



What actually makes bullying stop? Reports from former victims

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A B S T R A C T

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School bullying is a serious, worldwide problem which is not easily counteracted. The present study focuses on the perspective of former victims, asking them what it was that made the bullying stop in their case. Participants were 273 18-year-old former victims in Sweden, a country in which schools are doing extensive work against bullying and the bullying prevalence is relatively low. Results showed that although support from school personnel was the most common reason that the former victims gave to why the bullying had ended, it was only mentioned by a fourth of them. In fact, it was almost equally as common that the bullying had ended in that the victims transitioned to a new school level or changed their way of coping with the bullying. Very few of the adolescents reported that the bullying had stopped due to support from peers.

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Bullying is a form of repeated physical, verbal, or relational/indirect aggression against a less powerful individual (Smith, 2003). It has severe and long-term consequences for its victims, including psychological and physical ill-being, poor self-esteem, school absence, anxiety, and depression (Frisén & Bjarnelind, 2010; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Lunde, Frisé, & Hwang, 2007; Rigby, 2003; Smith, Ananiadou, & Cowie, 2003; Stassen Berger, 2007). Although considerable effort has gone into counteracting and preventing bullying, the results are somewhat ambiguous (Craig, Pepler, Murphy, & McCuaig-Edge, 2010; Plog, Epstein, Jens, & Porter, 2010). In the present study, we asked Swedish 18-year-olds who have been victims of bullying during school about what *they*, themselves, think made the bullying stop. What was it that made a difference in their case?

Students' own perspective of bullying

Simply by going to school, students acquire a unique, and for bullying research very valuable, close-up perspective of the bullying problem. Several researchers have examined students' own perspective when it comes to defining bullying and reasons for why bullying occurs (e.g. Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006; Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker, 1999; Boulton, Trueman, & Flemington, 2002; Erling & Hwang, 2004; Frisé, Holmqvist, & Oscarsson, 2008; Frisé, Jonsson, & Persson, 2007; Gini, 2008; Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Oliver, Hoover, & Hazler, 1994; Smith & Levan, 1995; Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011; Varjas et al., 2008). However, fewer have asked the students about what they, themselves, think should be done to actually stop the bullying problem. Mainly, such studies have focused on how students think that victims should cope in bullying situations (Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006; Kristensen & Smith, 2003; Smith et al., 2008; Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor, & Chauhan, 2004; Tenenbaum, Varjas, Meyers, & Parris, 2011). Unfortunately, we were only able to locate two previous studies that have examined students' perception of what should be done, overall, to

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stop the bullying problem (that is, not only what victims should do). In one of those two studies, Crothers, Kolbert, and Barker (2006) asked middle school students to rate fifteen different anti-bullying strategies according to how helpful they considered them to be. Generally, results revealed that the students wished that teachers more efficiently would notice and interfere in bullying situations, provide assistance to bullied students in terms of how to cope with their situation, and involve the parents of both perpetrators and victims (Crothers et al., 2006). Frisé and Holmqvist (2010) found similar results when they asked students at age 13 and 16 an open-ended question about what they considered important in order to stop the bullying of a student. At both 13 and 16, the students' most frequent answer was that school personnel should take action by having serious talks with the students involved and that victims should learn to cope with the bullying e.g. by standing up for themselves or by ignoring the bully (Frisé & Holmqvist, 2010).

The present study, similarly to Crothers et al. (2006) and Frisé and Holmqvist (2010), intend to examine students' own perspective of bullying interventions. However, in contrast to the two studies previously mentioned, the present study does not examine the perception of adolescents in general; it focuses on the perception of the victims. Importantly, also, it does not investigate victims' general view of which interventions that may be helpful in bullying situations; it asks the victims of what it was that helped in *their* case. By doing so, we hope to gain a picture as realistic as possible of the bullying interventions that the victims considered to have had effect. We chose to examine adolescents at the age of 18 since previous research has shown that this is an age when the bullying most probably has finished (e.g. Nansel et al., 2001; Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann, & Jugert, 2006).

Bullying in Sweden

Bullying prevalence varies widely between countries (Elgar, Craig, Boyce, Morgon, & Vella-Zarb, 2009) and so does the extent to which different countries work to counteract the bullying problem (Jimerson & Huai, 2010). In Sweden, schools are doing extensive work against bullying and personnel active in the Swedish school system are by law (The Swedish Education Act, legislated in 1985) obliged to "actively counteract all types of insulting treatment such as bullying or racist behavior" (The National Swedish Agency for Education, 2009). Large-scale international comparisons suggest that Sweden has the lowest prevalence of bullying compared to other European countries and North America (according to these, approximately 4–6% of Swedish 11–15 year-olds are bullied) (Due et al., 2005; Elgar et al., 2009). However, prevalence as high as 12% has been found among 13-year-old Swedish boys (Frisé & Bjarnelind, 2010). Interestingly, despite the possibly low rates of bullying in Sweden, the association between being victimized and reporting negative physical and psychological symptoms appears to be stronger in Sweden than in many other countries (Due et al., 2005). Such results indicate that bullying is a serious problem in Swedish schools that needs to be given further attention.

There are several anti-bullying programs being implemented in schools in Sweden and internationally, all with somewhat different theoretical frameworks on how to tackle bullying situations (The National Swedish Agency for Education, 2009). It is common that these programs focus on educating school personnel (e.g. the Olweus bullying prevention program; Olweus, 1993) since school personnel's attitudes, routines, and behaviors have shown to be decisive factors in the degree to which a school will manifest bullying problems (Olweus, 1999). Previous research has, for instance, found a clear negative correlation between teacher density during recess and amount of bullying problems in schools (Olweus, 1999). Another approach in anti-bullying preventions is to focus on the enhancement of victims' coping strategies (e.g. FearNot; referred to in Watson et al., 2010). Previous research has shown that the typical victims are more anxious and insecure than students in general and do not cope effectively in bullying situations. When attacked by bullies, they commonly react by crying (at least in the lower grades) and withdrawal, resulting in repeated episodes of bullying (Olweus, 1999). It has therefore been hypothesized that improving victims' coping strategies (e.g. by teaching victims to be assertive in bullying situations) might help victims to handle the bullying problem themselves (Rigby, 2001). According to Rigby (2001), it is always better if victims are able to handle the bullying problem on their own, and that the increase in self-esteem resulting from successfully doing so is enormous (Rigby, 2001). Finally, the idea of bullying as a group phenomenon, and thus not only dependent on school personnel or the students directly involved in the bullying (the victim and the bully), has also increasingly started to guide anti-bullying interventions. As a result, some anti-bullying programs (e.g. the KiVa program; Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010) focus on the intervention of peers. As suggested by Salmivalli (1999), peers constantly witness bullying situations and through their behavior in these situations (defending the victim, assisting the bully, or simply being a bystander providing an audience for the bully), they take a position toward what is going on. Peers' behavior in such situations has been suggested to have great effects on the outcome of the bullying episodes, and it is therefore highly relevant to include peers in anti-bullying interventions (Salmivalli, 1999). Peers' behavior may in fact be easier to change than the behavior of the bullies, and through these changes, the behavior of the bullies might also be affected. The bully probably does not continue to bully without his/her supporters and audience, for instance (Salmivalli, 1999).

Although the anti-bullying programs described are based on different theoretical frameworks considering the aspects that are important in counteracting bullying, the positive effects of these programs are often modest and ambiguous (Craig et al., 2010). This makes it difficult to establish what elements that should be incorporated in anti-bullying programs to ensure maximum success (Craig et al., 2010; Rigby, 2006). Additionally, since Swedish schools often pick strategies from several different programs, it is impossible to identify the strategies that have been effective (The National Swedish Agency for Education, 2009). Thus, by giving voice to a few of the former bullying victims in Sweden, we hope to point out some of the strategies that they considered most helpful.

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