

From Zero Tolerance to Early Intervention: The Evolution of School Anti-bullying Policy

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Abstract

Responding to school bullying is a prominent preoccupation for school administrators and policymakers, particularly when considering the widely reported negative effects of bullying between peers. At the root of dealing with bullying in schools are policies that frame prevention and intervention measures. This paper critically examines the evolution of anti-bullying policies, namely in terms of the strengths and limitations of two policy approaches to addressing bullying between peers in schools: zero tolerance and early intervention. Implications for policy implementation are presented in combination with extant research findings of constructive anti-bullying policy practices.

Research has commonly shown that school bullying prevention and intervention strategies are enhanced considerably when guided by effective anti-bullying policies (Coloroso, 2002; Rigby, Smith & Pepler, 2004; Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009). There has been a paradigm shift over the past two decades, however, in terms of the ways that bullying between peers is addressed. Following an extensive review of the literature on school bullying policies, two main categories of anti-bullying policy orientation in schools were identified, which appear to adopt divergent approaches to addressing bullying between peers: zero tolerance towards bullying behaviors, more commonly adopted in the 1990s, and early intervention towards bullying behaviors more commonly adopted in current times. This paper critically examines how anti-bullying policies have evolved from zero tolerance to the early intervention discipline models, of which some of the guiding principles have been, and remain, widely utilized in schools. The strengths and limitations of both models are weighed through a systematic review of these anti-bullying policy approaches in comparison to extant research findings on constructive practices to counter school bullying. This analysis allows for significant discourse on areas of policy development and implementation that are conducive to reducing bullying in schools.

Defining Bullying

Defining bullying is complex and multifaceted. There is no scientific and academic consensus, in fact, on a precise definition of bullying. Some common characteristics described in numerous studies include actions towards another that form an intent to harm, or actions that should be reasonably known to harm and that are repeated through time, as well as an imbalance of power between the perpetrator of bullying and the individual victimized by bullying (Henkin, 2005; Nansel et al., 2001; Rigby, 2008).

Bullying can take many forms: physical (hitting, kicking, stealing or damaging belongings), verbal (threats, insults), social or relational (spreading false rumors, purposely excluding someone from a group) religious or ethnical (bullying due to someone's religious beliefs or ethnicity), homophobic (bullying due to sexual orientation, negative comments about someone's gender-based behavioral habits), sexual (inappropriate touching, inappropriate comments of a sexual nature, and electronic (utilizing technology or social media to target someone by bullying). It should be noted that cyberbullying (electronic bullying) rates have risen considerably with the evolution of technology and the growing utilization of social media

by youth (Shariff, 2008). The other forms of bullying mentioned above frequently occur in areas of schools where there is limited adult supervision or outside of school grounds, namely on the way to and from school.

Brief Historical Overview of Bullying Policies

Bullying between peers in schools has existed for many decades. Nonetheless, formal study of the bullying phenomenon in schools can be traced back to the 1970s, but was limited to certain European countries. School officials became involved in the study of bullying in the early 1980s following the suicide of three students from Norway as a direct result of being severely bullied by their peers (Olweus, 1993). The incident triggered a mass media campaign and a widespread public call for action to counter school bullying. Soon thereafter, countries from around the globe joined the effort to prevent school bullying and intervene to reduce it or to eliminate it from schools. Policies to frame anti-bullying efforts were created and implemented as a result. Anti-bullying policies are increasingly common and are now mandatory in countless schools around the globe (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009; Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

The Zero Tolerance Model

The first zero tolerance policies appeared in schools with the intent of addressing issues of violence, weaponry, and drugs. They later became adapted to American schools to address bullying through the Gun-Free School Act (Gun-Free School Act, 1994; Martinez, 2009). One of the defining characteristics of zero tolerance is that all students who commit a given offense receive the same treatment. Holloway (2002) further defines zero tolerance as a set of prescribed consequences and punishments that are required for dealing with all student bullying behaviors in schools. Daniel and Bondy (2008) note that the appeal of the zero tolerance approach rests in the fact that all bullying is directly addressed once administrators or school interveners are made aware of the issue. The postulation is that students could refrain from engaging in bullying behaviors because they would purportedly be aware of the fact that they would automatically face severe sanctions. Research into the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies gradually uncovered serious problems with this approach, specifically that it appeared to target certain ethnic groups, and that administrators were misusing these policies to address a wide range of student behaviors in the form of severe sanctions that were detrimental to students (Advancement Project and the Civil Rights Project, 2002; Martinez, 2009; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 1993).

The Early Intervention Discipline Model

In the wake of documented shortcomings in zero tolerance policies, school administrators and policy makers gradually began to replace zero tolerance policies with early intervention policies. The typical foundations of early intervention approach to dealing with bullying in schools are as follows: creating an overall culture of respect and understanding in schools, implementing character education and social skills training in the classroom, and the tailoring of interventions for bullying behaviors to the incident, the individuals involved, and factors that have exerted influence on their behaviors (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Early intervention also implies a continuous monitoring and documentation of bullying incidents accompanied by a problem-solving and restorative justice approach to mend the harm that has been caused by bullying. For clarity, it should be noted that the nomenclature surrounding early intervention discipline models to address bullying behaviors is varied. Terms such as progressive discipline, early identification, and positive discipline, are often utilized to depict an approach that strives to comprehend and contextualize student behaviors in school settings, and intervene accordingly.

Implications for Policy Development and Implementation

Several implications for policy development and implementation are consequential of lessons learned from the zero tolerance and early intervention approaches to countering school bullying. Primarily, in terms of the overall orientation of both models, one end of the spectrum (zero tolerance) represents an automatic suspension or expulsions for bullying behaviors, whereas the other (early intervention) represents a series of flexible preventative and restorative measures to counter school bullying. Some educators could contend that the severity of the sanctions for bullying behaviors serves as a deterrent for students from engaging in those behaviors, for fear of the subsequent consequences of their actions. Historically, however, punitive approaches to dealing with student behaviors have not proven as effective as reinforcement of positive behaviors (Caron, 1994; Jones, 1987). In support, Olweus (2004), a pioneer researcher in bullying between peers, advises against disproportionate focus on modifying behaviors, deeming it counterproductive when attempting to reduce bullying in schools. Furthermore, as has been mentioned above, bullying often occurs in the absence of adult supervision and is often unreported due to the fact that students who are victims of bullying may fear subsequent reprisal. Therefore, it is rational to refute claims that zero tolerance policies address all bullying behavior, since only a small percentage of bullying behaviors are reported, and fewer bullying incidents are actually noticed by adults/supervisors in the school setting. The advent of technology to bullying has added an anonymous dimensions to this phenomenon; it may be impossible to determine who has perpetrated the bullying, and therefore impossible to suspend or expulse a student responsible for a cyberbullying incident (Dryden, 2011; Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012).

Furthermore, some researchers construe bullying as a relationship problem (Swearer, Espelage & Napolitano, 2009; Thompson, Cohen & O'Neill Grace, 2002; Voors, 2000). Consequently, these researchers believe that successful intervention should attempt to repair relationship between peers and to empower individuals to react to bullying situations encountered (Rigby, 2009; Thompson et al., 2002; Voors, 2000), such as is afforded by an early identification strategy. One could infer that individuals possess the ability to grow, to mature, and to rectify problematic behaviors, especially with guidance towards a more constructive approach to life situations that are faced. In the zero tolerance model, students are removed from the school environment through automatic suspension or expulsion once they exhibit problematic behaviors. This removal could appear to be counterproductive to the repair of the relationship, as no remedial action occurs if individuals involved in acts of bullying, whether as a bully or victim, are not in contact. Structured restorative justice appears to be especially neglected in the case of permanent expulsion from the school of a person who has been accused of bullying. This restorative justice is important given the fact that research has reported lasting negative effects of bullying, for the person who bullies, the person who is bullied, and for bystanders who witness bullying without intervening (Coloroso, 2002; Rigby, 2009).

Conversely it should be noted that the absence of contact between an individual who has bullied and the person victimized continuously by acts of bullying could be necessary in the interest of the safety of students. This absence of contact is guaranteed in a zero tolerance approach to bullying. Incidents of extreme violence may also be prevented. Similarly, Rigby (2009) denounces publications that claim to "bully-proof" children, claiming that it is implausible to assume that the teaching of social skills will automatically empower all students to deal with bullying, thus eliminating it from schools.

Another consideration is the subjectivity of policy interpretation (Glover, Cartwright, Gough & Johnson, 1998). There is often confusion in terms of what is understood by zero tolerance to bullying behaviors. The varied possible names for early intervention policies have also been presented above, and the flexibility in the constitution of this policy model means that there is no distinct way to develop an early intervention anti-bullying policy. For example, in Ontario (Canada), the Safe Schools Act that was

implemented following a promise of zero tolerance from the Ministry of Education contained discretionary articles in terms of students' ability to comprehend the severity of their actions and the assessed level of threat to the safety of others if the student was to remain in the school (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 1993). This approach was later replaced with a province-wide progressive discipline strategy. Given these facts, it could be argued that the presence of mitigating factors suggests that the Safe Schools Act was not one of zero tolerance at all, despite claims to the contrary. Research has shown, however, that mitigating circumstances were infrequently considered when ascribing a consequence or a suspension for bullying behaviors during the realm of the SSA and the episteme of zero tolerance (Advancement Project and the Civil Rights Project, 2000; Coloroso, 2002; Daniel & Bondy, 2008).

In addition, the most widely articulated criticism of zero tolerance policies has been the fervent application of severe punishment for minor infractions by school administrators (Coloroso, 2002; Daniel & Bondy, 2008; Martinez, 2009). From a developmental standpoint, school-aged students require guidance and support in order to learn to function in society, whereas the zero tolerance approach appears to leave students to their own devices (Daniel & Bondy, 2008). Research has not clearly delineated the concept of zero tolerance, which makes it unclear whether the perceived ineffectiveness of this approach was correlated to its misuse, to its fundamental vision of dealing with student behaviors, or to other contextual factors.

As a final point, the overall school culture has also been found to have a greater impact on bullying behaviors than the quality of bullying policies (Bradshaw & Waasdorp, 2009; Glover et al., 1998; Smith, Smith, Osborne & Samara, 2008; Woods & Wolke, 2003). This fact does not suggest that bullying prevention and intervention policies should not be developed, but rather, that administrators should not depend on the simple presence of policies to counter school bullying. Research has shown that bullying prevention and intervention endeavours are typically more predisposed to success if they target anti-bullying action at the administrative level, at the school level, at the classroom level, and elicit participation from community partners (Coloroso, 2002; Olweus, 1993; Swearer, Espelage & Napolitano, 2009). In terms of policy development, these facts suggest that different systemic levels of prevention and intervention should be targeted in anti-bullying policies. A process of continuous monitoring and review of policies has also proven effective, and necessary, in order to ensure that bullying prevention and intervention policies are meeting the evolving needs of the school environment (Glover et al., 1998).

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this review of the ways in which anti-bullying policies have evolved, it is reasonable to conclude that utilizing strict punishments as a panacea for bullying behaviors has not been proven effective in extant research. Nonetheless, while there is no doubt that the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies remains in question, the main issue with this approach appears to be the fact that it has been extensively misused by administrators. Additional research would be warranted to determine whether the school districts who are currently correctly applying zero tolerance approaches to bullying behaviors are seeing any positive effects as a result. The effectiveness of an early identification approach would also require further research, given the fact that it is a relatively novel framework for dealing with bullying, and that the influence of policies in anti-bullying endeavors appears marginal. In conclusion, when analyzing past challenges with the application of a framework to counter bullying in schools, it seems to be of primary importance to identify the needs of a particular setting as a starting point, and then tailoring the anti-bullying policy to the particularities of the school environment. Another notable concern is to ensure that policy language is clear and interpreted consistently by all individuals involved in its implementation. Finally, anti-bullying policies should be subjected to continuous review to adhere to societal changes and the evolution of the needs of the school environment.

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