Prejudice-related bullying and behaviour

_____
_

Definition

The term prejudice-related bullying refers to a range of hurtful behaviour, physical or emotional or both, which causes someone to feel powerless, worthless, excluded or marginalised, and which is connected with prejudices around belonging, identity and equality in wider society – in particular, prejudices to do with

- disabilities and special educational needs

- ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds

- gender

- home life, for example in relation to issues of care, parental occupation, poverty and social class

- sexual identity.

Key features of prejudice-related bullying in schools

The following aspects of prejudice-related bullying should be borne in mind:

- Pupils at the receiving end experience great distress. They may become fearful, depressed and lacking in self-confidence, and reluctant to attend school. Their progress at school may be severely damaged. Their distress is connected with feelings of being left out, invisible, excluded, unvalued, rejected.

- Those who engage or collude in bullying develop a false pride in their own superiority.

- Teachers and even parents are sometimes not aware of the miseries that are being inflicted, or of the cruelty that is being perpetrated.

- Girls and boys engage in bullying in different ways.

- When dealing with incidents, staff must attend to a) the needs, feelings and wishes of pupils at the receiving end b) the needs, feelings and wishes of their parents and carers c) the children and young people principally responsible for the bullying d) any supporters they have and e) any bystanders and witnesses.

- Prejudices have a long history affecting millions of people and are a common feature in wider society. People are seriously harmed and injured by them, and sometimes even viciously attacked and murdered. Words such Spotty, Ginger, Fatty and Four Eyes are seldom used by adults and seldom if ever used by adults to justify offensive behaviour. Forms of prejudice-related bullying, however, are associated with discrimination in employment and the provision of services, and with a range of criminal offences. Children and young children do not, it follows, necessarily 'grow out of' them.

- There is tacit or even explicit support for certain prejudices in the tabloid press, in radio phone-in programmes and in some television. In particular there is support for prejudices against Muslim people, Travellers and Gypsies, people seeking asylum, and people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual.

- The distinctive feature of a prejudice-related attack or insult is that a person is attacked or insulted not as an individual, as in most other offences, but as the representative of a family, community or group. Other members of the same group, family or community are in consequence made to feel threatened and intimidated as well. So it is not just the pupil who is attacked who feels unwelcome or marginalised. 'When they call me a Paki,' explains nine-year-old Sereena, 'it's not just me they're hurting. It's all my family and all other black people too.'

- Or for example all women are intimidated if a single woman is attacked in a lonely place; all disabled people feel threatened and reluctant to go out into public spaces when they hear of an attack on a single disabled individual; all gay, lesbian and bisexual people have their liberty of movement curtailed by an attack on an individual who is believed to be non-heterosexual.

- Prejudice-related words and behaviour are experienced as attacks on the values, loyalties and commitments central to a person's sense of identity and self-worth. Often, therefore, they hurt not only more widely but also more deeply. 'They attack me for being an Arab,' remarks Ahmed. 'But I'm an Arab because my father is an Arab, and I love my father. Do they think I should stop loving my father? I couldn't do that, ever.' In an analogous way attacks on gay, lesbian or bisexual people are experienced as attacks not only on one person but also on friends, lovers and partners, and the LGBT community more generally.

- Prejudice-related attacks are committed not only against a community but also, in the eyes of offenders themselves, on behalf of a community – they see themselves as 'normal', and as representative of, and supported in their behaviour by, their friends, family and peer group, and they may well feel it is right and proper to take the law into their own hands.

- Quite apart from whether those responsible see themselves as representatives of their own community, taking the law into their own hands, this is how they may be seen by those at the receiving end. So a disabled child, for example, may then fear and distrust all non-disabled people, not just those who engage in bullying.

- Most bullying or harassment involves a series of incidents over time. In the case of prejudice-related bullying, however, a single one-off incident may have precisely the same impact as a series of incidents over time. This is because it may be experienced by the person at the receiving end as part of a general pattern of prejudiced hostility. It can in consequence be every bit as intimidating, rejecting and hurtful as a series of events over time.

- In the case of homophobic bullying, the person under attack may or may not be gay, lesbian or bisexual, or may be uncertain about their sexuality. Coming out to a teacher about their sexuality or uncertainty may be stressful and the response by the teacher may require substantial sensitivity to give appropriate support and advice.

Approaches to bullying and harassment in schools

There are four broad approaches to dealing with bullying and harassment: 1) dismissive 2) punitive 3) corrective and 4) transformative. These are discussed below.

Approach 1
Dismissive

Ignoring or making light of an incidentis seldom if ever appropriate. It permits the pupil principally responsible for the bullying — and also his or her friends and associates, and any witnesses and bystanders — to assume there's nothing wrong with their behaviour. The behaviour may therefore be repeated.

Also, and even more seriously, this approach gives no support to the pupil(s) at the receiving end. They may in consequence assume teachers and the school generally are indifferent to issues of prejudice and hostility in the school and in society, and will not bother to complain if there are further incidents. They may feel further that the school does not care for them, does not understand their experiences and perceptions, does not see them as fully belonging. Feelings of being excluded and worthless, caused by the bullying, will then be exacerbated, and a picture builds up of the whole school being insensitive and uncaring.

Approach 2
Punitive

Children and young people responsible for bullying and any onlookers must be in no doubt that their behaviour is unacceptable, and children and young people at the receiving end of bullying must similarly be in no doubt they are supported by the school. But if expressions of disapproval and punishments are used in isolation, and not complemented by teaching and learning about the reasons why prejudice-related bullying is wrong, they may feed bitterness and a sense of not being understood. Such bitterness may then be expressed elsewhere, away from the school's awareness.

Approach 3
Corrective

It is important that teachers should explain why prejudice is wrong, and that they should correct ignorant views and prejudices with facts, statistics and rational arguments. This is likely to involve deconstructing specific lines of thought, pointing out contradictions and inconsistencies, and showing that even when a factual statement is true ('They own all the corner shops round here') it does not logically justify harassment, abuse or violence. Also, it is likely to involve challenging over-generalisations.

But like expressions of disapproval and punishments, intellectual arguments may feed bitterness and a sense of not being understood. Pupils may feel an increased sense of personal inferiority and powerlessness, and greater resentment of authority. They may become *more* prejudiced in their attitudes and behaviour rather than less. They may then be readily attracted to claims by organisations such as the British National Party and by some newspapers that the country is being destroyed by 'the political correctness brigade'

Approach 4
Transformative

In general terms, the primary objectives of a transformative approach are to:

- attend fully to the emotional and social needs of those who are at the receiving end of bullying, and of those who are close to them

- prevent re–offending by enabling offenders to assume active responsibility for their actions and by reintegrating them into the school community

- avoid escalation, and mounting expense of time and energy

- repair and recreate the community that has been damaged by the bullying, with a view to making it more active in preventing further bullying in the future.

The essential purpose of the transformative approach is to put right the wrongs and harms that have been caused. It does this by:

- focusing on the harms and consequent needs of those at the receiving end, as well as also the harms and needs of the community and of offenders

- addressing the obligations that arise from those harms, particularly the obligations of the offender and of the wider community

- using inclusive, collaborative processes

- involving all stakeholders, including not only those at the receiving end and those responsible, but also parents and friends, audiences and bystanders, and the wider community.

The differences between punitive and transformative approaches are shown in the table below.

Differences between punitive justice and transformative justice

Key questions	Punitive justice	Restorative justice
What is crime?	A violation of the law and the state	A violation of people and relationships
What do violations create?	Guilt	Needs and obligations
What should be the central focus?	Offenders getting what they deserve	The needs of those who have been hurt and the obligations of offenders to repair harm
What does justice require?	That those who are guilty should be identified and punished.	That victims, offenders and the community should work together to put things right

Source: adapted slightly from Howard Zehr (2002) *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*.

When designing and using transformative approaches to prejudice-related bullying, harassment and abuse, it is relevant to bear in mind the following points.

- Prejudiced beliefs and behaviour in young people have their sources in anxieties about identity and territory, and in desires to belong to a sub-culture of peers or a gang where racism, sexism, homophobia and hostility towards disabled people are some (but usually not all) of the principal features.

- Those who are responsible, it follows, often operate as a group rather than as single individuals, and teachers need to engage not only with those most obviously responsible but also with witnesses, bystanders, audiences and supporters.

- Teachers should show they understand the anxieties and desires which children and young people have around identity, belonging and self-esteem, and do their best to engage with these.

- All pupils should be involved in dealing with prejudice-related incidents, for example through peer mediation activities. It is not just a matter for adults.

- Both as individuals and as staffs, teachers need to have a shared philosophy about the nature of a diverse society, and about how to deal with conflicts, controversies and difference in such a society.

- There should be attention to preventing and reducing prejudice-related bullying through the curriculum (particularly but by no means only the citizenship and PSHE curriculum) and in a school's overall ethos.

_____
_