How Australian parents of bullied and non-bullied children see their school responding to bullying

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How Australian parents of bullied and non-bullied children see their school responding to bullying

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ABSTRACT

Views on how schools in Australia are responding to student victimisation were accessed through an on-line survey answered by 167 parents whose children were attending government schools in year levels 5 to 10. Some 50.2% of the parents believed that their children had been bullied at school. The perceptions and judgments of these parents were compared with those of parents whose children were thought not to have been bullied. The former were significantly less positive in their judgments of the actions undertaken by the schools. Although both sets of parents made similar, mostly positive, appraisals of the work of teachers, for example, through classroom work, the parents of bullied children were more critical of the school's anti-bullying policy and the supervision of student behaviour. Reasons for these differences are discussed, together with suggestions provided by parents on how bullying can be more effectively addressed by schools.

Introduction

Bullying in schools constitutes a problem about which much concern has been expressed in many countries in recent times by professional educators and by parents (Brown, Aalsma, and Ott 2013; Smith 2015). Broadly, bullying has been defined as "the systematic abuse of power" (Smith and Sharp 1994). It involves repeated aggressive behaviour, exercised in situations in which there is an imbalance of power and the targeted person cannot defend himself or herself adequately. Definitions of bullying provided by parents are generally consistent with this formulation (Sawyer et al. 2011).

Estimates of the prevalence of bullying in schools have been conducted in many countries based upon self-reports from students (Due et al. 2005). In Australia, three major surveys have been undertaken to assess bullying prevalence. In a nation-wide survey of 38,684 students attending schools in Australia, Rigby (1998a) reported that approximately one child in five is bullied by peers on a weekly basis. More recently, Cross et al. (2009) reported on a national survey of students in Australian schools from which it was estimated that one child in four is bullied every few weeks or more often. In 2016, Rigby and Johnson reported on results from a national study in which it was estimated that approximately 16% of students

in Australian schools are bullied every few weeks or more often. Although there is some evidence that the prevalence of bullying is reducing to a modest degree in most countries, including Australia (Rigby and Smith 2011) bullying remains a matter of serious concern. The negative effects of school bullying on the health and wellbeing of children, both short term and long term, has been widely documented (Rigby 1998b, 2003, 2008). More recently studies have confirmed that bullying can lead to clinical depression (Ford et al. 2017) and to suicidal ideation (Lardier et al. 2016). Such findings have raised widespread concern among educators about how the negative effects of bullying on the health and well being of school-children could be avoided.

In effectively addressing the problem of bullying, it is generally agreed that optimal outcomes require the active collaboration of the wider school community, including the school staff, the students and their parents (Axford et al. 2015). Collaboration is needed at different levels: in the prevention of bullying through social education, and through action designed to stop cases of bullying from continuing once bullying has begun. Numerous studies have examined the perceptions and attitudes of teachers and/or students towards bullying in schools, for example, Fekkes, Pijpers, and Verloove-Vanhorick (2005) in the Netherlands; Thompson and Smith (2011) in England; Nixon and Davis (2011) in the USA, and Garandeau, Poskiparta, and Salmivalli (2014) in Finland. Although such studies provide abundant evidence that teachers by and large see the need to address bullying in their schools and undertake actions to do so, they appear to overestimate the success of their interventions, that is in comparison with accounts provided by students (Rigby 2014). Comparatively few studies have examined the perceptions and evaluations of parents in relation to how the schools are responding to bullying. This is surprising, as parents commonly have an intimate knowledge of how their children have been affected by bullying and can comment on what has been done, or not done to help them.

Studies of bullying from the perspective of parents have hitherto focussed on the views of parents who believed that their children had been bullied at school and on how the school has responded to the bullying. Some of these studies have used a qualitative methodology. In a systematic review of relevant research, Harcourt, Jasperse, and Green (2014) identified 13 such studies. With the exception of a study of cyber bullying reported by Cassidy, Brown, and Jackson (2012) in which data were gathered through interviews with 315 parents of children attending schools in Canada the samples have been small, with numbers ranging from 3 to 24. Studies making use of quantitative data have similarly focussed on the views of parents of bullied children. The largest of such surveys was completed online by 773 parents of victimised students enrolled in 93 schools (elementary, middle and high) in the United States. Parents were asked whether their child had been bullied at school, but those that reported that their child had not been bullied were excluded from the data analysis (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, and Duong 2011).

The findings reported from the surveys of parents of bullied children provide evidence that such parents tend to be highly critical of how schools are addressing bullying. For example, in their quantitative study, Waasdorp, Bradshaw, and Duong (2011) reported that those parents whose children had experienced most bullying, direct and/or indirect, were less likely to rate their school positively, for example, in caring about their child and doing enough to prevent and stop bullying. Negative judgments of the way their school addressed bullying were reported in a qualitative study in the United States by Brown, Aalsma, and Ott (2013). Ten of the eleven parents whom they interviewed stated that they were left with two

choices: remove their youth from the school or let the victimisation continue (pp. 495–496). In a study undertaken in Canada reported by Mishna, Pepler, and Weiner (2006), parents expressed disappointment in what they perceived as the teachers' lack of willingness or ability to help children, which they believed aggravated the situation. Similarly in a study of the educational experiences of migrant families in the USA, parents expressed the view that "teachers did not do enough to intervene during relational bullying." (Shea et al. 2016, 91). This is consistent with research indicating that teachers are less likely to notice and intervene during episodes of relational bullying than during physical bullying (Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier 2008).

To date, studies of parental perceptions of bullying and of school responses to bullying have derived only from those parents who reported that their children had been bullied at school. As a result, it is not known how the perceptions and judgements of such parents compare with those of parents whose children have not, to the best of their knowledge, been bullied at school. Such parents can be expected to have a different perspective on how the school responds to the problem of bullying. Evaluating the judgements parents make about their school's response to school bullying requires a recognition of the experiences that the judgements are based upon. Unlike the parents of bullied children, other parents appear to be less emotionally involved, but at the same time less knowledgeable about how their school deals with actual cases of bullying. Judgements from both sets of parents are needed in evaluating the work of a school in countering bullying.

The views of parents should be seen in the context of current expectations placed upon schools over how schools should respond to bullying. In many countries government bodies including Departments of Education require that schools take reasonable steps to prevent peer victimisation and to take appropriate action when bullying takes place. In Australia, for instance, schools are required to have an acceptable anti-bullying policy (Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2004). Further, legal action may be taken against schools who fail to act appropriately (Butler 2006). In this context one would expect parents who believe that their child has been bullied at school to be especially critical of schools not discharging their responsibilities.

In summary, the study had three basic aims. The first was to identify from among parent respondents (i) those who had children who were perceived as having been bullied at school and (ii) those who had children who were not known to have been bullied at school. The second aim was to compare the views of the parents reporting that their children had been bullied at school with the views of other parents on how their school was handling the problem of bullying, both proactively and reactively. The expectation was that the parents of bullied children would rate the work of the school in addressing bullying less positively. If this were so, then appraising of the views expressed by parents about the work of the school in addressing bullying would need to take into account whether they could be influenced by the parent's knowledge and experience of their child being bullied. The third was to examine views and suggestions of parents whose children were reportedly being bullied on how schools may address bullying more effectively. Finally, it was of interest to know with whom parents of bullied and non-bullied children had consulted in providing the data for this study: specifically, their child, their partner and friend(s).

Method

A mixed methods approach was adopted in undertaking this study. This involved the respondents, in this case parents of children attending school, answering on-line a questionnaire containing a series of closed ended questions about how their school was handling bullying and an open ended question which allowed respondents to express their views in their own words on the way the school had responded to actual cases of bullying. This approach was chosen on the grounds that qualitative and quantitative results could yield complementary data that would produce a combination of perspectives and thereby provide a more complete picture of the domain under study (Lund 2012).

Procedure

Ethics

In order to undertake this study, ethics approval was first obtained from the University of South Australia and each of the educational jurisdictions responsible for the schools in which the study was conducted. An active commitment for parents to take part was required.

Obtaining the parent sample

Data for this study were collected as part of an Australian government supported project entitled *The prevalence and effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies employed in Australian schools* (Rigby and Johnson 2016). Obtaining a sample of parents involved a multi-stage process. Firstly, permission was obtained from government educational jurisdictions to approach schools and invite them to participate in the research. Six of the eight Australian state and territory governments gave their permission. In 2014, email invitations were sent to 250 randomly selected mainstream Government schools stratified so as to be representative of types and numbers of schools (primary, secondary and combined) in the various jurisdictions. The response rate to the invitations was low, with only 14 schools agreeing to take part in the survey. In 2015, in order to increase the sample size, additional invitations were sent to Australian schools with the assistance of the *Principals Australia Institute* through their newsletter. A further 32 schools agreed to participate in the study. Hence the sample of schools, as described in detail below, must be regarded as one of convenience.

Of the 46 schools agreeing to take part, 37 of them contacted the parents of students involved in the study. To do so a note was carried by students to their parents with a request to "opt-in" if they wished to take part in the parent survey. It was explained that information was being gathered from schools and students throughout Australia to discover how schools were addressing the problem of bullying. It was added:

> We believe that parents of children attending schools can tell us a good deal about their children's school and the experiences of their children. Even if your child is unaffected by bullying, your views and opinions on school bullying are of great interest to us. Please take some time to answer this anonymous questionnaire on-line. It will help in developing better policies and practices in Australian schools.

Parents who wished to take part were informed as to how they could access the *anonymous online* questionnaire.

Participants

The sample of parents was drawn from those who had students attending mainstream, co-educational schools in Years 5–10 in six of the eight State/Territory government educational jurisdictions in Australia. Parents (*N*=160) answered questions about schools attended by their children. These comprised 21 primary schools, 12 high schools and 4 combined schools (catering for children of all ages). Some 57.5% of the parents had a child attending primary school, 36.5% attending high school and 6.0% attending combined schools. The number of parents who had children attending any one school varied between 1 and 26. Data were not requested of schools regarding the number of parents invited to take part. On the basis of the numbers of classes from which student respondents were drawn and their estimated class sizes, it may be concluded that approximately 3000 parents were invited to access and complete the parent questionnaire. The response rate was low with only around 5% of parents providing data. Given that an "opting in" procedure was used in this study it appears likely that the sample contained relatively few parents of older children and relatively few children with low academic achievement. (Shaw, Cross, and Zubrick 2015). It is not known to what extent the sample reflected the socio-economic status or ethnicity of the community.

Measures

All parents were requested to answer a series of core questions about their child currently attending school. Where parents had more than one child attending school, the older child was to be chosen. Core questions elicited demographic information relating to the child's age (in years), gender and the name of the school attended. As an introduction to the questions, the following definition of bullying was provided:

> Bullying occurs when a more powerful person or group of persons repeatedly seek to upset, hurt or intimidate somebody. It may take place in the school grounds, in class, on the way to school, on the way home or by electronic means. Remember this is NOT the same thing as occasional quarrelling or fighting between people who are about equally matched. With bullying one person or group is more powerful in some way and the target cannot effectively defend himself or herself.

The following summarises the questions relevant to this article that were asked of parents in this study. Precise details of the questions and response alternatives are given in Rigby and Johnson (2016, 151–162). See http://www.unisa.edu.au/Global/EASS/EDS/184856%20 Anti-bullying%20Report-FINAL-3large.pdf

The questions were devised to elicit responses and judgements of the effectiveness of strategies and actions as recommended to schools in the Australian National Safe Schools Framework (Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2004). Details of bullying incidents such as when, how often and where they occurred were not requested as it was considered that many parents would not have access to such details and that an extension of the questionnaire would deter some respondents from completing it thereby reducing the sample size.

All parents were asked to answer questions relating to:

(i) The school anti-bullying policy.
(ii) Actions being taken by teachers to inform and educate children about bullying.
(iii) The quality of school supervision of student behaviour.
(iv) The involvement of parents in addressing bullying.
(v) The effectiveness of school action in dealing with cases of bullying.

At this point, respondents were asked: *To the best of your knowledge has the child described above been bullied by students attending the school?* Response options were *Yes*, *No* or *Don't know*. The survey branched at this point, depending on the response given.

Parents who reported that their child had been bullied were asked a number of closed ended questions around the following themes:

(i) The perceived nature and frequency of the bullying experienced by the child. Eight forms of bullying were described: (a) being ignored, (b) physical abuse, (c) rumour spreading being made afraid, (d) hurtful teasing, (e) receiving harassing texts, (f) cruel things said online, (g) sexual harassment, (h) harassed because of race.
(ii) Perceived effects of bullying on the child. Questions related to (a) how upset the child was about the bullying, and (b) whether the child had stayed away from school because of bullying.
(iii) How the school actually handled the case of their child being bullied.
(iv) How the parent expected the school to handle the case involving their child.

In addition, parents of bullied children were asked to indicate whether they believed the school could have handled the case of their child being bullied better. The parents who believed that the school could have done so were asked to explain how. Parents who reported that their child had not been bullied and those who did not know were asked to indicate what they *thought* the school would do if their child was bullied and how effective the action would be.

On completion of the questionnaire all respondents were asked whether, in answering the questions, they had consulted with any of the following: a partner, a friend or friends, your child or children.

Data analyses

Quantitative

Responses to the closed ended questions from the parents of reportedly bullied children and the parents of reportedly non-bullied children were compared using, where appropriate, the Fisher Exact test and the independent samples t-test. Given that multiple calculations were performed, the Bonferroni correction was applied, as described by McDonald (2014), to determine which results were significant at the .01 level (two tailed). Because of missing data on some variables there is variation, (as indicated in the Results section) in the numbers of respondents involved in some reported analyses.

Qualitative

In summarising and illustrating comments to an open-ended question provided by the parents of bullied children on how the schools might handle cases better, a conventional approach was adopted to developing categories, as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005); that is preconceived categories were not employed but allowed to emerge through

immersion in the data. Each statement was read by the author and labelled preliminarily. Constant comparative analysis was then employed in the form of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990), to elicit the similarities and differences. Distinctive categories were then developed according to which the author and a research colleague independently assigned each statement. A high consensus of over 90% was subsequently reached in the assigning of the statements.

Results

Quantitative

From among the 160 parents who answered the questionnaire, 50.3% reported that their child had been bullied at school, 42.8% thought they had not, and 6.9% indicated that they did not know. Among parents who reported that their child had been bullied, 50.7% had consulted with their child compared with 34.2% of the other parents: χ^2 *(1, N=144)=3.99, p=.046.* Consulting with a partner was reported by 50% of parents of bullied children and 16.2% by the other parents: χ^2 *(1, N=148) = 19.07, p<.001.* Consulting with friend or friends was reported by 30% of parents of bullied children and by 4.4% of other parents; χ^2 *(1, N=138) = 15.72, p<.001.* In general, parents of bullied children were more likely to consult with others about their child's situation at school.

The ages of children to whom the parents referred ranged from 5 to 17 years. The mean age for bullied children was *11.06, SD=2.45;* for not bullied, *M=11.75; SD=2.38: t(158) = p=.075.* Boys (50.2%) and girls (49.8%) were almost equally represented among those who were reported as being bullied. Finally, parents of children who were attending primary school were more likely than the parents of those attending secondary school to report that their children were being bullied: χ^2 *(1,N=151) = 8.51, p<.004.*

The bulk of the reported bullying was non-physical, taking the form of cruel teasing, being excluded and rumour mongering. Cyber bullying came next, followed by being hit, pushed or kicked, with sexual and racial harassment the least commonly reported. Further details are summarised in Table 1.

The effects of their children being bullied as reported by 81 parents were as follows: 3.7% were "not upset"; 16.0%, "a bit upset"; 46.9%, "quite upset"; and 33.3%, "very upset". Some 36.9% of the parents of bullied children thought their child had stayed away from school because of bullying; 4.9% were unsure and 64.2% thought not.

Among parents of bullied children, 70.4% indicated that their child's school had a written anti-bullying policy; among other parents, 64.7% thought so, a non-significant difference:

Table 1. Percentages of children reportedly bullied "often" and "ever" at school.

Nature of reported victimisation	Happened "often"	Happened "ever"	N
Made fun of or teased in a mean or hurtful way	38.0	86.1	79
Ignored, left out on purpose or not allowed to join in	33.8	81.2	80
Lies or nasty stories being told to make others not like your child	30.7	62.8	78
Made afraid of getting hurt	10.4	39.0	77
Cruel things said on-line or on social network, such as Facebook	11.7	18.2	77
Hit, kicked or pushed around	6.4	48.7	78
Sent harassing texts or emails	5.2	14.5	76
Sexually harassed by another	1.3	10.4	77
Harassed by a student or students because of his or her race	1.3	7.8	77

Note: N refers to the number of respondents providing responses.

χ^2 (1, N=148) = 0.47, p=0.493. Among those who indicated awareness of such a policy, ratings of the policy were significantly higher for parents of non-bullied children. Using a 5-point scale with "very poor" as 1 and "very good" as 5, for the parents of non-bullied students (N=43) the mean rating was 4.07 with SD=0.74; for the parents of bullied children (N=55) the corresponding mean was 3.60, SD=0.92: t(96) = 2.74, p<.004. Comments by some parents of bullied children acknowledged that the problem of tackling bullying lay less in the policy statements and more in the implementation, for example: "the policy is fine, if only it was adhered to"; "consistent action is the real test of policy"; and "there is a policy but its enforcement is poor."

Parents were asked whether each of five actions was being carried out by their school to prevent bullying: (i) the subject of school bullying was addressed at school assembly, (ii) teachers talked to students in classrooms about bullying, (iii) teachers promoted positive relations between students through exercises and discussions, (iv) the school encouraged students to help other students who were being bullied, (v) students were advised by the staff to seek help from a trusted adult if they are bullied at school. The percentages of parents indicating their knowledge of the actions (abbreviated) undertaken are given in Table 2.

With the exception of bullying being addressed at assembly at their school, a majority of parents of both bullied and non-bullied students reported an awareness of the positive actions their schools were taking to counter bullying. Recognition of what their school was doing proactively in these ways did not differ significantly.

Parents were asked to rate the quality of supervision of student behaviour as very good, good, adequate, poor or very poor. For the parents of bullied students, 52.5% thought that the supervision was good or very good; 25% thought it was adequate and 22.5% thought it was poor or very poor. For parents of non-bullied students, 73.5% rated the supervision good or very good, 23.5% as adequate and 2.9% as poor or very poor. The differences were

Table 2. Percentages of parents indicating knowledge of whether actions were taken by their school to prevent bullying.

Action	Yes	No	Don't Know	Chi square
Address given at school assembly				
Parents of bullied children	43.8	11.3	45.0	
Parents of non-bullied children	41.8	6.3	51.9	0.06: ns
Teachers talk about bullying in class				
Parents of bullied children	63.7	6.3	30.0	
Parents of non-bullied children	63.3	3.8	32.9	0.00: ns
Teachers promote good peer relations				
Parents of bullied children	68.8	8.8	22.5	
Parents of non-bullied children	82.1	1.3	16.7	3.78 *
Students encouraged to help those bullied				
Parents of bullied children	54.4	19.0	26.6	
Parents of non-bullied children	52.7	0.0	38.5	0.79: ns
Bullied students encouraged to seek help from an adult at school				
Parents of bullied children	62.5	13.8	23.8	
Parents of non-bullied children	69.2	0.9	3.08	0.82: ns

Notes: Due to missing data, numbers of respondents varied slightly. Among parents of bullied children, N=79–80; among parents of non-bullied children, N=78–79.

Due to low expected frequencies for No responses chi square was computed after pooling No; and Don't Know responses.

*By chi square, this value is significant at the .05 level. However, following the application of the Bonferroni correction this value, like the others in this table is non-significant. (p > .05).

significant: χ^2 *(2, N=158)=14.79, p<.001*. Of the parents of bullied children, a majority the saw the supervision as "good", while a significant proportion considered it "poor".

Parents were asked whether they had received information about bullying in a school newsletter, whether they had been invited to a meeting at the school with other parents to discuss bullying and, if so, whether they attended and whether it was helpful. No significant differences were found between the parents of bullied and non-bullied children in responses to any of these questions. Overall, 60.1% reported having received such a newsletter; 19.6% recalled having been invited to a meeting to discuss bullying, and 9% actually attended. Of these, 76% found the meeting helpful.

Comparisons were made between the outcomes of interventions undertaken by the school as reported by parents of bullied children with the outcomes that were expected by parents of non-bullied children in the event of their child being bullied. According to parents of bullied children (following the actions taken by the school) in 27.4% of cases the bullying stopped; in 32.9% the bullying reduced but did not stop; in 30.1% the school's action made no difference; and in 9.6% of cases the bullying got worse. Among parents of non-bullied children 49.3% of them expected that the bullying would stop; other parents (50.7%) reported that the situation for their child would improve. The differences between the responses (after combining numbers for "bullying made no difference" and bullying "got worse") were significant: χ^2 *(2, N=167) = 37.21, p<.001*. Parents of non-bullied children expected much better outcomes if their children were bullied.

Of the 80 parents who reported that their child had been bullied at school, 52% reported that the school did something about it; 36% reported that nothing was done and 12.5% reported that they did not know what, if anything, was done. Depending on the specific action the school might take, information about what was done by the school about the bullying was reported by 38 or 39 parents whose child they believed had been bullied. Again, depending on the specific action, 74 or 75 parents who believed their child had *not* been bullied indicated how they expected the school would act if their child was bullied.

Figure 1 summarises the results.

For each of the eight actions indicated in Figure 1, a higher percentage of the parents of non-bullied children expected that the school would take that action compared with what the parents of bullied children believed had been the case when the school intervened in the case of their own child. Parents of non-bullied children had expectations that significantly exceeded the incidence of actions reported by other parents with respect to (i) advising what to do, (ii) contacting the parent of the alleged bully, (iii) getting the bully to apologise, (iv) inviting student support, (v) arranging peer mediation, and (vi) imposing sanctions on the bully.

Parents of bullied children were asked how the case involving their child could have been handled better by the school. Of 75 parents who answered this question, 58% indicated that it could have been handled better, 30.7% were unsure and 10.5% reported that it could not have been handled better.

Qualitative

In answering the open-ended question about how the school could have handled bullying some parents referred directly to experiences relating to their own child, whilst others responded more generally on how cases of bullying should be handled. The responses had
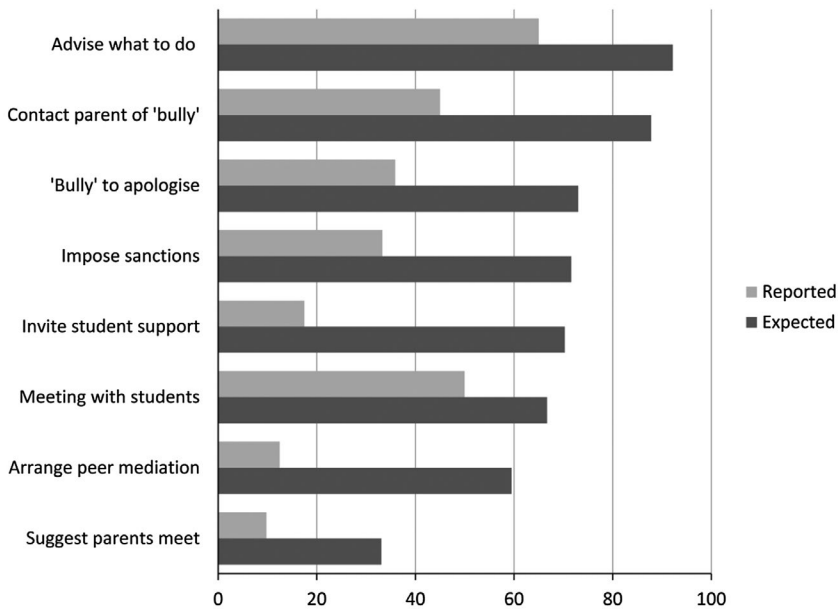
Figure 1. School actions as reported by parents of bullied children compared with those expected by parents of non-bullied children: percentages responding.

in common the expression of a belief about what the school should do in handling bullying. The analyses undertaken included statements made by 40 parents from whom beliefs, in the form of statements, were made about how the school should act in cases of bullying. In total, there were 52 such statements of which 45 could be accommodated under seven categories, indicated below. Representative parent responses are indicated in Table 3, with the total number of statements in each category given in parentheses.

A number of points made by parents could not be classified in the categories as above. These were (i) follow the school anti-bullying policy, (ii) determine *why* the offending student engaged in bullying, (iii) talk with the bully's parent(s), (iv) promote social activities that would engender helping behaviour, (v) develop a stronger anti-bullying culture, (vi) break up gangs of bullies by accommodating them in different classes, and (vii) obtain information from the feeder primary schools regarding children who may be particularly vulnerable to bullying at secondary school. Each of these points was made by one parent only.

Discussion

It is clear from this study that the parents of bullied children experience considerable distress and frustration regarding the situation at their child's school; secondly, evaluations of the work of schools in addressing bullying, as obtained from the parents of children who are bullied, are likely to be less positive than those of parents whose children are not reported as bullied; and thirdly, suggestions made by the parents of bullied children reflect their deeply felt concerns and provide a range of considerations that schools can take into account in addressing school bullying.

Table 3. Parent views on the handling of bullying cases, categorised under seven themes.

Recognise bullying (including non-physical bullying) and be sensitive to the hurt that may result (10)
"Exclusion can be just as detrimental to a child's self esteem as physical bullying and should be treated seriously"
"There is a more subtle form of bullying where one of the cool kids ostracizes another child and the others bow to peer pressure"
"Identify the bullying as covert bullying"
Confront the bully and apply appropriate sanctions (9)
"There are not enough consequences for the children doing the wrong thing"
"Remove the child from the playground each time an incident occurs"
"They could be given a stern warning –don't be gentle to the bully!"
Supervise student behaviour closely (7)
"Keep an active watch on the child to ensure he keeps his hands to himself"
"As the bullying was done in school playtime better supervision would have prevented the bullying"
"He [the bully] should have been monitored more"
Communicate with parents more adequately(6)
"As a parent I could have been informed earlier in regard to the actions taken"
"I would have liked a phone call explaining the situation to me"
"The school did not inform me about it. Not until I rang up was any of it discussed with me"
Act promptly (5)
"My child was quite upset and completely sick of it. It should have been stopped earlier"
"The school should have acted on it ASAP. The delay was unacceptable"
"We wanted a mediation between the bully and our daughter but this never happened. The bullying got bigger over time. It was left too long in our view"
Act fairly (4)
"As the bully's parents had made a stance previously, the teacher couldn't be seen to reprimand the bully"
"The school chose to ignore the situation and turn a blind eye as the bully was a very intelligent student and the school didn't want to disadvantage her in any way"
"My son was moved into a new class halfway through term, whilst the group of boys involved in the bullying all remained together"
Promote the acquisition of appropriate social skills (4)
"Give the kids a chance to express themselves in a non-confronting way that might expose bullying earlier"
"Practical options to the child being bullied. One-on-one role plays with the child being bullied"
"The child's [i.e. the bully's] anger management should have been addressed and my child given the right tools to cope with this child"

A major conclusion from this study is that, as expected, different judgements by parents regarding the work of the school in countering bullying is likely to be related to whether the parent has a child at school who has been bullied at school. School authorities clearly need to know whether the parent making a judgement has a child who has been bullied. This does not mean that it should be dismissed as biased as a consequence of any emotional involvement on the part of the parent; nor that it should be accepted because it is based on personal experience. The judgements of parents of bullied and non-bullied children need to be taken into account and weighted accordingly.

The first aim of the study was to identify a sample of parents whose children were perceived as being bullied at school. Comparisons with results obtained directly from Australian students suggest that the percentage of parents of bullied children in the sample (50.5%) was slightly in excess of the percentage derived from student responses (43.8%), as indicated in the student survey conducted by Rigby and Johnson (2016). Arguably, the parents with bullied children may be slightly over-represented, possibly as a result of such parents being more inclined to "opt into" the study. Alternatively, these parents may have been less in denial about their children being bullied than the children themselves. The kinds of bullying reported by parents were similar to those reported in the survey of students undertaken by Rigby and Johnson; that is, verbal teasing and exclusion were the most commonly reported forms of bullying, followed by physical bullying, cyber bullying, and sexual and racial harassment. However, a larger percentage of parents than students reported negative effects.

Among parents, 96.3% reported that their children had been upset by the bullying compared with 56.0% reported in the student survey. Their child being absent from school because of bullying was reported by 30.0% of parents; the student survey gave a figure of 14.2%. Although the results reported above are not for matched pairs of parents and students, they do suggest that parents of bullied children are more inclined to report the effects of bullying as severe compared with what is reported by children.

The second aim of this study was to compare the views of the parents of bullied and non-bullied children on how their school was handling the problem of bullying, both pro-actively and reactively. It was expected that the parents of bullied children would be less positive in their recognition and evaluations of actions taken by their children's schools. This expectation was confirmed with respect to the judgments made about the effectiveness of actions taken to address cases of bullying. On what their schools were doing to prevent bullying from occurring, opinions expressed by the two sets of parents were similar, with respect to some actions but not to others.

Views on the effectiveness of school interventions in cases of bullying were strikingly different. Whilst the parents of non-bullied children opined that if their child was bullied the school would act so as to reduce, if not stop, the bullying, parents of bullied children believed that in a substantial percentage of cases (approximately 40%), the actions of the school had made no difference or had made matters worse. Particularly striking is the mismatch between what the parents of non-bullied children expected the school to achieve in handling cases of bullying and the reports from the parents of bullied children about what happened when the school handled their own child being bullied. This suggests that many parents greatly overestimate the effectiveness of actions taken by the school in dealing with cases. Further research might usefully examine possible explanations for the contrasting judgements.

The differences between the views of the two sets of parents were less evident in relation to what schools were doing to *prevent* bullying. A similar proportion was aware of the school anti-bullying policy and of the positive efforts their school was making to educate students about bullying. No differences emerged regarding actions taken by the schools to involve parents through communications and meetings arranged to discuss bullying. The significant differences were in the area of the perceived effectiveness of the school anti-bullying policy and the quality of the supervision of student behaviour. On both of these matters, the parents of bullied children were less positive.

Overall, parents who believed their children had been bullied at school were less positive in their appraisals of how their school was addressing the problem. As suggested, this is consistent with the high expectations that have been placed upon schools in recent years and the perceptions of parents of bullied children regarding the ineffectiveness of school responses when their own child was bullied. From this study it is not, however, possible to dismiss the view that the *style* of parenting of parents whose children are bullied may also be related to (a) their child being bullied at school and (b) their reactions to such an event. There is evidence that some bullied children are more likely than others to be overprotected in families that are described as "enmeshed" (Bowers, Smith, and Binney 1994). The possibility therefore remains that a predisposition to react over-protectively and be critical of the school may in some cases predate and affect the judgements parents may make of their school's response to bullying.

The views expressed by the parents of bullied children regarding how the situation could be improved reflected many of the concerns identified in the quantitative analyses.

Predominant was a plea that schools recognise the prevalence of bullying – not only physical bullying but also more covert forms – and the distress that bullying causes. Action, it was felt, should be directed towards changing the behaviour of the bully through the use of appropriate sanctions, rather than through encouraging the victim to become more resilient. Closer supervision of student behaviour in classrooms and the playground was seen as needed, together with early intervention when bullying was identified. Communication between the school and parents was noted as inadequate; parents being left in the dark as to what was happening. Finally there was some recognition that the social and emotional skills of students who become involved in bullying should be addressed by the school.

On the basis of the responses from parent the following suggestions are made.

First, recognise that the views of parents of children who are being bullied are likely to be more negative regarding the actions the schools are taking to counter bullying. A more balanced view may be obtained by taking into account the views of parents of non-bullied students, for example through conducting broadly based surveys of parent opinion.

Secondly, bear in mind that the proportion of children who are being bullied at school, as revealed through student surveys in Australia as well as parent surveys, is substantial and estimated as around 50% ever being bullied (Rigby and Johnson 2016). Further, the views expressed by parents of bullied children are based to a large degree on the experiences of how cases of bullying have been handled by the school and deserve special consideration. Thirdly, in the light of the findings from this study, schools may wish to consider whether (i) they are sufficiently aware of the kinds of bullying that are occurring at their school and the distress that can ensue, (ii) they have an appropriate anti-bullying policy that they are actually implementing, (iii) that they are effectively monitoring student behaviour, (iv) they are conducting interventions in cases of bullying using the most appropriate methods, (v) that they are taking steps to help vulnerable students to acquire relevant social skills, and (vi) they are engaging as early as possible with parents in resolving cases of bullying.

Overall, it may be said that judgments made by many parents about the ineffectiveness of school actions when handling incidents of bullying suggest that schools need to improve their capacity to deal with troublesome cases of bullying. There is now evidence that anti-bullying programs and case interventions, when appropriately applied, can achieve a small but significant degree of success (Rigby 2012, 2014; Thompson and Smith 2011; Ttofi and Farrington 2011). Especially as seen from the perspective of parents of bullied children, this study suggests that there is considerable scope for improvement in tackling school–based bullying and in teachers working more closely with such parents. Recognising and evaluating the judgements being made by parents on how their school is addressing the problem of bullying is an important task confronting schools.

Further studies in this area could usefully extend our understanding of parent perceptions and attitudes towards the way schools respond to bullying. In particular, it would be helpful to conduct studies that directly link the views of parents to the schools attended by their children. Given that bullying may take different forms with increasing emotional and cognitive maturity among children (Joaquim 2014) and present teachers with different challenges, further studies might examine the perceptions of how the school is responding to bullying according to the age of the child or children attending the school, as well as the nature and severity of the bullying that has been experienced.

Limitations and strengths of the study

Although this study was undertaken in a country similar to many Western European and North American countries in having a roughly equivalent level of bullying prevalence in schools, generalisation must be limited at this stage to one country, namely Australia. Moreover, the sample of parents was one of convenience, comprising those opting into the study, and was also restricted to those parents with students in government schools attending Years 5 to 10. The representativeness of the parent sample with respect to such factors as ethnicity and socio-economic status was not known. The design of the study did not enable linking the parent responses with their children's responses. A further limitation was that the study did not attempt to link the views of parents with the gender and age of their child; nor with what was being done to counter bullying in the schools attended by their children. In this study no attempt was made to examine in detail what schools were actually doing in addressing bullying. No attempt was made to investigate and assign responsibility within schools for the actions undertaken or not undertaken to address bullying. The assumption was that in referring to the "school" parents were implying a collective responsibility. The major strength in this study lies in it being unique in comparing and differentiating between the views of parents of bullied and non-bullied children, thereby enabling one to recognise the influence of the personal experiences of parents on judgements of how well schools are addressing bullying in a variety of ways and to take into account the source of the judgements.

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