

Chapter seven: Discussion and conclusions

The cause of school violence has been attributed to a variety of reasons, the main ones being individual behavioural characteristics of certain students and how that antisocial behaviour plays out in school, as well as how the school environments themselves contribute to violent and bullying type behaviour. More often school violence is a combination of all three. Indications are that New Zealanders have a high tolerance for violence and while schools cannot be responsible for the ills of society, schools can make a difference in how violence is dealt with. Preventive approaches will help reduce school bullying and violence, but it will still happen despite schools' best efforts – and teachers need to know how to deal with it when it does occur.

This inquiry has not been extensive enough to conclude that bullying is a systemic problem entrenched in the New Zealand school system. However by its very nature, bullying is “a systemic, ongoing set of behaviour instigated by an individual or a group of individuals who are attempting to gain power, prestige, or goods” (Espelage & Swearer, 2003, p. 368). Many schools operate effectively and appropriately and have clear policies to ensure bullying is addressed. Some of the most recent literature supports the view that school is increasingly becoming a safer place for most New Zealand students. For example, *Youth '07 The Health and Wellbeing of Secondary School Students in New Zealand* found that 84 percent of students feel safe for all or most of the time at school. Furthermore, the school climate has improved between 2001 and 2007, with more students reporting feeling connected and safe at school in 2007 compared to 2001. This does not negate the fact that six percent of students reported being bullied weekly or more often and “a small but significant number of students (10 percent) report being afraid several times during the past school year that someone at school would hurt or bother them” (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2008, p. 17).

Recently researched statistics from the *What's Up* telephone counselling service for children and young people aged five to 18 years reveal that although the proportion of calls about bullying did not change between 2007 and 2008, the actual severity of the bullying reported decreased. In fact, the proportion of frequent incidents or continual harassment dropped significantly, from 43 percent in 2007 to 27 percent in 2008 (Barnardos, 2009, p. 7). While the data show an increasing, long-term trend over time,

the increase may have levelled off because there has been a stabilisation of the total proportion of bullying-related calls between 2007 and 2008 and a definite drop in the severity of those calls. Findings from both *Youth '07* and the *What's Up Statistical Summary 2008* are encouraging, given the importance of healthy and positive school environments for students' wellbeing and achievement.

Bullying behaviour is complex. First, someone has to feel victimised. Bullying can only happen if the recipient feels bullied. When should aggressive acts at school be called bullying and when should they be called violence? Inconsistency in the ways that schools defined violence and bullying is a key finding of this project. That schools *defined* these terms differently and in some cases *responded* completely differently to the various incidents they experienced is not really surprising because there are also definitional issues in the research literature related to the concept of violence.

Not every act of aggression or violence is bullying. It should only be described as bullying if there is ongoing victimisation. It is important that schools ascertain the nature of the aggression, and in particular whether the victim has experienced persistent and ongoing acts of aggression. Furthermore gang rivalry erupting in the playground is another form of violence altogether and should not be confused with bullying. Different acts require different responses.

We know that most bullying incidents have witnesses, therefore bullying can only occur if the bystanders allow it to happen by not intervening. Some bullies intimidate others to gain peer approval, or for the benefit of an audience in the playground. Youth culture and the desire to belong contribute to students' reluctance to step outside their peer group and it takes courage to stand tall beside the young person being isolated or hurt by the group. But if peers are part of the problem they should also be part of the solution, and effective schools understand the importance of involving their students in a whole school approach to eradicate bullying. Peer disapproval has the potential to reduce bullying in any context. Both parents and teachers need to encourage and empower children to speak out because bystander or peer intervention is the most effective means of controlling behaviour.

Children's perceptions and the rates and nature of violence and bullying they report provided new insights into our understanding of their school experiences. Their information could help to combat school violence and bullying and to design effective prevention and intervention strategies. Indeed, as argued by Anderson, Kinsey, Loader and Smith (1994) "it is only through trying to understand young people's views of their experiences as victims and witnesses that we can confront the problem in a way that is meaningful and acceptable to them" (p. 66). It makes sense that effective development and provision of policy should be based on data that reflects children's perceptions of school violence and bullying in the context of their own experiences.

The success case study schools that participated in this inquiry into school safety had all worked over time to build a strong culture and ethos of school community. These schools used a range of strategies. They often implemented a number of educational programmes that were "tools in the toolbox" and complemented their whole school approach. The approaches, programmes and strategies easily aligned with the key competencies of the New Zealand Curriculum. Primary prevention programmes are designed to reduce the risk of violence by educating students about violence and bullying and how it may be avoided or prevented. These programmes are readily available, and schools should be discerning (as were the case study schools) about which ones they choose (it is always better to use comprehensive programmes that have been evaluated for their effectiveness). For best effect, these programmes require long-term follow-ups.

While the case study schools might have used a different approach to build their positive school cultures, the benefits were the same. Their students showed a greater liking of their class and school; they articulated concern and empathy for others' feelings; seemed motivated to be kind and helpful to their peers; and possessed good self-esteem and conflict resolution skills. The school culture established a sense of belonging and connectedness ("this is the way we do things here").

Identified barriers and enablers to school safety

While it is now accepted that bullying occurs in every school, this inquiry determined that a minority number of schools either had no systems in place or those systems were not

robust enough to cope when things go wrong. There is evidence to suggest that in schools where things went wrong, it went horribly wrong. What are the factors that contribute to effective or ineffective practices around school safety? Informed by a comprehensive review of the literature (eg. see Blazer, 2005), the following factors have been found to either enable or act as barriers to school safety. The identified barriers and enablers are further supported by the findings of this report.

Enablers to school safety

- Acknowledgment that bullying behaviour is a risk to be managed (ERO, 2007).
- Good policies define bullying and the school's position against it, and outline procedures to discourage bullying and help victims (Rigby, Smith, & Pepler, 2004, as cited in Raskauskas, 2007).
- Involvement and education of parents increases the effectiveness of their schools' anti-bullying measures.
- Establishing a school-wide Code of Conduct that clearly specifies appropriate and inappropriate behaviour as well as providing clear guidelines for teachers will facilitate a shared understanding and consistency.
- Providing training for staff in recognising and responding to bullying.
- Keeping a log of all bullying incidents that detail who was involved, where it occurred, how often it happened, and the strategies employed to address the problem, can over time identify behaviour patterns and the most successful interventions.
- Establishing a confidential reporting system will encourage students to disclose. 'Bully boxes' where students can place anonymous reports have proven to be successful in some schools.
- Conducting anonymous student surveys about student safety at school.

- Adopting a culture of ‘safe telling’, with students understanding it is part of the school’s ethos will ensure that student interactions do not insinuate messages about the acceptance or rejection of particular students.
- Implementing strategies, programmes and interventions to prevent and manage bullying. Anti-bullying programmes most likely to be successful are the ones that shift the balance of power from the bullies to the silent majority of students who are upskilled and empowered to confront the bullies.
- Ascertaining the success of these strategies, programmes, and interventions through self-review (ERO, 2007).
- Increased adult supervision in common “hot spot” locations around the school (eg. playgrounds, toilets, bus stops, and corridors), especially at commonly “less supervised” times (eg. class changes, intervals and lunch times) helps to prevent the occurrence of bullying and violence. Reducing the amount of time spent with minimal supervision is also effective in some schools (eg. shorter lunch breaks and class changes). Staggering class release times has enabled schools to reduce the numbers of bully-victim problems at any one time and makes identification of bullying incidents easier.

Barriers to school safety

- Anti-bullying programmes are less likely to succeed when staff perceive teaching the anti-bullying programmes to be an added burden because of insufficient support, lack of time, and inadequate training etc.
- Implementing reactive measures such as metal detectors or surveillance cameras to increase security at school has not been proven in the research literature (interestingly children and young people consulted in this inquiry consistently identified this as a potential strategy for reducing the incidence of bullying).
- Encouraging students to “stand up” to bullies without adequate support from peers or adults may be harmful and physically dangerous for victims.

- Providing self-esteem training for bullies and training students in conflict resolution and peer mediation may both be misguided approaches and could actually act as a barrier to bullying prevention. Research suggests that most bullies do not lack self-esteem and while peer mediation programmes may resolve conflict between peers of equal status, the power imbalance between bullies and victims might further victimise students who have been bullied through the continued abuse of power.
- Adopting ‘zero tolerance’ policies rely on exclusionary measures such as suspension and expulsion. They do not change the bully’s behaviour and, indeed, may exacerbate it because after being excluded the bully has even more unsupervised time than if he or she had still been at school. Issues around zero tolerance will now be further explored.

There has been some controversy around the term ‘zero tolerance’. This inquiry has determined that schools should maintain a ‘zero tolerance’ *attitude* to violent and bullying behaviours. In other words, they should clearly state that “violence is not okay” and will not be tolerated in their schools. Schools that endorse a zero tolerance attitude to violence are signalling that any form of violence (eg. physical assaults such as fighting or shoving; or verbal abuse such as swearing, sexist or racist language, and persistent exclusion from groups) will not be condoned or viewed as acceptable behaviour. Zero tolerance towards violence means taking a stand to encourage pro-social behaviours that contribute to improved school climates. However, zero tolerance does not mean that schools should always take a harsh and punitive stance by responding to all infringements in the same way. The findings of this school safety inquiry confirm that students experience a range of behaviours that could be described as violence and bullying. First, all students have the right to natural justice which puts the obligations on principals to act fairly and reasonably in the circumstances. Second, each case is different and must be treated accordingly because what response is required will vary according to the situation. Third, zero tolerance ‘action plans’ may stop the behaviour but do not teach new behaviours and often spell the end of a student’s education. The New Zealand School Trustees Association (2008) states quite clearly that:

A school’s “zero tolerance” of any behaviour is untenable... From the time the

principal begins considering if a student should be stood down or suspended, the principles of natural justice apply...The principal has to consider the circumstances of each situation and be satisfied that it warrants standing down or suspending a student...by carefully considering the evidence and all the circumstances at the time (p. 4).

In the same way that this report recommends different reporting and notification approaches, so too should the various forms of bullying be treated differently. Serious assaults will go down a different track to incidents of relational aggression among friends. While the emotional impact may be similar, serious physical assaults are likely to involve the police, whereas relational aggression would be best dealt with through a restorative justice approach. Restoration implies bringing back to what was happening before. Hagemann (2009) suggests this term may be misleading, but in a school setting, where victims simply want the bullying to stop, restorative practices are particularly successful in bringing about restoration and healing.

The enablers and barriers are now reinforced by further recommendations based on the findings of this inquiry.

Recommendations for schools

The following recommendations are grouped under four categories:

1. Whole school approach

- Perceive bullying to be a whole of community response
- Involve the school community. The principal should publicly announce the school's commitment to the prevention of violence and bullying
- Ensure that prevention and intervention strategies and programmes consider the school climate as a potential contributing factor in promoting or inhibiting bullying
- View bullying as a group phenomenon that recognises the diversity of experiences along the bully/victim continuum, including students as bystanders and reinforcers and the contribution of peers in relational aggression
- Implement whole school approaches and violence prevention programmes
- Adopt a zero tolerance *attitude* to violence and bullying, but do not adopt exclusionary zero tolerance *policies*.

2. Policy and procedures

- View bullying, violence and child abuse separately according to the agreed upon definitions
- Adopt consistent procedures as suggested in the flowcharts
- Develop crisis procedures for rapid response to serious incidents of violence
- Implement procedures around mobile phone use at school
- Know the appropriate legislation and policies relevant to students' safety at school
- Establish a confidential reporting system for students
- Establish a safety web and safety advocates
- Integrate anti-violence strategies into the existing school curriculum
- Consider employing a school counsellor in primary schools to manage the restorative practices and anti-bullying approaches, and the children wanting "a safe place" during interval and lunch times.

3. Ongoing review and professional development

- Conduct regular and ongoing self-reviews of the school's anti-violence policies and procedures. This should also involve an assessment of the school's safety and subsequent implementation of correction procedures in light of the self-review
- Undertake professional development for teachers. This training should also be available to pre-service teacher education students to ensure that all teachers know how to identify bullying and how to intervene
- Conduct staff training on the school's anti-violence and bullying policies and procedures
- Be discerning about which anti-bullying programmes to use.

4. Collaborative responses

- Respond immediately so that students and their families feel confident about the school's commitment and response to issues of bullying and violence
- Use the police and other agencies when the need arises (eg. serious incidents involving assault)

- For less serious incidents, invite the school's Youth Aid officer to the restorative conference (ie. when schools run a restorative conference, as opposed to a Youth Justice one). This will forge good school/police partnerships
- Access support and coaching on how to deal with the media.

A safe learning environment is one that “recognises that bullying is unacceptable and where policies are adopted to ensure it does not flourish” (Raskauskas, 2007, p. 9). Furthermore, as stated by Kazmierow and Walsh (2004):

The standards which assist education providers in eliminating bullying are extensive, and practical steps to diminish bullying are well documented. To minimise the risk of expensive litigation and to meet legal and ethical obligations, the challenge is for schools to commit to school wide policies, and to ‘walk the talk’ in a consistent and steadfast way (p. 128).

A first step in committing to the eradication of bullying is the ‘acknowledgement that bullying exists in the school’ and until this acknowledgement is made, any interventions, anti-bullying strategies or initiatives, will not get to the essence of the problem. The challenge is to alter the school environment rather than focusing on the perpetrators and victims alone. The key message therefore, is the need for a ‘whole school approach’ that is embedded in the culture and ethos of a school and its community. Effective intervention requires ‘immediate action’ and the majority of approaches view professional development of teachers in the field of student behaviour management as a prerequisite to building a safe school culture.

The research strongly suggests that students’ social relationships at school will be best supported when there are changes at the level of the classroom, but most importantly, when there are systemic changes that focus on the school as a caring community. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner shares this view. Uncovering the nature and extent of bullying in schools and taking steps to address issues, particularly through whole school policy is critical. Aggressive, violent and bullying antisocial behaviour will only be effectively reduced when the intervention involves an ongoing commitment at multiple levels, with individual, family, classroom, school, and the wider community combining to achieve this goal.