



HARD LINES

DESPITE OUR BEST EFFORTS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OVER MANY YEARS, BULLYING IS STILL RIFE WITHIN OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM. COULD THAT BE BECAUSE THE PROBLEM IS THE SYSTEM ITSELF, ASKS NEIL DUNCAN...

The proliferation of research and intervention programmes regarding bullying in schools indicates that the phenomenon is considered a serious, prevalent and abiding problem, both nationally and overseas.

Various claims of success in dealing with bullying have been made over the years by those who are paid to investigate or tackle it.

Educators can be rightly cynical about such claims. In the case of bullying, I will not draw upon the academic literature, but allude only to the fact that if we were successful we would not need a national anti-bullying week nor a plethora of support charities; it would not be the priority it appears to be in Childline calls; nor would there be reports in the press of suicides, attempted and actual, of victims.

There are a number of possible theories as to why bullying persists so intractably throughout schooling in the UK. One possibility is that there is no 'cure'. Many children are aggressive, mean and sadistic, the argument runs; they are just born that way. They get pleasure from hurting others physically or mentally, and will do that until they are stopped one way or another. Bullying persists therefore, due to constraints in

“ IT IS A WONDER THAT TEACHERS CONTROL AS WELL AND AS HUMANELY AS THEY DO, GIVEN THE CONDITIONS IN WHICH THEY MUST OPERATE...”

disciplining or segregating pupils who exhibit this behaviour, and the response ought to be a more robust policy of punishment or exclusion.

Another possibility is that there is a way to teach bullying out of kids, or to head it off by one of many interventions proposed by the experts. The current lack of success is therefore due to lack of funding or training, so we need more resources to help ordinary schools get back on track with their core purpose of teaching and learning. Or perhaps we just haven't found the optimal way of dealing with it but more research will unlock the secret of bullying in the future. Until then we will carry on with what the experts tell us to do.

The theories above are credible to many teachers as they represent frustrations that educators commonly encounter in their work – difficult individuals and chronic under-resourcing in vital areas of need. However there are other possibilities for bullying's resistance to effective management or eradication, and one of these is the nature of schooling itself.

The four Cs

Schooling in the UK, or more specifically, England, has acquired by tradition and political tinkering certain features that make it a unique site for four factors that sustain and promote bullying behaviour amongst the children. These factors are found in other institutions, but not all of them simultaneously, and never in precisely the same form. These factors are:

- Compulsion
- Compression
- Control
- Competition

In our society, which we describe with pride as 'free,' prohibition is common, but **compulsion** is rare. However, the laws that compel parents to provide education for their children combined with the economic and social realities over the last 70 years or so, ensure that the huge majority of kids attend school on pain of legal action against the parents or institutionalisation of the children. This last resort is never too far away from certain sections of our community, and every year in England about 20 parents are jailed for non-compliance. And so we begin our relationship with schooling with the promise of free state education concealing a threat. The first lesson to be learned is one of coercion. For those who have strong reasons for not wanting to be at school for six hours a day over 11 of the best years of their lives, frustration, anger and resentment at compulsory attendance is unlikely to make them calm and contented.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Neil Duncan is Reader in Education for Social Justice at the University of Wolverhampton. Neil qualified as a teacher of art in the 1970s but has worked extensively with young people with exceptional behavioural issues in a variety of settings, as well as being a Head of Year in a Midlands comprehensive school. Since the late 1980s Neil has researched sexualised forms of bullying, and how institutional ethos and organisation can impact upon pupil behaviour.

The compression of many growing bodies within a small architectural space, some of which resent their presence in the first place, is another stressor. Experiments with rats and other organisms show how territory is defended, and decreasing personal space increases aggression as well as opportunity to aggress. With regard to bullying, often is heard the advice 'if you can't get on, just keep away from her/him'. In schools, this is practically impossible.

The level of control required to manage this seething, compressed population is massive. It is a wonder that teachers control as well and as humanely as they do, given the conditions in which they must operate. It ill behoves politicians and inspectors to berate teachers for poor discipline when they must surely know how hard the task is. Nevertheless, while the majority comply with the petty rules and oppressive discipline, for some, the removal of personal identifiers such as clothing, jewellery and hairstyles is an affront to their dignity. Being controlled in your language, dress, conduct, and even basic human needs like eating, drinking and when you can use the toilet, has little to do with learning or achievement and everything with crushing sedition. It also stokes the fires of grievance and resentment against the staff, but only provides an outlet against peers.

The last factor in our quartet is **competition**. LAs are pitted against LAs, and schools against schools. Teachers are compared with performance related pay, and children's performances are constantly compared against others, the self and national norms. Exhortations to improve; go farther; try harder – all feed the competition. As exciting and invigorating as competition might be, it is bound to produce both winners and losers. Those with a good chance in the competition may be stressed, but still positively motivated and perhaps satisfied even if they come second, or third. For those who win nothing, the competition is a reminder of their personal failure and their lack of value to the school.

Many of the losers in education know their place from the time they leave Y1. Even very young children will be able to tell their parents who is the cleverest, the least clever, and the naughtiest in their class. Unfortunately place-value in class is not as fluid as we might hope, and the relative positions don't really alter much throughout schooling. After 11 years, what do we expect of the losers? To be pro-social, thoughtful, kind and generous to their peers? Actually, despite all their experiences some are! But a significant number respond to their experiences with what Frantz Fanon and Paolo Freiere called *horizontal violence*; itself another name for bullying.

Horizontal violence is defined as occurring when people in an oppressed state (e.g. colonisation and social) fail to challenge or resist the machinery of the system that oppresses them (vertical violence) and instead turn upon their peers. Such behaviour is not restricted to the lowest orders but can be enacted by individuals in the middle and upper tiers too, as a means of preserving a precarious advantage within an unfair system.

Freedom to choose

Can we really compare modern schooling to such oppressive regimes? Conceptually, I would argue yes. The four factors discussed above restrict our freedom as educators to pass on freedoms to our children. If we compare institutional similarities, schools are much more like prisons than libraries, and might be generating precisely the sorts of behaviour that we are charged with eradicating. The difficulty in even contemplating non-compulsory education leaves many intelligent people gasping for breath, but it needn't if we consider how universities operate with much lower levels of bullying. Imagine how much more satisfying it would be if we could all teach people who wanted to learn when they were ready for it.

Perhaps if we diverted some of the effort we expend on controlling and disciplining towards more voluntary and inviting learning environments, bullying would reduce. The trend however is in the opposite direction: more sticks, fewer carrots. The PISA statistics have reinvigorated calls for us to emulate our Far Eastern competitors whose harsh competitive ethos still needs corporal punishment (legal or illegal), and causes youth suicide rates that would be an outrage in the West. Whatever one believes is the cause of bullying in schools, schools are the places in which it occurs, and those institutions are ours to change if there is the will so to do.

Dr Duncan's fully referenced research article can be found at: tinyurl.com/tsDuncan