The power of the word: students' and school staff's use of the established bullying definition

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Structured Abstract

Background: Previous research has found that bullying is often defined differently by students, staff and researchers, leading researchers to call for a more consistent use of the term in practice to enable better intervention and measurement. However, little is known about the consequences of a more consistent use of the term in school.

Purpose: The article examines the consequences of schools adopting an exact definition of bullying.

Sample: Twenty Norwegian primary and lower secondary schools were selected from a survey (n = 455). The schools were characterised by a strong culture of bullying prevention, and their staff and students knew and used the same authoritative bullying definition. Four schools were then selected for closer ethnographic study.

Design and methods: Interviews were conducted with students, teachers, support staff and school management. The interviews were analysed qualitatively, using a grounded theory approach.

Results: For school staff, the term 'bullying' was construed as rigid and possessing an inherent power that is manifested through the way the term controls adults' actions. Teachers viewed students' use of the term as too wide. They emphasised the need to teach students the established definition, as students' overuse of the term may lead to the word's diminishing impact for those who are in real need of help. Nevertheless, many of the educators stated that few students report bullying. Both school staff and students displayed a sense of certainty when identifying what counts as bullying. Students' recognition of the power of the word was apparent in the way they used the term as a tool for social positioning.

Conclusions: By way of the status of a bullying definition as an established, research-based definition, it gains a potent power for management, teachers and students. Its power

lies in the fact that the use of the term gives rights and responsibilities, determines guilt, and confers blame and status. Unwanted effects of a strict control of the bullying term may involve the risk of missing cases and the risk that students use the term as a tool in the power relations between the students themselves.

Keywords: bullying definition; primary school; secondary school; student behaviour; teachers; school management; student well-being

Introduction

The well-known definition of bullying as 'an aggressive, intentional act or behaviour that is carried out by a group or an individual' (Olweus 1993, 5) was established by Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus. When absorbed into policy, this definition guides the conduct of school students and staff. Although definitions, to some degree, are reflections of the way terms are used, they also strongly shape the way we think about these concepts. In the case of bullying, the definition not only describes the consensus regarding what it is and is not, but also shapes our thinking about bullying and informs us about how we can recognise it—and possibly prevent and stop it. As such, the bullying definition contributes greatly to the practice and maintenance of social relations in school. The path of the definition has thus moved from practice to research to policies and back to practice.

Despite the ubiquitous nature of the established definition, a number of studies have found that researchers, teachers and students define the term 'bullying' differently, and staff and students do not necessarily adhere to the established definition most commonly used in research (Cheng et al. 2011; Craig, Bell, and Leschied 2011; Harger 2016; Maunder, Harrop, and Tattersall 2010). However, little is known about the application and interpretation of the established version of the bullying definition by people who are differently situated in school. Paradoxically, bullying as a social practice is highly varied and remarkably complex, whilst at the same time it is attached to one fixed definition in policies and in many schools' practice. Yet we know little about how the attempt to contain the complexity of

bullying in one authoritative definition affects different subjects' interpretation of, and investment in, the term. This article examines the consequences of schools adopting an exact definition of bullying at all school levels, exploring how the definition is interpreted and used by people differently situated in school.

The importance of defining bullying

The term 'bullying' and the terminology surrounding it continue to be highly debated in research (Rawlings 2016; Walton 2011). Whichever way it is defined, bullying is a serious and widespread problem that severely affects those exposed to it at the time of the bullying (Cornell et al. 2013; Rigby 2003) and has a long-term impact on their mental health and well-being (Arseneault, Bowes, and Shakoor 2010; Lereya et al. 2015). Therefore, school staff and students need to know what bullying is in order to recognise, report, and stop it (Chalmers et al. 2016; DeOrnellas and Spurgin 2017). Exclusion, talking about other people behind their backs, and spreading rumours about others, often called 'indirect bullying', tend not to be included as often in the lay bullying definitions (Maunder, Harrop, and Tattersall 2010) or in younger children's definition of bullying (Smith, Madsen, and Moody 1999). When 'indirect bullying' happens between boys, it may occur under the radar of both children and adults (Eriksen and Lyng 2016). The way bullying is defined and measured may have an impact on intervention work. Researchers have argued that bullying should be defined more consistently, not least to ensure that students understand it in the same way as teachers do (Maunder, Harrop, and Tattersall 2010). Maunder, Harrop, and Tattersall (2010) recommended that teachers spend more time talking to students about bullying.

There are three main strands of research focusing on the definition of bullying. The first is concerned with what the definition should include and exclude. Although many researchers adhere to some version of Olweus' definition, it has been rigorously evaluated and challenged for focusing on power relations exclusively between students (Goldsmid and Howie 2014) and for neglecting the school's psychosocial environment and educational system in a broader sense (Allen 2015; Ellwood and Davies 2010; Ringrose and Rawlings 2015; Søndergaard 2012). In some instances, such critique has led to alterations in the definition, such as by adding the concept of power inequity (Salmivalli and Nieminen 2002). Olweus' definition has also been questioned for seemingly viewing bullying as a deviant individual act, and researchers have argued that we must instead look at the institutional and social factors behind it (Rawlings 2016; Søndergaard 2012). This critique includes an investigation of how traditional conceptualisations of bullying and terminologies such as 'bully' and 'victim' are used to maintain and withhold traditional gender discourses (Eriksen and Lyng 2016; Rawlings 2016; Ringrose and Renold 2010).

The second strand of research on the bullying definition is concerned with the difficulties attached to the measurement of bullying. The most common method of measurement is through surveys recording students' self-reported bullying experiences (Vivolo-Kantor et al. 2014). However, different methods register different phenomena (Jimerson, Swearer, and Espelage 2009; Swearer et al. 2010), and even the same method may measure different things (Swearer et al. 2010). Quantitative methods, particularly in the field of psychology, have long dominated

the field of bullying research. This has prompted calls for more qualitative investigations of bullying, mixed-methods approaches (see Guerra, Williams, and Sadek 2011; Hong and Espelage 2012; Thornberg 2011), and more sociological approaches to bullying (Migliaccio 2015; Søndergaard 2012). Scholars have argued that bullying research has been shaped by the quantitative research paradigm and that investigations of the individually and socially constructed meanings of bullying have largely been left out (Ringrose 2008; Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003). As a result, relatively little attention has been paid to the study of the definition of bullying in practice and how people in schools interpret, construct and negotiate the term (Allen 2015).

The bullying definition in practice

There is, however, a growing interest in what may be perceived as the third strand of research on the bullying definition: a discursive approach to how educators and students define and discuss bullying. Researchers have explored the ways in which teachers and students understand bullying and how their perception has consequences for how bullying is handled in school in practice, both by adults and students (Cheng et al. 2011; DeOrnellas and Spurgin 2017; Hepburn 1997; Mishna et al. 2005). Several studies have found that teachers experience difficulties in applying the definition of bullying (Ellwood and Davies 2010; Migliaccio 2015; Naylor et al. 2006) and that they spend much time and effort on determining whether an incident is bullying (Allen 2015). Educators' definitions of bullying often differ from the definition commonly used by researchers (Chalmers et al. 2016; Cheng et al. 2011; Craig, Bell, and Leschied 2011; Harger 2016); likewise, staff and

students' definitions also frequently differ (Maunder, Harrop, and Tattersall 2010; Naylor et al. 2006). Many studies have found that students may construct and justify bullying victimisation as a consequence of the 'victim's' perceived difference from themselves (Forsberg 2017; Ryan and Morgan 2011; Thornberg 2011, 2015). Policy makers' definitions may also vary; in an Australian study, Chalmers et al. (2016) reported that only one of eleven professionals involved in policy making used a definition similar to the established one.

Purpose of the article

In sum, there is a consensus in the field of bullying definition research that we need a consistent and authoritative definition of bullying, which is often lacking in practice. However, little is known about the consequences of adopting a uniform definition in practice. This article investigates schools where staff and students know and use the same authoritative definition—the established definition in the tradition of Dan Olweus. The purpose of this article is to examine, systematically, differences in the way school management, support staff, teachers and students use, interpret and apply the definition. The central argument is that through its status as a research-based definition legitimised in educational policies, the definition gains a power that plays out forcibly, but in different ways, for subjects who are differently positioned in school.

Method

The Norwegian context

Some versions of Olweus' definition are found in a plethora of policy documents in many countries (Dixon and Smith 2011; Winton and Tuters 2015). This is also the case for Norway; for example, the guidance to the Norwegian Education Act (section 9a-3) provides a version of Olweus' definition (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, n.d.). The Norwegian Education Act (section 9a-3) states, in summary, that schools must have zero tolerance of offensive acts such as bullying, violence, discrimination and harassment and that all staff shall pay attention to the students' psychosocial environment and intervene if any such offensive acts occur. The guidance also states that schools must have zero tolerance of grievances less serious than those mentioned (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017). Although the law states that the school must also intervene in grievances other than bullying, it is bullying in particular that has occupied a central role in Norwegian schools' practice and discourse. This is not least because there has been a demand to write a resolution in cases of bullying, which has put much emphasis on the correct definition in practice (Eriksen and Lyng 2015).

The wider project

The data on which this article is based were sampled from a larger research project which was commissioned by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Eriksen and Lyng 2015). For that project, sociologist Selma Therese Lyng and I carried out a large qualitative ethnographic and interview-based study in 2014 and 2015 in 20 primary and lower secondary schools in Norway. The aim of the

larger study was to gain knowledge about students' psychosocial environment, the schools' strategies for fostering a sound psychosocial environment and reducing bullying, and the challenges related to these strategies.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Privacy Ombudsman for Research at the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. All participants gave their active and informed consent for conducting and reporting the research, and parents gave written consent for participants under the age of eighteen. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, the recordings were encrypted and deleted after transcription, and the transcriber signed a letter of confidentiality. Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms and obscuring facts that could lead to the identification of schools or participants.

Sample selection and procedure

For the wider study, twenty schools had been selected, based on a survey of schools in Eastern Norway (n = 455), because they had reported a positive change in the school environment and that this change was a consequence of their strategic involvement in the school environment. In the selected schools, there was a particularly conscious relationship with methods of bullying prevention, as well as a thorough knowledge among the staff of the importance of knowing, teaching, and applying the received bullying definition. Group interviews were carried out in each of the twenty schools, with the teachers and the school management and support staff interviewed separately. Each group typically had three to five participants. The school management and support staff group consisted of different combinations of

(always) the principal and (often) the vice principal, as well as school support staff such as well-being officers, social workers, and/or the school nurse. The staff were asked about their strategies in anti-bullying work, what worked and why, how they defined bullying, and the challenges they faced in the school environment. They were also asked to detail their experiences, procedure, and reflections on 'grey area' cases where they reported difficulty in determining whether an incident was actually bullying, according to the established definition.

For the detailed study that forms the focus of this paper, four schools were then selected from the twenty schools to investigate further different working approaches towards the school environment. The four schools were chosen because they used different approaches to the students' psychosocial environment, and because they had different student compositions in terms of ethnicity, age group (one primary school and three lower secondary schools), and city/country. In each of these four schools, three weeks of ethnographic fieldwork were carried out, following six school classes and interviewing the students in these classes, mostly in groups of three to five students. A few students were interviewed individually because of their particular circumstances. The children and young people were interviewed about their definition of bullying and asked about what they experienced as problematic, painful or good in their school life. They were also asked to describe their class and how relations in class had evolved since they started school.

Data analysis

The analyses presented here cannot be subject to generalisation. However, analysing the rich data using thorough qualitative contextualisation and comparison may elicit central themes, ambiguities and mechanisms involved in the use of the term 'bullying'. Inspired by a grounded theory approach to fieldwork and analysis (Charmaz 2014), data were coded using codes generated from the data itself. Codes and data were constantly compared horizontally (between schools), vertically (between differently positioned subjects within each school), and between discourse and practice. Accessing students' and staff's use of the term 'bullying' in theory and practice must be contextual (Ringrose and Renold 2010) and multimodal, by recording not only what they say they do, but also what they do with words in practice (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). An analysis of how people in school understand and use the term 'bullying' must, therefore, grasp both how people talk about the definition theoretically and how they describe their application of the definition in practice.

Two sections of the interviews are of particular relevance here: first, the staff and students were asked how they defined bullying, and the staff were asked how they used the term among themselves and with the students. Second, the staff were asked to narrate a situation where they had difficulty determining whether an incident was bullying, and the students were prompted to tell us about their concrete experiences with bullying or difficult social situations in school.

Findings

The findings from the qualitative analysis are presented and discussed below. Anonymised quotations are included to illustrate and illuminate the themes. The quotations, from the data, have been translated into English by the author.

The staff's use of the bullying definition

The following section focuses on the school staff's use of the bullying definition. The most apparent theme, which suffuses much of the interviews with the staff, is that the bullying definition is construed as a rigid definition that has the power to decide their intervention practice.

The staff's experience of the bullying definition as a rigid and powerful definition was most often made visible in incidents that were close to being defined as bullying but were deemed not to be. The following excerpt from an interview with a primary school teacher can serve as a typical illustration of how the definition is interpreted as rigid and what the practical consequences of this are:

> I have two in my classroom who are at each other all the time, who have been for many years, one boy and one girl. And where he just, like it just bounces off him, but for her it doesn't. She gets terribly upset, but they are just as bad, both of them. … They are just not nice towards one another. And that really affects her badly. But she is just as bad herself, while it just rolls off his back, kind of. So we haven't taken that one further.

In this extract, the teacher refers to a boy and a girl who are 'at each other all the time'. In her account, she states repeatedly and with emphasis how the two children engage in equally negative behaviour. In these two students' difficult relationship, two of three aspects qualify it as bullying, according to the definition: it has happened over time, and (at least one) student is repeatedly hurt. By observing that there was not any power relation, the teacher refers explicitly to the one element that does not make it bullying—the lack of a power imbalance between the students. The teacher's heavy reliance on the established definition becomes the reason that this situation is not further dealt with.

Bansel et al. (2009, 61) described how the teachers in their study found it 'deeply perplexing' to identify what counts as bullying. By contrast, the school staff in this study displayed, more often than not, a sense of certainty. They commonly emphasised that they used the research-based definition, which is referred to in central policy documents. This conscious reference to one definition makes for an interesting starting point for the investigation of how the educators apply this definition to everyday situations in school; the word has, via policy, gained a power that, with a certain amount of rigidity, guides the adults in school in their management of negative incidents between the students.

The authoritative role of the definition leaves the educators with two rather distinct strategies. One strategy is dealing with negative incidents as the teacher does in the above excerpt, where the rigidity of the definition is alluded to with some regret but nevertheless abided by. In the interviews with the teachers, there is a sense of powerlessness when they apply the definition to a real-life situation. However, this

powerlessness when facing the definition as something pre-set, powerful, and outside of their own influence is not necessarily only negative. Leaning on a strict and decisive definition and doing what it says may also alleviate some of the responsibility, particularly in 'grey area' cases such as this. For these teachers, the definition places the responsibility of negative incidents between students outside of the staff's jurisdiction.

The other strategy is used by educators who display a more critical engagement with the bullying definition and do not necessarily let their actions in 'grey area' situations depend on whether the incidents meet the criteria of the definition. An example of this is presented in the following interview with four teachers in a primary school:

> Teacher: I feel that the term 'bullying' has become an obstacle sometimes. Because when you talk about whether something is bullying, it involves, in any case, someone who has felt harassed. It is difficult for a teacher to determine if it really has happened over time … Very easily it ends up not being a case of bullying. Almost no one comes up to say that 'I'm being bullied'. You kind of have to see it yourself.

The bullying definition was consistently portrayed as something rigid, but here it is described as occasionally 'an obstruction' in the sense that it can act like a barrier to helping the students. This teacher suggests that regardless of whether something really is bullying, if someone uses that word, then the incident warrants investigation. This strategy was quite common among the staff, and the model of

investigating and intervening in every small negative incident was widespread.

Both strategies show that school staff understand and use the definition in a way that underlines the term's power. This power is manifested through the way the term controls adults' actions, and it is not an uncommon belief in the schools that the use of the term releases student rights and school responsibilities.

The relationship between the educators' and students' use of the term 'bullying'

A second pervasive theme is the emphasis that most staff—teachers, support staff and management—placed on teaching the students the established definition of bullying.

Most of the staff spoke about consciously teaching the students the meaning of 'bullying', and teaching them the established definition was an important part of this. The following interview extract is a typical example of how teachers talked about spending much time and effort educating the students about the correct definition of bullying:

> We have spent much time explaining the difference between teasing and bullying. In the bullying surveys, this is a point we have discussed a lot. They write that 'I have been bullied'. We have worked a lot with what that term means. It is still unclear and they do use the term. But not many tick that box for bullying.

Although it is most commonly teachers who instruct students on the definition of the term, the management were ordinarily aligned with the teachers in terms of why they have to do this. A common line of reasoning is evident in the following interview with a principal and a social worker:

> Social worker: We do talk a lot with them about the difference between teasing and exactly what is really bullying. Like 'when you said that you were bullied outside now' …
>
> Principal: But the students use the word 'bully' a lot, but that is because it is a term with which they know you will get a result immediately if you use it, because everyone knows that term. And this has the effect that many of our formal bullying complaints, when the parents say that it is bullying, end up with us saying that it is not bullying. This creates some dissatisfaction because they kind of feel that we, in a way, don't listen to them.

The definition is yet again construed as something rigorous, but here this has another dimension: the students' everyday use of the term is placed outside of this fixed meaning, and their (and their parents') use of the term poses the risk of diluting the 'correct' meaning of 'bullying'.

Moreover, the principal in the excerpt above presents the word 'bullying' as powerful in the sense that, when used, it demands the school's investigation and possible intervention. He also implies that this is a power that the students know about; they use it a lot because they know it will produce some result. He portrays it as a power that is there to be potentially misused by the students.

The same principal also talks about training the students to use the term correctly. What most clearly characterises the majority of the staff's relationship to the students' use of the bullying definition is that the staff have a need to control students' use of the term so that its meaning will not be watered down. This leads to extra paperwork or, at worst, too much attention being given to insignificant incidents, drawing attention away from the more serious cases. In effect, the staff subtly but surely communicated the power of the word to the students through the message that students must take care not to use the word too lightly, involuntarily or voluntarily. Moreover, their instructions seemed to work; in many of the interviews, the educators stated that few students reported bullying, despite their continuous use of the term.

The students' use and understanding of the established definition

Like the staff, almost all the students displayed great certainty when reciting the bullying definition in the interviews. They had grasped and could recite the key elements of the definition. At the same time, the students seemed to have perceived what the teachers had communicated indirectly in their firm instructions on the importance of getting the definition right: the power of the word 'bullying'. In the following examples, two different student positions relating to the term 'bullying' are presented, both of which illustrate how the word's power may be used by the students.

The first position is students employing the term 'bullying' as a tool to dis-identify themselves from others or as a tool to down-play the status of other students'

assertions. This position was taken only by students who were not bullied themselves. One example of this position can be found in the following interview with three 11-year-old boys as they discuss a fourth boy, Paul, who was bullied in his old school.

> Willy: But Paul told us that he quit his last school because everyone except one person bullied him. But when I was at his house, I found out that really, there were three boys that he was friends with.
>
> Mikkel: Well, you always exaggerate a bit when you're explaining stuff like that (laughs).
>
> Willy: I have been to his house three times. And the first time he said nothing, the other time he said that he had two friends, and then the third time I was at his house, he said that, then I found out that there were three boys that he was friends with.
>
> Jørgen: But he is such a nuisance; he asks so many questions, and if he remembers something funny, he says it all the time!
>
> Mikkel: But what is a bit annoying is that he says it like this: Heeeeeh! No, I can't do it! (laughs)
>
> Ingunn: What is bullying, really?
>
> Willy: When you are harassed several times. But Paul says that when he was being bullied, he managed to fight all of them. So he shouldn't have been bullied. So I don't understand his story very well …
>
> Jørgen: I don't think that people would bully him if he fought those guys. I guess he added that part.

The boys show that they know the established definition as it is used in the school, albeit cursorily by referencing being 'harassed several times'. They know this definition here and in other schools. Nevertheless, they dismiss Paul's experiences as 'not bullying' based on several aspects of his situation. First, as Willy says, Paul had friends in his old school. Second, Jørgen and Mikkel comment that Paul's behaviour can be annoying. Third, Paul allegedly fought the bullies, so 'he shouldn't have been bullied', as Willy remarks. This refers and adds to the power aspect of the established definition; bullying, in this account, entails a situation where the victim is harassed and has no friends but is still likeable and does not fight back. It seems that this almost impossible notion of a 'worthy' victim of bullying effectively takes away from Paul his experiences as a victim.

Two girls of the same age, Heidi and Christine, have a similar discussion in the next interview extract. They talk about two girls who were bullied in another school and were recently transferred to their school. On the question of what they think the difference is between the victims' old school and their current school, which both agree has a very positive psychosocial environment, they answer as follows:

> Heidi: I don't really think there is much difference—
>
> Christine: (overlaps)—think it's not a good school.
>
> Heidi: No, but I don't really think there is that much bullying there either. That may be Jorunn and Lisa, they are a bit// Jorunn, you know she interprets every comment in the worst sense, and she is grumpy—
>
> Christine: (overlaps)—and Lisa takes everything literally, kind of.

> Heidi: Yes, so they maybe thought that they were bullied in a way. But then it wasn't really that bad. That's maybe what I think. That they thought it.
>
> Christine: That's what I think too. The same as Heidi … Heidi went to visit Jorunn in the beginning, and some of Jorunn's other friends said something completely different from what Jorunn said.
>
> Heidi: Yes, because one, who is a friend of Jorunn's, now of course they have fallen out because Jorunn [sucks her teeth], yes [sighs]. She said that the other school is really good and that no one, almost no one, was bullied. And then the thought kind of hit me: yes, maybe it isn't as bad as she says it is.

Jorunn's and Lisa's bullying experiences from their old school are questioned for a similar reason as Paul's experience was in the boys' account above. Heidi and Christine question the new girls' integrity by indicating that what forced them to change schools was not bullying, or at least not something in the school environment, since the school is 'really good'. This is witnessed by Jorunn's friend, who, according to Heidi, also claims that 'almost no one' was bullied there. Their doubt also stems from Jorunn's perceived sensitivity; they believe she was not bullied and simply thought that she had been. Moreover, their perception is that both girls are difficult to like: Jorunn 'interprets every comment in the worst sense, and she is grumpy', and Lisa 'takes everything literally', implying that she is unable to take a joke.

The last two interview extracts show the children's perception of 'true' bullying as related to the victim's relative lack of strength and power, as in the established definition. However, in the children's version, the victim is not

necessarily truly bullied if he/she is not weaker, not friendless, or unable to 'take a joke'. Importantly, the children's version entails an individualisation of the responsibility for the bullying—the victims can blame themselves, particularly if they are seen as too sensitive and difficult to like. But this never stopped the children from reciting the established definition whenever asked. There is therefore a substantial gap evident between the descriptive and normative use of the definition in the way the students use the term.

What is most important in this context is that when children spread rumours about their new classmates and discuss them in their absence, their use of the bullying definition could potentially be seen as a form of bullying in itself. What happens in the two interview situations presented above is strikingly similar: while the interviewed students are, to different degrees, working to dis-identify themselves from the new and 'annoying' students, they metaphorically confiscate the experience of bullying from the victims as though the term is some prized possession that gives the victims a form of status or power. They seem to understand and translate its power, using it to position their vulnerable classmates. This may shed additional light on the power of the bullying definition: the way the term 'bullying' is used here is in itself the main tool in the students' competitive social positioning.

The other student position is taken by those who are or have been bullied themselves. For example, in an interview together with his friend Hans, Paul, who identifies himself as a 'victim of bullying', narrates his experiences with bullying at his old school:

Paul: It was bad. I had to quit. Three students were bullied out of school. Some students were reported to the police. A boy was bullied out because he was called gay. Some students were really rude to the teacher and were sent to the principal a lot. People pretended to be sick and just went home whenever they wanted.

Ingunn: What did you experience?

Paul: I experienced that everybody was against me. Everybody was against me, even the girls. Taunted me and stuff. Everybody was just really mean to me. Mostly the boys. They came in groups and sometimes they beat me up.

Hans: That sounds very bad.

Paul: Yes, if you had gone to that school, you would have had it bad too.

The insistence in Paul's repetition of 'everybody was against me' is noteworthy: 'bullying', here, is what explains what happened to him. Used like this, the term functions as a 'badge of courage'; the term is a signal that this was not his fault. His insistent tone suggests that he might suspect—or might have heard—some of his classmates' questions about his story. This is also evident in Paul's response to Hans' sympathetic comment that 'that sounds very bad'. Paul communicates throughout his narrative that he feels that his situation was because of the damaging psychosocial environment in the old school, implying that it had nothing to do with him. Conceptualising 'bullying' in the way that he does may be one important strategy to assert that he was not bullied because of something about him, but rather because of something beyond his control.

The way the students talk about the term 'bullying' in these two positions shows that they navigate two different logics. On the one hand, there is the taught definition that they know and can easily cite, as well as apply to a certain extent; on the other hand, there is the experience of the power of the bullying definition that leads them to use it as a tool for social positioning, whether as a victim or not.

Discussion: The power of the word

The findings suggest that the bullying definition gains a particularly potent power through its status as a research-based definition legitimised in educational policies in Norway. Both school staff and students use, and have a conscious relation to, the term as well as its power, but the power is evident in different ways for staff and students. The school staff present the definition as a rigid tool, leading to two main strategies for the teachers to deal with this rigidity. Whether the educators' strategy is to take action only when an incident is clearly bullying or to intervene regardless of whether it is bullying, but negotiate and discuss the term as an obstacle to action, it is clear that the bullying definition remains an important distinction that affects the teachers' reaction to the incident. Invoking the term means measures, help and attention, which is something that children and parents may want to seek. Some of the educators use the bullying definition as a tool with which to decide whether help is to be given.

The findings also show the emphasis that most staff place on teaching the students the established definition of bullying; many do so because students use the term too widely. As stated earlier, Maunder, Harrop, and Tattersall (2010) recommended that teachers spend more time talking to students about bullying. Controlling the students' use of the term might be important because overuse may lead to the word's diminished impact for those who are in real need of help. Nevertheless, this study indicates that although clear instruction is most probably better than the opposite, it may also have some unwanted effects. Further research may help shed further light on these effects: first, strict control of the way the term

is used may involve the risk of missing cases of harassment, bullying or conflicts, either by adults dismissing cases or by students not daring or willing to report them. As this study suggests, despite the students' continuous use of the term, few students officially report bullying. Second, the educators' control of the term likely imbues it with power in the eyes of the students. However, what is most apparent in the interviews with the students is not that which the educators fear, namely the students' investment in saying the word to make the teachers and principal react; rather, the power of the word is used in the micro-politics and nuanced relations between the students themselves.

While trickling down in the hierarchy from policies to practice and from principal to student, the power of the bullying definition is put to different uses and fought over, with different inflections depending on the position. The term 'bullying' masks the differences in what the term does for people differently positioned in school. Its power lies in the fact that the use of the term in itself gives rights and responsibilities, determines guilt, and confers blame and status—and may, for some, even serve as a 'badge of courage'.

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