DEANERY DIGEST

Bulying or counter-connecting?

What is this research about and why is it important?

It has been reported that about 40% of children and young people are exposed to bullying, but this rate has been reported to be as high as 69% for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Sadly, bullying involvement (either as a perpetrator and/or as a victim) can lead to detrimental effects on mental health in the short- and/or long-term and can be heightened for children with SEND who often experience bullying involvement more intensely or who cannot fully comprehend the situation or emotion.

Although reducing bullying in schools has been a public health priority for years, there is still no standardised or universally accepted definition of bullying and the definitions used, are often not inclusive of the experiences of children with SEND. Correctly defining and therefore distinguishing bullying from other aggressive or hurtful behaviours is essential.

This paper focused on developing a usable definition of bullying for researchers and school staff that can be applied not only to mainstream school and typically developing children but also to those with SEND, neurodivergence or attending special schools. A definition which can easily be checked and understood by teaching staff, practitioners and researchers working directly with children, as well as the children's parents, will help to avoid over- or under-reporting and managing of bullying incidences in school. The aim is for a usable definition to better identify both bullying perpetration behaviours as well as victimisation experiences.

What did we do?

Firstly, we searched and reviewed the current international literature on bullying definitions and bullying programmes and resources for children with SEND. We identified key terms, themes and suggestions.

Secondly, we spoke with seven special school teachers and seven parents of children with SEND for approximately 30 minutes each. With each person we talked about three key aspects of bullying that were identified from the literature (repetition, intent, and power imbalance) as well as inviting suggestions and discussions on other aspects or experiences related to bullying. We recorded and transcribed what was said and looked for reoccurring themes and patterns between the different interviews (known as thematic analysis).

What did we find?

Parents and teachers felt as though the definitions currently used were accurate, but that they were limited in terms supporting children with SEND. Of all the topics mentioned or raised, five were

consistently discussed as requiring inclusion or expansion in the current definitions: 1) intent, 2) power imbalance, 3) cyberbullying, 4) awareness and social interaction, 5) direction of bullying.

The team adapted a commonly used definition to reflect the discussions. The new additions are in italics.

Bullying:

- Involves a pattern of behaviour repeated over time, *from the same or different people, and in the same or different method*

- Can take many different forms including physical contact, words, mean gestures, exclusion from a group *or negative contact via digital device or platform*

- Involves an imbalance of strength or power *including age, strength, size, intellectual capacity, social skill understanding and emotional stability*

- The victim has difficulty defending themselves *or is unaware of being bullied*

- Harm is being inflicted intentionally.

Through reading the literature and listening to discussions with parents and teachers, it became apparent that simply redefining bullying was not sufficient. A new term was coined and defined – 'counter-connecting' – which identifies a situation in which an individual is targeted and victimised (as in a bullying situation), but there is no intentional, negative perpetrator (unlike a bullying situation). One example: a child may be trying to connect positively with another child (wanting to become their friend) but they are unsure how to do so, and so they punch the other child, thinking that this forms a connection. They may continue to perform this action over a period of hours, days or weeks without realising the distress and upset they are causing the other child (who is technically being targeted and victimised by these actions). The intent and desire are positive, but the connection has gone wrong. The child is counter-connecting.

Counter-connecting:

- Involves a pattern of behaviour repeated over time.

- *Can occur peer-to-peer but also between pupils and teachers.*

- Can take many different forms including physical contact, words, mean gestures, exclusion from a group *or negative contact via digital device or platform.*

- *An act that causes unintentional victimisation of another. There is a victim.*

- *Harm may be inflicted unintentionally.*

What does it all mean anyway?

If situated within a suitable anti-bullying programme, policy and/or whole-school approach, these two more accurate and useful definitions can work to impact the wider societal acknowledgement and recognition of bullying situations, enabling more supportive responses and actions from those around including teachers, pupils and parents. Accurate identification and therefore management of both bullying and counter-connecting can result in better mental health of all pupils, especially those with SEND.

In turn, having accurate definitions will help to definitively design and then evaluate the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions.

Digest prepared by Julia Badger.