Staff experiences of managing bullying in secondary schools: The importance of internal and external relationships in facilitating intervention

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There has been substantial research on school bullying and its effects on the children involved. Schools are required to have an anti-bullying policy, with strategies in place to prevent and deal effectively with bullying. Teachers and other school staff have a significant role to play in bullying intervention, however little research has explored how they experience this role, and the factors that may impact on their practice. A sample of 14 secondary school staff comprising eight teachers; two support staff; and four senior staff, participated in semi-structured interviews to investigate their experiences of managing bullying. Analysis of the transcripts revealed that the quality of relationships of staff within and outside the school with their colleagues; managers; pupils; and parents, had an important influence on how bullying was identified and dealt with. Within this context, individual staff made complex decisions about how they should respond to incoming information and what information should be passed on to other staff. The way bullying was being managed was, therefore, related to how the school was running as an organisation. Findings highlight the importance of viewing bullying in relation to other influences in the school environment rather than treating it in isolation. The study also reveals how organisational factors can impact on pupil experiences in school. Awareness and understanding of these complexities can facilitate ongoing work with schools to address bullying.

BULLYING IN SCHOOLS is recognised as a pervasive problem. Although there is no universally agreed definition (Arora, 1996), there is general consensus that bullying involves intentional repeated negative action by an individual or group towards another individual who is unable to defend him/herself (Borg, 1999). The behaviours can be verbal, physical or social in nature (Rivers & Smith, 1994). Estimated prevalence rates vary, but commonly quoted figures suggest that 10 to 20 per cent of pupils will report being bullied during a school term (Glover et al., 2000; Whitney & Smith, 1993).

There is evidence indicating that children who are bullied, or who bully others, experience a range of negative effects that can be long standing (Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Kumpulainen et al., 1998, Olweus, 1992).

This has heightened the importance of effective intervention work in schools. Recommendations in the UK *Every Child Matters* framework (DfES, 2004) and *Safe to Learn* guidance (DCSF, 2007) include the need for schools to ensure a safe environment to learn, free from bullying. Schools are, therefore, obligated to take action.

Substantial progress has been made in identifying strategies to address bullying. Guidance to schools includes disciplinary sanctions; increased supervision; encouraging pupils to report bullying; curriculum work; mediation between pupils and involvement of parents (DCSF, 2007). A whole-school approach is recommended whereby all members of the school community are involved (Cowie & Jennifer, 2008). The success of interventions varies (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003) but evaluations suggest that the most successful schools in reducing

bullying are those who do the most work (Sharp & Smith, 1994) and maintain sustained effort over time (Eslea & Smith, 1998). Primary schools have had more success than secondary schools (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003; Stevens et al., 2000) – possibly because secondary schools are larger, with more complex structures that are more resistant to change (Stevens et al., 2000).

When reviewing the range of interventions that schools might adopt it is clear that in most cases teachers are likely to be crucial in implementing them. They have a front-line role in preventing, identifying and dealing effectively with bullying (Menesini et al., 2002; Nicolaides et al., 2002) and, as O'Moore (2000) noted, they are, therefore, the main agents of change. Teachers' classroom management can affect the prevalence of bullying (Roland & Galloway, 2002), and ineffective or inadequate response by teachers may make the situation worse for victims (Smith & Shu, 2000), lower pupil confidence in teachers' ability to deal with bullying (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003) and reduce the chance that pupils will disclose bullying to them (Oliver & Candappa, 2007). Furthermore, teachers are important role models for pupils by setting standards of expected behaviour (O'Moore, 2000; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000), Therefore, it is important that pupils see teachers dealing effectively with bullying so that a clear message is sent about it being unacceptable (O'Moore, 2000).

Despite the vital part teachers play in bullying work, little research has explored how they experience this role. Previously, teachers have reported their lack of confidence when dealing with bullying (Boulton, 1997) and there have been calls for better training (O'Moore 2000; Nicolaides et al., 2002). Teaching is an occupation with high levels of reported stress (Borg, 1990; Kyriacou, 2001), and having additional responsibility for pastoral issues alongside curriculum work may add to this (Branwhite, 1994). Dealing with pupil misbehaviour on a more general level has been reported by

teachers as one of the most stressful aspects of their job, together with time and resource demands (Borg et al., 1991; Hastings & Bham, 2003). The pressure on schools from the media, parents and Government legislation to show success at reducing bullying could leave teachers under increased strain.

Given the importance of addressing bullying and the significant responsibility of teachers in this work, it seems pertinent that teachers' experience is explored in order to understand how they manage this role. In addition, support staff (such as lunchtime supervisors, teaching assistants) make a valuable contribution in schools by working alongside pupils and supporting teachers. Thus, they could and should play a significant part in school-based interventions to address bullying. However, they have been neglected in academic research to date (Boulton, 1996) and knowledge of all staff experiences should help schools to refine their policies and practices accordingly. Moreover, understanding how school staff feel about managing bullying and having awareness of some the complexities involved will assist educational psychologists and related professionals when they are advising schools. A particular focus on secondary schools is deemed important given their lower rates of success at reducing rates of bullying compared to primary schools. The aims of this study are therefore to investigate the following questions:
● How do staff manage bullying in secondary schools?
● What factors help and hinder their practice in this area?

Method
Approach
A qualitative approach was adopted because of the focus on exploring experiences. Qualitative research emphasises the importance of social experience and the meaning individuals attach to it, with a focus on describing and understanding phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Semi-structured interviews were chosen for data collection

because they enable a detailed account of a respondent's experience of a topic (Smith, 1995). They follow the format of a focused conversation (Mason, 1996) enabling people to express their views more freely than with questionnaire or observational methods.

Participants

Staff from four secondary schools from the same local education authority in north-west England participated in the study. The schools were all city-based and situated in an area of social deprivation. They were part of a larger research project about bullying (see Maunder, 2005; Maunder et al., 2009) and all had existing anti-bullying policies in place. In each school, the deputy head with responsibility for pastoral issues was interviewed. They also identified a small number of participants who were willing and available to take part in the interviews on an agreed date. The total sample consisted of 14 staff members – one female deputy head and three male deputy heads, two female support staff, two male teachers and six female teachers.

Procedure

An interview schedule was developed in advance to help retain focus on the central issues of interest (Mason, 1996; Smith 1995). The schedule consisted of a list of topics for discussion but was not intended to be too structured. Topics included exploring the participants' role in the school; how they defined and interpreted bullying; the sorts of bullying situations they encountered; things they found helpful and challenging and how they made decisions about the way incidents were handled. When meeting each staff member, the aims of the study were explained verbally and in writing. They were asked to read and sign a consent form and all (except three) gave consent for their interviews to be tape recorded. For the interviews that were not taped, detailed notes were made during and immediately after the interview.

Analytical process

The audio recordings and notes were transcribed. Staff members were sent a copy of their transcript (or detailed notes for non-recoded interviews) for approval and only one minor factual detail was amended. All transcripts were then analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), where the overall aim is examining participants' experience of a particular phenomenon (Smith, 2003). Using guidance from Smith (1995) and Willig (2001), transcripts were read thoroughly and initial codes that reflected meaning in the text were notes. Codes were then grouped into themes for each transcript. Related themes were clustered into master themes which reflected the shared experience of participants. Finally, the master themes were examined to explore how they related to each other. The first author undertook the main analysis, with the second author overseeing the process and commenting on interpretations.

Analysis

The analysis identified six master themes, three of which are discussed in this paper: identification of bullying; organisational factors affecting staff behaviour and dealing with bullying. The organisation of master themes and constituent themes can be seen in Table 1. As IPA involves the researcher making interpretations about the meaning of the data, the inclusion of illustrative quotes is important to enable the reader to consider the value of the interpretations in getting to the essence of participants' experiences. The quotes presented were taken only from the recorded interviews as these reflect the actual words of the participants.

Identification of bullying

When talking about the ways they found out about bullying incidents, staff positioned themselves within a communication network in the school environment drawing on information flowing in from external sources, direct reporting from pupils and also their own observations. They reported that the

Table 1: Illustration of the master themes and constituent themes established through the analytical process.*

Master theme	Constituent themes	Illustrative quote
Identification of bullying (14)	Sources of information (14)	'...sometimes other children will come to me and say that... 'so and so's being bullied'..I'm sure there's others we don't get to hear about... but there's an awful lot of them who will come and talk.'(Female teacher)
	Witnessing behaviour (10)	'Well aggression as in a group against one...that's mainly what you see...If it's one against one...very quietly done...you're not gonna see it.' (Female, Support staff)
Organisational factors influencing behaviour (12)	Referral (8)	'I mean, if it's a physical thing then it's violent...I immediately have to report it to...Head of Year...Senior Management, whatever and I pass it to them.' (Female teacher)
	Communication (6)	'...it's also very rare to be told of incidences...from the rest of the chain...there's a definite demarcation of responsibility...and I suppose I wouldn't expect to be told...there's processes going on elsewhere in the school...' (Male teacher)
	Team (7)	'...wherever you are...you make friends with certain people (more) than with others...so...if I feel that I needed to talk to somebody about it I always have my friends...that I can talk to...I have my line manager...who is very supportive...I also find that any senior management in school...they're always very supportive...you go to them with an issue I have never ever known them to dismiss it or say 'oh deal with it yourself'...' (Female teacher)
	Size (4)	'I mean...they'll come 'Miss, somebody pushed me on the stairs.' There's 1100 kids in school...I'll say 'who pushed you?' I don't know, it was a bigger one'...not a lot I can do.' (Female teacher)
Dealing with bullying (14)	Responsibility (7)	'...if it's something that could be sorted out I just do it...leave the teachers to it...because they do the duties and they go and get their dinner and they don't wanna be disturbed...so that's where we take over...' (Female, Support staff)
	Discussing (6)	'I think that's the best way...is to get them together...talk to them separately first and then get them together...and go through the stories and the incidents and try and work through it.' (Female teacher)
	Monitoring (4)	'And for a few weeks afterwards I see the victim and I'll just have them popping in to my office...at the end of the day...and sometimes they'll just give me a wave...and...I know everything's ok.' (Female teacher)
	Strategic approaches (5)	'...if...the victim says 'well...I don't want them to know I've told you' I do a secret deal with a member of staff. I'll wait a couple of lessons...and I will say to that member of staff 'can you do a deal?...can you go and...stand near there for a couple of lessons...and then can I use your name...as a lie and say...'I don't know what's going in your lessons but...*named teacher* tells me that she's got an uneasy feeling about your relationship with some of the pupils'...' (Female, Deputy Head)
	Time (5)	'...it's very difficult, people feel inadequate unless you are actually a pastoral person...and dealing with it on a day-to-day basis...the main concern of other people is that they don't have the time... there is...a strong anxiety amongst them that they're not handling it necessarily the best way.' (Female, Deputy Head)
	Stress (1)	'...probably more short tempered...less patient...I'm sort of thinking 'oh I could do without this now...what is it you...want?' I mean I don't...say to the kids 'what is it you want from me?' but that's maybe going through my head...it seems minor...compared to everything else that's going through your head.' (Female teacher)

*Numbers in brackets indicate the total number of participants where this theme was established

most common way of finding out about bullying was from parents. Pupils were also useful sources of information to several staff, although experiences of receiving reports directly from pupils were inconsistent across interviews, with other staff finding them more reluctant to disclose bullying. This indicated that some staff members were regarded as more approachable than others. They mentioned several barriers to disclosure that contributed to the situation, including lack of pupil confidence and concern that reporting incidents could make the situation worse. The amount of information reported to staff was often attributed to their ability to become an accepted part of the pupil culture.

> *'…they know who to say what to…if you…can be on their level…they will talk and if you can't they go 'pff!'…'* (Female, Support staff)

This comment implied that pupils made an assessment of individual members of staff and identified allies who they could confide in. Perceived closeness with a staff member lead to disclosure of personal experience whereas perceived distance resulted in closure of communication – expressed by the dismissive *'pff!'* in the quote above. The quality of information staff received from pupils was, therefore, related to the quality of communication channels between them. Support staff were seen by some as a 'bridge' between pupils and teachers, forming different relationships with pupils.

> *'I think with them being around…they are wonderful sources of information…kids drop their guard with them because they're not teachers.'* (Female, Deputy Head)

This comment implied a strong *'us and them'* distinction between teachers and pupils. Several staff felt that pupils often presented a façade to them making it difficult for them to break through this protective barrier and become accepted into their world. Individuals occupying neutral territory in the school environment were therefore perceived as more able to bridge the gap between the in-group (pupils) and the out-group (teachers)

and access pupil culture in a way that many teachers could not.

Some staff also witnessed bullying. These incidents tended to involve groups of children and focussed on physical action.

> *'…on break duty…you might see…two or three boys chasing somebody or throwing bags at them but then I think a lot of that is just normal…rough and tumble behaviour…if it looks as if it's a…ganging up situation or if it looks as if the victim isn't retaliating…and isn't joining in…if they look as if they're trying to escape it…'* (Female teacher)

Here the teacher used subtle cues to make an assessment of the situation. An internal representation of normalised behaviour was used to make a judgement about whether the observed actions fell outside the realms of 'normal play'. The observed actions and response of the victim were used as a signal. This representation of normalised behaviour was also used to identify subtle bullying. Several staff reported being alert to deviations from normality in pupils' behaviour as an indication that something was wrong. This teacher described making assessments of seating patterns in the classroom and using this prior knowledge to alert herself to changes in behaviour.

> *'…sometimes, if a person is normally seated by somebody for a long time…and then they split up…or they'll come and say 'can I sit on my own?'…I would say 'why?'…'* (Female teacher)

The ability to detect these differences in behaviour, therefore, required good knowledge of the pupils and their daily routines. Staff seemed to absorb information about their pupils, observing their behaviour and processing this knowledge to refer back to later. In addition, some staff talked about reacting to a *'gut instinct'* whereby they responded to subtle atmospheric and psychological signals that were difficult to verbalise or identify overtly. This was often attributed to experience, with several staff members saying that they have developed the ability to pick up on situations and recognise when something was wrong.

'I pick it up by standing around…on the yard… just watching children….and just feeling uneasy.' (Female, Deputy Head)

Her emotional response to the observed situation of *'feeling uneasy'* appeared to influence her assessment of whether or not bullying was occurring.

Organisational factors affecting staff behaviour

Once an incident of bullying had been identified, there were several factors affecting subsequent action. For example, the process of referring information was important. There was a chain of command where individual staff members passed on information about bullying incidents to senior staff to deal with. However, the decision to refer was complex. One teacher commented that physical bullying was passed on immediately. This implied an underlying assumption of physical bullying being taken more seriously because it was handled at senior level. Another teacher based his decision to refer on the complexity of the incident.

'I've always given a pledge to kids in my form that I'll resolve a situation within half a day…and if I can't resolve it I'll pass the buck…and give it to someone else…if I can't resolve it at my level of management…then maybe it's bigger than I can actually deal with…and therefore it's got to go along the chain of command.' (Male teacher)

This comment illustrated how the teacher situated himself within an organisational hierarchy with policies and procedures that had to be followed. He analysed a situation in relation to his roles and responsibilities to decide how it should be dealt with in line with structured procedures. It is interesting to note how he objectified the bullying incident into a solvable task. It is possible that re-conceptualising a distressing incident into a solution-focussed problem helped to regain some control and emotional distance. This 'matter of fact' decision making approach contrasted with other staff who outlined emotive factors affecting their decision to refer. One member of support staff was concerned about losing pupils' trust if she passed information on.

'Well, if I thought something was major where it was gonna effect their health…or something really wrong…I would go then to the Year Head…and say this one's been to me and said this…but other than that, I keep it to myself…keep it confidential because they come back time and time…to talk to me and I think …if they think they've got your confidentiality …they will talk to you.' (Female, Support staff)

This quote revealed an inner tension with the decision to refer – a *conflict of disclosure.* She seemed to perform a cost-benefit analysis of potential risks before deciding whether or not to take further action, and her relationship with the pupils and their trust in her was often prioritised in this analysis. Her rapport with the pupils was precious and she was reluctant to jeopardise it. The referral process was further complicated by variation in the recipient of the information. For example, one teacher spoke of including mentors in some situations rather than senior staff, and other staff sought help from colleagues. Referral was mainly a bottom-up process where individual staff passed information up to senior staff. However, the importance of top-down communication was also important with several staff commenting that they wanted to know what senior staff were doing. This communication was regarded as a strong motivator for one teacher.

'…one of the things that we as a school are not very wonderful at is passing information on or back…and sometimes you think so-and-so's had a really rough day, I managed to solve it for him…and I passed the problem on…because that's what we've got to do…what happened?…and sometimes you don't necessarily know what happened to him or her…to put in that amount of effort…should I really get involved and wound up about something and care enough…for me not to get a response?…' (Male teacher)

This teacher demonstrated a clear sense of frustration about lack of feedback from senior colleagues and questioned his continued

effort and concern for pupils' welfare. There was resignation towards the referral process as something that 'had to be done' but his vocalisation implied resistance to it.

The need for teamwork amongst staff and support from colleagues and management was often mentioned. This was closely related to communication because staff indicated that feeling comfortable and supported facilitated discussions and opened channels of communication between them. Within this 'staff team' the importance of form tutors was highlighted. In all participating schools, pupils were in a form group for registration and PSHE lessons that remained constant during their time at school. Several staff felt that form tutors were very important 'frontline' detectives for identifying bullying because the constant class group allowed them to get to know individual pupils and develop relationships with them. Yet some tension emerged about the lack of power and freedom that form tutors had to deal with incidents. This tension was closely related to the referral process and could suggest further *conflicts of disclosure* because individual staff members wanted to handle things themselves. There was a sense from several staff that they felt restricted by organisational systems.

> *'Form teachers generally know their kids best…and they're usually not used to their full. They actually know…very good form tutors can resolve situations…very quickly…but sometimes they're not allowed to…It's because…there are people responsible for different things.'* (Male teacher)

The reference to not being *'allowed'* to intervene draws on disciplinary discourses and implies a strong sense of hierarchy and demarcation of responsibility. This created a degree of tension and frustration resulting from a perceived lack of control. In addition, there were comments made about classroom size and school size being a mediating factor in bullying because pupils felt they were less likely to be detected and staff were less able to manage it. There was a sense of helplessness expressed by some staff due to the

number of children and the amount of incidents that occurred. These factors operated within the school as an organisation and were perceived to be beyond their individual level of control.

Dealing with bullying

The organisational factors described above affected staff behaviour once a bullying incident had been identified. Firstly, some individuals went through a process of analysing the situation and considering whether or not it was their responsibility to act. One member of support staff explained how she would only go and intervene if there were no other staff around.

> *'I've always been amongst them so if anything's gone on and there's nobody there…I've been able to go over to it and say 'eh…this is not on'…'* (Female, Support staff)

The phrase *'I've been able to'* suggests a demarcation of duties and concern about stepping 'outside' her role in situations with other staff present. There appeared to be a *diffusion of responsibility*, with the assumption that someone else would and perhaps should respond rather than her. The need for trust between colleagues was also mentioned when discussing responsibility to act. One teacher described how once he had referred information on, he had to trust that his personal responsibility had been transferred.

> *'…as a form teacher I'd go to my Year Teachers…so-and-so's in trouble, so-and-so's doing this, that whatever else. 'Ok leave it with me'…and then you know that the responsibility's been passed on…couple of days or weeks or whatever later they've come back and said 'this has happened' but otherwise you would assume that it's been dealt with because you've passed it on.'* (Male teacher)

There appeared to be an inherent trust between staff that they had all the relevant knowledge and were acting in the appropriate way. The verbal signal *'leave it with me'* was used as assurance and seemed crucial in formalising the confirmation that responsibility had been transferred.

Following the decision to act, staff discussed the methods they used to deal with bullying. The most common technique employed was discussing the situation with the children involved. This saw staff adopting a mediation role where they facilitated a resolution to the incident with the pupils. After these discussions had taken place, several staff explained a monitoring process where they would check if incidents were still occurring and remain alert to continuing problems. The monitoring process appeared to be largely reliant on pupils reporting how the situation had progressed and whether further incidents had occurred. Although an understandable approach, the effectiveness of the technique could be related back to staff comments about pupils reporting incidents to them and the barriers to disclosure that affect this reporting. In addition, although staff often depended on parents reporting bullying incidents to them, a tension with parents emerged as an added difficulty. Several staff talked about the challenge of dealing with parents who would not accept their child's poor behaviour and made excuses for them. Also, some staff spoke about the role of the local community in managing bullying. One teacher expressed a sense of helplessness about his ability to resolve incidents within the school because of the close community the school was situated within.

> *'Sometimes you…realise that there might be not a lot you can do about it…because you know that within school you can do as much as you can…within the system…but…because it's such a large close-knit community…you know that the situation's gonna get resolved outside anyway…so sometimes your hands are tied…or you feel as though they are.'* (Male teacher)

This articulates a feeling of powerlessness and restriction of influence. He expressed an ability to resolve situations limited to *'within the system'* – conceptualising the school environment as an organisational structure with specific powers and processes. This power is seen to be confined to the school, however; with the local community – referred to as *'outside'* – able to exert its own influence over and above what the school could deal with. His management of bullying was therefore perceived to be limited by outside influences.

Some staff employed covert strategic approaches to address bullying. They were aware that a barrier to disclosure for pupils was concern that telling someone about bullying could make the situation worse. Therefore, they had a common approach of claiming somebody else other than the child had reported the bullying. Staff also tried to organise witnesses to an incident so that their reports could be used as evidence rather than the pupil who initially came forward. The strategy expanded to positioning staff in particular locations so they could gather information and also involving parents. These strategic approaches demonstrated staff sensitivity towards pupils, and also showed how good collegial relationships and positive parental links were required when dealing with bullying. In order for these techniques to be effective and remain concealed, there needed to be a strong collaborative arrangement between the colleagues and parents involved. These approaches were time consuming, however, and concerns were raised about the time involved in dealing with bullying effectively.

> *'…we don't always have the time…I have them for registration I have a quarter of an hour in the morning with them…But other than that I don't… have any contact with them…And sometimes if there's an issue going on…you…have to pull them to one side and it's not always a lot of time…But…it's not always…my place…maybe if there is something and it's going on I should pass it over to somebody else who has got the time to deal with it.'* (Female teacher)

The reference to *'my place'* implied concern about interfering with matters that may not be her responsibility. Limited time seemed to increase the chances of incidents being referred. There appeared to be a necessary process of prioritisation in order to deal with

Figure 1: Graphical representation of integrated themes illustrating staff experience of managing bullying in the school environment.
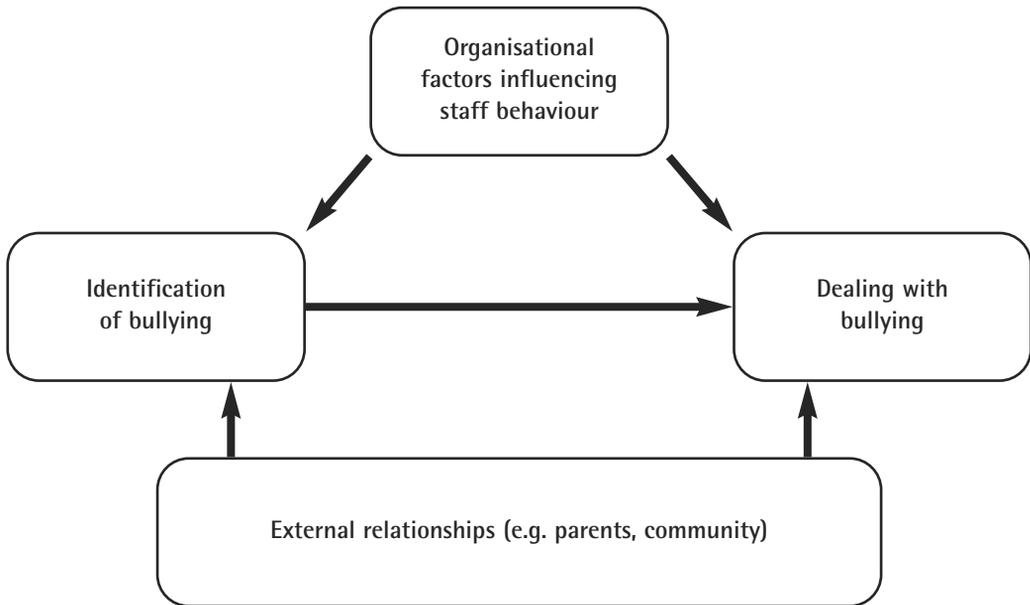
conflicting demands. Pressures on staff time contributed to their concerns about dealing with bullying effectively, with some anxiety expressed about whether they were dealing with things in the 'best' way.

It was apparent that dealing with bullying was a small element of staff roles. Although they acknowledged its importance and were concerned about how they responded to it, they were under pressure to manage other aspects of their job meaning that bullying was sometimes lowered in their list of priorities. The focus some staff put on external influences suggested that they viewed bullying as being related to many factors and they therefore felt they had limited control over it.

Integration of themes
The themes that emerged in the data, although distinct, were related to each other in a number of ways (see Figure 1).

The quality of staff relationships with pupils and parents affected reporting of inci-

dents. Staff were largely dependent on reports from parents about bullying and the reliability of this information was related to the quality of relationships schools had with parents. In addition, there was a perceived need for staff to develop good relationships with pupils so that they were accepted by pupils as credible sources of support. This good pupil-staff relationship was also important when incidents were witnessed, as staff could draw on prior knowledge about pupils and identify deviations from normal behaviour. Organisational factors mediated the relationship between identifying incidents and dealing with incidents because individual staff were responsible for referring information to senior staff. This referral process involved complex decisions influenced by the nature of the incident, appraisal of responsibility, time, and colleague support. As a result, not all incidents were referred on to other staff. The process of dealing with bullying was influenced by organisational factors such as staff

time, communication between staff and collegial relationships. Some of the strategic approaches employed relied upon other staff being involved as witnesses and therefore required a team approach. Good relationships with pupils were needed in order to facilitate the discussion and monitoring processes used to deal with incidents. Relationships outside the school, such as with parents and the local community, also impacted on dealing with bullying. Therefore, relationships both within and outside the school contributed to staff experiences.

Discussion and implications

What transpired from staff accounts was a complex pattern of experience situating bullying in a wider context of organisational influences and internal and external relationships. When addressing bullying, Roffey (2000) argues that there is a need to consider organisational factors and the overall culture operating within a school which may impact on its willingness and ability to change. The need for a whole school approach, therefore, becomes particularly pertinent. Cowie and Jennifer's (2008) whole-school approach to bullying includes addressing the organisational aspects of the school alongside community aspects and the informal relationships that exist within the school. In support of this, relationships were particularly important for the staff in this study. The relationship they had with pupils, parents, senior staff and colleagues impacted on the way they identified and dealt with bullying. The organisational system of the school also contributed to these relationships. For example, referral processes were both a tool for communication but also a source of tension, and issues of time and workload appeared to impact on the quality of staff-pupil relationships. The importance of relationships in creating a positive school climate is widely acknowledged. Rogers (2006) argues that good colleague relationships can reduce teacher stress; aid pupil discipline, facilitate the management of change and improve the overall school

culture. Additionally, Grove (2004) emphasises the need for positive relationships and a 'community mindset' when focusing on pastoral issues in schools (p.34). Therefore, it seems important that these factors are taken into account when addressing bullying.

It is important, however, to acknowledge the study's limitations. Firstly, participants were interviewed on the school premises and several interviews were conducted in a senior staff member's office which could have created a formal tone. Being interviewed in the workplace could make participants feel that they should respond in a certain way to avoid repercussions. In addition, it was the first time that the interviewer had met many of the participants so there was limited time to establish a rapport and comfortable atmosphere. Although these difficulties may have impacted on the start of the interviews, we found that staff members relaxed as the interview progressed and talked openly and honestly. The limited time available with participants due to school timetable arrangements meant that some interviews were fairly short. As a result we might infer that the issues raised in this study are likely to be starting points in our understanding of staff experiences. It cannot be assumed that the same issues would arise in other schools. Qualitative research by its nature focuses on exploring meaning in a specific case or group. The fact that the schools involved in this study were from the same region and were already participating in a larger bullying project makes them a particularly unique sample. Through further explorations with different staff groups we could confirm whether similar themes are identified and build a more comprehensive understanding of staff experiences.

From what has been established in this study about the factors that helped and hindered staff practice, the following characteristics appeared to facilitate anti-bullying work and would, therefore, be recommended for consideration in secondary schools:

- Clarity of roles and responsibilities for staff.
- Recognition of the valuable role of support staff and ensuring their active involvement.
- Strong and effective pupil-staff relationships.
- Clear procedures for referral of information.
- Mechanisms that enable feedback to staff on referred cases.
- Consideration of staff workloads when allocating responsibilities.
- Good community links.
- Regular and effective communication with parents.
- Supportive working environment with positive collegial relationships.

It is acknowledged that many of these recommendations take time to implement and would be unlikely to offer immediate results. Nevertheless, compared to 'quick fix' approaches which neglect the wider contributory factors, they are likely to offer a more effective long-term solution. What is being suggested is a 'macro' approach when dealing with bullying, rather than a 'micro' approach that just concentrates on the pupils themselves. Therefore, schools struggling to achieve success with their anti-bullying interventions might consider taking an organisational 'health check' (see Hart et al., 2000 and Bevans et al., 2007) in order to examine some of the wider influences that may be hindering their progress. There is a clear potential role for psychology here in identifying and exploring issues, reviewing options and instigating change. Educational psychol-ogists and professional advisors, as relative outsiders to individual school communities, may be in a very good position to look in on some of the processes and procedures in place and identify where changes may be beneficial. As Roffey (2000) proposes, there is a need for educational psychologists to operate as 'organisational consultants' in order to promote educational values and recognise staff needs as well as pupil needs.

Conclusion

School differences in rates of bullying and varying levels of success at dealing with bullying indicate that structural and organisational characteristics may be contributory factors (Watkins et al., 2007). The staff experiences reported in this paper support this notion and also emphasise the significant role that relationships play in bullying intervention. Within this perspective, bullying can be regarded as a symptom of a situational problem rather than an inevitable part of school life (Rivers & Soutter, 1996).

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