



PETER K. SMITH

Why I study ...

bullying in schools

'BRITAIN is the bullying capital of Europe'. Newspaper headlines like this appeared in late 1989, shortly after I had started research on school bullying and reported findings on its extent. The headline was an exaggeration, but it helped bring in government funding. Now, a decade later, we know a great deal more about bullying; and since last November all schools in England and Wales are required by law to have some anti-bullying policy or framework. It is a gratifying example of research helping to bring about positive changes in society. How did I get involved in this?

I had been interested in children's social development since my PhD thesis. In this, I had intended to study children's aggression; Lorenz's book *On Aggression* (1966) had recently been published and attracted my interest. I watched children in day nurseries, developing methods in child ethology and observation. However, I soon found out that three- and four-year-olds play a lot more often than they fight (thankfully!), so for the next 10–15 years I mainly researched children's play behaviour, and environmental factors such as nursery design. Work on play fighting, or 'rough-and-tumble play', was the nearest I got to bullying.

Things started to change when in 1988 we went on a family holiday to Norway. We drove to Bergen to get a boat back to

England, and I thought I would call Dan Olweus, whom I had met some years before. I went round to his lab, and he told me of the success of the Norwegian anti-bullying campaign of 1983–85.

He was just finalising the results, which showed a reduction of around 50 per cent in reports of bullying at school. This seemed a very inspiring finding. I went back to Sheffield, where I was then working, fired up to see if we could get similar results in this country.

Somehow it seemed to be the right time. Bullying was 'in the air'. There had been a European conference on the topic in 1988, and three books came out in 1989 — the first since Dan Olweus's book *Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys* in 1978. We edged into one of the 1989 books, an edited collection, with an undergraduate project in secondary schools by Colin Yates which I supervised. We had piloted the Olweus questionnaire in England, and were just in time to get a chapter in. This turned out to be very fortuitous. We had found rates of bullying about double those that Olweus had found in Norway.

The press release about the book led with the question 'Is Britain the bullying capital of Europe?' I had no hand in this and remember feeling shocked when I saw it. The resulting dramatic 'bullying capital' headlines stirred the Department for Education (DFE) into action.

I had previously written to the DFE suggesting some anti-bullying intervention work would be useful to support. I got a polite letter back stating that the DFE supported schools anti-bullying efforts. But after this publicity the DFE contacted me suggesting that the time was ripe to put in an application for intervention work. I did so with a number of colleagues and duly got the funds to run the Sheffield Anti-Bullying Project.

This project worked with 23 schools on monitored anti-bullying interventions. Sonia Sharp as research associate did wonders tracking the schools, and generally we had

positive outcomes. We found that most schools did achieve reductions in self-reports of being bullied of around 15–20 per cent. Also, schools which did more anti-bullying work (developed policies, did classroom work, improved playgrounds and supervision, and worked with bullies and victims) got better results than schools which did little.

These findings formed the basis for the DFE pack *Don't Suffer in Silence*, which was offered free to all state schools in England and Wales — about 23,000 schools (over 90 per cent) took it up. In a subsequent evaluation Kirsten Madsen and I found that generally schools found it useful and helpful. I have just recently co-ordinated a revision of the pack, some six years later. A lot has happened in the last six years.

While I was still at Sheffield we followed up the primary schools in the Sheffield Project. We found that having a whole-school policy and keeping it active was a key aspect of keeping victimisation rates down (Eslea & Smith, 1998). In addition it was suggested that anti-bullying work was having more success in targeting bullying experienced by boys, than that experienced by girls — one of a number of challenges for future work.

Another challenge is the increased risk of victimisation faced by children with disabilities. The idea of placing such children in mainstream schools is praiseworthy in its aims of integration, but research shows that it places some children at great risk of being bullied. We have found this for children with learning difficulties, and are currently finding this for children with hearing disabilities.

In addition, our research revealed that adults who had had a stammer at school often had very painful memories of bullying, not only by pupils but also sometimes by teachers (Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999). Fortunately the effect of school policies and anti-bullying work appears to make things better for children with special needs, as well as for their classmates.

In 1995 I moved to Goldsmiths College.

WEBLINKS

Lists of publications and other information (including Peter Smith's collaborations) are available at the following websites.

Training and Mobility of Researchers European research project: www.gold.ac.uk/tmr

European conference on bullying: www.gold.ac.uk/euconf

BBC: www.bbc.co.uk/education/bully/

Childline: www.childline.org.uk

Peer support systems in schools: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/peer/forum.htm

From 'play fighting' to bullying

Work here with postgraduate students focused more on psychological aspects of bully-victim relationships, and seeking answers to why some children proved rather stable in bully or victim roles despite some success of school-based interventions.

Our team found that insecure parent-child attachment (measured by the Separation Anxiety Test) was a significant correlate of both bully and victim status (Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998). We also discovered that contrary to the view of bullies as socially inept and unskilled, ringleader bullies in fact had high theory of mind abilities (Sutton *et al.*, 1999).

This work has continued with research on bully and victim roles in four- to six-year-olds as they start school. It appears that at this age victim status is not very stable; bully status is more stable, but as yet bullies do not have good theory of mind abilities (Monks & Smith, 2000). So the period from age five to nine may see important developmental changes in both bully and victim roles.

These studies may contribute to a greater understanding of how anti-bullying work can be more specifically tailored to children of different ages, and with different personalities and social abilities

From the early 1990s I also found the research was developing a European dimension. It was certainly easier to get funding for school bullying than it was for rough-and-tumble play! Funds obtained through Accionas Integradas (links with Spain) and Treaty of Windsor (links with Portugal), and personal associations with colleagues in Italy and Germany, led to a Training and Mobility of Researchers

network on the 'nature and prevention of bullying', bringing together nine teams in five European countries.

This research runs from 1997 to 2001 and is proving to be a large, challenging and exciting venture. It has led me into some work on links between school and workplace bullying; and to research on coping strategies of victims. European funding also helped us host a conference on ways of tackling school bullying, which took place in London in 1998.

Another international aspect has been participation in a cross-national study funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education and UNESCO. This was led by Yohji Morita (Osaka University) and included colleagues in Japan, Norway and The Netherlands. We devised a common questionnaire and compared findings on a cross-national basis (Smith *et al.*, 1999).

The Japanese are very concerned about bullying (which they call *ijime*). Like us they have had suicides due to school bullying. They are also taking action at a governmental level.

Our work here led to our finding

evidence for some reduction in rates of bullying in English schools compared with seven to eight years earlier — not really surprising, given the volume of anti-bullying work which has been introduced in schools during this period, but encouraging nonetheless. The rates in all four countries surveyed were rather comparable (though lowest in Japan, highest in The Netherlands); we are no longer the 'bullying capital of Europe', if indeed we ever were.

This decade of research has been satisfying to me for a number of reasons. Starting with the purely personal, it has given me an opportunity for meeting colleagues overseas on a much larger scale than I had previously experienced. At another level, I have had the satisfaction of seeing many research students complete their studies in this area and go on to successful careers.

And the whole research field has taken off. It may not rival 'theory of mind' in the popularity stakes at developmental psychology conferences, but it has become a noted presence; many gifted researchers are now in the area. Probably this says something about the priority of the issue at this historical epoch — an issue of human rights, as is feminism, racism, and how we treat those of different sexual orientation or those with disabilities.

Finally, this is research that has had a social impact — there has been a radical change in schools in attitudes to, and actions taken on, bullying in the last decade (Smith & Brain, 2000). This research has therefore been both intellectually stimulating and of practical relevance. It is difficult to ask for much more from one's chosen research area.

■ Peter K. Smith is Professor of Psychology and Head of the Unit for School and Family Studies at the Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths College, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. Tel: 020 7919 7898; e-mail: p.smith@gold.ac.uk.

References

- Eslea, M., & Smith, P. K. (1998). The long-term effectiveness of anti-bullying work in primary schools. *Educational Research*, 40, 203–218.
- Hugh-Jones, S., & Smith, P. K. (1999). Self-reports of short- and long-term effects of bullying on children who stammer. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 69, 141–158.
- Lorenz, K. Z. (1966). *On aggression*. London: Methuen.
- Monks, C., & Smith, P. K. (2000). Relationships of children involved in bully/victim problems at school. In R. S. L. Mills & S. Duck (Eds.), *Developmental Psychology of Personal Relationships* (pp. 131–153). Chichester: Wiley.
- Olweus, D. (1978). *Aggression in the schools: Bullies and whipping boys*. Washington, DC: Hemisphere.
- Smith, P. K., & Brain, P. (2000). Bullying in schools: Lessons from two decades of research. *Aggressive Behaviour*, 26, 1–9.
- Smith, P. K., Morita, Y., Junger-Tas, J., Olweus, D., Catalano, R., & Slee, P. (Eds.). (1999). *The nature of school bullying: A cross-national perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, P. K., & Myron-Wilson, R. (1998). Parenting and bullying. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 3, 405–417.
- Sutton, J., Smith, P. K., & Swettenham, J. (1999). Social cognition and bullying: Social inadequacy or skilled manipulation? *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 17, 435–450.