Developing a more positive school culture to address bullying and improve school relationships

Case studies from two primary schools and one intermediate school

Summary

AGENDA FOR Children

Mahere rautaki mā te Hunga Tamariki

This study helps implement Action Area 4 of *New Zealand's Agenda for Children*, which aims to address violence in children's lives with a particular focus on bullying. A full copy of the report is available on the Ministry of Social Development website www.msd.govt.nz/work-areas/children You can also obtain a free hard copy version of the report from the Ministry of Social Development – email: agendaforchildren@msd.govt.nz The aim was to collect information about how three schools have developed a more positive school culture and reduced bullying in their schools. The principles of change and the approaches to promoting positive relationships found in these three case study schools offer other New Zealand schools a starting point for reflection on how they might improve their own school culture and reduce violence and bullying.

Three schools were identified and invited to be part of the research:
- Papatoetoe Intermediate School is in Manukau City
- Wilford Primary School is a full primary in Hutt City
- Caversham Primary School is a contributing primary in Dunedin City.

The following principles were identified in the three schools for improving school culture and reducing bullying:
- leadership is critical to initiating the process but staff support, followed by student support, is needed to achieve school-wide development
- the development of a more positive school culture requires people to look at the relationships that make up the school
- the programmes implemented, and it is unlikely to be just one, need to focus on supporting the wellbeing of students and their families and whanau
- the change process requires lots of time and energy and is not self sustaining.

The three schools undertook, using the principles listed above, a single school-wide approach to managing student behaviour and the promotion of positive relationships. Such an approach included:
- creating clear expectations through discussion of desirable school relationships and appropriate behaviour
- setting in place consistent, immediate and fair consequences for both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour
- providing support for students so they could develop positive relationships and learn to behave appropriately.

The research questions focused on what the schools were like previously, how change was initiated, what programmes and community support were used, what the outcomes have been for schools and students, and what are the current challenges and goals that each school faces.

A researcher undertook interviews with the principal, teachers, school support staff, external professionals associated with the school, and a parent representative on the Board of Trustees and facilitated focus groups with students.

Each researcher then developed a profile for their school. These profiles contained:

- a description of the school
- a description of the school culture
- the process of changing the school culture
- a description of the various programmes that the school used to bring about change
- the role of different people in supporting the change in school culture
- outcomes and new challenges.

These profiles can be found at www.msd.govt.nz/work-areas/children-and-young-people/agenda-for-children

The results of the comparative analysis show that there are identifiable themes common to all three schools. These themes were the importance of leadership in bringing about change, the centrality of relationships to school culture, the nature of the programmes that were used to bring about change, and finally, the nature of the change process itself.

Each of the principals involved identified something different about their school that they wished to change but all three required a change in relationships within the school. All three schools had participated in the Specialist Education Services[1] *Eliminating Violence – Managing Anger programme*, but they also participated in many other external programmes or developed their own. All three schools had similar local factors that were influencing their development: they were all lower decile schools, they had high numbers of transient families, and families with diverse cultural backgrounds.

It was the view of all research participants that violence and bullying had reduced. Students within the focus groups reported they liked their school and felt safe there. They also knew what the expectations were in relation to appropriate behaviour at their school and could clearly describe what would happen if they or someone else were bullied.

[1] Specialist Education Services is now part of the Ministry of Education and referred to as Group Special Education.

Summary of school data according to the research questions

Questions	Papatoetoe Intermediate School	Caversham Primary School	Wilford Primary School
What was the previous school culture like – what values and beliefs underpinned it?	There was an approach of supporting teachers by finding ways to remove 'difficult' students who did not fit into the school's ways of doing things. This made the school management of student behaviour teacher centred rather than student centred.	The school was unsafe for students and staff. There was a high turnover in the principal's position and a number of children with behavioural issues joined the school. There was no respect shown between students and verbal and physical abuse occurred.	There was limited interaction between students and staff across the junior, middle and senior schools. The staff were operating as individuals rather than as a team.
To what extent was the previous school culture directly or indirectly supporting bullying in the school?	There was a lot more student fighting back then and the level of student engagement with the curriculum was unsatisfactory. It was not clear to what extent bullying was an implicit part of the school culture.	During the changes in leadership over a short period of time, the school culture had lost its focus on supporting positive relationships. The staff were in 'survival mode'. Positive school culture was not a priority.	A certain amount of physical and verbal abuse by some students was due to the absence of a consistent school-wide approach to managing student behaviour. The school was seen by some as rough due to the perceived level of violence.
How were changes initiated and where did the drive to change come from?	From 1993 a range of pastoral care systems were introduced within the school. The pastoral care committee he established developed a system for monitoring student progress and offering support where a need was identified.	The principal was alarmed by the culture of the school and sought support to start improving the relationships within the school. The school had received a number of critical ERO reports that had suggested changes would need to be made.	The principal made improving relationships within the school a focus. Reflection and review were used to evaluate progress. The principal encouraged the staff to focus on school-wide programmes and on a positive school culture.
What was the role of teachers in supporting change? What issues had to be resolved for teachers before success?	Teachers need to be consistent in their response to the management of student behaviour. School management support this by providing ongoing support and access to advice for teachers. Written information about school philosophies, policies and practices is made available to teachers and they are provided with training to adopt these.	The role of staff was to model appropriate behaviour; to be consistent and fair; to teach the curriculum and appropriate social behaviours; and to improve the self esteem and self worth of the children at the school. The teachers were always committed to the students but to contribute to a positive school culture this commitment had to be reflected in a school-wide vision for the students.	Relationships between staff had to be based on support rather than on competition. Staff were given the opportunity to develop their teaching goals and then they saw how other staff taught. This helped them learn from each other. Many of the staff were not used to articulating their practice and incorporating self reflection.
What aspects of the curriculum were used to support change?	Most of the programmes to support change are individually focused rather than classroom based although all are strongly supported by teachers within their classrooms. There is a virtues programme where a team decides which virtues will be promoted during different parts of the year. They also provide classroom units of work to promote the programme which ensures better consistency across classrooms.	The staff worked on their curriculum planning and engaged in a lot more professional development to support their planning in literacy and numeracy. The education outside the classroom programme is used to provide students with opportunities for social development and provide experiences they might not otherwise get.	Most recently the school has joined the Mentally Healthy Schools programme which works within the Health and Physical Education Curriculum to improve student mental health. Teachers actively incorporate the teaching of social skills, mediation and conflict resolution in their classrooms.
Was a specific anti-bullying programme or other values-based programme used to support change?	The virtues programme is promoted by the Working in Social Harmony (WISH) team, which developed out of the Eliminating Violence programme. The school has used the D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) programme in the past, but now prefers to run their own programme. The school is adept at taking successful components of various programmes and developing their own unique response tailored to their school.	The Eliminating Violence programme brought about the initial changes. The key components of the programme were celebrating good behaviour, developing rules and consequences, having students take responsibility for their actions and supporting children to find solutions to problem situations.	The school used the Eliminating Violence programme. This programme is an umbrella programme within which many other programmes are incorporated. The school has participated in many programmes including cool schools, skills for growing and Kia Kaha.
Was there community support for change? How were community resources or school-developed programmes used?	The community supports the approach taken by the school and the values being promoted. The financial support available from the parent community is low. This does not stop parents from taking an interest in their children's education.	The community was asked to provide support through a range of initiatives. Local businesses provided food for students. Parents are offered opportunities to join school outings, which have a strong social skill focus for students. Families contribute to school activities that celebrate the diverse ethnic make up of the school. The school has access to the social worker in schools programme that provides support to families within the school.	A counsellor from a local church provides a group programme for students suffering from grief or loss. The school actively promotes programmes to support the parent community. These have included literacy evening classes, parenting skills classes and parent evenings to introduce new programmes. The Board of Trustees is kept aware of programme developments and they have given their support to the shared vision that has developed.

Summary of school data according to the research questions continued

Questions	Papatoetoe Intermediate School	Caversham Primary School	Wilford Primary School
How were other external professionals important to supporting or initiating change?	A voluntary agency provides a life skills programme for small groups of students. The school works with schools in the area, both primary schools and some of the high schools the students go onto.	The facilitators with the Eliminating Violence programme were important in providing an outsider's view on the school. They collected data about the school and then shared that information with the school to encourage people to think about what types of change to make first. The principal has relationships with a number of social agencies who she calls in when particular types of support are required.	The Mentally Healthy Schools programme was used to document the programmes the school had put in place over the last few years. The access to this programme allowed a staff member to develop a social skills resource for the school. The RTLBs are used when children show particularly challenging behaviours.
How has children's behaviour changed over time as a result of school initiatives? Do they report noticing a difference?	The school draws on external professionals, has access to a resource teacher in learning and behaviour (RTLB) on site and has a counsellor on staff. The school funds the counsellor's position from its own funds. The Public Health Nurse is on the pastoral care committee and the school has used external programmes such as Eliminating Violence and Health Promoting Schools. The principal and other staff have excellent relationships with local agencies and draw on these as necessary.	The most recent ERO report noted the very different behaviour of children and how the students reported feeling much safer in the school. Some of the students, as part of the focus groups in this study, talked about the bullying that was present when they were younger and how this has disappeared. They now feel much safer in the playground.	Children feel students and adults care for one another. School-wide rules were developed and children know them. Students promote the expectations for appropriate behaviour. Staff are confident that students will behave appropriately at all times, including on school trips. Students feel safer in school, increased student attendance, and better academic achievement. Students felt the level of violence decreased because the teachers responded to incidents; the consequences for inappropriate behaviour were clear; and some children were no longer at the school. Students took certain actions if they saw violent incidents developing.
What features of the current school do people comment on as improvements?	The student safety audits and other regular monitoring suggest that the school is a safer place for students. There are fewer incidents of violence reported, fewer detentions being given and fewer students being stood down or suspended. The students themselves report they like the school and feel it is a good place to be.	The school is a safe and caring school. Improved student achievement, a welcoming family environment and less bullying or violence at the school. Staff went on school outings without fear of bad behaviour and parents were now sending their children to Caversham as a deliberate choice. Only one of the 13 children who were interviewed for this study said they were bullied at school by name-calling. All of the adult participants noted that bullying and violence did still occur at the school but the amount and level had greatly reduced. In addition, there were consistent procedures to follow and consistent consequences for bully behaviour.	Emphasis on respectful relationships across the school. Acceptance and celebration of diversity. Students take ownership and responsibility for maintaining the school culture, which is achieved by giving students an opportunity to have a say in what is happening at the school. Student safety is paramount. The school has become more collegial over time. People are working together as part of a team. The divisions between the junior, middle and senior schools have disappeared. Staff are given support to deal with difficult circumstances. Classroom and playground management is easier.
What are the current and future initiatives, goals and challenges for the school?	The school is a place at which students enjoy spending time. It does not mean there are not problems but people know how to respond when they do arise and the response is immediate and consistent. The level of reported bullying has dropped markedly over the last few years. The use of student behaviour conferences and a restorative justice programme are relatively new initiatives which have been successfully integrated within the school's pastoral care systems. The school is working on a foundation document. It will promote the pastoral care system and a consensus approach to student behaviour management. The school is implementing a school honours system to recognise students who show excellent behaviour and attitudes. Challenges are presented by having to bring new staff on board and new cohorts of students arriving each year against a picture of losing senior students after two years at the school.	The school has been successful in developing an accepting and caring school culture. The principal continues to survey students, parents and staff to check whether the school culture is maintaining itself. Programmes are altered or adapted on the basis of the information received. The challenges for the school are operating with a falling roll and a transient family population, with fewer economic resources to draw on.	Challenges: maintenance of the programme takes a lot of energy and time; continual turnover in student population due to a high transient community; staff are still learning not to take violent incidents personally; new enrolments in the senior school; engaging with parents who do not often visit school. Current goals include working with small groups of children who still have anger management problems. New initiatives include looking at resiliency training and the use of co-operative learning in the context of learning styles. The school is holding a celebration expo for the community to share its programme and celebrate its successes.

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora