



The Method of Shared Concern as an Intervention Technique to Address Bullying in Schools: An Overview and Appraisal

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This article outlines and appraises the method of shared concern as developed by Anatol Pikas and applied as a technique for resolving bully–victim problems in schools. It includes a description of how the method can be applied in schools, and critically examines some objections that have been raised to its use. These objections are shown to be largely based on misunderstandings of the method. It is concluded that the method of shared concern is, in fact, well grounded theoretically and can be highly effective in reducing bullying when employed by trained practitioners, especially in addressing problems in which there is group involvement by perpetrators of bullying in secondary schools.

A recent examination of the effectiveness of intervention programs around the world concluded that they had, in general, been only modestly successful with reduction rates ranging from zero to around 50%. The average reduction in reported peer victimisation in schools following the implementation of programs was around 10% to 15% (Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004). Clearly, intervention methods have enjoyed only limited success. Given the prevalence and seriousness of the problem of bullying in schools, there is an urgent need to achieve much more successful outcomes. One approach that claims to have this capacity, if well implemented, is the method of shared concern, as proposed by its originator, Anatol Pikas (2002).

The method has been employed as an element in a number of programs internationally, including ones implemented in England (Smith & Sharp, 1994) Spain (Ortega & Leara, 2000) Finland (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Voetin, Sinasammal, 2004) and Australia (Peterson & Rigby, 1999). These programs achieved a significant degree of success in reducing bullying in the schools where they were applied. Visits to Australia by Pikas in 1994 and 2003 resulted in a number of counsellors being trained in his method. In schools where shared concern has been applied, principally in Western Australia, a high level of success has been reported (Griffiths, 2001).

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Currently, however, there is a dearth of knowledge among counsellors and teachers about the method, and some misunderstandings about how it works.

In this article I will be outlining the method as I have come to understand it from participation in Pikas workshops and discussing its operation at Australian schools where it has been implemented. I shall also provide a critique or appraisal of its proposed uses and relevance as a tool in addressing forms of bullying.

■ The Essence of Shared Concern

Essentially, the method of shared concern is a means of working with children involved in an episode of bullying as perpetrators and target(s) in order to provide an acceptable solution to the problem raised by their behaviour. It does not seek to impose a solution, but rather facilitates the emergence of a solution through the use of interviews and discussion with the parties involved.

Shared concern is in some ways the opposite of traditional and still widely employed methods of dealing with cases of bullying. Suspected bullies are not interrogated, the facts of the case are not objectively assessed as in a court room, school rules and judgments are not invoked with an eye on precedents, guilt is not elicited or pronounced, punishments (often euphemistically described as ‘consequences or sanctions’) are not applied in an attempt to make the punishment fit the crime. Instead, the situation is explored as perceived by those involved, there is no digging for evidence of guilt, no accusations are made, the outcome at which the method is aimed is a resolution of the problem: that is, a reasonable expectation that the bullying will not continue.

Shared concern is a method that assumes group involvement of perpetrators in directing acts of bullying towards an individual who is less powerful than they are. Hence responsibility for the bullying behaviour is diffuse. There may be a ringleader, but the ringleader only leads if there are members of a ring that can be led. The motives of those involved may differ. Some may feel angry or affronted by the behaviour of the ‘victim’. Some may feel that what they are doing is fun. Others may be colluding with aggressive members of their group because they are afraid of becoming victims themselves. Understanding the group dynamics is an important aspect of the method. Contrast this with the more traditional approach, which seeks to identify individuals who are solely responsible for the bullying behaviour, in order to demonise and appropriately sentence them.

This is not to say that the individual is unimportant. Individuals may need to be differentiated from others. Personality factors may come into play. Insofar as group influence is accountable for the individual’s negative behaviour, efforts need to be made, where possible, to reindividualise that person. As part of the method, interviews with individual students are conducted. But at no point is there an intention to ‘break up the group’. Children have a right to enjoy themselves as group members. How they behave will always depend, to some degree, on peer group or friendship group influence. Work with the group must complement work with the individual.

■ The Method

The method of shared concern consists of a series of stages in which interviews or discussions are undertaken with students who are thought to have been involved in an episode of bullying. These include suspected bullies and their victim or victims. Cases are generally chosen in which a group of students are involved in bullying an individual student who has become distressed as a consequence. Highly serious cases that involve criminal actions are not included, nor are cases which are seen as relatively trivial and do not justify a lengthy procedure. The method is seen as more appropriately applied with secondary school students, and some prior training in its use method is considered essential

The method may begin when a bully–victim problem has been identified: that is, a student is being continually oppressed by another person, or more commonly by a group of students. Ideally, information about the situation becomes available through direct observations of what is happening or through reports by third parties. It is considered desirable not to obtain information about incidents from the victimised students in case he or she is victimised further for having ‘informed’ or ‘dobbed in’ the perpetrators. Information is not obtained directly from the victimised students. On the evidence available, students are identified as probably having taken part in the bullying and each is interviewed in turn. Importantly, none of them is accused of bullying. They are regarded as ‘suspected bullies’ who can, in time, assist in resolving the problem.

The Stages

Stage A. The suspected bullies are interviewed in turn, beginning with the student who seems most likely to fill the role of ringleader. The meeting takes place without other students being present or able to observe the interaction, ideally in a quiet room. The student is greeted and invited to sit in an adjoining chair. Once eye contact has been established, the interviewer begins to share a concern about the wellbeing of the person who has been treated badly. The interviewer may suggest that perhaps people have been ‘hard on’ him or her, and that he (or she) is really distressed. It is emphasised that the situation for that person is clearly not good. At this point the interviewee is asked to say what he or she knows about what has been happening. Commonly the distressing situation is acknowledged, not necessarily with any sense of culpability or guilt on the part of the interviewee. Immediately following the acknowledgment, the student is asked what can be done to improve matters. Suggestions are elicited. Positive ones are strongly reinforced. Arrangements are made for a further meeting to discuss how things have developed. The remaining students in the suspected bullying group are seen, again individually, and the procedure repeated. As one might expect, not all interviews run as planned. Students may deny any knowledge of events or attribute responsibility for the conflict to the provocative behaviour of the victim. Ways of working with those who assert their ignorance or innocence — and are reluctant to make any constructive suggestions — need to be improvised. But the experience of those who use the method is that typically those interviewed do acknowledge what has happened and do propose possible ways of helping to improve the situation, or ‘fall in’ with a suggested plan to improve matters, either because they feel concerned

about the plight of the victimised students and/or because they see that it is in their best interest to cooperate.

Stage B: Interview with victim. The victim is seen after all the suspected bullies have been interviewed. The interviewer begins by asking the student how things have been going generally at school, and on hearing about the abusive treatment from other students, expresses concern, sympathy and support over what has been happening. But further questions need to be asked to discover whether the victim has been doing anything to bring on the bullying — that is, by acting in a provocative way. The interviewer discloses that he or she has actually talked with the bullies individually and, with their cooperation, is helping to improve the situation.

Stage C. After further meetings have been held with individual bullies and real progress towards improving the situation has been confirmed, a meeting with the whole group of suspected bullies is arranged. At that meeting it is possible to (i) compliment the members on the progress that has been made; and (ii) respond to (or elicit) a suggestion from members of the group that the victim be invited to join them for a final meeting to demonstrate that the problem of bullying has really been resolved. Reassurances must be given by group members that they will act positively towards the victim at such a meeting. Importantly, the teacher/counsellor should not arrange such a meeting before it is evident that a constructive outcome can be obtained. The victim can normally be induced to join the group for a final meeting, with assurances that the perpetrators of the bullying will cooperate and a resolution of the problem will follow.

Stage D. The final meeting is to provide confirmation that the bullying is over and acceptable relations between all the students has been established. In cases where the victim has behaved provocatively, the interviewer must seek to facilitate adjustments in the behaviour of both sides, that is, play the role of mediator. This may lead to an agreement (signed by those concerned) on how the students will behave towards each other in future.

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■ Some Objections to Shared Concern and Rebuttals

As with most radically new methods of dealing with bully/victim problems, shared concern has its share of critics. Frequently the objections raised are based on a misunderstanding of the method or upon a lack of knowledge underlying the assumptions that are made. Commonly expression objections are examined below.

1. The method of shared concern is a 'no-blame approach' that assumes that individuals should not be held accountable for their actions. As such, it violates common principles of justice.

One of the major obstacles to the problem-solving approach to bullying, of which shared concern is a prominent example, lies in a common interpretation or misunderstanding of what is meant by the term 'no blame.' Parents, horrified at how their

child has been abused by ‘a mob of hooligans’ are often incensed at the idea that they should be ‘let off’. If they are not to blame, they say, who is? Speaking as a politician, the one-time English Minister of Education, David Blunkett, declared ‘it is time to end the no-blame culture of the 90s’ (Smithers, 2000). To some extent, Maines and Robinson (1992) must shoulder some blame for this unfortunate state of affairs, when they named their thoughtful and influential approach to bullying the ‘no-blame approach’. Subsequently, its title was modified or expanded upon by adding the ‘social group approach’. The damage has been hard to undo. To deny responsibility to individuals who commit deplorable or vicious acts upon others is as foolish as to deny responsibility to those who seek to help the victims of bullying. Philosophically, it implies a rejection of free will and any personal accountability for one’s actions. As such, it is hard to see how this view can ever be acceptable. However, as a means of resolving problems in which harm has been done to individuals by others, it is often a sensible way of proceeding — especially if (i) there is a recognition on the part of the perpetrators that there is better way of behaving; (ii) there is a commitment to action consistent with such a recognition; and (iii) a more peaceful and safe environment for children eventuates. To its credit the method of shared concern can often achieve such goals.

2. The method assumes that bullying is typically a publicly observable event that can be readily identified and can come to the attention of the teacher without the event being disclosed by the victim. This is unrealistic.

Research in fact shows that bullying in schools is typically observed by other students. Observational studies in Canadian primary schools indicate that on 85% of occasions bystanders are present (Pepler & Craig, 1995). Who is being bullied by whom is generally common knowledge among students. In schools where teachers are observant and where some children are prepared to inform, identifying those involved in episodes of bullying is relatively easy. At the same time, it must be conceded that some students, especially in Australian secondary schools, are reluctant to inform teachers, in part because they believe that incidents will be dealt with in a punitive and often unfair manner (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003). Effective use of the method of shared concern, a nonpunitive approach, can encourage students to seek the help of teachers (Peterson & Rigby, 1999).

3. Shared concern presupposes group involvement in bullying rather than bullying of a one-on-one kind, which is reported as being the case in many published accounts of bully/victim interactions.

It is true that joint action by a group, as in ‘mobbing’ as it is generally understood, that is, being akin to lynching, is not common in most schools, although it does sometimes occur. Further, there are many occasions in which one person appears to be the sole perpetrator. In fact, among the bystanders present, there are likely to be some who actively or passively support the bullying, as many recent studies have shown (Pepler & Craig, 1995; Salmivalli et al., 1999; Rigby & Johnson, 2004). The support and encouragement of the group to which the perpetrator belongs is commonly a key factor in the motivation and continuation of the bullying behaviour.

4. The method assumes that bullies are potentially empathetic and will respond positively to concern for their victim being expressed by a teacher. In fact, they lack empathy and the capacity to cooperate.

While research has shown that children who repeatedly bully others are significantly below average in their degree of empathy and cooperativeness (Slee & Rigby, 1993) and Rigby and Cox (1996), it should not be assumed that they are incapable of responding empathetically or cooperatively. Some perpetrators of bullying do in fact acknowledge feelings of sympathy for victims, especially when interviewed in one-to-one situations, and do cooperate with the interviewer. It should further be understood that many children who bully others come to see that it is in their best interests to seek an acceptable solution to the problem in which they are involved, in part because they themselves feel at risk of being bullied by other members of the group.

5. The method of shared concern assumes that a mediating process can effectively be applied to problems of conflict between bullies and victims. This requires that there should be an approximate equality of power between the two parties and a readiness, especially on the part of the more powerful, to reach a fair solution. These assumptions are invalid. Moreover, mediation requires neutrality on the part of the mediator, which is unrealistic and unfair to the victim, who is not to blame.

In the course of working with bullies and victims, the dynamics of the group situation are likely to change. In moving towards a constructive solution, the teacher is implicitly overcoming the imbalance of power. The victim is to a degree empowered. It should also be recognised that in some cases (though by no means all) the person being targeted has acted provocatively and needs to change his or her behaviour before the problem can be resolved. Mediation may play a particularly important part in such cases.

6. Parents have a right to know if a child is being investigated for bullying someone at school. Shared concern is unethical since it does not involve notifying parents.

Although a child may be interviewed after being identified as a ‘suspected bully’ no accusations are made by the interviewer. The child is being asked to help in the resolution of the problem; no infringement of student or parent rights takes place.

7. Parents of victims justifiably require that those who bully their children are punished, not counselled and ‘let off’.

Parents indeed often want to see the bullies punished, but when they are confronted with the option of whether their child is to be made more safe or have the satisfaction of seeing the bully punished (which often leads to renewed bullying that may be harder to identify as bullying, but equally or more damaging to the victim) they find the former option more attractive. As Pikas says: ‘You have to make a choice between revenge and security for your child behind the backs of teachers. I can provide the second and therefore I have to refrain from the first’ (Pikas, personal communication, 2005).

8. For many teachers the method is personally uncongenial because they instinctively feel angry and determined to see justice done. Moreover, training in the method and the application of the method are both very time-consuming and schools cannot accommodate these drawn-out processes.

Some teachers may indeed find that that they cannot behave in a calm, nonpunitive way required of the method. There remain, however, many teachers and counsellors who are interested in using the method and are prepared to undertake the necessary training. Whether the time taken in applying the method is justified depends on whether schools are prepared to invest in the training and the implementation of a method that promises to reduce bullying without resort to punitive methods.

The Evidence

No method of addressing bullying has been reported as 100% effective. Some cases present extreme difficulties because of the personalities of the participants in particular bully–victim problems. Some bullying occurs in schools in which there is an ethos in which bullying behaviour is frequently reinforced by other students. Users of the method may sometimes make mistakes in its application. Despite these recurring circumstances, the method of shared concern has been incorporated into a number of highly successful programs and appears to have played a part in achieving above average reductions in bullying (see especially the work of Salmivalli, 2004 in Finland). Its acceptability by teachers is strongly attested through its selection by numerous staff members in English schools undertaking antibullying work as part of the Sheffield study undertaken by Smith et al. (2004). In that study it was reported that interventions using shared concern were successful in approximately two thirds of cases. In a subsequent application of the method in Scottish schools, 34 of the 38 cases treated in this way were reported as having ‘successful’ or ‘very successful outcomes’ (Duncan, 1996).

■ Conclusion

The underlying rationale of shared concern is persuasive. Misgivings over its adoption as a means of countering bullying in schools are to a large extent due to misunderstandings, as well as to an understandable reluctance on the part of some counsellors and teachers to embrace an approach that appears radically different from many others, requires a serious investment of time in both training and application. Not only must individual school staff members become convinced of its efficacy, but the leadership in a school and a substantial proportion of school personnel also need to be convinced of its value and acceptability to the school community. In a supportive school environment in which school counsellors and teachers are prepared to examine the method carefully and develop among themselves, through discussion and role play, the capacity and confidence to apply the method of shared concern, first to relatively ‘easy’ cases, then later to more challenging ones, considerable inroads can be made into the occurrence of bullying behaviour between students.

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