**ARTICLE**

**Bullying in schools: why it happens, how it makes young people feel and what we can do about it Jeremy Sidea\* and Kelley Johnsonb**

aEducational Psychologist, Inclusion Services, Monkton Park, Winterborne Monkton, Dorchester, UK; bDirector of the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

In spite of decades of research and more recent guidance by Government, bullying in schools remains a serious concern to young people and to educational practitioners. This two year qualitative study explored the meanings eight teenagers gave to bullying they had experienced, and related this to an analysis of previous research and school policies about bullying. The ﬁndings from the study revealed that bullying affected the subjectivity of young people, including how they positioned themselves and believed themselves to be positioned by others. It also found previous research and school policies focused on the behavioural aspects of bullying, neglecting the subjective meanings that it had for those who experienced it. The research ﬁndings suggested that a more open approach by adults to what bullying means to individuals, and clearer guidance to teachers on how to work with them about subjective meanings, may provide a new direction in supporting young people who have been bullied. Keywords: understanding bullying; bullying in schools; Foucault

Introduction Bullying in schools is an issue which, in spite of a strong body of research literature, and government guidance designed to reduce bullying, continues to affect an estimated 50–80% of young people (Department for Children Schools and Families, Special Educational Needs, 2010; Oliver & Candappa, 2003). Approximately 16 children each year in the UK commit suicide as a result of being bullied (Marr & Field, 2001). The serious nature of this problem has been recognised through a raft of national government strategies (Direct Gov Parents, 2010; Secondary SEAL, 2010) and non-government interventions (Beatbullying, 2010; Childline, 2010; Kidscape, 2010). Guidance and interventions have, in part, been informed by research which has sought to deﬁne bullying and to identify its effects on young people who have experienced it. To some extent deﬁnitions of bullying remain contested. For example, while most deﬁnitions stress the importance of the repetition of “hurtful” behaviours as a primary characteristic of bullying (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007), others stress the importance of a power differential between those who bully and those who experience bullying (Baldry, 2003; Rigby, 1996; Woods & Wolke, 2004). Bullying has been characterised by a range of behaviours including

\*Corresponding author. Email: j.side@dorsetcc.gov.uk

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physical aggression, verbal abuse, cyber attacks and social rejection. In this paper the following working deﬁnition of bullying is used:

Behaviour by an individual or group, usually repeated over time, that intentionally hurts another individual or group either physically or emotionally. However, schools will wish to involve the whole school community in agreeing the deﬁnition of bullying that will be used in their own anti-bullying or behaviour policy … (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007 summary) The authors are not uncritical of this deﬁnition but nonetheless have used it as a starting point because it is part of current government guidance to schools and therefore is likely to be the one most commonly used in school policies in relation to bullying. Much of the government guidance relies on the results of research undertaken to better understand bullying. Such research has revealed that those who are bullied are more likely than their non-bullied peers to: have difﬁculties in achieving academic success (Beran, Hughes, & Lupart, 2008), experience depression and anxiety (Peskin, Tortolero, Markham, Addy, & Baumler, 2007 see also Campell & Morrison, 2007), have suicidal feelings (Klomek et al., 2008) or chronic stress (Newman, Holden, & Delville, 2005 see also Dao et al., 2006) and experience physical symptoms of sleeplessness and helplessness (Due et al., 2005). While there is a growing body of research in relation to bullying there is little that focuses on the subjective meanings it has for young people who experience it (Hepburn, 1997). In spite of extensive research which has added to an understanding of the nature of bullying and its effects, bullying continues. The research reported in this paper sought to explore if there were other ways of understanding bullying which may provide new ways of managing it or supporting young people more effectively. The approach taken in the research was a discursive analysis drawing on Foucault’s work (Foucault, 1977, 1978, see also Rose, 1990) which allowed for a deconstruction of how bullying was constituted by research, school policy and by young people who had experienced it. Discourse is a contested but central part of Foucault’s ideas (see Alvesson, 2002; Gee, 2008; Potter & Wetherell, 2007; Weedon, 1987). In this paper discourse is deﬁned in the following way:

… discourses specify truth as it is known at any particular time in history … they are concerned with the exercise of power in relation to the subjects which they constitute … discourses constitute and reveal the subjectivity of the people with whom they are concerned … discourses themselves are subject to change and challenge … (Johnson, 1998, p. 15) Discourses can be seen as combinations of knowledge and their use in practice through the exercise of power. Within the context of bullying, discourses are bodies of knowledge which construct bullying as a cultural object. They prescribe the ways in which it is understood and how it is managed in practice. They also focus on the way in which people are subject to power and knowledge and how they are positioned in relation to others (Henriques, Holloway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1998; Hollway, 1994; Kendall & Wickham, 2003).

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Method Research questions The research questions used in this study were: How does previous research construct the subject of bullying? How far does policy and practice in schools address the subjective experience of bullying? What meanings do young people who have been bullied give to the experience? How does bullying affect the way young people position themselves in relation to others?

Design This research was a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews, and a literature and school anti-bullying policy analysis. A discursive approach was taken to identify existing discourses in relation to bullying. The policy and literature analyses were then considered in relation to discourses and meanings ascribed to bullying by eight young people who participated in the study.

Literature review A literature search was carried out to identify research studies undertaken over the last 15 years. It included both qualitative and quantitative studies relating to bullying in general, and bullying in schools in particular, in both the UK and internationally. The resulting 42 studies were then critically examined using the following questions: What is the meaning(s) given to bullying by these studies? What knowledge does it create? How are those who are bullied positioned by this knowledge?

School anti-bullying policy analysis An analysis of government guidance to schools in relation to bullying, and school policies on bullying from the three schools included in the study, was conducted. The following questions were used as a guide: What is the intention of the policy? How is its position justiﬁed? How clearly deﬁned are the objectives? Who is seen as the subject of the policy? Who is the audience of the policy? What is missing from the policies? What is the meaning conveyed by the policies? How are those bullied positioned by the message in the policy?

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This analysis was undertaken after the ﬁrst interview with participants, and each participant was asked their views on the policy relevant to their school. Questions guiding this discussion were: Did you know about this policy? Were you involved in writing it? Did you use it or was it helpful in gaining support when you were bullied? Were the actions listed in the policy carried out when you were bullied? What else do you think should be included in the policy?

Interviews An interview guide was developed as a basis for the ﬁrst of two semi-structured recorded interviews with participants. The guide included contextual questions such as age and family circumstances, as well as questions relating to their interests and feelings about school. These were followed by questions which focussed particularly on bullying as a subjective experience. This part of the interview was led primarily by participants but included questions about the nature of the bullying experience, how the participant felt about each part of the bullying they experienced, what they did about seeking support and how they felt about the support they sought. The interviews also included questions about what support the participants would have liked to have received. There were opportunities throughout the interview for the young person to introduce issues which they thought were important. The sensitivity of the issue of bullying was recognised by the researcher and self disclosure, time out of the interview situation and the identiﬁcation of a trusted other person to whom the young person could go for additional support were included in the interviews. Interviews were administered on an individual basis and were held in school time in a room where privacy was secure. Neither teachers nor other students were aware of the nature of the interview. Each interview lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. This time was needed to let the young person tell their story in their own time and in their own words. There were opportunities given to the participants throughout each interview to end it, or to take a break. A second half hour interview was held with six of the participants (two young people were not able to attend the second interview) which had a focus on the antibullying policy from their school. Participants were shown and had an opportunity to read their school policy and a discussion was held with them about the content of the policy, the extent to which they knew about it and whether they agreed with the deﬁnitions of bullying used in it, and whether their experience reﬂected the support or practice outlined in the policy.

Participants Eight young people took part in the research. They were aged between 13 and 15 years old (ﬁve boys and three girls) from three mainstream secondary school in the UK. The criteria for participation were that the young people had experienced bullying and their parents and the school knew they had had this experience. The young people

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had experienced bullying in a range of different ways including cyber bullying, physical bullying and verbal bullying. For two of the young people the experience of being bullied was a recent event, the remaining six had been bullied over time. Consent from the young people and their parents was gained via consent forms and information letters explaining the interview process and detailing the research. At interview the young people were told that their names would be changed to assure conﬁdentiality. They also received an explanation about the limits to conﬁdentiality, for example if they said something that indicated they or another person might be in danger. The young people were aware they could withdraw from the study. The names used for the young people who took part were; Rachel, Paul, Anna, David and Chris, who were all 13years old. Clair, Norman and John were 15years old.

Analysis In order to identify key concerns and issues for the group of participants in their subjective experiences of bullying, a modiﬁed thematic analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This included an interrogation of the data in terms of the subjective meanings given to bullying and its effects on how young people saw themselves and how they thought they were seen by others. Analysis of the literature was undertaken at the beginning of the study using the questions outlined previously in this paper. An analysis of school policies occurred following the ﬁrst interview with participants. The ﬁrst interview was transcribed and was interrogated using the following questions: What meanings did bullying have for this young person? How does this young person talk about their experience of being bullied? How did they see themselves after being bullied and how did they believe others saw them? How did they position themselves as a result of being bullied? How did they manage the experience of being bullied? What issues did they face? What support if any did they receive and from whom? While these questions provided a framework for analysis, it was also guided by the information the young people gave in the interview. The second interview focussed on a discussion of the relevant school anti-bullying policy. Was the discourse identiﬁed in the interviews similar or different to the discourses conveyed in either the research or the school anti-bullying policies? The analysis of this interview focussed particularly on the extent to which the meanings attributed to bullying and its effects by the young people were mirrored in their school policies.

Ethics Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Bristol, School of Applied Community and Health Studies prior to the commencement of the study. Students

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were made aware that the issues raised in the interviews might provoke upsetting feelings; all the participants agreed to continue with the interview. Safeguards to support young people who may have been upset by the interview were also put in place but were not needed.

Results Emerging themes from the literature review, the school policies and interviews with participants were analysed and categorised, then sorted into relevant groups constituting different discourses about bullying.

Analysis of how bullying was constituted through academic literature The research literature about bullying in schools suggested a number of different conclusions. Firstly, it remained a concept which, while widely used, was often unclear or ambiguous in deﬁnition. Some studies focussed on cyber bullying (Li, 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007), others on verbal (Bright, 2005; Smith & Shu, 2000) or physical bullying. Some research used the term generically without consideration of the type of bullying. Secondly the focus of the literature was on how bullying could be managed or controlled rather than on how it might be prevented. In part this was because of the very individualistic focus of the research which constituted bullying as a relationship at an individual level. Thirdly, bullying was constituted in terms of a series of polarities: strong/weak, powerful/powerless. There was no analysis of the normative nature of bullying in which those diverging from the norm were being constrained or punished for this. Finally there was a strong focus on the behavioural manifestation of bullying rather than on the subjective meanings and implications for individuals; bullying was generally described as behaviours rather than how it made young people feel. The focus of support mirrored the behavioural basis of how bullying was constituted by focusing on prevention rather than support. The research around bullying accepts its existence from a particular perspective. The literature creates, conveys and maintains the norm of how bullying is currently viewed. It maintains the view that bullying is an individual issue. It is seen as a problem which needs to be managed by a variety of practices, spelled out (to greater or lesser extent) in government guidance and school policies. The research describes bullying in power terms only, which describe the bullied as powerless.

Analysis of how bullying was constituted through school policies Only one of the young people had seen their school anti-bullying policy before these interviews. This created a fundamental tension in terms of supporting the rights of young people at school around not being bullied. This lack of knowledge of, or involvement in, the development of school bullying policies by young people meant that they were unable to identify their rights in relation to bullying or to understand the possible supports available to them. When shown it the young people generally did not agree with the deﬁnition of bullying used in their school policy. The exception to this was in one school where participants were positive about the deﬁnition.

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At xxx School it felt safer to deﬁne bullying as: Any action of one student, or group of students on another … such that the victim feels bullied. (xxx School Policy) The young people did not agree that the policy indications about how they would be supported were evident in practice. The experiences of the participants did not match the practice detailed in the policies. However, there was some positive praise for the actions of individual teachers who supported the young people in speciﬁc ways, but not for how the school as a whole managed bullying. One issue regarding a lack of effective practice could be that none of the policies had aims and objectives and types of support that were written by young people. Young people were positioned as having to seek adult support but there was no recognition of how difﬁcult this might be. The meaning created by the policies was that adults in schools held the information about bullying, both how it could be prevented and how it would be managed. Their role was to manage and control bullying in ways which did not use active involvement by those involved in bullying incidents. Schools are in a position of power and authority and are telling the young people what to do rather than working with them to understand the support they need individually.

How bullying was constituted by young people Rachel, Paul, Chris, David, Anna, Clair, Norman and John experienced a number of different forms of bullying: Table 1 Key to Table 1 X=the type of bullying the young person experienced As can be seen from Table 1, the most common form of bullying the young people experienced was verbal bullying. Six of the participants experienced physical as well as other types of bullying. Two of the participants experienced verbal, physical and cyber bullying. Two key themes from young people emerged from the data. The ﬁrst theme was the extent to which the young people saw themselves as “different” from some implicit norm adopted by those who were bullying them. The second theme was the extent to which they were affected by the experience, how it impacted on their subjectivity or how they saw themselves or believed that others saw them.

Perceived difference For some participants physical appearance was seen as the main reason for the bullying they experienced:

I had the Mick taken out of me because I’m like small … skinny. (David)

Table 1. Types of bullying experienced by participants. Verbal bullying Cyber bullying Physical bullying Rachel X X Paul X X Chris X X David X Anna X Clair X X X Norman X X John X X X

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Sometimes they pick on me and stuff … I was small … (Paul) Weight … I wasn’t like proper fat but I had a little bit on me … (Chris) I got picked on for having big ears and for having a lisp … (Norman) … it’s like hard to explain you know people just stereotype you. (Anna) Rachel, Clair and John saw the reason they were bullied was because of something they did. Rachel tried to avoid doing what the bullies were trying to make her do:

… there was a few girls that used to pick on me and try and order me around and make me do things with them. (Rachel) Clair told her friend’s mother about a relationship her friend was having with a boy and this started the bullying she experienced:

… we rang [my friend’s] mum up and told her that she was going out with him … anyway it kicked off a massive argument … (Clair) John felt the reason he was bullied was because he was involved in an incident where one of his friends got hurt and the boy’s family felt that John was to blame and as a result John experienced bullying:

… well basically I’ve been accused of something … (John) All of the young people described a perceived difference, implicit norms that they were somehow outside of, as the reason they were bullied. Each young person took ownership for being bullied because they felt it was because of something about them. They internalised the bullying they experienced, which impacted on how they saw themselves and how they believed others saw them. The norms they judged themselves by were conveyed in perceived peer-related discourses, for example, ideal body size or characteristics and group memberships. Group membership involved adhering to a set of often implicit norms and values and, whilst these have been seen as a positive way to encourage group identity (see Tajﬁel, 1982), they also create benchmarks by which others fall short. Rachel, Paul, Anna, Chris, David, Clair, Norman and John all experienced bullying in individual ways. All of them felt that they were being bullied because of something about them that they could not change. They all took ownership of the bullying; in essence they felt that they were the reason they were bullied. The implication was that being bullied was not only about the characteristics of the bully or the system, it was about them being different. The results from this study suggested that bullying served a normative function in either attempting to force conformity by the person being bullied or conﬁrming their exclusion (Foucault, 1977, 1978).

How the young people were affected by being bullied The second theme to emerge from the analysis of the data from the interviews with young people was the extent to which they had been affected by the experience of bullying. This was an important theme to emerge because often the focus of academic literature was on the behavioural results of bullying rather than how it made young people feel. The results from this study powerfully demonstrated the feeling response that young people had when they were bullied. For some people the bullying led to feelings of sadness and humiliation. For example:

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Rachel described how being bullied made her feel:

… it just makes you feel sad and horrible and just small. (Rachel) Paul said:

… humiliating … sort of feeling a bit weak and just really kind of small. (Paul) For others there was a feeling of powerlessness and helplessness which for some participants led to high anxiety about school. For example Anna described how being bullied made her feel:

… I was helpless … I felt like I was alone … I did feel extremely alone … (Anna) Chris described his feelings about being bullied:

… I was like scared to go into school … it wasn’t really a school for me it was more like … I don’t know a prison or something … I couldn’t sleep at night I was like crying non-stop … I didn’t feel happy I just wanted to crawl into a little ball and like die because I was too upset … (Chris) The powerful effects on both physical and psychological well-being were stated clearly by Clair:

… it got to a point where I wasn’t eating, I wasn’t sleeping and I was just like at a really low point … too upset to come to school … I didn’t feel I could cry I felt like you know like when everything goes quiet and it is just like you sitting there, I felt like … my whole world was just collapsing around me and I didn’t know what to say … it felt inside like everyone in the school had turned against me like absolutely everyone just hated me … I was scared to go places on my own … it made me feel like some people have massive power over some people … they just have so much power, I think they could see that they was like getting through to me … I was like going home and locking myself in my room and not eating … (Clair) Norman responded to bullying with anger and with concerns about the effects of it on his family and on his learning at school:

I felt quite annoyed, sad and angry … it feels like quite annoying … I don’t want to get stressed out because … it affects your family … it feels really annoying because they’ve actually stopped me from learning a lot and they’ve stopped people from getting to know me very well … over the years it’s brought me down and down and down … (Norman) All of the young people identiﬁed a range of ways being bullied made them feel. What is clear from their accounts is that it is not just the actual bullying incidents that were the issue, it was how those incidents positioned them in relation to themselves and others. Their subjectivity changed as a result of the fears and feelings they had as a result of being bullied.

Discussion The aim of this study was to highlight common discourses constituting bullying conveyed in academic literature, government guidance and three school anti-bullying policies relating to bullying, and to explore discourses constituting bullying from eight young people who have experienced it, with a view to identifying more effective ways of supporting young people experiencing bullying.

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The research questions supporting the aims of the study were: How does previous research construct the subject of bullying? How far does policy and practice in schools address the subjective experience of bullying? What meanings do young people who have been bullied give to the experience? How does bullying affect the way young people position themselves in relation to others?

These research questions will now be discussed in light of the analysis carried out in this study.

How does previous research construct the subject of bullying? This study used Foucault’s ideas (Foucault, 1977, 1978) about how cultural objects, like bullying, are constituted by discourses to explore the ways bullying is understood. In particular Foucault (1977, 1978) identiﬁed discourses as constructing objects that people position themselves and others by. Discourse and power are intrinsically linked because through discourse power is exercised. Power is exercised in the sense that discourses create understanding, on which actions are then based. Evident from the analysis in this research is that bullying is currently constituted by academic literature, government guidance and school policies as particular behaviours experienced over time which are intended to cause harm in some way to a victim. Research arguably creates a dominant understanding of bullying with far reaching impacts, because government directives and policies are based on the knowledge conveyed in the literature. Through most of the literature bullying is seen as something that happens between people; it is not seen as having a normalising function. Some of the participants interviewed in this study thought that some teachers ignored bullying incidents. This is perhaps a reﬂection of the different ways bullying is understood by different groups, where adults and young people have differing views about what bullying is, and what support is effective. This is mirrored in the literature that highlighted that teachers have become desensitised towards bullying (Barone & Kappan, 1997), that they do not see some particular behaviours as bullying (Bright, 2005) and, depending on the attitude they hold, this impacts on whether they will intervene (Kochenderfer & Pelletiers, 2008). This situation highlights that bullying as a cultural object is constituted in many different ways. By exploring how previous research constitutes bullying and that these discourses differ from those of young people who experience it, this study has been able to highlight the importance of using the discourses from young people to inform effective ways of supporting those who experience bullying.

How far does policy and practice in schools address the subjective experience of bullying? In relation to school policies about bullying, like academic literature, the policies analysed in this study approach bullying from a perspective that accepts its existence as a social problem which is speciﬁc to individual relationships. The policies focus

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on the behaviours of the bully, they talk at young people and not to them and they do not convey that adults understand how being bullied makes young people feel. The six participants re-interviewed with their school’s anti-bullying policy all commented that the actions speciﬁed in the policy, in terms of how staff at the school manage bullying, did not happen in their experience. If the intention of the policies is to guide practice, then for those interviewed this was not their experience. While policies can be used to guide practice in response to legal requirements they can also be used in a more proactive way. Schools could use them as a vehicle for expressing a desired outcome. Therefore, a policy could be seen as a way of reﬂecting the values and beliefs of a school, rather than a display of how they meet their legal obligations (Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2000). The vision of what schools want for young people needs to be conveyed explicitly through policy. Having a positive vision may help change attitudes towards bullying (Glover et al., 2000). It may help those working with young people to appreciate that promoting positive behaviours could have a greater impact than policing negative ones. Another aspect of an appropriate policy is that it accurately reﬂects the needs and views of the group for whom the policy is intended. Generally, the participants disagreed with the deﬁnition of bullying that the schools used in their policies, and they all added to the deﬁnitions in some way. The disagreement in views is a reﬂection of the different ways objects like bullying can be understood, but it is the dominant understanding conveyed in literature and school policies that shapes deﬁnitions of bullying. It may be helpful to use deﬁnitions of bullying from young people who actually experience it. A further aspect of an appropriate policy would be for it to show some level of understanding about the reasonableness of its directions. The three school policies analysed in this study all made explicit statements about young people needing to tell an adult if they were being bullied. Such a view places the responsibility of reporting bullying on those who are being bullied. In a sense, the weakest must complain. The young people in this study repeatedly stressed in interviews that they had tried over time to manage the situation themselves and that they sought adult help only when their own strategies failed. A preferable situation would be for a policy not only to convey that it is the responsibility of the whole school community to report bullying incidents, but to support this approach through a change in understanding towards bullying. Finally in relation to school policies aimed at addressing bullying, government guidance suggests that participation of children and young people in creating policies might result in more effective policies. The analysis carried out in this study indicates each school community needs to be encouraged to make their own personalised policy, including views from the whole school community about the aims of a policy, how bullying is deﬁned within the school community and details of what support children and young people want when they experience bullying.

What meanings do young people who have been bullied give to the experience? As stated earlier, academic literature, government guidance and school policies use deﬁnitions of bullying that focus on particular behaviours present over time which are intended to hurt the victim. None of the deﬁnitions focused on the subjective nature of how young people are affected by bullying or what the experience means to them. This study has shown that the experience of being bullied has far reaching

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consequences, that it is not just about the behaviours that are experienced, rather, it is about how the experience as a whole affects a young person. The analysis carried out in this research has revealed that, for those who took part, being bullied was a life changing event. This means that more attention needs to be given to effectively supporting young people who experience bullying by ﬁnding out from them how much it has affected them and what support they feel they need.

How does bullying affect the way young people position themselves in relation to others? It was clear from the accounts given by the participants that they all felt they had changed as a result of being bullied. The changes described included how they viewed themselves and others. The participants identiﬁed that they took ownership for being bullied. The bullying as they saw it was not about the one who bullied them, rather, it was something they felt was different about themselves. This highlights that young people judge each other, and themselves, relative to norms relating to their group. Moreover, as Foucault (1977, 1978) highlighted, in society, being outside a norm brings with it management to ensure conformity; management that can include exclusion. From the accounts given by participants it is clear that they owned the reason for being bullied which meant that they questioned who they were. They were no longer free to be themselves; they were now a different self. This caused tensions for them, and this was particularly evident in Anna’s situation where she faced a dilemma between her religious identity and the desire to ﬁt in and not be bullied. Being the only girl in the school wearing a head covering led to a dilemma for her. In her interview she stated that wearing a head covering led to bullying; not wearing it transgressed her religious beliefs and isolated her from her family, making gaining their support more difﬁcult. This was a struggle that changed who she was as a person. All the other young people reported ways they felt differently about themselves following their experiences. The participants identiﬁed how it felt to be positioned by normalising judgements. Further, the participants identiﬁed that the act of being bullied was itself an isolating experience. Some of them talked about how alone they felt they were with the problem. However, Clair was surprised to hear that 50% of young people experience bullying, she indicated that if more young people knew that was the case then they would feel better about coming forward and making a stand:

I think if that was made across more to kids in this school then we’d be brave enough to say we are being bullied can someone help us. (Clair) Clair’s comment highlights the norms around how she understood bullying. She felt bullying was not as widespread as it is. This new knowledge, or norm, had a positive effect on Clair, she felt that young people would be able to talk about being bullied if they knew the frequency of it. Understanding that young people own the reasons for being bullied has a number of implications. It helps to explain why they ﬁnd it so difﬁcult to tell someone about the experience. However, more than this, it suggests a different way of thinking about the meaning of bullying. In research bullying is construed in polarities of power and powerlessness. For the young people in this study bullying was about something which they felt placed them outside of the norm for their group. If we see bullying in

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normative terms it may help to shape different forms of practice about it. This is not to deny the issue of power, rather, seeing bullying as related to norms helps to understand the nature of the power that is being exercised in bullying. The analysis of this research highlighting bullying as a normative function reinforces the importance of effectively supporting those who experience bullying by tailoring support at the individual level, rather than having a one size ﬁts all approach.

Implications for educational psychology practice Arguably, one of the key roles of the educational psychologist is to support the most vulnerable children and young people. From this research study, an understanding has been gained regarding the extent to which young people can be affected by bullying and it could be argued they need to be seen as a vulnerable group. Supporting individuals on the basis of the ﬁndings from this study would necessitate a collaborative relationship with the young person who had been bullied to identify what this experience meant to them personally and what supports they would ﬁnd most useful. One of the difﬁculties some of the young people identiﬁed in seeking support was that they were not told what action teachers had taken in relation to the bullying they experienced. This left them feeling uncertain and powerless and increased their anxiety. The importance of an agreed plan of action and of ensuring that the young person concerned is kept informed of what is occurring is important. At a more systemic level, educational psychologists can have a role in supporting schools to take a proactive rather than reactive stance in relation to bullying. Ensuring that young people are actively involved in developing school bullying policies, that these are available within the school for all students, and that bullying is not seen as an individual problem but something that can be altered through a positive, informed school vision, would seem to be important measures that educational psychologists can encourage and support.

Conclusion This study indicates that bullying is currently constituted by academic literature, government guidance and school policies as particular behaviours present over time that are intended to negatively affect a victim in some way. The study has shown that important discourses about bullying, from young people who experience it, in terms of how it felt to be positioned as different, and how deeply they were affected by the experience, need to contribute to how bullying is constituted. These additional discourses from young people help us understand the impact of bullying from their perspective and, in turn, help us understand how they can be supported more effectively.

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