

## **School Bullying in the US: Are we missing something?**

By Dr. Sairah Qureshi,

The subject of school bullying is and always has been a deeply complex and contentious issue. It is a subject we all consider gravely important, yet often parents/teachers/schools and indeed children and young people take the subject lightly and for the majority of the victims, they do nothing but just learn to 'deal with it'. The ramifications for many victims include therefore copycat bullying; lower self-esteem; negative self-perception; low academic achievement; poor health and in the worst case scenario, suicide. There are also incidents where after prolonged periods of bullying and neglect, the victim ultimately resorts to violence. Much media coverage has been given towards young people on shooting sprees.

Academic research reveals school bullying to be a global problem, whilst also indicating that as there is no universal definition of what bullying is, this causes even more controversy. In particular, international research offers a different definition for bullying. Unlike the research conducted in the UK, the international definition is associated with feelings of hurt, anger and physical harm. More emphasis is given to aggression, and less upon power relations (Smith, *et al.*, 2002). As well as inconsistencies in its definition, Smith *et al.*, (2002) argue, young people construct bullying according to their experiences. Bullying behaviour therefore, is part of many young people's experiences as perpetrators and as victims. Never-the-less, academic research advocates for more anti-bullying awareness in schools (Samara and Smith, 2008) than less, despite the complexity of the definition of bullying.

Over a period of time, U.S. government legislation has required schools to become more aware, implement and adhere to anti-bullying policy guidelines and increasingly highlight such problematic issues pertaining to bullying via promoting anti-bullying education. Many educators and organizations indeed do their part to train teachers and work with young people to fight against bullying. Indeed the media has contributed significantly in highlighting the seriousness of bullying via documentary films, (Bully) interviews and news reports (Anderson Cooper, 360). However, academic research along with media coverage strongly indicate that bullying and focusing on US schools, it continues to remain the most challenging and contentious issues for US

schools (Coloroso 2008). The question remains, are we, the school education system, educators, counselors and parents are we missing something?

We first need to establish the common signs of how bullying takes shape. In general, bullying is associated with verbal name calling, indirect actions such as staring and physical bullying. Verbal name calling, which is the most common use of bullying in schools, often involves reference to specific visible differences of the victim, such as their weight, wearing glasses or wearing different styles of clothes. Verbal abuse is also identified as the most common form of racist bullying in schools (see chapter two) (Barter, 1999; Connolly and Keenan, 2002), and is serious due to the psychological and emotional impacts sustained on victims (Rigby, 2004). With physical bullying however, this involves a range of repeated physical acts against the victim that include, hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving, holding as well as hostile gesturing and stealing personal items or money (Ma *et al.*, 2001). Similar to verbal bullying, the nature of physical bullying can vary from minor to more extreme. Indirect forms of bullying include physical bullying which range from threatening and intimidation to spitting on the victim.

Other indirect forms of bullying include verbal bullying which involves subtle actions such as staring, ostracizing the victim and rumor spreading (Sullivan *et al.* 2006). Dixon (2007) asserts that this is a process which is defined in stages and occurs if an individual is perceived to have broken a group norm. Therefore, where a norm has been broken, aversive behaviors are targeted at coercing the individual to conform through physical attack as well as rejection from the social group, although the behaviour varies between verbal, physical and then threats to exclude, whether it is temporary or actual exclusion (Dixon, 2007). Failure to conform to subcultural norms often results in permanent exclusion (Dixon, 2007).

In recent years bullying has also been affected by technology, which has become a viable and popular tool used to violate the victim. Termed as Cyberbullying (Schrock and Boyd 2008) Cyberbullying appears where abusive messages can be posted in chat rooms by instant messaging, or isolating the victim in chat rooms. Bullies further use the internet to develop offensive web pages against the victim (<http://www.bullying.co.uk/advice/anti-bullying-advice>, 2011). Cyberbullying can also appear through the abuse of mobile phones such as silent or abusive phone calls and offensive texts. Furthermore, during physical fights, bystanders can record the incident on their mobile phones and subsequently forward the bullying event to all their friends. A key

difference between Cyberbullying and the traditional face-to-face bullying is that the abuse follows the victim, whereby the home no longer provides protection and the abuser is able to remain anonymous. More recently, victims are being targeted due to transgender issues, sexting and on the basis of homophobia. Whilst the victim can be targeted by the bully alone, in most cases, the perpetrator is surrounded by their peers or bystanders against the victim, rendering them further helpless.

Indeed much research into school bullying derives from the psychological background where theories exist into the mental state or individual factors of the bully/perpetrator, however and as achieved through my own PhD research into school bullying and racist bullying, examining the socio-economic factors and environment as well as the psychological factors, also contribute and account for why bullying is likely to occur. Thus combining both perspectives better informs for a broader anti-bullying intervention and prevention education where schools can implement the appropriate measures according to what form of bullying or anti-social behaviour is the biggest problem. Where some schools major challenge is dealing with indirect and Cyberbullying, others may need to combat more physical bullying that may tantamount to extreme violence.

One major issue that schools in the US and indeed worldwide face is the problem of underreporting and the vast majority of peers/bystanders unwilling to report incidents on the victim's behalf. Academic research shows that by and large, victims prefer to remain silent for numerous reasons. Victims largely remain silent as a prime coping strategy (Roberts and Coursel 1996, in Ma, *et al.*, 2001) for two reasons: firstly, fear of retaliation and secondly, because of experience of inadequate support from adults when they do ask for help. Yet research also suggests that younger students are more likely to tell someone (Hunter *et al.*, 2004). However, Hunter *et al.*'s study fails to articulate gender differences or differences in the nature of bullying with regards to asking for help. Bijtteber and Vertommen (1988 in Cowie, 2000) report that gender differences in the coping strategies adopted by victims result in boys tending to fight back more often than girls. Furthermore, it must be understood that younger students, particularly primary children are more likely to speak out due to the smaller numbers in the school and in the class, and the support received by teachers. It may be suggested that as children grow older, they become more reluctant to share their bullying experiences, particularly with an adult for fear of retaliation by the bully(ies), not being taken seriously and due to the vagueness in how supportive the schools are towards promoting an

environment where victims are encouraged to speak out. What preventative education is provided for them and whether provisions have been made for victims through counseling is another issue to consider. As Rigby particularly notes:

*“Research has already reported prevalence of telling, who/where, when children tell and efficiency of telling. However, seeking help can be viewed as a coping behaviour and coping processes such as appraisal and emotion may be important predictions of whether pupils ask for help” (Rigby, 2002:176).*

Indeed it is this notion of promoting social and emotional teaching in academia that strongly advocates success in assisting to cut down on bullying. In the United States, few organizations promote this theory, the National School Climate Center (New York) however fundamentally advocate for such type of teaching. In addition promoting harmonious behaviour amongst young people and particularly teaching young people to support victims or stand against bullying, thus acting as positive bystanders/upstanders is one of the most powerful mechanisms to reduce bullying. Yet, if peers are to support the victims and report incidents, there must be adequate trust in teachers and the schools to support and investigate the incidents fully. Long has academic research revealed that children and young people hold substantial power in the bullying process, by means of preventing from occurring, prolonging to encouraging bullying to continue (Rigby and Johnson, 2006). Yet research also reveals that many bystanders refrain from preventing the bullying or reporting incidents for fear that they will next become the target of bullying. This fact transpired not only through my academic research, but also during school interviews and outreach work conducted primary school level.

This realization of the full extent in the power held by bystanders is acknowledged by Salmivalli. In one of her earlier studies conducted in 1996, she asserts that *“children are reasonably aware of their participant roles in bullying, although they tend to underestimate the results of their participant roles in active bullying”* (Salmivalli *et al.*, 1996: 5). This suggests that children and young people need strong encouragement to act as upstanders. Sullivan *et al.* (2005) further claim that bullying is usually a group activity that flourishes with an audience. If the peer group rejects bullying, then it will be directionless, without direction or a leader, there will be no bully. Sullivan *et al.* (2005) however argue that attitudes are difficult to change unless it is strongly encouraged and supported by the school and positive attitudes of the teachers. Finally, Gini *et al.*, (2008) are one of the few studies to attempt to establish a

connection between peer relations, bystanders and the school environment. This study contributes as it acknowledges that social factors such as adherence to peer group norms, homophily and social identity concerns might also contribute to inter-group conflicts and aggressive conduct among peers (Gini *et al.*, 2008).

In the states of New York and New Jersey for example, the State Department for Education require that all schools implement anti-bullying education as well as a procedure to record all bullying and bias-based incidents. However, there is no firm legislation requiring schools to actually REPORT the incidents to the D.O.E, unlike their British and European counterparts. Surely this would contribute to another cause why pupils and victims remain silent? Where schools are given such leverage, where is the incentive to actively pursue bullying on a long term proactive level? This is not to assume or accuse schools of holding pupils social and emotional welfare as a lesser priority, however, this does suggest that it indeed is on the onus of the school to provide whatever little or substantial support for victims of bullying and proactive education.

So the question remains, what are we missing? Are schools in the US adequately addressing bullying by implementing sufficient preventative education, counseling and outside support rather than intervention measures once bullying occurs? Are schools on top of their recording measures? Are teachers efficiently promoting social and emotional learning behaviour in the curriculum? Are schools recognizing and supporting the positive long term impact of the role of upstanders to reduce school bullying not only on, but also off the school premises?

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About the author:

Dr. Sairah Qureshi earned her PhD in Sociology and Criminology entitled: "Perceptions of School Bullying and Racist Bullying in a Northern City" from Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK in November 2011. During her tenure, Dr. Qureshi worked with children and young people in schools in the UK on anti-bullying and became Associate Member of the top UK Anti-bullying organization, Anti-Bullying Alliance where she presented at meetings and undertook workshops during Anti-Bullying week 2009. Dr. Qureshi has also been acting as Residential Consultant Expert in anti-bullying for the

Downtown Manhattan Community Board 1, NY, Youth and Education Committee since May 2010. As part of the committee, Dr. Qureshi developed various proposals, in which resolutions were passed and presented to the New York City Department of Education particularly in the area seeking to develop and improve anti-bullying proactive preventative education. She has also written and developed modules on school racism and bias-based bullying for the National School Climate Center, NY and is currently in the process of converting her PhD thesis into a book targeted towards schools and universities, pending publication. In addition, Dr. Qureshi has presented her work through numerous seminars at universities in the UK and has lectured in her area. Dr. Qureshi lives with her husband in New Jersey and teaches Sociology for undergraduate students at Strayer University, NJ.