

## **Towards an inclusive understanding of bullying: identifying conceptions and practice in the primary school workforce.**

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### **Abstract**

Bullying is defined in a variety of ways in different contexts, and each individual school in England is required to develop its own working definition, parameters and policy. This paper explores a variety of definitions from government and third sector organisations in the UK, making comparison with those from other contexts. In particular it considers whether bullying is repeated behaviour or experience, and how labels such as target, victim and perpetrator have the potential to damage individual identities. It highlights common themes and differences across definitions and interpretations, comparing them with those of staff (n = 131) drawn from research in sixteen schools in one large local authority area in England, detailing their conceptions and experiences of bullying. These staff identify whether, where and how bullying is encountered in their settings, how they address such issues, and whether there are particular stimuli on which they focus. It concludes that a redeveloped, clear and understandable definition of bullying is needed that is accessible to all stakeholders in schools, including children. This needs to be inclusive in its focus, unambiguous and applicable across a broad range of settings, leaving aside the historical baggage associated with the subject.

**Key words:** bullying, primary education, teachers, school staff, defining bullying

**Biographical note:** Richard Woolley is deputy head in the Institute of Education at the University of Worcester, England.

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## **Introduction**

Bullying is a complex and contentious subject. For those experiencing it, there can be consequences that last well into adult life (Copeland et al 2013; Takizawa et al 2014). In England schools are required to monitor instances of bullying (DfE 2014), and are required to provide “records and

analysis of bullying, discriminatory and prejudicial behaviour, either directly or indirectly, including racist, disability and homophobic bullying, use of derogatory language and racist incidents” when statutory inspections take place (Ofsted 2015: 16). Inspectors from Ofsted, the national regulator, ask children about their experience in school, whether they feel happy and safe, and whether there are incidences of bullying within their school. The views of parents/carers are also collected.

The right not to be bullied is enshrined in law, albeit implicitly, for example the UK *Human Rights Act* (1998), *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989, ratified in the UK in 1991), and more overtly the right not to be bullied is combined by UNICEF (undated: 2) with a responsibility not to bully:

If children have a right to be protected from conflict, cruelty, exploitation and neglect, then they also have a responsibility not to bully or harm each other.

Given this context, one could assume that anti-bullying education would be high on the agenda in schools and in training courses for teachers and trainee teachers. However, in order to address the issue with confidence and clarity an agreed definition of what bullying is, and is not, is required. This paper will explore examples of definitions from a range of sources, and compare these with research undertaken with members of staff drawn from sixteen schools in one local authority area in England.

## **Context**

In 2016 *Ditch the Label*, one of the UK’s largest anti-bullying charities, found that 50% of young people who had been bullied had experienced it within the past year, 46% of whom had been bullied at least once a week. Of those who had been bullied, 24% went on to bully someone else, and people who have been bullied are twice as likely to bully others. Based on their own definition, 14% of young people who had not been bullied admitted to bullying somebody else (*Ditch the Label* 2016: 7-11).

This survey included results gained from 8,850 young people aged 12 – 20 years (34% were aged 13 years or younger), making this the largest benchmark of bullying in the UK. Of those who were bullied in the past year, 40% had not reported it. Of those who did, 87% told a teacher, 86% a family member and 70% a friend. Reasons for not reporting bullying included: concern about being called a ‘snitch’ (36%), feeling able to deal with it themselves (36%), being scared of it getting worse (34%) and concern that it would not be taken seriously (31%). 22% indicated that they had reported bullying in the past and nothing happened as a result (Ditch the Label 2016: 17). Earlier research had also found that one in five young people reported being bullied in the last four weeks, and that quarter of young people said they often worry about being bullied (Chamberlain et al 2010). This suggests that bullying has a significant impact on the lives of young people and highlights the importance of addressing issues of agency, respect and self-value early in a child’s life.

The Children’s Society *Good Childhood Report* (2015) found that children in England were unhappier with their school experience than those in 13 other countries. Bullying emerged as a key theme in the findings in comparison to other countries, particularly with regard to emotional bullying. Almost twice as many children in Year 6 (34%) totally agreed that they liked going to school compared to Year 8 (18%) (Children’s Society 2015: 39). Whilst the decline in liking school is interesting, the low figure for both age groups is of note. Around two-fifths (38%) of children said that they had been hit by other children in the past month and half said that they had been left out by classmates. Children in Year 6 (aged 10 – 11 years) were 60% more likely to have been hit than those in Year 8. Across the nations surveyed, children in England were the most likely to have been left out by classmates (Children’s Society 2015).

Although there are no official statistics on the number of children who are bullied in England (NSPCC 2015a) bullying was the biggest reason for children aged 11 and under to contact *ChildLine* (25% of children aged 11 and under) and the third biggest reason for children aged 12-15 (9% of 12-15 year olds). Bullying was the second biggest reason for boys to contact *ChildLine* (12% of boys)

and the third biggest reason for girls (9% of girls) (NSPCC 2015b). Furthermore *YouGov* polling indicates that:

More than two in five primary school teachers say they witness homophobic bullying in their schools, and three quarters say they hear children using the phrases ‘you’re so gay’ or ‘that’s so gay’ (Gibbons 2012: 14).

This is particularly notable, as research suggests that two in five young people who experience homophobic bullying deliberately harm themselves as a direct consequence of being bullied (Guasp 2012).

### **Defining bullying**

The UK government identifies that there is no legal definition of bullying in England (Gov.uk 2015). However, it also indicates that there are three strands to a common understanding (DfE 2014):

- it is behaviour that is repeated;
- it is intended “to hurt someone either physically or emotionally”; and
- it is often aimed at certain groups, mainly focussed on differences relating to gender, sexual orientation, religion or ‘race’.

These strands are reinforced in advice published for headteachers, staff and governors in the summer of 2017 (DfE 2017). As will be seen later, the first two points are common to many definitions of bullying. The third is interesting as it infers that the person experiencing bullying is a part of a “group”. Whilst these people may share similar traits, attributes or labels, this does not mean that there is any homogeneity brought by a sense of community or comradeship. Indeed, isolation may be a feature of bullying, which stands in stark contrast to this statement. Additional “groups” may be

added to this list: many relate to Cole's notion of '*isms*' and *phobias* (Cole 2008) that include classism, racism/xeno—racism and xenophobia, sexism, disablism, homophobia and Islamophobia.

### *United Kingdom*

Further, the Department for Education (DfE 2014) states that each school should have its own definition of bullying, and that bullying can take many forms including: physical assault; teasing; making threats; name calling; and cyberbullying. This raises an interesting issue, as it places the responsibility for defining bullying firmly in the local setting. This makes monitoring or benchmarking across the education sector impossible, and also creates the possibility that what is regarded as bullying behaviour in one school may fall outside that definition in another. This opens the door to inconsistency, and possibly to tolerance towards low-level bullying in some settings. As Rivers states: "Schools need guidance on what bullying is and is not, how to measure it, record it, and build interventions around knowledge of their own schools' circumstances" (in Brunel University 2014).

An earlier government definition had similarly stated that bullying is:

Behaviour by an individual or group, usually repeated over time, that intentionally hurts another individual or group either physically or emotionally. (DCSF 2007:6)

It must be noted that between the publication of the 2007 and 2014 definitions above, came the introduction of the Equality Act 2010 (Legislation.gov.uk). This made it illegal to discriminate against anyone on the grounds of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation. Such discrimination is illegal whether these characteristics are real or perceived, and also if a person is discriminated against because of association with others with such a protected characteristic. This legislation has placed a duty on schools to address bullying and discriminatory behaviour and attitudes, and indeed Ofsted

now asks schools how they are promoting British values, teaching about different families and tackling homophobic bullying (Ofsted 2015). The National Curriculum (DfE 2014) further affirms the applicability of key protected characteristics from the Equality Act within schools.

Bullying is identified as “a mixture of behaviours and impacts which can impact on a person’s capacity to feel in control of themselves. It is all about relationships and role modelling, and what happens when these go wrong” by Scotland’s anti-bullying service *Respect Me* (2013). It suggests that each instance of bullying should be looked at individually, and that sometimes it may be unintentional (for example when a child is copying the behaviours of others, including adults, and is unaware of the inappropriateness of their actions). They assert that the impact of bullying can be felt after one single incident, and that persistence is not needed in order for actions to impact on the mental health or well-being of a child: “It isn’t helpful to wait and see if a pattern of repetition emerges before taking action.” They assert that it is more important to act in response to behaviour, rather than focussing on a “rigid definition.” This approach stands in contrast to most of the others cited in this paper, as it rejects labelling, suggests that bullying can be unintentional, and that it need not be repetitious.

In contrast, *Kidscape* (2012) defines bullying as:

- deliberate hostility and aggression
- directed at a target who may appear vulnerable
- an outcome which is painful and distressing to the target

The definition of bullying as involving an aggressive intention, unequal power and a degree of repetition owes much to the influential definition provided by Olweus (1993). The use of “aggression” by *Kidscape* employs stronger language than the government definitions cited earlier, and provides an indication of a degree of subjectivity across a spectrum of interpretations of what bullying entails. *Kidscape* (undated) suggests that it can be verbal, physical, emotional or cyber in form, and proposes that the most common reasons are racist, homophobic, sexual, disability based

on real or perceived ‘difference’. *Kidscape* also identifies that a one-off incident may be so significant that it causes long-term effects, and is therefore categorised as bullying.

The word target is not helpful as a label and dehumanises the person. This notion of labelling is important. *Respect Me* (2013) advocates care in avoiding labels, as this can confirm the identity of the bully or victim and “result in an ongoing behaviour pattern based on this identity.” Their focus is on responding to the problematic behaviour, rather than assigning characteristics to those involved. An older government definition from the UK, again school-focused, reinforces the idea of repeated behaviours but also includes reference to a target: “Dominance of one pupil by another, or a group of others, which is pre-meditated and usually forms a pattern of behaviour rather than an isolated incident” (DfE 1994: 19), and “Includes a whole range of behaviour: name calling and teasing, malicious gossip, stealing from a target, physical violence, threats, coercion and isolating individuals from group activities” (summary from DfE 1994 cited in *Anti-Bullying Works* 2012).

It is interesting that later definitions in the same context (DCSF 2007 and DfE 2014) focus more on individuals, groups and persons, rather than targets (DfE 1994), showing some sense of how terminology and understanding has developed over time.

*Anti-Bullying Works* (undated) states that every organisation and service needs to have a clear definition of bullying that is shared with everyone in that community. The best definitions are “agreed collectively” by all stakeholders across the relevant range of age groups. It cites principles from the *Anti-Bullying Alliance’s* definition of bullying:

- “Bullying behaviour deliberately causes hurt (either physically or emotionally).
- Bullying behaviour is repetitive (though one-off incidents such as the posting of an image, or the sending of a text that is then forwarded to a group, can quickly become repetitive and spiral into bullying behaviour).



- Bullying behaviour involves an imbalance of power (the person on the receiving end feels like they can't defend themselves)."

They also identify what bullying is not:

- "Teasing or banter between friends without intention to cause hurt.
- Falling out between friends after a quarrel or disagreement.
- Behaviour that all parties have consented to and enjoy." (*Anti-Bullying Works* undated)

Bullying, according to this synthesis, is a conscious act intended to cause hurt; it can last for varying periods of time; it is an abuse of power by the perpetrator(s); it can be opportunistic as well as premeditated, and is sometimes random. Interestingly, *Anti-Bullying Works* (undated) suggest that bullying requires an audience; it relies on "observers, onlookers, watchers doing nothing to stop the bullying or becoming actively involved in supporting it." Pepler et al (2010) suggest that in at least 85% of cases of bullying there is an audience of peers present. Similarly, Salmivalli (2010) suggests that bullying is a group phenomenon which includes others in addition to the bully and their victim, namely defenders, reinforcers and bystanders. However, one-on-one bullying should not be excluded from any new definition, as even if the term "intimidation" or some other term is used; it is inappropriate behaviour that abuses power and must not be permitted.

ACAS, (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) is a UK-based organisation that provides free and impartial information and advice to employers and employees on all aspects of workplace relations and employment law. Whilst its definition relates more to the adult workplace than to a child's schooling, nonetheless it adds an interesting additional dimension:

Bullying may be characterised as offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means that undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient. (ACAS 2014:1)

The examples cited by ACAS reflect those listed above by other organisations, with the addition of “deliberately undermining a competent worker by constant criticism” (ACAS 2014: 2). The term “undermining” is a useful addition to this discussion and worth considering within the setting of a school, where a child’s peers or adults may undermine, sometimes persistently, their sense of self-worth and confidence. The *NSPCC* (undated) also uses the word ‘undermine’ in its definition, stating that bullying is:

... behaviour that hurts someone else – such as name calling, hitting, pushing, spreading rumours, threatening or undermining someone.

They suggest that it is usually repeated over a long period of time, and can occur anywhere.

The penultimate point is worth particular note, as it indicates that both victim and perpetrator are affected by the occurrence of bullying. The destructive impact that bullying has on relationships, and thereby on self-esteem and a sense of self-worth, affects all those involved in the engagement in a detrimental manner. Thus it is not only the person being bullied who needs resolution, but also the person undertaking the bullying.

### ***United States and Australia***

Writing in the context of the United States of America, *Stopbullying.gov* (undated) adds a further dimension to the understanding of bullying:

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behaviour among school aged children that involves real or perceived power imbalance. The behaviour is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.

This definition is partial, as it relates solely to children of school age, whereas bullying can be experienced by those of any age and in any context. Further elaboration identifies that the power imbalance can be exhibited through physical strength, access to embarrassing information or impact on a person's popularity, to control or harm others. It also acknowledges that such power imbalances can change over time and are not fixed. *Stopbullying.gov* suggests that there are three main types of bullying: verbal, social and physical. The interesting addition is that the behaviour "has the potential to be repeated". The notion of a perceived power imbalance is similar to the focus in the Equality Act (Legislation.gov.uk 2010) in the UK, which states that discrimination can take place for a range of reasons relating to difference, "whether real or perceived" (Legislation.gov.uk 2010). In common with *Respect Me* (2013) and *Kidscape* (2012) there is an indication that the behaviour need not be repeated.

Again writing in the USA, Graham (2016) draws on the work of Olweus (1993) to define school bullying as the "physical, verbal, or psychological abuse of victims by perpetrators who intend to cause them harm" (Graham 2016: 137). It is distinguished from more general forms of conflict between peers through the power imbalance between those involved and the intention to do harm. She notes that "even one traumatic experience of being bullied can be painful and plant the fear of continued abuse" (Graham 2016: 137). Again, this raises the question of whether definitions of bullying should include reference to the behaviour being repeated, highlighting the impact of one occurrence of such behaviour in some circumstances. The use of the term perpetrator reflects the focus on victim, perpetrator and bystander found in other definitions, raising the issue of whether labelling is either helpful or productive in the process, as will be discussed later.

In contrast, writing in the context of Australia, the State of New South Wales states that:

Bullying is repeated verbal, physical, social or psychological behaviour that is harmful and involves the misuse of power by an individual or group towards one or more persons. (NSW Public Schools 2014)

Again, this brings a focus on repeated behaviour, but the reference to persons changes the emphasis from a role or label to the impact on specific human beings.

Writing on the US-based Verywell.com website, Lee (2015) develops a further definition:

Bullying is intentional aggressive behaviour. It can take the form of physical or verbal harassment and involves an imbalance of power (a group of children can gang up on a victim or someone who is physically bigger or more aggressive can intimidate someone else).

This is reinforced by Lee, who seeks to make clarification between general aggression amongst children and aggressive behaviour that is bullying. She states that there are three elements that help to differentiate between the two: first the actions are not an accident and are intended to cause hurt or harm (thus an outburst caused by frustration, a lack of language or emotional skills or by being upset does not constitute bullying); secondly there is an imbalance of power (which may come through being older or bigger, two children against one, or actions against a child unable to defend themselves); and thirdly there is repetition (including a high likelihood that the behaviour may occur again). Lee adds insulting someone (including about differences or personal traits), shoving, hitting and excluding someone or gossiping about someone as examples of bullying behaviours and suggests that it is “frequently repeated” unless there is an intervention, which infers that it is not solely repeated behaviour.

### **Taking a different view**

Horton (2016) suggests that for too long a macro lens has been used when researching bullying, creating a skewed focus on individuals and on roles including victim, perpetrator and bystander. A wide-angle lens could provide the opportunity to look at institutional and societal factors that come into play. For example, wider societal norms including social class, race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation affect how people are positioned and how they position themselves, how individuals exercise power, and thus how they may engage in bullying or be bullied. Bullying requires such a wide-angle lens because of the larger societal issues and anxieties that influence people's views and behaviour. Horton suggests that the move from focussing on group dynamics to individual behaviour came about in the 1970s (Horton 2016: 211):

A discourse of blame has been constructed, which has allowed blame to be shifted onto the individual children involved, and this in turn has ensured continued reliance on the macro lens.

Horton suggests that what is required is a fully rounded view, taking into account a broad range of factors. This, he claims, will take the focus away from seeing individual children as 'monsters', so that "we may once again see ordinary children attempting to navigate a range of power relationships in social, institutional and societal contexts over which they have little control" (Horton 2016: 212).

*UNESCO* (2016) adds the further dimension of being able to defend oneself to the definition of bullying. This moves the focus from the behaviour of the bully, to the ability to cope on the part of the recipient:

A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself.

The three important components that *UNESCO* (2016) elaborates from this definition are:

- “bullying is aggressive behaviour than involves unwanted, negative actions;
- bullying involves a pattern of behaviour repeated over time;
- bullying involves an imbalance of power or strength.”

These points reflect many of those in the definitions already outlined. It is the notion of being able to defend oneself, which infers having coping strategies, resilience and self-confidence, that is of significant note in this international perspective.

Professor Ian Rivers from Brunel University has worked to develop a uniform definition of bullying to be used by the US government (working as part of a group for the *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*). This has been agreed at a federal level in order to support a consistent measurement, which individual states can then adapt for monitoring purposes. Rivers (Brunel University 2014) states that:

Bullying is a very subjective experience and the definition often describes the behaviour of the perpetrator whereas the measurement is often from the perspective of the victim. How we operationalise our understanding of bullying and apply it in school or work-based contexts differs.

This is one of the few definitions that acknowledged the subjectivity of the concept, and the tension between the experiences of both parties to the bullying. It also acknowledges that at an operational level understandings vary, as indicated by the practice in England of individual schools developing their own definitions of bullying.

The agreed US *Definition of Bullying Among Youths* is:

Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behaviour(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social or educational harm. (Gladden et al 2014:7)

The exclusion of some individuals within this definition is interesting, and one would question why a sister, brother or dating partner cannot bully (although this may be termed domestic violence). Such differentiators may not be appropriate for use with children in school, where clear definitions and boundaries may be beneficial.

Figure 1: Overview of key elements of definitions of bullying.

To conclude this section, Figure 1 provides a summary of some of the main features of the definitions already outlined. This illustrates that three common elements are repetition, a power imbalance and the causing of hurt or harm. These three reflect Olweus' (1993) seminal definition. Having identified the main elements of some definitions from different contexts, it is now possible to develop a comparison with the views gained during research with primary school teachers in England.

## **Methodology**

During the spring of 2016, an online questionnaire was used to elicit the views on and experiences of bullying with staff in sixteen primary schools in a local authority area in England. The local authority covers a broad geographical area with both rural and urban populations. The schools were self-selecting, having indicated a willingness to engage in a project to develop anti-bullying strategies and resources to promote children's well-being, advocacy and self-esteem, led by *GR8 AS UR* (a not-for-

profit organisation) and funded by a National Lottery *Reaching Communities* grant. The questionnaire elicited initial baseline data, including staff members' experiences of bullying between children in schools and their personal definitions.

The questionnaire was devised by an academic, and validated by a senior academic from a university independent of the project. It gained ethical approval through the first university, and was administered through the sending of an electronic link shared by *GR8 AS U R* with the gatekeeper in each school. All responses were anonymous, and no school or individual could be identified. All respondents had a right of withdrawal, and all were informed of the aims and purposes of the research.

Responses were received from 132 individuals across the sixteen schools, of which 131 were usable. The range of participants included teachers (53%), teaching assistants (27%), members of the senior leadership team (12%), midday and cover supervisors (5%) and administrators or bursars (3%). 13 of the respondents identified as male.

Respondents had a mean average of 13.1 years in the teaching profession. The range across respondents was 39.5 years (with the lowest 0.5 and the highest 40 years) and the median 11 years. The most common length of service (mode) for respondents was 5 years.

### **Staff experiences and definitions of bullying**

Staff members were asked how often they encountered bullying amongst children in their role (Table 1). Where more than one answer was given, the most frequent was included in the data. This showed that occurrences of bullying were relatively infrequent, with the majority of staff encountering them rarely, and a small number (3%) never. It was interesting to find that staff in a range of roles across the schools, including office staff, came across bullying at least at some point in their work. 79% of teachers and 80.5% of teaching assistants indicated that they encountered bullying rarely with 97% and 94% respectively coming across it at some point in their role.



Table 1: The frequency of encountering bullying amongst children

When asked: “If you do see bullying, what are the most frequent types?” respondents identified a range of occurrences (Table 2). Some instances were only identified by one member of staff, including: threatening; older to younger; texting; mental abuse; friendship complaints; race-related; embarrassing others; making fun of someone; picking on others; behaviour towards a member of the class others find insufferable or irritating.

It is notable that 16.8% (n = 22) did not see bullying, or chose not to give an answer. This contrasts with the results in Table 1 that indicate that nearly all staff come across bullying at some points, but as most come across it rarely they may not have been able to indicate the most frequent types. Craig et al (2000) suggest that low rates of teacher intervention tend to reinforce the bullying behaviours of students, but in this case the participants indicate that it is a low occurrence of bullying that is found in their schools. This highlights the point that each school will have its own definition of bullying, its own boundaries and expectations for behaviour, and a school-specific policy in this regard. This makes drawing conclusions somewhat complex, but with 131 respondents across 16 schools at least an embryonic sense of staff perception is possible.

Table 2: The most frequent types of bullying encountered by staff

35 participants identified more than one type of bullying. Not all answers were clear in their specific meaning. The most common instances related to verbal bullying, excluding others, or physical engagement. It is notable that 22 responses (16.8%) relate to exclusion from groups or play, with a

further two identifying ostracisation. This is an element that was not included overtly in the review of literature detailed earlier. The most frequent type of bullying identified is not unexpected, as verbal abuse is the most commonly reported form of bullying across a range of studies (James 2010).

Respondents were asked where they most commonly encountered bullying, if they did (Table 3).

Table 3: Places where bullying is most commonly encountered

A significant majority of staff members identified unstructured time (breaks and lunchtimes) as the most common time for bullying to occur. One identified bullying as taking place in the staffroom, and other single answers included: out of earshot and out of the classroom. Again 26% did not identify a location (n = 34) reflecting the low incidence of bullying identified by the participants.

Members of staff were asked to provide a short definition of bullying (Table 4). Key words from each response were collated, and themes identified. Actual numbers are reported, with 289 terms summarised from 131 responses.

Table 4: Summary of staff members' brief definitions of bullying

Over half of the respondents (57%, n = 75) identified bullying as being repeated or persistent. Only 30.5% specifically included verbal incidents in their definition, despite almost 60% identifying it as the most common kind of bullying that they encounter (see Table 2). Only six responses (4.6%) included reference to bullying being deliberate or intentional within their definition, although perhaps this may have been taken to be self-evident. Participants were not asked what had informed their understanding of bullying, or any sources of particular influence on their thoughts or practice. This

would be an interesting area to explore further. 43% of staff members indicated that they had either had no training in the area of bullying (n = 33), or gave no answer (n = 23). 30.5% had received some formal training on one or more established programmes (e.g. Thrive or STEPS). 17.5% (n = 23) had received safeguarding training, and individuals identified other specific areas where training had been received which they judged to be relevant (for example on bereavement, drugs education, homophobic bullying, or first aid).

Staff were asked to identify how they help children to learn to be safe and look after the safety and well-being of others. The responses were coded and grouped, with 145 specific areas identified, and 9 participants choosing not to answer. Of the 9, 5 were teachers, 2 administrators and 2 teaching assistants.

Table 5: How do members staff help children to learn to be safe and look after the safety and well-being of others?

The data in Table 5 reflects Graham's recommendation that teachers should use witnessed bullying incidents as "teachable moments" (2016: 141), with the majority of respondents using circle time or classroom activities to address developing children's well-being. Such strategies open the door to discuss difficult topics with children, including why some choose to be bystanders and how the impact of bullying can be painful and destructive: "At times, engaging in such difficult dialogues may be a more useful teacher response than quick and harsh punishment of perpetrators" (Graham 2016: 142). As Hektner and Swenson (2011) note, victimisation tends to decline with increased intervention from teachers. Furthermore, Tucker and Maunder (2015: 469) draw tentative conclusions from their small scale study with primary school teachers, concluding that "through teachers tackling bullying by focussing on the skills children need to nurture effective personal relationships, we suggest that they are also addressing an important aspect which can contribute to well-being in schools and build

children's resilience." This not only involved tackling bullying in a reactive way, but developing skills with children proactively in order to promote bullying avoidance and diminution.

Staff members were also asked in what ways they help children to be welcoming and to accept, value and celebrate difference (Table 6). Again, lessons and classroom activities scored highly.

Table 6: How do staff members help children to be welcoming and to accept, value and celebrate difference?

Staff members were asked whether there were particular differences that they felt were particularly important, or that they have to focus on regularly.

Table 7: Are there particular differences that you feel are particularly important, or that you have to focus on regularly?

Low scoring responses included personal hygiene (1), social skills (2), LGB issues (2) and name calling (2). One teacher commented "I'm gay. I talk more often about my husband and that I'm married." This was one of the few responses that seemed to be about addressing an area of importance, rather than needing to be focussed on regularly for other more negative reasons, and provides an example of a teacher acting as a role model in order to create a positive learning environment. It also reflects the emphasis on being an effective role model identified in earlier questions. It is interesting that 88 responses (67% of the sample group) did not highlight an area that they felt to be of importance, even if there was not an issue that required regular attention for other reasons.

## **Towards a definition**

One key element is missing from many of the above definitions both from participants in the survey and the literature, and that is the impact of the bullying behaviour on those termed perpetrator(s).

Their behaviour is likely to:

- affect their relationship(s) with others, including their peer group;
- impact on the ways(s) in which they are perceived and regarded by others;
- give them an inappropriate understanding of power relationships and the way(s) in which power should be used within relationships with others.

The bully is thus a victim of their own bullying, and they need to be enabled to develop healthy, positive and constructive relationships with others, where their sense of self-esteem and self-worth is not dependent on dominant, hurtful or intimidating behaviour.

Graham (2016: 139) refers to young people who are both bullies and victims, terming these bully-victims:

Bully-victims, in fact, seem to have the worst of all possible worlds. They are overwhelmingly rejected by their peers, while not enjoying any of the social benefits that sometimes accrue to bullies... bully-victims are considered to be more troubled and vulnerable than either bullies or victims.

Thus there are two strands here:

- bullying, and

- being bullied

Both are unacceptable and inappropriate ways of being human, and are destructive.

In coming to a definition it is important to consider whether the definition should empower the person being bullied, or highlight the behaviour of the person undertaking the bullying, or both. The focus in this last sentence is on persons, rather than labels (victim, perpetrator or bully) which are unhelpful in seeking a resolution and make a summary judgement on that person. This may be an inaccurate overall judgement, as a person may bully or be bullied in one situation, but not in the rest of their activity/living. It is not helpful for a child to identify or be identified as strong (which might be a “badge of honour”) or weak (which does not help them to cope with the situation). The label could thus be disempowering or lead to an identity with disproportionate impact (without wishing to underestimate the impact of the behaviour on the individual).

A comprehensive definition, drawing on the main themes from the teachers’ responses and the literature cited earlier could be:

- Bullying is unkind, hurtful behaviour on purpose.

This includes the attitude of the person exhibiting the bullying behaviour (unkind), their intention (on purpose) and the impact (hurtful) that includes physical and/or emotional pain. The language is also appropriate for children of a range of ages, including those in the early years of primary schools. An adaptation of this, drawing further on the definitions from published sources detailed earlier, and the views of 75 of the survey respondents, would be:

- Bullying is *repeated* unkind, hurtful behaviour on purpose.

Repeated can mean “more than once” rather than infer “on several occasions”. However, if the behaviour is done “on purpose” it should not be accepted, and inappropriate behaviour must always be addressed by those who observe it (and those experiencing it need to be empowered to address it, whether directly or by asking for support). A zero tolerance approach would remove the opportunity for hurtful and unkind behaviour to be ignored by childcare professionals and others because they think “this is the first time.” The word “hurt” reflects the two government definitions at the start of this document, and reflects the term “harmful” used in New South Wales (2014). “On purpose” reflects the DCSF (2007), the NSPCC (2015b) and Kidscape (2012) definitions, and that of the Anti-Bullying Alliance (Anti-Bullying Works undated). Only 4.5% of the staff in schools noted intentionality in their definitions (n = 6). This raises the important issues that it is key to understand what intentionality looks like, and how the motivation of a perpetrator is to be adjudged. To this Horton (2016) adds an additional dimension, suggesting that those researching bullying in schools have often focussed on the individuals involved, rather than wider institutional, social and societal contexts. Citing Olweus’ work (1993) and that of others, he suggests that macro definitions of victims and perpetrators (including passive, submissive, typical and provocative victims; typical, passive, followers or henchmen bullies) miss wider issues across a school and within society. This highlights the importance of school ethos (as indicated by the respondents in the survey), and raises a question for further research: what factors across and outside a school impact upon the occurrence of bullying behaviours within?

## **Conclusion**

The importance of addressing bullying because of its potentially destructive consequences for all involved has been stated. The *Young Minds vs. Bullying: stop the rot campaign* (undated) identifies a range of background data from the UK that reinforces the impact of bullying in UK society:

- 16,000 young people aged 11 – 15 are absent at school at any one time because of bullying.  
(Brown et al 2011)

- Bullied children are up to three times more likely than their peers to self-harm when they reach adolescence. Half of 12-year-olds who self-harm were frequently bullied. (Fisher et al 2012)
- Victims and perpetrators of bullying are more likely to have mental illness, physical illness, be in poverty, struggle to hold down a regular job and have poor social relationships. (Wolke et al 2013)

These data emphasise the longer-term consequences of bullying, and emphasise the need for proactive interventions, positive school ethos's and clear definitions early in the school career of children in order to minimise or eradicate impact.

The term bullying is problematic because it is contentious, contested and lacks a consistent definition. If bullying has to be a repeated behaviour it can potentially cause a difficult conversation between teacher and child:

Child: I have been bullied by X.

Teacher: Tell me what happened. Has it happened more than once?

Child: This was the first time and X has been very hurtful to me.

Teacher: That is not appropriate behaviour, but it is not bullying.

This does not properly value the child's situation and experience, or their bravery in raising the issue. It may be more effective to leave aside the word bullying, whilst addressing its meaning, in order to bypass any contention or historical baggage. Perhaps stronger statements (that avoid the word bullying, with its complexities and context-specific implications) are (with impact/focus indicated in brackets):

- No one should be unkind or hurtful on purpose. [the most direct statement]



This uses direct and accessible language, appropriate for a primary school setting (as well as elsewhere) and is aspirational in its intention to address behaviour before any repetition occurs, it maintains the focus on intention, thus inferring a power imbalance. Variations could include:

- No one should be unkind or hurtful to me on purpose. [empowers the individual]
- No one should be unkind or hurtful to anybody on purpose. [inclusive]
- I must not be unkind or hurtful to anyone on purpose. [focuses on behaviour, although identifying intentionality can be problematic]

Whilst the most succinct and powerful might be:

- No one should be unkind or hurtful.

This final suggestion could also encompass the idea that we should not be unkind or hurtful *to ourselves*, and it removes the direct focus on intention (as suggested by *Respect Me* 2013) and repetition, both of which can make decisions about identifying bullying more complex. This is also reminiscent of Horton's (2016) suggestion that we should see children and consider their context, rather than viewing them as monsters.

Whilst this research does not fully comply with Horton's (2016) call for a wide-angle lens, it does begin to develop a multi-pixelated presentation of definitions of bullying within literature drawn from a wide range of sources and contexts, and from across a variety of schools. As the research and its analysis develops further, with members of the children's workforce, children and parents/carers the picture will develop further in its breadth. At this stage in the research process it is important to emphasise the emergence of an understanding for all those involved in a child's education to engage in reflecting on received definitions of bullying, its usefulness as a term, the complexities and diverse

understandings of its meaning, and to exercise caution in adopting common assumptions, particularly about it requiring repetition and about intentionality.

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