Research summary

Title: Participant roles in bullying: how can peer bystanders be utilized in interventions?

Author: Christina Salmivalli

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This paper is a synthesis of over 20 years of research on the role of the participant/bystander in bullying and how the bystander role can reinforce bullying behaviour or contribute to its reduction.

According to Salmivalli, those who exhibit bullying behaviour seek maximum social gains including visibility, power and peer group status. Peer bystanders (and sometimes others) are typically present when bullying takes place, often providing these social benefits. Therefore the reaction of the bystander is an integral part of a bullying situation. (Salmivalli does not define bullying or comment on the methodology or quality of the research she references).

The bystander can typically be categorised into the following roles:
- the reinforcer – who provides verbal or non-verbal cues to support the child bullying;
- the assistant – who may prevent the targeted child from escaping the situation;
- the silent approver – not directly involved in the bullying, but through inaction they are seen to approve; and
- the defender – supports the targeted child either at the time of the incident or afterwards.

The actions of bystanders are complex and the paper highlights both the social and individual perspectives that influence them. Bystanders may not intervene when bullying behaviour occurs because, if no one challenges bullying behaviour, students perceive each other as approving of it. Those who exhibit bullying behaviour are also often perceived as ‘cool’ and students may be worried to interfere and affect their own social status or become a target themselves. The bystander can often struggle with knowing bullying is wrong but striving to maintain safety and status within their peer group.

The research states that approximately 7% of the total variation in bullying behaviour is due to differences between classes, with positive outcomes resulting from a teacher clearly disapproving of bullying and positive and supportive student-teacher relationships. Importantly, research indicates that even vulnerable at-risk children are less likely to be bullied if the classroom context does not support such behaviour.

Implications of this research for schools include:
• Bystander peers are more likely to be influenced by intervention than those students who directly exhibit bullying behaviour.
• An area for school intervention is student perceptions about their peers’ views of bullying.
• Bystanders need to be taught safe strategies to intervene to help the targeted student.

Schools should work with bystanders to influence their behaviour as well as working with those who exhibit bullying behaviour and those who are targeted.