

# Bystanders in Schools: What Do They Do and What Do They Think? Factors Influencing the Behaviour of English Students as Bystanders

COLLEEN McLAUGHLIN, RAY ARNOLD and EVE BOYD, *Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK*

This article reports on the English data from an international research project. Students' reports of being bullied are detailed but the main emphasis is on the role of the bystander, that is, what students did when they witnessed bullying in school and the reasons they gave for their actions. The study found that there were differences between students, in particular between primary and secondary phase students, and schools, in these areas. The responses are explored and the characteristics of those who intervened or did not. The implications for research and practice are debated.

**Keywords:** bystander behaviour; bullying; peer approaches.

## The English Study

This research study explored the behaviour of student bystanders of incidents of bullying at schools, as reported by 416 upper primary and lower secondary school students in rural and urban settings in England. It is part of an international study which aims to identify a range of factors that influence student bystanders, as detailed further in this edition.

For many years bullying has been studied mainly from a personality perspective, for example, Olweus (1999). This study aims to explore bystanding behaviour and bullying from a social perspective. This article will address two main questions: What do students say they would do if they witnessed bullying at school? and, what are the reasons they give for their intended actions?

## Why Study Bystanding?

Bystanding has been studied by many from many different perspectives – the moral, the political and the

psychological (cf. Clarkson, 1997). There is debate around the key issues of power, responsibility, social influence and determinants of bystander behaviour. However, it has not been systematically studied in school contexts. While there have been numerous investigations over the last 15 years in many countries into the problem of bullying in schools (see Smith *et al.*, 1999), relatively few have examined the behaviour of student bystanders when they observe bullying taking place in public settings such as school playgrounds. Yet from recent studies in Canada (O'Connell, Pepler and Craig, 1999), in Finland (Salmivalli *et al.*, 1999) and in the UK (Cowie, 2002), it is evident that how bystanders react is often crucial to the discontinuation or otherwise of bullying behaviour, which is known to have serious consequences for the mental and physical health of some students (Rigby, 1999). Thus far, few have investigated relevant social and psychological factors and how these affect bystander behaviour among school children. This study aimed to identify such factors, in order to advance research and assist in the development of more effective ways of reducing bullying in schools.

## Research Methods

The study used an audio-visual resource developed and trialled at the University of South Australia by Rigby and Johnson in 2002. This resource makes use of a series of 26 slides, with audio, projected by computer in a standardized manner suitable for presentation to schoolchildren. Students in classrooms view the presentation and give their responses to questions on a questionnaire (see full description by Ken Rigby in this edition).

The English sample consisted of children drawn from eight schools – four primary schools (two urban and two rural): four secondary schools (two urban and two rural) in the rural and urban settings. There was an even sample of boys, girls and year groups, that is, year 5, 6, 7 and 8.

## The Problem of Bullying and Bystander Behaviour

Bullying can be defined as negative actions, which may be physical or verbal, have hostile intent, are repeated over time and involve a power differential (O'Connell

*et al.*, 1999). It may involve one or more perpetrators and recipients (Farrington, 1993). The recent emphasis in research on bystanding behaviour and peer pressure processes arises from the evidence that these influence the rates of bullying and because 'it makes sense to look at bullying and related peer processes as possible precursors of later antisocial and problematic behaviour patterns' (O'Connell *et al.*, 1999, p. 438).

### *Bullying Behaviour Reported by Students*

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they had personally experienced six kinds of bullying over the last year. Direct verbal bullying, as in name-calling and hurtful teasing, were the most commonly experienced. This study supports other research in the UK (Cowie, 2002), which shows that name-calling and hurtful teasing were the most frequently reported forms of bullying in schools. Rigby (1998) reported that for children in Australia between 8 and 12 years rates of name-calling 'often' were 14.4 per cent for boys and 11.2 per cent for girls. This is similar to results in Table 1. Less direct forms of bullying, as in being deliberately excluded and having lies told about one, were somewhat less frequently reported. Direct physical bullying, as in being hit or kicked, was the least commonly reported, but even here slightly more than half had been treated in this way during the current year, and almost one in three had been threatened with harm. Clearly most students had experienced at least one form of bullying during the past year. Further details are given in Table 1.

### *Estimating Frequencies of Bullying in the Presence of Bystanders*

To estimate the extent to which bullying in the presence of bystanders occurred at each school, respondents provided estimates in relation to physical, verbal and sexual forms of bullying or coercion. These data presented in Table 2 show the same patterns as those in Table 1 – students' reported rates of being bullied. Verbal bullying is still the most common. Students are also bystanders to physical and sexual bullying. The reported incidence of physical bullying in the presence of bystanders is high, that is, 33 per cent of students see physical bullying on an everyday or weekly basis. Sexual bullying is reported as the least common form of bullying seen in schools. 54.8 per cent of students reported that they hardly ever saw harassment and only 4.1 per cent students reported it as an everyday occurrence. Students perceived that boys were more likely to harass than girls. No real differences were found between primary and secondary students or year groups in terms of sexual harassment.

### *Differences Between Schools*

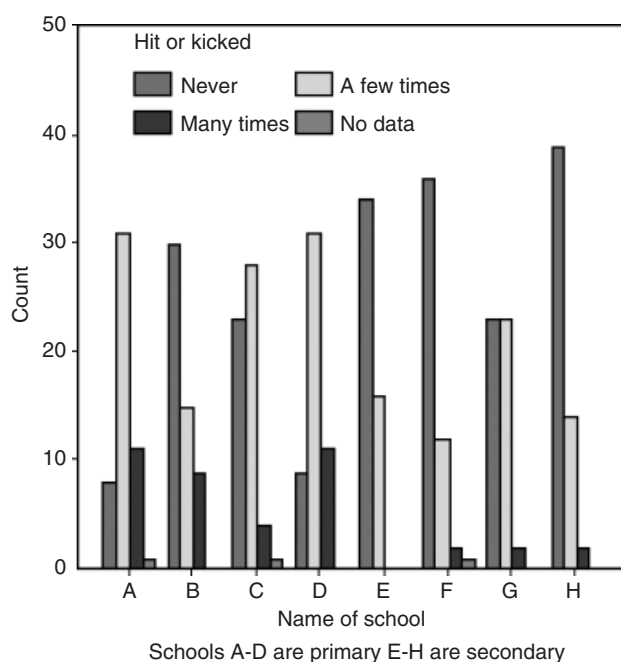
There were big school differences in the incidence of bullying experienced and observed by students. Figure 1

*Table 1. Reported Types of Bullying Experienced over the Last Year*

<i>n</i> = 416	Never (%)	A few times (%)	Many times (%)
Name-calling	22.1	59.9	17
Hurtful teasing	27.	60.8	11.1
Lies about you	32	51	16.1
Hit or kicked	48.6	40.9	9.9
Deliberately excluded	52.2	40.6	6.3
Threatened with harm	63.9	27.2	7.7

*Table 2. Estimated Frequencies of Bullying in the Presence of Bystanders*

<i>n</i> = 416	% reporting verbal	% reporting physical	% reporting sexual
Every day	5.3	3.4	4.1
Most days	15.4	8.2	8.7
Once/twice a week	39.7	21.6	16.6
Less than one week	15.6	21.4	15.9
Hardly ever	24.0	45.2	54.8



*Figure 1. School differences in reported incidence of being hit or kicked.*

is an example of the range seen in the reported incidence of being hit or kicked in school. The range is from 11 per cent of primary students in one school reporting that they are being hit or kicked many times to 3 per cent of secondary school students in one school. The differences were also between schools in the same phase, that is, primary and secondary.

So in this study the reported rates of bullying are similar to other recent studies. The two factors that are

of particular interest are firstly, that rates of bullying reported by students are highest in primary schools. This does not fit with some of the other studies in other countries, for example, Australia. Name-calling is the form of bullying most predominant. Secondly, the rates vary considerably between schools and suggest that there is much scope for action here.

### Attitudes to Bullying, to Victim and to Bully

The ability to empathize with those being bullied is reflective of attitudes to bullying and has a part to play in action. Smith and Shu Shu (2000) suggest that in the UK only 14 per cent of children view the victim with pity or empathy. The data in this study are less conclusive: there are differences in attitudes to different elements. Students showed empathy in that 85 per cent felt it was not funny to see someone teased and 84 per cent felt that children should complain about being bullied and that bullies should be told off. They also felt that it was good when one of their peers stood up to a bully (79% agreement). However in relation to these issues the number of those who were unsure was quite high (between 7% and 13%).

Students were in less agreement about the issues of power. For example, only 75 per cent agreed that you should not pick on someone weaker than you, 11 per cent disagreed and 11 per cent were not sure. Whether victims deserved it was also not so clear to the students. Sixty-seven per cent disagreed with the statement that 'picked-on kids deserved it,' but 25.7 per cent were not sure. However, our sample does not fit with Smith and Shu Shu's (2000) findings. They found that 39 per cent of students felt that he/she deserved it; our sample found that only 5.3 per cent felt that. There was support for the idea that 'no one likes a wimp' (only 60% disagreed) and the weakest responses were to the idea that a bully is really a coward (73% of students agreed with this). It seems that students support the disapproval of bullying and the actions taken to stop it and they are less sure about issues related to power.

### Bystanding

Previous studies (Rigby and Slee, 1992; O'Connell *et al.*, 1997) show that children know that adults expect them to support each other; that they state they want to support the victims; and they are aware of bullying. However, they do not follow through their stated

intentions. O'Connell *et al.* (1999) found that *during bullying episodes 75 per cent of peers' time is spent in ways that may provide positive reinforcement to the bully and do not help the victim* (p. 450).

*Participant Roles.* The participant roles approach looks at bullying as a group phenomenon rather than viewing it as an individual matter. A participant role refers to *students' ways of being involved in bullying situations* (Salmivalli, 1999, p. 453). The position that children adopt to witnessing bullying episodes affects the outcomes of the harassment. Salmivalli's (1999) research suggests that the roles are those of 'Victims', that is, those who are repeatedly and systematically harassed; 'Bullies' – those who are active and initiative-taking perpetrators; 'Assistants' – those who actively help the bully by joining in; 'Reinforcers' – those who offer positive feedback to the bully by providing an audience or by making encouraging gestures; 'Outsiders' – those who stay away, do not take sides but silently approve; and 'Defenders' – those who comfort the victims, take sides with him/her and try to make the others stop. Staying silent is seen as a problematic response or as a reinforcing behaviour since it allows the behaviour to continue. This is an oversimplification for there are clearly many reasons why students do or do not intervene and later the thinking behind their actions is reported and explored. However, what students do and why is an important area for enquiry.

### Reported Bystander Behaviour in this Study

This study only reports what students say they would do and we know that this does not necessarily marry with actual behaviour. Nevertheless it is important. When students were asked to say how they would respond to three different bullying situations, the overall findings were remarkably similar.

Name-calling is the behaviour most likely to be ignored and this may be because it is more common and the victims of physical bullying and harassment receive somewhat more support. The favoured intervention amongst the total sample is to go and get a teacher. Girls were slightly more likely to go and get a teacher (54.1%) than boys (45.9%). In terms of how boys and girls responded to different sorts of bullying, there were large differences. Boys would be much more likely to support the bully when it was physical (66.7% compared with 33.3% of girls) and if a boy were harassing a girl, 80 per cent of boys would support the bully and only 20 per cent of girls (Table 4).

Table 3. Overall Reported Bystander Behaviours

<i>n</i> = 416	% reporting name-calling	% reporting pushing	% reporting harassment
Ignore it	20.7	18	16.6
Support the bullied	30.8	33.9	35.1
Support the bully	.5	1.4	2.4
Get a teacher	47.1	45	45.2

Table 4. Primary and Secondary Children's Bystander Responses

Primary <i>n</i> = 213; Secondary <i>n</i> = 203	% reporting name-calling		% reporting pushing down		% reporting harassment	
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
Ignore it	5.2	36.9	5.2	31.5	7	26.6
Support victim	22.2	39.9	22.1	43.3	20.7	50.2
Support bully	0.9	0	0.9	0.5	3.3	1.5
Get a teacher	70.9	22.2	70.9	21.7	68.5	20.7

There were also substantial differences in the intended responses of primary and secondary children. Primary students were more likely to go and get a teacher. Secondary students were more likely to intervene in supporting the bully and especially in cases of sexual harassment. Secondary aged students were also more likely to ignore behaviour and this is seen by some as a passive response, which allows the bullying to take place (see Table 4).

When we explore the reasons that they give for actions, their thinking becomes clearer.

### Students' Thinking Regarding their Bystanding Behaviour

#### Why Get a Teacher?

Both primary and secondary aged students gave similar reasons for going to get a teacher, although there were some differences in the primary aged students' responses. The following categories were seen in their thinking.

1. *Teachers as effective and proper agents with authority* (Secondary – 46 responses: Primary – 304 responses): The thinking given was that the teacher had the power and authority to deal with the bullying more effectively than a student, including sorting out the problem that caused the incident. This category included the idea that teachers knew best and that they needed to know if something serious was occurring. There was a range from straightforward statements that teachers will sort it out or stop it, to a feeling that the teacher would be a more effective agent and the problem would be solved, for example,

*I would get a teacher to stop it.  
Because we tell the teacher and they tell them because it is much better.  
If I got the teacher she would sort it out.*

Clearly some responses reflected that a particular scheme had been set up in the school concerned involving red cards etc. and an additional 15 responses were in the category of 'this is what we are supposed to do'.

#### 2. Morality and justice

(Secondary – 34 responses: Primary – 102 responses): These respondents said bullying was wrong, they did not agree with it and so they would get a teacher. This also contained the notion that there should be

consequences for bullying. The students felt bullies should be stopped and this was the way of doing it.

*It's wrong to bully, it isn't fair and you shouldn't ignore it.  
Bullies should be punished or shouldn't get away with it.*

#### 3. Fear-based or safety conscious responses

(Secondary – 11 responses: Primary – 114 responses): Here students were expressing a fear for their own or others' safety. They felt that only adults could deal with such contexts. *I would be afraid to act myself* was a typical response and this was closely linked, for some, to feelings of powerlessness, which are a later category. It was encapsulated in comments such as *I would be no good at it*. Some students said they did not want to take sides in the dispute. Typical comments in this area were:

*I won't get hurt if I get a teacher.  
It will stop the person from being hurt.  
It might get worse if I don't get a teacher.*

#### 4. Empathy-based responses

(Secondary – 27 responses: Primary – 25 responses): These responses were based on concerns that the other person was getting hurt, that the students would not like it to happen to them or had experienced bullying so understood the feelings of the bullied, for example, *I wouldn't like it if it happened to me*. There was a desire to support the other person.

#### 5. Powerlessness and lack of sense of agency

(Secondary – 11: Primary – 9 responses): Here students were not just discussing the fears for their own or others' safety but were expressing a sense of inability to act, for example, *I couldn't sort it out on my own*.

#### 6. Non-participation

(Secondary – 7 responses: Primary – 24 responses): These students did not want to get involved and were keen to stay out of such matters seeing it as not their business and the numbers in this category were small.

*I don't want to get involved.*

#### Why Ignore the Behaviour?

Here the two main motivations were self-protection and non-involvement. For secondary students the

desire not to get involved was the main reason given for ignoring the behaviour (64 responses). It was seen as different from getting hurt, just not part of the pattern of social relations, and mirrors some concerns about adult behaviour in society. This was also the biggest category for primary students (14 responses) although relatively few primary students were in this category. Not knowing how to act was also mentioned here.

The second largest category was that which could be entitled 'self-protection.' (Secondary – 59 responses: Primary – 9 responses). Many students said they were fearful of getting hurt or getting into trouble and so chose to ignore the bullying. Intervening was also perceived as possibly making matters worse.

#### *Why Support those Being Bullied?*

The main reasons given were based on notions of moral and social support. Bullying was perceived as wrong and unfair and therefore one should stand and support those being bullied (Secondary – 173 responses: Primary – 60 responses). This included statements like *it is good to stick up for people*. For the majority of the respondents, it was a matter of justice – bullying was wrong, unfair, not the fault of the victim and not something that these students liked to see. Students demonstrated an awareness of the social dynamics of bullying in that support for individuals was seen as necessary if bullying was to be stopped. This was particularly the case for secondary students. Some students stated that supporting the bullied would stop support for the bully and it was acknowledged that bullies had more support usually in terms of numbers.

The second largest category (Secondary – 64: Primary – 31) was responses based on empathizing with those being bullied. It included feelings that bullies need help, that it hurts to be bullied, that students feel sorry for them, that they have experienced bullying and so identified with those being bullied, for example, *I wouldn't like it to happen to me* exemplified this group of responses.

Thirty-one secondary aged students saw gender based support as important. The harassment scenario with which students were presented elicited a strong theme of gender-based support. Many girls and some boys argued that they would support a student based on the fact that they were the same gender. Sexual harassment was strongly disapproved of by this cohort.

Some students (Secondary – 7 responses) acted out of a sense of loyalty to the bullied person whom they identified as a friend or they were motivated by a sense of loyalty to their peer group. Some students argued that they acted out of friendship alone. If the victim was known then some students argued that they would

Table 5. Expectations of Others in Terms of Responses to Bullying

n = 416	Mother (%)	Father (%)	Teachers (%)	Friends (%)
Strongly support victim	37.5	33.2	51.7	19
Support the victim	41.6	45.4	26.2	39.9
Do nothing	19.5	18.0	20.9	33.2
Support the bully	0.7	1.0	0.2	6.3
Strongly support bully	0.2	1.0	0.5	0.2

have intervened. A few students said that they needed to know the circumstances before they would act.

Some just said they would because they would and could not elaborate further.

#### *Why Support the Bully?*

This was an interesting category where there was no overall trend. The reasons given were: I want to; supporting friends; being unclear about the reasons behind the behaviour; and avoiding trouble. Many boys identified with the gender based bullying and wanted to support their own sex.

#### **The Influence of Others**

One aim was also to explore if there were connections between the expectations of significant others and students' behaviour. When students were asked to report how they felt their mother, father, brother and friends would respond to bullying behaviours some interesting differences emerged. The children were sure that their mother, father and teachers would strongly support or support the victims. Table 5 above gives the figures for the respective categories.

There was little perceived difference between mother and father, and teachers were seen as the group who would most strongly support the victim. Adults were seen as unequivocally supporting the victims of bullying and not the bully. However, friends were seen as much more in support of doing nothing and although 59 per cent felt that friends would support the victim, the 'do nothing' category is much bigger. There is still little support for bullies even in the 'friends' category.

The 'do nothing' category is interesting in that between-school differences were seen here too. Children in one of the schools, which had the highest rates of reported bullying, see teachers as expecting children to do nothing. This stands out and a similar pattern was seen in one of the other schools.

What is hard to know is if 'do nothing' is seen as support for the victim or if it is seen as a message of do not get involved, which may be seen as a safety

message. However, we know that doing nothing is a bystander behaviour seen as supporting bullying. The trend in terms of the year groups was that as the children got older, the categories of 'do nothing' and 'support for the bully' grew slightly. There was no evident difference between the genders, although girls tended to feel more than boys that others would expect them to support the bullied.

#### *Characteristics of those who Intervened*

The numbers of students in this study who reported that they would intervene are similar to others' studies (Rigby, 1996; Salmivalli, 1999). The students most likely to object to bullying and to act have the following characteristics. Firstly, they are likely to be pro-victim and have fellow feeling for those who are bullied. Secondly, they perceive that their friends would expect them to act and so the normative pressures that are important are those of the peer group. Although adults are perceived as highly disapproving of bullying, it is the expectation of the friendship group that seem to have some impact on action. Thirdly, if the student has intervened in the past then they are more likely to do so again. The experience of intervening is very important. Lastly, primary aged students are more likely to intervene and their preferred intervention is to get a teacher. Secondary students in this study were more likely to act as direct agents and intervene to support the person being bullied.

#### **Concluding Comments**

This study raises some interesting issues for practitioners to debate. Firstly, it is still of concern that the incidence of bullying remains so consistent and recent initiatives such as the formation of the Anti Bullying Alliance ([www.ncb.org.uk/aba](http://www.ncb.org.uk/aba)) remain important. Secondly, it is also interesting to see how clearly young people see that adults disapprove of bullying and will support them. The favoured intervention in primary schools of going to get a teacher has two interesting elements. It is a statement of faith in teachers; however, it also suggests that we may unintentionally be supporting passivity in young people rather than helping them to become active agents in their own social worlds. The fear of risk may be a theme here and

the initiatives designed to foster the agency of peers continue to be important here and the accompanying articles by Helen Cowie and Netta Cartwright in this volume debate this more fully.

Thirdly, the theme that schools make a difference as well as peers is reinforced yet again. There were significant differences between the rates of bullying and the perceptions of safety, support and intervention from the students. The social context is open to intervention by teachers and should continue to be a focus for such work.

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#### *Correspondence*

Colleen McLaughlin  
Faculty of Education  
University of Cambridge  
184 Hills Road  
Cambridge CB2 2PQ UK  
E-mail: [cm10009@cam.ac.uk](mailto:cm10009@cam.ac.uk)