**WEEK 2 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**

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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

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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 exp