Adults’ responses to bullying: the victimized youth’s perspectives

Ylva Bjereld, Kristian Daneback, and Faye Mishna

Version Final PDF / Published version

Citation (Published version) Ylva Bjereld, Kristian Daneback & Faye Mishna (2019): Adults’ responses to bullying: the victimized youth’s perspectives, Research Papers in Education, DOI: 10.1080/02671522.2019.1646793

Publisher’s statement © 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Copyright/License This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/.

How to cite TSpace items

Always cite the published version, so the author(s) will receive recognition through services that track citation counts, e.g. Scopus. If you need to cite the page number of the author manuscript from TSpace because you cannot access the published version, then cite the TSpace version in addition to the published version using the permanent URI (handle) found on the record page.

This article was made openly accessible by U of T Faculty. Please tell us how this access benefits you. Your story matters.
Adults’ responses to bullying: the victimized youth’s perspectives

Ylva Bjereld\textsuperscript{a}, Kristian Daneback\textsuperscript{b} and Faye Mishna\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden; \textsuperscript{b}Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden; \textsuperscript{c}Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Children are generally encouraged to tell adults about bullying. Although telling can be effective in ending bullying, adults do not necessarily respond in a way that is helpful. Previous research has rarely included victims’ own thoughts and feelings regarding what adult actions and reactions are experienced as positive and helpful, and which are experienced as negative and unhelpful in managing bullying situations. This paper reports on interviews with bullied youth, with the overall aims of describing adults’ responses to bullying from the victimized youth’s perspectives and discussing how the youth experienced these responses. The analysis comprised grounded theory, emphasizing the victimized youth’s points of view. When adults became aware of bullying, they responded in three ways; verbal, physical or avoiding/ignoring. Responses that included increasing adult presence were typically experienced as helpful, as were responses whereby the youth felt adults listened without blaming the victim for the bullying or, listened without excusing the behaviour of the youth that bullied. No response was depicted by the participants as unambiguously helpful although when adults avoided or ignored the bullying it was never helpful.

\textbf{Introduction}

Bullying is recognized as a problem all over the world, usually defined as behaviour that is aggressive, intentional, repetitive and that contains an imbalance of power whereby the victimized youth has difficulties defending him/herself (Olweus 2013). Due to the negative consequences of bullying victimization, numerous prevention programs have been developed worldwide. Anti-bullying programs often include components of monitoring/evaluating bullying behaviours and outcomes, schoolyard supervision, relationship building and pupil/parent/teacher participation. The components have various effects, depending on the specific context and conditions in each school (Flygare, Gill, and Johansson 2013). An evaluation of anti-bullying programs found that although schoolyard supervision was associated with lower prevalence of bullying victimization, it was most effective in reducing bullying if the supervision was scheduled, placed extra
attention on ‘hot spots’ and specified personnel responsible for the supervision (Flygare, Gill, and Johansson 2013). In studies that utilized surveys, children subjected to bullying have rated teachers as the most likely source to stop bullying (Dowling and Carey 2013). In addition to support by school personnel, parental support can be effective in decreasing bullying (Frisén, Hasselblad, and Holmqvist 2012), as can the victimized child changing their class or school (Frisén, Hasselblad, and Holmqvist 2012; Thornberg et al. 2011). Changing one’s class or school, however, does not inevitably result in a positive outcome (Thornberg et al. 2011). As there is limited research attention on the specific helpful characteristics of adult support, the purpose of the current study was to address this gap.

Encouraging students to tell an adult if they are bullied is a common strategy regarding bullying (Black, Weinles, and Washington 2010). Nevertheless, a large proportion of bullied children do not tell an adult about their victimization (see Black, Weinles, and Washington 2010; Frisén, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson 2008; Rigby 2017; Waasdorp and Bradshaw 2015). The reasons children do not disclose to adults about bullying has mainly been studied through surveys, which have identified the existence of ‘hidden’ or ‘silent’ victimized children that do not disclose bullying (Black, Weinles, and Washington 2010; Boulton et al. 2017; Frisén, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson 2008; Rigby 2017; Waasdorp and Bradshaw 2015). The research has shown that parents often are unsure whether their child has been bullied (Bjereld et al. 2015), and that parents and teachers generally rate the frequency of bullying incidents as lower than do the children (Demaray et al. 2013; Holt, Finkelhor, and Kantor 2007; Livingstone et al. 2011; Matsunaga 2009).

Disclosing victimization is important as a way of making adults aware of bullying that otherwise is hidden from them. First, if adults are aware of ongoing bullying it is possible for them to intervene and try to help the victimized youth, both in practically managing the bullying and in helping the child to cope with the associated feelings. When they are aware of bullying, the majority of teachers and parents make an effort to stop it (Hale, Fox, and Murray 2017; Yoon, Sulkowski, and Bauman 2014). In a survey study it was shown that the teacher’s response that most often lead to a better situation was when the teacher showed concern and care for the victim (Bauman et al. 2016). Nevertheless, there is a lack of evidence on when, or in what way, talking to an adult about being bullied helps the victimized youth. Support from school personnel has been reported by 25–9 percent of former victims as the reason bullying ended (Frisén, Hasselblad, and Holmqvist 2012; Rigby and Johnson 2016), and 40 percent reported that the bullying had been reduced after it was reported to teachers/counsellors (Rigby and Johnson 2016). Indeed, telling school personnel about bullying often helps the victims’ situation. For approximately one-third of children that are subjected to bullying, however, their situation will not become better after telling an adult. Little research has been conducted on how in their own words, victimized youth describes their experience of adults’ responses to bullying.

A few studies have used qualitative methods to obtain bullied children’s perspectives when they have and have not, disclosed victimization. Findings indicated that children reported that they often initially had tried to tell an adult, which may not have resulted in desired outcomes for the child/youth (Bjereld 2018; Delara 2012; Mishna and Alaggia 2005). The victimized youth sometimes experienced adult responses as downplaying the seriousness of the situation or as not helpful (Bjereld 2018; Delara 2012; Mishna 2004).
Former victims have described how they experienced lack of support from teachers and other professionals, leading to feelings of abandonment during the period when they had been bullied (Tholander, Lindberg, and Svensson 2019).

While little research has been conducted on when bullying disclosure is helpful for the victimized youth, more research has been conducted on disclosing childhood trauma in general, specifically sexual abuse. To disclose such trauma has similarities with bullying in the sense that something harmful has been done to the youth about which the adult is seldom aware, and which can be difficult for the youth to talk about. This research points out that the circumstances of the disclosure and how it is received impact whether it was helpful for the victimized youth to talk about the trauma. Further, the findings suggest that: disclosure is beneficial in preventing post-traumatic symptoms (Arata 1998); childhood victims of sexual abuse have fewer mental health symptoms as adults if they discussed the abuse with someone within one year of the abuse (O’Leary, Coohey, and Easton 2010); and children think it is important to be able to talk to an adult about negative feelings (Armstrong, Hill, and Secker 2000). When children are listened to, they can make peace with their negative experience and create a positive narrative, which can be associated with having a good later life (Garbarino 2008; Matsuba et al. 2010).

More common than interviews with victims are interviews with teachers about bullying (e.g. Rigby and Johnson 2016; Mishna 2004; Mishna et al. 2005; Mishna 2012). Research on responses to bullying disclosure from the teachers’ perspectives found that teachers sometimes described children’s experience of being bullied as the child misperceiving the situation (Mishna 2012). Whether a victim was seen as ‘deserving’ of the teacher’s support has been found to depend on whether the child was considered to blame or responsible for the victimization (Mishna 2004; Mishna et al. 2005). The reasons the teachers viewed bullying differently could partly be understood by the teachers’ assumptions about how victimized children would present themselves. Assumptions include such factors as victimized youth not being ‘well adjusted’ and presenting as passive or lacking confidence (Mishna, Pepler, and Wiener 2006). When a child does not behave in ways that match these assumptions, therefore, the teachers might not view the child as bullied and might not even consider such a possibility. In a study by Sokol, Bussey, and Rapee (2016) it was found that teachers’ attitudes and reactions to bullying varied depending on the victim’s emotional display and behavioural response to the bullying. If the victimized youth appeared angry, for example, teachers blamed the victim for what happened or found that the child deserved the victimization more often. Teachers had fewer intentions to intervene if the victim appeared to be confident. Teachers also considered bullying of confident victims as less serious than if the victim was angry, sad or ignoring the situation (Sokol, Bussey, and Rapee 2016).

In a previous study the process of disclosing bullying victimization was explored from the victims’ viewpoints (Bjereld 2018). Bullying disclosure was identified as a circular process between hidden victimization, whereby adults were not aware of the bullying, and open victimization, whereby adults knew about the bullying. One component of this model described how victims’ perceptions of adult responses after telling about the bullying was crucial if the child was to continue to disclose future victimization. While the study did not include further investigation of adults’ responses, the author concluded that when victims did not feel the disclosure had helped, they might stop telling adults, despite continuation of the
bullying (Bjereld 2018). The focus of the present study is on adults’ responses to bullying from the victimized youth’s perspectives. Previous research has rarely included victims’ own thoughts and feelings about what they perceive as the ways adults react and act that are helpful in their coping with the bullying emotionally, or in managing the bullying practically. It is thus unclear what actions and reactions by adults are experienced as negative and unhelpful, or as positive and helpful. The aims of this study were to describe adults’ responses to bullying according to the victimized youth’s views and to discuss how the youth experienced these responses.

Methods

Participants

Recruitment of participants was carried out by posting flyers in Gothenburg and surroundings. The flyers were posted at high schools, and in other locations where youth spend time, such as at social advice and guidance centres for young people, and job market organizations that focus on young adults, as well as on two of the authors’ Facebook pages along with the comment ‘please share’. The flyer provided information on the study, including inclusion criteria such as youth who had been bullied and were between 15 and 24 years of age.

The rationale for setting the lower age limit to 15 years was that in Sweden children younger than 15 require their parents’ permission to participate in research interviews. As a significant percentage of children and youth that have been bullied do not tell adults about these experiences (see Black, Weinles, and Washington 2010; Boulton et al. 2017; Frisén, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson 2008; Rigby 2017; Waasdorp and Bradshaw 2015) requiring parental permission would make it difficult to include children and youth who did not want their parents to know about the victimization. The higher age limit was set to 24 years as according to the United Nations definition, individuals over this age are not considered as youth (www.unesco.org).

Procedure

The interviews included questions about both previous and ongoing bullying and were conducted through email, telephone or face to face. Recognizing that talking about their experiences of victimization is difficult for some youth, offering three options was intended to allow youth who might not wish to be interviewed face to face, to be able to participate. Previous research on sensitive topics shows that an online setting could be experienced as positive because it provides anonymity (Daneback 2008). All of the participants in the current study, however, chose to disclose their names and email addresses. Two pilot interviews were conducted with adults who were former victims of bullying to verify that the format was satisfactory. One pilot interview was carried out face to face and one by email.

Recruitment resulted in a sample of 10 participants, comprising Swedish youth aged 15–23 who were currently experiencing bullying or had been previously bullied by several peers, either during specific periods in school or throughout their entire time at school (see Table 1). All participants had been subjected to verbal bullying. In addition,
most had experienced social exclusion and physical bullying, and some had also been cyberbullied.

All participants were told that they were free to choose the time, location and type of medium for the interview. Four participants participated by email, four were interviewed face to face, one participant chose to be interviewed by phone, and one participated both through e-mail and phone. The participants were informed prior to the interview that it was their right to terminate the interview at any time and to skip any questions. The study was approved by the Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg, which is a Swedish authority.

**Data analysis**

The analysis was performed in order to develop a deeper understanding of how victimized youth experienced adults’ responses to their bullying victimization. The analysis comprised grounded theory in order to capture the victimized youth’s points of view. It must be stressed that the focus of the study was the student participants’ perspectives and experiences of adult responses to bullying, with no intention to uncover adults’ ‘real’ responses. Initially, the transcripts were read several times and the first author listened to the interview audio tapes. Next, parts of the transcripts were selected, which included situations and thoughts about adults’ actions and reactions to bullying. Initial and focused coding (Charmaz 2014) were used at the selected parts of the transcripts. The initial coding was constructed with a focus on processes and was performed line by line. In the focused coding, codes were compared to each other and to memos that were written throughout the analysis. Clustering (Charmaz 2014) was used to organize the data and understand how categories were related to each other.

The identified categories were further interpreted with the concept of social norms and attribution of blame (Bandura 2002). Norms are shared patterns of thought, feelings, and behaviour (Hogg and Tindale 2005). Within a particular context, norms do not only describe behaviour but also prescribe it, stating the appropriate way to behave (Terry and Hogg 1996). The concept of victimization comprises a set of norms that defines who will be socially recognized as a victim (Cunniff Gilson 2016). Assumptions about how children who are bullied would behave can prevent adults from recognizing and intervening.

### Table 1. Participant characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Bullied in school grade*</th>
<th>Interview type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sofie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5–12</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1–10</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Preschool, 1–5, 8</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1–9</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7–9</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Preschool, 1–2,7–10</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1–9</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3–9</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7–11</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anya</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1–5, 8–12</td>
<td>E-mail and telephone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Swedish school system is based on a voluntarily pre-school (age 1–5), a compulsory elementary school (age 6–15, grade 1–9) and a voluntarily high school (age 16–19, grade 10–12).
Attribution of blame is a concept within the theory of moral disengagement that explains why people sometimes act in ways they think is morally wrong yet manage to feel good about themselves and their actions (Bandura 2002). For example, most adults probably think a bullied child should be helped; nonetheless some of these adults do not intervene when they find out about bullying. Attribution of blame entails attributing responsibility to the victims for bringing suffering on themselves. By fixing the blame on others, one’s own actions are excusable (Bandura 2002). If adults believe the bullying was provoked by the victimized child (Mishna, Pepler, and Wiener 2006) or if the child occupies a double position as both a victim and a bully (Solberg, Olweus, and Endresen 2007), the adult might deem that the child brought the suffering on oneself, which could provide a rationale for the teacher to not intervene.

**Results**

The present study sample included a range of participants, from those who almost never had disclosed anything about being bullied to those who most often told an adult. Which adult to whom the participants disclosed bullying varied; most commonly it was a parent, teacher or school counsellor, while sometimes it was a school nurse, older sibling, or grandparent. Although not all participants had explicitly stated to an adult that they were bullied, at some point they indicated that they had all reported an incident to an adult, in which they had been subjected to negative actions by other students, such as being called names or physically beaten. The youth in this study had been bullied over several years, and even though not all of them actively sought help from adults, the victimization eventually became apparent and without specific disclosure, the adults nonetheless became aware of the bullying. According to participants, when the bullying victimization was disclosed by the victim, or if the bullying became sufficiently apparent so that adults couldn’t remain unaware, the adults responded in various ways. The participants experienced some responses as more helpful in assisting the victimized youth feel better, or in decreasing or stopping the bullying.

It emerged through analysis of the interviews, that when adults became aware of bullying they responded in three ways, which sometimes interacted and overlapped. As shown in Figure 1, this could be a *verbal response*, a *physical response*, or taking no action and rather, *avoiding or ignoring* the bullying. A verbal response entailed the adults talking to the participant about the bullying, most often in person. At times, the adult organized meetings to talk about the situation with the participant and other concerned individuals, such as the participant’s parents, the teacher, principal, school counsellor, and/or the child who bullied and their parents. A response was labelled physicals when adults acted in some way to separate the participant from the children that bullied them, which could entail for example situate them far from each other, or could ensure adult presence, by having an adult near the participant. When an adult was considered to not respond and rather avoid or ignore the bullying adults were described by participants as directly witnessing a bullying situation without intervening or talking to the participant afterwards. The results that follow describe participant depictions of adults’ responses to bullying and the victimized youth’s experience and reactions to these responses.
Verbal response: helpful

According to the participants, when adults found out about bullying, one way they responded was by talking to the victimized youth.

And she [teacher] took the time and started talking with me. Or she dared, and that had never happened before. (Sebastian)

Talking with adults about negative feelings has been described as important for children’s mental health (Armstrong, Hill, and Secker 2000). In the current study, the victimized youth experienced talking about the bullying as helpful if they felt supported and thus felt it was possible to turn to the adult again if the bullying continued.

In high school I had a good school counsellor that I could visit once a week. And I could also call her and talk to her about most things. It became difficult during the Christmas holidays, and since I had her number, I could call her. And I could text her in the middle of the night. Because it, the bullying started at 2 am in the night. And then I texted the school counsellor, and she answered and called me as soon as she read it. (Anya)

As evident in the quote above, participants sometimes described one special person, such as a teacher, a school counsellor or a parent, to whom they could turn. This was a person that supported them, often by listening. Not all participants had someone with whom they felt they could talk. Chris, who did not disclose bullying during his later years in school describes how he would have needed such a person:

And I believe that many of those stories that you hear, about ‘this cool teacher that I could turn to’ and so on, the thing with those [teachers] are that they are part of a context somewhere and are present there and then. Not the strict cathedral teacher that I have a meeting with once, asking how I’m feeling. That, if there is anything that I would had needed, it’s probably that kind of person that had been there for me. (Chris)

Talking about trauma can be protective for the mental health of the victim (Arata 1998; O’Leary, Coohey, and Easton 2010). The experience of being listened to has been described in previous research as a way to make peace with the negative experience.
(Garbarino 2008). In the following quotation an informant describes how she talked about the bullying with the school counsellor.

During the short period I was seeing her it felt very good. I had large confidence in her and thought that she would make everything better. And for a little while it became better. (Emma)

A critical aspect that facilitated youth feeling supported was that no blame was placed on them for being bullied. This was mainly, but not exclusively, something that parents communicated. For example, Hanna’s mother told her, ‘appearance is not a reason to bully anyone’; Linda’s parents communicated, ‘it was not my fault, it was theirs [the bullies]’. Anya explained that her teacher said, ‘you are more mature than the others’. Marcus’ mother said to him that she had told the bullies, ‘Marcus is not coming to school today, and it’s because of you’. These are examples of how the responsibility for the bullying was placed on the youth that bully, which helped the victimized youth to feel supported.

**Verbal response: not helpful**

Not all conversations with adults were depicted as helpful for the participants. Chris, for example, described how during primary school he disclosed bullying to a teacher that took him and what he disclosed seriously. She brought him to a meeting with the school counsellor, in which Chris described feeling uncomfortable. The meeting was held in a small room with the school counsellor and the teachers. Chris experienced the meeting and the adults as very serious, asking questions and taking notes. He started to worry that they were going to make his situation worse, and he started to deny being bullied. Although Chris continued being bullied during his entire time in school, he never disclosed his bullying victimization again. When asked what would have made the meeting better for him, he explained that he would have wanted to continue to disclose the bullying in the informal setting alone with the teacher to whom he first spoke.

Other situations in which the participants had not felt supported by adults can be related to social norms, particularly norms about gender and victimization. Gender norms can be prescriptive, directing what kinds of behaviour are considered appropriate or correct for a specific gender (Diekman and Goodfriend 2006). This is illustrated by one informant’s (Linda) description of herself during primary school as liking to play soccer and run through steeplechase courses. By participating in activities that in her school were only performed by boys, Linda was challenging the taken for granted social norms about how girls should behave. When Linda asked her teacher for help when she was bullied by the boys, the teacher advised her to play with the girls instead. Linda did not follow the advice, feeling it was unfair that she was not allowed to do the things she liked when the boys could do whatever they wanted. Linda explained that when she did not follow the teacher’s advice by adjusting to the gender norm, the teacher stopped trying to help her. Such a response can be understood by the concept attribution of blame (Bandura 2002). The teacher initially tried to help her because she was bullied. Linda felt however, that when she did not heed the teacher’s advice, the teacher withdrew her help in response to subsequent bullying. One could speculate, based on the nature of the advice, that the teacher thought that by not changing her behaviour with peers, Linda was responsible for
the continuing bullying victimization by the boys and therefore no longer deserving of help. This kind of reasoning has been found in previous studies which included interviews with teachers (Mishna 2004; Mishna et al. 2005).

Another participant, Sebastian, described how the school guide at his lower secondary school was the adult the school specifically had assigned to work with bullying during breaks. Previous research findings have indicated that having specified personnel in charge of the schoolyard supervision is effective in reducing bullying (Flygare, Gill, and Johansson 2013). For Sebastian, however, who was just realizing that he was gay, it was problematic to talk to the school guide, as he explained that the school guide openly disliked gays.

And I remember that it was ‘fab 5’ or what the name was, the five gays on the tele. And I remember that he [the school guide] was just like this ‘Oh God how lucky we are that we not have any of these kinds at school’. (Sebastian)

Based on hearing comments about gay individuals at their school, when Sebastian was bullied for his sexuality he did not feel he could ask the school guide for help. This could also be understood as attribution of blame (Bandura 2002), or as a fear of attribution of blame. Based on the school guide’s comments, Sebastian was concerned that if he told the school guide about the bullying and his sexuality, the school guide’s response would make him feel responsible for his victimization due to his sexual orientation.

Adults were described as sometimes not understanding the severity of the bullying. This was due to the victim not fitting the norm of a ‘typical’ victim, and rather, appearing strong. Linda described a situation in which teachers in her lower secondary school witnessed bullying without intervening.

Something that the teachers commented on was that I seldom cried or became angry. That was because I knew that these girls wanted reactions. So, I could just sit there when they told me: ‘You are fucking brainless’. And I was like ‘Okay’. ‘You are a whore’ ‘Okay’. ‘No one likes you’. And I was like, ‘No, okay’. So, I just sat there cold and answered everything they said. And then the teachers didn’t think it was that bad. Because I wasn’t crying aloud. Until it became too much. (Linda).

Linda’s impression was that the teachers did not appear to think she was bullied, or at least not harmed by the bullying she experienced, since she did not seem upset. It is possible that because Linda appeared confident and not vulnerable to the teachers, they may have viewed her bullying victimization as less serious and thus less likely to intervene (see Sokol, Bussey, and Rapee 2016). This kind of reasoning is similar to findings of in previous studies, in which teachers sometimes assumed that victimized youth would not appear or be ‘well adjusted’ and would therefore appear as passive or as lacking confidence (Mishna, Pepler, and Wiener 2006).

**Taking into consideration the perspectives of the youth that bully**

Bullying involves at least one victimized youth and at least one youth who bullies. Participants explained that when adults talked with them, they sometimes incorporated the bully’s perspectives. For example, according to the participants adults sometimes implied that the youth who bullied may have had difficulties at home and that their actions should be understood in that context. Another example entailed adults explaining that because the victimized youth had acted in a way that was breaking social norms
the people who bullied them may have understandably found the behaviour of the victimized youth difficult to accept. The participants found that even when the teachers did not say anything about the bullying youth’s perspective, simply the knowledge that the teacher did not see the bullying exclusively from the victimized youth’s point of view could be experienced as unsupportive.

I think that they [teachers] do not always really understand. They always want what’s best for everyone, and then they can’t really take a stand for one person. And then, it’s a feeling of insecurity, kind of. (Anya)

Adult responses to bullying are sometimes influenced by their difficulties differentiating conflict from bullying (Mishna et al. 2005). Participants in the current study described how adults sometimes witnessed a bullying incident without really understanding what was going on. It could be that they did not understand the situation as including an imbalance of power and therefore treating the bullying situation as a conflict between two equal parties in which both the youth who bullied and the victimized youth were responsible.

And everybody had heard that I had not done it, but nobody was taking my side, because I was the unpopular little one. And yes, they had to pull this one; “Now you two apologize to each other.” That never works. And is even more terror. To look my bully in the eye, the person who seconds before, had been sitting on top of me and slapped me in my face. That is not a nice feeling. You just want to be as far from the person as you could. (Marcus)

In addition to speaking individually with the victim, adults talked with the child that bullied. This sometimes occurred in the presence of the victimized youth whereas other times the victimized youth was told about the conversation afterwards. According to the participants, adults speaking with the child that bullied sometimes helped, resulting in decreased bullying or in an apology by the youth who bullied. If they felt the youth who bullied was not genuine when adults were listening, or that the bullying continued despite the talk, the victimized youth experienced these meetings in which adults talked with both youth who bullied and were victimized as negative and unhelpful.

**Physical means: helpful**

One way in which adults were depicted as acting to reduce the bullying entailed separating the youth who bullied from those that were victims. This was described by youth as manifesting in various ways. For instance, in the classroom the teacher might implement seating arrangements whereby the victimized youth was placed far away from the youth that bullied, to have the victimized youth work alone or with a small number of students in a separate room, or to allow the victimized child to stay inside during breaks. Outside the classroom, adults might accompany the victimized youth to and from school. Schoolyard supervision is a common component in anti-bullying programs (Flygare, Gill, and Johansson 2013) and participants described school staff remaining close by during breaks, in response to bullying situations. This physical separation between victimized youth and students that bully was usually experienced as positive since it reduced the bullying and enabled the victimized youth to feel safer. Some participants believed teachers or other adults in their school should have been more present during breaks.
I do not know how much you can put on the teachers. But it feels like there should be a teacher around on the breaks. Who kept a close eye, I was not the only one in my school that was afraid of breaks. (Sandra)

According to the youth, since adult presence alone was not sufficient, adults should actively keep track of what was happening and look for problems among students.

Because you [adults] do not see what’s happening when you are not around. Create a forum for play when you are around! I think it should be like ‘big brother watches you’ although it’s teachers watching instead. To play during surveillance. Because a lot of shit is happening when playing in the woods. (Chris).

Chris, who almost never turned to adults for help, added that teachers should create inclusive activities during classes and breaks, in which there was no room for exclusion. Without such activities, children without friends would be alone.

Sometimes the use of physical means within a school class, during breaks and on the way to and from school was insufficient. In those cases, a definitive separation was a further strategy, such as when the victimized youth stayed at home, or changed class or even schools.

I had several meetings with my class mentor and the school counsellor, but nothing helped. In the end, I chose the easy way and changed school to have a new start. (Anya)

According to former victimized youth, changing schools is one of the most effective ways to end bullying (Frisén, Hasselblad, and Holmqvist 2012; Thornberg et al. 2011). For Anya, the transfer to a new school helped her escape the bullying. Although she described this as the ‘easy way’, not all victims that change schools escape the bullying. The context and the social climate in the new class influence how the transfer will turn out (Thornberg et al. 2011).

**Physical means: not helpful**

The use of physical means to help the victimized child was often a successful strategy in reducing the bullying. It was, however, not a strategy to solve bullying. When the use of physical means to control the bullying became a permanent solution it could be a negative experience for the victimized youth:

Mother. She was very angry. And she threatened to press charges against the school if they didn’t do anything. They did not want to be reported of course, so they did what they could, which was to continue to isolate me. And sending school staff with me during breaks. And you do not want an adult walking after you to make sure that you are not getting hit. But that was how it was. And yes, in the end I just sat there [in a room next to the class room], painting. I didn’t even manage to get outside. (Marcus)

Even if initially experienced as helpful, should initial surveillance or separation lead to the victimized youth being isolated from their peers, it becomes difficult to break this isolation and exclusion, and to socialize with peers or develop new friendships. A strategy that at first was effective in putting an end to the bullying might rather, turn into a destructive result.
Avoiding/ignoring: not helpful

When participants had disclosed victimization, or when the bullying was so evident that the youth knew adults must have noticed the bullying, they were sometimes faced with the experience of adults appearing to ignore or avoid the situation. Below is an excerpt in which Sebastian describes how other students shouted negative labels at him in the corridors.

*Sebastian:* The teachers at this school were very good in closing their eyes.

*Interviewer:* Do you think that the teachers heard these words and . . . ?

*Sebastian:* Yes absolutely! I believe that. It was a large school, but it was classrooms everywhere and corridors, these narrow corridors, there where teachers were, almost everywhere. At least inside the classrooms, and it was very thin walls. I think that many, that many teachers closed their eyes.

Sometimes participants experienced the adults as not responding at all when they witnessed bullying. The participants explained that at other times adults may have acted to intervene with the bullying initially, but if this was not effective or if the informant (victimized youth) did not follow the adult’s advice, the adults stopped responding and rather, ignored the bullying. In some cases, the participants understood the adults’ behaviour as their expression of powerlessness, their lack of control over the students or their fear of the bullying students. The teachers were depicted as remaining in the staff room during breaks or even as not daring to intervene. In other cases, the participants interpreted teachers’ avoidance as a sign of not caring, the opposite to what previous research has identified as needed in order to improve the situation for the victim (see Bauman et al. 2016).

Rather than avoiding the subject, some students expressed the need for more information and discussion about bullying in schools. Linda said that the bullies never really understood how much they hurt her. If there had been a lecture on bullying, she thought they would have realized what they were doing to her. In the school Sebastian attended, there were strong norms, such as which kind of sexuality was acceptable and proper. Sebastian did not follow that norm as he did not share these thoughts, behaviour and feelings towards sexuality (see Hogg and Tindale 2005). By informing other students about diversity, he hoped his peers would learn about other ways to be rather than being constrained by the norm at his school. Having been bullied for his sexuality and his looks, Sebastian believed there should be more education on bullying in schools, with a focus on diversity:

That you talk about that there exist several kinds of sexuality and that there is nothing strange. I think that is important because, although I think it’s idiotic, I can understand them. I mean, I can understand that if you are not educated such things can be strange because it’s so different, because you do not see it every day. And maybe have heard from older siblings that it is the worst thing. So I think that a lot of education can learn students that there are different kinds of people. And that everyone looks different (Sebastian).

Anya felt it was so important to inform other students about bullying that during high school she made a presentation on bullying for the school class in which she had been bullied.
Discussion

This study’s focus was to examine victimized youth’s perspectives and experiences of the ways adults responded to the youth’s bullying experiences. The findings show that there is not a clear pathway from bullying disclosure to help for victimized children and youth. Through analysis of the interviews, it emerged that the various actions by adults in response to bullying, such as talking to the victimized youth or separating the student that bullied form the victimized youth, were helpful in some circumstances whereas these strategies were not helpful in other situations. It was clear, however, that adults taking no action, and rather, ignoring the bullying, was never helpful for the victimized youth.

Findings of the current study can inform adult responses to bullying. When adults talked to the victimized child in a way that was experienced as helpful, the victim had the impression of the adult as listening, understanding, available, and not blaming the youth for their bullying victimization. The victimized youth reported not finding the conversation with adults helpful, however, when they felt the adult did not understand the victimized youth’s position, but rather considered the perspective of the youth that bullied or blamed the victimized youth for the bullying (e.g. attribution of blame). While it emerged that participants considered such responses by adults as unhelpful, it is important to examine the effects on the victimized youth, which can compound the effects of the bullying victimization (Clarke and Kiselica 1997).

The findings in the current study indicate that physical responses by adults can be effective in the short run in reducing bullying, for example ensuring that the students who bullied and who were victimized were separated and away from each other. The finding that schoolyard supervision was experienced as helpful is consistent with findings of other research (Flygare, Gill, and Johansson 2013). Relying solely on physical means to reduce bullying in the longer term, however, was described by participants as possibly leading to greater isolation. According to participants, teachers relying on physical means such as separation and monitoring could exacerbate the victimized youth’s isolation and difficulty developing new friendships.

These findings can be useful for parents, teachers, school counsellors and other adults that work with children and thus must respond to bullying. When children are encouraged to tell an adult about being bullied, there seems to be an implicit assumption that telling will lead to help. The findings of this study indicate that while telling an adult can be helpful, it may not be, which supports previous findings (Bjereld 2018; Mishna and Alaggia 2005). Moreover, youth have articulated that telling can make things worse (Mishna, Pepler, and Wiener 2006). It seems important that the advice to tell an adult be more nuanced. To state that an adult will help is to simplify the outcome, which is unrealistic and can lead to further disappointment for youth. An implication is that the advice to tell an adult include a statement that if the child does not receive help from the adult, ask another one until the child finds an adult that is helpful.

This study findings suggest that rigid norms that prescribe typical behaviours based on gender, sexuality and victimization (see Cunniiff Gilson 2016; Diekman and Goodfriend 2006) are obstacles to helping bullied children. It was found in this study that when children behave in a way that is not prescribed by the social ‘taken for granted’ norm, they may risk receiving less help than children that behave according to the norm. Consistent with this finding, previous research has illuminated how assumptions by adults about how children
who are bullied behave can prevent the adults from recognizing bullying situations, and thus to a lack of intervention (Mishna, Pepler, and Wiener 2006). More research is needed to understand norms that influence whether and how victimized youth receive help and how these norms can be illuminated and addressed, in order to promote adults’ ability to respond effectively to bullying.

The current study’s results are based on bullying about which adults are aware. A large proportion of children that are bullied, however, do not disclose victimization to adults. According to research, when children do not feel that adults react helpfully to bullying victimization, they often stop disclosing bullying, although the bullying continues (Bjereld 2018). It is important to conduct further research on what actions by adults are helpful, to enable more victimized youth to receive supportive and helpful adult responses which will promote their continued disclosure of bullying victimization to adults.

**Limitations**

There are some limitations to consider in this study. The first is that the online interviews were less detailed than the telephone and face to face interviews. The option to participate online enabled participants who might not otherwise take part to do so. Although the interviews were not focused on why participants chose a particular interview format, the participants explained the online choice as the ‘easiest’; the participants described themselves as otherwise ‘hard to reach’, ‘difficult to meet’ or as having ‘fear of the telephone’. The online interviews thus contributed to the findings in a substantial way, a contribution that would otherwise not been available.

Previous studies have shown that it is difficult to recruit victimized youth to participate in research utilizing interviews. Using various ways to recruit participants, previous studies ended up with around 10 interviewees, similar with this study (Bouchard et al. 2018; Thornberg et al. 2011). In grounded theory categories are considered saturated when more interviews do not spark new theoretical insights (Charmaz 2014). This article presents an overview of the process of adults’ responses to bullying – from the victimized youth’s points of view. It is likely that interviews with a larger number of participants would have contributed to richer data, in which the categories had been fully saturated (see Charmaz 2014). If asked for parental permission, the victimized children that did not want their parents to know, would likely not volunteer to participate in an interview. In the study’s sample, some of the participants’ parents were not aware of the bullying, and other parents had been unaware of their child’s bullying experiences for a lengthy period of time.

Although adult responses to bullying were examined, this was from the victimized youth’s points of view. The participants can only provide their perspectives of the events, which is a limited view that does not take into account other consideration by the adults, such as whether teachers had consulted colleagues or made changes in the classroom that were not apparent to the victim. The interviews were based on the experiences of older students. Since the bullying had been ongoing during several years, including early school years, participants were asked to answer in retrospect. In a study by Tustin and Hayne (2019) findings were that adults tended to fill in the blanks when describing events they experienced when they were 5 years, thus adjusting their perceptions. When recalling memories from
when they were 10 and 13, they reported approximately the same information about the memory as they had when they were children (Tustin and Hayne 2019).

Although adults’ responses to bullying have been examined in previous studies (e.g. Bauman et al. 2016; Frisén, Hasselblad, and Holmqvist 2012; Mishna 2012; Rigby and Johnson 2016; Sokol, Bussey, and Rapee 2016) this study is unique in interviewing victimized youth about their experiences and perspectives on adults’ actions and reactions when they found out about the bullying.

**Conclusion**

A recurring question related to bullying is what adult responses and strategies are helpful. This issue emerged as complex. The youth participants did not unambiguously find any response helpful. Some strategies were described as possibly helpful or unhelpful, based on circumstances. Some strategies were considered unhelpful. Adult responses to bullying that were typically experienced as helpful included: 1) increasing adult presence; and 2) feeling that adults listened without blaming the victim for the bullying or without excusing the behaviour of youth that bullied. It is critical that adults act on information about victimization, listen to the victimized youth’s story and try to understand the situation from the victimized student’s perspective.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Notes on contributors**

Ylva Bjereld is Postdoctoral researcher in Education at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning at Linköping University in Sweden. Her research concerns bullying among children and youth. Bjereld has a special research interest in how bullying victimization can be understood in relation to identity, mental health and social relations.

Kristian Daneback is Professor in Social Work and Pro Dean at the faculty of Social Science at the University of Gothenburg. His research interests concern aspects of internet and everyday life. More specifically he has published in the areas of internet and sexuality, parenting, and bullying.

Faye Mishna is Professor at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, cross-appointed to the Department of Psychiatry and holds the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Chair in Child and Family. Her program of research is cyber bullying, sexting, and the impact of cyber technology in traditional face-to-face counselling.

**ORCID**

Ylva Bjereld [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8755-6922]
References


