

**Brief report: Helping children to get along: Teachers' strategies for dealing with  
bullying in Primary schools**

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### **Abstract**

This brief report describes a small scale qualitative interview study with primary school teachers in England, investigating their perceptions of bullying and strategies to prevent and manage it. Findings showed that much intervention work was situationally dependent, with teachers making subtle judgements about when and how to intervene. Prevention and intervention work centred on empathy development, and teaching children skills to help them nurture effective social relationships. We suggest that this holistic approach to bullying enables teachers to address multiple agendas aligned towards promoting children's social and emotional learning.

**Keywords:** bullying; primary school; teachers; social and emotional learning

### **Introduction**

The Department for Education (DfE) in England define bullying as 'behaviour by an individual or group, repeated over time, that intentionally hurts another individual or group either physically or emotionally' (2013, 6). Bullying is a major concern for pupils,

and there is a wealth of evidence linking bullying experiences to a range of negative effects (Areseneault, Bowes and Shakoor 2010).

Teachers are on the front line in schools' anti-bullying efforts and are likely to be the ones identifying and responding to incidents. However, the approaches teachers take to intervention are based on their perceptions of the situation (Marshall et al. 2009), and they have been shown to intervene with certain forms of bullying over others (Yoon and Kerber 2003). If and how teachers respond to bullying sends an important message to pupils in terms of acceptable behaviours, yet teacher experiences in this area are chronically under-researched (Marshall et al. 2009). It seems timely that we explore bullying management in schools from the perspective of teachers in order to understand how they handle bullying in their classrooms. As a result, this piece of research aimed to explore experiences of preventing and managing bullying in the primary school environment from teachers' perspectives.

## **Method**

Six teachers, recruited via personal contacts and opportunity sampling, were interviewed from two primary schools in the East Midlands of England. A qualitative approach was adopted, using semi-structured interviews, enabling teachers to talk about their experiences in depth. Interviews were loosely structured around the following topics: 1) definitions of bullying, 2) preventative strategies and 3) identification and management of bullying. Interviews were conducted on the school premises in a quiet office and were

audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. All study materials were approved in advance by a university ethics committee.

## **Analysis**

Analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance for thematic analysis, involving detailed reading and re-reading of transcripts, systematic coding of data, identifying patterns between codes and forming thematic maps of identified themes which were refined as the analysis progressed. Two themes are reported in this paper: Subjective judgements and Continuum of interpersonal relationships.

### ***Subjective judgements***

This theme shows how teachers were making subjective judgments when dealing with bullying. They talked about the policies that were in place at school, and the need for transparent processes which everyone could follow. However, when they talked about how they decided which incidents were bullying, and how to intervene appropriately, their decisions drew on subjective assessments and individual interpretations. Decisions and responses were situationally dependent, and context-specific.

*I think they have clear roles for trying to prevent bullying and I think  
there is quite a clear understanding about the rules in school that  
are unacceptable...I think sometimes with any person it's difficult to  
define it when people have different definitions of it...managing*

*bullying is probably a bit harder for a teachers role because how you would deal with a situation there are certain structures that if it was involving racism or if it was involving physical hurting then there would be things in place but it's the bullying that involves verbal bullying, I think it's difficult for teachers to know when it is the right time to act upon and when it's not the right time and I think there is a grey area there with teachers.*

This teacher expressed difficulties in interpreting whether an incident is bullying or not. Certain forms of bullying were seen as more ambiguous and ‘difficult to define’, and there was uncertainty in knowing how and when to intervene. In particular, teachers grappled with the more ‘invisible’ forms of bullying when they may not have witnessed an incident or seen something happen.

*the verbal bullying is quite hard because you know you actually see the physical but with the verbal you don't know the exact words that were said and some children.. are more sensitive than others and take things the wrong way and in the initial stages it's hard to know whether that is it the beginning of bullying.*

This comment highlights the contextual nature of bullying incidents, and the need for flexibility in judgements. Teachers were making subjective assessments and decisions based on the nature of the incident and the children involved. There seemed to be a

tension between the objective protocols of school policies and procedures and the more fluid ‘messy’ reality of handling the subjectivities of bullying on the ground.

### ***Continuum of interpersonal relationships***

Teachers positioned bullying on a spectrum of relationships, alongside conflict and prosocial behaviour. This was evident in the way they talked about the strategies used to tackle bullying, which largely centred on talking, building relationship skills and promoting positive social behaviours. They described having discussions with children involved in bullying, explaining to them about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

*I would... have them on a one to one and discuss you know why that behaviour is not appropriate and that you cannot always go around having your own way and saying spiteful things.*

Here, strategies of negotiation and conflict resolution are used when dealing with bullying, involving bringing children together and 'talking things through', helping individuals see different sides of the argument, and understand the impact of their behaviour. The teacher used bullying incidents as a tool to 'teach' students valuable relationship skills, and help them get along more effectively. These approaches were not specific to bullying – but were related more generally to developing and building effective relationships. In fact, another teacher acknowledged this when she reflected on the strategies used in the school to address bullying.

*thinking about it, so it's not all directly about bullying... a lot of it's  
about the skills of communication and social skills, so it's not all  
geared up to bullying but it all impacts on it.*

She noted how the communication and social skills that they seek to develop in children were not specific to bullying - but impact on it. As such, she highlighted the distinct nature of bullying, but also drew parallels between bullying and interpersonal skills more generally. They are on the same continuum, and mutually affect each other.

Teachers also held internal ideas about forms of bullying which were more or less severe, and where behaviour fell on this scale of seriousness impacted on intervention approaches that were chosen.

*another thing that might effect things is that if this is a child that bully  
themselves if it's the first occasion or if they have been in trouble  
before that would effect....and as I say the type, how serious it is  
whether it's name calling or physical violence, if it's racist umm that's  
all treated differently but I mean generally the class teacher, parent  
would be involved if it was felt the need umm if it was very serious the  
head.*

This teacher considered whether the incident has occurred before, and whether there was a pattern behind it – implying that this would be seen as more serious than a one-off

incident. She also considered what type of behaviour it was. Here, physical violence, racism and name calling were described as ‘treated differently’. Reference to the Head becoming involved if it’s ‘very serious’ indicated that school referral and management procedures were based on the severity of the incident.

This illustrates the overlaps teachers reported between bullying and the ways in which human interpersonal relations operate more generally. Intersections between bullying and peer relationships were reported, and teachers drew on relationship skills to help deal with bullying between children. They also gradated different types of bullying and situational factors surrounding incidents in order to decide when and how to intervene.

## **Discussion**

Our findings show that teachers viewed bullying as contextual and dependent on a variety of factors such as who is involved, and the nature of the incident. They described making complex decisions about what bullying is, how serious an incident was, and when and how to intervene. This resonates with existing literature showing a link between teachers’ internal views about bullying, and their decisions about intervention (Yoon and Kerber 2004; Marshall et al. 2009). Given the impact of teacher intervention on the likelihood of further bullying occurring, it seems important to further explore how teachers’ perceptions of bullying behaviour are developed, and used to make judgements.

Teachers drew frequent parallels and contrasts between bullying and the prosocial behaviour which characterises getting along with others - indicating that they saw them as related concepts on a continuum of relationships. When they dealt with bullying, teachers used strategies to facilitate positive interpersonal relationships. They talked about helping children to deal with fallouts and disagreements, reflect on the impact of their actions, and develop empathy for others. These are all aspects which develop children's social and emotional skills, and build social competence. Positive relationships and social competence are related to a range of well-being indicators and can provide valuable resources to 'buffer' individuals from difficult circumstances (Kendrick Jutengren and Stattin 2012). Therefore, through teachers tackling bullying by focussing on the skills children need to nurture effective interpersonal 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 clearly has benefits for schools in terms of pupil welfare, but also for channelling resources and addressing multiple agendas in social and emotional learning at the same time.

We recognise that our study is small-scale, and only reflects practice in two schools. However, the fact that our findings resonate with existing literature indicate that teacher experiences are not particularly different or unique compared to what we might expect in other schools. Further qualitative studies of this kind would contribute to our understanding of teacher experiences in this area.

### **Notes on contributors**

Emma Tucker works for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Kettering, England. This research was undertaken as part of her postgraduate studies at The University of Northampton.

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