JUSTICE SOCIAL GROUP

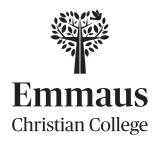## BULLYING AND VIOLENCE RESEARCH PRELIMINARY REPORT

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TABOR
LEADING EDUCATION IN COMMUNITY PROFESSIONS

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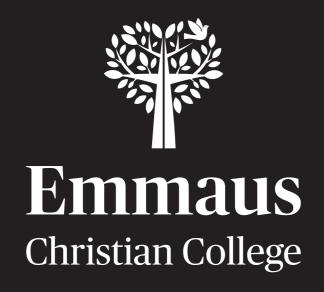
In semester 1 of 2020, students in Social Justice Group, facilitated by Amy Chesser, participated in a pilot research project about young people's ideas and experiences of bullying and violence in secondary schooling. Participants were invited to join in six workshops, as well as pre-and-post 1:1 interviews, in which they discussed the issues of violence and bullying.

Students were asked to discuss the difference between violence and bulling, where they see it happening in their school, community and society, and how it might be prevented. The workshop took the form of democratic dialogue in which the students, teacher and researcher explored together how this complex issue might best be understood.

A key feature of the discussion was a framework call the "sociological imagination" (Mills, 1970) which facilitates thinking about the connection between personal troubles and public issues. In other words, how bullying and violence might be thought about as a result of personal characteristics, but importantly also social and cultural norms.

This report provides a preliminary insight into the findings of the study. Participants have been given pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity. This style of qualitative research is focussed on facilitating a deep and rich exploration of ideas, rather than attempting to generalisable representation of an issue. It also facilitates students "coming to voice" (hooks, 1994), or to practice speaking out about issues so that these skills can be translated into other areas. The purpose of the study was to learn from young people, rather than to capture data about them or identify the victims of perpetrators of bullying and violence.

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EMMAUS SCHOOL CULTURE

Participants consistently described ECC as a place where bullying, and violence in particular, were not a concern. They said it was uncommon to see or hear about bullying, and that physical violence almost never happened. When there was incidents of bullying the participants said they knew they could go to a teacher, and that they would receive help to solve the problem in an appropriate way.

"There isn't,… if not any of that group mentality here at ECC… everyone seems to have a group or a collection of people that

> **Certainly everyone seems to try as hard as possible to make people feel included through a home group events.**

they hang around with. Certainly everyone seems to try as hard as possible to make people feel included through a home group events. Just trying to… bring people together and try and find people for others that they can relate with and hang around… group bullying is not an issue."

"There's nothing crazy at this school. Well, particularly with this school… it's pretty good here because I feel like this school manages it quite, quite well."

"And if you have someone that's being bullied, then they can go to those, it's like teachers here, you can go to the teachers and bring up the problem knowing that they won't judge you for that. And, and they'll help you figure out a solution."

UNDERSTANDING BULLYING AND VIOLENCE

Existing definitions of bullying draw primarily on psychological and behavioural frameworks. These are important, however they are also limited in their ability to conceptualised the social and cultural dynamics the enable bullying and violence. The South Australian Department of Education adopts the following definition of bullying:

> "Bullying is an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that intends to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm.
>
> It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power, or perceived power, over one or more persons who feel unable to stop it from happening.
>
> Bullying can happen in person or online, via various digital platforms and devices and it can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert). Bullying behaviour is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time (for example, through sharing of digital records).
>
> Bullying of any form or for any reason can have immediate, medium and long-term effects on those involved, including bystanders. Single incidents and conflict or fights between equals, whether in person or online, are not defined as bullying."

National definition of bullying Education Council (2018)

The group discussed many aspects of the definition of bullying includes interrogating aspects including repetition, the nature of the power dynamic and the effects on others. Existing definitions of bullying also draw distinctions between bullying and violence. Participants in the study interrogated these distinctions and found that they aren't as clear as they first appear.

"I guess it can be because for me, violence is very much and we talked about this as well as that, it's very much a group to individual thing, where a group targets an individual because it's about that power . If you have power over someone you're potentially controlling their behavior, you're, you're, you're controlling how they act, you're enforcing what you want upon them. And therefore, if that is a form of violence, ah, you're basically doing the same thing. You're trying to get power over them and therefore, bullying would be another, I guess, a negative demonstration of, I guess, using your power to build yourself up at the cost of putting crushing other people. Yeah"

"I guess perhaps if we look at in the sense that violence is more you're trying to build yourself up where bullying is, more you're trying to break down others. Therefore, if violence is more, I guess, just a power in in both games or whatever it is, it's not so much a targeted attack on an individual to break them down."

A major feature of the discussion centred around the role of power in enabling and resulting from bullying. In particular the group discussed the nature of the power and role of groups.

"It's just to demonstrate your power and to try and I guess build yourself up to get to the top of your your group or something like that. So I think that that's kind of what I meant by that. It doesn't have to be bullying. It's more so just a power move."

"If you are not seen as the social norm. I think celebrities these days have massive influence over that. And if you are not seen, I guess, as similar to someone in a power status, maybe like a teacher, maybe like a principal, um, maybe go bigger than that,

go celebrities, tv presenter, If you are not really seen as relatable to them, that makes you a target for it. And I think that is what makes it possible, because we put these standards on people because of celebrities and, um, higher powers, like you know Presidents and Prime Ministers, and people in power that if we don't look like…"

"It also depends a situation or, and you have, like if you're in a group, you have more power because it's like a collective than if you're just an individual. Cos' you're going up against this massive group, sort of thing. And that's why if you have like a small group of, like, bullies and then you have a one individual and that's what bystanders can do to like disrupt the power and help the people on the side."

> **violence is more you're trying to build yourself up where bullying is, more you're trying to break down others.**

"Like with people saying, you know, I'm the victim, but they're, if I become the bully, then I'll be safe. You are almost creating your power in that, it's like a, like a power sphere, that people want to join in, you know, with you. They see you as a leader that's, you know, bullying other people."

"But it's never gonna be the one bully, by themselves against multiple people. Because they know that the power is now outweighed by like, it could have been like, individually, they might have a small amount, but all together they have got a larger amount than what the bully's."

BANTER VERSUS BULLYING

An important theme that emerged from the conversations was the relationship between "banter" and "bullying". "Banter" described an acceptable practice of playfully insults that are exchanged between friends. Participants explained that this practice has a lot of the same features of bullying, however there is an understanding in the relationship that this practice is acceptable and can in fact strengthen rather than harm the relationship. On one occasion a participant described this practice taking place between a teacher and a student. The group was unsure about how to best define the difference between these two activities and that there was the potential for misunderstanding; i.e. one party experiencing it as bullying.

In an exit interview, one participant described one of their friends had challenging the banter in their friendship group. Their friend pointed out that the banter in the group had become negative. The student said what he learnt in the workshop helped him to respond positively to his friend and the group changed their behaviour.

> " each person has their own individual definition of what is bullying and what is playful banter "

"Ohhh. I suppose. Not to a harmful extent. It's like passive violence in a way. You know, joking around and calling someone names, as a joke, obviously. And even the teaches do it some times. Like, it's kind of made to be seen as ok, to sort of joke about someone's weaknesses… Well , going back to the jokes. Seeing that the teachers do it sometimes kids might think, "hey, it's okay to do this". Whereas other kids might think, "hey, I don't want to be the target of that joke". And because people, kids never communicate properly, that's where the trouble happens."

"I think our school is a very, um, safe place. You're, you're not going to come to any physical harm. I don't think. But obviously there is, there is always bullying. Little… jabs and things, which, which is hard to define bullying as well because, each person has their own individual, ah, definition of what is bullying and what is playful banter"

"And you could keep repeating that behavior, but not in an intentionally harmful way… it's just playful banter… just friendly kind of chat on the way past. I'm sure it happens in the workplace and it does definitely happen at school. So it's just it can be taken out of context and it's important that those issues are discussed."

EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPATION

Participants consistently spoke about enjoying the process of the project. They said they enjoyed having the opportunity to share their thoughts and learn from others. They also reported discovering ideas and challenging questions they had not come across before.

The students met together during lunch, once a week for 6 weeks, with the researcher and teacher. The workshops focussed on a different theme each week provided by the researcher, starting with defining bullying and violence and moving to thinking critically about social patterns and systems as well as abstract concepts like power. Discussions were student-led and notes from the previous week's discussion were provided for reflection and comment.

> " Very insightful. I've also got a lot of questions now, which is I think probably one of the points as well, is that is to make you think about it "

"It was fantastic. I loved it. I learned heaps. Ah, really got me thinking into the, you know, what really is this? What really is that? Where do I stand within all that? Yeah I learned lots."

"I would have to say that this experience has been very beneficial. Enjoyed almost every moment of it."

"I enjoyed it. It was good learning different views and how you can interpret situation. Ah, definitely learned a bunch about different things. I enjoyed it because it was like, it was also good chatting to, about people and about their views and stuff like that. You don't have that very often around here. Like, you have it in your friendship groups or some like that. Sometimes people might, like, they might if it's anonymous like this. You don't have to use personal experience and sort of things."

"But in the end, after the experience, we kind of like, you, kind of like, appreciate everyone else in the group more than when we started because you didn't know them as much and now. Yeah. That's what I find."

"Very insightful. I've also got a lot of questions now, which is I think probably one of the points as well, is that is to make you think about it. Because the more, you know, if, if we're thinking about it, we're, we're learning. And, I think it's very important… because it's helped me to understand how we perceive as well; violence."

"It was awesome… I think ultimately the meeting every week as a group and having these discussions was a really, really effective way of doing things. I think it worked really well."

MORE INFORMATION

For more information about these findings or the larger research project visit someyouthfulthoughts.wordpress.com or get in contact with Dr Ben Lohmeyer via (08) 8373 8777 or blohmeyer@tabor.edu.au

Ethics approval for this project was attained though Flinders University project no. 6655.

References

hooks b (1994) *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press

Mills CW (1970) *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.