Siobhan (00:07):

Hello and welcome to In the cactus. I'm Siobhan Jones and I'll be your host as we power through difficulties together with hope. If you're in the cactus, a troubling situation like bullying, or want to help someone who is, this is the show for you.

New Speaker (00:34):

With so much research going on internationally and domestically, I wanted to know what Australia was doing about bullying at the national level. So in today's episode of In the cactus, we're joined by Dr. Natalie Swayn, Chair of the Safe and Supportive School Communities (SSSC) Working Group. The SSSC includes representatives from the Commonwealth and all States and territories, as well as national Catholic and independent schooling representatives. The SSSC is coordinated by the Queensland government on behalf of the Australian Government, Catholic and independent school communities. So let's get started.

New Speaker (01:15):

Natalie. Thanks for joining us on In the cactus.

SSSC Chair (01:20):

Thank you for the invitation.

Siobhan (01:23):

Can I ask you why bullying is such a pervasive aspect of social culture and what can we do about that culture today?

SSSC Chair (01:32):

I think it's pervasive in that it would be difficult to come across any kind of community or location or economic strata that didn't experience bullying. And that goes across all ages. There's a heightened focus of it, obviously on young people, because they're a much more vulnerable cohort of our population. But it's because bullying is situated within the very nature of interactions between people and it's about perspective and context. So it's difficult to escape. It's also really difficult to pin down what it means to different people. So it's not, there's no simple answer to that. And when you describe it in those terms, it can sound like an insurmountable problem, but it does start just with really simple pieces of your actions and conversations and behaviour. I think one of the pieces that we're learning as we go along is that criminalising or a punitive approach to bullying is not a way to change interactions into the form that we want them to be in. And that the more educative process that we can take both with those who engage in the bullying behaviours, those who observe it, and those who are subject to it, is what builds the capacity and capability to change cultural patterns. I think it's also important to remember that where children are reflecting or rehearsing behaviours that they see and observe around them with adults and as part of the community. And what they're seeing on television or hearing on the internet. So it isn't just something that's invented by children. They are reproducing social order patterns.

Siobhan (03:09):

And can you tell us a little bit about the work of the working group?

SSSC Chair (03:12):

The working group is a national project. That's been going since about 1999. So in Queensland, we have the secretariat that sits with us. We work with all states and territories. We have a representative from each state and territories' education department, as well as Catholic and independent school sectors, to come together and work on what it is that we're seeing as current issues. We dedicate time towards existing research analysis, predicting what it is that we think we're going to need as a research direction in the future. What resources at schools are requesting, what the themes are in terms of what students are reporting as bullying issues, or what staff that are working in supporting those students might be seeing. So for example, the changing patterns, since even if you looked at 1999 to 2009, that's a massive growth in the introduction of social media and technology. The format of bullying changed quite a lot during that period. We're trying to put time towards that so that we can continue to help our colleagues in schools and school communities to have the resources and information they need to intervene.

Siobhan (04:28):

What does the research say is effective in preventing bullying?

SSSC Chair (04:33):

It depends on the type of bullying, but I think preparation and prevention is number one. Busting the myths that it's just a natural part of growing up, or it's just something you should expect because you're part of a community. The research, particularly with younger children, talks about explicit teaching. So explicit prosocial skill teaching around how to work positively with groups, how to negotiate and get your needs met in a way that's appropriate, teaching prosocial skills explicitly as part of the curriculum and at home and in the community. Those are all things that help to prevent the need to rely on bullying type behaviours, to get your needs met, or to get the attention you want. It also requires attentive adults to intervene and reshape behaviour. So you are what it is that you walk past. The standard you walk past is the standard you accept.

SSSC Chair (05:27):

So when students or young people see adults ignoring that behaviour or not paying attention to bullying behaviours, they start to understand subtly what's acceptable and what's not acceptable. That's why you see a lot more attention sometimes towards the physical forms of bullying than verbal or social exclusion. And those types of behaviours are harder to see than somebody hitting another child. It is about education, more modelling, and that the response, that you will see a change in the certainty. So students change when they know there's certainly going to be a response rather than the severity of the response. You give them when you observe or become part of a culture in a school where you know, that there's bullying going on. We also make a big effort in the research and now into our practice to separate the behaviour from the person. We try to avoid language like 'bully,' 'victim', 'perpetrator,' and talk about the behaviours, what it is. It's unacceptable rather than the child being unacceptable. We're not rejecting the child, we're rejecting the behaviour and that we support all that are involved. The children that might be directly involved in the bullying behaviour and those who are observing that behaviour as well. And to an extent that sometimes involves working with and educating the parents that are around them, because it's not just the child who is subject to the bullying that needs help. It's a child who's demonstrating that behaviour.

Siobhan (06:52):

What is Australia working on to prevent bullying at that national level? And why is that coordination role that your working group is playing? Why is that so important do you think?

Siobhan ([07:03](#)):

I think it's important because staff in schools are really busy during the normal day to day teaching work. And we need a dedicated team that's going to be looking at that work on a day to day basis and constantly feeding in new insights, outcomes from research and responding to issues that our colleagues in schools are raising as well. So the SSSC has put together the Bullying no way website as one of our biggest pools of resources. So we know that at any point in time, mums that are really worried can log on at two in the morning and get the latest research and ideas and links to go and get help. Colleagues that are having problems and seeing growing patterns of bullying in their schools can log on and get that information and have a look at not just emergency responses to incidents, but the research. And then things like the STEPS decision making framework, which is] a piece of work that's been developed by the SSSC that helps schools collect and consider all the relevant information around making evidence-based decisions to selecting interventions for their schools.

SSSC Chair ([08:07](#)):

So that looks at what the definition of bullying is. What we know is effective in terms of our evidence informed approach, how to deliver it, the fit between your school and that program, or that approach, and how to measure the change for implementation. Having all of that together and that resources like we've got Allen the alien for early intervention. We've moved into doing more apps for students, just try and build and get used that social media platform to get them engaged. Because it's difficult when you talk to, even if you talk to a three or four year old, they don't really understand the language of 'bullying'. That's quite an adult term. Young people refer to it as drama, 'there's drama going on at school', 'there's drama going on' with that social group. They learn that from adults. So, trying to get a group such as SSSC and the Bullying no way team to look at what it is that students are telling us and listening to them as well as adults. And then producing materials that help our colleagues in schools on a day to day basis, is really critical I think.

Siobhan ([09:09](#)):

What's the biggest challenge that the working group is facing and why?

SSSC Chair ([09:13](#)):

One would be - particularly in this area when you've got very desperate people who are talking about the most precious object in their lives - is their relationship with their child and wanting their child to be happy and safe. It's really easy to get distracted by bright, shiny programs that are super expensive. Or that we need the newest and latest thing that isn't necessarily evidence-based or the best. But you want the best for your child. So that drive may push people towards programs that aren't going to help necessarily, but it sounds good. And has all the marketing and the glossy brochures. Probably the most important thing we hear from children is they want someone to hear them. They want someone to listen to them and to work through a solution that works for them.

SSSC Chair ([10:01](#)):

So when we've talked to young people around bullying, what you'll hear, particularly as they get into that sort of 12, 13, 14 year old age group, they won't tell an adult. That old age where we'd say, go and tell an adult on the playground or go and tell your parents. That's not where children will go. And when we've asked them why they do that, they'll say, 'If I go and tell a teacher or I go and tell my parent, sometimes it gets worse because the first thing my dad does is go up to the school and start talking to other adults there about, what are you doing to protect my child? And things seem to get worse.' So trying to find solutions that we know fit with the evidence, but also meet what it is the young people want us to do.

SSSC Chair (10:40):

We know that they just want to feel safe, finding a way to do that, that doesn't make their life more difficult or complex. Once they do tell us what's going on or become aware of it, it's quite a tricky, wicked problem to try and address. Not applying adult solutions to the unique circumstances of young people is quite tricky. And I think it's also important to remember that schools are unlike any environment you're ever going to be in past school. You're grouping very diverse groups of people together for long periods of time. They would never necessarily choose to spend that volume of time together. It's quite a different, or fake environment to what the rest of your life is going to be like. So, trying to get them through that piece, but also give them the skills for longer term life negotiation is going to be quite a challenge for many generations to come.

New Speaker (11:33):

I think because bullying doesn't just stop at the end of school. There's workplace bullying, there's bullying in the community. So how can we also build that capability to give them the resilience and skills to navigate those situations moving forward? Probably the other one I would think of is busting myths is a big challenge for us. It's often that people will have in their heads that the idea that a bully is a character like Nelson Muntz from The Simpsons, that it's kind of a low income, poor academic achieving thuggish type of child. And yes, there are children that fit that kind of characteristic, but there are a lot of children who are highly socially skilled and highly capable who are also demonstrating those behaviours. So not just necessarily going towards a stereotyped end of what you think a bully is. So shattering some of those myths and that's with events like our National day of action against bullying and violence, help us raise the profile and get the conversation going. And opening up the doors to talk about the experience of bullying and that it is something that many people experience and have different solutions for.

Siobhan (12:44):

Can we talk a little bit about the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework? Why do we have an Australian Student Wellbeing Framework and how is it being used?

SSSC Chair (12:55):

So the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework has replaced what many people in schools will have known as the national safe schools framework. So this is the next sort of iteration of that, and it helps the Australian schools understand or embed learning communities that promote wellbeing, safety, and positive relationships. So it's based on evidence, but translated into practical terms about what a teacher can do in a school or what a whole school can do. So you might find a whole school that wants to invest in building our positive social culture and community, or it might be that the teacher wants to tackle that in their particular classroom that can be scaled up or scale down to meet the particular circumstances of that individual or community. It provides lots of really great links and, and teaching and learning resources that are current and get schools to focus on particular principles like leadership and inclusion of the very big growing theme in lots of our research now is the importance of student voice partnerships and other materials that may seem like they're not related to bullying, but very much are around how to resolve conflict, how to have respectful, differences of opinion.

SSSC Chair (14:12):

Those important skills are all embedded as part of that framework. So it enables schools to have some consistency in some certainty that what they're looking at is high quality evidence based information that will inform their decisions at the school. And it also falls under some of the work that the Education Council, which is the group that auspices our work, that's supporting generally children's and students, wellbeing,

resilience, and building and strengthening community partnerships, including parents in each of our schools. So it provides that overarching organisational framework for schools across Australia.

Siobhan ([14:48](#)):

How do we measure the effectiveness of what are doing right now and what, what should we be measuring?

SSSC Chair ([14:57](#)):

The research generally will indicate that adults underestimate how common bullying experiences are for young people. And there's a whole range of reasons and sort of supplied answers for why that might be occurring. Some of it's because we measure it on what children report, rather than what we might observe or what people call bullying. And 'bullying' is a term that I do struggle with. Because I think that it's difficult. If you say that you're being bullied, for example, what does that look like? Because it looks different depending on ... is it something you're getting online? Is it a rumour that's being repeated about you? Is it a physical interaction that's occurring? I think it's important, once you've got the label there, to then unpack it into, what does that look like? Or what does it feel like? Or what does it sound like to you? Once you've pinned it down, then it's easier to do the intervention rather than having this nebulous term of behaviour, which when you get into the area of outcome measures, you need to know what you're measuring.

SSSC Chair ([15:58](#)):

Otherwise you're just getting sort of, vague data that doesn't help you make that decision. I think if you're looking at measuring effectiveness, there's a whole range of different tools that you can use. And there's, again, some great resources on the Bullying no way website for school communities. If that's something they want to have a look at for their particular area. We Have audit tools and school surveys. In Queensland, for example, they have the school opinion survey, New South Wales has the 'tell them from us' survey, there's that opinion based end of it. But I think there's also more importantly a need to look at things like friendship. Classroom, friendship maps are a great example. So having a regular tool that you can use as a classroom teacher where you get students to write down who are the three people I've spent the most time with in the last week, and then measuring that four weeks on.

SSSC Chair ([16:51](#)):

When you have a look at that, you'll often see the same names appearing on different children's sheets, and then they'll just be complete silences about particular kids in your class. So those are children you know don't have the interactions or aren't having the relationships with other students and who are most at risk possibly of being bullied. So, having a look at the changing names or the continued absence of some children's names down to that level is just as important as doing broad scale surveys or observational tools. It doesn't have to cost money. They're just simple paper and pen kind of maps that you can get children to draw about who are the three friends that are in their friendship circle. That's as useful as doing large scale surveys. I think having goal setting for your school as well. So you can do interviews with students about the safest places they see in the school and the places they feel less safe. And then start looking at the environmental layout of your school to see where that changes over time. If you respond to the information that students are giving you about, where they don't feel safe and why that might be. So there's no simple answer to the measuring effectiveness. I'd still push people towards working directly with students and using their information about where they feel safe and who it is they're spending time with so that you can see who's not being included in interactions. And you know that they're the children that are most at risk.

Siobhan (18:14):

What are the key resources you recommend for people to go and check out?

SSSC Chair (18:18):

There are a lot of great resources to have a look at on the Bullying no way website. And we link off to a lot of community based resources, university-based resources. But I also think it's important to not think that there's a package out there somewhere for people. It does come back to basic communication skills and the Australian curriculum has got some really well-designed general capability lines throughout it. Around human relationships and respectful relationships that the resources are already there embedded in our Australian curriculum. And can be drawn out, emphasised if you're experiencing a particular problem. If you want to go further than that. Again, the next approach that I usually recommend is having a look at positive behaviour for learning. Some places call it positive behaviour support. But in Queensland, in many of the States in Australia, we call it positive behaviour for learning, which is a whole school approach to positive, explicit teaching of prosocial behaviours and having a tiered approach to... We know that the majority of children are capable of and are able to follow rules and follow the social expectations.

SSSC Chair (19:28):

They'll always be around 10, 15% of your student population or of any population that need additional support to meet those expectations. And then there will always be a 1-5% of the population that need intensive support. So those the children that we know that we need to give much more targeted, one-to-one explicit teaching and reinforcement follow-up check in so that we know from day one, we can do that intervention. I think it's also a model that research will show applies to adults as well. That they'll the majority of parents are very supportive and will work positively with schools. There'll be others that need a bit more support and then others that need more intensive support as well. So the ability to differentiate your levels of support and responsiveness need to match what it is you're doing with students as well, that you give that respect to everybody. So positive behaviour for learning. The other really great evidence based approach we'd recommend for schools and parents.

Siobhan (20:25):

What is your message of hope?

SSSC Chair (20:27):

My message of hope is that it matters to that one. You might think as a child or as an adult, that your voice or your interaction is just one swimming comment in the middle of millions at that person light here, but it might be that one thing that holds that together. So it is worth it stepping up, making a comment, if you're not confident enough to do it in front of the peer group saying something to that child a later point in time, taking them aside and having that conversation. When you talk about students that are disengaged or at risk students, research will show one of the most effective interventions for those children is one adult who shows an interest and smiles warmly. And says hello to them when they see them at school. So it doesn't have to be overly complicated. It is about relationships and human connection, and we can all make a difference in that way. Whether you're five years old or 50 years old, we can all make a contribution to having a much more positive social culture and recreating a place that everybody wants to be and feels welcome.

Siobhan (21:40):

Natalie, thank you for being on the show.

SSSC Chair (21:42):

Thank you very much, Siobhan.

Siobhan (21:44):

And that was Dr Natalie Swayn, Chair of the Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group. That's it for now. Go with hope [inaudible].