



## The impact of a peer counselling scheme to address bullying in an all-girl London secondary school: A short-term longitudinal study

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**Background.** A variety of peer support schemes are now widely used in schools, notably to reduce bullying. However, there has been little systematic investigation of the impact and effectiveness of these approaches.

**Aims.** To assess the impact of a peer counselling scheme on peer counsellors and the school community.

**Sample.** The research was conducted in a North London all-girls state secondary school. Data were collected from all lower school classes (years 7, 8, and 9) and some staff members, in addition to year 10 peer counsellors and an age equivalent comparison group.

**Methods.** A detailed 1-year longitudinal study combined qualitative and quantitative methods of assessment.

**Results.** Peer counsellors benefited from their involvement through an acquisition of transferable communication and interpersonal skills, and, compared to age-matched control pupils, had increased social self-esteem. There were no reductions in self-reported bullying and victimization, but in general pupils believed that there was less bullying in school and that the school was doing more about bullying, with year 7 students showing the most positive changes.

**Conclusions.** Peer-counselling schemes can improve self-esteem of peer supporters, and also impact positively on perceptions of bullying in the school; but impact on actual experiences of bullying is less clear, and there may be problems with the acceptance and use of such programmes by older students.

The Children Act 2004 highlighted the need for all UK schools to ensure the safety of children and young people and attempts to monitor and prevent pupil-pupil bullying are now assessed during school inspections (OFSTED, 2005). The repeated nature and imbalance of power between a bully and their victim distinguishes bullying from the broader concept of aggression (Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefoghe, 2002).

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With increased recognition of bullying as a group phenomenon, some interventions have focused on empowering bystanders to take action against bullying (Salmivalli, 1999). Cowie and Hutson (2005) suggest that the power of bystanders can be harnessed by encouraging students to adopt formal peer support roles within schools.

### **Peer support schemes and their possible benefits**

Peer support describes activities and systems within which children and young people's potential to help one another can be fostered through appropriate training. There are many different forms of peer support, the most common being: befriending; mediation/conflict resolution; mentoring; and counselling-based approaches (Cowie & Wallace, 2000). Counselling-based programmes are the most structured approaches and are more commonly used in secondary schools. Key aspects of all peer support schemes are that selected students are trained to be peer supporters; and that certain students will be users of the scheme, helped either directly by the peer supporter, or by the peer supporter arranging or encouraging other forms of help to be sought and/or given to them. Longer-term aims are to improve peer relationships generally and to reduce rates of unresolved conflicts and bullying among pupils in the school; and to have positive effects on school climate or ethos (Cowie, 1999).

Peer support has grown in popularity and is now a widely used anti-bullying intervention in primary and secondary schools in a number of countries. It is generally believed that the inclusion of such projects in schools provides significant opportunities for young people to become actively involved in decision-making on matters which directly affect them (Parsons & Blake, 2004). Some research has suggested that peer support systems can provide benefits for users of the scheme, peer supporters themselves and schools in general (Cowie, Naylor, Talamelli, Chauhan, & Smith, 2002; Naylor & Cowie, 1999). Smith and Watson (2004), in a review of ChildLine in Partnership with Schools' (CHIPS) peer support schemes, generally found schemes to be well received by staff and pupils, although boys in secondary schools were the least enthusiastic. Several difficulties often encountered when implementing peer support schemes were identified in this, and other studies. These include: getting sufficient representation of males as peer supporters; avoiding under-use of peer support services, especially when there can be possible stigmatization of users; ensuring awareness of the service through the school community; providing sufficient resources of time, staff, and space; quality of training, and staff supervision; support and acceptance of staff members, especially senior management (Cartwright, 2005; Cowie, 2000; Cowie *et al.*, 2002; Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Sharp, 2001).

However, the conclusions regarding the effectiveness of peer support schemes are mainly based on general opinions of teachers and pupils as to whether the scheme was helpful, often at just 1 time point. More convincing would be longitudinal studies, incorporating self-reports as well as general perceptions. Baginsky (2004) suggested that limitations such as failure to explore long-term effects and also an absence of control groups are issues which should be addressed in peer support research.

Two longitudinal studies have assessed peer-led anti-bullying interventions of a general nature. Peterson and Rigby (1999) measured victimization rates in years 7 (aged 12-13), 9, 10, and 11 (aged 14-17) over a 2-year period in one Australian secondary school, following a multifaceted intervention which included student-led activities and a peer helping scheme. There was no overall decrease in victimization, but there was a significant interaction with year group ( $p < .05$ ): victimization was less for year 7

pupils, but greater for year 9 pupils, at the post-test. Salmivalli (2001) reported effects of a small-scale peer-led intervention of a general awareness-raising nature in a Finnish secondary school. Seventh- (aged 12-13) and eighth-graders (aged 13-14) were assessed. For seventh-grade girls there were positive outcomes (reduction in self- and peer-reports of victimization), but these were not found in eighth-grade girls, or either year group of boys. Girls showed an increase in willingness to influence bullying problems; but boys actually increased in pro-bullying attitudes. However, this intervention was very short and there was no control group comparison.

Two studies have assessed the use of specific peer support anti-bullying strategies with the inclusion of non-intervention control classes. Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli, and Cowie (2003) evaluated the impact of a befriending intervention on students' participant bullying roles in sixth, seventh, and eighth-grades (aged 11-14) of two Italian middle schools over 1 year (October-May). Experimental classes showed a decrease in bullying and outsider roles, and less of an increase in reinforcer and assistant bullies, compared to controls; especially for boys. There were no significant changes in defender or victim roles overall, but both increased at sixth grade only. Attitudinal data showed an increase in anti-bullying attitudes only in sixth-graders. Ellis, Marsh, and Craven (2005) evaluated effects of a peer mentoring programme for year 7 students (aged 12-13) in three Australian secondary schools. Improvements were found in mentored year 7 pupils compared to control pupils in some aspects, including self-concept, and lower pro-bully attitudes; but there were no significant changes for pro-victim attitudes, or global self-esteem. This study did not assess levels of bullying, and did not report on variations in success by year group.

Overall, these findings suggest that both general peer-led interventions and specific peer support schemes may provide some beneficial outcomes, often varying by year group with more positive outcomes for younger students. One study has found rather negative outcomes. Cowie and Olafsson (2000), investigating the impact of a peer counselling scheme in an English secondary school, measured bullying rates over 1 year; they found some increase in students' self-reports of bullying others, and a decrease in reported interventions against bullying. This was attributed to poor management of the scheme, and a difficult catchment area with high levels of pupil aggression. No analysis was made by year group. Further research is required to investigate the impact of a peer counselling scheme in a less aggressive school climate.

There has also been little study of the effects of training on peer counsellors themselves, beyond general interview material. Cowie and Olafsson (2000) reported qualitative data indicating some positive views of the scheme from those trained as peer counsellors. Ellis *et al.* (2005) reported that the year 10 peer mentors in their study showed advances in global self-esteem, leadership ability, perceptions of bullying, self-confidence, peer relations, and social effectiveness.

Ahmed (2005) has found that students with higher shame acknowledgement (SA) (consisting of components of admitting shame, accepting responsibility, and making amends) and lower shame displacement (SD) (including components of externalizing blame, retaliatory anger, and displaced anger) are more likely to intervene in assisting victims of bullying. Teaching adaptive shame management skills may be a valuable way to enhance peer support schemes to reduce school bullying, and it is of interest to assess peer supporters on such measures, in addition to assessing other possible outcome variables such as self-esteem and social skills (SS).

Peer support training typically focuses on active listening and effective communication skills, empathy and perspective taking (Cowie & Wallace, 2000).

Solution focused therapy is an approach that emphasizes a solution- rather than a problem focused approach to difficulties (Wheeler, 2001). Young and Holdorf (2003, p. 271) suggest that 'solution focused therapy provides an(other) effective strategy to support pupils vulnerable to bullying'. Although their report was based on therapy provided by adult counsellors rather than trained students, the approach may be useful for secondary school-based peer counselling schemes. Here we evaluate the impact of a peer-counselling scheme based on such an approach, in one all-girls secondary school.

### **Research aims and objectives**

We aimed to evaluate the effect of a recently implemented peer support counselling service using a range of quantitative and qualitative methods:

- Questionnaires and discussion groups with peer supporters, to assess their views of the training and of the scheme itself.
- A pre-test, post-test design to evaluate changes in peer counsellors' shame management, self-esteem and SS, compared to an aged-matched control group.
- An evaluation of the perception and use of the peer counselling service was conducted across the whole lower school student population (years 7, 8, and 9), and the staff.
- Changes in students' self-reported bullying awareness and behaviour were monitored across the lower school.

## **Method**

### **The school**

The research was conducted in a North London all-girls state secondary school, with 673 pupils in years (grades) 7-11, and 58 teaching staff. This school was recruited as part of a local education school initiative, and was described as a 'good improving school' in the latest (2004) OFSTED report. Students were representative of a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Pupil surveys were conducted with all lower school classes (416 pupils: 139 in year 7, aged 11-12 years; 140 in year 8, aged 12-13 years; and 137 in year 9, aged 13-14 years; 15 classes in total, 5 tutor groups from each year).

### **Overview of the scheme**

A peer support counselling scheme was introduced as part of a review of how bullying was tackled within the school, following suggestions made by the student council. The school secured funding for external training and support, and the scheme was launched alongside a reformulation of the schools' anti-bullying policy, and curriculum based activities relating to bullying were also conducted during the autumn term.

Staff and student members of the school council interviewed volunteers from year 10 students and selected 14 as peer counsellors. Selection criteria were students' interpersonal skills, previous experience, approachability, and suitability for the role. Selected students received external training from an experienced supervisor of a successful and long running peer support programme at another North London secondary school. An initial all-day training session was held in the autumn term, with two shorter sessions at the end of the first term, and a final morning session at the

beginning of the spring term. Subsequently, regular monitoring meetings were held with the external trainer.

Training involved the development of basic skills associated with peer support, such as active listening and effective communication skills, the importance of maintaining personal boundaries, and issues of confidentiality; and the use of solution focused therapy. Peer counsellors were encouraged to adopt a non-judgemental attitude in supporting and helping younger students to think of their own solutions to various interpersonal problems, and assistance and practice in how to structure the peer counselling sessions was provided. Counselling sessions would begin with 'problem-free' conversation to enable the 'client' to relax. Peer counsellors used an emotional scaling apparatus to ascertain where the 'client' was currently and where they ideally wanted to be; 'clients' were asked how happy they would feel if they had a perfect day at school (on a 10-point scale), and why they would feel this way; then where they felt they were on this scale at the current time, and why; and finally, ways in which they could move up this scale and feel happier. Peer counsellors were encouraged to take a positive view and compliment the 'clients' on implied skills and personal qualities indicated by the student themselves.

The scheme was initiated at the start of the spring term and fully implemented by the end of this term. Peer counsellors designed ways to advertize the scheme; there was some attempt to raise awareness across the whole school, but the focus was on encouraging year 7 and 8 students to use it. Each year 7 and 8 class was assigned two peer counsellors who attended registration periods twice a week, in order to raise awareness of the peer counselling scheme, and to build a relationship of trust and familiarity with the younger students. Formal counselling sessions for individual students were run by pairs of peer supporters and conducted in the pastoral care office during scheduled appointment times. Students could make individual appointments by written request. Some problems were encountered with other students removing and reading these requests; an e-mail based system was introduced, but only a couple of weeks prior to the end of the academic year, so many year 7 and 8 pupils were not aware of this by the time of the post-test.

Counselling sessions typically lasted 20–30 minutes and involved the peer counsellors helping the student to resolve their personal difficulties, using the solution focused approach developed during the training sessions. Students were encouraged to arrange a follow-up session if they thought it would be helpful. Supervision meetings were held every 2 weeks, to enable the peer counsellors to discuss any problems they may have had and to receive further support and guidance from the adult supervisor of the scheme.

## **Measurements**

### *Evaluation by peer counsellors*

All 14 peer counsellors completed a short questionnaire after the final training session in March. This asked them to rate how enjoyable they found the training to be (very enjoyable/enjoyable/not sure/not enjoyable/not at all enjoyable) and how useful they believed this training to be (very useful/useful/not sure/not useful/not at all useful). They were also asked whether they thought the training had been sufficient for preparing them for the role as a peer counsellor (yes, not sure, no).

Discussion groups were held in the autumn term, a week before training for the peer counselling role began, and again in June at the end of the academic year.

Each discussion group was run by the researcher and at the school's request, was attended by the supervisor of the scheme.

*Assessment of peer counsellors and age-matched control pupils*

Peer counsellors and a control group of students completed three questionnaires. The control group were 14 year 10 girls, randomly selected from pupils who had applied to become peer counsellors but had not been successful at the recruitment stage. Both groups completed the scales before training for the peer counselling scheme had begun (T1), and again at the end of the summer term (T2).

*Shame management.* This comprised eight bullying scenarios from the management of shame state shame acknowledgement and shame displacement scale (MOSS-SASD: Ahmed, Braithwaite, & Braithwaite, 1996); students indicated agreement with 10 response statements relating to each scenario, five linked to SA and five to SD. Items were summed to give an average SA and SD score, range 0-5; increased scores reflected higher SA and displacement. Cronbach  $\alpha$ s were .88 at both pre- and post-test for SA, and .84 at both pre- and post-test for SD.

*Social self-esteem (SSE).* This comprised 18 items that loaded on Factor 3 (SSE) in Clarbour and Rodger's (2004) emotional behaviour questionnaire. Items included 'I am popular with most of the children in my class' and 'I sometimes feel really unwanted'. Students were asked whether they believed each statement was more or less like them. Some original statements were reversed to ensure a balance of positive and negative items. Scores could range from 0 to 18; higher SSE scores indicated better SSE. Cronbach  $\alpha$ s were .80 at both pre-test and post-test.

*Social skills.* All 20 items from Fox and Boulton's (2005) SS scale were initially included, 14 negative and 6 positive statements. Statements included 'I often try to spoil other kids games' and 'I let other kids know that they can't pick on me'. Students indicated whether each statement was more like them or less like them. Due to unsatisfactory Cronbach  $\alpha$ s (.50 at both pre-test and post-test), four items with the lowest alpha coefficients were removed. The remaining 16 items were summed to give a SS score. Scores could range from 0 to 16; high scores reflected good self-reported SS. Cronbach  $\alpha$ s were .69 at pre-test and .71 at post-test.

*Awareness and use of the scheme*

Questionnaires based on those used by Smith and Watson (2004) were distributed in the summer term during PGCE lessons to all years 7, 8, and 9 classes and completed by 342 pupils (response rate = 82%; 89% of year 7 = 123; 78% of year 8 = 109; 80% of year 9 = 110). Similar questionnaires were circulated to staff members, with responses from 34 (59%). Students and staff were asked whether or not they knew of the peer support system in their school, how to use this service, and whether they knew of anybody who had used it (yes/no); and if they believed that it was a good idea to have this peer support scheme in school, and whether they thought that the scheme helped to stop bullying (yes/not sure/no). Students were also asked if had used the scheme (yes, more than

once/yes, once/no) and if so, if they thought it had helped them (yes, a lot/yes, a bit/no). An open ended question at the end invited further comments on how the peer support scheme worked in the school.

#### *Experiences and perceptions of bullying in the school*

Questionnaires were given to years 7, 8, and 9 students after the autumn half term (T1) and completed by 375 pupils (response rate = 90%; 92% of year 7 = 128; 89% of year 8 = 125; 89% of year 9 = 122) and after the summer half term (T2) by 342 pupils (response rate = 82%; 89% of year 7 = 123; 78% of year 8 = 109; 80% of year 9 = 110).

Students were given the following definition of bullying; 'For the purpose of this research, bullying will be defined as the repeated abuse of power, where a negative act which occurs on purpose is *repeated* against a victim who *does not feel able to defend him- or herself*. Bullying behaviour can include physical acts such as hitting or pushing but also includes less obvious forms such as deliberately excluding someone from a group or spreading rumours about an individual'. Questions related to whether students had ever experienced bully/victim problems (yes/no), if so how recently this had occurred (this week/earlier this term/last term/earlier this school year/last school year/over one school year ago/before starting this school), if they thought bullying occurs in their school (yes often/sometimes/not sure/not a lot/hardly ever) and whether they thought the school does anything about bullying (yes a lot, yes a bit, not sure, no).

#### **Ethical issues**

Parental consent for peer counsellors' involvement in the project was obtained, together with oral consent for participation in discussion groups. All questionnaires were anonymous and confidential, students were informed that they could opt out of responding if they wished, and a bullying help sheet was provided. The study was approved by the Departmental Ethics Committee.

## **Results**

### ***Evaluation by peer counsellors***

#### *Questionnaire responses*

Almost all the 14 peer counsellors said that they found the training either 'very enjoyable' ( $N = 3$ ) or 'enjoyable' ( $N = 10$ ); and the training to be either 'very useful' ( $N = 7$ ) or 'useful' ( $N = 6$ ). Nearly all ( $N = 13$ ) thought that the training had been sufficient for preparing them for their role and said they would like to continue to be part of the peer counselling scheme. One student was not sure whether she wanted to continue, felt that the training had not been sufficient, was unsure whether she had found it enjoyable and had not found it useful.

#### *Discussion group*

Due to school timetable constraints each discussion group included all 14 peer counsellors. Sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed and common themes in the text identified. The initial discussion group focused on students' awareness of what their role of peer counsellor would involve, and their thoughts and concerns about joining the scheme. The later discussion session was for all peer counsellors to reflect on their

experiences of the training and their involvement in the scheme. As expected with larger groups, some students contributed more to the discussion than others, however all students were encouraged to participate and there was generally a high degree of consensus between students.

In the initial discussion group, a concern raised by eight peer counsellors was whether the scheme should be aimed at both years 7 and 8, or only focused on year 7. Six felt that year 8 students would not need this service and expressed some apprehension in offering support to these older students.

In the end of year discussion group, all peer counsellors stated that the uptake and use of the service had been slow, particularly with year 8 students. Four peer counsellors suggested that students were deterred from requesting an appointment due to concerns regarding the privacy of written requests; nine thought that the new e-mail based system would help to overcome this problem, while five were unsure, but did think it was a good idea to offer it. Another issue was variation in experiences of form group registration sessions. Perceived success of these meetings was related to teachers' expectations of the scheme and the role the peer counsellors adopted. Recent examination and extracurricular commitments meant that 10 of the peer counsellors had not visited their assigned form groups for some time; those who had, indicated that it had been on a more informal basis. Two peer counsellors suggested that to encourage students to use the service, such meetings needed to occur more frequently, all remaining peer supporters agreed with this comment.

Despite these implementation issues, all peer counsellors were very positive about their involvement in the scheme. Ten of them stated that the skills developed during training could be utilized outside of the formal peer counselling setting and they had used them to communicate more effectively with friends and siblings. All commented on how being involved in the scheme had improved their confidence, with six mentioning improved feelings of self-worth, and eight the stronger relationship between them and staff running the scheme.

#### *Assessment of peer counsellors and age-matched controls*

Results from the three questionnaires are reported in terms of standardized effect sizes (ES), and independent group  $t$  tests; see Table 1. For each variable, any initial differences between the groups were explored. Change scores for each participant were then calculated by subtracting the T1 score from T2 score. The difference in the mean change scores between the groups was then calculated. Bonferroni adjustments were made to the corresponding  $t$  tests in order to control the family wise error rate of 0.05. Thus the per comparison error rate was set to 0.006. Cohen (1988) has suggested general conventions for standardized ES, where 0.20 is 'small', 0.50 'medium', and 0.80 indicates a 'large' ES.

#### *Shame acknowledgement and displacement*

Before training, peer counsellors expressed more adaptive shame management than controls. The mean pre-training SA score for peer counsellors was higher than for controls,  $t_{(26)} = 3.39$ ,  $p < .006$ ,  $ES = 1.3$ ; whilst their SD score was a little lower,  $t_{(26)} = -2.12$ ,  $p < .006$ ,  $ES = -0.9$ . Although shame management itself was not used as a selection criterion, components associated with adaptive shame management such as higher levels of admitting shame, accepting responsibility and making amends (SA) and

**Table 1.** Peer counsellor and control groups' mean social characteristics scores, in autumn (T1) and summer (T2) terms

	T1	T2	Change scores
Shame acknowledgement			
Peer counsellors	3.82 (0.54)	3.38 (0.88)	-0.45 (0.85)
Control group	2.78 (1.02)	2.76 (0.96)	-0.02 (0.55)
Shame displacement			
Peer counsellors	0.71 (0.53)	0.55 (0.43)	-0.15 (0.56)
Control group	1.23 (0.77)	0.87 (0.67)	-0.37 (0.93)
Social self-esteem			
Peer counsellors	13.00 (3.09)	14.79 (2.46)	1.79 (2.23)
Control group	13.07 (4.31)	12.57 (4.13)	-0.50 (1.79)
Social skills			
Peer counsellors	12.71 (2.76)	14.36 (2.17)	1.64 (2.53)
Control group	11.64 (2.82)	12.43 (2.50)	0.79 (1.58)

lower levels of externalizing blame, retaliatory anger and displaced anger (SD) may have contributed to perceived suitability and selection for the peer counselling role. However, there was no significant change over time for either group in SA,  $t_{(26)} = -1.58$ ,  $p = .125$ , ES = 0.6, or SD,  $t_{(26)} = 0.74$ ,  $p = .466$ , ES = 0.3.

#### *Social self-esteem*

There were no significant differences between peer counsellors and controls in initial SSE scores,  $t_{(26)} = -0.05$ ,  $p = .960$ , ES = 0. However, peer counsellors' mean SSE score increased by the summer term, whilst controls mean score reduced slightly, a significant difference,  $t_{(26)} = 3.00$ ,  $p < .006$ , ES = 1.2.

#### *Social skills*

There were no significant differences between peer counsellors and controls in initial SS scores,  $t_{(26)} = 1.02$ ,  $p = .319$ , ES = 0.4. Scores increased in both groups over time, more for the peer counsellors but not significantly so,  $t_{(26)} = 1.08$ ,  $p = .292$ , ES = 0.7.

### **Perceptions of the peer counselling scheme**

#### *Staff perceptions*

Most staff members ( $N = 32$ , or 94%) were aware of the existence of the peer counselling system within the school. The majority ( $N = 25$ , 74%) said they would know how to recommend a pupil to use the scheme, but only 10 (30%) reported that they actually knew of a pupil who had used it. Most ( $N = 27$ , 79%) thought that it was a good idea to have the peer counselling scheme in the school ( $N = 7$  being unsure); and a majority ( $N = 21$ , 62%) thought that it helped to stop bullying ( $N = 13$  being unsure).

#### *Pupils' awareness*

There was greater awareness of the scheme in those year groups in which it had been implemented. All of year 7 and the majority of year 8 students were aware of the peer

counselling system in the school; many more than in year 9; see Table 2. As the scheme had not been employed for year 9 use, further questions exploring knowledge and use of the peer counselling service are only reported for the younger year groups.

**Table 2.** Students' awareness, use and perception of the peer counselling scheme, by year group

		Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
<i>Awareness</i>				
Do you know that there is a peer support scheme in your school?	Yes	116 (100%)	98 (91.6%)	32 (30.8%)
	No	0	9 (8.4%)	72 (69.2%)
Would you know how to use it for yourself or a friend?	Yes	103 (91.2%)	71 (68.9%)	
	No	10 (8.8%)	32 (31.1%)	
Do you know anybody who has used it?	Yes	60 (53.6%)	22 (21.4%)	
	No	52 (46.4%)	81 (78.6%)	
<i>Use</i>				
Have you ever used the peer support service in school?	Yes, more than once	17 (14.9%)	3 (2.9%)	
	Yes, once	18 (15.8%)	8 (7.8%)	
	No	79 (69.3%)	92 (89.3%)	
Did using the peer support service help you?	Yes, a lot	6 (33.3%)	0	
	Yes, a bit	9 (50%)	6 (75%)	
	No	3 (16.7%)	2 (25%)	
<i>Perception</i>				
Do you think it is a good idea to have this scheme in school?	Yes	84 (74.3%)	55 (53.4%)	49 (50.5%)
	Not sure	20 (17.7%)	39 (37.9%)	43 (44.4%)
	No	9 (8.0%)	9 (8.7%)	5 (5.2%)
Do you think this scheme is helping to stop bullying?	Yes	32 (28.1%)	19 (18.4%)	14 (14.4%)
	Not sure	59 (51.8%)	45 (43.7%)	68 (70.1%)
	No	23 (20.2%)	39 (37.9%)	15 (15.5%)

Significantly more year 7 students reported that they knew how to use the peer counselling scheme, compared to year 8's,  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 16.98, p < .001$ . Similarly, many more year 7 students knew of someone who had used the scheme than those in year 8,  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 23.6, p < .001$ .

#### *Pupils' use*

Over 30% of year 7 students indicated that they had used the peer counselling service at least once, many more than in year 8,  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 12.99, p < .001$ ; see Table 2. The majority of users in both years said that they thought that the peer counselling service had helped them, with one-third of year 7 users (but no year 8 students) saying it had helped 'a lot'.

#### *Pupil's perceptions*

There was a significant age difference in students' perception of whether the scheme is a good idea,  $\chi^2_{(4)} = 19.70, p < .01$ ; see Table 2. Year 7 students were the most positive, with more students in the older year groups unsure. A minority of students in each year group did not think the scheme was a good idea.

There was also a significant age difference in whether students thought that the scheme helped to stop bullying,  $\chi^2_{(4)} = 23.35, p < .001$ , this being highest in year 7;

see Table 2. Many students in each year-group were unsure, and a substantial minority thought it did not stop bullying.

#### *Qualitative comments from the questionnaire*

The majority of year 7 students were supportive of the scheme and stated that it provided them with an alternative to talking to a teacher and helped them to feel safe in school. Many year 8 students were concerned about the availability of the peer counsellors.

### **Bullying survey**

#### *Reported experiences*

Summing over all year groups, there was no significant difference between T1 and T2 in the number of students who reported either recent victimization (this week, sometime this term or sometime last term) ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.38, p = .54$ ) or recent bullying behaviour ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 2.34, p < .127$ ) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Students' self-reported bullying behaviour, in autumn (T1) and summer (T2) terms, by year group

	T1		T2	
	Number	%	Number	%
Students reporting engaging in bullying this week, earlier this term or last term				
Year 7	11	8.6	8	6.5
Year 8	11	8.8	23	21.1
Year 9	10	8.2	10	9.1
Students reporting being bullied this week, earlier this term or last term				
Year 7	25	19.5	24	19.5
Year 8	16	12.8	20	18.3
Year 9	11	9.0	9	8.2

Examining year group variations, reported recent victimization and bullying remained the same in year 7 ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.00, p = 1$ ;  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.39, p = .53$ ) and year 9 ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.05, p = .82$ ;  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.06, p = .81$ ). The upward trend in year 8 was not significant for victimization ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.38, p = .24$ ), but was significant for bullying ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 7.09, p < .05$ ).

#### *Students' perceptions of bullying*

Students' categorical responses to whether bullying occurred in their school were coded from 1 to 5, higher scores indicated a more positive perception of bullying, see Table 4. A time (T1/T2)  $\times$  bullying perception (1 = yes often to 5 = hardly ever) ANOVA was calculated. There was a significant main effect of time,  $F_{(1,710)} = 11.30, p = .001$ , indicating an overall improvement in students' perception of bullying in the school. There was also a significant main effect of year-group,  $F_{(2,710)} = 10.94, p < .001$ . There was no significant time  $\times$  year group interaction,  $F_{(2,710)} = 2.52, p = .081$ . Employing the Bonferroni *post hoc* test, significant differences were found between year 7 and year 8 students ( $p < .001$ ) and between year 7 and year 9 students ( $p < .001$ ); but no significant

difference between year 8 and 9 students ( $p = .32$ ). As shown in Table 4, at T1 and T2, year 7 students thought that bullying occurred the least, compared to year 8 and 9 students; by T2, year 8 students thought that bullying occurred more than year 7 and year 9 students.

**Table 4.** Mean scores for students' perceptions of whether bullying occurs in the school and whether the school does anything about bullying, at autumn (T1) and summer (T2) terms, by year group

	T1		T2	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Does bullying occur in the school (1 = yes, often to 5 = hardly ever)				
Year 7	2.51	1.00	2.76	1.26
Year 8	2.23	0.92	2.28	1.09
Year 9	2.02	0.86	2.50	1.00
Does the school do anything about bullying (1 = no to 4 = yes, a lot)				
Year 7	2.92	1.07	3.38	0.80
Year 8	2.84	0.88	2.86	1.02
Year 9	2.52	0.89	2.92	0.93

Students responses to whether they thought the school did something about bullying was coded from 1 = no action to 4 = yes, a lot; see Table 4. A time (T1/T2)  $\times$  year group ANOVA showed that the main effect of time was significant,  $F_{(1,684)} = 17.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ; students' perception of the schools' efforts to tackle bullying improved by the summer term. There was a significant main effect of year-group,  $F_{(2,684)} = 12.60$ ,  $p < .001$  and a significant time  $\times$  year group interaction,  $F_{(2,684)} = 3.75$ ,  $p < .05$ . Employing the Bonferroni *post hoc* test, significant differences were found between year 7 and year 8 students ( $p < .01$ ) and between year 7 and year 9 students ( $p < .001$ ); but no significant difference between year 8 and 9 students ( $p = .32$ ). As shown in Table 4, year 7's were the most positive in their perception of whether the school targets bullying and this increased over time. Year 9's also showed an increase in their perception of the school's anti-bullying action, but this change was smaller in year 8's.

## Discussion

The data obtained from a variety of sources yielded considerable information on the impact of the peer counselling scheme on those trained, on users, and on levels of bullying generally. We first discuss aspects of the implementation of the scheme; and then the findings from various data sources, with reference to comparable studies. After considering strengths and limitations of the study, we conclude by considering the broader implications of the findings.

### **How the scheme developed and implementation issues**

A number of factors associated with successful peer support were identified. Members of senior management took an active role in supporting the scheme and funding was provided for initial training. Peer counsellors themselves were given the opportunity to shape the development of the project, whilst members of the school council were involved in selecting appropriate students for training. Despite these strengths, there were still areas for improvement.

As found previously (Naylor & Cowie, 1999), peer counsellors indicated that the initial uptake of the service was slow and subjected to misuse. One reason, indicated by peer counsellors and supported by qualitative comments from some year 8 students, was that students did not feel they knew the peer counsellors. Regular form group sessions were established to encourage a natural supportive relationship to develop. However, findings from the discussion groups with the peer counsellors suggest that the success of these sessions seemed to depend on the degree to which teachers encouraged peer counsellors to take responsibility. Cowie and Olafsson (2000) found that some adults are reluctant to share power with young people, which presents problems for peer-led programmes.

Further problems were encountered in relation to resources and time. In particular, peer counsellors' curriculum demands and subsequent reduction in form group sessions, appeared to have a negative effect on some students' perception and use of the counselling service. However, both students and staff directly involved in the project seem committed to improving the scheme and continued to make amendments to improve its effectiveness, such as the introduction and development of the e-mail based request system and the search for a suitable room to dedicate to the counselling service.

### **Effects on the peer counsellors**

Both qualitative and quantitative findings indicated that peer counsellors did benefit from their involvement in the school's peer support project. Students were largely very positive about the training they had received and displayed an awareness that it had led to the acquisition of transferable communication and interpersonal skills, consistent with previous research findings (Cowie *et al.*, 2002; Smith & Watson, 2004).

Peer counsellors showed increases in SSE scores, compared to controls. This was both highly significant statistically, and displayed a large ES. This supports the findings obtained by Ellis *et al.* (2005) in their longitudinal study of an Australian peer mentoring scheme, and provides quantitative evidence for what has previously been largely asserted on anecdotal evidence rather than by rigorous assessment and with matched controls. It is plausible that peer supporters should gain in self-esteem, because they have been selected for the training, the training itself provides various skills relevant to self-esteem, and finally trained students have the opportunity to practice helping skills with other pupils. Laible, Carlo, and Roesch (2004) found that prosocial behaviour is a significant predictor of self-esteem in adolescence, and that engaging in prosocial behaviour may be especially important in fostering feelings of self-worth in adolescent girls. If increased self-esteem is a consequence of students' active involvement in peer support schemes, there may be benefit in involving many or all students to some degree, although there are obviously management issues relating to expanding such training schemes. These are certainly issues relevant for further research in the area of peer counselling and peer support more generally.

The improved difference in peer counsellors' SS change scores, relative to that of the controls, bordered on a large ES, but was not statistically significant, perhaps due to the relatively small sample. There were no improvements in shame management relative to the control group; this suggests that the training and experience associated with peer counselling does not specifically deal with components of shame management. However, peer counsellors did display more adaptive shame management abilities than the control group in pre-training testing. Adaptive shame management is related to

positive bystander bullying intervention (Ahmed, 2005) and therefore this difference may represent an important characteristic, which distinguishes between students who are successfully selected as peer counsellors and those who are not.

### **Knowledge and use of the service**

The efforts of the peer counsellors and others at raising awareness had been successful, as year 7 and 8 students' knowledge of the counselling service was very high (Table 2). The majority of users stated that the peer counselling service had been helpful, consistent with previous research (Cowie *et al.*, 2002; Naylor & Cowie, 1999). However, the scheme was used more and was rated as more helpful by users in year 7 than year 8.

The majority of staff were aware of the existence of the peer counselling service, how to recommend its use to a student, and thought that it was a good idea. The overall awareness of the scheme, at 94%, is similar to the figure of 97% obtained from staff at eight secondary schools in Smith and Watson (2004). However, only 74% of staff stated that they knew how to recommend a pupil to use the scheme; and only 30% knew of a student who had used the schools' peer support service (compared to 92 and 76%, respectively in Smith and Watson's sample); possibly because the scheme in this study had only recently been implemented, whereas Smith and Watson's sample included schools with well established peer support services.

### **Effects on bullying**

Following the revision of the anti-bullying policy and the introduction of the peer counselling scheme, there was no significant reduction in the number of students who reported being recently bullied or bullying another student. Levels of reported bullying others remained the same in years 7 and 9 and increased significantly in year 8. By the summer term, the highest level of self-reported bullying in the lower school years was observed in year 8 students. However, overall there was a decrease in students' perceptions of bullying occurring in the school, and an increase in their perception of the school's actions to combat bullying. The greatest changes were observed in year 7 students, who thought that bullying in school occurred the least often and were most positive in their belief in the school's efforts to target it; by the end of the summer term, year 8 students were the least positive in these respects.

This indicates a discrepancy between the impact of the scheme on self-reports and general peer perceptions of bullying in the school. Mixed effects on self and peer reports of bullying have also been observed in other anti-bullying intervention studies (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, & Voeten, 2005). Self-reports are a measure of students' personal experience of bullying. Pupils' definitions of bullying vary with age and are distinct from those used by teachers and researchers (Menesini, Fonzi, & Smith, 2002; Naylor, Cowie, Cossins, de Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006). Naylor *et al.* found that definitions provided by targeted students of bullying differed from those provided by non-targeted students; students who experience bullying directly perceive bullying differently to their peers. In this study, a common bullying definition was included in the questionnaire, but there is no guarantee that all students actually used it. From the evidence so far, the implementation of peer counselling schemes has not been shown to reduce the experiences of bullying. However, the existence of such schemes does seem to have a positive impact more generally, and in this study on overall peer perceptions of bullying in the school, with students reporting that there had been a decline in bullying behaviour, a belief particularly evident in year 7 students.

The changes in perceptions of bullying behaviour cannot be attributed to the implementation of the peer counselling scheme alone. Improvements were also observed over time in year 9 students, who did not have direct access to the peer counselling scheme. This suggests that the changes in students' perception of the school were related in part to the overall whole school approach and review of the existing anti-bullying policy. However, these effects were greatest for year 7 students; as the peer counselling service appeared to be well received by year 7s, this may account in part for the improved outcomes in terms of student perceptions.

### **Possible explanations of year group variations**

The peer counselling service was established for use by year 7 (aged 11-12) and 8 (aged 12-13) students; however there appear to be different outcomes displayed by these year groups. Three possible explanations are proposed for this finding.

#### *The varying year effects are generalisable and reflect a common school transition or age pattern*

These findings are consistent with previous research which report age variances in the outcome of peer-based anti-bullying interventions. Salmivalli (2001) found that self-reported bullying and victimization as well as peer-reported bullying decreased in seventh grade girls, whereas bullying/victimization rates increased and peer-reported bullying did not change in eighth grade girls, following a 1 week peer campaign. Similarly, in Peterson and Rigby's (1999), longitudinal study of peer directed anti-bullying activities, significant improvements were observed in year 7 students' perception of bullying, school safety and levels of victimization, however these results were not found in the older year groups. It is important to note that year 7 transition to secondary school occurs a year earlier in English schools relative to Australian and Finish schools. Although not directly comparable, these findings do suggest that peer-lead initiatives lead to more favourable outcomes for the youngest year group in secondary schools.

Pepler, Smith, and Rigby (2004) suggest that in general, bullying interventions tend to be more effective among younger students; one important factor being that younger students have stronger pro-victim attitudes and are less resistant to anti-bullying messages than some older students. Pro-bullying attitudes increase with age (Menesini *et al.*, 1997). Rigby (1997) found that although pro-victim attitudes peak in girls between the ages of 17 and 18, they are slightly higher in girls between the ages of 11 and 12, compared to those in girls aged between 13 and 14; while pro-bully attitudes reach a peak at around the ages of 13-14. Thus year 8's (age 12-13) resistance to the schools' anti-bullying efforts may reflect a critical period of change in attitudes to bullying.

#### *The varying year effects are related to how the scheme was implemented within the school*

There was some variance in how the peer counselling scheme was conducted for year 7 and 8 students. Several year 8 students stated that the decline in peer counsellors form visits had been a problem, however this issue was rarely raised by year 7 students. This may be related to peer counsellors' perception of student need and their feelings of efficacy in dealing with younger students. During the initial discussion group, held before students had begun their role as peer counsellors, concern was raised about dealing with pupils who were closer to themselves in age. Many felt that they would feel more comfortable assisting year 7 students. This may help to explain the difference in acceptance and use of the peer support service, which in-turn may account for some of the year group variation in the effect on bullying.

*The varying year effects are unrelated to the scheme and are not general, but are due to specific peer groups within the school*

Year 8 students' self-reported bullying was found to be especially high during the end of year testing, relative to other students. Also, in the final year discussion group, peer counsellors stated that the scheme was subject to misuse by year 8 students in particular. Earlier research suggests that aggressive groups may be resistant to peer support anti-bullying initiatives (Cowie & Olafsson, 2000). Therefore, the low acceptance and uptake of the peer counselling service within this year group may have resulted from strong aggressive attitudes held by dominant students.

Group norms may regulate bullying behaviours through social processes such as conformity to peer group pressure (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). Salmivalli and Voeten (2004) found that both individual anti-bullying attitudes and class norms have an effect on students' behaviour in bullying incidents. The classroom context was shown to have the greatest impact on girls and this effect increased with age. Thus the results in this current study may be related not only to a developmental change in bullying attitudes but also represent a greater pro-bullying normative view held by students in certain year 8 classes. Further analysis of this would need to analyse variations within classes of each year group (e.g. the number of bullies in each class and the association with attitudes and behaviour); unfortunately this was not possible in this study as the data gathered included information on year group but not form group.

In summary, there appears to be some support for the first two explanations proposed for the year group variances on bullying related outcomes, with a third remaining untested. These explanations may interact additively. For example, the general effects of age-related attitudes in addition to normative classroom views may effect how the peer counselling scheme was implemented within each year group. Future research should explore the relative influence of implementation factors, general developmental changes in attitude, and both individual and group normative views regarding bullying; in order to better understand the relationship these variables have over the effectiveness of peer-based anti-bullying initiatives. This study suggests that peer counselling schemes are best utilized by younger students. Targeting such schemes at year 7 students may be particularly important, considering that they are more vulnerable to the negative effects of bullying during the transition from primary to secondary school (Ellis *et al.*, 2005; Peterson & Rigby, 1999).

### **Limitations and conclusions**

The single case study approach adopted by this project allowed detailed data to be obtained from across the school community. However, the findings are restricted to one all girl secondary school. The nature of peer support programmes may be different in an all girl compared to a mixed sex school; e.g. there is not the issue of gender representation of peer supporters, previously identified as an important factor in the effectiveness of peer schemes (Cowie, 2000; Smith & Watson, 2004).

Counselling-based systems, implemented as part of a comprehensive school anti-bullying plan, can have benefits. First, they can enhance the self-esteem of peer supporters; it remains to be ascertained whether this is mainly due to the selection, training or practice of peer support, or a combination of all these. Second, they can provide a service that is well-known in the relevant year groups and by staff, used by a number of pupils, and rated as helpful by many such users. Third, they can lead to perceptions that the school is doing something about bullying, and a belief that bullying is declining. However, data based on personal experiences of bullying may show less

effect. Naylor and Cowie (1999) observed that the presence of a peer support system does not always bring about a decline in reported bullying behaviour. Schemes that have been running for less than 2 years are unlikely to contribute fully to improving the socio-emotional climate of the school, but over time, well-established peer support schemes can support an ethos of care, in which it is common practice for students to share problems and provide support to their peers (Cowie *et al.*, 2002). In our study, year group differences were particularly noticeable, and this has echoes in other reports. We propose three hypotheses to explain these year group differences. Two had some support in this study, while a third (peer group effects in specific classes) remains to be studied in future work.

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