

Against bullying

Christina Salmivalli (University of Turku, Finland) talks to Jon Sutton about her new approach to an age-old issue

There are many ways to define, measure and tackle bullying. What's different about yours?

There are three main components to the KIVA programme. What we call 'universal actions' such as student lessons about peer relations, aiming to influence the bystanders who often provide social rewards for the bullies who are seeking status and power. In a group, you often do things that you privately think are wrong, so in the lessons before we even go to bullying we talk about group pressure and how it influences you. It's about making salient our private actions, and making people see that we have the power to stop it.

Then there's an online learning environment and games related to the topics of the student lessons, so when you have gone through three lessons in the classroom you can play level one of the game. In the game you're also asked to reflect and report your own behaviour.

Finally we have 'indicated actions', which means when there is a case of bullying there is a KIVA team who have clear guidelines on how to address bullying problems.

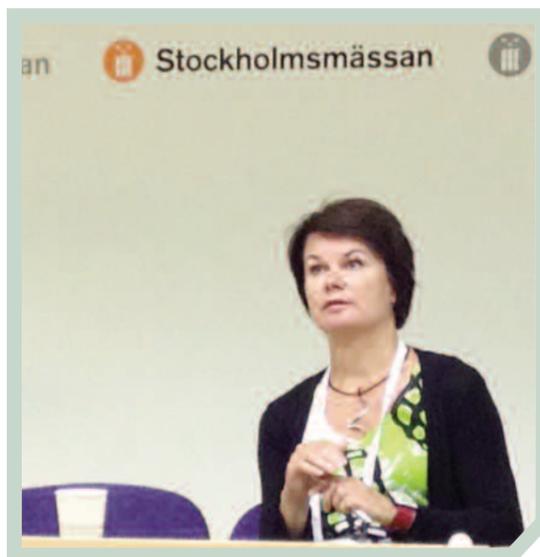
And it works?

One PhD student of mine calculated that during the first year of implementation of the programme we were able to save about 12,000 victimised students and about 8,000 bullies.

Impressive! KIVA actually means 'nice' in Finnish, as well as being an acronym for 'against bullying' in Finnish! So as much as it's an anti-bullying policy it's a 'pro-nice' policy?

Yes, although I would say there have been many interventions that have said 'we

don't even need to talk about bullying, let's just improve the school climate', but actually there is no evidence that such changes would be enough to reduce bullying. But there is evidence of the contrary effect, that if we reduce bullying then the atmosphere gets nicer. So to tackle bullying we need to talk about bullying, but not just in a negative way... everyone has the right to a nice, safe school environment, we are all responsible for that together.



People have said that anti-bullying preventions need to stem from the school themselves, to be effective. You haven't necessarily found that to be the case?

I don't think so. The KIVA programme is more systematic and structured than many others. It's not only that we provide materials for schools and say 'you can use them if you have some problems', it's really supposed to become an ongoing part of the normal school life. In Finland at first we thought teachers don't like it if

you tell them that in September you should do this and in October this and so on, but actually this was well-received. I think it's a reality that schools are already struggling with little resources, and I know that for us it took a lot of time and effort to develop the programme, and years of research. So just as someone has developed materials to teach mathematics or some other curriculum subject, I think it makes sense that this happens somewhere else, and also that the programmes and practices don't have to be different from school to school: there can be a national strategy.

By having that economy of scale of it being a national programme, does it become cheaper to implement? Because when I hear you talking about it, I think 'that sounds expensive, that sounds difficult to keep going'!

Actually per student it's not expensive at all. In Finland we have certain systems how we are trying to support schools in implementing the programme, like newsletters that we send them four times a year, KIVA conference days where staff from the schools gather bi-annually... that's a very nice event and certainly something that motivates them by seeing that there are other people that are enthusiastic about this.

And it's nice for you to see the impact, so you get that continued involvement. You're ensuring that the anti-bullying policy isn't just a yellowing piece of paper stuck to a classroom wall.

That's the big challenge for us now in Finland. The government supported the schools so that every school that started implementing the programme during the first three years that it was rolled out, they got all the materials for free and all the pre-implementation training for free, but now some of those schools are not implementing it. So we are all the time trying to find ways to support them and motivate them, and tell them about the findings.

There's still so much we don't know about effectiveness, for example whether it works better with younger or older children, whether it stops people taking up bullying or becoming a victim or tackles existing bullying.

It seems that KIVA, at least during the first year when we started it and did the randomised control trial, we had much stronger effects in primary school. The same was true during the broad roll out, but now it's starting to change. But I think that often when there are cases of bullying in the secondary school they can

be really strongly embedded in the social system, something that has lasted a long time. But I guess there are also reasons related to the way secondary schools are organised and how teachers perceive their role: they are subject specialists so they might find it more difficult to talk about these things with the kids.

When I was researching in the area for my own PhD (which was very much inspired by your approach), people always used to say 'you're never going to stamp out bullying'. Perhaps in those older children it's going to be very hard, but if you keep getting to successive generations of younger children it might never develop to that extent.

Yes, I think it would be a bit unrealistic to think we could stop bullying completely with any kind of prevention programme. It's just part

of human nature, we can never stop aggression. But I think we can reduce it a lot, and hopefully even if there are cases of bullying that emerge, hopefully they will not last that long. If we have better ways to intervene, or more responsible peers who are witnessing bullying, they are going to do something sooner. These are all the things we can influence.

Technology has had a pretty bad press in terms of facilitating bullying, but do you think in some ways it could be one of the keys to tackling it?

I think so. I think that all this discussion about cyberbullying... of course it can be horrible, but I think it's much more horrible what's going on in the schoolyard everyday. Cyberbullying is now a very hot topic, but if we discuss it too much even the educators might start to think that bullying is now in cyberspace, it doesn't happen in school. It can make it easier to close your eyes to the bullying that is happening in front of you.

Technology is motivating and fun for children, so why not use it in the prevention work? And also in reporting. When we started out with KIVA, we saw that there were many children who were repeatedly bullied, even in KIVA schools, and they never ended up with the KIVA team: they were still suffering in silence. So we were thinking of how we could make reporting easier, and that's when we added this component, that you can send a message to a mailbox to report if you are bullied or if you see somebody else is suffering. It has been used a lot. You cannot send it anonymously, each child has their own personal ID.

Bullying research in psychology has been around for about 30 years now, do you think it has delivered? When I left the area, what was frustrating me was that at every conference I went to people were still talking about definitions and extent, rather than actually doing much about it.

And they still are, that's true. It is sometimes frustrating, but I think that now I see very nice possibilities in good evaluation studies, in longitudinal studies where you are actually implementing programmes in some schools and not in others... we must be going in that direction now, it can't be any more that we just make an intervention study and

look at pre-test post-test. I think that will help us to understand much more, going back to the mechanisms, how the effects unfold and in what timeframe. But so far people haven't really had such data: it's a big effort to collect and it's also very expensive, so we were lucky in Finland that we had support from the government.

Rolling it out to other countries is interesting. Presumably you'd like to see loads of countries take up your approach, to avoid the danger of lots of different intervention studies in different countries, when we'd get more and better data with a big push of one approach?

Well, of course, part of me would like to say everyone should start using the KIVA programme, but it's not realistic. The main thing is that before people start big dissemination I would like them to collect very good and deep data, to understand how the programmes work. That's helpful for everyone then in developing their approaches.

So it's about that evidence base, which has been surprisingly lacking over a long period.

Exactly. And even just the designs in bullying intervention studies have been so varied. If you read them and you look at the findings and the effects and you look at the methods and the design, you must admit that we can't really say whether the effects were caused by the intervention or not.

And maybe often the interventions have stemmed from a personal approach to bullying rather than the evidence base. In terms of that personal approach, I always used to get asked 'which were you then, a bully

or a victim?' Do you get that?

Well, many people are assuming that was my problem. That doesn't apply, no. Of course now that I've been doing this work I've thought more back to the school days and I've remembered some cases. But I also remember we were in secondary school and there was this girl who was bullied mainly by other girls, a very prototypical victim, the only child of older parents, very withdrawn and shy... I remember we were a group of girls and we went to a teacher who had been our teacher in primary school, we were telling her that this girl was treated badly. But even though we did that, with the intention to help that girl, I still think that when we were back in our secondary school class we were also part of the problem.

So it's the social context, and it's so ambivalent.

Exactly. In a way you feel bad and you would like to do something for the person, but...

... you don't want to be bottom of the pile. So that's where the group processes and bystanders come in. Do Finnish schools differ from those in the UK when it comes to the ethos and climate around bullying?

I have no idea! There are always these stereotypes that in the UK there are these old boarding school systems and still something stemming from that...

Not so much in my experience, but then I suppose like most researchers in the field I had quite a biased view, based on the more enlightened schools that let me in! There were plenty that just said flat out 'we don't have any bullying here'.

Yes. Now we have this trial, in Wales, at the Social Research Unit in Dartington. They got this big innovation grant and they are starting a bigger trial this fall.

So watch this space!