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## BULLYING AND THE INCLUSIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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As Australian education departments and teacher education institutions become aware of international trends, they are keen to implement quickly pedagogical and curriculum changes that are being promoted as best practice for schools of the twenty-first century. One such recent change has been the inclusivity movement. There remain, however, many unresolved issues for teachers that fall outside these new paradigm shifts but still require urgent attention. Bullying is one issue that needs to be addressed within the complex socioeconomic and political institutions we call schools. Addressing bullying in schools requires a multifaceted approach, involving not only appropriate interventions for the bullies but also consideration of the adequacy, form and manner of support available for the victims. With the current educational debate in Australia, as elsewhere, focusing on developing more inclusive schools, bullying is considered in this paper from two perspectives: firstly, consideration is given to the current situation in Australian schools and secondly, the incidence of bullying in some Western Australian schools engaged in reviewing their inclusive educational practices is described, based on data collected from 246 staff, 1 449 students and 654 parents and carers.

### Introduction

As elsewhere, there is concern in Australia about the increasing incidence of bullying being reported in schools. Recent research has identified a number of key issues. These include the need for adequate definition of bullying; information on the extent of bullying in schools and the measures that can be taken against it; dealing with both the victims and the

instigators; gender differences; and identification of the populations most likely to be bullies and/or to be bullied (Edwards, 2000; Field, 2000; Maslen, 1998; Peterson & Rigby, 1999; Rigby, 2000; Rigby, 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1999).

### Defining Bullying

The Australian literature characterises bullying as a behaviour that is purposeful, with a desire by a more powerful person to hurt a weaker person (Longaretti, 2001; Edwards, 2000). It also has to be a repeated behaviour and without justification, except in the eyes of the bully (Rigby, 1996). Bullying can involve a number of aspects such as harassment, hitting, kicking, isolating, humiliating and teasing. A policy document of the Department of Education and Training (DET) in Western Australia, *Making the Difference: Behaviour Management in Schools* (1998), defines bullying as:

*A wilful, conscious desire to hurt, threaten or frighten. It can be physical and/or verbal in nature and can include racial, religious and sexual harassment, rude gestures, intimidation, social isolation and extortion. It must be recognised that bullying is ongoing in nature and that bullies are reinforced by another's pain, fear and humiliation. (p. 2)*

Rigby (1997) argues that harassment is in fact a different type of bullying as it connotes mainly events of a sexual nature and describes less-violent and less-abusive actions. In regard to the use of the terms bullying and harassment, Rigby posits that they are interchangeable in some cases, although there are instances, especially if physical aggression is involved, where

bullying is more appropriate than harassment.

### **Extent of bullying**

Statistics about the prevalence of bullying vary. Data have been collected using self-reports (Edwards, 2000; Rigby, 1999; Rigby & Slee, 1999), peer nominations of students who are bullies (Rigby & Slee, 1999; Slee & Rigby, 1994), teacher reports (Slee & Rigby, 1994) and adult observation (Martlew & Hodson, 1991). Most recently, 703 Australian Year 11 students responded to an on-line survey (Australian Democrats, 2003). Of these students, 64 per cent reported that bullying was a problem in their schools and 7.6 per cent that it was a serious problem. It is generally accepted that as many as one in six children are the victims of bullies each week in Australian schools (Edwards, 2000; Peterson & Rigby, 1999; Rigby, 1997). This takes into account a definition of bullying that involves being bullied at least once a week. The number is even higher when consideration is given to those students who are bullied less frequently. There is an underlying suggestion in the research that all schools experience bullying and can anticipate its occurrence. According to Healey (1998), two-thirds of children are bullied at some time in their school lives. Field (2000) argues that there would still be bullying even if everything possible was done to prevent it. In addition, it has been found that students in primary schools are bullied more and are at greater risk of being bullied than are students in secondary schools (Rigby, 1999; Rigby, Cox & Black, 1997; Rigby, 1996), although bullying among students of all ages is prevalent (Rigby, 2002).

The genders and ages of students have been shown to have an effect on whether they become the victims of bullying. Boys have reportedly been bullied more frequently than girls and are generally bullied in a physical or verbal manner (Longaretti, 2001; Maslen, 1998; Rigby,

Cox & Black, 1997). While girls seem to be bullied less frequently, the bullying they experience tends to be carried out in verbal or indirect ways that are potentially more harmful in the long term (Healey, 1998; Longaretti, 2001; Maslen, 1998). Specifically, Rigby (1999) found poor physical health was common among boys who were bullied at least once a week, but that both poor physical health and poor mental health were common among girls who were bullied. This indicates that bullying is having a greater emotional and psychological effect on girls, as well as affecting their health, even though they have been shown to have more effective support networks. Boys are less likely to admit to being affected by bullying, but if they do their feelings are generally of anger, whereas girls tend to report being sad or miserable (Rigby, 1997).

### **Addressing the issue**

While bullying may have little effect on students who are particularly resilient, it can cause a great deal of harm to those with inadequate support (Rigby, 2000). It has been reported that the incidence of bullying tends to vary inversely with the level of regular support within schools for those who are bullied (Slee & Rigby, 1994). A number of other outcomes have also been identified for victims, such as stress or general health problems (Rigby, 2000), problems with depression and suicidal ideation (Rigby & Slee, 1999), loss of self-esteem (Rigby, 1997), increased absenteeism (Rigby, 1997) and poor mental health (Rigby 2000). A marked increase in long-term psychosocial and psychosomatic illness in students who have been bullied has, moreover, been recorded (Forero, McLellan, Rissel & Bauman, 1999). In particular, bullying in early years is also indicative of later criminality and delinquency (Morrison, 2002; White, 2002; Farrell, 1999), hence the importance of early intervention that addresses all aspects of the problem thoroughly.

The overall results of the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs in schools are extremely varied (Edwards, 2000; Peterson & Rigby, 1999). They range from increases in reported bullying (Soutter & McKenzie, 2000) possibly due to an increased awareness of bullying behaviour, to falls in reported bullying of up to 50 per cent (Olweus, 1993, cited in Rigby, 1996). Extensive investigation by the NSW Department of Education and Training found that teachers address mainly the physical bullying occurring in their classrooms, but not the verbal or indirect bullying that may be causing more long-term damage to the students being victimised (Soutter & McKenzie, 2000). Peterson and Rigby (1999) suggest that one possible reason for the differences in success found by the various researchers is that different schools require different methods, and it is a matter of trial and error to determine which approach works best.

To improve the success of measures for addressing the issue of bullying in Australian schools, a whole-school approach is vital. The exact extent of the problem must first be identified (Peterson & Rigby, 1999) and a school policy that will provide guidelines for the implementation of strategies to combat bullying must be developed, implemented and reviewed regularly (Rigby, 2001). Programs to reduce bullying in schools must also have long-term objectives, as entrenched bullying may take a long time to eliminate or reduce (Rigby, 1997). A number of initiatives are being undertaken at the national level and state levels to address bullying in schools. The Commonwealth Department of Education provided a booklet for parents in 2000 to suggest ways in which they might help their children to stop bullying in schools (Rigby, 2002). Each of the state education authorities has its own policies with regard to bullying in schools (Rigby, 2002, Tasmanian Audit Office, 2002). These often require schools to consider bullying

and ways to counter it within their school development policies. Rigby (2002) suggests that there is little assessment data from schools about the efficacy of these policies in reducing or eliminating bullying.

Several programs have been trialled in schools, including Mind Matters: Dealing with Bullying and Harassment (Rigby, 2002); the Responsible Citizenship Program (Morrison, 2002); Peer Support (Rigby, 2002); Program Achieve (Rigby, 2002) and educational drama productions by Sticks and Stones (Brainstorm Productions, 2003). In Western Australia, a research group at Curtin University of Technology developed the Friendly Schools Project. This is a whole-school program designed to teach students the skills to support others who are being bullied and to be adaptive in their responses to bullies. It is intended for use with students in Years 4 and 5, but could possibly be adapted for use with younger children.

In addition, the Commonwealth Government has begun to allocate significant resources to reduce bullying in schools. In July 2003, it launched a *National Safe Schools Framework* that involved teacher professional development and ways of helping schools to select and implement effective, evidence-based, best practice programs to address bullying, violence and abuse. In November 2003, the Minister for Education, Science and Training announced a \$4.5m funding aimed at providing safe and supportive schooling for all young Australians (Nelson, 2003). A *Bullying No Way* website has also been established ([www.bullyingnoway.com.au](http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au)).

### **The Western Australian scene**

In accordance with national trends there has been increased concern in recent years in WA about the growing incidence and

severity of student bullying in schools and the need to consider better approaches for supporting school communities addressing the issues. A children's' free phone counselling service, Kids Help Line, receives a large number of calls about bullying. Since reported by Healey in 1998, the number of calls about bullying in WA has doubled, from approximately 4 per cent to 8.4 per cent of calls taken per year (Kids Help Line, 2002). The Kids Help Line reports differences in call volumes for each State and indicates that the WA rate is higher than the national average of 7.5 per cent (Kids Help Line, 2002). Most of the calls made relating to bullying were from children aged between 10 and 14 yrs (78 per cent). Kids Help Line is careful to note that this does not necessarily mean that WA has a higher rate of bullying, but that there may be factors (such as the students being more aware of what bullying is) that cause these figures to be higher (Healey, 1998). Apparently no specific data on bullying are recorded statewide by the government school system in WA (C. Griffiths, personal communication, 15 October 2003). However, according to the Department of Education and Training, schools collect their own data.

Government schools are expected to address specifically the issue of misbehaviour, including bullying, in their *school behaviour management plans*. Independent and Catholic schools also deal with bullying in their individual school policies. All schools are encouraged to include input from members of the community, parents, staff and students.

Since 2001, this process has been furthered in WA by the focus on inclusive educational practices. School communities have begun to dedicate considerable time and resources to reflecting on inclusivity and identifying the degree to which their cultures, policies and practices provide an inclusive environment for all staff and students (Forlin, 2002, 2002a, 2004). The Department of Education and Training has

initiated several programs to support schools in this process. Its major initiative, *Building Inclusive Schools: Managing for Diversity* (DET, 2002), supports a philosophy that provides for the development of genuinely inclusive school communities. This is enhanced further by the DET *Plan for Government Schools 2004 – 2007*. Of the four Key Objectives, Objective 3 in particular emphasises the need to ensure that schools support and provide for the learning, physical, emotional and behavioural needs of all students. Within this strategy it is proposed that students should develop skills in self-management of their behaviour and that all students, teachers and other staff should be respected and valued.

As school communities endeavour to become more inclusive, existing restrictions to inclusion are being recognised. They include school admissions policies, homophobia, the absence of a welcoming environment for students and staff, the absence of a shared school philosophy, teachers' attitudes and bullying (Forlin, 2002a).

This paper describes the extent to which eight school communities in WA consider their schools to be supportive and caring environments and the degree to which the staff, students and parents believed that bullying was a problem for students. The schools were representative of age groups from Kindergarten to compulsory Year 10, from each of the three major educational systems (Government, Catholic and Independent) in Western Australia. All schools were within a one-hour drive of the Perth metropolitan area.

## Method

Eight schools in the South-West region of Western Australia that were engaged in reviewing inclusive perspectives during 2001 and 2002 were selected. They used the British *Index for Inclusion* (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, &

Shaw, 2000). As part of the *Index for Inclusion* process, schools are encouraged to assess themselves on how inclusive they are over a range of measures. One facet of this process involves using formal questionnaires to obtain a quantifiable measure of the degree to which aspects of inclusion are of concern to them. Three questionnaires were specifically developed from the sample surveys included in the *Index for Inclusion* that were contextually appropriate for use in WA school communities for administration to staff, students and parents or carers (Forlin, 2002). The items were based on the three dimensions concerned with a school's culture, policy and practice. These were administered to all participants to explore the views of staff, students and parents of each school community.

### Participants

The research participants were the whole school communities, including all students in Year 3 and above, teaching and non-teaching staff and parents. A total of 246 staff, 1 449 students and 654 parents responded with usable questionnaires. (Note: the numbers of responses in the tables will vary because not all participants completed every item).

### Data analysis

Questionnaires contained up to 25 items relating to three different aspects of inclusivity (culture, policy and practice). Different questionnaires were given to staff, parents or carers and students. Wherever possible, statements were matched to allow comparison of responses for individual items across all participants. Responses were recorded using a 4-point Likert scale from '1' (definitely agree); '2' (agree to some extent); '3' (disagree), to '4' (need more information). Mean responses were calculated from '1' (definitely agree); to '3' (disagree), with a higher mean

response indicating less agreement with an item.

This paper reports the findings for two statements relating to the school environment (*Staff strive to make the school a safe, happy place* and *Staff and students treat one another with respect*) and two statements related directly to the issue of bullying (*Bullying is not a problem for the children I know / me / my child* and *The school is doing all it can to minimise bullying*). Gender and year levels (3-5, 6-7 and 8-10) were analysed as independent variables. In addition, all written responses to two questions (which asked respondents to list *Three things I like about this school* and *Three things I would like to change about this school*) that related to a safe environment or to bullying were analysed using a deductive analytical approach. Core categories and sub-categories were identified. This provided a framework within which to evaluate the impact of the environment and bullying in these eight schools.

### Results

#### A safe, happy and respectful environment

The first statements discussed focus on the school environment as providing a safe, happy and respectful place for everyone to work in. It is clear from Table 1 that staff (mean = 1.22) and female students (mean = 1.28) rate statement 1 (*Staff strive to make the school a safe, happy place*) the highest, with relatively strong agreement that staff were making their schools safe places. Although slightly less positive, male students (mean = 1.34) and parents (mean = 1.45) also believe that staff were striving to make schools happy locations. Worthy of note is the fact that in one school (5), all staff gave this item a '1' (definitely agree) response.

Table 1  
Staff strive to make the school a safe, happy place

Sch	Staff		Students' Gender				Students' Year Level						Parents	
			Male		Female		3 - 5		6 - 7		8 - 10			
			N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M		
1	29	1.24	84	1.25	99	1.19	98	1.14	83	1.29	NA	NA	112	1.34
2	59	1.17	20	1.10	10	1.10	2	1.00	5	1.40	15	1.07	53	1.13
3	58	1.31	187	1.63	169	1.66	60	1.12	60	1.55	235	1.80	86	2.15
4	25	1.12	89	1.24	106	1.16	93	1.22	102	1.18	NA	NA	115	1.34
5	17	1.00	31	1.23	27	1.04	46	1.13	9	1.22	NA	NA	76	1.18
6	12	1.42	119	1.41	114	1.35	122	1.22	111	1.56	NA	NA	157	1.29
7	28	1.32	126	1.65	85	1.49	95	1.36	53	1.60	65	1.91	34	1.71
8	18	1.22	91	1.21	92	1.23	NA	NA	NA	NA	198	1.22	21	1.48
Totals	246	1.22	747	1.34	702	1.28	516	1.17	423	1.40	513	1.66	654	1.45

Note: shaded cells indicate significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between groups

Students, in Years 3-5 rated this item more positively (mean = 1.17) than those in Years 6-7 (mean = 1.40). The most negative group were the students in Years 8-10, who show less agreement with this item (mean = 1.66). In particular, in Schools 1, 3, 6 and 7 this trend toward greater negativity with age was significant.

The statement *Staff and students treat one another with respect* was not seen in such a positive light (see Table 2). In all instances, staff, students and parents, while considering that staff were doing a relatively good job of attempting to make schools safe and happy places, did not consider that staff and students were treating each other with respect. This seemed of particular concern in Schools 1, 3 and 7, in which responses were quite negative. Again a similar trend was noted for differences in age, with an increase in age correlating with a perception of less respect between staff and students. This age difference was significant for four schools.

**Table 2**  
Staff and students treat one another with respect

Sch	Staff		Students' Gender				Students' Year Level						Parents	
			Male		Female		3 - 5		6 - 7		8 - 10			
			N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M		
1	29	1.93	81	1.72	100	1.72	100	1.55	79	1.94	NA	NA	111	1.95
2	59	1.79	19	1.11	10	1.20	2	1.00	4	1.25	15	1.20	50	1.34
3	58	2.09	188	2.02	166	1.95	61	1.48	58	1.95	234	2.12	82	2.04
4	24	1.79	86	1.50	107	1.54	94	1.51	99	1.54	NA	NA	107	1.74
5	17	1.29	30	1.53	27	1.37	45	1.47	9	1.44	NA	NA	76	1.28
6	12	1.58	119	1.72	114	1.55	120	1.52	113	1.77	NA	NA	161	1.47
7	29	1.97	124	1.94	92	1.84	91	1.71	58	1.98	69	2.06	30	2.07
8	17	1.76	94	1.56	90	1.59	NA	NA	NA	NA	198	1.58	20	1.90
Totals	245	1.78	741	1.64	706	1.60	513	1.46	420	1.63	516	1.74	637	1.72

Note: shaded cells indicate significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between groups

These findings were supported further by the responses in the written feedback sought about the *Three things I like about this school*.

**Staff**

While the majority of responses by staff related to administrative, curriculum and staffing issues, many commented on the friendly nature of their colleagues and the students and families at their schools. Others mentioned the 'welcoming' and 'inclusive' atmosphere in their schools. Another aspect frequently referred to was networking among staff, which was linked to responses regarding the care and support provided for one another in times of difficulty and the 'open door' policy in the schools. Staff from at least two schools provided comments supporting the positive impact of their school's pastoral care system and anti-bullying strategies, suggesting that these practices had a significant influence in creating a positive school environment.

**Students**

Students further reinforced the importance of friendliness within the school environment. Comments such as 'friendly students' and 'caring students' appeared as some of the most frequent responses in all eight schools. In addition, students described respect between them and their peers: for example, 'my friends respect me and care for me and my feelings' and 'all students respect each other'. Many students also noted the welcoming and inclusive environment of their schools: for example, 'everyone looks after everyone' and 'I am in a wheelchair and I like the way the kids help me'. Five of the eight schools also provided comments about how the students felt 'safe' within the school environment, although the context in which this was meant was not often elaborated upon.

**Parents**

Parents and carers were also asked to comment on the positive aspects of their



schools. As with staff and students, many referred to the friendliness of the staff and students, noting that their children were happy and were treated well and respected by others. Some of these comments were quite specific to their own children's needs (for example, 'every teacher I have dealt with has been interested in my children's welfare') with issues of equality, such as racial harmony, being mentioned in several cases. Policy was also touched on by some parents, including an emphasis on the positive impact of the Christian ethos in one of the non-government schools. Other schools' parents and carers commented occasionally on the success of specific policies linked to bullying, although this was not a common response.

It is clear that these written responses reflect strongly the importance that staff, students and parents place on safe, happy and respectful school environments. It is interesting to note that more staff, students and parents commented that the environment was friendly than those who

referred to respect for one another. Specifically, the students were the only group that raised consistently the issue of respect, although this was deemed to be between peers rather than between staff and students. This reflects the data from the two items where the scores revealing the degree of respect in the school environment were consistently more negative than the results for a safe, happy environment.

**Bullying in schools**

The second two statements related to the specific issue of bullying in schools. Responses to the statement *bullying is not a problem for the children I know / me / my child* ranged from erring on the side of disagreement by the staff (mean = 2.20) to agreeing to some extent by the parents (mean = 1.64). While the staffs appeared to consider that bullying was a problem for the children that they knew, parents seemed less aware of the impact of bullying on their own children (see Table 3).

Table 3  
Bullying is not a problem for the children I know / me / my child

Sch	Staff		Students' Gender				Students' Year Level						Parents	
			Male		Female		3 - 5		6 - 7		8 - 10			
	N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M
1	29	2.52	79	1.85	98	1.92	98	1.96	76	1.82	NA	NA	112	1.84
2	55	2.04	20	1.75	9	1.67	2	2.50	5	1.80	15	1.73	41	1.49
3	57	2.53	187	1.78	162	1.91	57	1.89	55	1.93	236	1.81	92	1.47
4	23	2.26	81	1.89	104	2.01	92	2.09	93	1.83	NA	NA	112	1.78
5	17	1.47	26	1.69	24	1.88	39	1.82	8	1.50	NA	NA	77	1.40
6	12	1.83	115	1.71	112	1.82	118	1.86	109	1.66	NA	NA	153	1.75
7	29	2.52	129	1.74	94	1.66	89	1.74	63	1.84	72	1.57	34	1.91
8	18	2.44	93	1.62	92	1.72	NA	NA	NA	NA	198	1.67	28	1.50
Totals	240	2.20	730	1.75	695	1.82	495	1.98	409	1.77	521	1.70	649	1.64

Note: shaded cells indicate significant differences (p < .05) between groups

There were also noticeable differences in responses between staff from the different schools. Although one school considered that bullying was not an issue, staff at the other schools indicated that bullying was a problem for the children they knew, with mean responses ranging as high as 2.53. The students' responses indicated generally

that bullying was more of a problem for those in the younger age group. In most schools, female students considered that bullying was more of a problem for them than for their male peers; however, these differences were statistically significant for only one school.

Table 4  
The school is doing all it can to minimise bullying

Sch	Staff		Students' Gender				Students' Year Level						Parents	
			Male		Female		3 - 5		6 - 7		8 - 10			
			N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M		
1	28	1.61	82	1.54	97	1.30	97	1.38	80	1.45	NA	NA	112	1.71
2	54	1.44	19	1.37	10	1.10	2	1.50	5	1.60	15	1.27	37	1.30
3	55	1.80	190	1.86	164	1.91	60	1.38	58	2.02	234	1.97	62	1.97
4	25	1.44	88	1.27	106	1.28	94	1.36	100	1.20	NA	NA	113	1.40
5	17	1.18	28	1.61	27	1.19	43	1.28	9	2.11	NA	NA	67	1.37
6	12	1.58	116	1.60	111	1.50	120	1.51	107	1.61	NA	NA	149	1.64
7	28	1.64	125	1.62	91	1.56	92	1.29	57	1.72	69	1.87	34	1.85
8	17	1.59	95	1.45	91	1.46	NA	NA	NA	NA	198	1.46	23	1.78
Totals	236	1.54	743	1.54	697	1.41	508	1.39	416	1.47	516	1.64	597	1.41

Note: shaded cells indicate significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between groups

In response to the statement *The school is doing all it can to minimise bullying* staff, students and parents were fairly much in agreement (see Table 4). There were, however, some noticeable differences between student groups. Most female students rated this item more positively than their male peers, although these differences were statistically significant for only one school. This is a particularly interesting finding, because while female students tended to consider bullying more of a problem for them, compared with the boys they also perceived that more was being done to help minimise it. As

indicated, the issue of bullying was considered less of a problem with the older children, but when compared with their younger counterparts, the older children thought that schools were also doing less to minimise bullying. With the exception of School 4, as students became older they considered that their schools were not doing as much in minimising bullying. For Schools 3, 6 and 7, these differences were statistically significant.

These findings were supported further by the responses in the written feedback

sought about *Three things I would like to Staff*

Most staff responded with quite specific comments that related more to administrative and curriculum changes than to anything else. Although staff were generally one of the most negative groups in response to the statement *Bullying is not a problem for the students I know*, and also one of the most negative groups for the statement *The school is doing all it can to minimise bullying*, they referred least to bullying in their written comments. Staff who mentioned bullying did so mainly in reference to a desire for improvement in school policy and practice related to bullying. This was evident in only two of the eight schools surveyed.

### Students

Students were much more willing than staff to refer specifically to bullying issues in their written comments. Students in all schools made comments relating to bullying, with bullying-related issues among the most frequently appearing concerns in at least three schools. The students from two schools had quite a high level of concern about bullying, with about a third of the written responses stating that they would like to reduce the level of bullying at their schools. Examples of typical written comments included 'I would like to see bullying cut down so that no-one ever does it', 'I don't like other kids hurting my friends' and 'I think kids should feel safer than they are'. Fewer students related the ongoing problems with bullying to a lack of discipline or support from the staff. Most of these observations came from secondary students: 'I don't think teachers make enough of an effort...when kids get bullied. They always seem to be doing something but never actually are'. Some primary school students also mentioned their desire for changes in discipline systems for addressing bullying behaviour.

*change about this school.*

### Parents

Although fewer parents than students commented on the perceived need for reduced bullying in schools, those that did so often voiced their opinions strongly and specifically. Some gave ideas about what could be put into practice (for example, the use of slogans about respect, anti-bullying, or the need to better reward positive behaviour). Most advocated a greater effort being made in terms of discipline in general: for example, 'Bullying is a problem in all schools. There should be more follow-through procedures, eg. letters to parents, meetings, etc.'

While positive comments often centred on the school being a safe, happy and welcoming place, negative comments tended to be more specifically related to particular issues such as bullying and respect for others. This is consistent with the quantitative data that show in most cases a more positive response to the statement *Staff strive to make the school a safe, happy place* and a more negative response to the statement *Staff and students treat each other with respect* and *The school is doing all it can to minimise bullying*.

### Conclusion

It would appear that in these eight schools that there was an overall feeling that they were providing safe and happy places for students and staff. Although this feeling tended to become more negative among students as they grew older, each school was generally considered by its staff, students and parents to be a secure and cheerful place. There was less agreement on the issue of respect between students and staff. This lack of respect was also heightened as students got older, when they perceived that there was less respect between them and the staff. Conversely,

many students commented on the respect shown to them by their peers and the caring attitudes between students.

With regard to the impact of bullying on students, there was a clear indication that bullying was a problem in these schools and that this was more so for the students in Years 3-5 than for the upper primary or secondary-aged students. Although this does not seem to reflect the data from the Kids Help Line, it may well be that older students find it easier to make personal calls to such agencies. If this is the case, then consideration needs to be given to how younger children might access support other than by using the telephone, as they appear to be bullied more frequently than older children, yet seek support less. While this is similar to previous findings reported by Rigby (1996, 1999) and Rigby et al. (1997), earlier data on gender differences differ from what was found in WA. Previously, boys had been found to be bullied more frequently than girls are (Longaretti, 2001; Maslen, 1998; Rigby et al., 1997), whereas in these schools, girls reported higher levels of bullying than boys.

Even though all schools reported fairly positive environments, there were considerable variations in how much each school considered it was doing to minimise bullying. In general, all schools considered that they could be doing more. Most feedback on the need to improve policies and practices regarding bullying came from the students themselves, with many voicing concerns about their peers being bullied rather than directly about themselves. While it must be acknowledged that there will still be bullying even if everything possible is done to avert it (Field, 2002), it would seem clear that school communities think that more could certainly be done at the school level to address the issue of bullying. The recent provision of additional funding by the Commonwealth to encourage schools to consider and develop appropriate interventions would seem to be a positive way forward, as the incidence of

bullying has been found to be reduced in schools in which there is more support available (Slee & Rigby, 1994). While schools continue to focus on becoming more inclusive, strategies need to be considered not just for including students with identified disabilities but for addressing the issue of bullying, which can affect any student at any time during his or her school life and can pose a real barrier to inclusivity.

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