

Peer Support: A Strategy to Help Bystanders Challenge School Bullying

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In this article, the authors first discuss the nature of peer support and some of the ways in which it has evolved over time, particularly in the UK. Under the umbrella of peer support they include activities such as befriending, peer counselling, conflict resolution or mediation and intervening in bullying situations. Secondly, they describe research studies of peer support and discuss their relevance to bystander behaviour. Thirdly, they draw some conclusions that relate to the wider context of the developing role of peer support in schools today. These include the benefits to peer supporters and the key processes of flexible monitoring and clear observation of the needs of the potential users.

also has the potential to contribute to the creation of a learning environment in which psychological health and emotional literacy are valued (Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey and Beland, 2002; Cowie, Boardman, Dawkins and Jennifer, 2004). School-based anti-bullying peer support schemes are designed to improve interpersonal problem-solving skills in children and young people by training them to identify the interpersonal problem and to generate non-violent solutions (Pepler, Craig and Roberts, 1995; Cunningham, Cunningham, Martorelli, Tran, Young and Zacharias, 1998).

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Keywords: peer support; bystanders; bullying in schools.

Introduction

Peer support is a widely used anti-bullying intervention in both primary and secondary schools. Cowie and Wallace (2000) identified the following key features of peer support:

- young people are trained to work together outside friendship groups. This type of interaction helps to reduce prejudice and fosters trust across gender and ethnic groups.
- young people are given opportunities through training to learn good communication skills, to share information and to reflect on their own emotions in relationships with others.
- young people are trained to deal with conflict and to help peers to relate to one another in a more constructive, non-violent way.

The method does not confine itself to the immediate protagonists in a bullying situation but includes the bystanders, especially those who observe bullying and would like to play an active part in its prevention. It

The Nature of Peer Support

Peer Counselling

The earliest types of peer support were grounded in a counselling model. Bystanders in the role of pupil helpers were trained (usually by a qualified counsellor or psychologist) to use active listening skills to support peers in distress. The aims were to give bystanders skills to deal with peers' interpersonal issues, to help the victims of bullying and to challenge pupils who bully. Regular supervision (whether by a qualified counsellor or by the teacher who managed the peer support scheme) was an essential feature. Peer counsellors were likely to see users of the service in a specially designated room just as counsellors see their clients in a private consultation. Peer counselling was pioneered in the UK in 1990 by Netta Cartwright, the school counsellor at a Midlands secondary school, who trained students in basic listening and co-counselling skills as a critical part of the school's anti-bullying policy (Cartwright, 1996; Glover, Cartwright and Gleeson, 1998). The theory behind Cartwright's training was Re-evaluation Counselling (RC), a person-centered approach. RC proposes that our ability to think and function well has been impaired by the

distress experienced in the process of growing up in a society structured on inequality, injustice and pressure to compete and conform. At the same time, everyone has the natural ability to recover from the effects of the hurts that they have experienced through a process of release or discharge that includes laughing, crying, raging, shaking, trembling and animated talk. The healing takes place when we discharge our distress through re-evaluation of self and others, increased awareness of how oppressive systems operate to the detriment of all people, and the opportunity to act on this awareness. Over the years, as Cartwright trained cohorts of peer supporters, students reported that they felt safer, whether or not they actually used the service and the whole culture and climate of the school became more positive. Influenced by Cartwright's work, the team at the DES-funded Anti-bullying project (Smith and Sharp, 1994) decided to include the peer support method in a Sheffield secondary school as one of the interventions to be evaluated as a method to empower bystanders to counteract bullying. A counselling approach was adapted for use with young people, and cohorts of students were trained to use active listening skills, to facilitate supportive relationships and to reflect on the helping process (Sharp, Sellors and Cowie, 1994; Sellors, 1996).

Befriending

Over time, peer counselling services have evolved into befriending/buddying schemes that still involve active listening skills and a person-centered approach during training, but which, in their implementation, adopt a much more informal approach. This change in practice has often been initiated by peer supporters themselves who report that both they and the users of the schemes have difficulties with a formal counselling approach and prefer the anonymity of an informal befriending scheme. Usually befrienders are same-age peers or older pupils, who are selected by teachers on the basis of their friendly personal qualities. In some systems existing befrienders are also involved in the selection and interviewing of volunteers. Usually there is some training in interpersonal skills, such as active listening, assertiveness and leadership. For example, Athy Demetriades, teacher at a London secondary school and founder of *Children of the Storm*, trained pupils to act as *peer partners* to help young refugees adjust to school (Demetriades, 1996). The peer partners were trained in listening skills so that they could help war-traumatized peers deal with difficult feelings and to affirm their attempts to grow and survive despite the unbearable memories that they all carried. The method also demonstrated bystanders' potential through befriending to play an active role in responsible decision-making alongside the adult trustees of the *Children of the Storm* project. Studies of befriending indicate a number of advantages, not least the recruitment of bystanders to tackle the problem of bullying. For vulnerable pupils, the experience of being befriended can be a critical part of the process of feeling more

positive about themselves. Through the process of being helped, these pupils are given an opportunity to express their feelings about upsetting aspects of their lives. Bystanders in the role of befrienders report that they too benefit from the helping process, that they feel more confident in themselves and that they learn to value other people more. Teachers frequently report that the school environment becomes safer and more caring following the introduction of a befriending scheme, and that peer relationships in general improve (Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli and Cowie, 2003).

Conflict Resolution/Mediation

Conflict resolution/mediation is a structured process in which a bystander in the role of neutral third party assists voluntary participants to resolve their dispute (Cunningham *et al.*, 1998). There must be a follow-up meeting at which participants review the success or otherwise of the solution and acknowledge their willingness to make adjustments if necessary. At the heart of the process of mediation we find the quality of *active listening* and the ability to respond genuinely and authentically to the needs and feelings of the participants in the mediation. It is essential for the peer mediator not to deny or repress strong emotions usually present during and after a conflict but to have the strength to allow them to emerge and be shared in a sympathetic, supportive environment. At the same time, they need to go beyond empathy to a rational problem-solving stance so that the disputants can move through their conflict into a resolution. This is where good communication skills are also essential. The peer mediators must show through their choice of words, the tone of their voice, the rhythm of their speech and their confidence that they believe in the real possibility of a solution to the problem. There must be a follow-up meeting at which participants review the success or otherwise of the solution and acknowledge their willingness to make adjustments if necessary. Evaluation of this approach indicates that there is a substantial decrease in the incidence of aggressive behaviour. Typically, over 80 per cent of disputes mediated by peers result in lasting agreements (Paterson, Bentley, Singer and O'Hear, 1996; Cunningham *et al.*, 1998; Fernandez, Villaoslada and Funes, 2002).

Promotion of Children's Rights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1991) proposes an international perspective on the rights of children to life itself and to a reasonable quality of life. In addition to protection from abuse and violence and provision of state services of care, education, social security and health, the UN document emphasizes the need for active participation by children and young people in decision-making on matters affecting the child. By addressing the needs of all young people, the UN Convention identifies a clear role for bystanders in addressing problems such as

school bullying, and, as a result, for some years children's rights groups have successfully developed such initiatives as school councils and youth parliaments (Dalrymple and Hough, 1995) which actively harness the energies of bystanders to tackle problems in the school community. In harmony with these aspirations, many teachers who co-ordinate peer support systems encourage peer supporters to play an active part in managing the schemes, by, for example, critiquing and monitoring their effectiveness. In fact, there is evidence that young people's management of peer support systems can act as a significant catalyst for change (Cowie, Naylor, Talamelli, Chauhan and Smith, 2002) by identifying new forms of bullying (e.g. where bullies use text messages to intimidate others), by devising new approaches to target such behaviour (e.g. by disseminating information on these new forms of abuse in order to support victimized peers) and by making changes in the logistics of peer support (e.g. by using evidence from systematic evaluation of the service to change from a counselling-based approach to a befriending approach). Recently, the peer support movement has contributed to UK government strategies and initiatives that demonstrate commitment to involving young people in decisions that affect their lives, for example, *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) and *Working Together: Giving Children and Young People a Say* (DfES, 2004). The opportunity to be a peer supporter is now viewed by many educators as an important pathway for the inclusion of children and young people in policy-making (Parsons and Blake, 2004) and is central to the vision of anti-bullying initiatives by major UK charities such as ChildLine.

In line with the UN Convention for the Rights of the Child (1991), an all boys school in South West London wanted to involve the pupils in decision making after an incidence of physical bullying. The school ran focus groups with all Year 9 boys, asking them to identify any gaps in the school's pastoral care system. One of the services requested was an email peer support scheme. Email was the preferred method, as it allowed anonymity and confidentiality for any boys seeking counselling. There was concern that being seen by your classmates talking to peer supporters in the playground would be construed as 'grassing'. Through adopting email as a communication channel, this fear was allayed. The view was that an email helpdesk would provide the boys with an open space to meet, without preconceptions, personalities or boundaries.

Research has shown that in a mixed sex environment, boys tend to be less likely to volunteer for peer support schemes. They defend their gender boundaries, and perceive peer support as a female domain. In single sex schools, where there are no members of the opposite sex to compare against, gender boundaries become more diffuse. This theory was borne out when 82 boys volunteered to be peer supporters on day one of the recruitment drive.

The volunteers were whittled down to 25 to make it a manageable number for RC training (as described in the section on Netta Cartwright's work), and to ensure their commitment – so that the scheme was tenable and had longevity. The 25 recruits were peer-selected, based on their responses to a standardized application form. Volunteers were wide-ranging – some had experienced bullying themselves, others had witnessed it as bystanders. Some drew from experiences at home, such as mediating in their parents' marriage. One applicant had been suspended for bullying himself, and therefore felt he would have a greater understanding of why bullying occurred and how to stop it. The majority expressed a desire to transcend and challenge the 'cliquey' atmosphere that pervaded school life. In short, initiating the peer support scheme encouraged, on an equal footing, the bully, the bystander and the victim to stand up and be accountable.

The scheme also contributed to fostering a more caring and integrated school environment. Mixed age groups of four peer supporters worked together on a rota system to respond to emails during designated time-frames, three times a week. The boys came from different Year Groups, and were allocated to different rota groups each week to harness inter-Year Group relations. The email scheme was mediated by the Teacher to ensure anonymity, and maintain control over more serious cases. Boys seeking peer support were required to email from their school email account (which they could access remotely through the web from home) to a generic email address. Incoming emails were logged by a teacher, who cut and pasted the text onto a blank page, and forwarded on to the Peer Supporters. They responded in their groups of four, and returned their response to the teacher, who then sent it on to the correct email account. The only shortfall of the scheme was its lack of immediacy. Checking the email account three times a week could mean that a boy in crisis may have to wait for help.

So far, the scheme has been successful. The overall school environment has been positively impacted, and it has encouraged a more emotionally literate environment by forcing pupils to consider the impact of their actions on others more carefully.

Research Evidence

There is strong research evidence that peer support is an effective method for helping bystanders to improve the quality of peer relationships among school age pupils (Cunningham *et al.*, 1998; Stacey, 2000). Surveying 2313 secondary school pupils and 234 teachers in 51 schools where there was a well-established system of peer support, Naylor and Cowie (1999) questioned peer supporters, groups of service users or potential users, teachers involved in managing the systems and a sample of teachers not involved in running the systems. They found that, while peer

support systems do not always reduce the incidence of bullying, they can be an effective preventative measure. Above all, they reduce the negative impact of bullying on victims and make it more acceptable for them to report it. The existence of a peer support system was perceived as beneficial to the school as a whole for the following reasons:

- peers are able to detect bullying at a much earlier stage than adults could;
- young people are more likely to confide in contemporaries than in adults;
- victims have someone to turn to;
- peer supporters gain valuable social skills and self-confidence;
- the school enhances its reputation among parents and the local community;
- over time, the school is perceived as a community that cares.

82 per cent of pupils who used peer support schemes reported that they found these helpful in giving them the strength to cope with bullying. In a follow-up study of a sample of the same cohort of pupils (Cowie *et al.*, 2002), it was confirmed that many pupils appreciated the provision of a service to protect their safety, and viewed its presence as a sign that the school was caring. Peer support systems were used, and were perceived as helpful, by a high proportion of users. Furthermore, peer supporters appreciated the opportunity of addressing a real problem in their school community and being given the skills and structures to tackle it.

We go into the dining room with Year 7s (age 11–12) and we keep an eye out even though we are not on duty. We just look and if we see anyone upset we go and talk to them, or we start up a conversation, like, even if they are not upset. We start a conversation, you know, just how are you finding the school.

(Boy peer supporter)

Peer supporters commented favourably on the usefulness of the communication skills that they learned in the course of training. All peer helpers reported that there were great personal benefits for them through their involvement in the schemes. Another frequently mentioned benefit was a gratifying sense of responsibility.

My Dad seems really proud for what I am doing because he knows that I've helped someone and if he knows that I've helped one person, he knows I can help other people.

(Girl peer supporter)

In virtually all of the groups interviewed, the peer supporters spontaneously spoke of their satisfaction in helping to make the school a safer place and commented on their pride in being able to make changes to the systems on the basis of their experience. A frequent comment was that the experience of

participating in the peer support scheme had led them to decide on one of the caring professions for a career.

Cowie *et al.* (2002) noticed that peer supporters in their study changed over time. There were transformations in confidence and a growing identity as peer supporters. There were also differences that often related to the extent and degree of help that the peer supporters received from others, including the quality of teacher facilitation, parental approval, the extent and relevance of training and debriefing groups, and feedback from other pupils, whether users or potential users. Some boy peer supporters struggled with the issue of gender identity; others managed to find compatibility between the role of peer supporter and being 'manly'. Each peer supporter had to co-ordinate his/her individual efforts with guidance from other peer supporters; at the group level, each was guided through training and practices developed by previous peer supporters. There were also links with other systems, such as external training agencies (e.g. ChildLine), pressure groups (e.g. the Peer Support Forum), and higher education (e.g. a university-based research project).

Conclusion

Studies of peer support indicate a number of advantages. For vulnerable pupils, the experience of being befriended can be a critical part of the process of feeling more positive about themselves. Through the process of being helped, these pupils are given an opportunity to express their feelings about upsetting aspects of their lives. Peer supporters report that they too benefit from the helping process, that they feel more confident in themselves and that they learn to value other people more. Teachers frequently report that the school environment becomes safer and more caring following the introduction of a peer support scheme, and that peer relationships in general improve (Cowie and Sharp, 1996; Cowie *et al.*, 2002).

Peer support systems are now accepted and valued for their contribution to the quality of life, including the empowerment of bystanders at bullying episodes, in a growing number of schools. Victimized pupils overwhelmingly state that they like the presence of a peer support system; bystanders state that they would use the system if they needed to and would recommend it to a friend in need. Teachers in charge of systems report that their colleagues are for the most part extremely supportive. There are also external signs of acknowledgement from parent groups. In these schools, there is a strong sense of confidence in their peer support systems and belief in their usefulness.

The research so far indicates that the key to success lies in a process of flexible monitoring and clear observation of the needs of the potential users. Teachers running the schemes also need to take account of the social context in which they operate and to make

appropriate use of the situated knowledge that the young peer supporters bring to their task. It is also essential to acknowledge that in some very violent settings it may be impossible for peer supporters to have much impact (Cowie and Olafsson, 2000). In this, there is a growing appreciation of the role that young people themselves might play in learning new skills and in reflectively adapting these skills to their particular context.

The phenomenon of peer support offers a rich source of information about the nature of peer group relationships and about the role of bystanders in challenging injustice. In this article, we have presented some research and practice findings that may help us to understand how and why change can be affected. We hope too that they offer some integration at different levels of analysis to include the individual, the school community and the wider social context. The greatest achievement of peer support may be encouraging the bullies, bystanders and victims to work together, in a safe environment, towards a common goal.

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