

**INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG  
PEOPLE**

**Name:** Name suppressed  
**Date received:** 15/06/2009

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*Partially Confidential*

Supplementary Submission (#3) to Bullying of children and young people (Inquiry)

12<sup>th</sup> June 2009

Material not in boxes such as this may be made public.

This submission was originally drafted on 24 April, 2009. However, on that date I was informed that no personal witnesses are to be called by the committee, and as a result felt unable to complete it. I am sure many of the other witnesses are also feeling disappointed by this decision. Would it be possible for the committee to contact people who made submissions and inform them that they will not be called as witnesses?

Now that the third (and last?) committee meeting is imminent, I felt it necessary to finalise this submission and send it in.

A recent move from a primary school where bullying and violence is the norm to a school where the culture is one of support and caring was incredibly eye-opening for me. Attitudes of the staff, some of the parents and the children at the two schools are extremely different. This is not to say that no incidents occur at the "better" school, it is the way in which they are handled that is extremely different. It is with this experience that I write my submission(s) to the inquiry.

**1. DET staff acting inappropriately**

It is good that better training of staff in the handling of bullying situations is being discussed and planned. I like to believe that most staff associated with schools have the attitude of ECM (every child matters) and actively try to put that into practice. However, it has been my experience that this is not always the case – and on your web-site some of the submissions from individuals have documented instances of this. In order to truly protect the children in its care, the DET needs to take more action with staff who continually behave unprofessionally and unethically. Teaching staff, and sometimes even Principals, can behave in ways which actively harm children. Parents have a responsibility to report incidents of staff behaving inappropriately, but then they have the right for appropriate action to be taken. In some cases, if a parent reports a staff member, their children have become "targets" of the staff in question (illegal suspensions, refusal to assist when being bullied or assaulted, inappropriately interviewed, ridiculed in front of other students etc.).

The reality is that the unacceptable climate of intimidation in some schools will not change until the DET deals more pro-actively with staff who continually act outside their guidelines. Particularly with Principals who "mess up one school" to the point that enrolments drop, and then they are sent to another, often larger school to do the same thing all over again. I believe this has recently occurred with schools:

For more concrete examples, here are some comments I recall from staff of the DET:

“Three of the four (children) are lost forever, one might be redeemable.” – from a Principal! This appalled me that this might even be thought, let alone stated out loud!

“What happened was a disgrace. Those children should have got a three-day suspension and not been allowed to participate in activities such as open day for at least a term.” – from a teacher to another parent after an incident of serious violence against a Kindergarten child. The discipline imposed on the children in question was one 20 minute lunchtime detention. Also, the seriousness of the incident was not related to the parents of the aggressors.

When the Regional Student Welfare Consultant was asked to intervene, the outcome was “We cannot go back and discipline students for something they did on the past.” However, even from then on the Principal did insufficient to keep the Kindergarten child safe, and an attack occurred again just a couple of months later.

“We will do nothing.” – from the Assistant Principal when asked what the school would do to assist with a six-year old who had been bullied to a state in which they were having screaming panic attacks in the classroom and playground. This was *after* calling in the student welfare consultant again.

At a meeting with the SED (School Area Director) and staff development officer, I was grilled: “What makes you think it is your responsibility to bring these matters to our attention? We have our own reporting systems in place.” I responded by saying that I did not believe the Principal would report these things, even if she did know about some of them. After several minutes of giving details and watching two faces go very white I was advised to “get your kids out of that school as soon as you can.” and “We will do things behind the scenes – you won’t be able to see them, but things will be done.”

On a related topic, what is the point of having an internal investigation branch such as EPAC (Employee Performance and Conduct Unit) if their recommendation are simply to be overridden? If EPAC recommends dismissal of a Principal, the person who overrides that recommendation should have to give reasons and take responsibility for their decision. The Principal in question returned to the school and subsequently was able to damage more children and their families. When I spoke to the locum SED about a concern that I had, the response was “Oh – this is such a politically hot potato – I’ll have to contact the permanent SED on holidays before I can even make a phone call about that.” This is the same Principal that the SED said to another parent “We can’t sack them just because they are incompetent!”

I apologise that my logic here is all over the place, but our family has been through a lot in the last two years. When I put in 32 pages of evidence that DET staff had acted inappropriately (dates, times, places, names, details etc.), to the SED, this is the response I received:

I think we've tried very hard to address your concerns and put a great deal of time and effort into that. I regret that you are still so dissatisfied with our response.

I am still dissatisfied, and I am especially concerned that members of the school community to which this Principal has been sent are not being protected.

I put it to the inquiry panel that some of the individual cases of DET staff behaving in an inappropriate manner need to be passed on to the relevant authority for further investigation.

## 2. "Competitive" vs "caring"

Page 9 of the transcript from Mon 6 April contains the following:

"You cannot suddenly wack it into a school that has a fairly cutthroat or competitive ethos rather than a cooperative relationship-building ethos.

From this it seems that the committee takes the view that a school culture of being "competitive" is not conducive of one which does not tolerate bullying. As such, a school should **not** take pride in having a competitive culture – a very large amount of antisocial behaviour has been defended as "the child is just competitive" (including name calling, death threats, hitting, kicking, scratching, pushing, punching, biting). These are acts of aggression and violence, not "competitiveness".

We as a society cannot tolerate a "Lord of the Flies" mentality in our schools. Especially, we cannot tolerate staff defending such behaviour as being merely "competitive". At the **primary** school to which I am referring there is a queue of parents waiting until some children turn 10 years of age so that they can take out apprehended violence orders on them. This is indeed a very sad situation.

## 3. Consistency of the response of authority

Police have a responsibility to act according to well defined guidelines – not total discretion as to whether to intervene or not in a case with children under the age of 10. The amount of support received by a family should not depend on the individual attitude of the Police Youth Liaison Officer at the area command they are in the region for.

I put it to the committee that better training and more stringent guidelines be made available to assist Police Youth Liaison Officers to better support local families.

## 4. "Integration" program

Page 13 of the transcript from Mon 6 April contains the following:

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Do you think there is a need to establish a special school for problem kids or should it just be managed by the school?

**Professor McGRATH:** The research that is coming out now and informing what is happening in the Victorian sector suggests that those schools are not particularly productive and that the approach that should be taken is more within the school.

The committee should be aware that the "integration program" of taking violent and disturbed students and placing them in mainstream classes does not work. There are rules about what is acceptable on children's TV, but not so in the playground it seems. For example, at one school, a child (7-8 years old) on the integration program has among many other things:

- The teachers afraid of them
- Thrown bricks at a group of Kindie children
- Pinned a younger child down, held a sharpened pencil to his eye and threatened to kill him
- Stated to children aged 5-8 years:
  - "go home and hump your mother"
  - "your father's a fa\*\*ot and you s\*\*k his c\*\*k"
- Been suspended more than five times in a two term period, and yet cannot be expelled.

Other children are witnessing the violence over and over again. Some have started to have chest pains because of their anxiety that it might be them next time. Surely it is **NOT** acceptable to have young (or indeed any) children exposed to this on a continuing basis.

The "Integration program" needs to be rethought – with positive outcomes sought not just for the "troubled" child, but for all children who may be exposed to such abhorrent behaviour. At the very least, there needs to be a study of the impact on the other children of their continued exposure to such behaviour.

#### **6. Protection of primary aged children at after school and vacation care.**

I am surprised to see no submission to this inquiry from DOCS; especially as it has responsible for the quality of care our children receive in OOSH centres. At present I believe there is no legislation regarding conditions at school aged care facilities, however there are some proposed. Currently, there are guidelines, but these are optional and severely lacking in the area of discipline. Staff need a range of strategies, ranging from a short verbal reprimand right through to expulsion from the centre. Staff also need training in the application of such strategies. Methods that work for pre-schoolers will not necessarily work for 10-year olds.

One of the biggest problems we as a society must address are the psychological effects on all children (those doing the bullying, those being bullied, and those who witness it) of not having incidents dealt with appropriately.

#### **7. Consequences of ongoing "bullying"**

Recently it was brought to my attention that a group of boys at a vacation care facility, who would normally never consider violence as acceptable, participated in a "revenge attack" on another boy who has been violent and antisocial toward them for a very long period of time. Essentially every child at the centre has been spat at, kicked, punched and I don't know what else by this child. The consequences imposed have not been a deterrent (for example, 5 minutes of scrubbing tables for essentially strangling a younger child).

These boys will have to live with the knowledge of what they have done for the rest of their lives. Many have since been removed from that centre and school by their parents, as the parents do not see the situation changing for the better in the foreseeable future.

The "aggressor" ("bully" does not seem to be the correct term in this circumstance) needs to be protected both from themselves and from such acts of retribution. If children on the receiving end are not aware of any consequences for the aggressor, frustration will build up, and such attacks **will** occur. This is a very important aspect which does not seem to have been addressed by the committee so far. Also, if the relevant authorities do not actively impose appropriate consequences, the child's behaviour could easily totally derail – this is when we see 12 and 13 year-olds in Juvenile Court.

It is unthinkable that 8-year olds can be so violent – but there have been cases reported over the years (one in England springs to mind where two boys murdered a 4 year old). The life-long consequences on all involved must be incredible – surely it has to be better to "nip it in the bud" than wait for a serious event before intervening.

## 8. What defines an "appropriate" consequence?

This is a matter which has been discussed for a very long time, and is now the topic of much research ... and about time!

Page 9 of the transcript from Mon 6 April contains the following:

There is a whole range from those more softly-softly approaches, which have some evidentiary support, right up to the suspension-expulsion-detention approach.

I agree that a softly-softly approach is the first step in managing a child's behaviour that is beginning to go off the rails, but continued antisocial behaviour and violence needs consequences in accord with their seriousness.

A matter of concern is that these more severe consequences do not seem to ever be being used – the documents containing them "live in a drawer". Children on the receiving end of bullying and violence can only take so much before they snap and dole out their own retribution.

This is very concerning, and the committee needs to acknowledge that such incidents do occur.

## 9. Some parting thoughts

Thank you for allowing individuals to make submissions to this inquiry. I believe you have had some very disturbing reports – please understand that it takes a substantial amount of time for anger to subside when an injustice has occurred.

Please inform those people who made submissions that they will not be called to be a witness. I am sure some feel that they have not been sufficiently "listened to" in the past. I am hoping that these submissions are given serious consideration.

Please forward any submissions you feel warrant further investigation to the appropriate authorities. If this cannot be done due to confidentiality reasons, please contact those who made the submission with advice on how to proceed.

Let us hope we can learn from our mistakes and look forward to a brighter tomorrow. I leave you with a lament I penned during all our problems:

To the tune of "Where oh where has my little dog gone"

Oh where oh where has my innocence gone  
Oh where oh where can it be?  
I used to trust that DET staff  
Cared for the children truly.

The children who spat and punched and kicked  
Were simply "competitive"  
I was told that "You must realize  
The world is a competitive place...

But now after years of tears and begging  
I've moved my children on.  
Not only were the bullies tolerated  
They were by the school defended.

We are preparing the kids for later life  
By allowing slaps in the face now.  
We will do nothing at all to help you  
And that is the end if it!