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Implementing the Support Group Method in Switzerland From www.luckyduck.co.uk



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Since 1995 I've conducted countless school-based and other professional development workshops for teachers, educational psychologists and school social workers in Switzerland and have talked to many groups of parents about bullying in schools. For the past six years, I've also been directly intervening in bullying situations in the school in which I now work as a trouble shooter. During this time, I've learned a lot about bullying, about victims, about bullies and about bystanders ("enablers").

My message in these workshops and lectures is simple: (1) Bullying occurs in this school; (2) Bullying is distressing, especially for the victim; and (3) Bullying situations can (and must) be resolved. Through my workshops, lectures and direct interventions, I challenge the capitulation and helplessness that too often accompanies the bullying dynamic. (My psychologist colleague, Jacqueline Schmid, has been engaging in similar work over the same period.)

Although the necessity for systematic violence prevention initiatives in Swiss schools has been recognized since the 1990's and a new word "mobbing" has been found to describe what English speakers have always known as "bullying", many adults who work in schools are unsure about whether (and how) they should (and can) deal with bullying behaviour amongst their pupils. I still detect a tendency in some places to blame the victim for his or her predicament ("If he didn't behave so strangely, this wouldn't happen!") or to believe that learning to deal with bullying is a necessary developmental stage that we all pass through ("She just has to learn to assert herself better!"). And this from teachers as well as pupils!

Two important initiatives have helped however to raise awareness about bullying and its effects in Swiss schools. The leading Swiss bullying researcher, Professor Françoise Alsaker (Psychology Department at the University of Berne) and the film maker, Ruedi Welten have produced a very moving documentary film "Bullying Is Not Child's Play" ("Mobbing ist kein Kinderspiel") in which children and adolescents (bullies, victims and bystanders) explain their motivations and actions. The Swiss Teachers' Union arranged the translation into German of a wonderful Australian children's poster "Bullying: Spotting It, Stopping It" (from the Australian Psychological Society) and has distributed more than 20,000 copies free of charge to its members and other interested people. This poster is now also being distributed in Germany by Detlef Beck and Heike Blum, who also maintain the website www.no-blame-approach.de. A training video, in which a teacher, Lydia Sidler demonstrates her resolution of a bullying situation in her class of quite difficult adolescents, has added to the credibility of the "No Blame Approach"/"Support Group Method" amongst teachers.

The film, poster and video contribute to a heightened empathy in our Swiss audiences and thus fuel their desire to intervene effectively in bullying situations. Being a somewhat pragmatic folk, the Swiss are then keen to hear about and implement practical techniques to achieve their goals. The "No Blame Approach"/"Support Group Method", with its simple steps and focussed language, is well-received. The feedback that we get during the workshops and then later about successful interventions is very encouraging. But as with most solution-focussed interventions (of which I consider the "Support Group Method" to be one), it is simple, but not easy. The sophistication of the model can be overlooked and indeed misunderstood, which has probably led to the current controversy in England. In recent personal correspondence with Barbara Maines, I expressed my regret that the "No Blame

Approach" had become the "Support Group Method". For me, a "method" describes more a technique, whereas an "approach" denotes a way of seeing the world, from which specific actions can then be derived.

Perhaps I write from a Swiss cultural perspective, in which the need to apportion blame and to punish the perpetrators of bullying seems to be less strong here than in England. It doesn't require much to convince Swiss teachers that our prime goal should be to stop the bullying rather than to punish the bully, particularly when this could possibly lead to a worsening of the situation of the victim. Once the bullying stops, the need to punish dissolves. The implications of the difference between "stopping the bullying" and "punishing the bully" were first pointed out to me by Barbara Maines and George Robinson in a workshop they conducted in Switzerland a number of years ago. Their ideas found a resonance here then which we continue to feel.

In my experience, it is the combination of the two elements, "no blame" and "support group" which are responsible for the good results that we are achieving in Switzerland. The members of the support groups (particularly those in the roles of the bully or bystander) are motivated to engage in helpful behaviours (or at least desist from further bullying) when they hear that I intend to assist the person who is feeling distressed ("sad", "angry" and "desperate" are the most common feelings experienced by the victims), rather than prove the guilt of the perpetrators. It's a civilised process with civilising results.

"No blame" in Switzerland does not mean "no responsibility". On the contrary, it means full responsibility for one's actions in a school context in which physical, verbal or relational violence is by no means condoned. An intervention with the "No Blame Approach"/"Support Group Method" creates time and space for those involved in the dynamic to reflect on their previously aggressive and destructive behaviours, to "save face" and to publicly demonstrate restitution. (But without "naming and shaming".) This process is carefully supervised by responsible adults who can thus demonstrate that two important principles of violence prevention are being observed: (1) protection of the victim; and (2) undertaking actions which serve to reduce the probability of further assaults. My optimistic world view is continually being confirmed by the willingness of children and adolescents to turn away from their bullying behaviour. These are often very influential children who then learn to use their influence in a socially constructive manner. I watch many of them develop into very fine young adults.

In my experience, it is quite embarrassing for pupils involved in a bullying situation to have an adult drawing attention to their behaviour and demanding that this stops, and therefore calls for subtlety on the part of the adult, especially when dealing with the induced shame. Members of the support groups with which I have worked often express a strong desire to explain or justify their bullying behaviours, particularly in terms of something that the victim has done wrong. They realise that what they are doing is hurtful, but they argue that their behaviour is justified. Often they are very angry at the victim, also because he or she has reported the bullying. At first, they are often not particularly positively disposed to helping this person.

I overcome this initial resistance by saying to them at the beginning that it is *me* who has the problem and it is *me* who needs their help. My problem is that the victim is suffering and that some of our school rules (e.g. "All pupils and adults in our school have a right to feel safe and happy" and "I refrain from verbal and physical violence") are not being adhered to. I need the assistance of the group to solve this problem. Are they willing to help me? In this way, I deal very gently with their shame.

I find that those support group members who respect me as a person are willing to actively participate. I offer these a carrot, but I also carry a stick, so to speak. Those who have less

respect for me as a person are aware of the possibilities afforded me by my position in the school and are clever enough to realise that this gentle (but firm) intervention of mine is a chance for them to show restitution, otherwise the consequences of further bullying could be more drastic. But this is a perceived threat and remains unstated on my part. The bullies know what I'm saying without me having to say it. The success of the "No Blame Approach" (or "Support Group Method") relies on understatement and an engaged, assertive non-verbal style. I do not recommended it for "softies"!

On the basis of my own experience as well as of those of many course participants over the past decade who have reported on their own work with the "No Blame Approach"/"Support Group Method" in Switzerland, I can conclude the following:

- (1) It is my intervention of first choice, although I am prepared to intervene in other ways when the situation calls for it.
- (2) The victim and his or her parents must receive detailed information (also in written form) about the procedure and then give their consent.
- (3) The victim is assured that "we are not going to stop until the bullying stops".
- (4) The authority of the person leading the support group discussion is respected by the group members.
- (5) Although one expects success with the intervention, this is not 100% guaranteed and therefore a hierarchy of alternative interventions should be established before one begins.
- (6) The intervention should be embedded in a comprehensive bullying and violence prevention program of the school.

There will always be bullying in Swiss schools. Always has been. But with our current information campaigns and our training programs, I hope we can contribute to a greater sophistication in even more schools, enabling them to encourage the reporting of bullying behaviour and then guarantee the implementation of successful strategies to reduce the damage done. Without this security, the bullied pupils are reluctant to tell.

Unless we come under the same political pressure in Switzerland that is being applied in England, we probably won't allocate the resources to engage in systematic quantitative research to prove the effectiveness of the "No Blame Approach"/"Support Group Method" in Switzerland. That's because we know it already!

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