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BULLYING AMONG STUDENTS IN FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION...

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THE ROLE OF COUNSELLORS IN ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Helen Cowie and **Carrie-Ann Myers** shine a light on the hidden issue of bullying in our institutions. Can counsellors have any impact on this disturbing aspect of student life?



The nature and incidence of bullying in further and higher education

Most research on bullying has taken place in schools and we can gain a great deal of knowledge from this literature in terms of effectiveness of interventions for supporting victims. However, more recently, there has been an upsurge of interest in bullying among post-16 students, whether in further or higher education, for example, in Canada and in the UK.¹⁻⁵ The most widely used definition of school bullying is the one originally proposed by Olweus, which identifies three core components:

- i. There is an intent to harm or upset another student
- ii. The harmful behaviour is done repeatedly over time
- iii. The relationship between bully/bullies and victim/victims is characterized by an imbalance in power⁶

Cyberbullying has also emerged as a phenomenon at both college and university levels. Like traditional face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying involves the deliberate intent to hurt a person or persons through the electronic transmission of messages and images which target the victim(s) repeatedly over time.⁷

The problem has become so serious in the UK that Universities UK (UUK) has issued a report, *Changing the Culture*, on sexual violence, harassment and hate

crime on campus, with a list of recommendations, emphasising prevention, that all universities should take on board.⁸ There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that there is some continuity in perpetration between childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood. In a retrospective study of 186 university students who admitted to bullying their peers, Curwen et al found that, although there was an overall decrease in the incidence of verbal and physical bullying between high school and university, a substantial proportion of the student bullies in their study had also engaged in bullying behaviour at elementary and high school levels.⁹ Chapell et al found that over half of the adult bullies in their sample had also bullied others during childhood and adolescence, and conclude that this history of bullying indicates long-term benefits so that the behaviour becomes entrenched and continues to be a successful strategy for improving the bully's social status.¹⁰ Not only that, there is evidence that bullies are popular among their peers and that bystanders are often indifferent to the suffering of the victims.¹¹

Bullying among post-16 students takes many forms and includes such behaviours as: spreading nasty rumours on the grounds of race, disability, gender, religion and sexual orientation; ridiculing or demeaning a person; social exclusion; unwelcome sexual advances; stalking; threatening someone, either directly or online; and revealing personal

information about a person that was shared in confidence.^{5,12} In a study of students in the age group 16-19 years, West explored the incidence of cyberbullying in one FE college. He found that 6.7 per cent reported being cybervictims and 10.7 per cent admitted to being a cyberbully.¹³ In a follow-up study, he carried out a survey of 5,690 students from 41 sixth-form colleges and colleges of further education in England.¹⁴ He found that 7.9 per cent reported being a victim of cyberbullying, but only 1.9 per cent admitted to being a cyberbully. The victims reported

...BULLIES ARE POPULAR AMONG THEIR PEERS AND... BYSTANDERS ARE OFTEN INDIFFERENT TO THE SUFFERING OF THE VICTIMS

such disturbing behaviour as being told to kill themselves, being sexually harassed, being taunted on account of their religion, being bullied on account of their sexual orientation, being attacked by a

‘gang’ of former friends on Twitter, and having nasty comments posted online by a former romantic partner. The emotions experienced by the targets of bullying included anger, hurt, sadness, depression, embarrassment, anxiety, difficulty in concentrating, isolation, self-blame, fear, and suicidal thoughts. Victims also reported that the cyberbullying had an adverse effect on their capacity to study and on their ability to form social relationships online and in the real world. In the same study, the students who admitted to being cyberbullies reported a number of reasons. These included fun, revenge, anger, jealousy, provocation, desire for power and status, and freedom to behave in this way through the anonymity of the social media.

Cyberbullying is reported to be a particularly pernicious form of bullying because it can invade all aspects of a target’s privacy and because of the potential anonymity of the perpetrators. Molluzzo and Lawler elicited responses from 121 undergraduates on their perceptions of cyberbullying.¹⁵ The students reported cyberbullying as a matter of great concern and were aware of the prevalence of homophobic and misogynist forms of cyberbullying, with the posting of harassing messages on social networking sites the most common form of abuse. These findings are confirmed in a larger study (N=1,925) by Faucher et al, who also noted that women students were more vulnerable to attack through such forms of bullying as ‘sexting’, ‘morphing’, ‘virtual rape’ and ‘revenge porn’.¹ (See also Phipps and Young.)¹⁶

In their study of US undergraduate students who were members of fraternities or sororities, Simmons

and colleagues revealed discriminatory attitudes and behaviour towards fellow students on the grounds of ethnicity and sexual orientation.⁴ In retaliation, it appeared that minority groups formed their own fraternities and sororities, so perpetuating rather than resolving the discriminatory behaviour that they experienced. Again, Björklund reported that university students are more at risk of being stalked than other young people, with rates of 11 per cent or over.¹⁷ These studies demonstrate the different forms that bullying takes at college and university levels and also highlight the gendered nature of bullying at this level.

In the context of HE, Pörhölä et al, in a pioneering ongoing cross-cultural study of bullying at universities in Argentina, Finland, Estonia and US, found that the most common type of bullying was reported by women students in all four countries in the form of unjustified criticism, belittling or humiliation related to studies.¹⁸ In contrast to school, where high-flyers are often the target of bullying, university students in all four countries reported that it was academically weak students who were belittled for their lack of achievement. Studies like these indicate the necessity of viewing bullying in its post-compulsory social and cultural context where people have chosen to study. A number of surveys broadly confirm these findings; for example, Zalaquett and Chatters (in colleges) and Akbulut and Eristi, and Faucher, Jackson, and Cassidy (in universities).^{1, 19, 20} Since the students in these studies are over 16 years of age, they are considered as young adults rather than children and so some of the bullying behaviours, for example, defamatory emails, posting unauthorised photographs or videos of a person, stalking, sexual bullying or hate crime, can be defined as illegal within the UK as well as some other European countries.²¹

The impact on mental health

For the students who are the targets of such bullying behaviours, the experience is unpleasant and distressing in the short term. However, for some, there are longer-term negative consequences for their mental health and their academic career. Bullying affects the target’s self-esteem and often leads to social withdrawal from peer group networks. Consequently, victims of bullying run a heightened risk of mental health disorders, including depression and social anxiety. For example, Schenk and Fremouw found that college student victims of cyberbullying were more likely than non-bullied peers to suffer from depression, anxiety and a range of psychosomatic complaints, as well as academic

difficulties.²² Research into the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students confirms the negative effect of bullying on the mental health of targets. One National Union of Students (NUS) survey found that one in five LGB students, and one in three transgender students reported at least one form of bullying on campus; many reported that they had to pass as ‘straight’ in order to protect themselves from homophobia and transphobia.²³ Rivers and Valentine et al report on the extremely negative effect that such treatment had on the mental health of staff and students.^{24, 25} In extremis, this could lead to suicide.

The role of counsellors in reducing and preventing bullying

With such a range of negative, harmful and potentially life-changing behaviours occurring on a daily basis on FE and HE campuses, we now consider how counselling-based interventions could be used to tackle the problem.

Counselling support and staff training

Student health services are alert to the outcomes of bullying, but they are already overstretched by the variety of problems that students face when leaving home for the first time to make the transition from school to college or university.²⁶ Clearly, counsellors are trained to offer one-to-one support to the victims of bullying. But they could go further by training other colleagues. In the context of sexual bullying, Luca argues that more staff training is necessary to help tutors and lecturers listen to students and offer appropriate support.²⁶ The majority of universities have a personal tutor system, but there is no training

for lecturers and little guidance on how to deal with bullying, if it is even reported. If a student does disclose an incident, the lack of practical, central, information available to tutors is leaving those who come forward

further distressed and is resulting in a reluctance on the part of students to tell anyone anything about their problem. Furthermore, there is a need to heighten awareness among staff and students of the potentially damaging effects that bullying can have on both targets and perpetrators. But this process would be enhanced through active support from the authorities in partnership with student counselling and health services.

Training student bystanders and witnesses

Some pioneering work has already been done in colleges and universities, in particular through the voluntary work of students in a variety of peer support roles, such as telephone counselling, and befriending new students in halls of residence. Giovazolias and Malikiosi-Loizos document the development of peer support systems at the University of Athens where students are trained in empathy and active listening as well as basic communication and counselling skills to address such issues as adjustment to college life, separation from family, loneliness and relationship difficulties.²⁷ Yet, despite their effectiveness, such systems are scarcely implemented in other European universities. Well-designed peer support systems at primary and secondary school levels have been shown to be effective in alleviating the suffering of victims of bullying.²⁸ The most effective systems seem to be those that are embedded in a whole-school policy.²⁹ Similarly, it would seem that peer support systems at college and university levels would benefit greatly from being part of an institution-wide policy to reduce and prevent bullying.

Unfortunately, this overall commitment to addressing the issue of bullying among students is not evident in most universities.^{30, 31} However, bystander training is one of the key recommendations from the UUK Taskforce, which provides case study evidence for its effectiveness at university level.^{8, 32} College and university counsellors potentially could play a key role in this process by offering training for peer supporters, students’ union leaders and hall of residence wardens and ambassadors, in order to empower these students to challenge bullying when they encounter it and to demonstrate alternative non-violent ways of dealing with relationships.

Anti-bullying policies

The UUK Taskforce recommendations are timely in making recommendations which, it is to be hoped, will become embedded in all college and university policies and codes of practice. Anti-bullying policies exist in some universities, but student perception is that the authorities provide very little protection.²³ It is essential to consider systemic influences on bullying that may be embedded in the culture of the university. Shariff and DeMartini, in confirmation of NUS surveys, argue that cyberbullying (such as posting offensive material online) appears to be rooted in a laddish culture typified by such bullying behaviour as ‘slut-shaming’ as a mechanism for subduing women as well as LGBT students.²

[A] COMMITMENT TO ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF BULLYING AMONG STUDENTS IS NOT EVIDENT IN MOST UNIVERSITIES

As they argue, the behaviour is the symptom, not the root of the problem. From this perspective, counsellors could play a significant part in heightening awareness of the *systemic* influences on bullying in FE and HE settings by their involvement in changing the whole culture of the college/university from ‘laddishness’ to one that is more person centred.⁸ This process of cultural change requires cooperation and understanding among all members of the academic community – lecturers, researchers, senior management and healthcare and counselling

professionals. To achieve this change, the college or university authorities need to fund and resource such a whole-institution approach. All the evidence from schools indicates the absolute necessity of an

institution-wide approach involving the integration of all policies and interventions if reduction and prevention of bullying are to be achieved.

Conclusion

Overall, we argue, colleges and universities need to have much greater awareness of the emotional, social and cognitive risks to the student body of on-campus bullying, with counselling and healthcare staff having an influence on the development of policies and interventions to reduce and prevent it. Counsellors’ unique knowledge of the student experience and of the major mental health risks posed by bullying has the potential to be an invaluable resource for strategic planning. Rather than denying the problem, as seems to be the case at present with a lack of coherent policy, it is essential for college and university authorities to engage in an open process of dialogue and debate if any progress is to be made. There is also a need for colleges and universities to put in place a range of systems to address the issue, such as counselling resources, peer support and bystander training as well as systems for promoting empathy and inclusion across the university. Such interventions should take account of up-to-date psychological knowledge about the importance of positive social relationships during the critical lifespan transition from adolescence to adulthood that the majority of FE and HE students are undergoing. Counsellors, with their in-depth knowledge of the processes through which individuals integrate or fail to integrate into the networks of the student community, have the

potential to play a critical role in preventing such cruel and discriminatory behaviour from continuing unchecked. Such behaviour, as research demonstrates, continues into the workplace, and consequently bullying must be tackled across the lifespan. ●



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ALL THE EVIDENCE FROM SCHOOLS INDICATES THE ABSOLUTE NECESSITY OF AN INSTITUTION-WIDE APPROACH INVOLVING THE INTEGRATION OF ALL POLICIES AND INTERVENTIONS IF REDUCTION AND PREVENTION OF BULLYING IS TO BE ACHIEVED

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