The problem of bullying at school is serious and widespread. Each year, towards the end of the school summer holidays, the ‘back to school’ features of the popular print and television media will usually include at least a brief focus on the issue, sometimes reporting the tragedies of young people who have taken their own lives, rather than having to face being bullied (see Marr and Fields’ 2001 book Bullcide).

It’s also a pervasive issue. Many of us who went to school in the 20th century, and experienced or witnessed bullying at school, will have read a fictional description of bullying that dated from the mid-19th century (i.e. that perpetrated by the character Flashman in Tom Brown’s Schooldays). And when the results of the systematic research into the issue of school bullying that began in the 1970s confirmed the impression that many of us had – that if you hadn’t been bullied yourself at school, then you must at least have known someone who had been – almost no one was surprised.

Internationally, according to a study of 35 countries conducted by the World Health Organization in 2004, over one third of young people reported having taken part in the bullying of others at least once in the previous couple of months, and over one third reported having been bullied at least once in the same period.

So what is being done, and can we make interventions more effective?

The Scandinavian approach

Large-scale research into bullying at school began with the pioneering efforts of Professor Dan Olweus, in his native Sweden and especially in Norway, where he has been a long-term resident. Olweus has influenced the ways in which school bullying has been defined (usually, as repeated aggression involving a power imbalance between the perpetrator(s) and the target(s)), researched (generally, through the large-scale implementation of self-report measures with school students) and tackled (see Peter K. Smith and colleagues’ 1999 summary of interventions).

Famously, three tragic school bullying-related suicides in Norway in 1982 prompted the government to support and fund the first nationwide anti-bullying programme, designed by Olweus, and informed by the data that he had collected. From the late 1980s, researchers elsewhere in Europe, and also in Australasia and North America, used Olweus’s methods (and often, translated versions of his data-collection instruments) in establishing the incidence rates of school bullying in their countries, and developing their own anti-bullying programmes, often with large-scale regional or national implementation ambitions. Peter K. Smith and colleagues, in Sheffield and then Goldsmiths University of London, were key to these efforts.

Central government support continued for anti-bullying efforts in Norway, and with the announcement of the Manifesto against Bullying in 2009, a package of central government-supported measures at a nationwide level, Norway cemented its position as the

Why aren’t we beating bullying?

Stephen James Minton feels that attending to prejudice could be the key to improving anti-bullying research and action.
world's leader in the field. Legal reform was a key part of students' self-reports of having been bullied, and having taken part in the bullying of others. KiVa currently has licensed partners in many countries around the world. In northern and southern England, and since its first nationwide roll-out in 2009, KiVa has been piloted, along with three Cheshire primary schools, with pre- and post-test evaluations (using the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire). As such, showing statistically significant reductions in all participating schools of students' self-reports of having been bullied, and having taken part in the bullying of others (see Hutchings & Clarkson, 2015).

Through its structured work with students in particular, KiVa seems to offer the possibility of a more thorough working through of students' knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. I feel that it would be interesting to see how students who belong to ‘minorities’ fare in KiVa schools, whilst such variables have not been included in such studies. I think it will be a challenge to date, the finding that there was a 27 per cent reduction in the proportion of students reporting having been bullied on the basis of their ethnicity or country of origin, the proportion may be even higher, as far as I can tell. What is clear, and to be expected, is that bullying as just one of the many challenges that students can face is likely to remain a problem, and that we must continue to work on finding solutions. In this sense, KiVa offers a promising example of how to approach bullying in schools.