

## **Using Restorative Strategies to Tackle Bullying**

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**by**

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Bullying affects a substantial number of children and youth in all schools. Like many countries, bullying is an issue of growing concern to parents, teachers and social workers in Hong Kong. In general, bullying is defined as repeated oppression, physical or mental, of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons. It occurs where there is an imbalance in power between people, and it is a persistent or continued unwelcome behavior (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1996; Smith & Sharp, 1994). It ranges from simple teasing to violent physical acts. This paper illustrates the growing concern with bullying in Hong Kong and the possibility that it may be the precursor of general juvenile delinquency or youth violence. Apart from highlighting some recent incidences and research results of bullying in the community, this paper discusses the negative spiral effect of bullying and a restorative anti-bullying strategy for tackling the problem.

### **A VICIOUS CYCLE OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE**

In Hong Kong, severe school violence such as gun shooting or fighting with weapon is not frequent but bullying among school children such as spitting, verbal insults, name calling and taunting is certainly not a new phenomenon. Recently, “physical bullying” such as hitting, tripping up, kicking and assaults and “extortion” such as making students feeling intimidated and asking for money with threatening words are two major threats to students’ well being in schools. These kinds of bullying behavior are rather common in middle schools with lower academic banding. Parents and community leaders worry about how school will protect their children from bullying. The following is typical example of physical bullying:

Kelvin, a big twelve-year old boy, often made use of his strong body to bully other. The incidence happened when Kelvin was playing in the basketball ground with three friends just after lunch at school. An eleven-year old boy called Andy, a classmate of Kelvin, passed by. Kelvin and three classmates threw pencils at him for fun. Andy stared at them with hatred. However, they had not stopped and threw soft drink cans and garbage at Andy again. Andy could not take it anymore and picked up a broom and hit them. As there were a lot of people on Kelvin’s side, and since he was so big in size, they knocked Andy down easily. Andy was extremely angry; he went up to the second floor and returned to Kelvin with a cutter. During the fight, the cutter hurt Kelvin’s left eye seriously. Andy was charged by the Police for assaulting Kelvin (Causing a student, 1999).

In the abovementioned case, the one who was seriously hurt had been involved in bullying others for a certain period of time. It is noted that the offender and victim are often classmates or friends before the violence occurred. Physical violence was either a result of continuing bullying or a revenge taken against the bullies by the victim. For example, Andy was eventually taken to police for seriously hurting Kelvin's eye. Ironically, the offender Andy was in fact a victim of continued school bullying. The incidence is a typical case of school violence which is a manifestation of an abuse of power.

#### **STUDIES OF SCHOOL BULLYING**

In Hong Kong, there was no systematic study on the prevalence of school bullying before 1999. In the past two decades, the only relevant studies of bullying have been those on causes or predictors of delinquency; the nature and extent of youth deviant behaviors in local districts; the process of deviation; and the types of unruly and delinquent behavior of students. Since the middle of 2000, the author has been studying the problem of school bullying. Research teams have been formed to investigate teachers' and students' perceptions of school bullying in local districts as well as at a community-wide level (Aberdeen Caritas Outreaching Team & Wong, 2000; Wong, 2001; Wong et al., 2002).

The results of the first comprehensive research on secondary school teachers' and students' perceptions of bullying were published in mid-2001. The study collected 905 questionnaires from teachers and social workers, and 3,297 questionnaires from students, from 29 secondary schools (Wong & Lo, 2001). Another community-wide research report on the prevalence of school bullying in primary schools in Hong Kong was also released in 2002 (Wong et al., 2002). Altogether 7,025 questionnaires were collected from 47 primary schools. These studies found that more than half of the respondents were involved in bullying – as bystanders, bullies or victims. The results from the studies indicate that the problem of physically bullying seems to be more serious than bullying with extortion in both primary and secondary schools. It was found that 17.2 % of the secondary sample and 22.5% of the primary sample admitted bullying other students at some time during the preceding six months. Similarly, 18.3% of the secondary sample and 31.7% from the primary sample reported that they had been the victims of physical bullying.

How can we explain school bullying? Research suggests that typical bullies are often characterized by impulsivity; a strong need to dominate others; surround themselves with a small group of friends who possess violence values and support them; and have little empathy toward victims (Cairns et al., 1988; Olweus, 1993; Pulkkinen & Tremblay, 1992). So far as bullies are concerned, researchers have found that experiencing more strains at school such as negative peer relations, negative teacher relations, and having low academic achievement are more likely to engage in school crime (Agnew, 2000; Elliott et al., 1998; Welsh et al., 1999). Besides, lack of warmth in the family, use of physical violence within the family, and lack of clear guidelines for behavior and monitoring of children's activities are found to be risk factors. Bullies are more likely than other students to follow an anti-social path (Loeber & Dishion, 1983; Magnusson et al., 1983; Olweus, 1994; Patterson, 1986). Research on peer victimization shows that the typical victims are more anxious and non-assertive than students in general. They are often lonely, abandoned at school, more likely to be depressed, over-protected by parents, and have poorer self-esteem (Olweus, 1994).

The abovementioned research findings can be viewed as a reflection of the interplay between two sets of countervailing factors: conditions favoring to enhance bully/victim problems and factors controlling the widespread of bullying. Taken together, factors such as strains at school, peer and mass media influences, and psychosocial conditions of the bully/victim are crucial social determinants of bullying. From the results conducted by the author of this paper, we found that when children were happy, emotionally stable, satisfied with school performance and accepted by classmates, their likelihood of engagement in bully/victim problems was less frequent. On the contrary, children might involve in peer victimization when their relationships with peers, parents and/or siblings were unsatisfactory. Same trend had also been identified in the relationship between children's feeling towards a harmony school and school bullying (Wong & Lo, 2001; Wong et al., 2002).

### **SUPPRESSIVE STRATEGY VS. RESTORATIVE STRATEGY**

There have been two major strategies for tackling school bullying - a suppressive strategy and a restorative strategy. Broadly, the former values establishing blame, while the latter values accountability as well as restoring relationships. Restorative strategy is a collective term which covers a wide spectrum of tactics relating to restorative practices. These practices range from informal restorative statements, impromptu conference to as formal as third party formal mediation session or family group conference. It's real focus place upon restoration of relationships, not just resolving disputes without real reconciliation (Umbreit, 1995, Wachtel, 1997).

A suppressive strategy is basically a punitive approach which is bully focus and blame driven. In Hong Kong, school managers tend to reply overly on harsh punishment and deter students from engaging school violence. Teachers used to sanctioning student's wrongdoing publicly and bullies will normally be shamed and ordered to correct their behaviors. However, the heavy use of punitive measures, as opposed to resolving conflicts through restorative practices (Morrison, 2002), may make the relationships between bullies and victims much worst. Scholars have found that overreaction might intensify the delinquent problem and inadvertently promote further delinquency (Gray, 1994; Wong, 1999).

Unlike the suppressive strategy, a restorative strategy aims to involve the conflicting parties to resolve conflicts and rebuild a relationship. Having known that bullying is negatively associated a harmonious school environment, positively associated with violence-prone values and poor individual's psychosocial conditions, this strategy designs to mobilize resource to develop ways of supporting those who are bullied as well as methods of changing attitudes and habits of the bullies through restorative practices. This strategy is necessary for creating a counter culture of school violence and breaking the vicious cycle of bullying.

Knowing that teachers and parents in Hong Kong are not taking the problem of bullying seriously, based on practice wisdom from overseas (Arora, 1994; Bodine & Crawford, 1998; Limper, 2000; Roland, 2000), the author initiated the first comprehensive anti-bullying program in Hong Kong from August 2000 to April 2001. In this period, the author worked with teachers and a team of social workers to promote a harmonious and loving environment in a secondary school. Being a pioneer one, this program only targeted the junior form students (Secondary 1 to Secondary 3). The Quality Education Fund from the Government funded this project. Firstly, we organized a series of activities for parents to involve their participation in the program. At the beginning of the academic year, our team made good use of the

orientation weeks to provide training to parents regarding prevalence and causes of bullying. We publicly invited parents to join the anti-bullying movement and to face and prevent the problem of bullying assertively. These talks could educate parents that the school would take bullying very seriously. In the subsequent months, we organized staff development programs for the school principal, teachers and social worker staff of the school. We shared with all parties concerned about some recent overseas and local research findings in bullying, and the restorative ways for preventing and tackling bullying. During these workshops, a clear message was passed to the teachers: “Bullying can grow to become very serious or it can be nipped in the bud” (Sullivan, 2000). If teachers knew of bullying or suspected that it was occurring, they should deal with it in a restorative manner by running peace education curriculum, using circle time and mediation to resolve conflicts.

From our experience, harsh punishment is not effective for stopping bullying. Indeed, often students will not talk when they are dealt with by authorities and may take revenge afterwards. Thus, youth violence and bullying continue. To prevent bullying, setting aside circle time for students and their teachers to share joys, celebrate success and resolve interpersonal conflicts is extremely useful. To stop bullying acts and at the same time address psychosocial conditions of the bullies/victims, the author finds the following practical tactics useful:

1. To encourage victims to tell the truth and help them to develop a strong character.
2. To educate bullies who lack social skills and remind them not to seek attention in a teasing way.
3. To shame bullies who intend to do harm through reintegrative shaming method without negatively labeled them (Braithwaite, 1989).
4. To promote a peaceful environment by using restorative practices such as use of third-party mediation method or peer mediation program.

## **CONCLUSION**

Wong and Lo (2001) found that school principals and teachers have not fully understood what restorative practices were, despite the fact that there had been numerous discussions in this area throughout the world (Limper, 2000; Roland, 2000; Salmivalli, 1999). Survey results further found that programs commonly used in overseas in dealing with the problems of school violence and bullying were rarely adopted in Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2002). Only a few mentioned the use of peer mediation tactics or formal curricula, such as anti-bullying curricula, anger management curricula, or safe school and peace education curricula for preventing and stopping physical bullying. An effective strategy can educate bystanders, deter bullies and at the same time empower victims.

Other than suppressive tactics, adopting a restorative approach such as assisting teachers or senior students to develop adequate skills in conducting restorative conferences seems to be a useful strategy. The theoretical underpinning of a restorative approach is a shared culture, forgiveness and effective communication (Braithwaite, 1989; Morrison, 2002). The advantages of using restorative practices are as follows:

- Appoint social worker, counselor or teacher as mediator or facilitator to assist

students to resolve conflicts – hold students accountable without negatively labeling them.

- Students can restore relationships as well as develop empathy and problem solving skills.
- Students who witness bullying can be brought in to help both parties to understand how bad the conflict was.
- Victims can express their feelings during the restorative conferences.
- It also provides a chance for bullies to apologize and, if necessary, provide reparation or compensation.
- In the restorative process, bullies will understand how it feels to be a victim, and to realize what they did was wrong.
- When students have rebuilt a harmonious atmosphere to study, that is restorative.

Overall, all parties concerned should work hand in hand to define policies and procedures for dealing with cases of bullying. Restorative practices can teach both parties to develop positive experiences including positive role models; improving self-efficacy; a sense of harmony; belief in oneself; strong social skills; good peer relationships; bonding with teachers; empathy and stable emotion; and sense of control of one's life.

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