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School bullying as a creator of pupil peer pressure

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School bullying as a creator of pupil peer pressure

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Background: Research into school bullying has a long tradition but a rather narrow scope. Many prevention programmes have been designed, but despite extensive investigation, most studies suggest that bullying is not decreasing. There is something paradoxical in this phenomenon. In order to have any real impact on some phenomena, thorough understanding is needed. What, then, is the essence of school bullying? How does it develop and how is it maintained in a community? In the present study written material and interviews concerning pupilś experiences of bullying were used to examine how the status of the bully is created among pupils and how cultural norms and values in the community are constructed via bullying. Bullying as a phenomenon is a hidden process, where teachers are often misled. The meanings given to bullying behaviour can often be understood only by the pupils in the community. This is why bullying is possible in the presence of the teacher and also during lessons. The study suggests the need to see bullying in a broader social and cultural framework, which also provides a new way of understanding pupilś social relationships.
Purpose: This study attempts to understand school bullying as a phenomenon from a social and cultural viewpoint. Communication in and meanings given to bullying acts in the school community are in focus.
Sample: The study sample comprised 85 lower secondary school pupils, aged 13–15, from various schools in central Finland. The data analysed consisted of 85 written accounts and 10 interviews.
Design and methods: Pupils were asked to write about 'School bullying'. The interviews were open-ended thematic interviews or episodic interviews (cf. Friebert-shäuser). A hermeneutic method was used in analysing the meanings in the texts. The transcribed texts were analysed using categories and themes within which the meanings given to bullying were interpreted.
Results: Our study suggested that bullying behaviour consists of short communicative situations which are often hidden from teachers. These separate situations account for the subjective experience of bullying. Bullying behaviour is a way of gaining power and status in a group or school class. The status is maintained by calling a pupil who is bullied different names. The 'difference' in the bullied pupil is interpreted as a culturally avoidable characteristic. In this way, bullying behaviour creates cultural norms and forces all pupils in the bullying community to follow them. Telling stories and calling the bullied pupil names increases the group's cohesion and the treatment of the bullied pupil creates fear in other pupils, who do not dare to fight bullying. In a community where bullying occurs, fear and guilt are obvious.
Conclusions: Bullying is embedded in cultural norms, values and social status in the whole community. The hidden nature of the phenomenon emerges in short communicative situations that should be taken seriously. This research applies an approach from sociology and cultural studies to an area that has been dominated by

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psychological approaches. In doing so, it opens up a variety of interpretations of what bullying is and how it develops in schools.

Introduction

School bullying is a global phenomenon with a rather long, but narrow, research tradition. Bullying research has been criticised for its homogeneity and for seeing problems through the individuals' perspective (Thelin 2004, 30–1; Hägglund 2004, 82–4; Eriksson et al. 2002). Although a number of writers have researched school bullying, only a few studies investigate it from the social and cultural viewpoint (see Yoneyama and Naito 2003; Eriksson 2001).

The present study aimed at investigating bullying as a phenomenon in the school community and in its cultural environment. It is situated in the micro-cultural experiences of bullying and is primarily concerned with the phenomenon of bullying and its dynamics. The research focuses particularly on the perspective of pupils and how they understand bullying within their community. The study addresses different understandings of how to become aware of bullying in the school. By being aware of bullying as a phenomenon, schools can design more focused prevention programmes and intervention strategies to tackle the problem. For example, when we understand bullying as a way to create status in the community, we can help the bully find more positive ways to achieve status at the same time as intervening in the bullying. At present, we are developing an intervention programme based on our research findings.

Conceptualising bullying

Bullying is a phenomenon which is not easily defined and measured. Definitions encompassing all possible facets of bullying are in danger of being counterproductive (Okabayashi 1996, 170). Defining bullying as a specific phenomenon may result in a situation in which only acts conforming to the particular definition are perceived and labelled as bullying. Thus, the definition can be used to steer practical actions.

According to some researchers (e.g. Wernersson 2004, 93; Thelin 2004, 28), the common definition of bullying is overly narrow and can, in fact, exclude certain questions from research. Wernersson (2004, 28) suggests that the definition of bullying should be surrounded by a family of concepts through which research into bullying can be deepened (Eriksson et al. 2002, 103–6). Sanders (2004, 13), on the other hand, proposes that an 'eclectic' theoretical approach needs to be taken to explain bullying behaviour.

Up until relatively recently, most researchers have tended to employ a standard, internationally accepted definition of bullying, and many studies are based on the work of Olweus (1992, 14): '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.' Olweus further argues that bullying involves an imbalance of power. Bullying has various forms, it can be verbal (e.g., name-calling), physical or indirect (e.g., spreading unpleasant rumours) (Olweus 1992). Bullying is thus a complex phenomenon, and despite the generally accepted definition, bullying behaviour has been conceptualized in different ways.

The definition by Olweus labels bullying as a subset of aggressive behaviour. Aggressive behaviour is often defined 'as negative acts carried out intentionally to harm another' (Smith et al. 2002, 1120; see also Kaukiainen 2002, 116; Baron 1977, 36–8). Smith and Sharp (1995, 2), for their part, define bullying as a systematic abuse of power. Repetitiveness and imbalance of power are included in the definition.

In this study, bullying is examined as a phenomenon which occurs in the child's social context and culture, where interaction plays a central role (Swearer and Doll 2001, 9–11; Atlas and Pepler 1998, 86; Eriksson 2001, 25). Bullying is a phenomenon broken out in social processes under certain circumstances and as a result of these processes. An imbalance of power is essential in a situation where dominant person(s) cause(s) intentionally and repeatedly distress for some culturally different members of a community.

To summarise, many aspects of these definitions are essential for developing an understanding of bullying. But we also need an understanding of how pupils, as actors in their own community, interpret the phenomenon of bullying. The only way to reach this shared understanding is communication in the school between pupils, teachers and also parents. Shared understanding, then, helps us to interpret the phenomenon in the same way and intervene in it. Evidence of differences between teachers', parents' and pupils' understandings of bullying may have serious consequences for how the schools successfully deal with the problem (Naylor et al. 2006). It may also be desirable to adopt a broader definition of bullying in schools and other communities compared with the definition used in research, because they are used for different purposes. In research the main point is to define the phenomenon as precisely as possible, for example, to compare it in different countries or over a long period of time. In communities, however, we try to discover possible cases of incipient bullying in order to intervene in them at a very early stage.

Data and methodology

The aim of the present study is to extend our understanding of bullying as a phenomenon in the school community and pupil culture. The findings arise from the self-report data of 85 pupils of various lower secondary schools in central Finland. Pupils' age ranged from 13 to 15. The pupils who were peer support students were used as key informants. The peer support pupils were invited to an annual weekend seminar and asked to write essays about their own experiences of bullying at the beginning of the seminar. The following year, a parallel seminar was held and ten pupils who had admitted to having acted as bullies were also interviewed individually in order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of bullying. The sample is large enough to provide access to the cultural meanings and practices of bullies, the bullied and bystanders. The categorising was carried out on the basis of the roles pupils had in the stories they told. Thus, they themselves defined their roles in the narratives. The research methodology follows the hermeneutic principle. Hermeneutics is a theoretical approach that proposes that what something means depends on the cultural context in which it was originally created, as well as on the cultural context within which it is subsequently interpreted. Hermeneutics provides a theoretical framework for interpretative understanding of meaning, with special attention to context and original purpose, and offers a perspective for interpreting stories and texts (Patton 2002). The texts were analysed from the position of the hermeneutic circle, where meanings are derived from a consideration of the whole, which is itself created through understanding the parts (Josselson 2004). In principle, such a hermeneutical explication of the text is an infinite process, but it ends in practice when a sensible meaning, a coherent understanding free of inner contradictions, has been reached (Patton 2002, 113–5; Kvale 1996, 62).

The hermeneutic circle involves a continuous back-and-forth process between the parts and the whole that results from the hermeneutical circle. One then goes back to certain themes and special expressions, tries to develop their meaning and then, again, returns to the more global meaning of the text in the light of the deepened meaning of the parts, and

so on. Meanings cannot be identified except in relation to others (Taylor 1982, 159–60; Kaikkonen 1999). The interpretation goes beyond the immediately given and enriches understanding by bringing forth new differentiations and interrelations, thus extending its meaning. Correspondingly, the immediately experienced meanings in the interview situations are expanded and refined through interpretations (Kvale 1996).

This study used a qualitative method to draw information from the pupils' accounts. During the data collection, the children had the opportunity to suggest their own meanings for bullying (e.g. Winch 1986). The compositions were analysed using a meaning analysis approach: the meaning contents given by the pupils of the term 'bullying' were elicited from their texts. The writings were also analysed on a timeline, which manifested the evolution of bullying as a process with various phases and forms. The essays can be seen as personal documents of a narrative nature (Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 134; Patton 2002, 115–8). Temporality is usually seen as the defining characteristic of a narrative. Stories also often contain a beginning, middle and an end (Hyden 1994, 101).

In the first phase, the essays were categorised according to the pupils' own categories. While asked to write about 'School bullying', pupils wrote about six categories: bullied pupils, studying at school, relations to school friends, school personnel, family and other people outside the school and, finally, the end of the story (see Taylor and Bogdan 1984). With regard to these categories, various units of meaning could be found, including: being different, teasing, a subjective way to react to bullying, misleading, creating reputation, tolerating, rejecting, similarity and community of the group, plays, rituals, fear, power, guilt and norms. The text mass was placed under these themes and each theme was analysed in order to uncover its meaning, and these partial meanings were related to the whole story and total text mass. After the analysis of the compositions, thematic interviews were conducted to obtain a more profound understanding of bullying as a phenomenon (Taylor and Bogdan 1984).

After the analysis of the essays, ten pupils were interviewed. Each interview was started with the following, open-ended question: 'Tell me about bullying at your school. You may have been the bully, bullied or someone who has seen bullying happen.' Each interview was allowed to flow as a conversation without any time limit. By asking 'Then what happened?', pupils were invited to transform personal experience into a narrative.

Ultimately, in judging the findings, it is important not to overlook the limitations of the study and the insights from other studies. This research extends the findings of certain previous studies into bullying; for instance, Eriksson's (2001) emphasis of school as a social community for bullying and Bliding's (2004) ethnographic dissertation on organising social exclusion and inclusion at school. However, the aim of the present study has been to go beyond the pupils' view of school as a social place where they can sort out their relations, create a pupil culture and so achieve power. Thus, this study introduces a socio-cultural view of school bullying as a phenomenon which is closely linked to communication.

Main findings of the study

Difference as a cause of bullying

Perceiving and producing difference

Bullying focuses on difference and can legitimise the resulting attitudes. One reason for bullying is said to be the perception of difference. Difference is at the core of bullying.

The existence of the difference is legitimised because the perceptions are trusted (Rastas 2002):

> In our class there's this one quite quiet boy (a bit sensitive as well, I'd say). For some weird reason, one of the toughies in our class started calling this boy 'mummy's boy', 'faggot' and that sort of thing. The guy's getting bullied, 'cos he was kind of sensitive, burst into tears, which obviously gave the bully even more ammunition. 'Cry-baby', 'whimp', 'dude can't take the facts'. (no. 80)

Later, more features experienced as different were perceived and produced. The names were perhaps extended to apply to the home, family, friends or hobbies of the person being bullied.

The qualities relating to the 'differences' of the pupil being bullied were considered to be negative characteristics within the youth culture, and respectively their opposites were culturally desired and appreciated. Quietness, shyness, being timid, sensitivity and being unfashionable, sickness/illness, race, stupidity, childishness, or exaggerated swottishness or religiosity are opposites of the cultural ideals represented by the students.

The concept of difference comprises 'otherness' (Kristeva 1992), which is associated with unimportance, and 'strangeness' (Kristeva 1992; Bauman 1990), which refers to the 'not-belonging' to the same community. Otherness and strangeness result in isolation that can be discreet, on the one hand, but the isolation can, on the other hand, also be direct and physical. Isolation is often connected to the drawing of clear boundaries and constructing juxtapositions:

> When doing pair work everyone would quickly look for someone else to pair up with so that they would not need to work with the 'spastic'. When we practised resuscitation, this girl didn't want to try giving the kiss of life to the doll. The reason for this was most probably one boy's exclamation, 'I sure don't wanna touch that doll, if the spastic drools on it!' (no. 17)

Isolation occurs during the classes. Even those who do not actively participate in bullying do not want to do group work with the victim of bullying because of the social pressure of the community. What is at stake is not know-how, because, in fact, the pupil in question 'knows much more about things than most of our other classmates' (no. 17).

Developing a reputation through stories

In the present data, a reputation of being some particular type was developed for the victim on the basis of difference during the act of bullying. Reputation is, according to Karvonen (1999, 46), based on what is mentioned and said about someone and what kinds of stories are heard about him/her. According to Tolonen (2001, 37), stories are used to fashion one's social status in relation to others and also to evaluate the actions of others. Through developing a reputation, the victim of bullying was isolated from social interaction with the rest of the class or school community. Reputations spread, via various interactions, to the whole of the community and affected other students' decisions about various social relations. Reputation is part of the social and cultural reality, which can consequently be 'as paralysing as physical reality' and which can also affect the attitudes within one's social environment (Karvonen 1999, 17–8, 49). Images can be used to persuade and perpetuate ideas that words alone cannot (Lester 1995):

> The school had started and the other pupils had been abroad and their parents were still together. But, one pupil's dad had died during the summer and because a boy, who had

previously been his friend, had become a bully, this pupil started to be called names (Murderer).The bully came up with these trumped-up tales and others bought them. And he spread this stuff all around the school. (no. 47)

Creating reputation through telling stories and name-calling were used as means of demonstrating social power. Telling stories was used to acquire supporters for oneself and to make the victim's friends leave him/her. Manipulative definition of the situation is connected to the developing of reputations; stories are used as means of social power and control (Strandell 1994, 187–8; Gabriel 2000, 113–6). In the act of bullying, the bully and his/her group develop a particular reputation for the victim. At the same time, an audience, through which the reputation is further spread within the community, is essential in developing this reputation.

Ways to construct difference

The substance of bullying is created through a constructed difference. Various acts, such as teasing, having fun, silencing, fooling, rituals and the unity of the group, are all means of bullying. These acts facilitate the continuation of bullying within the community.

Teasing

Bullying starts with teasing. This does not necessarily lead to bullying, but can be a starting point (Pikas 1990). When talking about teasing, students use various terms, for example, 'taking the mickey', 'spouting shit', 'taking the piss', 'having a laugh':

> There's a big crowd, 'the gang', and then there's this one boy/girl on their own. Someone from the crowd starts to spout mean shit. That's when the bullying starts. There's more bullying going on in the crowd, because the gang also wants to show off to each other a bit. (no. 69)

The teasing has three goals. Through teasing it is possible to find out who will join in with the messing around and support the bullying. It also tells something about the class or school community's attitude towards the situation. Thirdly, the bully acquires knowledge about how the target of the teasing reacts.

Amusement and play

Bullying also involves generally having fun and preventing the boredom of everyday life. This kind of having fun usually involves something experienced as either embarrassing or shameful. While in the name of having fun a pupil is humiliated, an aspect of power arises. Having fun is often connected to the cultural and unofficial norms, and it also strengthens the solidarity within the group participating in it (cf. Talib 1999, 224).

Tolonen (1998, 2001) suggests that telling stories and laughing with friends are important forms of sociality and sources of power. Pupils create their own social spaces in relation to each other and the teacher, as well as emphasise their own agency through this space. (All pupil names used in the examples have been changed.)

> A: And so it just goes on, and then sometimes it can even go like, 'I go and get an eraser from Eero', and then he starts, sort of, like pushing him around. Not like hitting him in the face or anything, but kind of like, you know, in a way like, 'Oh sorry, did I push you', something stupid like that.
>
> I: Hmm, how does he push him?

A: Oh, well, like, for instance, he can sort of accidentally push Eero's desk so that all the stuff falls on the floor. Or then walking past, he just like shoves Eero's head or something.

I: Hmm, and what happens then?

A: Well, then just like, 'Oh, sorry', and then the teacher comes like, 'Go back to your desk'. And then it just goes on.

. . .

A: Yeah, and then there's like this aggro and then maybe a couple of other guys get involved in that hassle sort of and . . .

. . .

A: Yeah, and then the others are just like, 'blaah blaah blaah blaah' in the background when the teacher doesn't notice, when s/he's involved with those others.

I: With those hassling around?

A: Yeah, and then the others who're not involved in the hassle can talk all nonsense and, sort of, getting on with it, so to speak, and don't need to pay attention to the homework stuff and such. (interview with Aino)

As a performance, hassling in this incident appeared to the teacher as simply borrowing an eraser, but to the class collective, it meant the humiliation of the victim and, at the same time, a moment's peace from classwork as well as taking time for chatting. It was also obvious that the others did not mind this kind of bullying.

In the classroom, the pupils' counter-culture functions in a hidden manner, protected by a common agreement. This is why it is difficult for a single pupil to interfere with the bullying. In opposing the bullying, s/he would also oppose those 'unofficial benefits' that the bullying provides for the whole class. The teacher gets misled unless s/he is conscious enough of the social relations between the pupils. Funny stories and ideas bring about popularity. With their help, it is possible to acquire power in the group. A pupil with funny stories, and so forth, is liked and others want his/her company. When the victim no longer provides enough fun, it is possible to change the victim.

Silencing

Silencing is, on the one hand, the reason for becoming the victim, but silencing happens, on the other hand, as a result of bullying. When the victim has been made a stranger through public humiliation and having fun, and when the desire for uniformity within the group becomes stronger, the victim is isolated and isolates him/herself from the community. Bauman (2000) and Kristeva (1992) talk about strangers, aliens and others. People identified in this way are distinguishable within the community and isolated, bullied. They are allowed to be seen but not heard. Or, if they must be listened to, let them not be heard (Bauman 2000, 104–9):

> When she [victim, Terhi] started to tell something, the whole class sighed out loud and started to pull faces to each other. Finally, the teacher notified the rest of us about it. (no. 8)

It is essential to show that what the strangers say is insignificant and meaningless in terms of what is desired and what can be done (Bauman 2000, 105). Silencing can also be direct:

> E: Then there where a few of those who always said to him/her like 'shut up' and then like, well okay, maybe that was a bit nasty and wrong, but not now. (interview with Emilia)

There is an attempt to separate the stranger spatially or to limit the interaction to a specific demarcated area. When social conflicts are avoided, there is also an attempt to prevent the physical closeness from turning into a mental one (Bauman 1990, 79–80).

Rituals

Rituals are one way of producing and strengthening bullying. Rituals are used to produce power and to oppress. They are connected to the mental image and the world of otherness which have been constructed around the victim. Rituals often originate from the reason given for bullying or they can be, through mental images, connected to the victim's personality and milieu. Rituals strengthen the feeling of collectivity of those who participate in them. They are also used to express the understandings or the emotional attitudes of the members of the community (Lesko 1988, 111–2).

In the rituals connected to bullying, the presence of an audience is essential and they also often cause social turmoil. Rituals connected to the showing off of power and its maintenance, subjugation rituals, disgust rituals, isolation rituals, silencing rituals, as well as rituals producing coherence and unity within the group, were all present in the data. In what follows, we will examine one of these, the power ritual, as an example.

Repeated kickings and beating are examples of the power ritual. For the pupils, the rituals connected to violence are the gravest and they expect someone to intervene in them. If there is no intervention in these rituals of violence, the forms of bullying may become harder or the victim may take desperate action. The rituals which include violence are often used to secure one's own status and to create fear among the members of the community in the sense that the pupil who supports the victim might end up a victim him/herself:

> T: Well, he's got friends, but no one stands up for him in a fight. It's 'cos this Aleksi, he has always bullied everyone and if you talk back at all, if anyone says anything, even a bit out of order, they'll get smacked for sure. (interview with Teemu)

The power of fear in the community was concrete. Sometimes there is no reason for getting physical with someone. The bully maintains his/her position as a frightening avenger about whom everyone is too scared to say anything. The repeating of the ritual is reminiscent of fear and power.

Misleading and mispresentation

In this study, the term mispresentation means *collusive communication*. People who are given access to the secret communication are placed in a collusive relationship with one another *vis-à-vis* the rest of the participants. By acknowledging to one another that they are keeping relevant secrets from the others present, they also acknowledge that the show they officially project is merely a show. They mispresent (Goffman 1959, 176–8). Team collusions are systems of signals through which performers can surreptitiously receive or transmit pertinent information, request for assistance and do other things that are relevant to a successful performance. These staging cues, as Goffman (1959, 177–9) calls them, come from, or to, the director of the (mis)presentation.

Bullying also involves misleading and mispresentation in interaction. There might be double messages in speech created by stress, intonation or through the words themselves, the meaning of which is often papered over. This papering over is caused by the fact that the real, in some way negative, message needs to be put in a more socially acceptable form.

In this way, it is difficult for the receiver to react to the message, even though s/he generally understands it (Aho and Laine 1997, 73–4).

In the act of bullying in the present data, the double message was used to con the teachers. The victim was greeted when the teacher was present in order to make the teachers believe that the victim was a friend:

> M: Hmmm. So this form teacher said that 'I thought you got on and so. I didn't know that there was anything like that'. It's not like, it's not kind of visible.
>
> I: Yeah. And was that which was visible, was that something that said that they're friends?
>
> M: Well in a way, yeah, like when we said 'Hi', we sort of did it in a kind of twisted way, sort of like we didn't really mean it.
>
> …
>
> I: How would you then, if there would have been, for instance, Sini [Milla's friend] and you would have said 'Hi' first to Sini; what would you have said then?
>
> M: I would've kind of like, with a normal voice said, 'All right?', but then to Iina (the victim), I would've said, 'Hi' [in a high-pitched voice, the intonation of the voice changes] or something. (interview with Milla)

The aforementioned greeting includes a double message. The pitch of the voice tells the pupils that it is an unkind and sneering greeting. The emotional space is expressed through the oral hint (Trenholm and Jensen 1992, 196). For the teacher, the meaning was alien: s/he was unable to interpret the fact that a particular pitch transformed the greeting from a kind one into an unkind one.

Mispresentation guarantees that bullying is not intervened in, because the official world does not recognise it. Smith and Sharp (1995, 11) state that although teachers might attempt to get information about bullying cases, it is usually only the tip of the iceberg that comes to the surface. The official world interprets bullying events as non-bullying, which is why bullying may continue even though teachers are keeping their eyes open for it (e.g. Boulton 1995). The pupil community acts according to its own unofficial norms and ideals and the adult community is often quite ignorant about them. If the school community is not aware of the social relationships of the pupils, their values, attitudes or the unofficial norms which underlie their behaviour, it may unintentionally reinforce a behavioural model which is in fact in contradiction with the official norms.

Bullying as a way of creating status and pupil culture

Every new group must decide how to distribute power and status, how to define criteria for inclusion and exclusion, how to develop norms and rules that define peer relationships and how to define punishments and rewards (Schein 2004, 116–35). It is through differences and similarities that a pupil community creates and renews its culture. The perception of differences is, in most cases, focused on the crucial aspects of culture, such as the ideals related to clothing, beauty and powerfulness. Thus, bullying is a way of creating and renewing culturally accepted and appreciated values and ideas. Difference is no longer an issue of individual difference, because the difference of the bullied pupil represents features which are opposite to what the community appreciates culturally. Deviation from similarity is, then, punished in various ways – often socially through, for example, rejection, contempt or isolation. These punishments are much more harsh than what the sanctions of the official world might be – e.g. detention or to be summoned to see the principal. This explains why it is so difficult for pupils to defend their bullied peer.

A bully who defines what is different in the pupil community creates the group of 'us' and 'them' and through the definition gains acceptance for the values represented by 'us'. This definition creates a status within the community, and the means of bullying create fear of the social punishment to follow. Therefore, few members dare question the values created by the bully and his/her supporters.

The community spirit created through bullying is not real or genuine. The class, however, may experience it as being real, because the bullied pupil creates a social space within the community and becomes its common enemy. The process of bullying must therefore continue for the community spirit to remain unharmed. Because there exists a threat within this kind of a community for the spirit to be lost, the bully ensures it with fear: nobody dares to side with the bullied so as not to become bullied him/herself. In this way a group of followers is created, remaining together either for fear or for pursuit of status.

The feeling of community in a class where bullying is present does not concern the whole group. The pupils feel misplaced security within the social networks where friendships are pursued and isolation is feared (see Hey 1997). Someone else being bullied is not seen as a personal threat.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings presented here, although from a small-scale qualitative study, add to the understanding of bullying behaviour without making an exaggerated claim for generalisability (Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 32–3). We feel that the findings open up new ways of seeing and understanding bullying from a cultural perspective, and each reader can assess for him/herself how this understanding may assist in seeing the phenomenon in his/her own community.

In general, the findings of the present study show that bullying often results from pursuit of power, status or popularity. It starts by naming what is different in the bullied person such as a characteristic not accepted in the pupil culture. What is central in bullying is the 'otherness' of the bullied, developed by creating a certain kind of a reputation for the bullied. Telling stories about the bullied is very significant in creating this reputation. Other means that reinforce bullying are play-acting for the audience, misleading or mispresenting to the bullied pupil or the teacher, and various rituals.

Pursuit for power in bullying happens through creating a certain pupil culture. By using the difference of the bullied, the bully defines what is to be appreciated or treated with contempt within the group's culture. In this way, the bully gains power and the members of the community are forced to pursue the same cultural values in order to avoid becoming bullied themselves. For example, if fatness is culturally unaccepted within the pupil community cases of anorexia nervosa may result.

Understanding bullying as a cultural and social phenomenon with interaction and communication as its crucial element, opens up new opportunities for educators to detect bullying-related phenomena. Bullying should perhaps not be looked upon as a long-standing process, because it is often realised in small interactive incidents which are joined in the experiences of the bullied into something as much as a year-long continuous chain. Identifying and understanding these small incidents may be the key for the teacher to notice bullying and to intervene to stop it.

Consequently, it is essential to be aware of the prevailing cultural values, fear, power and norms that reign among pupil communities in society. Bullying occurs in a society where there are norms that underpin it as an ongoing process. Talking about these norms

helps pupils to understand power use that is related to social relationships. This is one way of dismantling the power that has been built around these norms by the bully. Knowing one's pupils is a prerequisite for preventing bullying. If teachers do not know their pupils, they can be easily misled and even the lesson can be used as the stage for bullying without their knowledge.

In terms of policy implications, then, the findings of this study suggest that successful prevention and intervention are only possible if the target problem is fully understood (Aarnos 2003, 84; see also Hamarus 2006a, 2006b). The concept of a secure learning environment at school should include the aspect of feeling secure socially. The points and findings reported in the study also have their counterparts in other communities of our societies, where an increasing amount of difference and otherness is emerging due to today's multiculturalism and globalisation (Melucci 1996, 114–6; Kaikkonen 2004).

Although the present study did not examine teachers' or parents' understanding of bullying, it has implications for future research. The findings of the study have brought the nature of bullying into light and provided a new evidential basis from which prevention and intervention programmes can be developed. We need much more research in order to gain more extensive and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon as a whole in order to develop effective counter-measures against bullying.

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