



Articles

The Effectiveness of “Undercover Anti-Bullying Teams” as Reported by Participants

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Abstract

An analysis of archival data retrieved from a school counselor’s careful recording of student responses during the conducting of 35 “undercover anti-bullying teams” reveals a highly positive qualitative account of the success of these teams. A targeted, non-punitive, restorative process calls forth peer influence to transform the bullying relation in a short time-frame. The bullies are involved in the transformation and the victim is never required to confront the bullies. Student responses show that participants value the chance to help a peer, take up the responsibility of stopping bullying responsibly, and victims are happy with the results.

Keywords: bullying, undercover teams, school counseling, narrative therapy

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This paper reports on the analysis of archival data collected in one high school in Auckland, New Zealand, on the use of undercover anti-bullying teams to combat bullying relationships. The data is qualitative in nature and is gleaned from records kept in the process of administering the process of setting up and monitoring the work of 35 teams over the course of five years (2006-2011). The value of this data is that it provides a glimpse into the effectiveness of the process through the eyes of participants in the process, including victims, bullies and bystanders.

An undercover anti-bullying team (Williams, 2010; Williams & Winslade, 2007; Winslade & Williams, 2012) is a unique approach to bullying. It embodies a non-punitive relational approach to the problem of bullying. It invites those who are bullying “to develop positive relationships with the victim and other students and thereby rewrite the bullying story” (Williams, 2010, p. 1). The focus is on transforming the relationship between the bully and the victim rather than on identifying the bully as a problem person and either pathologizing or punishing him or her.

Approaches to Bullying

Ever since Dan Olweus (1978) popularized the concern over bullying, there has developed an accumulation of methods for reducing bullying behavior in schools. Some approaches have been educational in focus (for example,

[Olweus & Limber, 2010](#)), aiming to raise awareness about bullying and appealing in the end to students' rational better judgment of what constitutes bullying and what should best be avoided.

Other approaches have been primarily legislative in focus. For instance, forty-six U.S. states have put anti-bullying legislation in place in the last twenty years ([Stuart-Cassell, Bell, & Springer, 2011](#)). The aims of such legislation varies, but it may include imposing legal obligations on schools to implement anti-bullying awareness and prevention programs, but these are usually unfunded ([Stuart-Cassell et al., 2011](#), *ibid*). Legislation may in some instances specify the rights of victims to seek legal redress against bullies. The latter approach assumes that the identity of bully is a stable phenomenon that can be isolated and (by implication) punished in order to protect victims. As Bronwyn [Davies \(2011\)](#) argues, many intervention approaches also assume that bullying can be accounted for by typifying the type of person who does it. Usually a deficit discourse ([Gergen, 1994](#)) is referred to. Bullies may be described, for example, as lacking in "empathy" ([Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008](#)), or "self-esteem", although this idea is strongly disputed (see [Salmivalli, 2001](#)). Other deficits in "factors" such as social perception or cognitive functioning ([Merrell et al., 2008](#), *ibid*) are sometimes postulated as going some way toward explaining why certain individuals can be found doing bullying, but the link between these deficits and particular events and behaviors is shaky. Appeals to "evolutionary" advantages for bullying responses are sometimes advocated (see [Juvonen, 2005](#)) but these are at best speculative and seldom lead to clear strategies for intervention.

The approach focused on in this paper makes no such assumption and instead assumes that bullying is not best explained with reference to the essential nature of the bully (or for that matter, of the victim). Rather bullying is a power tactic ([de Certeau, 1984](#)) in relations between students that can be taken up by anyone and can also be let go of, given the right kind of invitation. This idea rests upon a more relational psychology, as opposed to a more individualistic psychology (see [McNamee & Gergen, 1998](#)) and suggests that intervention approaches are needed that target the relations between students, rather than targeting the bully himself or herself.

There are other such intervention programs of course. Some target relationships in general or overall school climate in schools. For example, peer support programs have been found to have some effect in reducing bullying when associated with whole school educational efforts ([McElearney, Roosmale-Cocq, Scott, & Stephenson, 2008](#); see also [Low & Van Ryzin, 2014](#)). The Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) program ([Ross & Horner, 2014](#)) also addresses overall school climate. School-wide programs, however, ideally require everyone in the school to be on board. The approach advocated here, however, has the benefit of being targeted at specific instances in which bullying has developed. It, therefore, represents an economy of effort.

Mediation programs (see [Pease, 2014](#)) are also claimed to be useful and can be targeted directly at the relationships involved. However, mediation suggests a relatively equal responsibility in the relationship with the problem, which may not always be the case. In the approach documented in this paper, the victim is offered the authority of decision-making at key moments but is not required to confront the person(s) who have been doing the bullying at all.

The Undercover Anti-Bullying Team Process — Undercover teams progress through five phases. 1) In the first phase, a counselor listens to the victim's story about the incidents of bullying and asks how the person has been affected by the bullying. The main points of the story and the effects of the bullying are recorded in the victim's own words. This is the first source of the data below. Once the counselor ascertains that an undercover team would be an appropriate choice, the counselor and the victim begin to assemble names of students who could be part of a team. Importantly the two "worst" bullies are invited to be part of the team along with four other members (two males and two females) who have never been bullied or bullied others. 2) The counselor then

brings the chosen team together, shares the story of the victim and what he or she has said about the effects of the bullying, without at first identifying him or her. Then the students are asked whether they would be willing to join in an effort to change the student’s experience of school. When they have agreed to join in this project, the team is then invited to develop a plan to eliminate the bullying and its effects. This is the second source of the data below. Over the course of two weeks, 3) the counselor meets with the victim 4) and also meets with the team (separately) to monitor the progress of the team’s work and to make modifications to the plan as needed. Their comments on what has been happening are carefully recorded in their own words. The words of the team are read out to the victim and the words of the victim are read out to the team. These comments are the next source of the data below. 5) Once the victim declares that bullying has stopped, the team comes to an end and team members are presented with a certificate and a small food voucher. All participants in the process are then asked to complete a brief survey. At each step of the process team members’ and victims’ responses are recorded in their own words. These documents are the source for the data presented in this paper.

Principles of the Undercover Team Approach — The undercover anti-bullying teams approach is adapted from the ‘no blame’ approach to bullying developed by [Robinson and Maines \(1997\)](#) in the U.K. ([Williams & Winslade, 2007](#)). They are an attempt to utilize peer influence to change the experience of the victim of bullying. Typically the suffering of the victim is pronounced as a result of the isolation that the bullying relation produces. This approach starts from the assumption that bullying is a narrative performance of a relational story. To change this narrative, a different relational story needs to be substituted.

Typical approaches to bullying in schools punish the bully with the greater power of the teacher, always with the risk of retaliation against the victim. Not surprisingly, many victims hesitate to reveal to teachers what has been happening. In this approach, however, the bullies are recruited into a team of six students who set out to reverse the experience of the victim. Crucially the bullies are outnumbered and peer pressure is thus reversed. The victim is never required to confront the bullies or even to be in the same room at the same time, but is placed in the powerful position of deciding when the work of the undercover team is complete.

Meanwhile the other students on the team are given an opportunity to turn bystanding into assistance for the victim instead of the bully. Another key element in the approach is the sense that is created of an undercover “secret mission”. The team is asked to do its work without being too obvious. Many young people enjoy this sense of intrigue and develop elaborate subterfuges to keep the team’s work from being revealed.

Literature on Undercover Anti-Bullying Teams — To date, the literature on undercover anti-bullying teams is thin. Three articles and one book chapter exist. The approach was first described by [Williams and Winslade \(2007\)](#), together with a story of its use. [Williams \(2010\)](#) published a further account and illustrated it with another story and [Winslade and Williams \(2012\)](#) included a similar version in their book on school conflict resolution. The success of the approach is thus to date largely supported with anecdotal accounts.

Other school counselors have nevertheless taken up the practice of setting up undercover teams, including counselors and schools in California at the middle and elementary school levels. To date, however, no further studies have been published. Williams’s archival data from 35 undercover teams has been analyzed by four students from California who were completing research projects for Masters degrees ([Barba, 2012](#); [Knox, 2012](#); [Uppal, 2012](#); [Williams, 2012](#)). Their data forms the basis for this paper.

In the account that Winslade and Williams developed, the undercover team process meshes with a narrative orientation to school counseling (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004a, 2004b; Cheshire, Lewis, & the Anti-harassment Team, 2004; McMenamin, 2004; Morgan, 1995; Winslade & Cheshire, 1997; Winslade & Monk, 2008; Winslade, 2012). The principles of this work draw closely from narrative family therapy (Epston & White, 1992; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Monk & Winslade, 2013; Monk, Winslade, Crocket, & Epston, 1997; Payne, 1999; White, 1995, 2007, 2010; White & Epston, 1990; Winslade & Monk, 2007). Narrative practice is built on the idea that the most useful knowledge that can be drawn upon to address any problem is found in the local, indigenous knowledge, or folk knowledge (White, 2001) of those directly involved. Asking questions that access this knowledge is the key focus of narrative practice. Doing so avoids the dangers of professional colonization of people's lives and gives the best opportunity for persons who are subject to power relations (defined by Foucault, 1982, as "actions upon the actions of others", p. 220) to take up positions of agency in their own behalf. A key assumption in all this work is expressed in Michael White's (1989) aphorism, "The person is not the problem; the problem is the problem" (p. 6). Translated into the context of anti-bullying work, this aphorism can be rendered as, "The bully is not the problem; bullying is the problem."

Since narrative counseling draws extensively on a poststructuralist analysis of power relations (after Foucault, 2000), it is not surprising that others who talk about bullying from this perspective also pick up on a similar theme. In particular, Bronwyn Davies and her colleagues (Bansel, Davies, Laws, & Linnell, 2009; Davies, 2011; Ellwood & Davies, 2010; see also Winslade, 2013) have argued against the pathologizing of those who bully as having some kind of moral deficit and instead suggest that they are better understood as policing social norms and solidifying identity categories that fit with these norms.

The approach documented in this paper fits with this emphasis to the extent that it emphasizes bullying as a relational phenomenon constructed out of and reproductive of social relations in the school. All students involved in the drama of bullying, including bullies, victims and bystanders, are invited in this approach to participate in re-drawing relationships in a way that is more inclusive and accepting of difference. The cultural world of young people is called upon as a resource in the overcoming of a problem, rather than treated as a hostile world to be tamed by the power of school authorities.

There are also elements of restorative practice in the undercover teams approach. Restorative practices, in general, aim to address offending behavior as primarily doing harm to relationships, rather than as constituting a challenge to school rules and authorities (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Hopkins, 2004; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013; Zehr, 1990, 2002). They aim to repair harm done to school relationships by inviting offenders to take account of the effects of their actions on victims and to take up responsibility for making things right. In the undercover anti-bullying teams, the team (including the bullies) collaborates to make the victim's life at school happier and less isolated. The counselor carefully documents the effects of the problem on the victim and asks the team to respond to these concerns without blaming the bullies. Meanwhile, the victim is placed in the position of deciding when the team has been successful in its work.

Not all versions of restorative practice deploy assumptions that are consistent with narrative counseling but there are versions that do (Drewery, 2004; Restorative Practices Development Team, 2003; Winslade & Monk, 2008; Winslade & Williams, 2012). These versions focus explicitly on the externalizing of relational problems, rather than on the pathologizing of individuals in deficit terms. They also intervene directly with the discourses or narratives

that govern bullying relations, rather than seeking change through intervening in individual psychological processes such as emotional expression or cognitive functioning.

Method

Most of the data for this study derives from responses written down by the counselor as spoken by the participants in the undercover teams during each of the five stages outlined above. A form developed for this recording purpose (see Appendix I) was used over a five-year period in which 35 undercover teams were convened. The data was originally collected on this form so that the counselor could keep track of the work done by each of the teams, rather than for a research purpose. For the purposes of this study, however, the forms containing the words of the participants were treated as archival data and analyzed for what could be learned about the collective experiences of participants. This process was approved by the Institutional Review Board at California State University San Bernardino.

It is qualitative data, since it is in verbal form, and thus yields less of a picture of overall outcome effects but more of a picture of the process experiences of the students involved. It is primarily “process” data, since it records information about the process at each stage of its development. It can nevertheless be argued that this process data also shows moment-by-moment outcomes of each step in the process and in the end shows not just *that* the process was effective but *how* it was so.

Participants were male and female students at one high school in New Zealand varying from Years 7-9 (equivalent to U.S. grades 8-10). The school is a co-educational school in an urban area, which is ranked at decile 4 (slightly lower than the middle) on census data for socioeconomic status (SES). Names of students were removed from the forms before the analysis was undertaken.

Key questions asked of participants during team meetings were structured and guided by the forms and data was recorded in response to these questions or headings in the participants’ own words. For Stage 1, the initial meeting with the victim, these questions were as follows:

- *What has been happening? (Brief outline of incident(s); where, when and what happened?)*
- *How did the incident(s) make you feel and think?*
- *Ideally, how would you like things to be?*

The form then leaves space for the names of the team members as the victim comes up with these.

In Stage 2 the counselor meets with the team members and reads out the victim’s responses to the above prompts. After the second prompt, the counselor asks the team to imagine themselves in the victim’s position and inquires what they think it would be like. Next, the team members are asked to come up with five ideas for what they could do to change the experience of the victim and make him or her feel better. For each suggestion that is agreed upon, the counselor asks who will do this. The form prompts these responses with the headings:

- *Agreements reached at meeting.*
- *Team members participating.*

Stages 3 and 4 are follow-up meetings, first with the victim and then with the team. This rotation is repeated as many times as necessary until the victim is satisfied that the bullying has stopped. At each meeting, participants

are asked what has been happening and their responses are recorded in their own words on the form under the heading: *Monitoring*.

One additional source of data for this paper was a brief survey given to participants (victims have one form, and bullies and other team members have a slightly different form) during their final meeting. The survey was used for 29 undercover teams (it was designed after the first six teams were completed) and 165 survey responses were received (27 by victims of bullying and 138 by undercover team members, although there was no way of distinguishing responses from the bullies).

Questions asked on this form were more geared toward outcome evaluation but yielded a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. Victims were asked:

- *What do you remember most about the way that the team supported you?*
- *How successful do you think the team was at the time? Please circle the number that best fits your answer [on a Likert scale of 1-5 where 1 represented 'waste of time' and 5 represented 'very successful'].*
- *How long do think the results will last for you? Please circle the number that best fits your answer [on a Likert scale of 1-5 in which 1 represented 'shortlived - less than a week' and 5 represented 'very successful – more than a month'].*
- *What did you like or not like about being involved with the undercover team?*
- *If a friend was being bullied or you were bullied again, would you recommend that an undercover team be set up for yourself or for him or her?*
- *What improvements do you think could be made to the Undercover Teams?*
- *Any other comments?*

Team members were asked parallel questions:

- *What do you remember most about being on the team?*
- *How successful do you think the team was at the time in getting rid of the bullying? Please circle the number that best fits your answer [on a Likert scale of 1-5 where 1 represented 'waste of time' and 5 represented 'very successful'].*
- *How long do you think the effects of the team's work will last? Please circle the number that best fits your answer [on a Likert scale of 1-5 in which 1 represented 'shortlived - less than a week' and 5 represented 'very successful – more than a month'].*
- *If a friend was being bullied, would you recommend that an undercover team be set up for yourself or for him or her?*
- *What improvements do you think could be made to the Undercover Teams?*
- *Any other comments?*

Data Analysis

The data from the undercover teams process forms was analyzed with three specific questions in mind:

1. What was the nature of the bullying that the undercover teams were addressing?
2. What were the effects of the bullying reported by the victims?
3. What kinds of interventions did the undercover team members generate to combat the effects of the bullying?

Data from the process forms was selected in response to each of these questions. Themes were identified and categories of responses aggregated for each category.

Data from the surveys was also analyzed. These data were more focused on the outcomes of the whole undercover team process and addressed the following specific questions:

1. What did the participants regard as the most memorable aspects of the process?
2. How successful did the participants (victims and team members) think the undercover team process was?
3. How long-lasting did the participants expect that the effects of the undercover team process would be?
4. On the basis of this experience, how positively did the participants rate their experience, as measured by their stated willingness to do something similar again or recommend it to a friend who was being bullied?
5. What suggestions did the participants have for improving the process?

Numerical data was calculated for Questions 5 and 6 (the Likert scale questions) and for the ordinal data from Question 7. For Questions 4 and 8, responses were listed, themes were identified, and categories of response were created. A selection of qualitative responses are included below in order to preserve a flavor of the things that participants said.

Results

The Nature of the Bullying

This study yielded a unique picture of the nature of bullying at the moment when a victim is reaching out to a counselor for help. It does not amount to an overall picture of bullying as a field of interactions (as would a cross-sectional survey) but it does view bullying through a lens of immediacy. Incidents are described in the rawness of the moment when they are being experienced, rather than from memory some months later. These incidents were written down in the victim’s own words, preserving the sense of immediacy.

Of the 35 victims in this study, ten reported being physically bullied and a further six were threatened with physical harm. Here are some examples of the physical attacks victims reported:

Physical attacks

- *There was this other kid who was calling me a faggot and he pushed me and punched me after I pulled the fingers [equivalent to what is called in the U.S. “flipping the bird”].*
- *One kid spat in my face when I was on my way to class.*
- *Sometimes they deliberately push me into walls and bump into me when they walk past and nobody else is looking.*

- *He throws pens at me and has tipped water down my back. He tried pulling my bra strap.*

Threats of physical harm were also reported in these examples:

Threats of physical harm

- *People are calling me names and pushing me and threatening to give me a hiding [a beating].*
- *She said that she was going to get her humongous boyfriend to beat me up and to watch my back.*
- *It started off in English: the bully said, "What are you looking at? I am going to get my big sister onto you."*
- *I was waiting by the tree at school at interval for my friends and all the girls came around and threatened me.*

Other forms of reported relational aggression included intimidating or contemptuous looks, continuous harassment, verbal attacks, social exclusion, theft and destruction of property. Here are some examples:

Other forms of relational aggression

- *This morning, I heard some kids making up a song about me; "Why was I born, how can she still be alive, whenever I look at her, my own eyes will crack," they were singing.*
- *I also get the evils [intimidating looks] and I have to sit amongst people I think might hate me.*
- *When I am in science, people take my stuff, like my pencil case; sometimes they open it up and tip all the stuff out on the floor, sometimes they throw it out the window.*
- *It's the same kid who pissed in my bag and on my computer one day behind the tuck shop [shop which sells lunch and snack food].*
- *She took my money, and I said nothing. She opened my bag and then she got the money out of my bag. She asked me if I had any more money, and I told her. She took it and never gave it back.*

The bullying often seemed to target students who were different from a designated social norm and can thus be described as "category maintenance" work (Ellwood & Davies, 2010, p. 90). Differences targeted included disability, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, gender, bodily appearance, and obesity. Here are some of the instances that suggest such targeting of difference:

Targeting of difference

- *Kids kick my wheelchair. They kick the bottom of my shoe because it's big.*
- *[Kids] mock me a lot saying things like "legless" and other really mean things. They ... don't seem to know when to stop teasing me.*
- *She mocks me for being white and weak and calls me a midget.*
- *One girl said, "Fuck [student's name], fuck your India", and some other words. I don't know what to say. I say, "Why are you so mean?" She says, "Nothing, nothing."*
- *Everyone started calling me "snoop-dog" and it was getting annoying ... When it is lunchtime, ... he calls me a "kaffir".*
- *There was this other kid who was calling me a faggot.*

- *It started last year when I started to hang out with my best friend. We ended up getting mocked, because we are always together. Kids said we were gay and that we should get married.*

Victims also frequently expressed awareness of the role played by bystanders to support the bullying. Here are some examples:

Role played by bystanders

- *All his mates just laugh and support him.*
- *When everyone heard one boy saying it, everyone started in ... When I went in afterward [from talking to the teacher outside] some kids were laughing, 'cause I was crying.*
- *When we were in P.E. on Friday, there was a gap on the bench on one side and no more space on the other side, and the girl asked the others if they could move over so that she wouldn't have to sit next to me.*

The Effects of the Bullying

In the initial interview with the victim, the school counselor asked the student, "How did the incident(s) make you feel and think?" Responses were written down on the process form in the actual words of the victim so that later they could be read out to the undercover team members. These responses afford glimpses into the effects of the bullying on the person on the receiving end. Again they are valuable, not so much because of their comprehensiveness, but because of their rawness in the immediacy of the moment when the victim is asking for help. These effects can be divided according to consistent themes that emerged. These were: psychological effects inside the victim; effects on academic performance; effects on other family members; and production of the desire to retaliate. What follows are examples of how students reported each of these effects in turn.

Here are examples of victims of bullying speaking about their internal experience of being bullied. They range from painful emotional experience, to thoughts of suicide or running away, to a sense of not belonging.

Psychological effects inside the victim

- *It makes me feel sad and angry and depressed, lonely and confused.*
- *I just feel like crawling into a hole and dying or running away.*
- *I have thought about hurting myself.*
- *Sometimes I want to die.*
- *I just want to run away. I hate this feeling of rejection.*
- *I feel like I don't belong in the class.*
- *I feel scared to come to school and go to classes or even walk around the school by myself.*
- *It made me feel insecure.*
- *It makes me feel useless. I feel powerless basically all the time.*
- *It made me feel sore inside like I am being tortured by people, that everyone is making fun of me over something that small.*
- *I feel like a crazy person, because I am trying hard not to lash out.*

Students also reported regularly that bullying affected performance in class or desire to come to learn. Here are some examples:

Effects on academic performance

- *I feel distracted from my class work. My mum wants to move me.*
- *It makes me not want to do my schoolwork.*
- *I can't think of my schoolwork because the bullying is still in my head.*
- *It makes me want to sit there and do nothing and I do. That gets me in trouble from the teacher for not working.*
- *I'm too busy focusing on that to worry about my schoolwork.*
- *I don't want to come to school.*
- *I feel scared to come to school. I can't pay attention properly because I can't stop thinking about what people are saying.*
- *I like school but I want to go far away.*
- *I don't want to come to class. I haven't been back to art for ages.*
- *I can't learn. I hate this place.*

The effects of the bullying often extended beyond immediate effects on the bullying to other family members. Here are some examples:

Effects on others, especially family members

- *My mum and my dad are fearful of my safety. They are coming into school today for a meeting.*
- *My mum sees that I am upset, she starts crying. When my dad gets home and my mum tells him what's wrong, he gets angry at the bullies and has hit the wall with his fist, because my artificial foot was broken once. This means he has to take time off work to take me to the limb centre.*
- *[My mum] was angry and asked me where my things were and where the money was for the bus. I told her what had happened and she was angry. She emailed the school with this.*
- *My dad is angry and my sister is upset and wants something done quickly.*
- *My mum knows about this teasing and has told me to ignore it.*
- *Now my family is being split in half, those who believe me and those who don't. My mum has noticed how quiet I am.*
- *I feel like hitting my sister, biting her and kicking her in the shins. I yell at my family and slam doors, I shout, I throw my toys around my room and that gets me into trouble with my mum.*
- *I don't even do stuff with my family any more, because I'm afraid to go out with them and they don't know about this stuff at school.*

Not surprisingly, another effect is that the bullying produces in victims a desire to retaliate and exact retribution from those who are bullying them. Victims in this study reported this desire often. For some it remained an impulse

they did not act on. Others caved into the impulse. Others chose not to act on it, for fear of getting in trouble at school, or because they lacked sufficient courage. Here are examples of what they said:

Production of the desire to retaliate

- *It made me act more aggressive against the person who said stuff.*
- *I wanted to retaliate and hurt somebody.*
- *I wanted to stab the bully for a couple of seconds but I really hated him.*
- *I've thought about retaliating but I've never built up the courage to do that.*
- *I cracked and lost it and I hit him.*
- *I want to punch people, throw things. It also gets me to write mean things about them in my book that I don't really mean.*

The Nature of Peer Interventions

The next section of this analysis is drawn from the record of the undercover team's discussion with the counselor about how they plan to counter the bullying and its effects on the victim. Team members were invited to develop a five-point plan for this purpose, usually in response to the counselor's question, "If you were going through the same thing, what would make a difference for you?" The strategies decided upon all came from student suggestions, rather than from the counselor and were recorded in the participants' own words. These responses were grouped according to emergent themes as follows: change in behavior by (apparent) bullies; extending relational support towards the victim; assisting the victim with class work; direct interventions to interrupt bullying; giving advice to the victim; and reporting problems to teachers or other adults. Here are examples that emerged in relation to each theme.

It was not possible to be certain which suggestions came from team members who had been the bullies, because they were never identified, unless they chose to identify themselves (and some did so). However, the language of the subsequent suggestions indicates that they are offered from the perspective of such individuals.

Change in behavior by (apparent) bullies.

- *Stop the mocking.*
- *Keep it simple, do the right thing.*
- *Don't laugh at her.*
- *Put a stop to name-calling.*

Many of the strategies undercover teams came up with provided direct relational support for the victim, in contrast with the isolating effects of bullying. They included simple gestures of greeting, building conversation, group inclusion, emotional responsiveness, invitations to shared activities, and protection from difficult situations. These examples show what team members planned to do:

Extending relational support towards the victim

- *Say hi to him every day.*
- *Ask her how she is.*

- *Listen to her.*
- *Give her compliments.*
- *Have a normal conversation with her.*
- *Ask her if we see she is upset.*
- *During lunch time and library go up to her.*
- *Ask her into our group activities.*
- *Hang out with her at lunchtime.*
- *Invite him to my place for an overnight.*
- *Help her with her problems.*
- *Tell her if she needs help she can ask us.*
- *Ask her if she's OK if she is having a bad day.*
- *Try to comfort her when she's sad.*
- *When he's angry be there to comfort him.*

A smaller category of suggested strategies from the team members focused directly on the effects of bullying on the victim's class performance and sought to provide peer assistance to help students stay on track with learning. Here are examples:

Assisting the victim with class work

- *Help her with her words and work.*
- *When he is off task, remind him to get back on task.*
- *If he needs help, help him with his work.*

The undercover teams often saw the need for direct intervention in contexts where bullying might take place. These amount to efforts to create specific ruptures in relations of power at the micro level. They are remarkable for their simplicity and pragmatic directness. Here are examples:

Direct interventions to interrupt bullying

- *Stick up for him.*
- *If you see any mocking or fooling, tell them to stop.*
- *Tell others to back off.*
- *We'll tell her come and talk to us if anyone is bullying her.*
- *Stop the mocking when we hear it by telling them to kick back.*
- *Tell people that the rumors aren't true.*
- *Talk to the person who has been mocking her and get them to understand what they are doing.*

- *Make friends with the people who are mocking, so then if they mock her we can tell them to stop and they don't get angry.*

Some of the undercover team members also came up with suggestions for the victim that might help change the relational dimensions. It is important to notice here that the problematic contributions to relationship do not always go in one direction. These suggestions, however, were all recorded at the first meeting of the undercover team. When the team returns for a follow-up meeting with the counselor, they are usually specifically asked whether they have any advice for the victim. Perhaps there might be more frequent suggestions at this point of the process that have not been captured by this analysis. Nevertheless, here are examples of what team members said:

Giving advice to the victim

- *Remind her that she doesn't need to go all stupid. Tell her off in a good way.*
- *Help her to stop if she is annoying.*
- *Encourage her to stand up for herself with help from us.*
- *Give her some advice on how to handle it.*

Undercover teams did not often think about involving adults in addressing bullying, usually preferring to deal with it through peer influence. Perhaps this emphasis reflects youthful confidence that they can deal with difficult situations without adult help, or perhaps it indicates distrust in adult inclination to respond with punishment. Either way, it is worth noting that this category of responses was very rare. It did, however, appear occasionally. Here are examples:

Reporting problems to teachers or other adults

- *Tell teacher if we see bullying.*
- *Tell teachers if there is any pushing.*

The Outcomes of Peer Interventions

Initial data was collected on the process forms under the heading ‘monitoring’. Then on the conclusion of each team, a survey was given to team members and victims to complete. On the ‘monitoring’ data the following outcomes were noted.

Five of the victims were offered spontaneous apologies by one of the bullies soon after the first undercover team meetings. For example:

Apologies

- *He came up to me and said he was sorry straight after the meeting.*
- *He said, “I'm sorry,” for everything he has done and gave me a chocolate.*
- *He apologized to me yesterday.*

Comments about reduction in the bullying were common. Among them were the following:

Reduction in bullying

- *Teasing and bullying has reduced a lot.*

- *She has heard that [protagonist] has said that it is over.*
- *People have stopped bullying in class and out of class.*
- *The program worked.*
- *Everyone has been talking to me. No more bullying.*
- *They haven't bullied anyone else, they are starting to not go back to their bad self.*
- *It's fine now and I want to go to class because I'm not being bullied any more.*
- *The two bullies have stopped bullying and they have told their friends to back off.*

In many instances, participants noticed changes in the victim's mood. Examples included:

Victim appears happier

- *We've noticed she's happier.*
- *[Victim K] waved at me and I waved back and felt really happy.*
- *I am much happier now, happy that I don't have to be teased.*
- *I've felt much happier because no one is being mean to me.*
- *Teachers have noticed a huge change.*
- *There is no need for the team anymore. Things are much better.*

There were spontaneous comments about changes in the victim's behavior as well.

Victim's behavior changed

- *She's done really well.*
- *Her attitude has changed.*
- *She doesn't get smart any more.*
- *She starts conversations now.*
- *He hardly puts himself down anymore.*
- *His jokes are improving.*

On the other hand there were some examples of specific complaints about the victim's behavior that were noted. Because these were specific, rather than totalizing putdowns, they appeared to be things that the victim could respond to. Examples were:

Complaints about the victim

- *All of us are trying to cooperate but we say hi and she doesn't say hi back.*
- *It's not gone for good because she does stuff.*
- *You can't have a conversation with him if he doesn't want to talk.*

Ratings of the Program’s Success

Likert scale questions — The results of the two 5-point Likert scale questions on the survey were as follows. The two responses, “successful” and “very successful” (for the second question this meant longer than a month) were combined together and a percentage calculated for the number of responses in these two categories (See Table 1)

Table 1

Success Rate and Longevity of Successful Outcomes as Assessed by Victims and Team Members

Question	Victims (n = 27)		Team members (includes bullies) (n = 138)		All (N = 165)	
	Mean rating on 5-point Likert scale	% rating success as 'successful' or 'very successful'	Mean rating on 5-point Likert scale	% rating success as 'successful' or 'very successful'	Mean rating on 5-point Likert scale	% rating success as 'successful' or 'very successful'
How successful was the undercover team?	4.44	89.7%	4.74	90.6%	4.37	90.5%
How long-lasting do you expect its effects to be?	4.23	74.1%	4.53	76.0%	4.48	75.7%

With 90.5% of team members rating the undercover teams as successful and 75.7% of them expecting the effects to last longer than a month, these data suggest a strongly positive response from the perspective of those participating in the process.

Table 2 records responses to the questions about whether participants would a) recommend the undercover team process if a friend was being bullied and b) be willing to participate in an undercover team again in future (not asked of victims).

Table 2

Willingness in Future to Recommend Undercover Team Process and to Participate Again in a Team.

Question	Yes		No		Total Yes
	Team members		Victims	Team members	
	Victims (n = 27)	(n = 138)			All (N = 165)
Would you recommend an undercover team if a friend was being bullied?	25 (92.6%)	133 (96.38%)	2 (7.4%)	5 (3.62%)	163 (94.6%)
Would you participate again?	-	134 (97.10%)	-	4 (2.90%)	-

94.6% of participants would recommend this process if a friend was being bullied and this result is consistent for both victims and team members. 97.1% of team members would also be willing to be part of a future undercover team. Moreover this figure is so high that it has to include a significant proportion of those who had been doing the bullying.

What victims would remember — In response to the open-ended question about what participants would remember most from their involvement in the undercover team process, victims mentioned most frequently the following themes: an increased sense of protection and of safety; an experience of personal support; the establishment of new friendships; and improved academic performance. Examples of what they said they would remember most were:

An increased sense of protection and of safety

- *They pulled me away when I was going to get into a fight*
- *They always stuck up for me when I was being bullied.*
- *They were always there when I needed them.*
- *They made sure that the bully stopped.*

An experience of personal support

- *They supported me in my drawings and that really inspired me.*
- *They supported me in doing sports.*
- *They helped me keep my hopes up. Supported me by saying the bullying will stop and if I was sad making sure that I was happy again in no time.*

The establishment of new friendships

- *They were really ... friendly.*
- *They treated me like everyone else and not some disease-ridden thing.*
- *They complimented me and always greeted me and got me involved in lots of things.*
- *[Participants X and Z] insisted on sitting next to me in class.*
- *They encouraged me and involved me in their group.*

Improved academic performance

- *They encouraged me to come to art class, which was a huge obstacle for me as I had been skipping art class for months. But with the support of the team I started going to art and started enjoying being there.*
- *They would make me do my work.*
- *Helped me study and in P.E. class.*

What team-members would remember — In response to the same open-ended question about what they would remember most about the undercover team process, team members mentioned most frequently the following themes: the opportunity to help others; the discussions during team meetings; and the interventions with peers to stop bullying. Examples of what they said they would remember most were:

The opportunity to help others

- *How we helped the person and successfully made them feel safe in the classroom again.*
- *Helping the people that are getting picked on in class.*
- *Getting people who are so different or not close friends to work together to help someone.*
- *Helping one person that was struggling and getting bullied.*
- *The thought that something I did helped someone out and made their day just that little bit better.*
- *Helping a person in need because she was bullied in class, and we really help her now everyone is her friend.*

- *Being nice to the person you mocked.*
- *Supporting others that never had a friend.*
- *It was good to be a part of something that helped someone out and to see that people had actually changed.*
- *That I was asked to help.*
- *The one big thing that I remember is being called in to help the school with bullying.*

The discussions during team meetings and sense of teamwork

- *I remember most having the team meeting and discovering our progress.*
- *That we are working together and that we are supportive of each other’s feelings and opinions.*
- *Having meetings and helping Victim X with his problems.*
- *The way we worked together and made ideas to help the person in need.*
- *When we all worked together, and when we got our award. I felt proud.*
- *Writing ideas of how we can or could help that person.*

The interventions with peers to stop bullying

- *I remember that it was hard at the beginning because we had to stop [Bully X] from being smart to people and therefore people wouldn’t be smart to him.*
- *That we stopped all the bullying and we had fun doing this.*
- *How we all responded when [Victim Y] was being bullied.*
- *Helping [Victim Z] to fit in by sticking up for her and being really nice to her.*
- *I remember on the second day this group of girls had mocked [Victim W] and it was fun telling them off and it was cool when the whole team stepped in.*
- *Getting people who are so different or not close friends to work together and help someone.*

What victims liked — The next open-ended question participants (victims and team members) were asked on the survey was about what they had liked or not liked about the undercover team. Answers were varied but again some themes emerged strongly. Victims clearly liked receiving the help from the undercover team. The following are examples of what victims said they liked:

What victims liked

- *I like knowing that there were people to help me if I were in trouble.*
- *I liked knowing that I don’t have to worry about people calling me names and bullying me and swearing at me.*
- *I liked that everything was confidential and it helped stop the bullying from happening again.*
- *I liked the undercover team, because Mr. Bully was a part of it and they made them realize their mistake and fix it.*

- *I liked hearing positive feedback from the other members, which helped me to think more positive and enjoy being in class.*
- *I loved the fact that I gained friends from this. I am really happy I started.*

What team members liked — Team members mentioned frequently that they had liked the following: the sense of helping others; developing awareness of bullying; that the bullying had stopped; the pleasure of working together as a team; that they had gained new friends; and the confidentiality of the team process. The following are examples of what team members said they liked:

The sense of helping others

- *I enjoyed helping to stop the bullying and knowing that I am helping someone.*
- *I liked the fact that I was given the opportunity to help out instead of being stereotyped as the bully.*
- *I really enjoyed helping out someone that never had a friend in her whole life.*
- *I liked everything about it. It's real fun to help out others and if someone was to ask me to do it again I would go for it.*
- *I liked it because it made me feel proud that I could help others when they needed it.*
- *The undercover team was not bad at all. It was great helping out someone, which needed our help so much.*

Developing awareness of bullying

- *I liked it. I thought it was good to know what some of our classmates are going through.*
- *Just being able to help someone made me more aware.*
- *We all learned a lesson from this.*
- *I did begin to understand the situation more. It was good seeing her be supported.*
- *It helped me understand that even if you can't see bullying that it's still happening.*

That the bullying had stopped

- *What I liked was when everyone stopped teasing [Victim R], that made me happy.*
- *I liked it when [Victim T] didn't get bullied anymore and she felt more happier.*
- *Helping others in bullying and making sure it will never happen again.*
- *I liked being involved because I liked stopping the mocking and bullying in the class.*
- *I liked how just six people can change how people think about someone.*
- *I liked being on the team because me and my friends stopped bullying from going around in the school.*

The pleasure of working together as a team

- *What I liked was all of us working together as a team.*
- *I liked how the team had a bond with each other and how we were all supportive.*
- *I liked coming, because I got to share ideas on how to help people, I felt good when I went back to class.*

- *I liked working as a team and the free shop vouchers.*
- *Everything was great about the team because we were supporting someone under the influence of bullying.*
- *The thing that I liked was having been chosen to be in it.*
- *I liked everything because we always got together and talked about the problem and I am going to miss that now.*

Gaining new friends

- *I liked making new friends and defending people to help the team feel better.*
- *I liked being close to [Victim O], we are now much closer than before.*
- *I'm glad that I got to know the person and make a friend.*

The confidentiality of the team process

- *I liked the fact that it was undercover and that made it easier to deal with bullying together.*
- *Keeping everything on the d-low, making sure no one was slipping.*
- *I liked the part where like no one knew we were undercover. Everybody stopped being mean to her and treated her the way the team was treating her.*
- *I liked being on a secret mission.*
- *I liked the feeling of being a secret agent.*

What victims and team members did not like about the process — While students responded with far more things that they liked than that they disliked, the survey also ask about what they had disliked. Such a question can point to problems about the process as well as to instances where it was less effective. There were, however, only two comments from victims about what they disliked.

What victims did not like

- *I think I shouldn't have chosen a team because the people I may have chosen would have spread the gossip.*
- *I didn't like the fact of being undercover because it's sort of embarrassing being bullied.*

Team members came up with more aspects of the process that they disliked. Their comments are informative, especially about implementation issues. One particular issue emerged too that deserves attention. There were repeated expressions about the difficulty of keeping the team's work secret. Some felt obliged to lie to their classmates and were uncomfortable about doing so. Here is what they said.

What team members did not like

- *I didn't like having to lie to my classmates about why we get pulled out of class to go to meetings.*
- *I didn't like how people kept asking us why we had to go and just kept asking.*
- *The thing that I hated about the undercover team was that I had no right to tell anyone other than the team and my family about it.*
- *I didn't like being questioned about why I stuck up for her.*

- *I did not like how we could not tell anyone because it was very hard but I guess it was for the victim's confidentiality.*
- *I didn't like how I was lying to my friends about where I was going and why am I going to the counselor.*

Suggestions to improve the undercover team process — Participants were also asked for their suggestions for improving the process. 17 victims (63%) and 89 team members (64%) did not respond to this question, but some did. There were several themes that emerged frequently in these responses. 20 of the team members and 5 of the victims suggested in some way that they team meet more frequently. 11 of the team members and 3 of the victims called for more students to be asked to participate in the undercover teams. We might speculate that some participants are left at the end of the process still fearful that the bullying might return. It is not exactly clear what the call for more participants suggests. Perhaps it might eliminate some of the concern about having to be so secret about the team.

Further comments — It is good practice for surveys to include space for any comments participants want to make, beyond what specific questions asked and this survey did so. Many (78% of victims and 93% of team members) did not respond but some took the opportunity to do so. Some responses were further indicators of the success of the undercover team's work. Others introduced qualifications or concerns about the process. Here are the victims' responses:

Positive comments

- *I am now regularly attending all my classes.*
- *Bullying stopped when team was around.*
- *It has changed my life for the future ahead.*

Concerns registered

- 2 girls left the team.

Discussion

The data presented here presents an accumulated picture of the undercover anti-bullying teams in action and of their achievements. While not a formal outcome study of the effects of the process, the accumulated sense conveyed is promising and indicative of the usefulness of the intervention in the eyes of the participants. Participant survey responses and the careful recording at each step of the process of student voices (both victims and undercover team members) convey a flavor of the participants' experience and yield an insight into how early teenagers think about bullying and how it can be addressed.

The nature of the bullying and its effects on the victim in this study derive from one school in New Zealand and are not gathered via a general survey. The uniqueness of the data, however, is that it represents the moment when a victim is experiencing the pain of the bullying and describing its effects in the immediacy of that moment. The strength of its impact lies primarily in its qualitative and phenomenological force rather than in quantitative accuracy.

The bullying itself ranged across actual physical assault, verbal threats, persistent put-downs and social exclusion. Bullying is clearly a practice of power but it often amounts to more than power at the personal level. It was frequently

targeted at others who were different (or perceived to be different) from a social norm in some way (with regard to disability, race, gender, sexual orientation, or bodily appearance) and it served the purpose of rendering support for social category maintenance. There was little mention of cyber-bullying by victims, which was perhaps surprising, but may be explained by the in-school data source and by the length of the data collection timeframe (2006-11). The incidence of cyber-bullying has probably increased during this period.

The effects of the bullying reported by victims ranged across internal psychological effects, effects on academic performance, and effects on other family members. There was frequent mention of feelings like sadness, fear, anger and loneliness and a number of victims were struggling with depression, the impulse to hurt themselves, the desire to run away, a sense of worthlessness, or a sense of not belonging. Some were staying away from school, or missing classes and others were struggling to concentrate in class. Learning was clearly being affected for many. Family members were described as responding in various ways: getting angry, becoming upset, and blaming the school or the victim as well as the bully. Family relations sometimes became strained in ways that were also affecting the victim. The bullying also regularly produced among victims a desire to retaliate, usually remaining unexpressed but occasionally becoming caught up in the frustrations of the power relations produced by bullying.

The suggestions of team members that became incorporated in each of the five-point plans were notable for their straightforward pragmatism. The students planned a range of simple actions to counter isolation and to build friendly relations with the victim. They mentioned helping victims with work in class. They were also willing to stand up against bullying when they encountered it. Some suggestions that indicated those who had been participating in the bullying were immediately prepared to change their behavior after hearing about the impact on the victim of the bullying. Only two suggestions involved telling teachers or other adults about what had been going on, although that could have been a result of the “undercover” ethos and an artifact of the fact that they were told about the bullying by the school counselor anyway.

With regard to the success of the undercover teams in transforming the bullying relation, 90.5% of participants rated the process as successful or very successful (and there was scarcely any difference between victims and team members in this regard). Participants were slightly less certain that the effects of the process would last as long as a month (75.7% expected this) but it should be noted that they were being asked about this at the start of the month rather than after it. In further affirmations of the value of the undercover teams, participants were adamant that they would recommend the process if someone they knew was being bullied (94.6% agreed) and 97.1% of team members indicated they were willing to be part of an undercover team again in future. These amount to solid endorsements of the process, particularly when it is remembered that undercover teams contained two students who had previously been involved in the bullying.

In response to an open-ended question about what they would remember most about the undercover team process, team members indicated that they strongly valued being asked to help another student. They also enjoyed being part of the undercover team meetings and were pleased with the success of their actions in stopping the bullying (with which the victims agreed). It was similar when asked what they liked and disliked about the process. They liked the sense of helping others, and the fact that the bullying had stopped. They sometimes mentioned that they had grown greater awareness of bullying as an issue, or had gained new friends, and they appreciated how their actions had interrupted the bullying.

With regard to the “undercover” aspect, which required them to keep the team’s existence secret and confidential there was a split however. Some students clearly reveled in this aspect of the process. Others did not like it, found it hard to maintain, and were uncomfortable about having to lie to others. Perhaps in future this aspect of the process deserves further discussion in team meetings and one student’s comment, “... *but I guess it was for the victim’s confidentiality,*” should perhaps be emphasized.

What all this amounts to is that the process is strongly indicated to have a positive effect in transforming the bullying relation in schools. Indications are too that the unique aspect of involving the bullies in the process of change is effective, as is the strategy of using peer influence to quickly change the dynamics of bullying, rather than resorting to teacher power to overrule it. It was noteworthy that so many students stated that they valued being asked to help or being given the chance to help others, suggesting that peer assistance was an overlooked resource in this and perhaps in other contexts. Contrary to some adult concerns about the undercover team process, team members were overwhelmingly consistent in the responsibility of the actions they took to challenge bullying and the courage with which they took up this task. They did not report any resorting to violent or aggressive measures themselves or use bullying tactics of their own.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There are of course limitations to this study. The data analyzed was archival data rather than a systematically-designed research study. Therefore its findings are at best preliminary. It draws upon a limited number of participants (35 victims of bullying only). Data was collected from a single school – a high school in New Zealand. How generalizable this data might be to other countries or other levels of schooling remains unknown.

Moreover the study is limited to what was written down on the process sheets by the school counselor and therefore amount to a selection from what participants said. The basis for this selection is hardly systematic. It is also limited to situations in which a student victim was willing to describe what had been happening to a counselor. Other students who might have been bullied were not included either for study or for comparison. The use of open-ended questions is useful in capturing the authentic voices of students but leads to many problems of interpretation where it is not exactly clear what was meant.

Further research should include questions more geared toward the intentional and systematic collection of generalizable data. Team meetings could perhaps be recorded for analysis, rather than relying on counselor transcription. Research should address the use of undercover teams at other levels of schooling and in other schools in other countries. It should extend the research to understand the longer-term effects of the process for both victims and bullies in order to establish just how transformative the process might be. Studies could also be designed to investigate the effects of this approach on overall classroom relationships and to compare the undercover teams approach with other approaches to bullying.

Concluding Remarks

Despite these limitations, this study does contribute to understanding the value of the undercover teams approach. No other more systematic studies of undercover anti-bullying teams are currently available and these data yield a promising picture of the work done by the teams. The data do represent the actual voices of students in a way that opens their reasoning for understanding.

The undercover teams approach does, moreover, target actual instances of bullying and appears to transform relations around these instances with an economical use of professional time and with the effective involvement

of peer group members. The process avoids the side effects of a more punitive approach and appears to provide a learning opportunity for bullies (a face-saving opportunity at that) as well as for bystanders and victims.

This process illustrates that schools can address bullying and that it is important that they do so. It is not good enough to repeat platitudes about bullying being part of growing up or to dress such ideas up in theories of bullying as a necessary rite of passage. When we do so students suffer unnecessarily and learning is affected. There are things that can be done to address bullying and this study encourages counselors, teachers and principals to play a role in transformation, rather than helpless acceptance, of the bullying relation.

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UNDERCOVER TEAM TO COMPLETE	
Agreements reached at meeting:	Team members participating:
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
MONITORING	
<i>(Further blank lines left here for recording team members' and victims' comments in stage 3 and 4.</i>	

Figure 2. Undercover Team Process Data Recording: Stage 2.