

The rise and fall of a social problem: Critical reflections on educational policy and research issues

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Abstract

This article examines a growing and distressing social phenomenon, namely, bullying, the historical development, social dimensions, and political impact of which are taken into account and subjected to reflection and critical consideration. It describes both the progress of and problems with the concept of bullying. It also reflects on the research that has been done within the context of a specific research paradigm. The article ends by noting that the phenomenon still exists while the concept itself is no longer applied in Swedish laws or national curricula.

Introduction

The Swedish equivalent to the English word “bullying” is “mobbing”. As soon as the phenomenon was defined and the problem recognized, research increased into this at least initially unknown problem (Nordgren, 2009). Over four decades, not only has the amount of research increased, but the problem itself also seems to have become more prevalent, as the number of individuals affected by these negative actions and the number of serious incidents have increased.

In the 1960s, Swedish children were unaware that they were sometimes being exposed to what we today know as bullying – they had never heard this word. Today every schoolchild knows what bullying is. It is a well-known concept, and people generally become upset when they hear about these negative actions, often described by lurid headlines in the media.

This article problematizes the history of the growing social phenomenon of bullying. The concept was first used in Sweden in 1969 to describe a certain negative behaviour noted by Peter Paul Heinemann in the schoolyard, where his adopted son was attacked by a group of children. Heinemann thought that such actions resembled the behaviour of animals when they were attempting to frighten off rivals or intruders to protect their territory (cf. Lorenz, 1967.)

When Swedish research into bullying started in the 1970s, the focus was on identifying and classifying bullying incidents and on noting rates of occurrence. Moreover, the research treated the matter as an individual-related issue, and findings often ended up providing detailed descriptions of the individual characteristics of perpetrators and victims (see, e.g., Olweus, 1972, 1973, 1978, 1979). This research was based on an individual psychological research paradigm, in which aggressive personality traits were used as explanatory factors. This concentration of research efforts has had various implications. First, the fact that one paradigm grew in strength and dominance resulted in the production of very narrow results that could nevertheless hardly be criticized, due to the strong evidence presented by the representatives of this paradigm (Frånberg, 2003).

Second, the fact that very few alternate perspectives have been able to gain a hearing has meant that this field has been very much coloured by the perception of bullying presented by the first scholars in the area (Frånberg and Wrethander, 2011).

Third, the initial definition of bullying was accepted as useful and practical, simply because no alternatives existed. People were lulled into a false sense of security that the problems could be found in the individuals themselves: they were presented as “bad guys” or “good guys”, and one had to learn how to recognize such individuals. Otherwise, it would be difficult to know whom to take action against. If the involved individuals were well described it would be easy to identify them and act accordingly (Eriksson et al., 2003). The perpetrators were thought to be aggressive and dominant and to enjoy tormenting other people. The victims, on the other hand, were supposed to be weak, timid, and inhibited (Olweus, 1986; Roland and Idsöe, 2001; Twemlow, 2000).

Fourth, the research object in the first period was aggressive boys who unrelentingly and persistently harassed other boys. However, the results of research into such boys were used in explaining bullying in general, as if girls also had been studied. This has become a growing problem, since the measures used to eliminate or reduce bullying have not been gender sensitive (Skolverket, 2011). So-called female bullying has not received the same degree of attention, in terms of either research or anti-bullying programmes. Girls have been subtly rendered invisible.

The history of bullying in Sweden started in 1969 when the phenomenon was named and officially established. The research era began in the 1970s and developed within an individual psychological paradigm, in which the questions largely concerned perpetrator and victim characteristics (Frånberg and Wrethander, 2011).

The definition of a social problem

A specific concept of bullying thus became established and attracted both researchers and practitioners. In the most common and best-known definition the repetition of negative actions is central, so isolated violations are not included. Another important point is that overt aggressiveness has become almost synonymous with bullying due to the perception of bullying prevalent in early research studies. Aggressive behaviour is defined as negative acts carried out intentionally to harm another (Smith et al., 2002).

Many problems are connected with considering bullying as equivalent to aggressive behaviour and thus to the intention to inflict hurt. This view involves categorizing those involved as perpetrators and attributing them with characteristics of aggressiveness, viciousness, and nastiness. These children are attributed certain qualities, labelled, and at the same time stigmatized (Goffman, 1963). Once labelled, the child in question will be addressed in a special way and will probably act in accordance with expectations, and vice versa, a process that will certainly affect the child's identity construction and development (Goffman, 1973). However, not only is the aggressive personality designation linked to the perception of bullying; a clear imbalance of power between victim and offender is also included in the above-mentioned definition:

A person is being bullied when she or he is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more persons and there is an imbalance of power between the child who bullies and the child who is victimized. (Olweus, 1986, p. 14).

In our opinion, the prevalent definition is both too narrow and too broad. If negative actions against somebody are described as bullying, then they must be repeated several times to be *perceived* as bullying, a matter questioned in recent studies (cf. Hamarus and Kaikkonen, 2008). It has been noted that, if bullying is regarded as an ongoing process, small interactive incidents might not be detected (Wrethander, 2007a). This might explain why bullying can occur in the presence of the teacher and even during lessons (Skolverket, 2011).

Another problem with this definition is that it is based on the results of research into aggressive behaviour in boys. Girls' bullying behaviour has not been taken into consideration to the same extent. On the contrary, girls are not expected to display direct aggression because it does not match expectations of what is appropriate behaviour for them (Simmons, 2002).

Recent studies aiming to understand bullying as a phenomenon from a social and cultural viewpoint focus, among other matters, on communication in and meanings assigned to bullying (see Hamarus and Kaikkonen, 2008). Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008) conclude that bullying consists of short communicative situations that are often hidden from teachers. They also found that bullying was embedded in cultural norms, values, and social status in the whole community.

Japanese researchers have problematized the initial paradigm that has set the tone for what questions to ask and how to perceive bullying (Akiba, 2004; Taki, 2001). They argue that bullying is not necessarily related to individual characteristics. Anyone can become a bully, and the recurrent and seemingly stable figures for the frequency of bullying over time actually indicate that some bullies stop bullying while others start bullying during a certain period.

Japanese researchers have also criticized the definition prevalent in the Western research tradition (cf. Taki, 2003). They argue that "our" definition actually refers to criminal acts prohibited by law; such illegal actions should be handed over to others to investigate and resolve. Bullying, according to the Japanese definition, comprises actions such as ignoring, excluding, threatening, and "bad mouthing" by e-mail, and is

fairly similar to what we call “girls’ bullying”. Bullying so defined definitely requires significantly more social competence than “boys’ bullying”, which is more obvious and easier to detect.

Recent research in the Swedish context has also problematized the definition of bullying and treated the phenomenon as a social construct (Frånberg and Wrethander, 2011).

Bullying: the Swedish perspective

When researchers examine the extent of bullying, they have often done so by asking children whether they have been bullied or have bullied someone. Asking such questions is not unproblematic. The first problem is connected with the definition of the bullying concept, as mentioned above: What are such questions asking about, and according to what understanding are the students actually responding?

Studies of frequency

In many studies (see, e.g., Danielson and Sundbaum, 2003; BRÅ, 2007), children are asked how often they “have been bullied” or “have been bullied in recent months”. Such questions are based on the definition of bullying presented above and are in fact impossible to answer. According to the above definition, one must be repeatedly exposed to negative actions over a period of time to be considered subject to bullying. Answering “one or two times” or “sometimes” means that one defines bullying in terms of isolated events, which creates confusion when both answering the question and analyzing the results.

Another problem with these frequency studies concerns the difficulty of interpreting results presented in such a context. Results presented indicate that bullying has not declined significantly over time, despite the extensive efforts undertaken to reduce it.

There is also uncertainty concerning the differing frequency results reported by various studies. Responses can vary unexpectedly, and we only can speculate as to what that indicates. The fact that the frequency studies are based on self-assessment surveys has also led to uncertainty in assessing the results. For example, studies based on mental illness self-assessment surveys (SOU 2006:77) indicate that sick leave

increases significantly with time for individuals, whereas professional diagnosis indicates the opposite. Self-assessment is not invalid in itself but, when interpreting its results, researchers must be aware that informants might respond based on other considerations and experiences than those cited in the questionnaire. Outcomes based on self-reported data alone, then, may have less revealing implications for actual events.

Children's answers: whose reality are we talking about?

Responses may also be linked to the definition of bullying with which children and young people are familiar. They may answer questions based on individual definitions of bullying and other terms, and it is important that the researcher be well aware of how children understand and perceive the terms used.

One question often neglected in frequency studies is the incidence of bullying and offensive acts between *adults* and students in school, something that many children and adolescents experience without being able to respond to actively.

Children and adolescents who attend school are more vulnerable than adults are, having more difficulties feeling involved, and exerting influence. They also have a much more limited scope for action and are more dependent on adults' understanding, positive action, and support. Children cannot leave their "work" if they feel uncomfortable – something adults are more likely to do.

Researchers also assert that, when bullying occurs in the classroom, students feel uncertain of how to act; they are also less satisfied with school life in general (Peterson and Skiba, 2001). What is worse, students think that bullying is tolerated and ignored: teachers rarely detect bullying and take action in only 4% of cases. Students do not believe, according to Peterson and Skiba (2001), that teachers will intervene even if they are aware of bullying. These results can serve as a wake-up call and function as a platform for reflection on bullying.

First, it appears that teachers and students experience reality in different ways. Their perceptions of what is happening and why seem diametrically opposed, which in turn concerns their quite different experiences and the fact that students and teachers are parts of different environments, despite occupying a shared workplace. Students know

more about peer culture at school and see more of what is going on during breaks in the school day. Teachers know more about educational issues, how children learn, and how groups function, while students know most about where and when bullying occurs and who bullies and is bullied. However, children and young people respond to questioning in line with their own definitions and understandings of what constitutes bullying, so it may be important to understand these when children are asked about bullying.

It is important to be aware that it is the child's definition of bullying that is the basis for the child's answer. Nordgren (2009) claims that the concept of bullying is already loaded with beliefs, values, morals, and stigmatization. When someone is asked about bullying, s/he is thrust into a situation in which s/he must make moral judgements and answer questions in line with them. One can rightly ask on what basis such respondents are really answering. Given the great variation in survey results, which indicate that 1–15% of students claim to have been bullied at school, one cannot help wondering what the results really indicate. Is it even possible to determine how many children are exposed to bullying at school and, if so, what exactly they are exposed to?

Another problem related to self-assessment concerns the timing of the event. Incidents during school recess occur when the feeling of vulnerability is at its highest. The same goes when teachers and students have recently discussed or otherwise come into contact with bullying: this affects respondent memory, putting bullying incidents in the foreground. Other things can affect students in a way that makes them respond spontaneously based on a strong feeling they have just experienced. It has also been demonstrated that some issues are very difficult for younger respondents to understand, which might affect student answers in ways not intended by the researcher.

A recent evaluation of anti-bullying programmes in Sweden

The results of a recent evaluation of anti-bullying programmes in Sweden indicate that the bullying rate in Sweden is lower than in many other countries (Skolverket, 2011). Three questionnaires in three rounds were sent to approximately 10,000 elementary and secondary school students. The questions concerned respondents'

experiences of being bullied and why they think they were exposed to bullying. Unlike other studies in this field, the concept itself, i.e., bullying, was not cited in the questionnaire; instead, the students were asked about whether they had specifically been pushed, teased, beaten, etc. Children could respond more easily to questions about acts that they could easily identify than to questions about what is meant by the generally accepted definition of the abstract concept of bullying.

The results indicate that, according to the definition the researchers formulated from the children's answers, approximately 7.5% of surveyed students – the same proportions of boys and girls – had been bullied during the studied period.

Since individual-level data are available, it is also possible to determine whether certain individuals were exposed to ongoing bullying throughout the studied period. Closer examination revealed that “only” 1.5% of respondents were bullied on an ongoing basis. It was found that 6% of the study group were new victims while 6% were no longer being bullied. What do these figures mean?

First, bullying victims do not generally remain the same over an extended period. Second, there is a small group that is exposed to ongoing bullying. Third, new bullies and thus new victims continually arise in a given period. What about specific personalities: are some people “talented” as bullies and others as victims? Apparently anyone can become a bully or a victim, something that Japanese researchers have also found in recent studies (cf. Taki, 2003).

Another fact to be taken into account when considering the Swedish case concerns the Education Act's clear zero tolerance mandate, and requirement that schools draw up plans for outlining the actions needed to prevent and stop degrading treatment of children and students (Skollag, 2010:800). In the national curriculum, fundamental democratic values are described that should be present in both the content and method of the school's work (Lpo94).

Anti-bullying programmes

In Sweden and other countries where the problem of bullying has been noted, a market has grown in response to requirements that schools and communities must deal with bullying. Many anti-bullying programmes are being offered, all of which

promise a lot. This market has grown to serve Swedish schools' new commitments and the difficulties experienced in realizing them (see below). Teacher education programmes do not take the anti-bullying mission seriously, and major related deficiencies have been noted in the education field (Frånberg, 2006). Teachers simply lack scientific knowledge of this phenomenon, and the kind of "education" that programme representatives, often consultants, offer consists primarily of information about the programme they are promoting.

Teachers' everyday knowledge of bullying is insufficient (Frånberg and Wrethander, 2011). It is also insufficient to display only emotional involvement, although it may serve a purpose. The knowledge that is needed must be both educational and scientific. Decisions about bullying-related matters must be based on scientific and educational competence, so that – among other things – the right steps are taken to handle these problems.

Swedish educationalists Frånberg and Wrethander (2009) have examined and analysed eight anti-bullying programmes in common use in Swedish schools. Most of them are American in origin, but have been adapted to Swedish conditions. Their analysis focussed on the theoretical basis of the programmes as presented by the programme creators in their manuals and as integrated into the marketing. In addition, the costs of programme implementation have been included in an analysis. These educationists have also participated in the various educational settings arranged by the programme representatives for offering the programmes to teachers and school principals.

Frånberg and Wrethander's (2009) assessment is not very positive. Most of the marketing material for anti-bullying programmes makes exaggerated claims. Programme costs are excessive and implementation sometimes takes considerable resources from other activities and is time consuming in general. The theoretical basis of the programmes is weak. The manuals make fairly extensive references to the literature, but the cited concepts do not generally fit the conceptual bases of the programmes. The assessment identifies quite a few specific problems with the programme material.

Some programmes designed to reduce bullying have been created from findings produced within the individual psychological paradigm and thus treat bullying as a

purely behavioural matter. What are the implications of these biased and simplistic assumptions?

To start with, we mention Gerald Walton (2011) who compares the actions taken against bullying in school to a car stuck in the snow vainly spinning its wheels. Worldwide efforts to eliminate bullying have not had any positive effects to speak of. On the contrary: bullying behaviour has found new arenas, new means, and is becoming subtler. Walton claims that this has occurred because the discourse on bullying has treated bullying as mere behaviour.

According to Walton, the dominant discourse on bullying is that bullying is antisocial behaviour in which one student wields power over another, usually because of physical size. One problem with this is that anti-bullying programmes convey the idea that bullying is only about behaviour, because that is how it has come to be popularly conceived. He also asserts that the dominant discourse on bullying has become normalized over time, and that policies and programmes have been shaped accordingly. What effects may this have had on the problem and on the possibility of alleviating it?

First, the bullying rate has not declined due to the anti-bullying programmes implemented (Skolverket, 2011). Second, the measures recommended in various anti-bullying programmes have had different effects on boys and on girls. Third, isolated offensive acts have not been taken account of and have therefore not been addressed at all (Wrethander, 2007b). Fourth, the measures proposed in line with the anti-bullying programmes on the market have often used disciplinary strategies that ideologically belong within a neoconservative ethos whose goal is the inculcation of politeness, good habits, and appropriate conduct. Fifth, since the discourse on bullying focuses on behaviours, “old” methods have been picked up from behaviourism.

Critical considerations

The programmes assume that students will be involved in ways that are not recommended: students are expected to be good role models but also informers; they should be good friends and at the same time tattle. The evaluation of anti-bullying programmes mentioned above has also noted problems with this (Skolverket, 2011).

In schools where students had to assume such responsibility, the incidence of bullying even increased. Another dubious constituent is the behaviouristic tradition that serves as the basis for some programmes.

Another problem with the reviewed anti-bullying programmes concerns the findings of the initial research carried out in this field, which identified aggression as the reason for bullying (Frånberg and Wrethander, 2009). More “moderate” levels of relational aggression were not emphasized to any great extent by the programmes. Another problem is the assumption that bullying concerns individual traits. Yet another has to do with the discourse on bullying that became well-known and popular, i.e., that bullying constitutes behaviour and that it is only behaviour that must be stopped. Why are these circumstances problematic?

First, many of the programmes based on behaviouristic values recognize punishment and reward, applying methods based on learning psychology and behavioural approaches. The assumptions on which this scientific perspective is based assume a reductive view of human beings that holds, for example, that behaviour can be learned separately and apart from its context by means of simple stimulus–response techniques.

Another programme component is behaviour extinction measures. Such measures aim at disciplining students to obey and change their behaviour into, from a grown-up perspective, what are accepted ways of acting. The disciplinary strategies that are part of many anti-bullying programmes seem to succeed in modifying boys’ behaviour, perhaps because research within the initial paradigm began with research on boys (Safran, 2007).

According to Foucault (1977), binary oppositions such as good versus bad are not to be regarded as describing only particular modes; rather, they also form ideas, meanings, and perspectives that do not take account of gradations. If we think about bullies as bad and victims as good, we have seriously oversimplified the problem. To single out a child as bad can also be described as a stigma (Goffman, 1963), which also may have other impacts. This designation will certainly affect the child’s identification process and can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy that is counterproductive.

Hacking (1986, p. 223) writes that “people spontaneously come to fit their categories”, meaning that the categories themselves generate people who fit them. Furthermore, there is the risk that the classification of perpetrator versus victim becomes “the relevant thing” (Edwards, 1998, p. 19) in understanding the child, with risks of stigmatization (Goffman, 1963) and consequences for the child’s identity and life course.

The use of disciplinary strategies also has other implications than just the correction of asocial behaviour. Such strategies can also lead to anxiety, insecurity, and fear of doing anything at all. In the Swedish evaluation mentioned above (Skolverket, 2011), it turned out that only boys changed their behaviour when they were subjected to disciplinary strategies.

The rise and fall of a social phenomenon

This text describes a specific social phenomenon as an ascendant problem in both human and research terms. The process started in 1969 when the concept of bullying was introduced into the Swedish context. Since then, the phenomenon has grown in extent and our knowledge of it has also increased. Interestingly, the concept of bullying seems to have disappeared from the latest policy documents and from the Education Act. In addition, the Swedish government has obviously found the concept, definition, and discourse of bullying to be problematic: the term is no longer used to describe the negative actions were called bullying for over four decades. The concept has been replaced with “harassment” and other terms referring to abusive treatment and discrimination. Has the underlying problem then been solved?

Now we must start all over again defining a new social problem. A new research era will begin, in which these “new” concepts and the social phenomena referred to must be described and understood. One problem with the new concept of violation/abusive treatment in this context concerns the fact that it is the victim who decides whether s/he has been hurt. The problem with the concept of discrimination involves its definition according to the Discrimination Act (2008: 571):

As part of the work in school, activities to promote equal rights and opportunities for children and students, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability or sexual orientation, must be conducted. (Ch. 3, § 14)

Schools must take measures to prevent any child or student from being subjected to harassment related to gender, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation, or sexuality. Negative acts related, for example, to appearance are not covered by the law and thus not considered discrimination.

Neoconservative trends: a final discussion

Hand in hand with these changes in the Education Act, other political changes have occurred. A neoconservative regime has been ascendant for four years, and several amendments relating to school governance are at stake. The new regime is eager to replace the old Social Democratic ideals. Order and discipline as well as subject knowledge are now emphasized in education, to displace the “fuzzy pedagogy” that is said to have been dominant during the long Social Democratic era. In Sweden, corporal punishment was banned in schools in 1958 and corporal punishment of children was completely banned in 1979. Until 1970, grades were assigned for order and conduct in school using a three-level scale: A, very good; B, good; and C, less good. This meant that teachers lost two disciplining tools (Landahl, 2006). The relationship between student and teacher needed to change, but how?

It was at that point that the behaviouristic renaissance emerged. Reward, behaviour extinction, and punishment very easily compensated for the lost tools. The social order was no longer threatened, and teachers seemed very pleased to find ways of disciplining students without using corporal punishment.

Hand in hand with these new trends came greater demands for schools to solve bullying problems to avoid fines (see above). Then the market saw its chance to take over the pedagogical assignment. Teachers, principals, and communities were very vulnerable and probably welcomed “quick fixes” that, although costly, could be implemented quickly.

We estimate that almost every school in Sweden has bought and implemented at least one anti-bullying programme. Many schools are not using just one programme, but several (Skolverket, 2011), which has various consequences. First, the conventional bullying discourse is still treated as valid insofar as most programmes are based on it. Second, the programmes largely aim to change asocial behaviours. Third, the

problems are seen as related to individual characteristics. Fourth, the assumptions on which the programmes are based come from behaviourism.

It is now recommended that a misbehaving child be carried to an empty room to sit alone for some time and reflect on his/her misbehaviour. This method is called “time out” and is a common method of punishment. It is also recommended that children who are behaving badly, according to grownups, be ignored. Children can also be punished by removing rewards. Detention and expulsion are also common and somewhat paradoxical, indicating that schools are perceived by grown ups as prisons at the same time as they are to constitute positive and tolerant learning environments.

In 2011, the behaviourist legacy still weighs heavily on Swedish schools. Though the consequences for Swedish children and adolescents in “a school for all” are not yet apparent, they are unlikely to represent progress.

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