



Helping children in bullying situations: The role of intersubjective understanding and co-regulation

Velibor Bobo Kovač  and Elin Marie Frivold Kostøl

University of Agder, Norway

Abstract

Contemporary definitions of bullying are strikingly in agreement that bullying represents aggressive behaviour involving premeditation, time span, power imbalance and clear role assignment. Even though useful in some situations, these premises are not as helpful if the aim is to improve the social environment in educational contexts. The aim of the present article is to argue that educators need alternative theoretical tools when attempting to improve relations between children. We argue that interpretations of bullying in educational contexts are not ‘owned’ by any specific party, but rather involve (1) intersubjective negotiation and (2) the co-regulative competence of educators and children. The present theoretical proposition suggests that the role of educators is not to establish who did what, how and why, but rather to acknowledge and respect the children’s profound subjective experiences of the bullying situation, regardless of assigned roles in the conflict. We therefore suggest that intersubjective understanding of situations and the sensitive co-regulative competence of educators represent useful theoretical tools when dealing with systematic conflicts between children. The conclusion points out that nonpartial understanding of bullying and emotional recognition of experiences might increase children’s self-awareness, making them a part of the solution rather than ‘a part of the problem’.

Keywords

bullying, definitions, intersubjectivity, self-regulation, co-regulation, teachers

Corresponding author:

Velibor Bobo Kovač, Faculty of Humanities and Education, University of Agder, PO Box 422, 4604 Kristiansand, Norway.

Email: bobo.kovac@uia.no

Introduction

Even though there have been long-standing debates on the number of components that constitute bullying (e.g. Guerin & Hennessy, 2002), the nature of bullying itself (e.g. Farrington, 1993; Smith, 2004; Vaillancourt et al., 2008), and other related issues (Arora, 1996; Walton, 2011), it is fair to say that dominant perspectives in the field portray bullying as more or less premeditated aggression with a clear hostile, nearly evolutionary, behavioural pattern (Rigby, 2002). This apparent consensus concerning definitional issues is centred around several key components of bullying that are in turn described in an astonishingly uniform manner by using the same or similar terms, such as aggression or aggressive behaviour, harm or distress, conscious desire and intention to execute behaviour, power imbalance between actors and incidents over a span of time (Aalsma & Brown, 2008; Boulton, 1997; Olweus, 1993; Roland, 1989; Smith, 2004; Smith & Sharp, 1994). Focus on aggression contributes to the conceptualisation of bullying as a relationship between the involved parties where defined labels are given to them, i.e. one side is termed 'victim', the other side performing hurtful or aggressive behaviour is usually termed 'bully', in addition to spectators, bystanders and mediators (Perren & Alsaker, 2006). The benefits of identifying the key components and assigning roles are obvious when it comes to criteria such as definitional clarity and perhaps the ability to measure and decide whether or not a given act can be labelled as bullying. This apparent reference to directly observable aspects of behaviour is probably also the reason why relatively similar definitions of bullying have been consistently used or preferred over many years, and basically have been problematised to a very little degree in the contemporary literature.

However, this approach, influential in shaping practice of social relations in educational institutions, has its obvious shortcomings. First, the language used to describe bullying is excessively legal, unavoidably resulting in the identification and transmission of responsibility, and more importantly blame (Eriksen, 2018). This is by no means accidental considering the fact that bullying situations in many cultural contexts indeed become a legal matter with respect to the school leader's and educator's accountability. However, this focus on overt behaviour in terms of 'who did what to whom' might have an unfortunate effect if the aim is to improve the relations between children with the overarching goal of achieving a better learning and social environment. Second, even though traditional definitions are effective in situations when the given conflict must be labelled by the school principal and parents, or measured by researchers, they all presuppose that bullying situations can be analysed and interpreted objectively. Thus, there is an implicit premise that all involved parties in a bullying situation should, after a while, acknowledge and agree on what happened and who therefore needs to change their behavioural pattern, feel guilt and perhaps apologise for their misconduct. These two shortcomings (i.e. assignment of blame/guilt and search for objectivity) represent serious limitations when it comes to dealing with bullying in educational contexts from the practitioner's point of view (Boulton, 1997), and more

importantly when it comes to helping children with their social interaction (Eriksen, 2018).

The main aim of the present article is to argue that interpretations of bullying situations in educational contexts are not owned by any of the involved parties, but are rather a matter of (1) intersubjective negotiation and (2) co-regulative competence. Bullying in most situations represents a reinterpretation of events and creation of meaning based on a mix of first- and second-hand information. Thus, the analysis of the bullying situations is based on the interplay between several, per definition, conflicting perspectives that need to be reconciled in order to be meaningful for the involved parties (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Furthermore, we argue in the present article that solutions or measures that are intended to improve existing relations should be based on professional guidance where the process of co-regulation is a key element. Focusing on aggression, using a discourse that assigns blame or guilt and insisting on objectivity in portraying a complicated series of events provide feeble ground from which practitioners can promote a healthy educational setting, especially when most of the available information is second-hand reinterpretation of the situations that occurred in partially hidden arenas over a prolonged period of time. Hence, contrary to a traditional assessment-based approach to bullying, the arguments presented here aim to develop an intersubjective perspective on bullying that is based on the co-regulative skills of educators. In the present perspective, the overriding aim is the learning and growth of all the involved parties, regardless of their roles in the conflict, and the preservation of the greater learning environment in educational settings.

It is important to convey early in the text that we are aware that the position argued in the present article is certainly not entirely novel. Some alternative views of bullying have gradually but steadily emerged in contemporary literature emphasising the role of general social processes, such as marginalisation and inclusion/exclusion (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014). Other researchers have also underlined that studies on bullying are often very particular, failing thus to position bullying situations in the larger social (educational) context (Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). The focus in research has gradually begun to change from particularistic analyses of behaviour or traits to conceptualisations of bullying as a social-ecological process (Swearer & Hymel, 2015; Thornberg, 2015) needing pedagogical adjustments guided by educational professionals (Lund, Helgeland, & Kovač, 2017). This slowly evolving paradigm shift suggests that rigid or universally accepted objective definitions of bullying are not as useful for the people who are supposed to assist and educate young children in academic and social achievements. In contrast to traditional measures, the suggestion here is that strategies aiming to reduce incidents of bullying should in part ignore stigmatising terminology and focus on patterns of behaviour that need adjustment. In simple words, the emphasis should be on measures that promote prosocial solutions (Arora, 1996). The need for the reconceptualisation of this phenomenon and exploration of alternative approaches is also supported by research findings showing that definitions and understandings of bullying might vary according to some parameters,

for example age (Monks & Smith, 2006), roles, such as teachers-children (Menesini, Fonzi, & Smith, 2002), and teacher perspectives (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005). Taking these individual voices in consideration, Carrera, DePalma, and Lameiras (2011) call for a more comprehensive research perspective aiming to broaden restrictive understandings of bullying and simple victim/perpetrator dichotomies.

In addition to these predominantly theoretical arguments, there exist a number of recent empirical studies showing clear advantages of more comprehensive approaches aiming to preserve the whole educational context. For example, Vreeman and Carroll (2007) conclude in their systematic review of school-based interventions to prevent bullying that, although various interventions were found to reduce bullying directly, the best results were found for interventions that involved whole-school approaches. The conclusions also emphasised the importance of systemic solutions involving all students, in addition to those who bully or are victims of bullying. Similarly, Whitson (2014) concludes that interventions need to focus on helping both offenders and victims to cope with the effects of bullying, encouraging development of the more compassionate and forgiving educational contexts. Indeed, there currently exists a concept of 'forgiveness education' representing a growing research field that emphasises the advantages of empathic and reconciling approaches in dealing with bullying (Skaar, Freedman, Carlon, & Watson, 2016). This is also supported by the results showing that attempts at making bullies feel empathy for the victim increased bullies' intention to stop, while blaming the bully had no significant effect (Garandeanu, Vartio, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2016).

In sum, these above-mentioned contributions reinforce the idea that interpretations of bullying are not owned by any specific party but rather reside in the social context and achieved consensus through educational negotiation with the overriding aim to improve the greater learning environment (Mishna et al., 2005). These perspectives emphasise that bullying must be understood as a social process occurring in a larger social context, as opposed to individual positions where origins of conflicts are fuelled by processes within a person and assessed objectively. Hence, we are operating from the positions of inclusive education and system thinking where alteration of environment has an impact on the behaviour of actors, as opposed to approaches that focus on changing the behaviour of actors directly. It follows that inclusive education, system thinking, and preservation of the wider social environment is the basic logic behind our propositions.

Having such a theoretical background in mind, the following points are developed and discussed in the present article: bullying is a social process that is (1) socially constructed, (2) intersubjective in nature, (3) in need of adjustment when it comes to interpersonal co-regulation, and (4) has a wider social context in mind. In the first section, we argue that objective realities of bullying incidents over time are regularly transformed in social constructions and are consequently a matter of intersubjective negotiation between all the involved parties. In the beginning of the second section we acknowledge that the establishment of intersubjective

communication is important, but nevertheless of limited effect if the professional educator does not aim to alter the social conditions and modify the interpersonal relations between the children. In the same section we also present the concepts of self-regulation and affect regulation that are essential if the aim is to fully understand the potential of co-regulation in dealing with specific bullying incidents. In the third section we introduce the concept of co-regulation and attempt to show the relevance of this term to bullying. We close the present article by pointing out some limitations of this analysis and discussing the possible implications our work might have on educational praxis.

Bullying as a matter of social construction

It is easy to acknowledge that each bullying situation represents per definition a social interaction between children that is characterised by power asymmetry, although roles can be switched depending on the passage of time and various contexts (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). Thus, at one point in time an involved party exerts threatening behaviour and a second party is threatened. The common denominator for both involved parties, regardless of the power asymmetry, is the state of the pronounced subjectivity. Subjective understanding of situations, and especially those situations that involve social interactions, is multi-dimensional in nature and includes people's constant emotional and cognitive (re)interpretations of interpersonal events (Welsh & Dickson, 2005). The complexity of these reinterpretations is challenging due to the demanding self-attributional process that requires appraisals of situations in terms of one's own motivations, other's intentions and the social influence of spectators/bystanders. Moreover, bullying situations, and the actors involved in these situations, frequently have previous history and these events are typically accompanied by stressful circumstances.

However, the whole situation is far more complex considering that, at some point in the process, the reinterpretation of events is commonly in the hands of proximate educators, parents, principals, bystanders/spectators/witnesses and possibly distant expert educators who are consequently, in some complex cases, invited to assist. It follows that each bullying situation therefore involves different actors who actively contribute with interpretations and reinterpretations of the given events, in addition to two conflicting parties. This means that the basic relation between the children that went wrong at some point in terms of social interaction is now constructed from various perspectives, involving perhaps opposing motivations and perceptions. The existence of various interpretations of one isolated incident, or a series of incidents, and based often on fragmented pieces of information, might have a clouding effect on the initial understanding of situations that directly involved the parties (i.e. the children) to begin with. The main point of the attempt to portray bullying situations as incidents that are unavoidably constructed out of many different subjective perspectives is to suggest that (1) the objective circumstances in these situations cannot possibly be grasped, and that

(2) this is not a productive way of pursuing the problem if the aim is to improve the specific relations between the children. Thus, the current portrayal of bullying as a state of pronounced subjectivity is in many ways compatible with a social constructionist approach where emotions and subjective understandings of the given phenomena influence the manner in which people construct and respond to various social conditions, consequently resulting in different, often opposing, interpretations (Loseke & Best, 2003).

It is important to note that bullying situations in the educational context, in contrast to bullying incidents between adults, come under the responsibility of professional educators. Thus, all adults employed in educational institutions have an explicit mandate to respond to situations that can have a disturbing effect on the general social environment. The first necessary step for any practitioner aiming to pedagogically solve the specific conflict and consequently improve the general learning environment is to understand and acknowledge the subjective experience of the directly involved parties in any given bullying situation (Powers, Welsh, & Wright, 1994). This means that the practitioner needs to meet the different parties and listen to their proffered versions of the past events with respect, bearing in mind, however, that their portrayed versions are subjective reconstructions of the situations that are seen and interpreted from one's own point of view. Thus, the educational practitioner is expected to be attentive to different versions in order to grasp the contours of the given event, but may not have the ambition or explicit aim to obtain an objective picture of 'what really happened here'. Put in another way, we propose that the role of the educational practitioner is not to be a criminal detective, identify perpetrators and establish who did what, how and why. Interpersonal relations can be improved by taking into account the subjective, predominantly affective experiences of the involved children and transforming their understandings over time into an intersubjective format that promotes personal growth in terms of 'give-and-take' participation. In contrast to the intuitive or perhaps common inclination to unearth the 'truth' behind the events, it is argued here that the most productive action for any practitioner is to (1) acknowledge each subjectivity with respect, and (2) operate from the mode of intersubjective understanding of described events, having in mind (3) the environment in which the bullying situations are taking place or embedded.

The importance of self-regulation and affect regulation

However, the mode of intersubjective communication between the involved parties is not enough to solve tensions and is merely a starting point for additional measures that are needed if the intention is to improve relations between pupils in one specific conflict. As argued in the introduction, one possible and relatively novel approach would be to strategically apply one's own co-regulative competencies, with the aim of being a role model for children involved in a bullying situation. However, to fully grasp the potential of co-regulation in resolving bullying

incidents, it is necessary to briefly introduce two interrelated concepts that illuminate and precede the ability to co-regulate, namely self-regulation and affect regulation.

Self-regulation is an umbrella term referring to the general ability to exercise control over oneself with the aim of bringing the self into line with required, imagined, real or self-imposed standards (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Thus, the process of self-regulation describes the personal ability to monitor and modulate cognition, emotions and behaviours in order to achieve one's goals and/or to adapt to environmental demands (Berger, 2011). Self-regulation also refers to a person's ability to process cognition and emotions so that impulse control, appropriate behaviour and problem solution can be exercised constructively (Murray, Rosanbalm, Christopoulos, & Hamoudi, 2015). In simplified form, one can say that cognition is closely associated with such executive functions as flexible attention, problem solving and planning (Berger, 2011), while the emotional domain refers to active management of intense and typically unpleasant emotions with the aim of establishing adaptive functions over one's own actions. The cognitive and emotional domains thus interactively contribute to situational and behavioural expressions and the establishment of lasting behavioural patterns (Murray et al., 2015). The end result of the interactive workings of these three domains is the ability to exercise adaptive behaviour, reduce impulsiveness and to think and plan before taking action (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004).

According to Jacobs and Gross (2014), the school has traditionally focused on cognitive processes. For example, Norwegian primary school explicitly emphasises basic skills, where cognitive and subject-related competencies are accentuated (Karseth & Engelsen, 2013). Similarly, research on the co-regulation of school-age children has often focused on the effects of co-regulation in the form of learning, such as collaborating on problem solving in a group (Didonato, 2013). This focus on cognition is in part understandable considering that school is the primary arena where traditional knowledge and rationality-based thinking are developed. On the other hand, some authors have pointed out that the academic achievements of school children must be understood and viewed in the context of emotions and the impact emotions have on experiences (Graham & Taylor, 2014). Thus, many important human functions connected to various life domains directly depend on emotional regulations (Siegel, 1999). The essence in emotional regulation revolves around one's ability to control the intensity of the emotional experience and thus control the latent action impulses with the overriding aim of promoting the constructive processing of problems and productive solutions. Even though the ability to practise emotional regulation is something that is influenced by social interaction in early ages of development (Guo, Leu, Barnard, Thompson, & Spieker, 2015), the school setting, under the guidance of the professional educator, represents a vital arena in which this competence is further developed. For this reason, the teacher must be able to understand the child's signals and needs in the demanding conflict situations, regardless of traditionally assigned roles such as 'bully', 'victim' and objective circumstances. The manner in which the pupils are treated and

confronted in these situations, where a number of emotions exists, would in turn have an impact on the further development of social interaction between all the involved parties, as well as on understandings of ‘what happened here’.

The role of co-regulation in bullying

The process of co-regulation has originally focused on dyadic relationships between caregiver and child, especially during the child’s first year of life. Co-regulation is described in current literature as a warm, receptive and supportive interaction between caregivers and a child that provides guidance, modelling, expression and modulation of the child’s thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Murray et al., 2015). Co-regulation involves creating a confidential relationship with the child so that the child learns to trust that their parents will help regulate stressful or frustrating situations (Fox, 1998). The child will learn that its caregivers will offer help and support if and when it is needed (Gillespie, 2015), and eventually the child will internalise the expectation of a caregiver’s calming response (Bath, 2008). The main aim of co-regulation is to teach children and adolescents to keep their emotional arousal in balance by using their cognitive regulatory skills so they can cope with demanding situations in the best possible way (Ting & Weiss, 2017). Co-regulation can therefore be understood as a practical model that helps young people to learn to master overwhelming and immediate emotions and develop sustained self-control.

Even with this brief description, it is easy to see that the importance and relevance of co-regulation in bullying situations within educational contexts is obvious, especially bearing in mind that co-regulation can be understood as a social process that establishes productive communication between the involved parties (Rämä & Kontu, 2012). In bullying situations in the school context, co-regulation will require that teachers closely follow the hints and emotional expressions that the pupils make and that they are then able to respond consistently and sensitively with the right amount of support over time (Gillespie, 2015). However, to ensure that co-regulation occurs, it is necessary that adults have the ability to regulate themselves, by recognising, acknowledging and safely dealing with their own emotions (Bath, 2008). For example, a pupil’s anger over time could test the teacher’s patience and result in the projection of consistently negative emotions on the child, in turn creating a situation of reciprocal causality where bad moods are mirrored back and forth between the child and the adult. Cook and Cameron (2010) found in their study that pupils with outrageous behaviour were more often rejected by teachers, leading in turn to such behaviour as defiance and hostility. The poor ability of the teacher to cope with conflicting information and emotional expressions can in turn lead to an escalation of the situation where the child becomes more uneasy and expresses more resistance. Hence, the potential circle of self-induced negative pedagogical reactions is never-ending, creating a mechanism where what started as small issues multiply and intensify over time.

It is therefore necessary to start any negotiation with an aware and reflective adult who can recognise his or her own emotions when facing behaviour that is challenging, using calm communication, providing support and showing genuine child-care. The goal of co-regulation is thus to calm the child who is experiencing a strong emotional activation and provide conditions under which productive respectful communication is possible. This is often done by helping the emotionally troubled child to see that his/her despair is acknowledged and taken seriously, regardless of the assigned role in the conflict. A child who is overwhelmed by emotions will hardly be able to be calmed down by a rational approach from the adult if he or she attempts to establish objective parameters such as 'who did what, why, and how long'. Thus, one of the points of co-regulative skills and intersubjectivity is to prepare children emotionally to contribute to finding solutions. Only when the child is calm and reassured that no one is being labelled or categorised, can the adult invite them to reflect on the problem and work slowly towards a possible transformation of the unwanted relationship. This also means that school educators should reduce their attempts to regulate children's challenging behaviours or emotional expressions through authoritarian 'commandments', the introduction of consequences (Bath, 2008) or the provision of simple solutions, such as 'say you're sorry'. It is rather important to understand and acknowledge that behaviour is fuelled by strong emotions and the effects of past unfortunate behavioural patterns that need to be altered over time.

For example, if the aim is to help John when he reports that he is repeatedly bullied, this situation must be approached from the position of the multidimensionality of underlying processes: there is a history, multiple motivations, guilt, despair, need for help, potential revenge and so on. At any point in time blame and guilt should be avoided but must be taken into consideration as potential motivational factors. The focus should be on John's safety in terms of stopping further development of the current situation, but also on improving the relationship between two persons, with the overarching aim of changing the basic premises on which their existing social relation is built. Again, it is clear that we need to immediately protect John, but we also have a pedagogical duty in the long-term to protect all involved parties from further deterioration of their situation. This means that John, who is directly endangered, should feel safe, and those who bully John should develop more prosocial behavioural patterns. We could stop John's bullying using traditional measures such as external control, power, authority and commands. This may, however, lead to short-term effects, meaning that one 'target' child (i.e. John) might be saved only to be replaced by another one after a while, or even John switching from victim to bully, if he hasn't learned from the situation. Thus, the main point is that transformation of one unhealthy relation (i.e. bullying) should contain a learning dimension and personal growth where the involved children discover that there are alternatives in the interaction.

All in all, the arguments presented in the present article argue against approaches to bullying that emphasise objective components or 'truths' that can be visibly measured. Alternative foci should emphasise (1) regulation of

emotions in terms of calming down, (2) establishment of intersubjective communication (i.e. no one owns the truth about what happened), (3) avoidance of categorising children by assigning typical roles, and most importantly (4) finding solutions that can repair or improve unfortunate behavioural patterns between children. Put simply, adults can help with their involvement, but they can also make things worse by creating deviance and labels out of one unfortunate behavioural pattern where children 'simply' need assistance, as opposed to verdicts. All children involved in one specific conflict should leave the room with the feeling that they have been understood, that their emotions have been acknowledged and basically that they have gained something out of one unfortunate situation. Only after intersubjectivity, propelled by the co-regulation skills of adults, has been established, can children be intrinsically willing to alter their behavioural patterns and emotional reactions. Hence, adults who are skilful in co-regulative communication serve as role models, thus helping children to develop and achieve more mature and robust self-regulatory skills in demanding situations (Guo et al., 2015). Furthermore, allowing children to reflect on possible solutions at some point in the process is an important component of co-regulation as this process involves self-attention and an invitation to reflection on problem solving (Bath, 2008). By allowing children of all ages to be challenged on how to solve a problem in the best possible way, they will become involved in the process, gaining a sensation of 'being a part of the solution' and not 'a part of the problem'. In this way, children can also gain greater self-awareness of what the problem actually consists of and what is required to achieve a solution. This could lead to greater insight into learning strategies, problem-solving skills and critical-thinking skills.

Limitations and further theoretical clarifications

The present analysis has several limitations requiring further theoretical clarification. First, we analyse bullying here in the light of the co-regulative skills educators should have and apply in demanding situations. We do not suggest that educators should explicitly teach children co-regulation directly, as this assignment requires special competencies and possibly is not a part of the mandate teachers in various cultural contexts have. We limit our work to the question of how the educator should practise co-regulation, and only indirectly influence or improve co-regulation between the involved parties. This would in turn make them role models and indirectly show children how to use these strategies in practical situations. This is why in several places in the article we merely refer to educators as role models without explicitly directing our attention on children's co-regulative skills. Second, our analysis primarily focuses on bullying in educational contexts where adults have an explicit mandate to help children in demanding social situations. Educational contexts, per definition, are guided by educational professionals who possess the necessary skills that enable them to show children how conflicts should be resolved and the type of communication

that is needed in these demanding social situations. Third, it is important to explicitly acknowledge our awareness that traditional approaches to bullying are probably using the components of intersubjectivity and co-regulation. However, it is fair to assume that ingredients of intersubjectivity and co-regulation in traditional approaches are predominantly used in a fairly intuitive and disorganized manner, and less as a systematic and reflective theoretical tool. We are not suggesting that our propositions are so new that they would require a completely new approach to bullying among professional practitioners. Rather, we are arguing for a change of course in the direction of the approaches that are to a higher degree based on intersubjective negotiation and co-regulative strategies. The fourth point to comment on is the possibility that our perspective, compared to more traditional understandings of bullying, is naïve, thus contributing to the failure to detect 'real' bullying, the failure to protect 'victims' and the failure to correct the behaviour of 'bullies'. So, the question is: how is one supposed to deal with bullying based on the present work when (1) no roles are assigned, and more importantly, (2) no explicit definition with specific and directly recognisable components of bullying is provided? Our position is that bullying, similarly to many concepts in the social sciences, exists as a construction in the intersubjective space between actors. Physical 'things' that exist in the objective manner can be bigger, smaller or perhaps vanish. Social constructions are, on the other hand, a matter of alteration so the perception of the one and same event or relation might be changed, but not necessarily in terms of quantity. We point out that we operate from the positions of the educator and the role educational professionals have in dealing with bullying. From these positions, objective and clear definitions are simply not useful when it comes to teaching children social competence and improving the greater learning environment, especially bearing in mind that the roles of 'victim' and 'bully' can shift at a different point in time. But the main point argued here is that authoritative corrections rarely result in learning. We realize that our positions could be (mis)interpreted as a failure to protect children who are victimized. Hence, it is important to convey that our perspective equally protects all children by arguing that the pedagogical sum result is considerably larger if one is tending to help both children in conflict, in contrast to nurturing one and condemning the other. Asking 'who did what' in terms of objective circumstances is perhaps unavoidable at some point early in the process, but the educator should move quickly from a 'detective' role to the employment of an intersubjective understanding and co-regulative skills. This is the reason why we recommend that labels and component-based definitions of bullying should be used to a lesser degree, except perhaps when legality or accountability aspects are in focus. And finally, it is also important to underline that our analysis certainly does not encompass the acts of extreme violence that, at least initially, must be dealt with firmly by stopping any form of direct aggression. However, we posit that our analysis speaks directly to many of nearly daily experiences of children and adults where the minor or major adjustment of emotions, thoughts and behavioural

patterns is needed. Thus, the tools of intersubjectivity and co-regulation are not supposed to be used in extreme or exceptional situations, but rather in the everyday work with children where the aim is to adjust unwanted social developments before they self-perpetuate and develop into chronically unhealthy relationships.

Concluding remarks

Professional educators are the ones who are responsible for transforming a conflict between children from being destructive to being prosocial, and for teaching children how to deal with similar conflicts. Our recommendation to educators is to develop co-regulative skills and operate from the position of intersubjectivity where acknowledgment of feelings is more important than the assignment of labels or roles. We also believe that our propositions refer to situations that could easily be recognised by educational professionals. All involved parties should, to varying degrees and according to the specific circumstances in each separate case, aim to improve their own co-regulation with the overarching aim being to improve social interaction. The educator should bring together the individual subjectivities of all the involved parties (children and parents) and operate from the position of intersubjectivity. The role of improved co-regulation in children is crucial but depends directly on the ability of the educators and other adults to grasp the intersubjective nature of the given conflicting situation. As noted in the introduction, the traditional approaches to bullying might be useful in some situations where accountability for school leaders and educators is in focus, but they are unproductive, even inflammatory and damaging, if the aim is to (1) teach children something about social competence, and (2) improve the greater social environment. Based on the presented arguments, we posit that understanding bullying through intersubjective glasses and the use of co-regulative skills represents a useful tool for obtaining better relations, diminishing conflict and improving the general social and working educational setting.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Velibor Bobo Kovač  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1461-0558>

References

Aalsma, M. C., & Brown, J. R. (2008). What is bullying? *Journal of Adolescent Health, 43*, 101–102. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2008.06.001

- Arora, C. M. J. (1996). Defining bullying: Towards a clearer general understanding and more effective intervention strategies. *School Psychology International, 17*(4), 317–329. doi:10.1177/0143034396174002
- Bath, H. (2008). Calming together: The pathway to self-control. Reclaiming children and youth. *The Journal of Strength-based Interventions, 16*(4), 44–46.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (Eds). (2004). *Handbook of self-regulation: Research, theory, and applications*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Berger, A. (2011). *Self-regulation. Brain, cognition, and development*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/12327-000
- Boulton, M. J. (1997). Teachers' views on bullying: Definitions, attitudes and ability to cope. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 67*(2), 223–233. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8279.1997.tb01239.x
- Carrera, M. V., DePalma, R., & Lameiras, M. (2011). Toward a more comprehensive understanding of bullying in school settings. *Educational Psychology Review, 23*(4), 479–499. doi:10.1007/s10648-011-9171-x
- Cook, B. G., & Cameron, D. L. (2010). Inclusive teachers' concern and rejection toward their students: Investigating the validity of ratings and comparing student groups. *Remedial and Special Education, 31*(2), 67–76. doi:10.1177/0741932508324402
- DiDonato, N. C. (2013). Effective self- and co-regulation in collaborative learning groups: An analysis of how students regulate problem solving of authentic interdisciplinary tasks. *Instructional Science, 41*(1), 25–47. doi:10.1007/s11251-012-9206-9
- Eriksen, I. M. (2018). The power of the word: students' and school staff's use of the established bullying definition. *Educational Research, 60*(2), 157–170. doi:10.1080/00131881.2018.1454263
- Farrington, D. P. (1993). Understanding and preventing bullying. In M. Tonry & N. Morris (Eds), *Crime and justice: An annual review of research* (pp. 381–458). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. doi:10.1086/449217
- Fox, N. A. (1998). Temperament and regulation of emotion in the first years of life. *Pediatrics, 102*(5), 1230–1237.
- Garandeau, C. F., Vartio, A., Poskiparta, E., & Salmivalli, C. (2016). School bullies' intention to change behavior following teacher interventions: Effects of empathy arousal, condemning of bullying, and blaming of the perpetrator. *Prevention Science, 17*(8), 1034–1043. doi:10.1007/s11121-016-0712-x
- Gillespie, L. (2015). It takes two: The role of co-regulation in building self-regulation skills. *Young Children: The Journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 70*(3), 94–96. www.jstor.org/stable/ycyoungchildren.70.3.94.
- Graham, T., & Taylor, A. Z. (2014). An attributional approach to emotional life in the classroom. In R. Pekrun, & L. Linnenbrink-Garcia (Eds.), *International handbook of emotions in education* (pp. 96–119). New York, NY: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203148211.ch6
- Guerin, S., & Hennessy, E. (2002). Pupils' definitions of bullying. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 17*(3), 249–261. doi:10.1007/BF03173535
- Guo, Y., Leu, S.-Y., Barnard, K. E., Thompson, E. A., & Spieker, S. J. (2015). An examination of changes in emotion co-regulation among mother and child dyads during the strange situation. *Infant and Child Development, 24*(3), 256–273. doi:10.1002/icd.1917
- Jacobs, S. E., & Gross, J. J. (2014). Emotion regulation in education – Conceptual foundations, current applications, and future directions. In R. Pekrun, & L. Linnenbrink-Garcia (Eds.), *International handbook of emotions in education* (pp. 183–202). New York, NY: Routledge.

- Karseth, B., & Engelsen, B. U. (2013). Læreplanen for Kunnskapsløftet: Velkjente tråkk og nye spor. In B. Karseth, J. Møller, & P. Aasen (Eds.), *Reformtakter. Om fornyelse og stabilitet i grunnskoleoppløringen* (pp. 43–60). Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget.
- Loseke, D. R., & Best, J. (Eds.). (2003). *Social problems: Constructionist readings*. New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Lund, I., Helgeland, A., & Kovač, V. B. (2017). På vei mot en ny forståelse av mobbing i et folkehelseperspektiv. *Acta Didactica Norge*, 11(3), 1–19. doi:10.5617/adno.4691
- Menesini, E., Fonzi, A., & Smith, P. K. (2002). Attribution of meanings to terms related to bullying: A comparison between teacher's and pupil's perspectives in Italy. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 17(4), 393. doi:10.1007/BF03173593
- Mishna, F., Scarcello, I., Pepler, D., & Wiener, J. (2005). Teachers' understanding of bullying. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, 28, 718–738. doi:10.2307/4126452
- Monks, C. P., & Smith, P. K. (2006). Definitions of bullying: Age differences in understanding of the term, and the role of experience. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 24(4), 801–821. doi:10.1348/026151005X82352
- Murray, D. W., Rosanbalm, K., Christopoulos, C., & Hamoudi, A. (2015). *Self-regulation and toxic stress: Foundations for understanding self-regulation from an applied developmental perspective* (OPRE Report 2015-21). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families.
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Perren, S., & Alsaker, F. D. (2006). Social behavior and peer relationships of victims, bully-victims, and bullies in kindergarten. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47(1), 45–57. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.2005.01445.x
- Powers, S. I., Welsh, D. P., & Wright, V. (1994). Adolescents' affective experience of family behaviors: The role of subjective understanding. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 4(4), 585–600. doi: 10.1207/s15327795jra0404_9
- Rämä, I., & Kontu, E. (2012). Searching for pedagogical adaptations by exploring teacher's tacit knowledge and interactional co-regulation in the education of pupils with autism. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 27(4), 417–431. doi:10.1080/08856257.2012.701064
- Rigby, K. (2002). *New perspectives on bullying*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.
- Rodkin, P. C., Espelage, D. L., & Hanish, L. D. (2015). A relational framework for understanding bullying: Developmental antecedents and outcomes. *American Psychologist*, 70(4), 311. doi:10.1037/a0038658
- Roland, E. (1989). Bullying: The Scandinavian research tradition. In D. P. Tattum, & D. A. Lane (Eds.), *Bullying in schools* (pp. 21–32). Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Trentham Books.
- Schott, R. M., & Søndergaard, D. M. (2014). *School bullying: New theories in context*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139226707
- Siegel, D. (1999). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Skaar, N. R., Freedman, S., Carlon, A., & Watson, E. (2016). Integrating models of collaborative consultation and systems change to implement forgiveness-focused bullying interventions. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 26(1), 63–86. doi:10.1080/10474412.2015.1012672

- Smith, P. K. (2004). Bullying: recent developments. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 9(3), 98–103. doi:10.1111/j.1475-3588.2004.00089.x
- Smith, P. K., & Sharp, S. (Eds). (1994). *School bullying: Insights and perspectives*. London, UK: Routledge. doi:10.1002/cbm.123
- Swearer, S. M., & Hymel, S. (2015). Understanding the psychology of bullying: Moving toward a social-ecological diathesis–stress model. *American Psychologist*, 70(4), 344. doi:10.1037/a0038929
- Thornberg, R. (2015). The social dynamics of school bullying: The necessary dialogue between the blind men around the elephant and the possible meeting point at the social-ecological square. *Confero: Essays on Education, Philosophy and Politics*, 3(2), 161–203. doi:10.3384/confero.2001-4562.1506245
- Ting, V., & Weiss, J. A. (2017). Emotion regulation and parent co-regulation in children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(3), 680–689. doi:10.1007/s10803-016-3009-9
- Vaillancourt, T., McDougall, P., Hymel, S., Krygsman, A., Miller, J., Stiver, K., & Davis, C. (2008). Bullying: Are researchers and children/youth talking about the same thing? *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 32(6), 486–495. doi:10.1177/0165025408095553
- Vreeman, R., & Carroll, A. (2007). A systematic review of school-based interventions to prevent bullying. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 161(1), 78–88. doi:10.1001/archpedi.161.1.78
- Walton, G. (2011). Spinning our wheels: Reconceptualizing bullying beyond behaviour-focused approaches. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(1), 131–144. doi:10.1080/01596306.2011.537079
- Welsh, D. P., & Dickson, J. W. (2005). Video-recall procedures for examining subjective understanding in observational data. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 19(1), 62–71. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.19.1.62
- Whitson, S. (2014). *8 Keys to end bullying: Strategies for parents & schools*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Yoneyama, S., & Naito, A. (2003). Problems with the paradigm: The school as a factor in understanding bullying (with special reference to Japan). *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24(3), 315–330. doi:10.1080/01425690301894

Author biographies

Velibor Bobo Kovač is a professor of educational psychology in the department of education at the University of Agder, Norway. He teaches courses in psychology, education, special education and research methods. His research includes studies on inclusion, student assessment, educational evaluation, bullying and addictive behaviours.

Elin Marie Frivold Kostøl is an assistant professor in the department of education at the University of Agder, Norway. She teaches courses in education, inclusion, learning strategies, and globalization and competence. Her research includes inclusion, self-regulation and general pedagogy.