

Bullying at School: It's hard not to feel helpless

Phillip T. Slee

A sample of 422 students (212 males; 210 females) ranging in age from 5–15 years completed an interview regarding their experiences of victimisation at school. Conservatively, 6% were bullied 'once a week or more', while 91% of the sample had witnessed incidents of bullying at school. Nearly one fifth of the sample felt powerless to stop bullying. The findings also indicated a relationship between victimisation and external locus of control suggesting that one outcome of victimisation is a feeling of powerlessness or helplessness. The findings were discussed in terms of the mental health outcomes for victims of bullying.

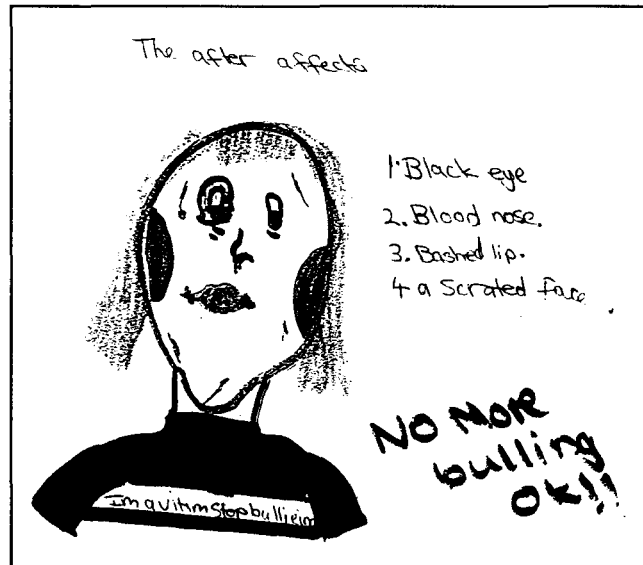
As reflected in this primary school student's drawing, the experience of bullying at school is a frightening one indeed. Poignantly, the student has written across the T-shirt 'I'm a victim stop bullieing' (sic). It is this victim-like helpless status that students frequently acquire when subject to bullying that has, for many years, concerned parents and teachers, and which more recently has attracted the attention of researchers.

Generally defined, bullying involves:

- (i) an imbalance of strength – either physical or psychological between the bully and the victim;
- (ii) repeated negative actions against the victim;
- (iii) a deliberate intention to hurt the other where the aggressive act is largely unprovoked. (Olweus 1989).

Pioneering studies were made into bullying by Olweus (1984, 1989) in Norway. More recently, Smith (1991) and Tattum (1989) have been writing and researching in the field in England.

In Australia, the study of bullying is a relatively new field of research (McFadden, 1986; Rigby & Slee, 1991; 1992; Slee & Rigby, 1993a). On the basis of a series of studies in the last



four years involving over 10,000 primary and secondary school students and their parents and teachers, it is estimated that at least one child in ten is bullied 'once a week or more', and one in twenty children engages in persistent bullying (Rigby & Slee, 1991, 1992). In South Australia, where approximately 190,000 students are at school, some 29,000 would be directly affected by bullying at any one time. These figures are generally consistent with overseas research.

Apart from the disturbing prevalence of the problem, gender differences and developmental trends are apparent. Males admit to more bullying than females (Rigby & Slee, 1991) and developmentally, there is a steady decrease

across primary and secondary school in the extent of victimisation (Rigby & Slee 1991; Smith & Whitney, 1992), but the extent of bullying remains fairly constant (Whitney & Smith, 1992).

As one can imagine from looking at the child's drawing presented earlier, apart from the physical, there are deleterious psychological side-effects to bullying. Research with primary and secondary school students clearly indicates that victims suffer lower self esteem (Rigby & Slee, 1992, Slee & Rigby, 1993), are less happy at school and like school less (Rigby, 1992). One

psychological variable that has not been examined in relation to the bully/victim problem is locus of control.

As presented by Julian Rotter (1954), some individuals believe that they are responsible for their own fate and for the events in their lives and as such are considered to have an internal locus of control. Individuals with an external locus feel they have little control over events and that what happens to them is determined by luck, chance or fate. Internal locus has been linked positively with school achievement. One possible unfortunate outcome of an external locus of control may be the development of a sense of despair or belief that one is powerless to affect what happens to one.

Phillip T. Slee Ph.D., Lecturer, Human Development, School of Education, Flinders University, SA.

Under these circumstances, the individual may eventually give up trying – a reaction labelled as 'learned helplessness' (Seligman, 1975). To date, there is only indirect evidence that victimised children may develop feelings of helplessness, or ineffectiveness (Lowenstein, 1979). Research with a valid and reliable measure of locus of control would help clarify the link with victimisation.

The purpose of the present study is to further explore the issue of Australian student's experience of victimisation at school with a particular focus on locus of control.

Method

Subjects: The total sample of 422 included students from schools around Metropolitan Adelaide. There were 212 males and 210 females ranging in age from 5–15 years (\bar{x} =10.8 yrs).

Measures: An interview format was devised which enabled the collection of demographic data along with students' responses to questions about their experience of bullying at school (questionnaire available from the author). Students completed the twenty item Nowicki-Strickland, Locus of Control Scale (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973).

Procedure: After the project was approved by the principals and parents, the children were individually interviewed in the school. They were assured that the questionnaire was not a test, that there were no right or wrong answers and that their responses were confidential. Prior to answering the questions regarding bullying, each student was read the following statement in order to clarify in their minds what was meant by bullying:

You may have noticed that children sometimes bully other children by deliberately and repeatedly hurting or upsetting them in some way eg, hitting them or pushing them around, teasing them or leaving them out of things on purpose. But it is not bullying when two young people of about the same strength have the odd fight or quarrel.

Results

The findings from the study are presented in terms of a number of questions asked of the children during the interview.

TABLE I Frequency of victimisation at school

every day	most days	1-2 days/week	once/week	once/month	never
1.9	3.3	8.3	6.2	37.8	42.5

Have you seen students bully others at school?

In response to this question, 91% of the students indicated that they had witnessed bullying at their school.

How often have you been bullied at school?

As indicated in Table 1, nearly 2% of students indicated that they were bullied 'everyday' while 6% of the students were bullied 'once a week/or more'. The fact that 58% of the students had some experience of victimisation highlights its widespread nature in schools.

If you have been bullied could you stop it if you wanted to?

Nearly one fifth (18%) of students responded that they could not stop it, highlighting their experience of powerlessness in the face of bullying.

To analyse the relationship between locus of control and victimisation, three groups of children were formed from the sample:

- (1) children who reported being victimised 'most days or more often'
- (2) children victimised 'once or twice a week'
- (3) children victimised 'once a month or never'.

A one way ANOVA (with a post hoc Scheffe test [$P \leq .05$]) of the three victim groups and locus of control scores indicated children being victimised 'most days or more often' ($n=20$) had significantly more external locus of control scores ($\bar{x}=17.10$) than those victimised less than 'once a month or less' ($n=180$) who had a mean locus of control score of 15.61. A two way ANOVA showed no significant age or sex effect.

TABLE II Could you join in bullying a student you disliked?

Yes	Yes, maybe	I don't know	I don't think so	No	Definitely not
6.7	14.5	21.9	14.0	18.3	24.7

Could you join in bullying another?

As indicated in Table 2, 21% or over one fifth responded 'yes' or 'yes, maybe' to this question.

How often have you bullied others? The figures in Table 3 show that 8% of the students had bullied others 'once a month or more'.

Locus of Control. The twenty item version of the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale was completed by all students. Analysis indicated that the twenty item version had low reliability ($\alpha=0.48$), albeit similar to that reported by Nowicki & Strickland (1973). An eleven item version of the scale was constructed which had more adequate reliability ($\alpha=0.68$) and this version was used in the present analysis.

Discussion

The findings of the present study certainly confirm the wide-ranging nature of student's experience of bullying at school. Incidents of bullying had been witnessed by 91% of the sample highlighting its prevalent nature in schools. The finding that at least 6% of the sample reported being bullied 'once a week' or more is consistent with previous Australian research (Rigby & Slee, 1991). If we were to add up the percentage of children bullied 'everyday' to 'once a week or more' inclusively, then 19.7% of students were victimised. This figure is not inconsistent with the 18% of 10–18 year olds reported by Rigby & O'Brien (1992) as being bullied once a week or more.

TABLE III How often have you bullied other students?

I haven't	Once/week	Once/month	Several times/week
50.0	41.7	7.1	1.2

Conservatively then, the results of the present study confirm that at least 6% of children in South Australian schools are victimised on a weekly basis and the true figure is probably higher.

The 18% of the students who felt powerless to stop the bullying to which they were subjected is a real cause for concern. Slee (1993b) in a study of primary school children, found that for 14% of children subject to victimisation, the experience lasted six months or more. Such conditions provide fertile ground for the development of a sense of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). That is, the development of a sense that nothing one does matters and that one is doomed to live for a time in a state of fear and anxiety. The real threats experienced by victims are illustrated in the following excerpts drawn from interviews conducted with children (Rigby, Slee & Conolly, 1990).

*kicked judoed nearly killed knocked out
kicked in rude places jumped on and
thrown in mud.*

eight-year-old boy

kicked punched push around.

ten-year-old boy

push around called names.

thirteen-year-old boy

kick in the leg.

seven-year-old boy

kicked pushed around the face.

ten-year-old boy

*they spit at me they cool me for loss
(four-eyes).*

seven-year-old girl

The fact that 21% of the students indicated they could join in bullying another child emphasises that while the majority of children (79%) are supportive of victims, a significant minority hold less than supportive views towards victims. As Rigby & Slee (1991) note, it is very important for school intervention programmes to take into account the perceptions students have. The majority of children are on the side of the victim and this resource should be mobilised as an important aspect of any intervention strategy.

The 8% of children who indicated that they have, in fact, bullied other students is not inconsistent with previous Australian (Rigby & Slee, 1991), or overseas research (Whitney & Smith, 1992). This hard core group of children should be identified as part of any intervention programme.

Finally, the findings of the present study do suggest a possible link between victimisation and external locus of control. Children who were victimised had a more external locus of control, which meant they felt less able to influence and control the events in their lives. Some validity for this relationship is found in the present study's finding that 20% of students felt powerless to stop bullying. One outcome of the victimisation experience may be 'learned helplessness', an outlook consistent with previous research indicating that victims suffer lower self esteem (Slee & Rigby, 1993). However, the present finding should be viewed with some caution in view of the low reliability of the Nowicki-Strickland questionnaire and the small number of students bullied 'most days or more often' and is deserving of replication.

...for a small but significant group of children, their basic right to be safe and feel safe while being educated is being violated... No child should have to live their life in such a state of quiet desperation.

In summary, to return to the student's drawing presented earlier, the present study of students' experience of victimisation at school highlights that for a small but significant group of children, their basic right to be safe and feel safe while being educated is being violated. Moreover, as a result of the victimisation, they feel helpless, ineffective, and powerless. No child should have to live their life in such a state of quiet desperation. ♦



References

- Lowenstein L.F. (1978). 'Who is the bully?' *Bulletin of the British Psychological Society*, 31, 147-149.
- McFadden J. (1986). 'Bullies and victims' *Primary Education*, Sept/Oct 25-26.
- Nowicki S. & Strickland B.R. (1973). 'A locus of control scale for children.' *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 3, 148-154.
- Olweus D. (1978). *Aggression in the schools: Bullies and whipping boys*. Washington DC: Hemisphere, Wiley.
- Olweus D. (1989). 'Bully/victim problems among school children: basic facts and effects of a school based intervention program.' in K. Rubin & D. Pepler (eds) *The development and treatment of childhood aggression*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Rigby K. & O'Brien M. (1992). *The influence of family factors on bully/victim behaviour*. Unpublished.
- Rigby K., Slee P.T. & Conolly, (1990). 'Victims and bullies in school communities.' *Australasian Journal of Victimology*, 1, 25-31.
- Rigby K. & Slee P.T. (1991). 'Bullying among Australian school children: Reported behaviour and attitudes to victims.' *Journal of Social Psychology*, 131, 615-627.
- Rigby K. & Slee P.T. (in press). 'Dimensions of interpersonal relating among Australian children and implications for psychological well being.' *Journal of Social Psychology*, 133, 33-42.
- Rotter J (1954). *Social learning and clinical psychology*. Engelwood Cliff NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Seligman D. (1975). *Helplessness*. San Francisco: Freeman.
- Slee P.T. & Rigby K. (1993a). 'The relationship of Eysenck's personality factors and self esteem to bully-victim behaviour in Australian school boys.' *Personality and Individual Differences*, 14, 371-373.
- Slee P.T. & Rigby K. (1993 b). 'Australian school children's self appraisal of interpersonal relations: the bullying experience.' *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 23, 272-282.
- Smith P.K. (1991). 'The silent nightmare: bullying and victimisation in school peer groups.' *The Psychologist*, 4, 243-248.
- Tattum D. (1989). 'Violence and aggression in schools.' in Tattum D.P. & Lane D.A. (eds.) *Bullying in schools* (Ch.1) England: Trentham Books.
- Whitney I. & Smith P.K. (1992). *A survey of the nature and extent of bullying in junior/middle and secondary schools*. Unpub. manuscript.