Bullying: A Case For Early Intervention

Dr M. Ann Farrell, Centre for Applied Studies in Early Childhood
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

While early intervention into bullying is identified as part of national crime prevention strategies in countries such as Australia, there is a relative paucity of bullying research in early childhood education in comparison to bullying research conducted in the formal school setting. There is little evidence also of usage by early childhood teachers of the binary categories of bully and victim with clear criteria for category membership to denote those individuals who threaten social order. This article reports on a beginning study of bullying with early childhood teachers and children in three centres catering for children from birth to 5 years in Brisbane, Australia. The emerging study seeks to examine the pedagogical practices employed by early childhood teachers to address the bullying phenomenon within an early intervention imperative. It also seeks to generate research-based insight into the nature of bullying and the strategies used to address and reduce bullying in early childhood education.[1]

Introduction

Given growing public awareness of bullying and its social consequences, many early childhood teachers and families have expressed concern about its presence in early childhood education. A range of authors concur that bullying is repeated, intentional, gendered oppression, of a physical or psychological nature, of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons and exclusion from the social group (Hyndman & Thorsborne, 1994; Michael, 1995; Rigby & Slee, 1994). Federal agencies in Australia such as the Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium (Homel, 1998), have identified bullying in the early years as predictive of later delinquency and criminality and is, therefore, an area that warrants intervention on a national scale. This consortium stresses the point that early years programs are pathways which are traversed by children, their families and teachers in sometimes less than 'child friendly' institutions. 'Pathways are understood not just as unique individual biographies, but as roads through life…that fork out in different directions at the kinds of crucial transition points that mark new experiences and relationships' (Homel, 1998: ix). Similarly, the work of Bowes and Hayes (1999) affirms the importance of coordinated early intervention to circumvent or reduce negative consequences of adverse life experiences for individuals, families and communities.

The emphasis on measurable policy outcomes for politically pragmatic national priorities such as crime prevention in Australia is germane to the public sector accountability pervading many western societies. Martinez (1998: 118), in discussing early childhood gender

equity policies in Australia, refers to this phenomenon as the pervasive 'balance-sheet' approach to measuring policy outcomes. The binary classification of the individual as bully and/or victim, therefore, serves the utilitarian function of early intervention in the preschool classroom as a plausible strategy for national crime prevention.

Bullying research and the anti-bullying movement that has ensued exemplify the usefulness of category membership whereby researchers locate and categorise persons and concomitant behaviours as powerful/powerless. Australian researcher Bronwyn Davies (1998), in addressing the politics of category membership in the light of post-structural theory, problematises the concept and suggests that strong category membership can 'essentialise' the category. In the case of bullying, the bully and victim become subjects of caricature who, in essential character and behaviour, capture the public gaze and require ongoing surveillance in order to maintain desired social order.

There is evidence that this dichotomous bully/victim categorisation as applied to young children has begun to permeate popular consciousness. Kids Help Line Queensland (1998), for example, has registered calls about bullying from children under five years of age (ie 19 children under 5 years reporting bullying from other children in 1998).

Bullying and Human Rights

Beyond the national policy agenda, bullying can be construed also as an international human rights issue under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Castelle, 1989). In the case of international humanitarian law, the contractual responsibility to uphold children's rights lies with the state as signatories to international treaties (Boyden, 1997). The 1990 World Summit for Children endorsed the UNCRC and advocated children's rights to 'provision, participation, protection' (including protection from bullying and harassment) (Farrell, 1998). In Australia successive governments since 1992 have acknowledged the rights of children, as holders of 'person status' (Hart & Pavlovic, 1991: 354), as fundamental human rights. Further, in 1992, Australia declared that the Convention would be made an international instrument for the purposes of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1986, thus enabling the Commission to conciliate complaints about acts or practices which breach the rights of the Convention (Farrell, 1998). Although the provisions of the UNCRC are not directly imported into specific legislation they are implemented by federal, state and territory governments into various statutes and translated into policies in a range of areas including early childhood education.

It is an uneasy yet clear paradox that human rights rhetoric of protection (for example, from bullying) is espoused simultaneous to the exploitation of young children. It is also clear that the coexistence of protection and exploitation has recurred many times throughout history. There is, too, evidence from the popular media that children are bullied as consumers in a global economy that increasingly requires their personalised income and expenditure (Farrell, 1999). The juxtaposition of the public discourse on bullying and the discourse on children's human rights, therefore, creates an important cultural backdrop to any investigation of bullying in the early years classrooms.

While children once may have been considered as dependent and subordinate to authority, legal commentators such as Kathleen Funder (1996) argue that the children's rights rhetoric challenges such assumptions through international conventions and legal precedent. In addition, Boyden's (1997) examination of the ideologies of childhood in the light of human rights' debates indicates that a major tenet of contemporary rights and welfare policy is that of regulation of children's lives in order to secure childhood as a 'carefree, safe, secure and happy phase of human existence (1997: 190). This reflects a growing awareness that many governments are remiss in their protective responsibility towards children and young people. Children's rights advocates, therefore, seek to embed in international law a universal system of children's rights based on normative childhood, including that it is relatively free of bullying.

Bullying as an Early Childhood Phenomenon

While human history is littered with literary references to bullying within a wide range of societies and there is a plenitude of contemporary research-based references to adverse phenomena such as domestic violence, child abuse, aggression and violent behaviour (Rossman & Rosenberg, 1992; Silvern & Kaersvang, 1989), bullying, as a social phenomenon, has only recently become the focus of research investigation. Most of such research activity is concentrated in the formal schooling setting and in the workplace. It is noteworthy that the international anti-bullying movement in schools has brought together research-driven policies on peer relations from the Scandinavian countries (Olweus, 1993), Britain (Besag, 1989; Roland & Munthe, 1989; Smith, 1991; Smith & Thompson, 1991), the United States (Perry, Kusel & Perry, 1988), Canada (Ziegler & Rosenstein-Manner, 1991) and, more recently, from Australia (Izard & Evans, 1996; Rigby & Slee, 1994; Slee, 1997). Such research verifies the high prevalence of bullying problems in primary and secondary schools. It is estimated, for example, that one in seven students will have bullying experiences either as a victim or as a bully (Olweus, 1993; Smith & Thompson, 1991). There is, moreover, substantial evidence that bullying behaviour may have negative emotional and physical effects which, in turn, may have adverse consequences for learning and for overall health and wellbeing.

In early childhood education, however, we note a relative paucity of such research using the nomenclature of the bully and the bullied or victim. Perhaps a different lexicon is used by early childhood teachers to provide descriptors of the deleterious attitudes and behaviours which others may describe as bullying. There is ample evidence that early childhood teachers are exposed to policy documents dealing with social relationships in their institutions (eg Managing Behaviour in a Supportive School Environment Policy, 1994; Queensland Preschool Curriculum Guidelines, 1998). Yet within such documents there is little or no use of the bullying nomenclature. Does the absence of the bullying nomenclature and the paucity of research activity on bullying in early years' classrooms imply that bullying is of little concern in the preschool; that peer groups in the preschool do not exclude children or cause intentional harm; that teasing and taunting are not known in the preschool; that there are equal access and use of power in the early childhood program; that teachers are using effective pedagogical practices in maintaining social order in the classroom? Such questions indicate a gap in our knowledge about this critical issue and have precipitated the current study being undertaken by the author.

Pedagogy and Bullying

While the study is in its beginning stages and a comprehensive data set is yet to be generated, some insights are emerging in relation to teacher understandings of bullying in the early childhood classroom. Preliminary data with a range of early childhood teachers indicates that while early childhood teachers tend to be ambivalent about the category labels of bully and victim, they utilise other categories such as 'inappropriate' or 'unacceptable' to denote intervention into behaviours labelled as 'bullying' by their colleagues in formal schooling. Fine-grained analysis of teacher data may well yield a more comprehensive record of teacher understandings of such phenomena and will be the focus of a subsequent paper.

Given the binary category of bully/victim established in the bullying research within the formal school setting, the current study utilises ethnographic approaches to establish whether such categories exist in the lexicon of the preschool teacher, whether other euphemisms are employed to denote similar phenomena or whether such phenomena are absent altogether in early childhood classrooms. The overall aim of the current study is to investigate bullying in the preschool with a specific focus on early childhood teachers' definitions of bullying and the nature of their pedagogical practice within the early intervention framework. Specific research objectives are: to examine written policies on bullying in preschools; to establish the nature and extent of bullying behaviour in children in preschools; to investigate definitions of bullying held by early childhood teachers (eg characteristics of bullying behaviours, profile of bullies, victims and onlookers); to identify pedagogical practices used by early childhood teachers to combat bullying; and to draw implications for pedagogical practice for dissemination with teaching professionals and researchers.

An interpretative research methodology is being used to generate data in three early childhood centres (including a state, community and commercial centre catering for children from birth to 5 years) in the Brisbane metropolitan area. These three centres are representative of the range of preschool programs operating in the Australian state of Queensland. Primary data sources are: (i) policy documents, such as *Managing behaviour in a supportive school environment policy* (1994), in order to bring written historical and contextual dimensions to the ethnographic record and to juxtapose policy documents with interview and observation data. This process may illuminate the discrepancy between how things are either planned to be, or alleged to be, and how they are or how people want them to be (Plummer, 1983); (ii) naturalistic observation of routine and incidental aspects of what Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe as 'performance sites' where events are occurring and where people are acting. Here the researcher is positioned as a marginal native working around the edges of the performance site (Freilich, 1997); (iii) audio-recorded conversations with preschool teachers to investigate their definitions of bullying and their pedagogical practice in dealing with manifestations of bullying.

These data-generating activities are designed to make visible what has been hitherto invisible in the pedagogical practice of those who Davies (1998: 145) labels 'teachers-in-authority', as ones who know and, in particular, as ones who know right from wrong. Reflecting on a study of teachers and children in the playground, Davies (1998: 145) noted, 'It was in the light of this entry into the subtle, complex and contradictory meaning making going

on in the playground that we were able to design a successful school level strategy for interrupting the violence that had been the central and distressing feature of our playground'. Other Australian researchers such as Danby (1998: 175) observed social interactions in the preschool classroom and provided an alternate framework for early childhood educators to become aware of how preschool children construct social order through 'talk-in-interaction' within a discourse of hegemonic masculinity.

It is prudent also to locate the current study within the wider societal conditions that permit or indeed promulgate bullying. The work of Australian political scientist Eva Cox (1995) is apposite in exploring such institutional conditions. In her seminal Boyer lecture series in 1995, Cox crafted an apologetic for developing social capital within our social institutions which would include early years programs. Here she defined social capital as the social fabric of trust and mutuality that hold people together in private and public life. Her treatise is that we should create collective cultures that expect children to be aware of the needs of others, to be cooperative and to be able to work with others, and to experience connectedness and relationship. Without such institutional conditions we retreat into bureaucratic demand for law and order. Cox's work on the collective responsibility of social institutions resonates with the work of Maxine Green (1995) who theorises the construction of 'humane communities' and with the work of Nel Noddings (1992) who advocates communities who 'care'. While such work has face validity, we must ask how an ethic of humane care can be enacted when children are apportioned competitive roles for space and resources in educational institutions and where they may have limited opportunities to develop mutual trust in socially meaningful settings.

Conclusion

In the light of early intervention strategies as part of a national crime prevention agenda, there is a case for effective early intervention into bullying or its euphemisms in early childhood education. Such intervention, however, may well be compromised by prevailing teacher views of bullying and by pedagogical practices that teachers employ in addressing bullying. Work such as that undertaken in this study is needed, therefore, to generate insights into social life in the early years so that we can work towards institutional conditions that allow young learners to determine their actions and to develop skills that contribute to the common good in a socially just and civil society.

Keywords

Bullying; Early Intervention; Early Childhood Education; Australia.

References

Besag, V. E. (1989) *Bullies and victims in schools*. Bristol: Open University Press.

Bowes, J. & Hayes, A. (Eds) (1999) *Children, families and communities. Contexts and consequences.* Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Boyden, J. (1997) Childhood and the policy makers: A comparative perspective on the globalisation of childhood. In A. James & A. Prout (Eds.). *Constructing and*

reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood. Washington, DC: Falmer Press.

Castelle, K. (1989) *In the child's best interest. A primer on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.* New York: Defence of Children International.

Cox, E. (1995) *ABC Boyer lectures.* Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission.

Danby, S. (1998) The serious and playful work of gender. Talk and social order in a preschool classroom. In N. Yelland (Ed). *Gender in early childhood.* London: Routledge.

Davies, B. (1998) The politics of category membership. In N. Yelland (Ed). *Gender in early childhood.* London: Routledge.

Denzin, N. & Lincoln, L. (1994) *Handbook of qualitative research.* London: Sage.

Department of Education Queensland (1994) *Managing behaviour in a supportive school environment.* Brisbane: Department of Education.

Farrell, M.A. (1998) The gendering of human rights in early childhood. In N. Yelland (Ed). *Gender in early childhood.* London: Routledge.

Farrell, M.A. (1999) Children in a consumer society: Early childhood policies on children's rights. In H.K. Chiam (Ed). *Excellence in early childhood education.* Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Pelanduk.

Freilich, M. (1997) *Marginal natives: Anthropologist at work.* New York: Harper & Row.

Funder, K. (Ed.) (1996) *Citizen child.* Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Green, M. (1995) *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts and social change.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Hart, S.N. & Pavlovic, Z. (1991) Children's rights in education: An historical perspective. *School Psychology Review,* 20(3): 345-358.

Homel, R. (1998) *A Report for the National Campaign Against Violence and Crime and the National Crime Strategy.* Canberra, ACT: Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium.

Hyndman, M. & Thorsborne, M. (1994) Bullying: A school focus. In D. Evans, M. Myhill & J. Izard (Eds). *Student behaviour problems: Initiatives and new frontiers.* Melbourne: ACER.

Izard, J. & Evans, J. (1996) *Student behaviour. Policies, interventions and evaluations.* Melbourne: ACER.

Kids Help Line (1998) kidshelp@squirrel.com.au.

Martinez, L. (1998) Gender equity policies and early childhood education. In. Yelland, N. (Ed.) *Gender in early childhood.* London: Routledge.

Michael, M. (1995) *Creating a safe, non-bullying environment and participation and empowerment in a Brisbane primary school.* QUT, Brisbane: Unpublished dissertation.

Noddings, N. (1992) *The challenge to care in schools. An alternative approach to education.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Olweus, D. (1993) *Bullying at school*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Perry, D.G, Kusel, S.J. & Perry, L.C. (1988) Victims of peer aggression. *Developmental Psychology*, 25(6): 807-814.

Plummer, K. (1983) *Documents of life: An introduction to the problems and literature of humanistic method*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Queensland Schools Curriculum Council (1998) *Preschool curriculum guidelines*. Brisbane: QCSC.

Rigby, K. & Slee, P. (1994) *Australian school children's views on bullying: Implications for school-based interventions*. Paper presented at the First International Conference on Peer Relationships, Conflict and Cooperation, Adelaide.

Roland, E. (1989) A system oriented strategy against bullying. In E. Munthe and E. Roland (Eds) (1989) *Bullying. An international perspective*. London: David Fulton.

Rossman, B. & Rosenberg, M. (1992) Family stress and functioning in children: The moderating effects of children's beliefs about their control over parental conflict. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 33(4): 699-715.

Silvern, L. & Kaersvang, L. (1989) The traumatised children of violent marriages. *Child Welfare*, 58: 421-436.

Slee, P. T. (1997) *The peace pack. A program for reducing bullying in our schools.* Adelaide: University of South Australia.

Smith, P.K. (1991) The silent nightmare: Bullying and victimisation in school peer groups. *The Psychologist*, 4: 243-8.

Smith, P.K. & Thompson, D. (1991) Dealing with bully-victim problems in the UK. In P.K. Smith and D. Thompson (Eds). *Practical approaches to bullying*. London: David Fulton.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990) *Basics of qualitative research*. London: Sage.

UNICEF. (1990) *First call for children. World declaration and plan of action from the World Summit for Children.* New York: UNICEF.

Ziegler, S. & Rosenstein-Manner, M. (1991) *Bullying at school: Toronto in an international context.* (Report No 196). Toronto: Toronto Board of Education, Research Services

Endnote

[1] This paper contains excerpts from addresses presented to the *Conference on Bullying and Harassment*, ANZ Association of Education and Law, Brisbane, August 1998, and *The International Early Years Conference*, University of Warwick, Coventry, April, 1999. This research is funded by Queensland University of Technology, Faculty of Education 1998-9.