Anti-Bullying Alliance

Focus on:
BULLYING
2018

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This edition of Focus on: Bullying summarises publications, especially journal articles, on bullying in the UK (or involving UK participants) published during 2018.

Following the similar Focus for 2017, it is restricted to research on children and young people, including students in higher or further education, and to studies which had bullying as a primary or substantial focus.

We have endeavoured to cover major contributions using search engines and databases, but inevitably a few may have been missed.

CONTEXT: GOVERNMENT

The Keeping Children Safe in Education document[1] provides statutory guidance for schools and colleges around issues of safeguarding, abuse and sexual harassment.

Two documents specifically on bullying were provided by the Department for Education; one was a series of case studies from schools, the other a survey of pupils in England.

Approaches to preventing and tackling bullying[2] is based on interviews with senior teachers from 15 schools across England. Questions were asked about practice in preventing and tackling bullying. Responses are grouped in terms of common themes and challenges, providing a useful teacher-centred view of current practices.

Bullying in England, April 2013 to March 2018[3] provides findings from the Crime Survey of England and Wales, with data here just from English pupils aged 10-15 years, sampling over 2,000 each year from 2013/14 to 2017/18. They were asked 'has anyone bullied you in a way that frightened or upset you?' in the last 12 months, and a similar question about experiencing being cyberbullied (no definitions were given). The incidence of being bullied in the 2017/18 survey was 17%, and being cyberbullied 7%, both largely unchanged over the five survey years. Victim rates by gender varied by survey period, but for being cyberbullied were consistently higher for girls. Victim rates decreased with age for being bullied but not for being cyberbullied. By ethnicity, victim rates were highest in white pupils and lowest in Chinese pupils. By religion they were lower in Muslim and Hindu pupils. They were higher in pupils with a disability. By region, London had the lowest rates. Data is also provided on types of bullying, frequency and location. On average 72% of pupils said that their school dealt with bullying very well or quite well in 2017/18, but this had decreased from 78% in 2013/14.

ON AVERAGE 72% OF PUPILS SAID THAT THEIR SCHOOL DEALT WITH BULLYING VERY WELL OR QUITE WELL IN 2017/18.

PREVALENCE

Besides the evidence in[3], a survey by DitchTheLabel[4] surveyed 9,150 young people aged 12-20 years, across the UK. Respondents used their own definition of bullying, and on this basis, 22% said they had been bullied in the past 12 months, 22% said they had witnessed it, and 2% said they had bullied someone else. Verbal bullying was most commonly reported, often about appearance or interests. Feeling depressed or anxious, followed by suicidal thoughts or self-harm, were common outcomes reported. Of those bullied, 65% reported it, often to a teacher, family member, or friend. Of the 35% who did not report it, common reasons were being called a snitch, scared of it getting worse, and fears that it would not be taken seriously. There are many quotations from respondents. Data is also provided on the perpetrators, and the witnesses.

Bullying about appearance was highlighted in a survey of 1,006 young people aged 11-16, across the UK, carried out by the Be Real campaign in collaboration with the YMCA[5]. When asked if they had ever been bullied about their appearance, 55% said yes, often about weight, skin appearance or clothes. Most of this was verbal and offline, but some online bullying was seen as particularly hurtful. The impact of this was often to make the victim more anxious, isolated and depressed. Many took some action to change their appearance. Many also told someone (most often a parent/carer) about it, but 20% did not do so. The authors call for meaningful education around appearance-related bullying. This report also provided many quotations from respondents. For more on weight and bullying see[10].

UNDERSTANDING AND NATURE OF BULLYING

A study in 3 schools in the north of England[6] used focus groups and interviews with 20 selected pupils ('bullies', 'victims', 'bully-victims' and 'witnesses' of bullying) to examine how pupils defined bullying and how it was seen by teachers and the school. A pervasive theme emerging was that pupils saw teachers as having a different understanding of bullying, and from their perspective overusing the term, with negative consequences for issues such as how teachers intervened. The findings were argued to support the importance of pupil involvement in any anti-bullying policy.

Turning to teacher perceptions, a survey of 131 teachers from 16 primary schools reported on their definitions and examples of bullying, of which repeated physical and verbal actions were the most common[7]. The study also reported on

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location of bullying (most often the playground) and interventions to enhance safety and wellbeing (of which circle time, school ethos and curriculum work were most mentioned).

A study of 13-14 year olds in one secondary school in central England[8] used observations and group interviews with pupils to examine the role of popularity, especially in girls bullying. Bullying-type interactions of popular girls with other popular girls, and boys, were discussed, and it was argued that these were often unnoticed by teachers.

RISK FACTORS

There is an extensive literature on risk and protective factors for bullying involvement. A review of some international literature[9] considered 'traditional' or offline school bullying, and online or cyberbullying, in relation to family and social networks, individual characteristics, and coping skills. The review finds many similarities and a few differences with regards to these two kinds of bullying. For example, close parental relationships are a protective factor, and punitive parenting a risk factor, for both types. Over-protective parenting is a risk factor for school victimisation, whereas either too little or too much ICT use is a risk factor for cyberbullying involvement. Moral disengagement is common to both, but lower affective empathy seems more associated with school bullying.

One study[10] examined 411 over- or under-weight pupils aged 11-16 years, and perceptions of weight, with self-reports of bullying involvement (bully, victim, bully-victim). Data came from five secondary schools in the UK. No relationships of bullying involvement were found with actual weight. However, victims tended to perceive themselves as overweight, and bully-victims to perceive themselves as underweight (there were no significant relationships for bullies).

There has been concern about Islamophobia and bullying of Muslim pupils. Although Muslim religion was not found to be an increased risk factor in[3], a review and survey of 335 Muslim pupils aged 13-15 years[11] found that 25% claimed to be bullied because of their religion (there were no non-Muslim comparisons). There were no significant gender differences, but victimisation risk was related to personality (neuroticism) and frequency of worship attendance.

LGBT identity is known to be a risk factor for victimisation, A study of LGBT youth aged 13-25 years, using interviews, and a survey of 789 persons, examined predictors of suicidality (such as suicidal thoughts)[12]. One significant predictor was being abused about one's sexual orientation or gender identity.

A study in one secondary school in the Midlands[13] of 230 pupils aged 11-14 years, showed that over-estimation of threat could be a risk factor. This was assessed by responses to neutral social vignettes (such as 'someone in your school has tagged you in a Facebook post. You are not close friends'). Victims were more likely to say that such vignette actions had been done to upset or humiliate them. Experiences of being bullied related to paranoid thinking generally, and this explained about half of the link between victim experience and threat overestimation.

LOWER AFFECTIVE EMPATHY SEEMS MORE ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL BULLYING.

SIBLING BULLYING

Three studies reported on the topic of bullying between siblings. Two used data from 6,988 children aged 12 years from ALSPAC, with follow-up data at 18-20 years. The first[14] found significant associations of perpetration of sibling bullying with later antisocial behaviour, and of being a victim of sibling bullying with later nicotine dependence. The second[15] found associations of being a victim of sibling bullying, or a bully-victim, with later psychotic disorder. Associations were even stronger when there was combined bullying involvement at home and at school. A third study[16] used data from the Millennium Cohort Study, comparing 475 11-year-olds with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), with a much larger number of comparison children without ASD. Both perpetration and being a victim of sibling bullying were higher amongst the ASD children. Those who were bully-victims of sibling bullying were especially low in prosocial skills, and higher in internalising and externalising disorders. The authors suggested that these studies point to the importance of intervention work with sibling bullying as well as school bullying.

EFFECTS OF BEING VICTIMISED

A study as part of the INCLUSIVE trial[17,30] looked at health-related quality of life among 6,667 pupils aged 11-12 years in 40 state secondary schools from SE England. Being bullied, especially when frequent and if upset about it, was related to poorer health-related quality of life. Aggressive behaviours were also related to this, but to a lesser extent.

A study using data from the ALSPAC longitudinal study[18] examined factors related to school exclusion at 8 years and 16 years. Any involvement in bullying (as bully or victim) was related to significantly higher risk of school exclusion at 15-16.

A study using the 1958 British cohort data set[19] related parent reports of victimisation at 7 and 11 years to economic outcomes at 50 years. Child victims were less likely to be in employment at 50 years, had less earnings and less accumulated wealth. There were higher societal employment-related costs for men and women, and women had incurred more health service costs. Economic costs were estimated at £90 for women and £271 for men, annually, at age 50. It was argued that effects were related to greater childhood distress in victims, and lower educational attainment at age 33[18].

A study of 3,466 pupils from Greater Manchester[20], examined factors related to binge drinking (consuming 5+ units of alcohol on at least one occasion in the last 30 days). This was somewhat normative, with 49.8% of pupils having done so. The risk was higher for self-reported bullies (62.5 vs. 47.3%) but less for self-reported victims (44.6 vs. 50.9%).

Child maltreatment by a parent is known to be a risk factor for later health and well-being, and a study using the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) data[21] put an emphasis on protective factors regarding this. School factors were important, and one of these was 'not being bullied'. Especially for emotional maltreatment, 'not being bullied' was the most important protective factor for wellbeing.

Much research (see 2 and those above) has demonstrated adverse short- and long-term effects of being a victim of bullying, including low self-esteem, depression, and suicidal thoughts; but there have been queries about what is cause and what is effect. A comprehensive review of international literature[22,23] used evidence from both longitudinal studies, and studies with twins, to disentangle this. While both directions may be operative (e.g. low self-esteem leads to victimisation, victimisation leads to low self-esteem), this review provides powerful evidence for the effects of victim experiences for a range of outcomes – mental health, but also physical health and later socioeconomic outcomes.

ANY INVOLVEMENT IN BULLYING (AS BULLY OR VICTIM) WAS RELATED TO SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER RISK OF SCHOOL EXCLUSION AT 15-16.

COPING WITH BULLYING, AND BYSTANDERS

A study in an independent secondary school in the east of England[24] used 5 pupils as co-researchers, with a focus on why students might find it difficult to report bullying, or issues around 'snitching'. Using a survey, focus groups and interviews, themes identified included what counts as 'serious' bullying; loyalty to the peer group, fear of the bully, and who (among adults) can be trusted to tell.

An update[25] to an earlier review of coping with the emotional impact of bullying and cyberbullying discusses issues of being excluded in social networking groups, and the importance of bystanders in cyberbullying.

A review of bullying in further and higher education[26], makes a case for the role of counsellors, discussing issues around counselling support and staff training, training student bystanders and witnesses, and anti-bullying policies.

Bystanders are common in bullying situations, but often do not help the victim. What factors may affect this? A study of 868 pupils aged 11-13 years from two UK secondary schools[27], examined this using hypothetical vignettes. Positive helping responses were more likely from girls than boys, and for more severe incidents. They were also more likely in cyberbullying than traditional bullying, perhaps because help (such as by communicating with the victim) can be carried out with less risk of retaliation from the bullies.

Cyberbullying can be especially hurtful when hostile messages go viral. This is considered in a review[28], which covers aspects such as various types of moral disengagement and the actions of bystanders. Interventions to encourage more proactive and helpful bystander actions are discussed.

SCHOOL LEVEL FACTORS

A large-scale study of 648 primary schools[29] used self-report data from other 23,000 pupils to examined associations of bullying perpetration with individual and school factors, using multiple logistic regression. Overall 12% of pupils said that they bullied others ('sometimes' or 'always'). This was more common in boys than girls, in black rather than white pupils, in children having free school meals, and those with special educational needs. Type of school made an independent contribution in terms of deprivation (proportion of pupils with free school meals), and school climate perceived as poor.

OVERALL 12% OF PUPILS SAID THAT THEY BULLIED OTHERS ('SOMETIMES' OR 'ALWAYS').

INTERVENTIONS

Results have been reported of INCLUSIVE, a randomised control trial [RCT] of a program called Learning Together[30,31]. Over a 3 year period, 20 intervention and 20 control secondary schools from the south east of England participated, with around 6,000 pupils at 24 and 36 month assessments. Pupils were aged 11/12 years at the start and 14/15 years at the end of the project. The Learning Together program comprised three components: staff training in restorative practices; a school action group to encourage pupil participation; and a social and emotional skills curriculum. Comparatively, the intervention significantly reduced experiences of being victimised, although modestly (by 0.1 standard deviation). It decreased school misbehaviour, but not at a statistically significant level; and there were no effects on aggression. However there were positive effects on other health and well-being measures. Although the decrease in victimisation was of a small effect size, the cost of the intervention was also modest, estimated at an extra £58 per pupil.

Work in Scotland[32] developed a program aimed at counteracting bullying towards people with intellectual or learning disabilities. A 7-lesson curriculum within PSE was devised for 11-13 year olds, and tried out in 5 secondary schools. There was encouraging feedback from interviews and focus groups with pupils and teachers, although there was no assessment of actual behavioural changes.

A report from the Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA)[33] provides an evaluation of the All Together Programme, based on 165 schools. This programme focuses on schools reviewing their current anti-bullying work, engaging in training, and learning from incidents of bullying. Young people were involved when developing all associated materials. The past 18-months of the programme were evaluated using the ABA pupil wellbeing survey, school audit tool, training evaluation, and final evaluation questionnaire. The findings suggest that the programme had a positive impact on the schools and individuals involved. Reported experiences of bullying by pupils, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, reduced, and the school audit tool was highlighted by schools as an important and valuable means of developing their anti-bullying work.

> THE INTERVENTION SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCED EXPERIENCES OF BEING VICTIMISED.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

An LSE Working Paper[34] discusses variations in rates of cyber-victimisation across different countries (including England or UK), using databases such as the EU Kids Online project, and Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC). The review discusses difficulties and challenges in making cross-country comparisons. It also suggests a model for explaining differences in term of five factors: cultural values, education system, technological infrastructure, regulatory framework, and socio-economic stratification.

BOOKS

Books published on the topic of bullying include an introduction to school bullying for the general educated reader[35], an edited collection covering school bullying and mental health[36], and an edited collection of research from Europe, India and Australia, with some comparative data including England, on definitions of bullying and on anti-bullying interventions used in schools[37].

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Publications on school bullying continue to appear at a rapid rate, internationally and in the UK. Three surveys are reported here[3,4,5]; it is important to remember that prevalence rates depend on the definition of bullying (if given, or the implicit definition that a pupil has), the time period asked about, and other factors[35]. There are a considerable number of longitudinal data bases available in the UK, and many quantitative studies have used these to good effect, in showing the importance of sibling bullying[14,15,16] and especially in demonstrating medium- and long-term effects of bullying involvement[18,19,21]. More intensive qualitative studies can also give useful insights[6,8,24]. Some studies provide suggestions for focussing interventions[5,6,10,14,26,28], or developing[32] or evaluating[30,33] interventions. This is particularly important when some evidence suggests a slightly worsening situation compared to previous years[3].

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