Over the last decade or so there has been a vast increase in literature on countering bullying in schools. A significant proportion of it has focussed on what can be done to reduce its prevalence. Recently, researchers have begun to examine whether the anti-bullying programs and intervention strategies that have been produced and implemented in schools have actually worked.

The verdict is that they have been modestly successful. It has been estimated that anti-bullying programs have, on average, reduced bullying by around 20 per cent in schools where they have been employed and rigorously monitored. Significant reductions in peer victimisation over time have been reported in most European countries. Yet many commentators opine that things are getting worse and desperate measures are needed.

Why, in the light of indisputable progress in reducing bullying in schools, is there so much dissatisfaction? In part, this is because bullying in schools still continues to occur at an unacceptably high level. According to a recent Australian survey, among students between Years 4 and 9, about one child in four reports being bullied at school every few weeks or more often. If vital knowledge has in fact accrued in recent years on how to reduce bullying in schools, why is it having such a limited effect?

My answer is simply that schools are not accessing and making use of what is now known about countering bullying. Broadly, there are two aspects to the task of reducing bullying, First, there is the proactive or preventive aspect. This is concerned with how schools can help students to establish and maintain more positive relationships with each other and deal more adequately with interpersonal conflict. It includes work in classrooms with students to develop greater empathy, to act assertively when necessary, to become more resilient and to help others who are being bullied, for example, through positive bystander behaviour. All this can help to reduce the number of cases of bullying that may otherwise require intervention by the school.

The second aspect of countering bullying may be called reactive and requires the use of effective methods of intervention with cases of bullying. Research in England, Australia and the US concurs in claiming that interventions are frequently unsuccessful. About 30 per cent of students report having been bullied to teachers; around 50 per cent of students have indicated through anonymous surveys that their telling did not result in their situation improving. This is surely a matter of grave concern.

My concern is greatly increased when I reflect upon the fact that there are now known methods of intervention that have been shown to be effective in many situations – and they are simply not being employed in many schools.

There are six major methods of intervention in cases of school bullying. These can be listed as: the traditional disciplinary approach; strengthening the victim; mediation; restorative practice; the support group method; and the method of shared concern. Each of these methods can be effective and justified in addressing some cases of bullying in schools.

Cases of bullying are not all alike and may require different methods of intervention. Most bullying is relatively mild, consisting of repeated verbal slights or insults, occasional pushing around and deliberate but temporary exclusion by a group. Such treatment can nevertheless be extremely hurtful to some students and needs to be addressed. If it is not addressed effectively more serious forms of bullying such as physical assaults and comprehensive long term exclusion are likely to follow.

Interventions need to take into account the severity of the bullying, but also whether there is group involvement. In addition, there must be available skills, and training, of staff and interventions need to be consistent with the school’s anti-bullying policy and philosophy.

The traditional disciplinary approach
According to surveys of teachers and counsellors across many countries including the US, Australia, Canada, Germany, Norway and Finland, the disciplinary approach is seen by about 75 per cent of school staff as the most appropriate way of dealing with most, if not all, forms of
bullying. Essentially, it seeks to prevent bullying from continuing by imposing sanctions or punishments on the offender. It also "sends a message" to other students about what will happen to them if they engage in bullying. Although this approach may deter some students from continuing to bully, it commonly results in students continuing to bully in more covert and less detectable ways that are at least equally hurtful to those they bully. This approach requires a high degree of surveillance, which is often impossible or difficult to maintain. However, in cases of very violent or criminal behaviour, or in cases for which counselling approaches prove unsuccessful, sanctions are generally required.

**Strengthening the victim**

This approach to dealing with cases of bullying aims at assisting the victim in coping more effectively in interactions with the bully or bullies. To this end, students who are being targeted are advised or trained to become less vulnerable, for example, by learning to act more assertively. One technique victims may be taught is known as fogging. This involves openly acknowledging that the bully may actually believe the negative things he or she is saying and refusing to be disturbed or intimidated. It can be effective in some cases of one-to-one bullying but is limited to bullying that is verbal.

**Mediation**

According to this approach, students in conflict are invited to work with a trained teacher or peer-mediator, to find a mutually acceptable way of resolving their problem. It requires a readiness of the parties involved in the bullying to agree to meet and seek a solution, facilitated, if needed, by an external mediator. The support group method

This approach involves getting the offender to reflect upon his or her unacceptable behaviour, experience a sense of remorse and act to restore a damaged relationship with both the victim and the school community. Its application may take place at a community conference attended by those involved in the bullying plus significant others such as parents. It can also be used to resolve problems of bullying involving a group or class of students and issues of bullying that arise between two individuals. Necessary elements include the prior existence - or subsequent emergence - of remorse on the part of the offender and the readiness of the victim and others to accept the offender's apology and restorative action.

**The support group method**

This is a non-punitive approach that involves the students who have been identified as bullying someone being confronted at a group meeting with vivid evidence of the victim's distress. Those present also include a number of students who are supportive of the victim. The victim is not present. The students are required to say what they will do to improve the situation for the victim. The outcome is carefully monitored. This approach is seen as appropriate for non-violent, non-criminal forms of bullying. It does not, however, take into account any provocation that may have occurred to precipitate the bullying and the need, in some cases, for changes in behaviour on the part of both parties.

**Restorative practice**

This practice involves getting the offender to reflect upon his or her unacceptable behaviour, experience a sense of remorse and act to restore a damaged relationship with both the victim and the school community. Its application may take place at a community conference attended by those involved in the bullying plus significant others such as parents. It can also be used to resolve problems of bullying involving a group or class of students and issues of bullying that arise between two individuals. Necessary elements include the prior existence - or subsequent emergence - of remorse on the part of the offender and the readiness of the victim and others to accept the offender's apology and restorative action.

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