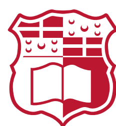

L-Università ta' Malta
Centre for Resilience &
Socio-Emotional Health

Peer Support in School

Helen Cowie

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Sixth Monograph in Resilience and Health, Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health, University of Malta, 2020

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Sixth Monograph in Resilience and Health by the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health, University of Malta

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Resilience and Health Monograph Series

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We are pleased to publish the sixth monograph in the *Resilience and Health* series by the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta. The series aims to provide an open access platform for the dissemination of knowledge and research in educational resilience and social and emotional health. We have one e-publication per year in such areas as social and emotional development, health, resilience and wellbeing in children and young people, social and emotional learning, mental health in schools and professionals' health and wellbeing.

The publication of the Resilience and Health Monograph Series is based on the philosophy of the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health, which develops and promotes the science and evidence-based practice of social and emotional health and resilience in children and young people.

We welcome contributions from colleagues who would like to share their wor with others in the field.

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About the Author

Helen is Emerita Professor at the University of Surrey (UK) in the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences. She is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a Chartered Counselling Psychologist. She is also book reviews editor for the *International Journal of Emotional Education.*

She has published widely in the field of anti-bullying interventions at school and university. In *Managing School Violence*, she and her co-author Dawn Jennifer designed training for a whole-school approach to reduce and prevent bullying. *New Perspectives on Bullying* emphasised the importance of fostering positive relationships in the school community as a whole and provided a wealth of evidence-based good practice for professionals. With a team of European colleagues, she designed a resource on school violence, the Violence in School Training Action (VISTA) project[1] and an online training manual on cyberbullying prevention for children, parents and teachers, as well as a virtual campus on *Second Life* which provides resources on research and practice in the field of violence-prevention. She was national representative on the *COST Cyberbullying Project* and contributed a cross-national chapter to the project book, *Cyberbullying through the New Media*. Most recently, she has carried out research into bullying on campus, co-authoring *Bullying Among University Students* which was published by Routledge in 2016. Her book, co-edited with Carrie-Anne Myers, *School Bullying and Mental Health: Risks, Intervention and Prevention*, was published by Routledge in 2018 as the first in a new series entitled *The Mental Health and Well-being of Children and Adolescents.* Her (2012) book; *From Birth to Sixteen* was selected by Routledge for a new edition which appeared in 2019.

[1] www.um.edu.mt/cres/ourresearch/resources

Chapter 1. Introduction

This monograph grew out of the keynote address that I gave to the ENSEC Conference in Budapest in 2019. From this experience and the discussions that took place in the course of the conference and afterwards, I discovered that the peer support literature continues to encourage many productive debates on such issues as the tensions between pro-social behavior and moral disengagement, competing pressures on young people to be either passive bystanders or proactive upstanders, conditions that inhibit or promote resilience in individuals and groups, and social factors that facilitate inclusion or exclusion, xenophilia or xenophobia.

With such a wide sweep, it is not surprising to note that peer support is expressed in different ways depending on the cultural context in which it evolves. In the present monograph, the focus is on peer supporters in their capacity i) to offer emotional help to children and young people who are the *targets* of bullying or cyberbullying and ii) to facilitate change in the social and emotional climate of the school, college or university, in other words, throughout the lifespan of education.

'Peer support' is an umbrella term that covers a whole range of interventions. Many studies highlight the benefits of a peer support system but, since they vary widely in their definitions of peer support and in the ways in which it is implemented, it can be difficult to make comparisons between one scheme and another.

I am proud to have this opportunity to offer this overview of a method that has evolved over time and has adapted itself to new challenges in our changing world.

Chapter 2. Defining Peer Support in School

2.1 What is peer support?

Definitions of peer support vary, reflecting different cultural contexts and theoretical approaches. Very generally, the concept of peer support has grown over time from the idea that interactions among people who are similar in some way or who share a similar situation can be a positive force for resolving problems, sharing ideas and changing attitudes. Peer support is also a flexible method that can be adapted to suit different age-groups and different social contexts. For example, peer mediators can range from primary school children to university students, with the training to resolve conflicts adjusted to meet the developmental level of both the peer supporters and their target group; bystander training can be found in schools, colleges and universities as a means to change the culture of the organization.

Peer support systems have developed throughout the world and take many forms, depending on the purpose for which they have been created. Peer support has evolved to address such issues as physical and mental health in settings that include hospitals, primary care clinics, community venues or residential homes, as well as schools and universities (Coleman, Sykes, & Groom, 2017; Horgan, McCarthy, & Sweeney, 2013; McVey, Lieberman, Voorberg, Wardrobe, & Blackmore, 2003; Pierce & Hoelterhoff, 2017; Richard et al., 2019; Walker, Ashby, Hoskins & Greene, 2009). Peer support has also been widely used as a method for communicating with young people about sensitive topics, such as sexual health, where traditional didactic approaches tend to be ineffective (Dobson, Beckmann, & Forrest, 2017). Peer support involves drawing on a shared personal experience to provide information, social interaction, emotional support or practical help, often in a way that is mutually beneficial (Cowie & Wallace, 2000). Peer support differs from other forms of support since it is provided by a person with similar experience to that of the people being helped. In educational settings, it is most effective when it is part of a wider structure of support, such as a whole school anti-bullying policy or a pastoral care system (Cowie & Jennifer,

2007). The existence of a peer support system in school, college or university gives direction to certain young people's willingness to play an active part in the maintenance of a good social climate where students and teachers look out for one another and where they are sensitive to those who may be experiencing social or emotional difficulties in their everyday life.

As I argue throughout this monograph, there are some children and young people who spontaneously act to help others in distress, but the skills can also be learned and many children have the potential for this kind of altruistic behaviour provided that the right training and supportive systems are in place. The widespread development of peer support systems has run parallel with a more general concern about the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people during their formative years. At a time when the mental health of youth is a prominent issue, particularly in Western cultures, educators are increasingly aware that they need to take much more account of the *whole* child, to include that young person's social and emotional development as well as academic achievement. In other words, peer support has a key role to play in the creation of safe social environments where there is a concern to promote fairness, inclusiveness and justice for all. In this context, researchers and educators are increasingly concerned to understand and promote *social connectedness* among children and young people as a crucial means of helping them to forge close relationships and fulfil the human need to play a meaningful part in their social group.

2.2 Early forms of peer support

Where did the concept come from? An early form of peer support focused on helping children with academic difficulties, in, for example, learning to read or write, or learning to do basic mathematical calculations. *Peer tutoring* is one such educational strategy in which the teacher provides the peer tutor, usually a slightly older child, with structured learning materials to enhance the learning of the tutee. Examples of this include paired reading, cued spelling and paired writing (Topping & Ehly, 1998). Peer tutoring has also been successfully used to

help children and young people with special educational needs (e.g. Carter et al., 2016; Dolva, Gustavsson, Borell, Hennigsson & Hälsa, 2011), or with mental health difficulties (e.g. Coleman et al., 2017).

Plate 2.1 Peer tutoring (Source: Sangoiri/Shutterstock.com)

What happens in these pairings is that the peer tutor 'scaffolds' the learning of the tutee through 'guided participation' and encouragement to manage the learning process more effectively. The peer tutor is more knowledgeable than the tutee and each is aware of their role as "expert" and "novice". Each knows that, since the peer tutor is only a little more expert than the novice, he/she is more likely to appreciate the difficulties involved and, with the supervision of the teacher, can plan each session in that light. Research indicates the positive cognitive and social benefits both to peer tutors and to their tutees. Furthermore, the gains are likely to endure and the tutees' motivation and self-esteem typically increase over time.

Another strand in the development of peer support involving adolescents has come through the process of *peer education* where

information on a topic, often relating to health, is provided and presented by same-age or slightly older peers who deliver age-appropriate activities including assemblies, role plays and discussions with whole classes and small groups on sensitive topics that fall into the broad category of Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) (Dobson et al., 2017). Topics of especial concern to young people during the adolescent years include sex education and education about the use of drugs and alcohol. From this standpoint, peer educators have a better understanding of the difficulties facing their peer group simply because they are closer in age and experience to their target audience and can provide information in a more appealing and less embarrassing way than adults, however well-meaning and informed, can do. Peer-led lessons on Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) facilitate open, relaxed communication and are more likely to increase the likelihood of attitudinal and behavioural change than teacher-led provision (Dobson et al., 2017).

Sometimes peer education takes the form of outreach work where the peer educators share the characteristics of the target group (for example, they are of a similar age, from the same ethnic group, speak the same language, or share the same sexual orientation) but seldom belong to their social group. This kind of peer education often takes place in informal settings, such as youth clubs, bars or shopping centres.

2.3 Peer support as an intervention to counteract bullying

The focus in this monograph is to enhance understanding of the important role that peer support potentially can play from the early years through to college and university in its capacity to challenge bullying, cyberbullying and the social exclusion of individuals and groups, in many educational contexts, to alleviate peer group relationship difficulties, such as bullying, cyberbullying, conflict and social exclusion (Cowie & James, 2016; Giovazolias & Malikiosi-Loizas, 2016; Olivas, 2019; Sellman, Cremin, & McCluskey, 2014; Smith, Kwak, & Toda, 2016).

Plate 2.2 Girl receiving nasty messages on her phone (Source: Burdun Iliya/Shutterstock.com)

In contemporary society, children and young people not only develop a sense of social connectedness face-to-face but also online through the wide range of networked technologies. As a result, young people require further support and coping skills to prepare them for a digitally connected society (James, Davis, Charmaraman, Konrath, Slovak, & Weinstein, 2017). Some individuals and groups across cultures are at risk of being targeted by more dominant or more numerous peers. Potentially anyone could at some point in their life be the victim of bullying and social exclusion.

In the context of bullying, the core concept that underpins the practice of peer support is the view that since bullying originates in the peer group, so children and young people are well-placed to resolve it, provided they are given the right training, supervision and guidance. Pastoral care systems have, of course, been in schools for many years and their importance in addressing such issues as bullying is widely recognized. But the providers of help and support are adults, such as teachers, school nurses, teaching assistants, social workers and school psychologists. Peer

support, by contrast, mobilises the skills and values of young people in addressing the issue of bullying in order to provide emotional support to peers before their distress escalates into more serious mental health difficulties. In the context of Greek universities, Giovazolias and Malikiosi-Loizas (2016, p. 122) propose that the primary focus of prevention programmes such as peer support should be “to educate students on how to defend themselves, or how to be proactive in bullying episodes if involved as victims or bystanders.”

Table 2.1 Some examples of risk factors for being bullied

- being perceived as different, for example, being taller, smaller, larger, thinner than the others;
- being weaker physically;
- belonging to a minority group that is perceived negatively by the majority;
- being gifted in some way, for example in sport, music, dance;
- having a learning difficulty;
- having a mental health difficulty;
- being on the ASD spectrum;
- being new to the class;
- being a refugee;
- speaking a different language from mainstream pupils;
- being identified as LGBTQ;
- having a disability.

Peer support is not one unique programme or method that can be applied in any context. Rather, it is a grass-roots approach that emerges from an analysis of the needs of a school community and takes account of the voices of the children and young people involved. Peer support can take the form of face-to-face sessions (Cowie & Wallace, 2000; Sellman

et al., 2014), support through landlines or mobile phones, social networking sites and online forums (Avilés, 2019; Myers & Cowie, 2019; Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2019) or actively promoting cooperation and belongingness in the whole school (Collett, 2016; Hopkins, 2004). In fact, the terms used include “befriending”, “mentoring”, “peer mediation”, “buddy mentoring”, “cybermentoring” and “buddying” or the specific names of the peer support scheme, such as “Big Brothers, Big Sisters” or “Anti Bullying Ambassadors”. Peer support can very broadly be defined as an extension of the altruistic willingness, evident in some individuals in most groups, to offer emotional or educational help and a listening ear to others in the same, or a similar, age-group or situation.

2.4 Types of peer support against bullying

Despite cultural and historical variations in the forms that peer support takes, there is a common element that underpins it. Although the forms that peer support takes vary widely, each has some features in common:

- Peer supporters are usually volunteers, often self-nominated;
- Peer supporters and teachers/coordinators develop a mutually shared understanding of issues of concern to children and young people;
- Members of the peer group often play a part in their selection, and the more extensive the training, the more likely that existing peer supporters are involved in selecting new recruits;
- Peer supporters usually receive need-based, goal-directed and experiential training;

In the most effective schemes, they are supervised or debriefed on a regular basis.

Chapter 3 presents some examples of peer support in action to illustrate the diversity of forms that it can take in different settings.

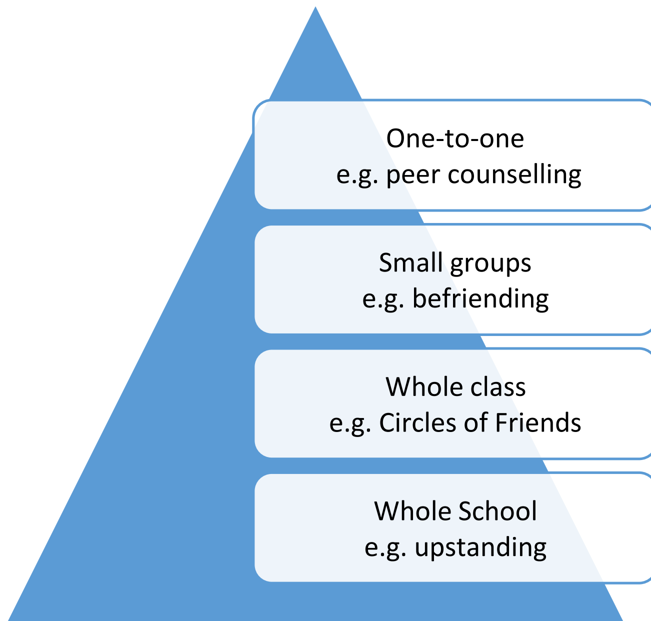

Figure 2.1 Different ways of practising peer support

Chapter 3. Case Studies of Peer Support

3.1 Befriending

Befriending is an approach that builds on children's natural helping skills which they learn through the process of everyday interaction with family and friends. Befrienders or buddies may, for example, organize after-school clubs that offer companionship and activities to peers who would otherwise be unhappy and alone, or they can look out for vulnerable children at recess, by creating a friendship bench where children who would like someone to talk to can sit in the knowledge that a friendly companion will shortly join them.

Plate 3.1 Children befriending one another
(Source: Rawpixel.com/Shutterstock.com)

Befrienders are usually based at primary school and in the early years of secondary school, but similar schemes operate at college and university levels for new students, for example, in the role of "floor

counsellors" in halls of residence or as "ambassadors" to induct first-years into student life.

3.2 Circle of Friends

The Circles of Friends method is a systems approach that recognizes the power of the peer group to be a positive influence on individual behaviour by involving a group of selected peers in the process of befriending a child who is experiencing interpersonal difficulties, for example, children who show withdrawn or aggressive behavior, who have been excluded from their previous school, or who have learning difficulties. Newton and Wilson (1999), who pioneered Circles of Friends, identify four concentric circles of relationship, each at a different level of closeness to the person.

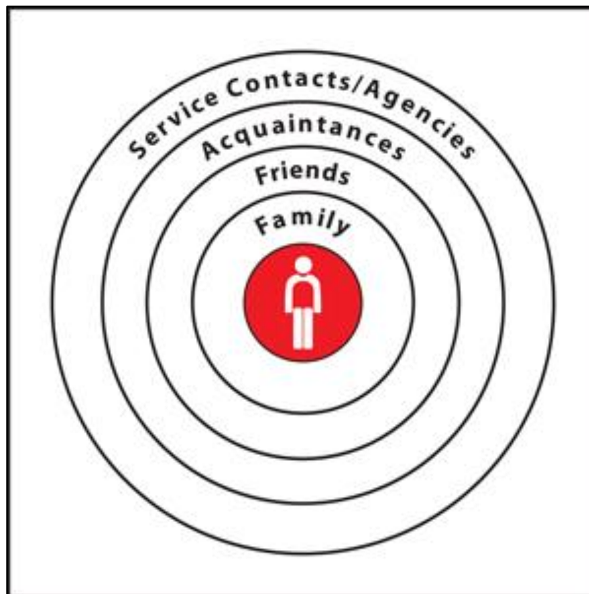

Figure 3.1 Four concentric circles of relationship

1. **Circle of intimacy**: the people who are closest to us, often our family; younger children may include pets;
2. **Circle of friendship**: the people who are our allies and friends. We confide in them and believe that they will stand up for us at times of difficulty. Without their support, we feel angry, isolated and depressed;
3. **Circle of participation**: these are the people that we see regularly as colleagues or classmates. We see them often though they may not be close friends.
4. **Circle of exchange**: the people who are paid to be in our lives, including teachers, doctors, social workers, school nurses, therapists, caregivers. They are paid to provide us with services. They are often bound by a code of ethics that prevents deep personal closeness

After a discussion with the focus child and parents, the session leader sets up a meeting with the whole class apart from the focus child. The class is informed that the focus child has agreed to this meeting. The class is asked to list the positive characteristics of the focus child; then, they are asked to list some of the things that they find difficult about the focus child. After a general discussion about the role of friendship in our lives, the children are shown the concentric circles model (Figure 3.1) and asked to consider how they would feel if the second and third circles were empty – in other words, if the only people in their lives were close family and paid professionals. Children usually reply with adjectives like "bored", "lonely", "sad", "unhappy", "unwanted". The class is then asked to consider how they might behave in those circumstances.

Typically, they respond with actions like "go and hide", "take drugs", "commit crimes", "steal things", "run away". When asked what might be done to help a person in this situation, the children will usually respond with such suggestions as "offer that person friendship" and "help them to keep on track". Next the facilitator asks the class to list things that might make it difficult for the focus child to change. It is from this starting point of honest exchange that the Circle of Friends is formed. The facilitator then invites the newly formed Circle of Friends to devise strategies that will help the focus child to change his or her behavior. Subsequently, the

leader of the Circle of Friends sets up a weekly meeting with 6/8 volunteers.

The method is extremely effective in defusing potentially difficult situations, for example, where the focus child has aggressive outbursts or tantrums. It is a creative and practical method for using the resource of peer support to help a troubling and troubled child by forming a peer network to enable the focus child to form more satisfying relationships with others (Newton, Taylor, & Wilson, 2007). As Taylor (2018) comments, the whole class has the chance to observe in everyday settings the positive changes in the target child's relationships with others through the peer support of their Circle of Friends. Not only target children but members of the Circle of Friends benefit from this rich learning experience.

3.3 Peer mediation

This is a structured method for empowering young people themselves to defuse interpersonal disagreements among peers, including bullying, racist name-calling, fighting and quarrelling (Cremin, 2015; Sellman et al., 2014). The aim of the mediation is:

- **Reparation** of the damage;
- **Restoration** of the quality of relationships;
- **Reintegration** of participants in the conflict back into the school community.

Kate and Nicky, aged 14, have been best friends since they were 12. Two weeks ago, Tony, a popular boy, asked Kate out; she could not wait to tell Nicky the news. After the date with Tony, he completely ignored her at school. That made her very moody. On Monday, Kate saw Nicky laughing and joking with Tony in the lunch queue. Kate felt betrayed, confronted Nicky, and shouted at her. The argument became so intense that they nearly came to blows. The Year Head saw what was happening and suggested that the two girls go to the school peer mediation service. The peer mediators took Kate and Nicky through the five steps, as they

had been trained to do. Each girl was invited to tell her side of the story. Then, the peer mediators invited each to say what they would like to happen. Kate said that, in an ideal world, she would like to be best friends with Nicky and have Tony as her boyfriend. Nicky said that she would like the quarrel to be forgotten; in an ideal world, they could both be friends with Tony. Kate suggested that one solution would be for Nicky to stop talking to Tony. Nicky suggested that one solution would be for her and Kate to meet as usual after school to practise dance steps. The peer mediators identified some risks and benefits in each of the solutions and invited the girls to choose the one with the highest possibility of success. They agreed to meet and practise dance steps. They also agreed that each was free to talk to Tony if the opportunity arose. Kate and Nicky agreed to meet the mediators again to review progress. A week later, the mediators noted that Kate and Nicky were very relaxed with each other. Kate reported that she was no longer going out with Tony as she had seen him flirting with other girls and realised that he was not serious about anyone, but her friendship with Nicky was much more important. They had joined a new music club at school and had already made friends with some boys there. All agreed that the mediation had been helpful.

Plate 3.2 Conflict resolution model
(Source: arka38/Shutterstock.com)

Trained peer mediators meet as a team to encourage individuals to problem-solve rather than fight. The method is 'no-blame' and the aim is that each disputant comes away from the mediation with a positive 'win-win' experience and a resolution of their disagreement that is perceived as fair to each party involved. Peer mediators do not offer solutions but they do provide space for each of the disputants to talk to one another about the problem from their own perspective and without blame or accusation. The ground rules are explained to each participant and the peer mediators insist that the protagonists adhere to these rules. Peer mediation builds on active listening skills by following a step-by-step process that leads to a mutually acceptable solution to the problem. At its heart is the idea that conflict *in itself* is not bad and that the important thing is to understand what each person feels, what they want and why they want it. During the process, the peer mediator helps the children or young people in dispute to work out a joint solution. Peer mediators are usually based in the upper years of primary school and the early years of secondary school, but the method can be used with older groups.

Key concepts:

1. **Conflict is not bad in itself.** If people are to work together constructively with conflict, they need to recognise that conflict is a normal and inevitable part of everyday life. Not only that, conflict can be positive. Through conflict we can learn about ourselves and others, build better relationships and learn new ways of resolving a difficulty;
2. **Conflict is not a contest.** If we assume from the outset that the outcome of a conflict will be for one person to 'win' and the other to 'lose', or at best for each person to give up something in order to reach a grudging compromise, then whatever the outcome, one person will be dissatisfied. Rather, conflict should be viewed as a problem to be solved so that all protagonists get what they want. The key idea that underpins all creative conflict resolution is looking for a 'win-win' solution.
3. **Distinguish between what people want and why they want it.** In conflict situations people often express their wishes rather than

their needs or interests, although it is their unmet needs that usually underlie the conflict. Each protagonist can win as long as they express their needs clearly.

Table 3.1 The Five Steps of Peer Mediation

1. **Identify the problem**: Make the two participants (who have become involved in a dispute) feel comfortable. Explain what the process of peer mediation is. Invite each participant to describe their view of the problem situation without interruption, stating feelings as well as facts. The peer mediator clarifies the needs and wishes of each participant, using such statements as, "As I understand it, what you said was this….". Each participant is asked to summarise what the other said.
2. **Explore options**: each participant states what ideally they would like to happen and is invited to suggest possible solutions.
3. **Take account of risks and benefits**: the peer mediator invites each participant to think about the outcomes of the suggested solutions. Each is invited to explore possible risks and benefits of the proposed solutions.
4. **Make a plan of action**: each participant considers which solutions are likely to meet the needs of both. They are asked to select one or two possible solutions. The peer mediator clarifies what each participant agrees to do and by when. The peer mediator then draws up an agreement, often in writing. The participants agree and shake hands.
5. **Review and evaluate**: the participants agree to meet again to review outcomes and to evaluate what happened. They agree to renegotiate as appropriate. The peer mediator praises each for progress that has been made, even if complete resolution has not been reached.

As Stacey (2000, p. 34) indicates, schools that adopt a peer mediation service report on the following positive outcomes:

- A reduction in the frequency of pupils reporting being a victim of bullying;
- A reduction in the frequency of pupils reporting bullying others;
- Types of bullying that appeared to reduce were physical bullying, teasing and psychological bullying;
- Pupil self-esteem improved;
- Pupil feelings of empowerment improved;
- Pupils developed more negative attitudes towards bullying;
- Pupils gained enormously in their ability to resolve conflicts, to give and receive positive comments, to co-operate, to communicate, and to listen to one another;
- Pupils often reported that they took these skills outside school into their families and communities.

3.4 Peer counselling

Peer counselling extends the befriending and peer mediation approaches to a deeper active listening process grounded in counselling and psychotherapy (Cowie & Sharp, 2018; Cowie & Wallace, 2000; Giovazolias & Malikiosi-Loizas, 2016). Training is extensive and is usually carried out by a counsellor/psychologist. Peer supporters are trained in a wide range of counselling skills, such as active listening, paraphrasing, demonstrating empathic understanding, concern for confidentiality, understanding the boundaries of confidentiality, knowing the limits of their skill and when to refer on to a more experienced adult, for example, when a user of the service is in immediate danger of self-harm. Regular supervision is a necessity in this type of peer support as the levels of skill and sensitivity needed are high. Peer supporters are typically from the upper years of secondary school or are students at college/university. Richard et al. (2019) describe the 40 hours of intensive training undergone by peer supporters at one Canadian university. He

indicates that all the volunteers were already experienced as peer supporters (often at school) and were further trained by mental health professionals. Richard et al. (2019) found that "supportees" (that is, users of the service) were more likely to be female (73.9%). One explanation for this disproportionate use of the service might be that male students have barriers to seeking support, such as embarrassment, stigma, lack of acceptance by peers or fear of homophobic responses and a preference for self-reliance (as noted by Lynch, Long, & Moorhead, 2018). Anxiety and depression were the most common reasons given for seeking help from the peer supporters. The researchers also found a relatively higher proportion of LGBTQ students using the service, suggesting that these students experienced stress related to discrimination and homophobia in the wider student community. The authors report high satisfaction by students who accessed the peer support service and conclude that well-organised peer support systems of this kind have great potential for helping minority groups as well as changing attitudes on campus.

3.5 Peer mentoring

Peer mentoring involves a one-to-one, supportive relationship between a younger student (the *mentee*) and a more experienced student (the *mentor*). The peer mentors are trained, often by an outside agency such as the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation[2]. The range of tasks varies but typically includes watching out for their mentee, especially in the first few weeks of term, or when they are new to the school, communication with the mentee during break times, lunchtimes and reading times, helping the mentee to get their lunch, guiding them in accessing the school's facilities, providing friendship by playing with the mentee or introducing them to other people. Another aspect is that the peer mentor will intervene if they notice that their mentee is being bullied or otherwise mistreated by the peer group, or is at risk of accidents, such as falling. Usually, mentors and mentees meet one-to-one, in small groups or, in some cases, on a drop-in basis. As mentees become more

[2] https://www.mandbf.org.uk/

comfortable in the school environment the need for a peer mentor gradually decreases, but the mentor remains available throughout the school year in case the need for support should arise again (Roach, 2014).

Tzani-Pepelasi, Ioannou and Synnott (2019) interviewed 19 peer mentors and mentees about their experiences. Here one mentee describes a distressing scenario where she was supported by her peer mentor:

> Year 4 children teased me because I have hair on my face and above my lips, and my buddy helped me. He told the teacher, and the teacher warned the boy who teased me, and he never teased me again. Teasing made me feel not happy. But I am very happy because my buddy is here to protect me. (p. 4)

Another reported:

> My buddy protects me from people who are mean to me because sometime they push me but not a lot. Sometimes they are boys and sometimes girls. My buddy sees that and he comes to me and picks me up and takes me to the teacher and that makes me feel happy. (p. 5)

Another showed how his resilience increased, thanks to the intervention of his peer mentor:

> Sometimes some people are mean to me and they push me on to stones and things. I don't go to my buddy for help. I will be OK. I am very strong and I can lift a tyre. Sometimes I push them and hit them back when they are mean to me. Sometimes I want to play by myself. (p.5)

Peer mentors can also offer support online. Here, they intervene when cyberbullying takes place and typically offer protection to the target child, offer advice on effective coping strategies, admonish passive onlookers who fail to challenge the aggressive behaviour of the cyberbully and encourage these bystanders not to participate in this type

of aggressive behaviour towards their mentee.

Cybermentors also provide guidance on how to deal with such internet risks as online grooming, violent online content, happy slapping and sexting. An important aspect is that the cybermentor acts as a role model and aims to promote acceptable online behaviour for all, as well as emotional and practical support for the target child. In some schemes, the identity of cybermentors is protected and they may appear as an online persona or avatar. Collett (2016) considers that a key task for the cybermentor is to promote digital resilience in the broadest sense, that is, not simply as an individual characteristic within the target child, but as a combination of self-awareness of individual responses to a cyberbullying situation and a learned set of coping strategies and skills to tackle the problem. In other words, digital resilience can be learned but it is necessary to have in place a system of support and guidance from peers and adults that strengthens the individual's capacity to cope with adverse online experiences themselves and provides social and emotional support to the target during this developmental learning process (Cefai, 2018; Cefai, Bartolo, Cavioni, & Downes 2018).

Plate 3.3 Peer supporters' cyberbullying guide. Reprinted with permission from the *Diana Award Anti-Bullying Campaign*

3.6 Upstanding

This approach focuses on the education and training of bystanders in a range of methods designed to challenge bullying and cyberbullying behaviour at different levels of engagement within the school and its community.

Plate 3.4 Girl says no to bullying (Source: Rob Marmion/Shutter-stock.com)

Some schemes involve direct face-to-face support of vulnerable students while others involve school-wide campaigning; still others involve action to change policies within the school and in the wider society. One successful example in the UK is the Diana Award Anti-Bullying Ambassador Programme[3] which encourages all students in a

[3] https://diana-award.org.uk/about/

school to become “upstanders” in their fight against bullying.

Children and young people are trained at all stages in the school through publicity events, experiential workshops and through online blogs to encourage their peers to move away from the stance of the passive onlooker who may not like bullying but who feels powerless or unwilling to take action against it (Collett, 2016). In other words, their aim is to recognize and mobilise the power of peer support to change attitudes and behaviour.

Similar initiatives have evolved in college and university settings (UUK, 2017; 2019). At each stage of the educational lifespan, there are new initiatives that aim to change the culture from one that condones or even promotes cyberbullying to one that challenges cyberbullying and other related expressions of prejudice and social exclusion (Myers & Cowie, 2019). It is encouraging to note that many of these initiatives spring from the students themselves and so demonstrate peer support in action.

Chapter 4. Social and Historical Context of Peer Support

In order to understand the continuing success of peer support in educational settings, it is necessary to put it in social and historical perspective. There are two major factors that have influenced the continuing development of peer support schemes: knowledge about the role of the bystander and recent research into the promotion of resilience in children and young people.

4.1 Peer support or bystander apathy?

Peer support has, since the 1990s, been viewed widely as a means for addressing such peer-on-peer issues as bullying, and, more recently, cyberbullying. Most peer support schemes in schools train peer supporters to help children who are the target of bullying or cyberbullying. Other schemes focus on all students in the class or school to change attitudes and behavior *in general* as a means of facilitating pro-social behaviour when bullying occurs.

Research into *participant roles* in bullying is especially relevant here. Pioneering research in Finland (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjőrkqvist, Ősterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Salmivalli, 2014) demonstrated the impact that young people in different participant roles might have on peer group relationships. Rather than focus on, for example, the individual bully and the individual victim in a conflict situation, Salmivalli and her team viewed bullying situations as *group* phenomena and identified a range of non-victim participant roles to include: *assistant* (who helps the bully carry out the aggressive act), *reinforcer* (who encourages the bully by laughing at the victim's distress or cheering on the bully), *outsider* (the passive bystander who ignores the bullying event or who appears to see no need to intervene), *defender* (who protects or comforts the victim or goes to get adult help to stop the bullying episode). From this perspective, the defenders engage in pro-social behaviour, the bullies and their supporters engage in anti-social behaviour, while the outsiders/bystanders

appear to display passive indifference. Kyriacou & Zuin (2018) found that, if unchallenged, the bystanders are typically unlikely to develop a sense of empathy for the victim's plight; such moral disengagement perpetuates the view that there is no need to intervene to prevent bullying or support the victim.

Clarkson (1996, p. 6) defines the bystander as "a person who does not become actively involved in a situation where someone else requires help". To illustrate, she points out that it is bystanding to be witness to, but not to confront, a racist, misogynous or homophobic joke. Letting a friend drive while drunk is bystanding. It is also bystanding not to get help for a colleague when you believe that they are being stressed due to disability or impairment. Sanderson (2020) proposes the urgent need for us all to speak out and intervene against injustice when we see it, and argues convincingly that bystanders can learn to be brave!

Latané and Darley (1970), in their classic studies of bystander apathy, proposed the Bystander Intervention Model which states that the bystander typically experiences five phases in the decision-making process about whether to intervene or not when someone is being attacked by another person:

- Awareness of the incident;
- Interpretation of the incident;
- Accepting responsibility to intervene;
- Knowledge and belief in ability to intervene;
- Performing the intervention.

Their research also highlighted the critical importance of the social context in which the episode occurs, for example, the presence of other people, social cues about what other bystanders are doing, ambiguity about which person is responsible for taking action.

Latané and Darley (1970) carried out their research with adults. By contrast, DeSmet, Bastiaensens, Van Cleemput, Poels, Vandebosch, Cardon and De Bourdeaudhuij (2016) investigated the process of bystander decision-making with a sample of 1,979 adolescents and aimed to find out about the factors which influenced whether a bystander might move from one phase to another in the process of deciding whether, or

not, to intervene in an episode of cyberbullying. They found that the strongest individual predictors for positive bystander behaviour were:

i. A positive intention to intervene;
ii. A strong sense of moral engagement, including positive attitudes towards comforting someone in distress;
iii. Friendship with the victim;
iv. An expectation that the intervention by them would result in a positive outcome for the victim.

Negative bystander behaviour was most strongly predicted by positive attitudes towards *passive* bystanding and a perception of lack of skill to intervene. Girls were more likely to intervene to help the victim; additionally, those who had been cyberbullied themselves in the past had higher intentions to use *positive* bystander behaviour through understanding from their own experience how distressing it can be to be cyberbullied. In-depth interviews with adolescents about how they would behave when they become aware of a cyberbullying episode (Patterson, Allan, & Cross, 2016) confirmed the bystander decision-making model. The participants reported that, in the absence of perceived physical danger to a cybervictim, they hesitated to intervene and in practice distanced themselves from online confrontations. The interview data indicated that in some ways the young people had become disempowered and had failed to develop the relevant skills of intervention. In other words, they felt that they lacked the skill to challenge cyberaggression when they encountered it.

Patterson et al. (2016, p 64) conclude that:

> actively encouraging the development of moral agency in young people will theoretically reduce the risk of students developing dysfunctional normative behaviours and expectations in the online environment, where adult influence is largely absent. Adults also need to find methods to assist adolescents to develop skills as bystanders, to intervene as peer supporters when they perceive cyber-aggression.

Working with younger participants, Van der Ploeg, Kretschmer, Salmivalli and Veenstra (2017), in a longitudinal study of 4,209

elementary school students (mean age 11.25 years), found that affective empathy and self-efficacy beliefs were predictive of defending behaviour over time. In other words, not only is empathy related to defending, but in addition, if a young person feels that they are capable of standing up to a bully or comforting a victim, they are more likely to intervene when the bullying event occurs. Despite the fact that they went against the behaviour of 'the silent majority', defenders over time increased in popularity with their peer group.

4.2 Are participant roles fixed?

There is growing evidence that participant roles are not necessarily fixed and may vary according to the social context of the bullying episode (Gumpel, Zioni-Koren, & Beckerman, 2014). Since Salmivalli's research was first published, subsequent researchers have explored the participant roles in detail with interesting results. Graeff (2014), for example, identified *upstanders*, a category of defender who was willing to uphold positive moral values in the face of the injustice of bullying a vulnerable peer. Levy and Gumpel (2018) surveyed 1,520 Israeli students from middle school (13-14 year) and high school (15-18 years) using the Participant Role Questionnaire-Revised (PRG-R) (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), the Help Recruiter (Tatar & Milgram, 2001) questionnaire, and the School Violence Inventory (SVI) (Gumpel, 2008). Their study distinguished two types of defender - the *opposers* (who challenged the bully) and the *help-recruiters* (who got help for the victim from friends, other bystanders or adults). The researchers noted that, while this kind of defender action did not necessarily stop the bullying, it at least provided emotional support for the victim. They also identified two onlooker roles – the *passive bystander* who was perceived by others as offering tacit approval for the bully, and the *disengaged outsider* who indicated awareness of the bullying situation but refrained from taking pro-social action. The researchers found a causal link between *outsiders* and *opposers*, suggesting that that this category of disengaged bystander was potentially open to adopting a defender participant role, given the right circumstances. In fact, they identified potential pathways from

disengaged onlooker through to *upstander*.

Levy and Gumpel (2018) suggest that, instead of talking about participant roles, it is more helpful to have the concept of "bullying circles". Here the followers of the bully actively engage in the bullying but do not initiate the attack. The supporters (passive bullies) encourage the bully. The passive supporters side with the aggressor but do not openly support him/her. The defender actively and openly assists the victim. This differs from the participant role approach in two ways: first, the bullying circle consists of two additional intervention styles: *passive supporters/possible aggressors* and *possible defenders*; secondly, the bullying circle approach portrays the participant roles as intervention *styles* situated on a continuum around the aggressor-victim dyad, rather than binary and independent individual traits. In other words, the intervention styles are fluid. The outsider participant role is portrayed by two separate constructs: *outsider* role (the original as portrayed by Salmivalli) and *neutral outsider* who potentially might be a mediator or third party who helps to resolve the conflict. From this perspective, both outsider and passive bystander portray passive involvement but they may differ in the extent of their provictim or proaggressor behavioural style. In other words, Levy and Gumpel (2018) consider these as separate constructs.

Similarly, the defender role has two separate constructs. Firstly, the original *defender* role (see Salmivalli) defends openly and directly either by opposing the aggressor or encouraging the victim. Secondly, indirect behaviours may be crucial since often adolescents find it hard to ask for help. A new dimension of help-seeker demonstrates behaviour that seeks out help for the victim without drawing the aggressor's attention, e.g. asking adults, friends or relatives for help. In other words, these roles are not fixed but lie on a continuum and are fluid and changeable.

There are strong implications for practice giving strength to whole-school interventions which positively support pro-victim action in practice and which neutralise the effect of the passive bystanders (as confirmed in the earlier study by Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli & Cowie, 2003).

Despite differences in the interpretation of the concept of participant role, there is widespread agreement that it is essential to recruit some of

the bystanders to provide moral and emotional support for their school mates who are being attacked whether psychologically or physically by their peers. Similarly, defenders need training, including training in peer support, in order to act effectively on their feelings of concern for the suffering of a peer and their willingness to work collaboratively in the peer group to resolve conflicts.

Without understanding the complexity of the peer group and the dynamics of social contexts in which bullying and other conflicts take place, interventions are much less likely to succeed. This is the case at school level (Sellman et al., 2014) and at university level (Cowie & Myers, 2016). Participant role theory has had a strong influence on research into the prevention of school bullying and has evolved into a whole-school anti-bullying program, KiVa, that incorporates peer support as part of its curriculum and which is successfully used in all schools in Finland.

A focus on upstanding lies at the heart of training schemes such as the Anti-bullying Ambassadors. In this context, Collett (2016) discusses the value of training large numbers of students in a school as a way of empowering the peer group to take positive action against bullying when it occurs. The bullying circles concept has also been incorporated into bystander training interventions in UK universities as documented by UUK (2017; 2019).

4.3 Promoting resilience in children and young people

Increasing focus on the development of resilience in children and young people has influenced the practice of peer support (Ungar, 2019). For example, in the context of cyberbullying, digital resilience is "a state of being aware of the positives and negatives of the internet, having awareness of yourself, your emotions and feelings, and having coping mechanisms in place to be able to bounce back from negative situations" (Collett, 2016, p. 10). In this context, Collett (2016) discusses ways of building digital resilience through the curriculum for all students and so, indirectly, helping those who potentially might become the targets of

online bullying, and, at the same time, empowering the peer group to take positive action against cyberbullying when it occurs. There is evidence that peer support systems are most effective when they are integrated into other pastoral care systems in the school (Sellman et al., 2014) and also when they keep up to date with new developments in young people's lives, such as the increased reliance on social media.

Because of their familiarity with the social networking sites popular with young people in their peer group, peer supporters have the potential to play a key part in any intervention to alleviate the distress caused by cyberbullying (Schultze-Krumbholtz et al., 2015). Smith, Thompson, Jessel, Kožuchova, Ferreira, Idriceanu, Menesini, Miklosz and de Villanueva (2019), in their evaluation of the effect of a cybermentoring intervention in six European countries, found a positive impact in all the schools involved and highly recommend its implementation in the future.

Cefai et al. (2018) construe resilience as a dynamic transactional process between the individual and his/her social context and emphasize how particular *individual qualities*, such as self-efficacy, problem-solving, optimism, agency and *social processes*, such as the availability of peer and adult support systems and child-centred policies, potentially interact to facilitate the healthy development and personal growth of children and young people observing or experiencing adversity in their lives. From this perspective, resilience is a quality that can be nurtured from a young age by helping children to develop qualities and attitudes that enhance personal relationships in the peer group as well as a concern for those who may be experiencing difficulties in their lives (Ungar, 2019).

As Cefai (2018) points out in his cross-national study based in Malta, resilience evolves as part of an interactive process that emerges in response to adversity. That is why, he argues, it is so important to give children learning experiences that provide them with competencies to deal with social and emotional difficulties as they arise. Having these tools to address challenges in everyday life will strengthen children's *potential* ability to overcome adversity and thrive, and their knowledge about where to seek out help when the pressures are too great to be dealt with alone.

Research into the perspectives of peer supporters consistently shows

that they develop qualities of resilience in the process of helping others; they also learn to be realistic about their own power to help as well as the times to seek out help from others; furthermore, in schools with active peer support schemes in place, the whole ethos of the school is experienced as being more positive and cooperative (Cowie & Smith, 2010). Research that evaluates the impact of training young people to be upstanders is still at an early stage, but preliminary findings are encouraging. As we have seen, research by Levy and Gumpel (2018) indicates that there is potential for movement from one participant role (or intervention strategy) to another which offers interesting possibilities for future research and practice.

Another example comes from the literature on peace-making in schools. Johnson and Johnson (2014) in the context of *peace-making* for both users and peer supporters, provide evidence of the benefits of peer mediation programs that are taught as part of a whole-school policy towards violence and bullying. The benefits, as documented over an evaluation period of 12 years, are impressive. One important outcome is that students and their teachers come to a shared understanding of how conflicts might be managed through a process of negotiation and mediation. A second is that, once students have experienced the peace-making process as it applies to their own conflicts with others, they become more skilled at recognizing conflict and its possible resolution when they observe it in others. Thirdly, students often transfer these skills to their homes and into the community. Overall, students become more confident at taking situations of conflict into their own hands and resolving them without the support of adults.

These findings are confirmed by Bickmore (2014), who found, in her study of peer mediation in primary schools, positive social and emotional outcomes for those students who had frequent opportunities to practise, communicate about and implement conflict resolution in relation to simple disputes, as well as more complex examples of social exclusion and prejudice, including homophobia, sexism and racism. Similarly, Schultze-Krumbholz et al. (2015) targeted cyberbullying at different levels in the school – working with individual bullies and victims, developing materials for the whole class and linking out to the families. They found that at the individual level, training enhanced social and

personal skills and encouraged perspective-taking and the development of empathy for others' suffering. At classroom level, well-designed materials focused on fostering positive attitudes and challenging bystander apathy. At family level, students applied their new skills and strategies to mediate in family disputes. Studies like these confirm the importance of giving children and young people a variety of opportunities to listen to one another and to experience in a direct way the positive aspects of pro-social behavior and the possibilities of alternatives to violence and aggression.

4.4 Connectedness

Innovative research in Australia (McLoughlin, Spears, & Taddio, 2018) indicates the crucial role of a *sense of connectedness* in helping adolescents to manage their own peer relationships. The young people in this study who reported that they felt socially and emotionally connected to their peer group had better mental health and showed a greater capacity to use active coping strategies when they experienced bullying or cyberbullying. The less peer support that they had, both offline and online, the greater their sense of loneliness and low self-efficacy.

Taking the concept of connectedness further in the educational lifespan, we find a similar pattern among university students in the UK (UUK, 2019) where there is growing recognition of the need to challenge bystander apathy by changing the culture on campus in order to foster a greater sense of inclusion among groups which are at particular risk of being bullied and socially excluded. When students feel that they belong to the university community, they are less vulnerable to bullying and sexual harassment. Similarly, in Canada, McBeath, Drysdale and Bohn (2018) found a strong relationship between a sense of belonging and peer support. Students' perceived sense of connectedness to their peer groups and to the university community, as well as access to high quality peer support when needed, was significantly related to overall mental health and well-being, especially as they made the transition to work-placements and the employment market.

As we have seen, many current peer support schemes aim to intervene

with help for individual victims of bullying and cyberbullying; additionally, they often aspire to change the culture of the school. Their prime aim is not to change the behaviour of the bullies, but once the school climate has changed to one that values peaceful resolution of bullying and violence, the behaviour of bullies and their supporters is likely to be modified (Hopkins, 2004; Johnson & Johnson, 2014; Schultze-Krumbholtz et al., 2015).

4.5 Convivencia: A perspective from Spain

Peer support has been adapted to a wide range of contexts in different cultures, often at the point where educators in different countries become aware of the critical role that schools and universities play in tackling social issues and facilitating the mental health of students. In Spain, there is widespread use by educators and policymakers of *convivencia* as a whole school approach that emphasizes harmony and cooperation in the school community. *Convivencia* involves the active sharing of space and time in a community where relationships matter and there is a shared concern to develop a collective climate of emotional well-being (Andrés & Barrios, 2006; Avilés, 2018). In this way, each school must develop, implement and regularly update its *Plan de Convivencia*. This involves all the agreements and actions that the educational community has designed, debated and adopted through dialogue and collaboration to address and prevent conflict and bullying. This process leads to a peaceful and healthy *convivencia*.

As Avilés (2018) has argued, in schools where *convivencia* underpins the core values of the organization, there exists a context that advocates the equal rights of all members of the school community to live and work together. This kind of social environment actively promotes the mental health and well-being of students and teachers alike. This is the ideal environment in which peer supporters can help fellow students who are being bullied and befriend classmates who are rejected or neglected by the peer group and so excluded from the life of the school.

In recent years, one of the most important strategies that has been developed through these plans has been the active involvement of the

students in the management of their own *convivencia*, making them positive actors in the solution of conflicts or bullying. In the case of peer abuse, the most widely used form of peer support has been that of helping the people who are directly involved in the incidents.

Following this, Avilés proposes a collective model of peer support called *Help Teams* (Avilés, Torres, & Vián, 2008; Avilés, Cowie, & Alonso, 2019) that enhances the effectiveness and training of the *team* for decision-making. This strengthens the individual components of the team as they provide help to those who need it. This method counteracts the risk of:

- the lack of initiative or moral authority of certain individuals within the group;
- excessive influence of one individual through team regulation;
- some individuals finding the task overwhelming.

In this way, since the *Help Teams* reinforce one another and act together in a shared task, complementing one another's skills, it is easier to renew and participate in this type of network than it would be for individuals acting alone. This model is now being implemented successfully in various Latin American countries (Avilés & Petta, 2018).

Plate 4.1 Equipos de ayuda (peer support)
(Reproduced with permission from Prof José María Avilés Martínez, University of Valladolid)

Plate 4.2 Help Teams during the training days (Reproduced with permission from Prof José María Avilés Martínez, University of Valladolid)

Clearly, the students who are part of the *Help Teams* and other networks need appropriately structured training, to include:

- Learning to present oneself, developing self-awareness and mutual awareness of others;
- Learning about conflict and steps in its resolution;
- Learning about communication, emotions, empathy and assertiveness;
- Learning about team decision-making and the process of reaching consensus;
- Practising these processes through discussion and role play;
- Celebration, applause and recognition. On completion of the training, all participants receive a certificate.

In order to sustain the momentum, it is necessary that the leadership adopts the roles of trainer, maintainer, guide and supervisor. To this end, many schools have developed structures for the creation of *convivencia* groups for the *teachers*, often named the *Convivencia Team*. These teams, also based on the principles of *convivencia*, facilitate reflection on the social and emotional wellbeing of students and their supportive learning

environments. At institutional level, there is recognition of the importance of the values of experiencing *convivencia* that are so necessary for future democratic citizenship.

In the case of cybermentors, Avilés (2019) describes two main tasks: *educational*: providing information to all students about the nature of cyberbullying and the practical and technical ways in which it can be addressed; and *psychological*: providing emotional support to those who are targets of cyberbullying, helping to reduce their anxiety and fear, directing them towards professional counselling in extreme cases, supporting victims as they build up their own capacity for digital resilience. The training advocated by Avilés (2019) involves such useful content as: the provision of supervision for the management of difficult cases; training exercises in self-regulation during situations of conflict; planning of strategies to counteract aggressive online behaviour; the capacity to evaluate the effectiveness or otherwise of the interventions being practised.

4.6 Building safer school communities: A perspective from Japan

In Japan, peer support is also considered as a crucial part of a wider social structure. Cowie and James (2016) identified three strands in the forms that peer support takes in Japan:

Peer support to nurture a positive climate in the whole school: here peer support focuses on the whole school community and involves training all students in positive interpersonal skills through group activities, such as school trips, drama projects, campaigns to clean the neighborhood, gardening projects and peer tutoring to help students with literacy issues. The aim is to create a caring school community.

Peer support to allay group fears and anxieties: This approach involves social skills training for the whole school to encourage good interaction with others. It also involves the training of older students to work with younger students who may be experiencing difficulties. Much of the work of the peer supporters is concerned with writing newsletters, participating in greetings campaigns to welcome new students and taking

part in school assemblies where common problems, such as bullying, are addressed and solutions suggested. This approach does not involve direct face-to-face support. The problems will have been elicited from fellow students through anonymous post-boxes to ensure the confidentiality of the individual experiencing the problem.

Peer support to allay individual fears and anxieties: a very few schemes involve peer supporters being trained in active listening skills and working one-to-one or in small groups with children who are experiencing social and emotional difficulties at school. Alternatively, peer supporters help individual fellow students via a confidential email service where letters are answered without the peer supporter knowing the identity of the individual seeking help.

Plate 4.3 Japanese peer supporters' greetings campaign. (Reproduced with permission from Dr Hideo Kato)

In Japan, with its more hierarchical educational system, peer support programs are increasingly being developed in response to concerns about students' emotional health and well-being. In contrast to Western peer support schemes, Japanese peer support often involves group sessions where problems are read out in public and solutions offered. Here the identity of the person in need is protected but there is no direct face-to-face emotional support as there would be in peer support systems in the

West (Kanetsuna & Toda, 2016). At university level, peer support schemes are being developed with the aim of enhancing peer relationships and building a sense of community. Some of these schemes focus directly on cyberbullyig by facilitating a range of opportunities to seek out help. The success of these interventions has led to the development of such schemes in over half of the universities in Japan, with every sign that their uptake is on the increase (Kanayama & Kurihara, 2019).

One of the most consistent findings in research into peer support in Japan has been the strong emphasis on confidentiality and anonymity, especially where students are the victims of bullying which, in Japan, often takes the form of *ijime*, or social exclusion from the group. Given the importance of being part of a group in Japanese schools, those who experience *ijime* are deeply ashamed and humiliated which explains the widespread use of anonymous forms of advice-giving, so typical of peer support as practised in Japan. Similarly, peer support that involves training for all students in a class in social skills is especially suited to the Japanese culture. In the case where *ijime* has occurred, the advantage of this group approach is that bystanders, bullies and victims will all be involved in the social skills training.

Kanetsuna and Toda (2016) indicate the great value of the Question and Answer (Q&A) Method through which students write their concerns anonymously on a piece of paper using a pen-name and post them into a designated postbox which is only opened by the teachers responsible for the peer support scheme. The teachers read the letters and decide which ones should be handed to the peer supporters to resolve. The peer supporters then discuss the problem and write their replies on the basis of their own experiences and training. Finally, the letters and peer supporters' replies are printed out in a newsletter and distributed to the whole school or read out in assemblies. The aim is to nurture an ethos of mutual support in the whole school community rather than draw attention to the personal issues of individuals. One outcome of this method, as reported by Kanetsuna and Toda (2016), has been to enhance the confidence of the peer supporters who take part and to encourage many more students to volunteer to become involved in other anti-bullying schemes in their school.

Chapter 5. The Benefits and Disadvantages of Peer Support

5.1 Shortcomings

Peer support systems vary so greatly in the forms that they take that it is not surprising to discover that opinions about their effectiveness are mixed. The shortcomings of peer support, as identified by research studies, are discussed in detail by Cowie and Smith (2010) and by Thompson and Smith (2011). For example, there is evidence that some educators are understandably doubtful about the capacity of children and young people to provide the skilled support that a trained psychologist or counsellor would be able to offer (Cowie & Smith, 2010). This reflects a misunderstanding of the peer supporters' role. Peer supporters have a unique insight into the dynamics of their own peer group but their work should never replace that of the trained professional and it is essential for coordinators of peer support schemes to be aware of the limitations of their peer support scheme. All the evidence indicates that peer support is most effective when it is part of a wider whole-institution policy on the emotional health and well-being of the students. Thompson and Smith (2011) noted some evidence of under-use of peer support services by a minority of pupils and of sabotage (presumably by disaffected pupils who do the bullying).

Ttofi and Farrington (2011), on the basis of an extensive meta-analysis of interventions to reduce or prevent bullying, concluded that there was very little evidence that peer support methods were effective. Most of the commendations, they claimed, came from subjective reports by teachers or the peer supporters themselves. They concluded that "work with peers" should not be used to reduce or prevent bullying. Such a conclusion, in my view, greatly undervalues the lived experience of peer supporters and of those who use their service. However, it is also important to acknowledge the critiques of peer support as an intervention to counteract the effects of bullying. Some suggestions appear in the final section of this chapter.

5.2 Evidence of benefits

At the same time, there is a body of evidence indicating the value of a whole range of peer support systems, provided that they are well-organized and supervised by adults. For one thing, research consistently shows that peer support systems *are* valued by most student users as well as potential users and perceived by teachers and students alike as enhancing the whole emotional climate of the school. Smith, Salmivalli and Cowie (2012), in a critique of Ttofi and Farrington (2011), pointed out the value of defender training as developed in the KiVa program which showed that well-designed peer support systems educate students to take responsibility for their own actions and train them in important mediation skills to defuse conflict. Research indicates too that peer supporters feel more respect and worth in their role if they are engaged and can put their skills to use. The dangers are, for example, that no-one comes to 'buddy benches' in the playground, or peer counselling rooms in the school, through fear of being stigmatized; or that peer supporters get given more routine tasks when assigned to tutor groups to befriend vulnerable pupils. Such under-use or misuse can be avoided. Peer befrienders and supporters can play a more active role in organizing games and activities, or lunchtime clubs, which can be attractive to many pupils while still allowing timid or bullied children to get support in a less obvious way. Schemes can make use of a school intranet or can be geared widely to support in a range of areas (academic as well as interpersonal), to avoid risks of stigmatizing those seeking help.

Most users of peer support systems report satisfaction at the service they receive; even those who do not actually use the system report that its presence makes them more secure. One well-established research finding is the benefit of peer support systems for the peer supporters *themselves.* There is evidence for improved self-esteem; increased social and communication skills; greater empathy; and a sense of responsibility and doing something worthwhile in the school (Cowie & Smith, 2010). For example, Houlston and Smith (2009), in their study of the impact of a peer counselling scheme in an all-girl London school, confirmed findings from previous research that *peer supporters* gained in self-esteem by

participating in the scheme. The researchers put this down to the positive impact on young people of engaging altruistically in pro-social activities.

In answer to the criticism that peer support schemes on their own do not reduce or prevent bullying, Smith, Salmivalli and Cowie (2012) argued that the schemes are not designed to target bullies but to help victims once the bullying has taken place. The criticism, however, should not be dismissed, since children who bully are also, like their victims, at high risk of mental health difficulty. The skills learned and practised by peer supporters could, with the right training and support, target the perpetrators too. On balance, however, evidence indicates many benefits derived from the presence of a well-planned and well-supervised peer support scheme, provided that it is integrated into other systems of pastoral care and anti-bullying policies in the school. The critiques are helpful in guiding the evolution of peer support over time and across cultures.

Plate 5.1 Helping hands
(Source: Vectorfair.com/Shutterstock.com)

Chapter 6. Challenging Collective Moral Disengagement

According to Salmivalli (2014), the most common participant role is that of the *outsider* – the onlooker who remains passive as a bystander of bullying and does not stand up for the victim. These young people demonstrate the characteristic of *individual* moral disengagement. Zych and Llorent (2018) found a significant negative correlation between affective empathy and bullying perpetration and significant correlations between all the mechanisms of moral disengagement (such as justifying the behaviour, minimizing its effects on the target, and distorting the consequences for the victim) and bullying perpetration. Gini, Thornberg and Pozzoli (2020) identified a further influential factor in bystanding – the presence of perceived *collective* moral disengagement. Bystander apathy in the face of bullying, they argue, is more likely when students are *personally* inclined to moral disengagement and when they *also* believe that morally disengaged justifications are common in their peer group. This argument holds at all levels of the educational lifespan (Myers & Cowie, 2019).

Gini et al. (2020) found a negative link between individual moral disengagement and reported moral distress at the sight of a victimized peer. However, this was significantly moderated by the students' perceptions of *collective* moral disengagement. Their study confirms the view that the response of the bystanders to a situation where someone needs help (as in the case of bullying) is strongly influenced by the social context in which the episode happens. If the expectation is that no-one will intervene to help, the effect on the individual is to remain passive. Their findings, of course, confirm the classic research on the unresponsive bystander by Latané and Darley (1970), who investigated the impact of bystander apathy in the face of a disturbing event and explained the phenomenon as being due to fear about stepping out of line when surrounded by a group of people who refrain from intervening to help.

Graeff (2014), in the context of cyberbullying and moral reasoning,

recommends that educators aim to model thinking processes and strategies that can lead to *upstanding* behaviour. He notes that the "natural" response to an ethical dilemma, such as cyberbullying, is to look out for yourself or your friends. However, if the school takes a stance against online discrimination and social exclusion, and backs this up with relevant information as well as opportunities to draw parallels and prompt reflection on different outcomes, then these are the conditions in which upstanding is likely to flourish.

Following in-depth interviews with adolescents, Patterson, Allan and Cross (2016) identified the need to take young people's perceptions into account by inviting them non-judgmentally to explore a range of possible bystander responses and to analyse the extent of moral engagement or disengagement in different situations. This process would also involve challenging bullies' mechanisms for justifying moral disengagement (Zych & Llorent, 2018), such as euphemistic language ("it was only in fun"), distorting the consequences ("they'll soon get over it") or blaming the victim ("they have no right to be here so deserved it.").

Typical training in peer support involves role-play and scenarios which provide experiential opportunities to practise interventions and to reflect on the consequences. These situations build on peer supporters' capacity to take the perspective of another person and to develop further their empathy for others in distress. The experience of helping others in real-life situations further fosters their capacity to act prosocially though positive bystander intervention.

Consequently, peer supporters are more likely to intervene to help a victim in the face of perceived *collective moral disengagement*, not only because their training and experience has heightened their sense of moral responsibility for the welfare of others, but also because they feel empowered *as a group* to challenge bullying when they encounter it, knowing that their fellow peer supporters will back them up.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

The fact that peer support systems are in process of evolving over time makes them especially difficult to investigate. Future research directions could focus on more rigorous evaluations of the impact of specific types of peer support on the wider context of whole-school or whole-institution anti-bullying policies. The most recent concern about cyberbullying could facilitate a new wave of research into the role of peers in addressing this issue. The development of child participatory methods of research could also harness the energy of peer supporters to document their lived experience of implementing peer support in different contexts. This would include the evaluation of online platforms where issues such as cyberbullying might be discussed in confidence (Smith et al., 2019). This could also provide insights into the different forms of peer support that have developed in different cultural contexts across the world. This would not only include evaluations of changes in behaviour but also changes in young people's moral and ethical values over time. It would be useful to find out more about the long-term impact of peer support on the culture of a school over time by using techniques and measurements like those developed by Gini et al. (2020).

As we have seen, there is evidence too, mostly of a qualitative nature, that over time, peer support has an impact on the social climate of the school. Although peer support is not directly targeted at those who bully, there are consistent qualitative reports from schools where peer support is an active part of the pastoral care system that the emotional ethos of the school changes for the better. Current findings about the phenomenon of moral disengagement indicate that the presence or absence of moral distress in the face of a peer's suffering is a significant component in bystander behaviour. This view is also confirmed by the research of Levy and Gumpel (2018) indicating that the participant roles are potentially fluid. Such findings confirm the need for some form of moral education to be a core part of the curriculum with opportunities for students to develop a moral stance through engagement in activities that promote empathy and concern for the well-being of others, whether in the immediate peer group or in the wider community.

The evidence presented in this chapter indicates that the presence of a peer support system offers practical and emotional guidance to victims of bullying and cyberbullying. Given the extensive evidence from earlier studies of the impact of peer support training on the young people who take part, there is a case for arguing that peer supporters should be given additional training on how to challenge bullies and bystander apathy as well as the more traditional forms of training in active listening and empathy. A range of different strategies is essential if schools and their pupils are to be successful in the on-going effort to create and sustain social and learning environments that are friendly and safe. There may also be an argument for the training to be carried out with all students in a school, as has been shown with peer mediation training, and training in upstanding, where results indicate that as the number of peer supporters grows so the violence and bullying declines. The challenge is how to utilize this pool of altruistic help and how to support and supervise the peer supporters as they adapt to a rapidly changing society.

Peer support is an intervention that, over the years, has consistently demonstrated its power to challenge moral disengagement and actively promote pro-social values in the school community. As we have seen, peer support is a difficult concept for researchers to capture and investigate. As Fitzpatrick and Bussey (2018) argue, there is a need for future researchers to examine more closely the link between peer friendships and moral values. As their research indicates, adolescents are more likely to engage in bullying when their best friend justifies bullying behaviours. Conversely, adolescents are also influenced by their best friend's moral disengagement to engage in reprehensible behaviours, such as bullying and cyberbullying. Research like this confirms the view that adolescents who adopt similar participant roles in bullying associate with one another, so perpetuating the behaviour within that role. However, as we saw in Chapter 4, movement between roles is also possible, as research into the impact of social interventions like the Anti-Bullying Ambassadors suggests where the whole culture of the peer group is targeted.

The research by DeSmet et al. (2016) and others seems to confirm the need to create many opportunities for children and young people to develop empathy for the distress of others (for example, through role play,

story-telling, drama, active involvement in peer support activity). It would appear that educators who devise anti-bullying interventions should take account of the powerful impact of the immediate social context on young people's capacity for empathy and altruism, and the many opportunities to develop positive outcome expectations, social skills, empathic skills and the capacity for moral engagement in the social life of the school and community.

The experiences of practitioners, peer supporters and researchers in this field indicate how important it is to integrate peer support services into a wider system for promoting inclusion and developing empathy for others' distress.

It takes moral courage to stand up to bullying but the presence of just a few peer supporters can motivate others to follow. That way, the school culture can be changed. Peer support from this perspective, and in all its diversity, has a critical part to play in the fostering of positive social relationships during the lifespan transitions from childhood, through adolescence into young adulthood.

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Peer support has the potential to foster positive social relationships during the lifespan transitions from childhood, through adolescence into young adulthood. In *Peer Support in School* Professor Cowie discusses the range of ways in which peer supporters can not only offer emotional help to children and young people who are the targets of bullying or cyberbullying but can also facilitate change in the social and emotional climate of their school, college, or university. Both evidence-based practice and theoretical aspects of peer support are reviewed here to support the argument that peer support has a key role to play in the creation of safe social environments where there is a concern to promote fairness, inclusiveness, and justice for all.