

CHAPTER 16

BULLYING: A STRENGTHS-BASED INTERVENTION WITH FIRST NATION STUDENTS

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The issue of school bullying can be defined as being a relationship problem, and one in which a perceived imbalance of power is used to victimize peers, through both overt and covert acts of aggression (Craig & McCuaig Edge, 2008). Bullying can have distressing and far-reaching consequences in the life of a victimized student, and the resulting hurt, humiliation and fear can impact the student immediately, throughout the school years and even into adult life. Studies on the effects of bullying have shown that victims can experience a wide variety of on-going difficulties, including: depression, anxiety and low self-esteem (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Smith, 2004), social avoidance (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004), health issues (Wilkins-Shurmer, et al., 2003), absenteeism (DeRosier, Kupersmidt & Patterson, 1994) and adjustment difficulties at school (Arseneault et al., 2006). Tragically, a small percentage of victims of bullying have retaliated with extreme violence towards their perceived aggressors, occasionally leading to tragic events such as school shootings (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Many anecdotal reports also exist claiming that bullying has resulted in children or adolescents completing suicide (CBC News Online, 2005). In a review of thirty-seven studies from thirteen countries, Kim and Leventhal concluded that there is a connection between bullying and suicidal thoughts and behaviour, although a causal link between bullying and suicide has not been confirmed (Kim & Leventhal, 2008).

In addition to the risks to the victims of bullying, young

people who participate in bullying behaviours are also at risk for long-term difficulties such as substance abuse, violence against women and other anti-social behaviours (Craig & McCuaig Edge, 2008).

Unfortunately, bullying is prevalent in the schools of most countries, and Canada is no exception. In 2006, a World Health Organization Cross National study titled Health Behaviour in School Aged Children, found that 36% of Canadian children in Grade 6 to Grade 10 reported being the victims of bullying, 39% of these children identified themselves as having bullied others, and 20% reported involvement in both being victimized and bullying others, in the two month period before the study took place (Craig & McCuaig Edge, 2008). A national study conducted in the United States found that “13% of sixth graders reported being a victim of bullying at least once a week, and 10% reported being responsible for bullying someone” (Nansel, et al., 2001 in Orpinas, 2003, p. 431). In a study of kindergarten children, approximately half of the children reported experiencing some form of victimization (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997 in Orpinas et al., 2003, p. 431).

What is Bullying?

Bullying is not the same as common schoolyard conflicts. As a form of peer victimization, one of the most important elements of bullying is the continued and repetitive abuse by other students: “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (Olweus, 1993, p. 9). A second important element of the bullying relationship is the expression of power through aggression. This bully-victim power imbalance increases over time and was identified by Naylor, Cowie, and del Rey (2001) in their study of children in the United Kingdom as being a central feature of a bullying relationship.

While bullying can assume many forms it is most often understood as falling into one of two broad categories: overt aggression and covert aggression. Overt aggression is usually readily apparent to the victim and to observers. Physical bullying includes overt physical attacks like hitting or kicking that can be carried out by one or more students. A less obvious form of overt aggression is verbal victimization including such actions as name-calling and teasing (Craig & Pepler, 2003; Naylor et al., 2001). Although more subtle than physical abuse, verbal bullying nevertheless represents overt aggression as it is abuse aimed *directly* at one student by one or more other students.

Covert aggression includes relational and social bullying. It is a more subtle, indirect form of victimization (Craig & Pepler, 2003; Naylor et al., 2001; Rigby, 2003; Woods & Wolke, 2004). The intent of relational and social bullying is social manipulation or social exclusion by negatively influencing or impacting the victim's relationship with his or her social network. This is often done through rumour spreading, and French, Jansen and Pidada (2002) suggest that this type of bullying is more frequent in female bullying interactions than male bullying. Relational and social bullying, although likely every bit as harmful to the victim as more overt forms of aggression (Rigby, 2003), is very often not immediately visible to observers. In addition, students who use e-mail, text messaging, or participate in other online activities are vulnerable to relational or social bullying 'at a distance'. This type of bullying has been labelled cyber bullying, and is described as a growing problem for school-aged children, with between 6% and 25% of school students reporting being either bullies or victims in incidents of Internet harassment (Campbell, 2005).

The First Nation Student Perspective

Schools today are communities consisting of a wide spectrum of people joining together from a variety of diverse backgrounds. In Thunder Bay, Ontario, the First Nation

population is continually and consistently growing. In some schools in Thunder Bay, the First Nation student population is becoming a significant proportion of the total student body, and every school includes some proportion of Aboriginal students. Baxter (2007) has noted that, "Our community's largest growing population is the Aboriginal Community. According to the report, "Ontario's New Approach to Aboriginal Affairs" (2005), Aboriginal youth is the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population" (p. 1).

The context of mainstream Canadian schools is one in which Aboriginal children may often feel marginalized. Schools can be described as "contact zones" which are "places where the values, ideologies, and practices of cultures are brought together, often at the expense of the non-majoritarian culture" (Van Ingen & Halas, 2006, p. 380).

With this in mind, schools must consider the *unique needs* of all students and, particularly in Northwestern Ontario, the unique needs of these First Nation students. The culture of a school must be one that sets students up to succeed in all aspects of their educational experience. In doing so, administrators must understand the uniqueness of the First Nation student, taking into consideration their culture and, in turn, their identity as an Aboriginal person. "Canada's Aboriginal peoples are comprised of many nations with very diverse cultures. It is imperative to realize that Aboriginal people are unique in their beliefs, spirituality, customs, histories, and languages" (Baxter, 2007, p. 7).

Within our school system today, bullying is a significant problem for First Nation children. Nishnawbe-Aski Nation surveys (Richmond-Saravia & Brownlee, 2005) show that 51% of First Nation children surveyed reported experiencing harassment and hostility from other children, and in a separate survey of Aboriginal mothers, 72% indicated that their child or children had missed school because of bullying. As well as being the victims of bullying, some Aboriginal students may also seek to gain power by taking on a bullying role, as van Ingen and Halas (2006) reported when some of the young women interviewed in a Manitoba High School indicated that within a context in which they did not feel

accepted or respected, they sought respect through fear.

As with other aspects of school interventions or programs, a number of researchers have recommended that to make anti-bullying programs effective, it is essential to shape intervention programs to match the needs of specific schools, communities, and students, and there is a need to tailor the program for the particular context (Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Van Oost, 2000). At present, there has been “very limited research on program development and research regarding bullying within and towards Aboriginal communities for the purposes of informing culturally-based solutions” (Mishna, 2008, p. 2). In this chapter, we will begin to look at a relatively novel anti-bullying program that has been introduced into the school system that includes an awareness of Aboriginal cultural realities. It is also one that explores the relationship between personal strengths and perceived risk of victimization among middle school students.

Unique Risks for First Nation Students

There are numerous risk factors affecting a First Nation student’s success at school, which are uniquely different from those of non-First Nation students. For example, the old Residential Schools system, the Federal/Christian institution where Aboriginal children were sent and segregated from their families, has had a long-standing impact on First Nations students today. Students of residential schools were not given the opportunity to speak their own language, or to celebrate their own culture, and hence, “(the schools) disrupted the smooth transmission of beliefs, skills and knowledge from one generation to the next...this system reflected mainstream attitudes of racial and cultural superiority” (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2006, p. 28). These students went on to have their own children, whilst struggling with their own identities. This made it difficult to parent, “...many former students found it difficult to raise their own children, because they had been deprived of any parental role models” (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2006, p. 29). As a result of the

Residential Schools system, and the after affects of the disclosed “sexual, emotional and physical abuse that occurred” (Baxter, 2007, p. 10), many children may be at higher risk in school. There is also a resulting general mistrust of institutions, including places of education, and this is coupled with a lack of confidence that affects parents' abilities to discuss their concerns with school authorities.

Another issue that may well impact Aboriginal children at school is their socio-economic status. In urban settings, Aboriginal people have been found to have higher rates of poverty, greater residential mobility, and lower levels of educational attainment and employment than non-Aboriginal populations (Fitzgerald & Carrington, 2008). In addition, the greatest socio-economic disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations has been found in cities in the Prairie Provinces, followed by Thunder Bay, where the current study took place (La Prairie, 2002). An international study that examined the issue of socio-economic distribution of adolescents' exposure to bullying concluded that children who are socially disadvantaged are at higher risk of victimization by bullying (Pernille, et al., 2009).

An additional risk factor for Aboriginal children in the school system is that they may become the victims of racial bullying. This has been described by Coy as being characterized by name-calling, in which the insults are directed to the child's family and ethnic group (Coy, 2001). Coy describes this as being a community issue in which racist attitudes may be transferred from one generation to another, and recommends that this issue be addressed directly to create a welcoming and respectful environment for all. Craig and McCuaig Edge (2006) have noted that racial bullying takes place less frequently than other types of bullying such as verbal teasing, physical aggression, sexual harassment or cyber bullying, but in the 2006 Health Behaviour in School Aged Children study on Canadian children in Grades Six to Ten, between 7 and 21% of students reported having experienced racial bullying.

A Strengths Approach

As indicated in the introduction, bullying is a significant social problem in Canadian schools (Craig & Peplar, 2007), and it is a problem that exacerbates the many other challenges that Aboriginal children face in negotiating the public school system. While anti-bullying programs have been extensively employed by schools (Smith, Cousins, & Stewart, 2005), the success rates of these programs have been varied and frequently limited (Baldry & Farrington, 2007; Ferguson, San Miguel, Kilburn, & Sanchez, 2007; Pepler, Smith & Rigby, 2004).

Although much of the above research has pointed to important negative consequences associated with bullying, this approach reflects a focus that has placed a significant emphasis on the pathological or ‘deficit-based’ aspects of bullying relationships. An alternative, more positive, orientation to understanding behaviour has emerged within both social work and psychology in the form of the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2007) and positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). These approaches, usually described as ‘strength-based’, direct attention to optimal development and the idea that everyone has strengths and that they are not simply defined by the presence of deficits.

A strength-based orientation has been portrayed as a way of understanding and working with people that draws upon qualities or characteristics that “create a sense of personal accomplishment; contribute to satisfying relationships with family members, peers, and adults; and promote one’s personal, social, and academic development” (Epstein & Sharma, 1998, p. 3). Rawana and Brownlee (2009) extended this definition to include the social value of strengths, namely, “a set of personal competencies and characteristics of the child or adolescent that were developed and embedded in culture and valued both by the individual and by society” (in press). The underlying assumption informing a strengths approach is that all children have strengths and, as noted above, by focusing on these strengths a child’s motivation and performance may be

improved (Epstein et al., 2004). Similarly, a focus on strengths may aid in the acceptance of interventions by the parties involved.

A natural question, therefore, is whether personal qualities can be identified that may act as protective factors for students against being victimized by other students. Is it possible for instance, that some personal strengths possessed by the victim may help him or her surmount the risk factors associated with being bullied? Strengths, or beneficial and adaptive personal competencies and characteristics, are assumed to be present to some degree in every student (Epstein, Mooney, Ryser, & Pierce, 2004) and may be an asset that can be used to address bullying and its consequences.

One School's Strengths-Based Response to Bullying

To deal with bullying and violence head-on, a change in school culture needs to take place, which includes effective use of prevention and intervention strategies. McKellar Park Central School in Thunder Bay, Ontario uses a strength-based approach in the prevention of, and effective intervention in bullying and violence. The McKellar Park approach has several components and each has been chosen for its contribution to the prevention of, and effective intervention in, bullying situations. Interwoven into each component is a common approach to dealing with behaviour; a strengths orientation. Whether one is dealing with bullies, victims or bystanders, it is essential to look at the strengths of each student. The main goal of this approach is to briefly assess students' strengths and to use that information to prevent, or to intervene effectively in, bullying and violent incidents. In essence, students' assets are used to help them deal with some of the problems they might be experiencing.

One important component of the McKellar Park approach is the Good Start program. The Good Start program has been very successful in transitioning students from First Nation communities into the school in a welcoming way.

Giving the students two days to get accustomed to, and comfortable with, the school and the people within the school, sets the student up for success when he or she begins in the classroom. It gives the student the awareness that the people in the school setting care for him or her and want them to succeed. The Good Start program makes school less intimidating for parents and students, and attempts to ensure that all needs are taken care of for both the student and the parents. This includes, but is not limited to, finding resources for the families in the form of housing information or food security, and 'buddying up' the student with a peer mentor. This type of transitional program to welcome Aboriginal students into a school is recommended by van Ingen and Halas (2000) as one strategy to engage children in school settings, which may otherwise feel alien and unwelcoming to them. An additional aspect of the Good Start program is a strengths inventory. This is completed with the student and their parents, and this information is used to help to successfully integrate the student into the school community. For example, if someone is good at sports, this becomes an important part of his or her school experience. This often reduces bullying and victimization as it helps to make the student feel comfortable and confident, thus preventing anxiety that can sometimes lead to negative behaviours. It has been found that these students are able to use their strengths while at school after this experience which, in turn, limits bullying or victimization behaviours.

Continuing to help students find strength while at school is a key component in preventing bullying and violence in schools. In the research and intervention conducted at McKellar Park, identifying as First Nation was related to lower measures in this area. For example, a student might report that he or she does not use “listening skills in school, or, enjoy school, or, get involved with school sports...” (Rawana et al., 2006). In order to work to increase this strength in First Nation students, many successful strategies are used. Cultural teaching by an Aboriginal youth worker has been developed, which incorporates Aboriginal history with the Ontario curriculum. Once a week, students spend time with the youth worker,

having an opportunity to work with an Aboriginal adult who demonstrates that he values school and education. In addition, a female drumming group meets every week where Aboriginal girls have the opportunity to spend time with a female Aboriginal role model to discuss issues which impact them, and to create art. Further, a male drumming group meets daily with the Aboriginal youth worker to sing and drum and to fill the school with an Aboriginal presence and culture. The integration of Aboriginal culture through these examples has created a powerful venue for First Nation students to begin to find strength in being at, and excelling in, school. Many First Nation students have found their strength in singing and drumming, some in dancing and regalia-making, and others in problem solving. This has had an amazing effect at reducing bullying and victimization. Students who were once seeking out power in negative ways are now able to find positive power situations, keeping them busy and in anticipation of coming to school each day.

When analyzing various risk factors among students, in particular First Nation students, it is vital to identify how their strengths might coincide with these risk factors. For example, it has been noted in research done at McKellar Park, that First Nation students do not typically find strength from 'goals and dreams'. For many of these children, feelings of powerlessness, lack of hope and future orientation due to the many disadvantages experienced in their daily lives may make it extremely difficult to set goals. Not finding strength from having goals and dreams is believed to be connected to higher levels of bullying and victimization. Therefore, a key to preventing bullying related to this risk/strength has been to provide workshops with the students on setting goals and dreams. Here they are given the opportunity to hear presentations from First Nation role models who have overcome their history to set goals for themselves and to 'rise above'. These are not famous people. Students have the opportunity to hear from people they live with in the community, everyday people, proving to students that anyone can achieve their goals, regardless of the circumstances.

In addition to workshops on goals and dreams, the

teachers of the grade 7 and 8 students have made setting goals a focus of instruction for a three-month period. Students are given the opportunity to read and write about goal setting and role models. They are able to write about their own strengths and how they might use these strengths to set goals. The integration of strengths into the existing curriculum helps the students to be engulfed in strength work. All classes in the school have posted a strength wall where students, teachers, and others post the strengths of one another for all to see. These are living walls, continually being added to, creating a culture of strength in each classroom. Again, this puts the student in a situation where strengths are central to success.

Another strategy used at McKellar Park is 'cool down' or prevention time. When a student has been asked to go to a cool down, that student is able to have one-to-one time with an adult mentor, and one of the key conversations surrounding strengths is discussing what path the student is on. This is nurtured throughout the student's time in the school, and re-examined and talked about each time the student is with key adults. This allows the student to see the importance of setting goals. It also shows that there are adults in the student's life who are interested in him or her. As a form of intervention, this approach empowers students to make better choices and to have a hand in creating a more positive culture within the school.

In conjunction with cool down or prevention time, McKellar Park uses alternatives to suspension practices. School administrators provide these as alternatives to students spending time at home when something has occurred that may have warranted a short suspension. The approach of offering alternatives to suspension is supported by the findings of Jull (2000), who notes that the practice of zero tolerance will consistently exclude students from school who are members of underrepresented and marginalized students within the school population, such as Aboriginal students. This is a step in progressive discipline where the student works on social skills, may partake in restorative justice, or may attend a talking/healing circle. Alternatives to suspension provide an opportunity to tap students' strengths by engaging in a

restorative practice conversation. For example, if a student has a strength in caring for someone, a behaviour that shows a lack of caring is inconsistent with that. Time is spent working through a resolution of the behaviour issue that benefits all involved. This has proven to be an effective intervention for dealing with bullying and violence as it offers formative consequences for the bully, and/or supportive consequences for the victim and bystanders.

The Ambassador's Club is another important component of the McKellar Park approach that builds on the strategies already discussed, both in terms of philosophy and implementation. This is a club made up of students, selected by the staff, who are at high risk for bullying, victimization, or bystander behaviours. These students' strengths have been evaluated and used to make them aware that positive power situations exist in the school to replace bullying behaviours. In addition, victims use their strengths to be more appropriately assertive in the eyes of those who may have previously bullied them. Bystanders, in turn, experience the success of helping to be a part of the solution, rather than contributing to the problem. Through these interactions, students can see themselves as being equal to, and potentially helpful to, each other, and to the school. The students spend a lunch hour every two weeks with the administrators working on social skills, problem solving, and organizing school activities, as well as discussing how to improve the school environment to make it more inviting to other students. The Ambassador's Club students also run assemblies and give tours to new students.

Finally, the New Experiences program, through Children's Centre Thunder Bay, has been an integral part of the McKellar Park approach. They have provided student and parent workshops and consultations, and have addressed specific issues that have come up in students' experiences. For example, some workshops have addressed grief, trauma, bullying, Seven Grandfathers' teachings, role models, the development of goals and dreams, and appropriate coping skills. The New Experiences program provides workshops at the school once a week. Working in collaboration with community agencies is one strategy recommended by

Wotherspoon and Schissel (1998) to foster educational success for Aboriginal students.

While the above strategies are more structured, there are also a number of strength based interventions that have happened naturally in the classrooms of the school, and are integrated into the students' daily experiences. An example of this is the building of the students' 'strength walls' based on self, peer, teacher, and parent identification of students' strengths. Underlying all of the interventions, including the New Experiences program, is the intent to build sustainability so that there is a cultural change within the school that perpetuates the traditions that have been established thus far.

Conclusion

Unique risk factors make it difficult for some Aboriginal students to function day-to-day in a school setting, and make them especially vulnerable to being victims of bullying, and to bullying others. It is paramount that the school responds appropriately to the needs of all students and especially to those who are at higher risk.

With a particular First Nation student, once strength work began incidents of bullying and violence ceased completely. This student is considered very high risk, having suffered the effects of sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Substance abuse was also a key factor in his life. This child had very little hope, and had not set goals for himself. He was very aggressive and angry. Once intervention began, this child partook in completing a strengths assessment inventory, multiple cool down sessions, alternatives to suspension, New Experiences workshops, and involvement in the Ambassador's Club. He knew that he had adults in his life that cared for him, and also cared about what was going to happen to him in the future. The change in his outlook on life is

phenomenal. This child has spoken of wanting to be a lawyer, and whether or not he achieves this dream, he now has goals and hope for his future. He has become a role model for other students in our school.

The McKellar Park approach has been proven to be a successful intervention with many students in the school, and has been pivotal in creating a welcoming culture of respect and caring. Approximately fifty percent of the McKellar Park student population is First Nation, and these students, in particular, have responded very well to a strength-based approach. In creating a culture of strength at McKellar Park, the groundwork has been laid to approach students' needs from a positive and powerful perspective. When issues arise, "what is wrong" is not the focus of discussion, rather "what is right" is looked into on a deeper level and, in turn, these strengths are used to continue to "make it right".

This approach to addressing these complex issues is supported by the recommendations of researchers in the area of Aboriginal education in Canada. van Ingen and Halas, (2006) examine the physical and social setting of schools, in terms of creating environments that welcome and include Aboriginal and other minority students, by recognizing and honouring their social history and culture. Ideally, this should include the attempt to hire Aboriginal school staff members, and to have other adults present in the school environment who reflect the identity of these students, as is done at McKellar Park School. Wotherspoon and Schissel (1998) focus on the need to teach Aboriginal children the value of their voices, by listening to and respecting those voices in a school setting that acknowledges that schools can be more than places for learning and intellectual development. They can also be "arenas of justice, personal development, collective action and individual achievement" (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998, p. 17). In working towards this goal, programs such as the one at McKellar Park School should be more widely introduced, adapted to the needs of individual schools and their pupils, and studied further, to provide a safer and more successful experience for Aboriginal students at school.

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