

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

OF

BULLYING AND VIOLENCE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLING

PHASE 2: FLO PILOT

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BACKGROUND

In semester 2 of 2020, students of the Uniting SA Flexible Learning Options program (UnSA FLO) in Christies Beach, South Australia were invited to participate in a pilot research project about young people's experiences of bullying and violence in secondary schooling. Case managers invited young people they believed had relevant experiences and would be interested and capable of participating.

The young people participated in an interview with a researcher to discuss their experiences. They were also invited to participate in a series of workshops with their peers to discuss their ideas further. Participants were asked about their understanding of violence and bullying. They were also asked where and if they have seen bullying happening in their school, community and society, as well as how it might be prevented.

The purpose of the conversation was to learn from young people about experiences of violence and bullying in school, and to better understand the contemporary social dynamics that enable and justify bullying. Participation was voluntary and participant's names have been removed from this report to maintain their anonymity. 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.

Six young people participated in an interview. Workshops were offered on several occasions, however only one young person participated on one occasion. The research experienced significant interruption and delays due to a state-wide COVID-19 lock-down and ongoing COVID management requirements. Despite the small number of participants, several themes emerged through the interviews that indicate a need for further investigation.

This style of qualitative research is focussed on facilitating a deep and rich exploration of ideas. This style 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.

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted on traditional lands and waters of Kurna Peoples and we pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge their sovereignty and continued responsibility to care for country.

Thank you to the young people who participated in this research giving their time to improve the schooling experiences of others.

Note from Uniting SA

This was a great opportunity for our young people to have a voice regarding their experiences of bullying. Clients reported that the chance to have their say regarding this topic was reaffirming and validating. This project has helped to change their perspective on their experience and has led to more open conversations in case management, not only in this area but in other challenging areas of their lives.

Project partners



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Innovation Research
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STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF UC FLO

The frequency of experiences of bullying and violence were mixed across the group. Not all participants had been bullied. Some participants acknowledged they had at one time been a bully. In some cases, participants described not ever being a victim of bullying. However, these young people regularly described witnessing or being in the vicinity of behaviours that fit a technical definition of bullying in school. When they had witnessed or experienced bullying, they often spoke about these instances being connected to inequalities such as class, gender, disability and race.

‘Yeah, I would say that it’s not, like, hectic, it’s not full on, it’s just, but that’s what it would look like if you see it and it’s just someone will be trying to start something by just looking at you or doing something very minimalistic, like trying to “I wasn’t actually starting from I’m just trying to get, you annoyed”, and then start it that way.’

‘... there wasn’t very much bullying at all. You know, there was, you know, the occasional sort of, you know, uh, say somebody, I don’t know, spilled yogurt on themselves. And you’d be like, “ha ha, you spilled yogurt on yourself” sort of thing. But there wasn’t any real you know, nobody ever got pushed into bins or, you know, that just wasn’t very much of it.’

‘Um, because I’ve been going to private schools, there hasn’t been as much like physical violence, more uh, just mental abuse than anything, even shockingly, sometimes even by teachers.’

‘I’ve gotten into fights and shit like that when I’ve deemed that, you know, this person is very much in the wrong. This person is instigating this. I have done nothing to bring this on. I don’t want this to continue. I’m going to end it kind of thing.’

‘Um, I think there’s been a lot more awareness around, like suicide from bullying with young people. And a lot of people have lost people they know. So, they’re kind of making changes to being nicer. Like, because my little brother is still in school ...

And he hasn’t, there hasn’t been many fights. He’s never been bullied like nothing. But when I was there, it was really like social media was a big thing ... they used Twitter to bully people and ... Facebook and Instagram and Ask FM. That was a thing that was pretty bad.’

The participants identified the FLO program as a safe place where bullying and violence did not occur. Some participants attributed this experience of FLO to the consistent presence of youth workers and teachers, as well as the voluntary nature of

the educational space. In other words, because students wanted to attend FLO programs, and these were spaces where support was readily available, bullying and violence was unlikely to occur.

‘...because of the type of, well, type of place FLO and or TAFE is because it’s just, the point is, there are literally teachers around nearly everyone ... So, if you were going to bully someone in there, you’re literally a fucking idiot ... Previously, in my older schooling I’ve seen a decent amount of bullying from, you know, people to me and

people to my friends and people to my brother and shit like that, so.’

‘Yeah, yeah. I personally haven’t noticed it in this school [FLO program] at all. But um, in previous schools. I have noticed it, uh, quite a bit.’

‘The young people that I’ve spoken ... from what they’ve told me ... bullying is more prevalent ... I had an 11-year-old boy tell me, ... he told me that three kids this term have had concussions from being beaten up from bullying at his school. And that’s just at a local primary school down south. And he, that freaked me out a bit. And then I have boys who is sixteen who goes to (school name), who’s got like autism. And he tells me that he gets bullied like day to day from his autism or he comes to the youth centre because that’s like his safe space’

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”



THINKING ABOUT BULLYING AND VIOLENCE

The participants described bullying and violence in complex ways, where boundaries between the two ideas were blurred. Some participants drew a clear distinction between bullying and violence. Others thought these were different words for similar experiences. While the sample size of this group was small, there appears to be many complex social arrangements and dynamics of bullying and its relationship to violence that aren't captured by the national definition of bullying employed by schools in Australia. The unique experiences of these young people are likely to be a missing voice in the national conversation on bullying due to their disengaged status from traditional schooling.

'For me it just seems to be like a title for someone who commits violence or mental abuse. So, it means basically the same, just more of a name because you wouldn't call someone like "you're violent", you're more call you're a bully or something like that because violence seems to be more of an extreme word.'

'They were sort of tied to each other, because there's it's, it's more like a fine line there, because if they go too hard into it ... because they never knocked anybody down, but they would just knock him out of the way. So, if it had of evolved into, you know, "if you get [in] my way, I'll push you over". That would be sort of bullying.'

'I think you can bully someone without like being, I think violence can come into bullying, but there can be bullying without violence. Like that can just be emotional torment. And just like there's different forms of bullying like it can be on the internet. I think violence is more when people like it's like in your face. And it is like if you are physically feeling threatened in your fight or flight's kicking in and like you are unsafe like.'

'...you need violence for bullying, you don't need bullying for violence. So, you know, I wouldn't exactly call 50 guys going to bash this one guy because he's different bullying. I would call it just straight up violence. But if it was, you know, these two guys egging on this one guy because it's different and egging him on, and egging him on, and swearing at them, and saying things that they specifically know will get on his nerves, and shit like that, then you know that, and then doing violent acts, that would be bullying. Even before the violent acts. But in general, that's kind of what makes the bullying.'



REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

This project was designed as the second phase of an exploratory pilot investigation of young people's experiences of the social dynamics of bullying and violence in secondary schooling. Significant research already exists on school bullying, however, policy and practice largely informed by psychological and behaviourist approaches (Eriksen, 2018: 159). This research contributes to the emerging second paradigm (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014) which focusses on the social and cultural dynamics of bullying.

The first phase of the project was undertaken with young people in private secondary schooling (report available here: <https://bit.ly/3ef721e>). This second phase sought to engage young people who are marginalised from the education system on the assumption that their voices would likely be absent from national and international conversations due to them being hard to reach.

The young people in this project did prove to be hard to reach. Despite employing an outreach model for interviews (i.e. visiting homes and youth centres) with the support of FLO Case Managers, the research returned low participant numbers. The planned focus groups attracted only one participant on one occasion. A COVID19 lockdown during the period of the focus groups prevented them from being held. In contrast, the during first phase in the private secondary school, the focus groups were able to be completed online despite similar COVID19 restrictions.

There are a range of influencing factors that need further analysis to fully understand the low engagement of this group. These factors might include the social and economic circumstances of participants, the selection process of case managers for referral, availability of internet access, and issues in the design of the project. Those who participated in the research were asked about their experience and reason for participating. Participants regularly described their experience of the conversation as positive and expressed a desire to help others through their own experiences.

This combination of factors and experiences suggest that the young people targeted in phase two of this pilot have important and valuable insights and a desire to share them. As such, further efforts are needed to overcome the barriers that constrain their participation.

'Yeah. Thank you for coming ... I just like really like take any opportunity that I can, and I feel like I have a good ... insight on what goes on, what is going on in bullying and stuff. Because I've gone to heaps of different schools and I've lived my life, like, I've been a bully and I've been a nice person. Like, I've done both sides of it...'

'Um, I may not personally gain anything from it, but it can help a lot of other people. So, I prefer to help other people. If I can see that I can do it'.

'I thought I would have some unique views based on my childhood yet the fact that I don't think violence is completely unnecessary because violence can definitely be used in can be utilized in ways that aren't necessarily bad at, face value? No, that makes it sound like it is bad, and then what am I, I don't know how to describe what I'm trying to say.'

'Um, well, first off, I thought it would be helpful for, uh, your study and I thought that, of my experience with bullying I thought I might be a fairly decent, I forgot the word, I lost it. Basically, I thought I was a good. I think I felt like I'd be a good participant for it ... Um, yeah, it was mostly good'.



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) 8201 7956 or ben.lohmeyer@flinders.edu.au

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

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