The Undercover Anti-Bullying Team Approach: Using relational solutions to address relational problems in the classroom

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Abstract

The relative intimacy of the classroom can be the site for extreme examples of aggressive action more commonly referred to as bullying. These actions are often covert and can significantly disrupt positive learning relationships amongst students. Traditional responses to bullying behaviour in schools usually focus on attempting to change the behaviour of the victim, or the bully, or to make modifications to the school systems. The 'Undercover Anti Bullying Team Approach' is a unique intervention that calls students into a collaborative alliance of support for the victim. By re-authoring relationships within the team and by promoting anti-bullying actions to the rest of the class, team members not only model supportive interpersonal relationships, but effectively challenge discourses of difference and hierarchical relations of dominance.

Definition of school bullying

Olweus (1993, p.9) defines bullying in the school as when a student is 'exposed, repeatedly over time, to negative actions of the part of one or more students'. These 'negative actions' can encompass a range of behaviours from intentional physical injury to teasing, mocking, humiliating and name-calling. Researchers have typically viewed bullying as aggressive actions located within a power imbalance between the target of the bullying and the perpetrator to the extent that the target is unable/unwilling to defend themselves (Carrera, De Palma & Lamerias, 2011). Other researchers have challenged this definition and have described bullying as 'a relational process of power relations in which bullying often involves students imposing behavioural norms on their peers or policing those norms once they are established' (Winslade, 2013, p.1). Bronwyn Davies and her colleagues have suggested that bullying is better understood in this way and have resisted the labelling and pathologising of bullies (Bansel, Davies, Laws, & Linnell, 2009; Winslade, 2013).

Undercover Anti Bullying Teams (UABTs)

Undercover Anti Bullying Teams (Williams, 2010; Williams & Winslade, 2007, 2012) utilise a non-punitive and non-blaming approach to bullying. The function for these teams is to solve the problem of bullying and to re-define the relationships between the victim/target of the bullying, the perpetrators and those who observe the bullying. When an individual, or as is more common, a group of students act in unison in practices of power and might, traditional responses to bullying that employ greater displays of power by school authorities, can create exactly the opposite of eliminating the bullying and can simply shift it to other locations and other students.

The term "undercover teams" was coined by Bill Hubbard (2004). Hubbard's work has been considerably developed since then to include conceptualising bullying as a narrative performance where perpetrators, victims, and bystanders all play out their roles according to a predefined storyline with a fairly predictable plot trajectory. The bullying event can therefore be viewed as 'a story of bullying' and the problem constructed as 'bullying' rather than personalising the bully as the problem. An UABT is primarily an alliance of students strategically formed by the school counsellor for the purpose of usurping the storyline of bullying and co-authoring a new story of harmonious relationships in a classroom.

The Undercover Team's five stages

Undercover Anti Bullying Teams (UABT) progress through 5 distinct stages. In the first stage, the counsellor listens carefully to the story told by target of the bullying and explores the main points of the bullying incident. If the counsellor decides that an undercover team may be appropriate he/she discusses the Undercover Anti Bullying team approach with the student.   As is often the case, the student may be unsure whether this approach would help. The counsellor can then refer to archival records of previous teams and invite the student to participate in this novel approach.

Once the approach is agreed to by the student, the second stage begins where the target's story is carefully recorded using their own words on the forms developed for this purpose. This stage is completed when the counsellor and the student assemble the names of those students on the team. The composition of the team is important and must include two of those students who are doing the worst bullying along with 4 others (two males and two females) who have respect and status in the class. Teachers are told by email that there is bullying in their class and the names of the students on the UABT are shared with them.

In the third stage, the counsellor meets the team and reads out the target's story without identifying names and then asks the students to join an alliance against the bullying. When they give their consent they are given the name of the student and this usually comes as no surprise. Then they devise a plan to eliminate the bullying and this is recorded on the forms.

The fourth stage of the process involves monitoring the progress of the plan. The comments of the team and the target are carefully noted and read out to each other and teachers are invited to comment on changes they have noticed. Any modifications to the plan are decided by the team. As relationships in the class begin to

shift and feedback from all parties becomes more positive, the target of the bullying decides whether or not the bullying has ceased.

When bullying has stopped, the team and the teachers are informed that the project has been successful and a date set for a final ceremony (stage five) where team members are presented with a certificate signed by the school Principal together with a small food voucher. Participants are asked to complete a brief survey and this data is used to evaluate the programme.

A case vignette

A teacher approached me (School Counsellor) about a student who seemed unhappy and unusually withdrawn in class. He described this boy as new to the school and that he was from Zimbabwe. He had noticed that he had few friends now and spent time walking around by himself. When asked how he was feeling, he told that the teacher that he was 'alright'.

I called George (not his real name) out of class and after reassuring him that it was safe to talk to me, I asked what was happening. He began to tell me about teasing by students in his class. From his initial explanation I had an idea that an UABT might work in this instance and briefly explained what I had in mind.

After gaining his permission to record his story, using the forms devised for this purpose, I wrote down his story in his own words.

There has been some racism, name calling, sometimes pushing, shoving and that's basically it. Sometimes they take stuff out of my bag. They take my books, my pens, my lunchbox. They always make jokes about things that are black and they look sideways at me when they are talking. Today we were just playing and they mentioned something about black sh*t, they saw some dog sh*t and they looked at it and then at me and went "oooo" and they all laughed".

I asked what he thought that meant and he said, "I took that to mean that the dog sh*t was me."

"Most times they call me fat, they say something about what I eat, how I eat and they say stuff about my mum. They ask me if she is black and if she has white teeth. They ask if she is fat. Sometimes I am walking down the stairs and they bump in to me on purpose".

I asked George how all this made him feel different.

Well, mostly they just look at me. I hate that. I hate people staring. I have been made to feel different because use of my colour. Racist jokes and all that, saying that I'm from Jamaica, black sambo, and I'm really from Zimbabwe. I was in history

and I got this answer wrong and this kid said I was a dumb ass and he got his book and stated hitting me on the head. It happened yesterday in science. He calls me names like dumb ass and sometimes racist names and he says something about my mum's private parts. He said he did her last night. He hits my head with books."

'How has this affected you George?' I asked.

"It makes nm me feel sad. It makes me feel sometimes angry. I have thought that no one wants me here. It's cause they always exclude me and stuff and I on the weekends when things are going on, they don't tell me about it. I would like them to get to know me so we can become friends. I thought that when I came here that no one would really care about my skin colour and that they would just look at me as if I was a normal person. This all stated in my last school and it's just the same now. I've told my parents and they say, just go to school do your work and ignore it."

I then asked George how it was affecting his school work.

"It hasn't really affected me that much. But when we were in P.E (Physical Education), sometimes they choose other people and leave me alone. I am all alone and it feels like I am an outsider. But yeah, it has affected some of my work. I stopped focusing in class and I couldn't do my work."

Then I asked George what the bullying has got him to do or think about doing.

"It's got me thinking about what I should be doing, like school work. Sometimes I wish I could go to a different school. Heaps of Zimbabweans go to that other school and nobody gets bullied there, nobody really cares about who you are or where you come from. I wish I could change schools but it's too far away. I had thought about punching the kids who say rude things about my mum but I stopped because I know you shouldn't get angry. It will just make it worse. I sometimes would like to say things back but I'm not that good at making smart comments."

Finally I asked him how he would ideally like things to be.

"No racism, no name-calling. We'd all just be friends. We'd make jokes and laugh. I don't want the kids to be punished or stood down from school. I just want to be included by them. I'd like to be treated with respect, you know. Yeah, that they'd be nice to me".

Then using class photographs as our guide, I asked him to select 6 students from his class including the two "worst bullies". I explained that the students that he chose (apart from the ones doing the bullying) were to be students who other kids looked up to, ones that don't bully others and are respected by the class and teacher and that the two "bullies" would not be exposed by me at any time.

After meeting the team the next day and reading out George's story, a plan was formed by them. Those who had been doing the bullying were never identified and they were told that they were recruited for their leadership qualities. They developed a typically simple plan that included sitting next to him, sticking up for him, checking to see if he was OK and "giving him positive thoughts". Everybody had ideas that would help and they were excited to get started.

At my next meeting with George, he told me that there had been a huge change and that things were completely different to how they had been. Everything mentioned in his story had been addressed by the team. When I met the team next they said they were thankful that he had selected them and that they were sticking to their plan. Teachers reported that the class was much happier and that George had changed a lot. The meetings continued for a couple more times until George said that the bullying had been completely eliminated. He said he was much happier and now he didn't want to change schools anymore. He agreed that it was time for our celebration ceremony and he asked if he could present the certificates and the food vouchers to the team.

After organising the vouchers and the certificates, we met during a morning interval and talked about the progress of the team and what they had all learned about themselves and about being ambassadors for peaceful relationships. The team members said that they were thankful that they had been given the opportunity and enjoyed being on an UABT. George shook hands with the team members and thanked them as he presented their certificates.

This process is a strategic intervention into a serious relational problem common to many schools. It is uniquely victim-focused but the victim of the bullying is not required to change in any way. Other students in the class are witness to unexpected actions that take place by a seemingly unusual combination of classmates and they typically come on board and support the actions of the UABT. The Team provides members with genuine opportunities to try out positive ways of relating and a chance to re-define identities, both for themselves and for the victim.

Discussion

Research data supports the effectiveness of the UABT approach. Winslade (2013) synthesised the research of four Masters students from California who had each studied particular aspects of archival data gathered by the author from 35 Undercover teams (2006-2011). 90.5% of participants (including bullies and victims) rated the process as successful or very successful (p.29). In a further study, Lambie, et al.

(2013) showed how the establishment of UABTs were followed by a statistically significant effect on classroom climate and "a reduction in feelings of victimisation (in the classroom) and an increase in students' perceptions of support from others" (p. 26). Themes of "social support" and "inclusion" emerged from the analysis of quantitative data (p. 29) and students enjoyed being given the opportunity to develop interpersonal skills through support for the victim.

The UABT approach is a powerful intervention for a seemingly intractable problem. It is a targeted intervention that addresses an actual instance of bullying through mobilising peer relationships in support of victims. A team is simple to set up and manage but is profound in its impact. In over 40 such teams, the author has not had one that was not effective in eliminating bullying for that student at that time.

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