harassment in the school is the oral sexual abuse, mainly of girls by boys. The school has adopted a zero tolerance in this matter and a lot of effort has been taken to get, especially the boys, to realize that their sexually offending language, per definition, is harassment.

Another effect of participation in the project is the schools initiative to invite the organisation *Friends* (Friends, 2006) to the school one day to inform about peer bullying and work with the students and staff doing different exercises. A positive result of that day is that the school now has student representatives with special responsibility, so called mate supporters. These were recommended by their mates and with some adjustments those with positive status and good personal courage (Bergecliff, 1999) were selected by the anti-bullying team. With supervision and guidance from the anti-bullying team these *mate supporters* have a specific task to report and if possible to react to harassment among their mates. Grades 1 to 5 in the local school announced in 2005 their interest in joining the anti-bullying work and a cooperation project will start in autumn 2006.

RESEARCH

The Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996) consists of 39 questions in the version for grade 6 – 9 and higher (SO1-SENIOR). There is also a SO1-JUNIOR version aimed for grade 3-5. Some questions could have as many as eleven options to choose between. The questions measure different aspects of peer bullying, which in Olweus' term is when *one or several individuals repeatedly and over time are exposed of negative actions from one or several others* (The Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire, page 3, Olweus, 1996). Clear instruction to teachers and a Teacher Handbook (Olweus, 1999) offers good administration possibilities for the questionnaire as well as for the work in classes and schools to prevent and take measures against peer bullying.

Evidence-based data from more than 150 000 students have shown a decrease in peer bullying by up to 50 percent and more during the first year of implementation. Also there is a decline in anti-social behaviour such as vandalism, fights, boozing and truancy. Other noticeable results were the improvement in the classes' social climate, better order and discipline, more positive friendship and a more positive attitude to school and school work. Additionally Olweus found an increase in the students' school satisfaction (Olweus, 1998).

The questions could be divided into four themes. The first considers general issues about peer bullying. The second theme is about feelings, attitudes and coping strategies towards peer bullying. The third focuses on the other persons involved and the environment. The last theme deals with mates and how the respondent likes or dislikes school. One important condition to obtain these results and sustain them is the involvement of all the staff in the school, the involvement from the politicians, students and parents and that the core program is kept up to date.

Analysis of The Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire in grade 6-8.

In May 2004 *The Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire* (Olweus, 1996) was administered to grade 6-8 students in the local school. The aim was to map the conditions concerning the problems of peer bullying in the school in order to take proper measures in the anti-bullying work.

Totally there were 283 respondents and five questionnaires in grade 8 are disregarded because it was very obvious that these respondents' answers were faked. In several of the questionnaires up to seven answers were missing.

<p>N = 278 (283) Grade 6 = 26 (11 girls and 15 boys) Grade 7 = 149 (65 girls and 84 boys) Grade 8 = 103 (61 girls and 42 boys)</p>

Figure 1. Respondents in the study

Each question in the questionnaires was transferred to the *BVQ-STAT Program* (Olweus, 1999) which gave an exact number for every alternative in the question. The program could be used to make a conclusion and analysis of the answers.

The results show that one of ten students report being bullied in school the last few months and more than 13% have a fear of being bullied. This is similar to the interval of victims that Olweus' research has shown (Olweus, 1998). There is a slight proportional overweight and an increasing number of bullies and victims among the boys which also international research confirms (Smith et al, 2001).

There are thefts of money and other items in the school and none of the 271 respondents report that they had taken money or items or destroyed items belonging to other students. There is also a negative correspondence between the number of victims and answers about questions about bullying others. These data could be explained by the theory of social desirability (Pervin & John, 1997).

Boys to a higher extent than girls do not tell anyone about harassment. Einarsen et al (1998) have found out that it is com-

mon that boys do not report being bullied especially if the bully is a girl. Although the students consider they should help the victim of peer bullying a third will not interfere. The lack of personal courage and the acceptance of violence in school is obviously still prevalent (Olsson, 1998). Every fifth boy is not sure if he would participate in bullying a student he does not like. This supports the findings of an increasing tougher climate in school (BRIS, 2006).

In his research Olweus (1998) has found out that victims are more anxious and overprotected by their parents. None of the questions in the questionnaire, however, cover this aspect. From my meetings with parents and victims the low self-esteem and anxiety of the victim and the parents' involvement to protect their children could as well be a consequence of the harassment. Also Lincoln and Guba (1985) are sceptical of too easy emphasizing causality as a viable concept.

More than 40% think the class teacher does little or nothing to prevent and take measures against peer bullying. My cooperation with the teachers in the project, however, has shown that a lot of work from their side is not public and therefore unknown to many students.

Nearly 85% like school *well or very well* which corresponds with the HBSC report (WHO, 2002) and the Skolverket investigation (2004). It is alarming that more than one of twenty students has none or just one pal. The analysis shows that there is an overrepresentation of victims in these figures.

The answers disregarded make up to 3% of the total answers. They should therefore not have any influence on the analysis.

SUMMARY

The results of these two years in the ArctiChildren Project have been promising. The involvement of the EU and the Municipality of Luleå, the Sámi School, the County Council and the University of Technology, Luleå, have had a great impact on the staffs' and the students' involvement in the participating schools. The symbolic value of such a concentration of resources must not be neglected. There are several statements from teachers, parents and students about the importance of improving the psychosocial climate in school and their willingness to do so.

In April 2006 The European Union (EU) granted funds for a prolongation for the project with the aim to work out and construct a sustainable method to improve the psycho-social health among youth and children in the Arctic. The involved schools' work to create better learning conditions has thereby got two more years of academic supervision and support. The prolongation of the project means that it will be possible to match and connect research results with the development work in the schools in all four countries.

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