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Cyberbullying prevention: One primary school's approach

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Abstract

Bullying in all its forms including cyberbullying is a continuing problem in schools. Given the severe consequences it can have on students (socially, psychologically and physically) it is not surprising that a number of intervention programs have been developed, with most advocating a whole school approach. The current study compared students' self-reports on bullying between schools with and without a Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach. A sample of 35 students in the P4C school and a matched sample of 35 students in other schools between the ages of 10 and 13 completed the *Student Bullying Survey*. Results indicated that while there were significant differences in incidences of face-to-face bullying, there were similar results from both cohorts in relation to cyberbullying. Both groups of students felt that teachers were more likely to prevent face-to-face bullying than cyberbullying. Findings indicate that teachers and guidance counsellors need to be as overt in teaching strategies about cyberbullying as they are in teaching strategies about reducing face-to-face bullying.

Key words: cyberbullying, philosophy, children, bullying

Cyberbullying has become a growing problem in schools. It mirrors other forms of bullying in the three elements that identify bullying: the behaviour is repetitive, there is an intention to harm, and it involves some form of power imbalance (Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007; Parada, 2008; Turkel, 2007). While cyberbullying is the newest form of bullying there are many others with which teachers and students have had to deal: physical (hitting, kicking), non-physical (exclusion, manipulation), verbal (taunting, teasing), relational (forced to comply with rules of others), and sexual (demean, embarrass, humiliate or control another on the basis of gender or sexual orientation) (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008; Bhat, 2008; Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Covert bullying, a less direct “hidden” kind of bullying, can take the form of spreading gossip, deliberate social exclusion and cyberbullying (Cross, Shaw, Epstein, Monks, Lester, et al., 2009). Recent statistics released from the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS) (Cross et al., 2009) revealed that one in four students in Australia between Years 4 to 9 had been bullied with the majority of them (61%) having experienced covert bullying. Of these students, 60% had also been teased in “nasty” ways, 24% had been physically hurt, and 13% had been sent nasty messages on the internet. It would seem that bullying for school-aged children remains a difficult dilemma for schools to resolve.

Cyberbullying is used by young people to harm others repeatedly through the use of technology such as social networking sites and other chat rooms, mobile phones, websites and web-cameras (Campbell, 2005; Keith & Martin, 2005). Until recently there has been little research into this form of bullying (Harewald, 2008). However, the ACBPS study (Cross et al., 2009) reported that 7 – 10% of students in Years 4 to 9 had experienced cyberbullying. Slightly higher rates were found among secondary students, suggesting that cyberbullying may be related to age or access to technology. Shariff and Johnny (2007) suggested that schools have too much information but too little knowledge on the complexities of cyberbullying to deal with it effectively. Difficulties arise

because of the anonymity of the offender and the fact that a high percentage of bullying goes unreported.

#### *Whole School Approach to Prevent Bullying*

Given the incidence of bullying in schools and the severe consequences it can have on students (socially, psychologically and physically) it is not surprising that a number of intervention programs have been developed. For example, a whole-school approach to bullying looks at prevention and intervention from multiple angles and across a broad spectrum of the school community (Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004). Generally, a whole-school approach takes into account the style and quality of leadership and management practices of the school, the quality and delivery of the curriculum, playground activities, the quality of supervision as well as formalised and agreed procedures to deal with a bullying incident (Suckling & Temple, 2001). However, there is limited positive evidence that a whole-school approach will prevent bullying (Ttofi & Farrington, 2009). While these approaches have led to some reductions in bullying, very few programs achieve a reduction of near or above the 50% mark, and some studies have reported minimal or no improvement (McGrath, 2006). However, while there is very limited solid evidence that whole-school approaches work, there is no evidence that other kinds of intervention are superior to the whole-school approach in dealing with bullying nor that the whole-school approach should be abandoned (Smith et al., 2004). Indeed, there is strong support that such an intervention can succeed, but not enough is known to indicate exactly how and when (Woods & Wolke, 2003).

A different approach to reducing bullying has a focus on dealing directly with bullying incidents, whatever kind of bullying has occurred. Some researchers (Galloway & Roland, 2004), however, have argued that this direct approach is not necessarily the most effective in the long term

as an explicit focus on a particular bullying incident cannot address all the factors that may contribute to the problem. For example, teachers' moral orientation in response to bullying, their training and skills to deal with problems of bullying or, indeed, their ability to recognise bullying when it occurs need to be taken into consideration (Ellis & Shute, 2007). The argument here is not that individual bullying incidents should not be addressed explicitly but rather it should be addressed within the wider context of social interactions. This view is supported by Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, and Feinberg (2005) who identified the need for social skills training, promotion of social competency (by teaching students how to interact more effectively with peers and adults through enhanced conflict resolution, developing problem solving skills), developing skills in negotiation, and developing friendship building abilities. One approach that aims to address the above needs is through a Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach, developed by Matthew Lipman in the 1960s (Haynes, 2008).

#### *The Philosophy for Children Approach*

The Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach argues that through philosophy a classroom can become a pluralistic community centred in dialogue and collaborative activity where critical, creative and complex thinking are present (Cam, 2006). The program is based not only on cognitive development but also, through participation in the community of enquiry, students' develop social skills leading to a strengthening of social competency. At its simplest, P4C is based on encouraging children to think for themselves about issues, to question assumptions and to join with other children in open-ended discussions about these issues. This process allows children to be exposed to a view range of viewpoints on ideas in which they themselves are interested (Shaw, 2003). However, there is a structure to the program based on the principles of constructivism. In the P4C approach, both cognitive and social constructivism interact allowing students opportunities to solve real life

problems. Cognitive constructivism (Powell & Kalina, 2009) has its origins in Piaget's work where ideas are constructed through an individual process. In order for learning to be effective it must be presented at students' personal level of logical and intellectual capabilities. Social constructivism is derived from Vygotsky's work (Adams, 2006; Powell & Kalina, 2009). In this approach, personal critical thinking processes are integrated through social interactions. Both approaches focus on the learner; the teacher becomes a facilitator in the learning process who aids in guiding the learner and explaining complex ideas so the learner can gain understanding. The learner is the one who constructs their understanding of concepts. Both approaches value inquiry as a method for learning where the teacher poses a puzzling situation and the students try to solve the problem through gathering data and working towards a solution.

The P4C approach has many aims which are derived from the principles of constructivism which include encouraging curiosity and questioning, strengthening judgement and reasoning skills, improving understanding and encouraging consideration of different viewpoints (Cam, 2006; Fisher, 1998). The process involves children reading or viewing a stimulus (such as a dilemma a person may face), developing questions in relation to the stimulus and then participating in a dialogue with each other (Haynes, 2008). Trickey and Topping (2004) undertook a systematic review of 10 studies in philosophy in education, and while the results showed positive outcomes in developing children's problem solving skills, their review concluded that it was not possible to assert that any use of P4C would always lead to positive outcomes because implementation is highly variable. However, there is a wide range of evidence to suggest that given certain conditions, children can gain significantly both academically and socially by participating in such a program.

The current study compares students' self-reports on bullying between schools with and without a P4C approach. A focus school has implemented a P4C program for over 13 years, starting

in 1997. All students at the school participate in a one-hour weekly philosophic discussion designed to improve their reasoning and inquiry skills by social dialogue. These discussions are a core subject timetabled into the curriculum. Lessons are planned and taught by the classroom teachers (from Prep to Year 7). All teachers at the school have undertaken training in teaching P4C, a component of which may include addressing the issues associated with bullying, depending on the stimulus material for the day and where the children take the discussion. However, while there may be discussions about bullying, the philosophy program at the school does not include it as a feature topic apart from any other topics. The main thrust of the program is the development of students' critical thinking capabilities based on a set of pre-determined readings. It was suggested by staff at the school that, through the readings and subsequent discussion students would develop a philosophical stance in their learning and the ability to reason through difficult issues such as bullying. In fact a reduction in bullying has been claimed for this program (Hinton, 2003).

Bullying programs are implemented in State schools. The Australian Government recognises the extreme effects bullying can have on students and in response has provided an anti-bullying resource pack and implementation manual for all schools to use (see the National Safety Schools Framework, DEEWR). All schools are required to address issues of bullying. The current study examined the incidence of bullying (including cyberbullying) and students' perceptions of their school's response to bullying from the P4C school and matched control students from other schools in the same state. It was hypothesised that there would be less bullying in all forms in the P4C school compared to students from other schools and that there would be more of a whole school response to bullying at the P4C school.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Purposive sampling of Years 6 and 7 students was undertaken where 35 students in Year 6 and 7 from a P4C school were matched from a pool of 465 students from other schools in the same state. The response rate from the P4C school was 72%. One student from each non-P4C schools was matched to each student in the focus P4C school based on a list of criteria. The criterion by which they were matched were gender, age, mother's highest level of education, father's highest level of education, internet access and mobile phone ownership. If a single match was still not discovered after this, a random number generator was used to choose one of the remaining matching students from the list. There were 17 boys and 18 girls in each matched group, ages ranged from 10 and 13 years, with the mean age of 11.49 years (SD= 0.654)( See Table 1).

#### *Measure*

*The Student Bullying Survey (Campbell, Slee, Spears, Kift, & Butler, 2007).*

The survey contains a total of 87 multiple choice and short answer questions on bullying, both cyber and other forms. As this study was part of a larger study the results of the whole survey will be published in another paper. Only demographics, bully and victim questions and the section on school response was utilised for this paper. Examples of questions included: (Q.12) *Have you been cyber bullied this year? (Yes / No); (Q.23) Have you cyber bullied someone this year? (Yes / No); (Q.42b) Do you think adults at your school would...discipline the person who cyber bullied?*

#### *Procedure*

Parents were sent home letters informing them of the study with requests for parental permission forms to be signed and returned if permission was granted for their children to participate in the study. The self-report questionnaires were completed by students during a 45-minute class period. Those students who were not given parental permission to participate were excused from the classroom and worked on other lessons during this time period.

## Results

A crosstabs (Chi square) analysis was conducted to investigate the distribution of victims and perpetrators of bullying in the P4C school and other schools. A higher percentage of P4C school students claimed to have both been face-to-face bullied and bullied others face-to-face in the last year than matched students at other schools (62.9% and 42.9%). Interestingly there were no significant differences between the two cohorts in reporting cyberbullying as either victims (17.1% and 17.1%) or cyberbullies (5.7% and 2.9%)( See Table 2).

There were also no differences between the two groups of students on their perceptions of adults dealing with bullying in their schools. However, there were differences in both cohorts between students' perceptions of how adults dealt with cyberbullying as opposed to face-to-face bullying. While 94.2% believed that adults try to prevent face-to-face bullying at their school (11.4% sometimes, 27.1% often and 55.7% always) only 84.3% thought that they tried to prevent cyberbullying (38.6% said sometimes, 20% often and 25.7% always). Furthermore, while about 84.3% of students said they were given lessons on face-to-face bullying (41.4% sometimes, 30% often and 12.9% always) only about 54.3% reported that they were given lessons on cyberbullying (45.7% sometimes, 5.7% often and 2.9% always). Similarly, while about 88.6% of students said adults told them about their school's anti-bullying policy for face-to-face bullying (38.6% sometimes, 34.3% sometimes and 15.7% always), only about 52.8% (37.1% sometimes, 10% often and 5.7% always) said they were told about any policy about cyberbullying (See Table 3).

## Discussion

The current study compared the incidence of both bullying and cyberbullying at a school that offers a whole school P4C approach to learning with students from other schools who do not use this

approach in upper primary. It was found that students at the P4C school reported significantly more face-to-face bullying, as both bullies and victims, than matched students at the other schools. However, there were no differences in reports of cyberbullying. These results are surprising as students at the P4C school have been participating in the P4C program for their entire school life, which for some is 6 years prior to this study. While the P4C program is not an anti-bullying program as such, a main feature is having weekly discussions with a focus on helping students to become critical thinkers, especially in relation to their behaviour towards others and how others behave towards them. One might expect, then, that these students would have developed enough critical thinking skills by Grades 6 and 7 to be consciously aware of the consequences of peer interactions and would have developed the skills to handle conflict with others in more appropriate ways than through bullying. Perhaps however, the children's raised awareness of social relationships made them more aware of incidents of bullying and they therefore reported all incidents whereas the other students might not have. On the other hand, it may be that while the students at the P4C school are learning how to conduct discussions to problem-solve situations from story books, they may not see these stories as necessarily relating to their own lives and so may have difficulty transferring solutions presented in the story to their own lives. To date there is little research as to the effects of the P4C approach on preventing bullying in school; more research into this important area is warranted.

It is interesting to note (despite small numbers) that the incidence of cyberbullying in these primary schools is equivalent to secondary school cyberbullying (Cross, et al., 2009; Slonje & Smith, 2007). One implication of this finding could be that students need to be explicitly taught about bullying and cyberbullying and not just rely on general critical thinking skills about social relationships. This finding has implications for primary school communities and guidance counsellors in that cyberbullying is not confined to older students and that prevention and

intervention programs need to be put in place much earlier for cyberbullying than was previously thought. As well as the small sample size a further limitation to the study might be that the data was gleaned through student self-reports and that young students might not be truthful in their responses, especially in regard to the sensitive nature of the context of this study. However, Espelage, Holt and Henkel (2003) compared self-report and peer nominations of bullying and found them to be similar. This suggests anonymous student self-reports tend to be truthful accounts.

Both cohorts of students reported that adults were twice as likely to prevent face-to-face bullying at their school than they would prevent cyberbullying. Eighty percent of students reported that they felt teachers would try to prevent face-to-face bullying but that only 46% felt that teachers would try to prevent cyberbullying. This supports the students' perceptions that adults at their school were generally not as aware of cyberbullying as of face-to-face bullying. This is a concern that these young students perceive their teachers do not know enough about the digital world as they do and that less than half think teachers would try to prevent cyberbullying. It is also of concern that while less than half of students say adults gave them lessons on face-to-face bullying only about 10% had any lessons on cyberbullying.

There are clear indications from these results that teachers and guidance counsellors need to extend both prevention and intervention programs about cyberbullying to much younger students. Cassidy, Jackson and Brown (2009) reported that students were more likely to report cyber bullying to school personnel if they witnessed the incident rather than experiencing it themselves, but were more inclined to tell their friends than an adult (70% if they witnessed cyber bullying; 74.5% if they experienced it). Findings from the current research concur with these results in that students are not likely to tell a teacher about cyberbullying if they do not believe the teacher can help them. All school personnel need be more direct in how they present anti-cyberbullying

programs and how they guide students to report incidents of cyberbullying. This will require training of school personnel in engaging in the digital world of the students so that the students have more confidence in the adults at their school.

### *Conclusion*

There appears to be a disconnect between the capabilities teachers anticipate students will develop to solve their own problems (by learning problem-solving techniques in the P4C program) compared to how capable students feel they are to solve problems of bullying without adult intervention and/or support. These results hold true not only for P4C but for all schools. However, the interesting finding of the differences in incidence between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying involved the whole sample, as did the differences in children's perceptions of teachers' involvement in cyberbullying. More research involving school programs such as this need to be conducted. Teachers cannot assume that students will be able to deal with cyberbullying. They need to offer explicit teaching to help students not engage in bullying behaviours and to develop the skills and strategies to address such problems.

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Table 1

Participants' demographics

	P4C	Others
Male	17	17
Female	18	18
Age 10 years	2	2
11 years	15	15
12 years	17	17
13 years	1	1
Mother's education to Y10	2	1
Y12	0	5
Technical	2	2
University	11	17
Don't know	18	10
Father's education to Y10	0	3
Y12	2	5
Technical	1	3
University	10	16
Don't know	22	8
Internet access at home	27 (77.1%)	19 (54.3%)
Mobile phone ownership	19 (54.3%)	23 (65.7%)

Table 2

Percentage of students who self-identified as victims and bullies of face-to-face and cyber bullying (with chi square analysis)

	P4C (35)	Other school students (35)
Victims face-to-face	62.9% (22)	42.9% (15)
Cyber bullying	17.1% (6)	17.1% (6)
Bullies face-to-face	25.7% (9)	20.0% (7)
Cyber bullying	5.7% (2)	2.9% (1)
Victim of both face-to-face and cyber bullying	17.1% (6)	2.9% (1)
Bully both face-to-face and cyber bullying	8.6% (3)	0.0% (0)

Table 3

Student perceptions of adult behaviour about bullying at their school (by student report of combined often and always or some and a lot responses)

	Face-to-face P4C	Face-to-face Others	Cyber bullying P4C	Cyber bullying Others
How much awareness do adults at your school have of bullying?	88.6% (31)	85.7% (30)	77.2% (27)	77.1% (27)
How often do adults try to prevent bullying?	82.8% (28)	82.9% (30)	45.7% (16)	45.7% (16)
How often would adults at your school discipline bullies?	54.3% (19)	48.6% (17)	45.7% (16)	54.3% (19)
How often do adults give lessons to you on bullying?	42.8 % (15)	42.9% (15)	8.6% (3)	8.6% (3)
How often do adults tell you about anti-bullying policies?	37.1% (13)	62.9% (22)	11.4% (4)	20.0% (7)