Peer bullying in a pre-registration student nursing population

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SUMMARY

Peer bullying is a major problem in schools and workplaces including the National Health Service. Although there are a few published studies exploring the incidence of peer bullying among university students, none is specific to pre-registration nursing students.

Nursing programmes are delivered across two campuses of the university however students registered at individual campuses do not mix which makes the experiences of each campus individual. The aim of this study was to explore the incidence and manifestation of peer bullying amongst pre-registration nursing students in the university setting. The study describes the reported incidence of the three types of peer bullying behaviour: physical, verbal and non-verbal bullying.

Participants in their final year of adult nurse education were asked to explore their perceptions of peer bullying, the frequency of witnessed or experienced behaviour and the location of where this behaviour occurred on the university campuses via a quantitative questionnaire. In total 190 students were surveyed with 156 (82%) responding. Participants reported peer bullying is experienced by student nurses on university premises and that academic members of staff are sometimes present when this behaviour is demonstrated. Reported levels of bullying decreased during their 2nd and 3rd years of the course compared to the foundation year. This decrease may have been in response to the university's strong anti-bullying stance.

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Introduction

Bullying is now recognised to be prevalent in schools (Olweus, 1984; Olweus, 1993; Olweus, 1994; Mellor, 1993; Banks, 1997; Pearce and Thompson, 1998), the work place (Hoel and Cooper, 2000, Field, 2004; HSE, 2005), and in personal relationships (Overholt, 2000). Unfortunately there has been little work done in relation to student peer bullying within higher education and especially student nurses. What recognition that has been given to the behaviours in further and higher education institutions has involved exploring bullying between and among academics, clerical staff and their relationships with students (Cooper, 1999; Field, 2006).

This research was not prompted by any official reports of the behaviour amongst student nurses within the faculty and the university has clear policies in regard to this issue. The literature into school bullying suggests that victims are wary of reporting incidents to teachers for fear that the bullies will become aware that they have been reported and increase victimisation making things worse (Olweus, 1984; Olweus, 1993; Olweus, 1994; Mellor, 1993; Banks, 1997; Pearce and Thompson, 1998). Therefore it was felt important to explore this topic in the context of pre-registration nurse education as increased knowledge of such conflicts has the potential to sensitise academics to the issue. In addition, it could generate more accepting attitudes, potentially making it easier for students to report and deal with such behaviour.

Background

Definitions of bullying

Bullying and the related terms of harassment, victimisation, intimidation, and belittlement are very difficult to define as specific behaviours. Much of this difficulty arises from the behaviour itself and the subtleness of the actions (Offler, 2000; Royal College of Nursing, 2002a, 2002b). It is acknowledged that the recognition of bullying behaviour is individual and the consequences of being a victim may be dependent on the victim's emotional health at the time (Field, 2004). Nevertheless there are some definitions which do exist. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1990) and Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) (2009) bullying represents acts which are intended to hurt or intimidate a weaker individual. Other definitions include deliberate use of aggression causing physical pain, emotional distress, or a combination of both and unequal power relationships between bully and victim linked to racism, teacher pupil relationships, and the domination of one individual over another (Pearce and Thompson, 1998; ACAS, 2009).

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These definitions clearly link to childhood behaviour (Kidscape, 2005), but can also be related to adults who report being victims of bullying (Field, 2006). Interestingly legal cases brought to employment tribunals do not use the word bullying. Cases arising where bullying is cited as the behaviour causing problems is addressed by the laws covering discrimination and harassment and lawyers continue to refer to bullying behaviours in the formal terminology of harassment and will classify whether it is sexual or racial in nature (ACAS, 2009). Both within legal and commonplace definitions it is the frequency and longevity of the behaviour that are taken into account (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; DoH, 2007).

Thus bullying can take a range of forms from physical contact, intimidation, verbal, and non-verbal behaviour as well as social exclusion (Royal College of Nursing, 2002a, 2002b; Field, 2006). Unfortunately, much of the previous literature does not distinguish between the different types of behaviour. In contrast, this work has used the different types of peer harassment and bullying behaviours as defined by the Royal College of Nursing from a survey they conducted (Royal College of Nursing, 2002b):

- *Verbal peer bullying*: identified and described as acts where there is verbal abuse and name calling.
- *Non-verbal peer bullying*: identified and described as exclusion from select groups and the with-holding of information from group members.
- *Physical peer bullying*: described as the striking with or without the intention to inflict pain of another person's body parts. Physical peer bullying was also identified as striking the property of a fellow student.

School bullying

Bullying in all forms has received increased recognition over the years with the first studies emerging from Scandinavia in the 1980s. These influential Norwegian studies by Olweus with school aged children disproved the prevailing concept that bullying assisted the individual to develop as a stronger adult (Banks, 1997; DfES, 2005). Olweus explored the negative aspects of bullying and developed character profiles of both the bullies and the bullied (Olweus, 1984; Olweus, 1993; Olweus, 1994). Since this early work others have attempted to examine bullying especially peer bullying with school aged children with reports suggesting that is it detrimental to both physical and mental health as well as having a negative effect on education and learning (Mellor, 1993; Banks, 1997; Pearce and Thompson, 1998).

Workplace bullying

The recognition of bullying in school aged children has informed studies into adult and work place harassment which is now recognised to be a contributing factor in work related stress (Cooper, 1999, Field 2004, DoH, 2007). Part of this enlightenment into the existence is bullying in the workplace comes as a result of the Dignity at Work Bill. According to Field (2006) this bill has been the subject of parliamentary debate since the mid 1990s. It relates to many issues faced by employees in the workplace and specifically calls for harassment and bullying not to be tolerated by employers. Many organisations such as the NHS and universities are in the process of reviewing their policies to support this act (Field, 2006). To date the bill has received a number of presentations through parliament but an exploration of Hansard by the authors suggests this bill has yet to become legislation.

The National Health Service uses staff satisfaction surveys to review bullying and harassment occurrences (Field, 2006). Although these reports into peer bullying among NHS employees fail to describe the types of behaviour used, there is strong evidence to suggest that bullying continues to thrive within this work environment (Quinne, 2002, RCN 2000, Mc Kenna et al., 2003; Edwards and O'Connell, 2006). A qualitative interview study of 29 nurses by Farrell (1997) and, a postal survey of 551 new nursing graduates explored by Mc Kenna et al. (2003), both describe a range of inter-staff bullying. These behaviours strongly relate to bullying actions described in the survey conducted by the Royal College of Nursing (2002a).

Bullying in further and higher education

Only two published studies have been found that fully explore the phenomena in further and higher education. A British study by McDougall (1999) explored a target group of 16–18 year old students in a further education college and identified the behaviour existed and examined where in the college it occurred. The National Union of Students (NUS) published a survey in 2007 that explored bullying behaviours in a number of further and higher education institutions. The survey described a range of bullying behaviours conducted by academic and clerical employees as well as other students and is supportive of the argument that peer bullying does occur in higher education (NUS, 2007). This NUS study supports other authors' findings in that bullying acts are present in higher education and are linked with inter-staff and student employee relationships (Cooper, 1999; Jackson et al., 2002; Edwards and O'Connell, 2006; NUS, 2007). No published work was found that specifically explored student nurse peer bullying within a university setting. Therefore, with the paucity of research into peer bullying amongst higher education students and particularly student nurses, a survey was conducted.

Aims

The aims of this survey were to ascertain whether:

- Participants were able to distinguish different types of peer bullying behaviours.
- Peer bullying as perceived by the respondents and defined in this paper occurs within groups of pre-registration nursing students in the university setting.
- If peer bullying occurs, does the occurrence vary by gender, ethnicity, age and levels of previous education?
- If peer bullying does occur within the participant group, is there any significance in location?

Methods

An author designed anonymous questionnaire survey was distributed across two campuses to 190 third year adult pre-registration nursing students from the same cohort. The questionnaire content was based upon the literature as reviewed above and the structure based on Oppenheim's work (Oppenheim, 2003). It explored their experiences during the programme including:

- Perceptions and understanding of specific peer bullying behaviours
- The occurrence of peer bullying experiences during their first foundation year and during their last 2 years while in the adult branch.

The following demographic information was also collected:

- Gender, age, ethnic origin and past educational achievements.

In addition, due to this being an unexplored topic, space was allocated for students to comment regarding their views and or experiences of peer bullying.

Demographic information, perceptions and understanding of specific bullying behaviour as well as the experience of the different types of bullying behaviour in their foundation year of the course and then during their 2 years of adult branch nurse education were