

Making School a Better Place: What the Children Say

Özhan Öztuğ and Helen Cowie

Abstract

In line with current view that children should be consulted about issues that concern them in their daily life and that their ideas must play a significant role in finding solutions, in the present study, children were asked to give their views on what would make school a better place to be. The research was carried out in four secondary schools in a small rural town, each with a well-organised pastoral care system and an active anti-bullying policy; two of the schools had established systems of peer support. The study involved 931 pupils aged between 11 and 14 years of age. Although a sizable minority of the sample chose not to offer any suggestions for improving their schools, of those who did respond, only a small number were negative, for example, suggesting that certain groups, such as ‘chavs’ be banned from the school. (The typical ‘chav’ is an aggressive young person who repeatedly engages in anti-social behaviour). Most of the suggestions were positive and ones that schools could easily implement. The results of the present study indicate that students are concerned about issues, such as the problem of school violence, but that they also have constructive ideas for dealing with the problem.

Keywords: Peer support, bullying; school violence, safety; active participation of young people, emotional health and wellbeing

Introduction

Children and young people regularly mention relationships within the peer group as the major factor that causes them to feel unsafe at school, with thousands of children each year (around 28,000 in 2006) telephoning ChildLine for advice on bullying either on behalf of themselves or because of their concern for another young person (ChildLine, 2005). Oliver and Candappa (2003) found that over half of UK primary and secondary school students reported bullying was ‘a big problem’ or ‘quite a problem’ in their school. In fact, the Children’s Commissioner cited bullying as a safety issue that attracted a bigger response from children and young people than any other aspect of his work (Aynsley-Green, 2006, p. 65).

The situation is complicated by the fact that these interpersonal safety issues are actually generated by the peer group and often in contexts that are difficult for adults to control. The recent upsurge of cyberbullying is a case in point. Teachers and parents are often powerless to intervene in the private world that children and young people create for themselves. Some studies have even indicated that children’s most effective conflict resolution may arise naturally out of their interactions with peers rather than as a result of intervention by adults (Killen and de Waal, 2000; Killen and Smetana, 2006). The Relational Model (de Waal, 2000) guides this explanation by proposing that all

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social animals, including humans, develop constructive ways of coping with interpersonal conflict. Underpinning this view is the premise that aggressive conflict depends on experience-based calculations weighing short-term gain against possible damage to social relationships. The likelihood of peacemaking increases when conflicting parties (a) share mutual interest in repairing damage to their relationship and (b) have access to relational-repair mechanisms. From this perspective, constructive forms of conflict do not presume the absence of aggression so much as the presence of peacemaking (de Waal, 2000). If this is the case, teacher intervention, however well-meaning, may disrupt the conflict-peacemaking cycle and in so doing actually prevent the emergence of peacemaking through such activities as reconciliation and 'together outcomes'. This idea was confirmed empirically by a recent study (Roseth et al., 2008) of the role that preschoolers play in resolving difficulties themselves, specifically in peer conflicts. The conclusion of Roseth et al. (2008) was that often intervention by the teacher disrupts the conflict resolution cycle.

At the same time, these researchers indicate the need for children to have access to appropriate relationship-repair mechanisms. This would suggest that there is a need to consult with children themselves on the most suitable methods to adopt in addressing the issues that they have identified as being of concern. A recent development in schools has involved the creation of systems through which school students are given the opportunity to engage in identifying issues in their school community and working through relevant structures in the school to resolve them. For example, schemes such as *Checkpoints for Young People* (Varnava, 2002) involve a process of consultation in order to achieve a safer and happier quality of life at school for all by providing the students with a tool for identifying the social and interpersonal issues that they find most difficult. Discussions with 10-11 year-olds revealed widespread fears about transferring to secondary school; their worries included 'being bullied', 'queuing for food', 'getting lost' and 'too many people'. The efficacy of *Checkpoints for Young People* was evaluated by Jennifer and Shaughnessy (2005) in two primary and two secondary schools. They found that in three of the schools where *Checkpoints for Young People* was implemented there was an improvement in the quality of life at school and a reduction in overt bullying behaviours, such as hitting, tripping and shouting in compassion with control schools.

These findings would indicate that researchers may need to ask children themselves not only about their fears and anxieties but also about possible solutions. Interviews with young people by Hutson and Cowie (2007), for example, reveal awareness of the discomfort experienced by many bystanders when they observe other students being mistreated by their peers and also show that even the bullies may feel guilty about their abusive behaviour and may welcome the opportunity to change their ways, for example by volunteering to become peer supporters.

Cowie and Oztug (2008) and Cowie et al. (2008), in their evaluation of the effectiveness of peer support systems in making schools safer, concluded that simply to have a peer support system in school on its own was not enough. Rather, for peer support to be used to best effect, students should be encouraged and trained to consult more extensively with the school population in order to discover the particular issues of concern, common fears and anxieties as well as suggestions for making safer, friendlier school environments. In particular, they recommended that there should be regular

surveys to find out issues of concern, that there should be regular feedback on the impact of interventions such as peer support, and that school supervision (by peers as well as adults) should target particular places (e.g. toilets) and times (breaks and lunch hours) in response to the findings of such surveys.

In line with these suggestions that children should be consulted about issues that concern them in their daily life, and that their ideas must play a significant role in finding solutions, in the present study, children were asked to give their views on 'what would make school a better place to be'.

Method

Participants

The research was carried out in four secondary schools in a small rural town, each with a well-organised pastoral care system and an active anti-bullying policy. Two schools that already had established peer support schemes were matched with two schools which had yet to commence their peer support training. The study involved a total of 931 pupils, (49.5% males, 50.5% females) where the participants were aged between 11 and 14 years of age.

All other demographic variables, such as social class and poverty were matched through examination of the census data about each of the school, as published by the government Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED, 2007).

Instruments

The survey was carried out using the School Climate Questionnaire (Myers and Hutson, 2007) which contains the question 'What are your suggestions for making school a better place to be?'

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered during a Personal and Social Health Education (PSHE) lesson by the classroom teachers. The research team provided each school with the required number of questionnaires and a script to read out to each class. Once the questionnaires were completed anonymously the schools posted them to the research team at the University of Surrey in pre-paid envelopes.

Specific instructions were provided to the teachers, and anonymity was assured. Informed consent was obtained from schools, pupils and parents. The questionnaires were personally delivered to the Head Teachers by members of the research team, and personally collected, so that any issues could be resolved face to face. The schools were asked to participate and agreed in writing after receiving an information pack. All parents of participating pupils were sent a letter the week before and information pack about the research using an opt-out format. On the day the research took place, pupils were again reminded that they could withdraw at any time and that participation was entirely voluntary. Each pupil also received an information

pack about the research. In the event, no pupils or parents opted out of the research. The researchers agreed to feedback the findings to each individual school.

Qualitative analysis

All responses to the questions were transferred to spreadsheet software Microsoft Office Excel and coded using content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). First, the two authors independently read through all responses, making notes of the types of solutions suggested by each student. Then keywords, such as ‘punish wrongdoers’, ‘install cameras’ or ‘clean up the playground’ were elicited and initial headings identified, for example, ‘punishment’ or ‘respond positively’. The two authors then compared their keywords and discussed the provisional headings. There was broad agreement between the two sets of codings. However, where there was disagreement, the authors returned to the data and discussed each area of disagreement in turn and resolved the differences. The heading that resulted in the most discussion was the one that eventually became ‘Tackle violence’ since the solutions ranged from very punitive ones to solutions that involved devising a more effective code of practice. After much discussion, each response was placed under the headings as shown in Tables 1 and 2. We also agreed that it was important to include the new heading ‘No suggestions’ since a large percentage of the sample came into this category. Finally, these headings became the main themes with examples of categories within them where appropriate.

Results

The results of the qualitative data analysis elicited six main themes as follows:

1. *Tackle violence and improve safety*: Create and implement a code of practice; have more supervision by adults and peers; punish aggressive students; install surveillance cameras in corridors and playground.
2. *No suggestions*
3. *Improve the physical environment and provide more activities and fun*: E.g. make the environment cleaner and healthier; provide more facilities; have more school clubs; improve dining facilities and food.
4. *Improve lesson time*: E.g. make lessons more interesting; have fewer rules.
5. *Remove or reduce requirement to go to school*: Abolish school; reduce time spent at school;
6. *Ban certain social groups from school*

These groupings are summarised in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of pupil's ideas of what would make school a better place to be: Gender differences (Missing responses=55)

Category	Male (N=434)		Female (N=442)		Overall (N=931)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Tackle violence	102	23.5	155	35.1	257	27.6
<i>Punishment</i>	27	6.2	33	7.5	60	6.4
<i>Implement a code of practice</i>	44	10.1	94	21.3	138	14.8
<i>More supervision by adults and peers</i>	24	5.5	20	4.5	44	4.7
<i>Surveillance cameras or other methods</i>	7	1.6	8	1.8	15	1.6
No suggestions	179	41.2	144	32.6	323	34.7
Improve the social & physical environment	60	13.8	77	17.4	137	14.7
Provide more activities & fun	33	7.6	21	4.8	54	5.8
Improve lesson time	13	3.0	12	2.7	25	2.7
Remove requirement to go to school or reduce time spent at school	33	7.6	23	5.2	56	6.0
Ban certain social groups from school	14	3.2	10	2.3	24	2.6

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of ideas of what would make school a better place to be: Age differences (Missing responses=65)

Category	11-12 (N=430)		13-14 (N=436)		Overall (N=931)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Tackle violence	147	33.9	110	24.9	257	27.6
<i>Punishment</i>	22	5.1	38	8.6	60	6.4
<i>Implement a code of practice</i>	85	19.6	53	12.0	138	14.8
<i>More supervision by adults and peers</i>	30	6.9	14	3.2	44	4.7
<i>Surveillance cameras or other methods</i>	10	2.3	5	1.1	15	1.6
No suggestions	135	31.1	181	41.0	316	33.9
Improve the social & physical environment	76	17.5	61	13.8	137	14.7
Provide more activities & fun	36	8.3	18	4.1	54	5.8
Improve lesson time	15	3.5	10	2.3	25	2.7
Remove requirement to go to school or reduce time spent at school	21	4.8	33	7.5	54	5.8
Ban certain social groups from school	0	0.0	23	5.2	23	2.5

A relatively high proportion of both boys (41.2%) and girls (32.6%) reported no ideas for improvements. Older students (41.0%) were more likely to have no suggestions for improvements than younger age groups (31.1%). However, from those who did offer suggestions for improvement, the majority recommended that there should be more effort on the part of the school in tackling the problem of violence. (This is in line with other studies, such as Aynsley-Green (2006), where the most frequently mentioned area of concern at school was bullying and violence.) These suggestions included creating a code of practice (14.8%) and implementing greater degrees of supervision by both adults and peers during break time and lunchtime (4.7%). Only a minority recommended punishment of aggressive peers (7.2%) or surveillance equipment such as the installation of cameras in corridors and the playground (1.6%). The majority of the students appeared to be satisfied with their lessons, with only 3.0% of boys and 2.7% of girls suggesting that there could be improvements there. However, a slightly higher percentage of students (7.6% of boys and 5.2% of girls) suggested that the requirement to go to school should be reduced or abolished and this percentage was greater for older students (7.5%) than for younger students (4.8%). None of the younger students suggested that certain groups (such as 'chavs') should be banned from school but 5.2% of the older students did.

Discussion

Although a sizable minority of the sample chose not to offer any suggestions for improving their schools, of those who did respond, only a small number were negative (for example, suggesting that certain anti-social groups, colloquially named in a derogatory way as 'chavs', be banned from the school). Most of the suggestions were positive ones and ones that schools could easily implement, for example, creating more clubs, brightening up the school environment, improving dining facilities. Some were extremely responsible, for example the suggestion that there should be more attention paid to implementing a code of good practice. These suggestions were more frequent than those that recommended greater punishment of aggressive students or those that requested the installation of surveillance cameras in corridors and the playground.

The results of the present study indicate that a fair proportion of students are realistic about the issues of concern, in particular with the problem of school violence, but that they also have constructive ideas for dealing with the problems (Cowie and Jennifer (2007). From these findings we could propose that constructive solutions do not presume the absence of aggression so much as the presence of positive alternatives to violence. This is in line with the Relational Model of de Waal (2000) who proposes that all social animals, including humans, naturally develop constructive ways of coping with interpersonal conflict, provided that they have access to appropriate relationship-repair mechanisms. The suggestions made by the young people in the present study indicate their willingness to try out positive ways of making the school more pleasant in the hope that this might prevent violence from taking place. This would suggest that there is a need to consult with children themselves on the most suitable methods to adopt in addressing the issues that they have identified as being of concern.

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Daha İyi Bir Okul Ortamı İçin Çocukların Görüşleri Nelerdir?

Özet

Çocukların kendileriyle ilgili günlük yaşantılardan doğan problemlerin çözümünde görüşlerinin alınması ve fikirlerine yer verilmesi önerilmektedir. Bu görüşe bağlı kalarak, araştırmada çocuklara 'okulunuzun ortamının daha iyi olması için neler yapılmalıdır?' sorusu yöneltilmiştir. Araştırmaya kırsal bölgelerden pastoral hizmet sistemi (öğrencilerin manevi ihtiyaçlarını gözeten sistem) ve zorbalığı önlemeye yönelik ilkeleri bulunan; ikisinde akran danışmanlığı programı bulunan, toplam dört okul dahil edilmiştir. Araştırma örneklemini 11 ve 14 yaşları arasında toplam 941 öğrenciden oluşmuştur. Araştırma sonuçları; küçük bir grup öğrencinin okullarını geliştirmek için herhangi bir öneride bulunmayı tercih etmediğini gösterirken, az sayıda öğrencinin; bazı sosyal grupların (örneğin, 'chav'lar) okuldan dışlanmasına yönelik olumsuz önerilerde buldukları belirlenmiştir.(Chav, Britanya'da genellikle kırsal bölgelerde yaşayan sürekli olarak antisosyal davranışlarda bulunan bireyler olarak nitelendirilir). Elde edilen bulgular sonucunda öğrencilerin genellikle olumlu ve okullarda kolaylıkla uygulamaya konulabilecek önerilerde buldukları saptanmıştır. Araştırma, öğrencilerin okullarda zorbalık konusuna önem verdiklerini ve problemlerin çözümüne yönelik yapıcı fikirlerinin bulunduğu sonucunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Akran desteği, zorbalık, okulda şiddet, güvenlik, gençlerin etkin katılımı, duygusal sağlık ve iyi oluş