

## Undercover Teams – A Low-Intrusion Restorative Approach to Class Bullying

Utilising the least intrusive intervention is a good principle to follow in most aspects of education, and especially so in the situation of bullying. Addressing bullying with the full might of a school's administration will probably solve the bullying but one must also consider what unwitting damage has this force had, and what learning opportunities have the students been deprived of?

Class bullying is unique. Because a teacher is usually present, it rarely reaches the level of serious physical assault but in many ways can be more damaging because of the confinement that the student experiences, the vulnerability to many bullying events within a day and for the erosive effect that it has upon the learning environment for not only the victim but also the others in the class.

Over the last seven or eight years I have come to favour a particular approach to addressing class bullying because of its effectiveness, its minimally intrusive nature, and its inherent promotion of life skills for students. I label it 'Undercover Teams', both for the covert nature of its operation but also because teenagers (even 'cool ones') love the title. In my mind, Undercover Teams are a restorative adaptation of the influential and far-sighted work in the early 90's of Barbara Maines and George Robinson from the UK. They labelled their contribution to addressing bullying as 'No-Blame', a title that has been much used (and misused) since then.

For the benefit of the reader, I shall describe a real case (with permission provided by the participants), and the path that the intervention took on its way to a successful conclusion.

Darren was a lanky year 9 boy in his first year of high school life, carrying many of the hallmarks of Asperger's syndrome disorder - in class he would talk to himself, make animal noises, shout out, and generally make no effort to communicate or 'fit in' with other students. Classmate's mild irritation with Darren from the beginning of the year had escalated by midyear to unconcealed derision and anger - Darren was frequently taunted with hurtful words towards him and his family, had items thrown at him, was often pushed and had been several times assaulted with a book.

Darren came to my notice because his teachers had taken notice of Darren's plight. Despite the teachers each being experienced, capable practitioners, all of them reported failure in attempting to address the bullying. The teachers had delivered detentions and other punishments to the key perpetrators but bullying Darren had grown to be recognised as a 'class sport' and increasing numbers of students were becoming involved. Darren's mood was sullen and bitter, not only towards the class but also towards the school for its apparent indifference to his treatment.

In my role as School Counsellor, I invited Darren to my office for a discussion about his victimisation. I told him about Undercover Teams and invited him to try this approach as a way of ending the bullying. Darren's response was that he had been bullied since he was in pre-school nine years earlier and that, " ...*nothing was going to change*". Discouragement at the failure of other anti-bullying approaches is a common obstacle in the early stages of Undercover Teams and following my description about its success in our school, Darren agreed to give an Undercover Team a trial. Thereafter, the steps that we took were as follows:

### Day One

Darren gave me a full account of the bullying which I recorded, carefully omitting the names of bullies. Secondly and most importantly, I recorded every single effect of the bullying upon Darren's personal life in every detail.

*"I feel really upset. It makes me want to leave this school. It makes me want to take my anger out on everyone and everything around me. I've been bullied most of my life and I don't know if I can take it anymore", etc.*

Using a class roll as a guide, Darren chose his Undercover Team, comprising the two most problematic bullies and four other students from that same class who were non-bullying/non-

bullied (in other words, confident, assertive kids). Darren was released to class with the advice to keep the Undercover Team intervention a total secret.

#### **Day One - later**

I invited the six selected students from Darren's class to my office. Because a couple of them (the two bullies) were always in trouble, the group naturally assumed that they were about to be 'told off'. Following a friendly greeting that implied no danger, I shared with the group that I was worried about one of their classmates, and mentioned Darren by name - as is usually the case, the two bullies gave an observable 'twitch'. As is also usual, one of the assertive students turned to the bullies to deliver a verbal scolding but as is necessary in this approach, I gently but firmly told the group that Darren's welfare was my only interest. Fortified with this assurance, some confessions of bullying cautiously started, even from some of the supposedly non-bullying students.

I shared with the group the information that Darren had left with me, paying particular emphasis to the most personal and heart-breaking disclosures. The group shifted in their seats uncomfortably, shocked at the history of misery in Darren's life and his level of distress at his current bullying. Giving a few seconds for the reality of the situation to 'sink in' and after some inquiries into their reactions, I invited them to join me in creating a rescue package for Darren. Although the bullies felt undeserving of this invitation (as is often the case), I reminded everyone that Darren had chosen them as the six most powerful students in the class, and informed them that they could do their work without directly challenging the class and its ingrained attitudes towards Darren - i.e. they could work 'undercover'.

I outlined the responsibilities of the Undercover job, emphasising that there was no acclaim or riches accruing to them from the position - rather, they should only accept the role if they wished to make a difference in someone's life and feeling the satisfaction that this brings. Although the common perception by some people is that teenagers are self-centred and selfish, these six students again proved this misconception wrong and cautiously yet excitedly accepted. "But heaps of kids hate Darren - what can us six kids do"? In turn, I asked them, "If you were Darren and you had been bullied because of your differentness for the last nine years, what would make an improvement for you? With encouragement to stick with simple ideas, they brainstormed until they had settled on the following list:

1. Say "hi" to Darren when you see him.
2. Sit with him if he is sitting alone in class.
3. Invite him into a group if we are working in groups for English or Science.
4. Tell kids to back off if they are picking on him.

We quickly talked about ways to keep their work confidential, such as beginning their 'pro-Darren' attitude in small, discrete and progressive steps - this move was especially important for the ex-bullies who could expect 'fall-out' from their mates at abandoning the attacks upon Darren. The Undercover Team agreed on a name for themselves and agreed upon a common alibi for why the six were called to the School Counsellor. We arranged to meet in a week's time to check on progress and adjust plans if necessary.

#### **Day 5**

I had a private chat with Darren to see how he is feeling - it was also a check for me that the Undercover Team had begun their tasks with firm resolution. Among other things, this is what Darren said,

*" They're [the class] treating me a lot better now - some people are wanting to talk to me. Some people have been wanting me to join their groups for Science and stuff. That's a big change".*

*"This is virtually the first time that I have felt wanted at school. It makes me want to go to school and not want to change schools"*

## Day Seven

Needless to say, when I checked with the Undercover Team following a week's activity, they were thrilled to hear about my conversation with Darren. All of the students were visibly proud of their achievements and probably, the ex-bullies especially so. Each of the six students volunteered that they had begun to look at Darren in a new light - several of them admitted to finding several likeable aspects to Darren's character that they had previously been blind to. All of them were surprised at how easily the class had been led away from vindictive treatment of Darren to more tolerant and good-humoured ways of regarding him. They were each beginning to recognise how influential they all were, and the responsibility that power brings.

Two years later, after that Undercover Team intervention, the bond between Darren and the six members of the team still remains. Although they are split up into different classes within the senior curriculum, there is still a strong protective streak towards Darren - and Darren is still loving school.

There have been innumerable Undercover Team successes against bullying at our school - the common theme to them all has been the way that an Undercover Team:

1. gives students the freedom to confess their bullying.
2. allows students to see a victim with 'new eyes'.
3. provides an opportunity for bullying kids to be pro-social in a 'cool' way.
4. utilises the peer effect marvellously in encouraging powerful kids to use their influence wisely.

The members of an Undercover Team tend to carry their skills through their school life and beyond. They make a wonderful human resource for the school for years to come - on several occasions I have resurrected Undercover Teams after more than a year's inactivity for a special purpose such as the arrival of a new student to class. The possibilities are endless! And as you can probably see, it is commonly the experience that the Undercover Team facilitators enjoy the process as much as the students they are working with.

The last quote however belongs to one of Darren's ex-bullies - and Undercover Team member,

*"I'm going to be a police officer - I wouldn't have thought about being a police officer but now I think that I can do it".*

The case study hopefully gives you many clues on how to run an Undercover Team - and also indicates the natural limitations of this approach. In classroom applications and for low/medium level bullying situations, Undercover Teams are an ideal option. But it should not always be the first choice for school staff for *all* bullying situations - in cases of sustained, high level bullying that demands a more formal school response, you may likely have to ignore the Undercover Team approach and move immediately to a mini-conference or full restorative conference.

For more complete details or other assistance in running Undercover Teams, please email me at [wbbhubbard@gmail.com](mailto:wbbhubbard@gmail.com)

Good Luck, Bill

Bill Hubbard currently works in a large co-ed state school in Auckland, New Zealand in the role of Leader of Student Support Services and School Counsellor. Bill became a convert to restorative approaches in school almost 10 years ago and has been developing and experimenting with this style of working since then.
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