

A Systems Approach to School Bullying

by Rollo Browne

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Bullying and harassment exist in every school and are an expression of social dynamics within the school system. Historically, schools have been ineffective in doing much about bullying.

I am invited to a high school to conduct staff development on bullying and harassment. This involves me in speaking with parents; running a half-day staff development seminar with ninety teaching and administrative staff; and meeting with the welfare committee of twelve teachers.

The Special Projects teacher who invites me to do this work says the school recognises it had a significant problem and she is keen to do something effective. She reports 'a very strong us-and-them mentality among students', and lets me know that 'the students refer to this place as a prison'. A survey on bullying of all students has been conducted in the lead-up to the staff development program. Most students see bullying in the school 'as a major concern'.

Of those students surveyed 30 per cent are bullied once a week or more. Bullying is worse overall for boys than for girls, and most frequent among Year 7 boys. In particular, Year 11 students report harassment and abuse from groups of Year 7 boys. In NSW, the high school years are from Year 7 (12–13 year olds) to Year 12 (17–18 year olds).

Taking A Systems Approach

As I commence this work I am keen to make an assessment of the school and community system rather than simply focus on student behaviour or on solutions for teachers. I know this will maximise the possibility for an enabling solution to the issues being presented.

I am focusing on systems being open or closed. While no human system can survive if it closes itself to its environment, I know human systems selectively close themselves to certain input. This is relevant to my effectiveness as a source of potential input.

As I commence I am working with the following hypotheses:

- ❖ Organisations, as human systems, exhibit characteristics of both openness and closure at the same time; that is, partially open to certain things and closed to others.
- ❖ Human systems are open to information that supports their existing purpose and identity.
- ❖ Human systems are typically closed to information that threatens system identity.
- ❖ Consequently, human systems will accept new information and concepts if they are linked to system purpose and are supportive of core aspects of system identity.

- ❖ Relationships within the organisation can be described as open or closed to learning (a sociometric description).

The School and Its Community

The school is relatively new and currently has 950 students. It is a large institution about two kilometres from the nearest centre. The students come from a series of small towns spread around the district, each with its own fierce loyalties and a sense of closed ranks. There is immense diversity across the extended school community: from the very wealthy to the timber-getters, surfies, hippies, ferals, armed forces and the local Aboriginal community, and also a few Asian students.

Almost all students arrive by bus, some travelling for up to an hour. A few walk and some ride bicycles. Buses are allowed to load many more students than there are seats (for

example 98 when there are 64 seats). A large number of students have to stand for the journey, and many bus routes are over windy roads and this involves a lot of jostling and holding on round the curves. As one teacher described it: 'The kids are already greeed up when they arrive at school. They have to wait in huge queues to get a place in the bus. Some have to wait up to 40 minutes. The bus thing is a huge problem'. Misbehaviour on the bus is legally the bus driver's responsibility but the bus company keeps saying the school is responsible. The bus company has met many times with the school and so far there has been no resolution.

A number of parents have expressed dissatisfaction with discipline at the school. Enrolments for Year 7 next year are down by one third on expected projections. Some parents were taking the option of putting

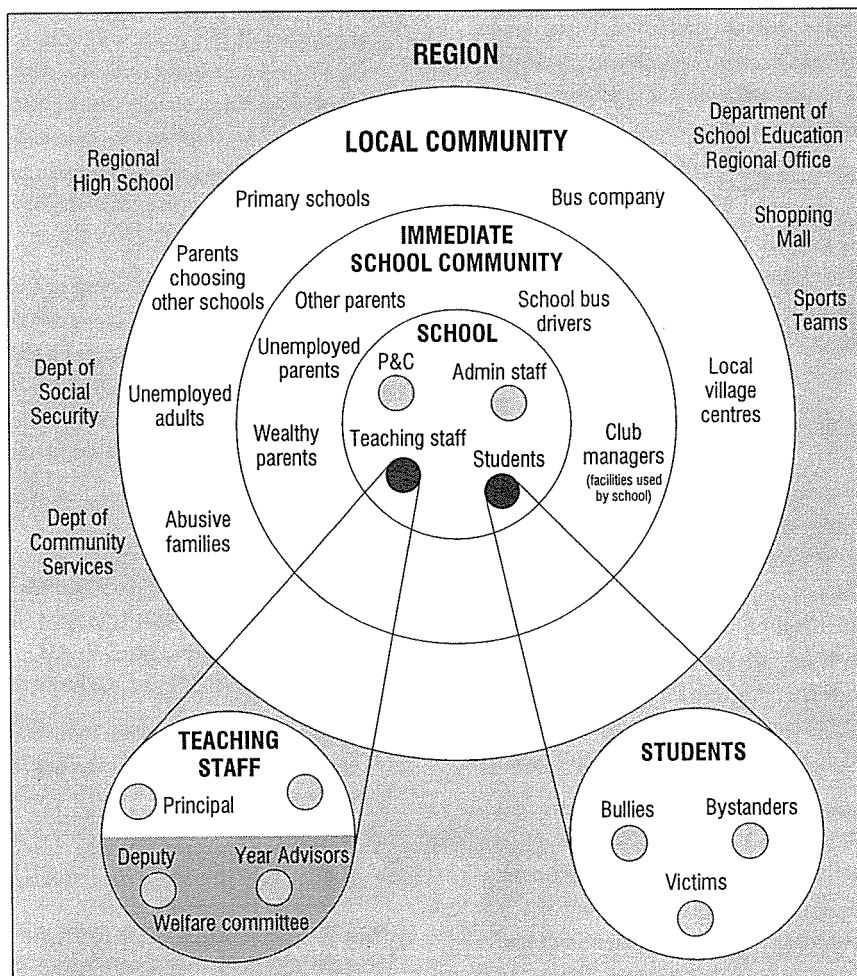


FIGURE 1: THE SCHOOL AS A SYSTEM

their children on the bus to the other high school in the regional centre.

There are restricted job opportunities in the local district and many people depend on social security. The area is well known as having high rates of domestic violence and drug and alcohol use.

The facilities in the area are extremely limited. The major form of community activity (apart from fishing) revolves around 'having a drink and playing the pokies in the clubs'. The regional centre is over 30 minutes drive away, or a \$10-plus bus ride – expensive for those on social security benefits

Analysis of the School and Community System

The nature of the overall system inevitably has an effect on student behaviour. What sense can be made of the effect of system characteristics on the high level of bullying at the school?

Invasion of Physical Space

There is clearly little respect for individual space. This is apparent in the overcrowding and jostling on the buses where students are forced into close proximity for up to an hour, prior to entering the formal learning environment. Securing a good seat is obviously desirable and in the absence of sophisticated negotiation skills a pecking order develops to share out this limited resource. Overcrowding is a significant stress factor in social institutions (jails, refugee camps, schools and housing estates).

The high level of domestic violence in the community has the effect of modelling:

- ❖ the physical invasion of personal space by the perpetrators of violence;
- ❖ some tolerance of physical aggression as this is the way things are – the strong dominate the weak;
- ❖ and the readiness to use abusive behaviour as a way of solving problems.

All of these are characteristic of bullying. Those who can take space and defend it, gain

status. There is an acceptance of intimidation and aggression.

Passing the Buck

From these behaviours we can see that one underlying world view in this system is 'in order to gain recognition and status it is necessary to force others to give me what I want'.

No one seems to be able to do anything about the bus situation. There is a stand-off. The school cannot force the bus drivers to take action. The students are relatively powerless to improve their situation and have to put up with it. When challenged, the response of the bus company is to pass the buck to the school.

The school is open to getting in an outsider to assist with the bullying issue, although one possibility is that the buck will be passed to the outside expert. The school has plans to stagger the starting time for the senior students (Years 11 and 12) next year, so they have a separate bus run and as a consequence bus travel should be less crowded. But for the moment at least, the situation is stuck.

The dynamic of avoiding the responsibility for taking action and blaming others is a characteristic response from bullies or bystanders when confronted with their behaviour. This is displayed by the group of parents critical of the school for not taking tougher action to prevent bullying, yet unwilling to be involved in the Parents and Citizens (P & C) Association. It is also present in staff critical of the Head for not getting tougher on discipline.

Blaming others is an extremely common tactic for avoiding the consequences of one's own behaviour. It is typically found in systems involved in managing 'problem' behaviour, particularly aggression in boys. For example, a

teacher may blame a student for provoking a power struggle; the student blames the teacher for belittling him. Each is closed in the way he perceives the other. Shifting this perception means developing new roles in relation to each other. When the role of blaming is overdeveloped, this becomes problematic when the person's preferred identity rests on maintaining that he is not responsible for the conflict and therefore doesn't have to change his behaviour. The rebel and the enforcer of discipline both maintain the closed system.

Life in the War Zone

Life is focused on survival. In the community there is a significant sub-group living on benefits and presumably dealing with boredom, frustration, inability to be a breadwinner, the stresses of parenting and a lack of money. One commonly modelled way of dealing with these stresses and life issues in this community is to 'get away from it all' by solitary beach fishing or by escape into alcohol and gambling. Another alternative is to lash out.

Individuals develop a sense of powerlessness when they are repeatedly exposed to a bully or a more dominant force. This tends to drive people into groups for safety. Predictably, the students move around the school in small cliques and gangs. Little sense of school spirit or cohesion as a school community is to be expected. The feeling that 'we as a community don't count' is reinforced by lack of community facilities, isolation from the regional centre and chronic unemployment in the area.

In a system where people feel they don't count, the search for some kind of personal power (a sense of worth) becomes more urgent. In the community, this shows up in the level of domestic violence, the clan-like village loyalty and, in the school, a high level of bullying and harassment.

Some students describe school as a prison and wish to escape. To them, school represents a loss of freedom, an institution where they 'do time' and they resent being told what to do. There is a corresponding

group of teachers concerned with enforcing discipline, in the complementary role of warden to the prison inmate. Unfortunately this supports the system of dominance inherent in bullying. These groups are locked into a power struggle and are closed to seeing the situation differently.

Interestingly, there are other links between sub-groups of staff and students. The bored, switched-off students going through the motions of learning have similarities to the teachers who have given up fighting to control students – teachers who have used the same teaching style for years and are looking for the least troublesome way of surviving until transfer or retirement. Both sub-groups are serving time and are mostly closed to new learning.

In contrast there are students who actually want to solve problems and will try new things. The corresponding group of teachers is prepared to experiment with different classroom management and teaching methods. These groups are open to learning.

Groups and Sub-groups within the School Community

Students

Although there are no students at the school when I visit, they have a strong presence as the focus of attention for parents and staff – their behaviour and welfare is the reason for the staff development activities.

Parents

I speak to fifteen people at the Parent Night which takes up the first hour of the P & C meeting. While an invitation to all parents would have been made, the placement of the talk within the Parents and Citizens (P&C)

meeting has probably discouraged some parents. The Head and the Special Projects Teacher both attend and I notice the P&C group are quite supportive of them.

The P&C group are very interested in the issue of bullying and in the results of the student survey. They ask a number of questions about managing bullying behaviour. The chairman runs the meeting tightly. I later witness the same determination in the Head steering the meeting of the student welfare committee where he wants it to go.

None of the hardline parents are present at the meeting. They are seen by the parents attending as part of the problem, as the hardline solution relies on increased punishment, effectively 'bullying the bully'. This split is echoed by the teaching staff when I meet with them.

The P&C sub-group of parents is open to information from an outside expert but is effectively closed to the involvement of critical hardline parents.

I suspect that a wider parent night has not been called because they wanted to vet what I have to say in case it gives ammunition to the opposing sub-group of parents.

The underlying belief in the P&C sub-group of parents is that the community does not sufficiently appreciate the work that is being done in the school; that this perception is wrong, and it must be addressed.

The P&C group's key action so far is to have set up a committee to develop and present a more positive image of the school to the community. I suggest that rather than marketing the school, it would be more productive to set up an anti-bullying committee to directly work on the bullying problem. I give an example of a Bully Busters program at another school which has formed a committee of staff, students and parents. Over 12 months it raised student and community awareness to the point where they have agreed they want it to stop. Without student agreement, I argue, nothing will change.

The suggestion is met with apparent interest but I do not get a sense the P&C will drive such a program. I think they would support whatever the school decides to do. In effect, these parents accept that those in charge of the school know best what the school needs and this is not to be challenged. In my view, this attitude undermines the potential value of the committee to the school.

The P&C parents are open to techniques of marketing and aware of the need to get certain information out but are closed to ideas that mean they will lose control of any initiative.

Teachers

Sub-groups among staff appear to form around two criteria: personal willingness to change classroom management methods; and a demand that the Head enforce a punitive school discipline system.

A) WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT METHODS

All the staff are generally fed up with the level of harassment and power struggles in class. I point out that teachers (and parents) also model bullying to control students. We spend some time on the difference between punishment and discipline based on logical consequence. Logical consequences are known in advance, not excessive to the offence and are not administered vindictively or to intimidate or humiliate. Any logical consequence can be made punitive by being unexpected, excessive or vindictive (McFadden 1996).

My sense is that the staff are open to this as an idea. Most school cultures pay lip service to the need for improved classroom management skills but little is done. Most teachers work in effective isolation. Taking punishment out of classroom discipline and cleaning up behaviour management techniques requires teachers to examine and make adjustments to their own behaviour. This involves the intensely personal realm of how they see themselves as teachers and the possibility of challenging their lived identity as a classroom practitioner.

As a group, staff are open to hearing ideas about limiting harassing and bullying behaviour in students, as long as it does not threaten their identity.

My impression is that only a small sub-group of teachers is open to deeper self-reflection. I can see that the extra work involved will have to pay off in terms of increased teacher satisfaction and classroom outcomes.

The sub-group that is open to experimenting with classroom management holds strongly to the identity of a teacher as someone who generates learning outcomes.

In my experience there is always a (second) sub-group of teachers who are traditional (autocratic) in their classroom control techniques and unwilling to change their ways. School management has little direct control over classroom management and teachers value their autonomy in the classroom highly. During the day, a number of male teachers tell me how they need to be quite strict with students and that this works well.

I have been alerted to a (third) sub-group of teachers who, like some parents, want a tougher system of punishment. These two sub-groups are closed to challenging their identity but are open to learning how to

improve the effectiveness of what they were already doing.

Sub-groups that are closed to changes in their classroom management techniques hold primarily to the identity of teacher as someone who maintains control.

B) PUNITIVE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE SYSTEM

During the day I become aware of a fundamental disagreement in the school about the need for a return to a 'levels system' of school discipline. Under such a system, a student at Level 1 might be warned that if their behaviour deteriorates they will be sent to the Head Teacher. At Level 2 they may get put on a conduct card to be signed by a teacher after each lesson, and cannot go on excursions. At Level 3, parents are informed and they spend all non-class time in detention. Level 4 involves suspension.

A (fourth) sub-group, including Head Teachers, feel the lack of a clear level system makes it impossible to get any consistency in consequences for misbehaviour. If they send a student to the Head they can not be sure that the student will be punished. This undermines the whole system of behaviour management in the school. If the rules are being broken 'we must get tougher'. It is perceived that students are able to manipulate the system and these staff want it tightened up. This sub-group is closed to the Head's view that each case has to be dealt

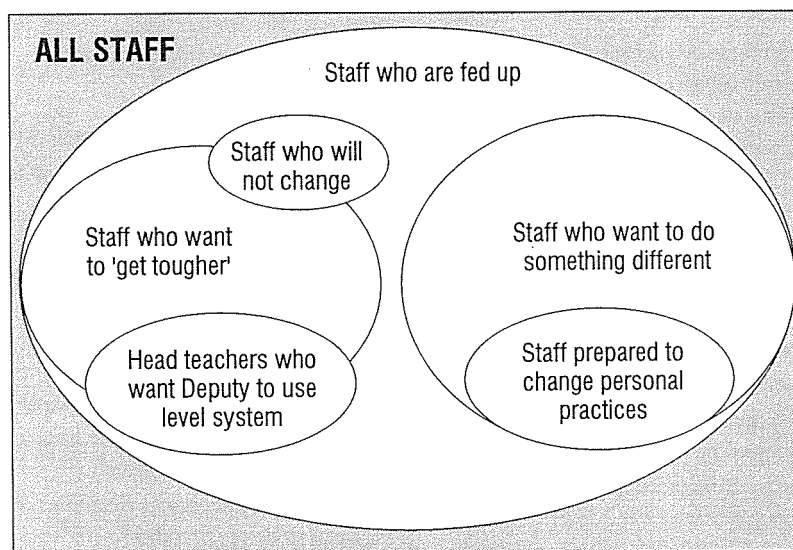


FIGURE 2: SUB-GROUPS EVIDENT AT TEACHER IN-SERVICE TRAINING

with on its merits and that a rule-based application of consequences is inappropriate.

The underlying belief of this fourth sub-group of staff is that consistency of punishment is essential in controlling student behaviour.

The Head does not believe in such a system and treats each student according to need. He believes that standard punishments are not effective and that it is necessary to engage the student in choosing different behaviour. Some staff (fifth sub-group) agree with him and are open to moving to a less traditional discipline structure.

The difference between these last two sub-groups repeats the division between those parents of supportive of and those critical of the Head. I begin to suspect that one reason I have been invited to the school is to soften up the 'tougher rules' sub-group of staff into accepting non-punitive initiatives.

The Student Welfare Group

I meet with a group of 12 teachers including all Year Advisers, the Head and the Teacher Special Projects to examine the welfare structure of the school.

The group is upbeat; hopeful that something can change. They are action-focused and want something they could do immediately that will make a difference. There is a sense that perhaps someone will guide them out of the wilderness. They are open to suggestions that fit their collective picture of the situation. They are open to hearing from me, an external consultant, who basically supports them in their work. They are closed to parents critical of the welfare/discipline system in the school and of their role in it.

As I had at the P&C meeting, I suggest that bullying will not change until the students want it to change. Therefore the teachers have to involve the students, and preferably parents, in the process. It is suggested that the school community:

- ❖ define bullying in simple terms that all members of the system can understand and support

- ❖ develop an effective way to deal with reported bullying
- ❖ focus the intervention on the best outcome for all involved, not just the victim.

The group is initially closed to the idea of including the wider community as it means less control over the program. It means possibly working with parents highly critical of the school and its behaviour management policies.

Doing this will mean giving up the notion that they as teachers are autonomous and have sufficient power to make effective changes without involving students or parents. Involving others means a longer process, more work and less certainty about the results. After some thought, the group do accept the need to involve the wider community. One possible explanation is that the group warms up to their wider identity as welfare managers rather than as front-line welfare agents.

The Welfare group is prepared to work out an improved welfare/discipline structure but is divided about the effectiveness of the current system for dealing with bullying incidents. The Head is adamant that the discipline system works. No one challenges him on this point, after all, he is responsible for discipline in the school.

The role of the Head is significant. He is closed to the idea that his plan isn't up to the task. This directly threatens his identity as a leader. However, he is open to the idea that the school community does not perceive or value the effectiveness of the existing discipline system. This maintains his identity (self-perceived) as 'the prophet of light' in a troubled system. As well, his task matches that of the P&C in seeking to lift the image of the school.

Once the Head indicates his willingness to accept the idea of involving the wider community, the welfare group becomes open to the idea of extending their operations.

The meeting becomes more task focused. Action is planned to:

- ❖ include students in doing something about the bullying culture at the school;
- ❖ create an anti-bullying committee including parents and students; and
- ❖ find ways to raise community perceptions of the effectiveness of the current discipline.

Analysis

Clearly elements within the school system are open in some ways and closed in others at the same time. This is reflected in the behaviours of the various sub-groups. The P&C parents, the school staff as a body and the welfare team were open to ideas from an outsider that are in line with their concerns about the school. They are all disappointed that enrolments are down and want to make changes. This attitude of openness reinforces the roles they see themselves in: hardworking caregivers, considerate practitioners and effective organisers of learning.

On the other hand, the P&C parents are closed to the critical ideas of 'hardline' parents. The Head and some teachers also hold this position. A sub-group of 'get tough' teachers are closed to the Head's ideas on discipline. The staff as a whole are not ready to examine their own classroom practices as teachers and a sub-group will always remain

closed to this. These attitudes support their existing identities as effective teachers who do not need to reconsider their own management styles.

Over the time of the discussions and seminars, several changes are noticeable. The Welfare group, initially closed to the idea of involving the wider community (especially the students), accept the value of raising community and student awareness and relinquishing, somewhat, control of the anti-bullying campaign.

This is assisted by the strong action focus of the welfare teachers, one of whom had students ready to perform a sketch at a school assembly. Their identity is predominantly one of action-focused student mentors.

The whole staff group also listen intently to the description of non-punitive discipline systems. Despite the friction over the school discipline structures, there is no repudiation of the non-punitive concept. I put this down to the linking of non-punitive measures to the fundamental purpose of schools and the primary task of teachers: minimising student misbehaviour so the learning purpose of the school can be met.

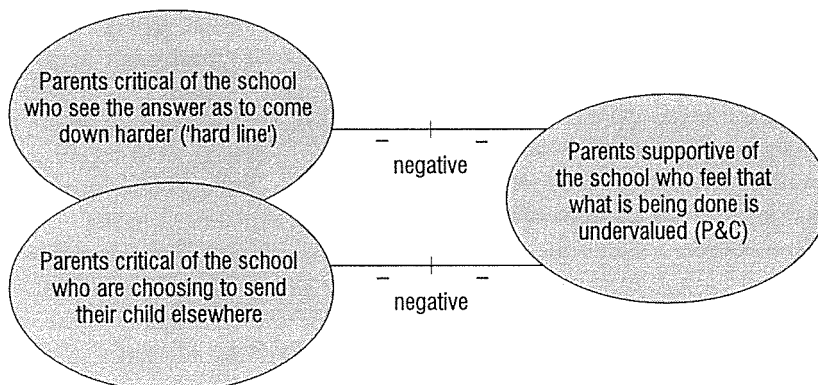


FIGURE 3: PARENT SUB-GROUPS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS OVER THE ISSUE OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

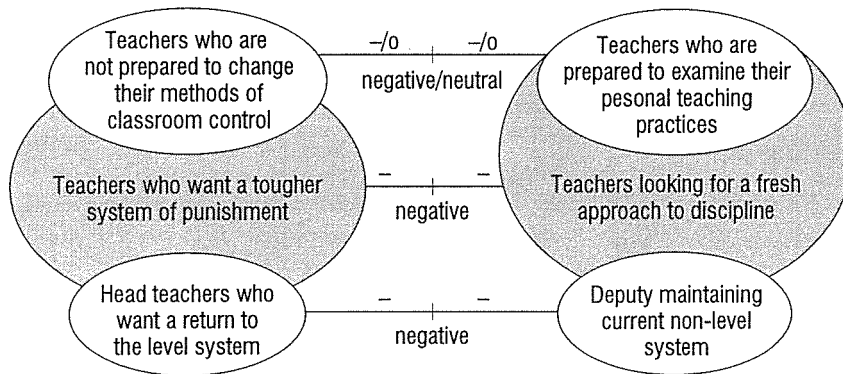


FIGURE 4: TEACHER SUB-GROUPS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS OVER THE ISSUE OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Themes

Authority and Dependency

There are a number of themes being expressed throughout the school community. Fundamental is the notion of who's in charge and how they use their authority. This issue is seen in the struggle for control of parents over their children, of spouses over their partners, of unemployed people over their lives, of the Head over teachers, of teachers over students and of students over each other.

When the normal methods of control (simple request, pointing out of reasonable consequences) begin to fail, the traditional response of getting tougher is used. The need to maintain control leads to an escalation of punishment (domestic violence, bullying, the call for tougher rules, the de facto exclusion of disaffected parents).

This goes hand in hand with blaming others or passing the buck for difficult and unresolved situations. This occurs with behaviour management on the school buses, with teachers frustrated at the lack of a Level system, with domestic violence perpetrators and bullies blaming victims for provoking them and for deserving it and even with unemployed people that have lost heart. This inevitably leads to negative or closed

relationships between elements in the system.

There is also dependency on an expert outsider to lead them out of the situation. This is reinforced by the cultural norm of accepting hierarchical leadership and of disaffected groups withdrawing and going silent. This includes refusal to challenge the Deputy in the student welfare group, critical parents not attending P&C meeting and less powerful spouses saying nothing for fear of conflict escalating.

Polarisation

A second theme is the split in each major school group over the issue of discipline.

Parents concerned about behaviour and academic performance at the school have formed at least three sub-groups. The relationship between those parents critical of the school and those supportive of the school is negative or closed, as shown in Figure 3 opposite.

Teachers form a number of sub-groups around the issue of discipline. The relationship between the two main clusters is closed or negative neutral as shown above in Figure 4.

The student welfare group is not in itself split although there were two identifiable sub-groups as shown below in Figure 5.

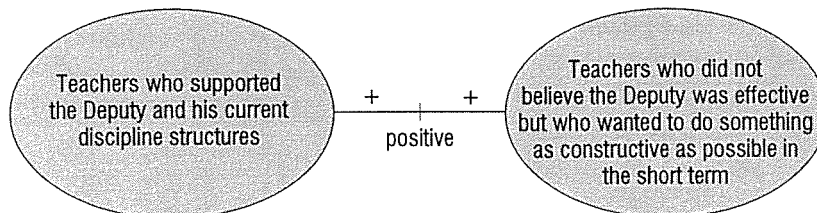


FIGURE 5: STUDENT WELFARE TEACHER SUB-GROUPS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP OVER THE ISSUE OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

The relationship between the student welfare sub-groups is positive and open. There is sufficient goodwill for them to find a course of action that satisfies both student welfare sub-groups. I believe this is because they are united in their distress at the existing bullying situation and are aware that they hold in common a clear purpose in seeking the best possible outcomes for the students.

Conclusion

It seems to me that any resolution of the situation will require that all key players be involved. In systems terms, the more elements of a system that can be gathered in decision-making, the greater the chance of an enabling solution. I saw the following views displayed:

- ❖ The school as a whole sees the students as the client group who need intervention (and invite the outside expert in to fix them). At this stage there is no acceptance that staff would have to change their classroom management practices.
- ❖ The Head sees the perception of some parents and some staff as a difficulty and the incidence of bullying as a related issue.
- ❖ The P&C parents see some students and some parents as the problem
- ❖ The hardline parents see the teachers as the problem.
- ❖ The get-tough teachers see the Head as one problem and students as a related problem.
- ❖ Initially no group is particularly concerned with what the students think. This changes during the discussions, most noticeably in the student welfare group.

Each group takes a stance that is closed to learning from the people they have identified as the problem. Difficulty arises about whose view is 'correct', who is right and what should be done. In one sense there is no correct view. However, if each party is not involved in the solution they will undermine whatever course of action follows.

Each group's stance displays its identity and the values it identifies with its purpose. Each group is open to and easily accepts information it has already agreed with or which does not seriously challenge its values. Where information is threatening, the sub-groups are closed. For example, the Head is defending his discipline system.

Schools are complex, multi-layered communities, with multiple agendas, tensions and factions. In thinking systemically I become aware of a possible starting point for the next phase of change. If I were to work further with this school my first instinct would be to address the division in the sub-groups by creating a shared identity and purpose for the desired change. This has begun in the Student Welfare Committee – when the larger purpose of improved welfare outcomes was brought out, relations between two sub-groups became more positive.

Establishing a vision for desired change across the entire school community at one level will not be hard. There is general agreement that the level of bullying is too high and the realisation that parents are enrolling their children elsewhere.

However, if sub-group relations are left unaddressed old dynamics between the groups may reassert themselves. Sub-groups need to become more aware of their roles, mutual concerns and how they are open and closed to learning from each other. Before the system can really be open to new input and unify around an overarching vision, sub-group relations must be recognised and addressed. This is the challenge facing the management group.

As I leave the school I am left with the impression of the difficulty of working within such day-to-day tension. The students arrive back tomorrow and the whole system gets re-enacted all over again. I begin reviewing my experience in their system to see if I can make some sense of it. I later offer to work further with the school but there is no follow-up.

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