



International Network for School Social Work

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Bullying in German Schools: The School Social Work Role Kathrin Beck (University of Eastern Finland), Kathrin_Beck87@web.de

My name is Kathrin Beck and I worked for several years in Bavaria, Germany as a school social worker at a primary school, a lower secondary school and a boarding school. Currently I am adjunct lecturer at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, teaching social work in the bachelor program. I am also working at the University of Eastern Finland to complete my dissertation which deals with a comparison of school social work in Germany and Finland. Bullying in schools is a concern in both countries and points to a valuable role for school social workers with both preventive activities at the school and intervention to help bullied children.

As a school social worker I was often confronted with different forms of violence, including bullying. I was always interested in the children's views about these topics. I held meetings with class representatives, which provided an opportunity to learn from them. Listening to the children and using their views and ideas to make change empowers the children. For example, in a discussion about bullying at our primary school we focused on areas of the school where bullying was taking place, so that the school community could find ways to prevent it. During the meeting, we learned that bullying occurs mostly in areas that are uncontrolled, such as in certain corners of the school-yard. The meetings were helpful in alerting school staff to bullying at the school and to increase adult visibility in these areas where children are more likely to be bullied.

Bullying in German schools

THE OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) provides data from a 2015 PISA report about the extent of bullying in German schools. Accordingly, 16% of German students reported being a victim of bullying 'at least a few times a month'. Bullying includes not just physical attacks but being made fun of, a victim of threats, personal property damage and being deliberately left out.

It can be hard to detect bullying in schools as it usually takes place where school staff are unlikely to observe it. Also bullies and victims often do not fit expected stereotypes. However, staff pick up on a variety of indications from children who attract attention by behaviors that signal that they feel intimidated, such as refusal to go to school, avoiding activities or making detours to avoid others.

Bullying intervention tool: No Blame Approach (NBA)

As well as working with staff to recognize indications for bullying at an early stage and to implement preventive measures, school social workers provide interventions with bullied children. The No Blame Approach was developed by Barbara Maines and George Robinson in the UK and is practiced nowadays in New Zealand, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. Since punishing the bully usually does not improve the situation for the bullied child, they developed an approach to change the group dynamics by enlisting support of peers. The approach consists of three steps, namely, (1) a meeting with the affected student, (2) a meeting with a support group of peers, and (3) follow-up meetings. The aim is to give some responsibility to the support group, which consists of bullies and/or bystanders as well as friendly students, to help solve the problem without blaming the bully.

What does it mean in practical terms?

As a school social worker, I worked with Florian, age eight years, who was excluded during school breaks, group activities and physical education as well as verbally attacked by his classmates for 1 year. His mother informed me about his situation and asked for help. To support him, I obtained more information from his teacher. We decided to carry out some group work within his class to observe the group behavior. We saw that Florian was mainly left alone. I decided to initiate the NBA and invited him to my office where we talked about his feelings in his class and my intention to support him. At the beginning, he was afraid that his situation could worsen if we involved classmates. After I told him that I would not discuss any information that I got from him with the group, he agreed to work with me. I asked Florian if he could name some classmates who are friendly, reliable or just simply neutral, as well as classmates who contribute to his situation.

I then invited five of these classmates to my office. I told them that Florian feels uncomfortable in his situation and asked them for help. Initially, the children laid the blame for his situation on Florian himself, saying that he acted strange. I repeated that I would like to search for ideas to improve his situation. Then, they started to make suggestions, saying that they could play with him during the break, care for him when he looks sad and just simply stop offending. I thanked them for their cooperation and told them that I will come back to them soon to check if the situation has improved. The follow-up meetings showed that Florian felt much better than before, even if it was still difficult for him not to revert to his old patterns. I told him that he can visit me regularly in my office and that he can take part in groupwork during school breaks.

Implications

In summary, the No Blame Approach is an effective tool to stop bullying and promote empathy. Nevertheless, it is important not to rely solely on intervention after the fact but to develop specific anti-bullying programs and a school climate characterized by respect and trust. This includes not only interactions between classmates, but also between all school personnel, children and parents. Intervention with children like Florian and preventive activities focused on school climate are valuable roles for school social workers.

References

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