

# VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS



**DAVID BOTSFORD**

## **BULLYING**

The phenomenon of bullying highlights the different legal environment that characterises the school from the rest of society. If the reader were to visit a department store or hotel and be subjected to physical assault by his or her fellow customers or guests, he or she would doubtless immediately leave the premises and call the police to have the culprits arrested and prosecuted. Any store or hotel which gained a reputation for such incidents would find itself losing customers and going out of business very quickly. Such recourses are not available to a pupil in school who faces the same treatment: if the victim attempts to walk out of the school, he or she will be forced back and punished; if he or she retaliates against the aggressor, he or she may be punished for “fighting” or “causing trouble”. Complaining to a teacher will bring no restitution, but rather a reputation as an informer and a coward which may intensify the bullying. Indeed, in many British schools, particularly public schools, the teachers either turn a blind eye or actually look favourably on bullying, as a means of “toughening the character”, “sorting out the rotters” and so on. There is often little dis-

inction between “unofficial” bullying and teacher-authorised “punishments” inflicted by senior pupils on junior ones over whom they have been given authority.

Bullying in schools is a taboo subject in Britain. Most victims never talk about it to anybody at the time, and this reluctance continues into adult life, as nobody likes to be considered to have been a “weaking” or a “misfit”, to have failed to obtain the collective approval of their peers. A pupil in a compulsory school where bullying is taking place has no opportunity to simply stand aside from the bullying: he or she must either “go along with the crowd” and join in the physical or verbal assault on the victim, or else face similar treatment. Thus many adults block out the experience from memory, just as do individuals who have lived under totalitarian regimes where the individual must join in the oppression and denunciation of victims, or else become a victim himself or herself. And of course head teachers and “educational” bureaucrats have a vested interest in denying that bullying occurs in the institutions they control.

Researchers in the Scandinavian countries use the term “mobbing” to designate the process of collective violence

## **Educational Notes No. 21**

ISSN 0953-7775      ISBN 1 85637 163 8

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance, 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN  
www.libertarian.co.uk      emails: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1993: Libertarian Alliance; David Botsford.

David Botsford is a freelance writer and desktop publisher, and a trainee hypnotherapist.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame      Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait      Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb



**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**

against an individual, as distinct from “bullying”, which they use to refer to a single individual inflicting violence against a victim. Professor Anatol Pikas of the University of Uppsala, in Sweden, shows that mobbing is a manifestation of the collectivist nature of the relationship between individual pupils within the compulsory school environment:

First of all, when one starts to treat mobbing, one meets up with the fact that the thoughts and feelings of a group are simpler than those of any of its individual members. All the members of a group strive towards a ‘common psychological denominator’ which is at the core of group dynamics.

Because of the relative simplicity of the ‘collective mind’, the behaviour of a group is predictable, and can thus be directed by a therapist who can combine a knowledge of this predictability with a certain amount of initiative and will. The most decisive and predictable factor in a mobbing group is that its members as individuals are themselves scared of their common denominator: they are caught up with the idea of tormenting a victim.

From this we can clearly derive the first important step for treatment: to re-individualize the group members through separate talks where their inherent fears and reservations towards their own mobbing behaviour are made conscious and an immediate escape from the noxious habit of mobbing.<sup>1</sup>

#### “YOU’RE FOR IT NEXT”

Now giving a victim of mobbing the right to walk out of the school, and to initiate criminal prosecution and civil suit to obtain restitution from the initiators of violence would be more effective than any amount of “separate talks” to the aggressors. Nonetheless, it is true that in school, young people have to constantly watch and modify their behaviour to “stay on the right side” of the bullies, whether or not they are direct victims of violence themselves. Sir John Betjeman thus describes life at Marlborough under the rule of the “captains”, older boys with the power of life and death over younger ones:

Upper School captains had the power to beat:  
Maximum six strokes, usually three.  
My frequent crime was far too many books,  
So that my desk lid would not shut at all:  
“Come to Big Fire then, Betjeman, after prep.”  
...  
Swift after prep all raced towards ‘Big Fire’,  
Giving the captain space to swing his cane:  
“One,” they would shout and downward came the blow;  
“Two” (rather louder); then, exultant, “Three!”  
And some in ecstasy would bellow “Four.”  
...

Upper School’s most terrible disgrace  
Involved a very different sort of pain.

...  
“Haven’t you heard?” said D. C. Wilkinson.  
“Angus is to be basketed tonight.”  
Why Angus ... ? Never mind. The victim’s found.  
Perhaps he sported coloured socks too soon,  
Perhaps he smarmed his hair with scented oil,  
Perhaps he was ‘immoral’ or a thief.  
We did not mind the cause: for Angus now  
The game was up. His friends deserted him,

And after his disgrace they’d stay away  
For fear of being basketed themselves.  
“By the boys, *for* the boys. The boys know best.  
Leave it to to them to pick the rotters out  
With that rough justice decent schoolboys know.”

...  
Elaborately easy at his desk  
Sat Angus, glancing at *The Autocar*.  
Fellows walked past him trying to make it look  
As if they didn’t know his coming fate,  
Though the boy’s body called “Unclean! Unclean!”  
And all of us felt goody-good-good,  
Nice wholesome boys who never sinned at all.  
At ten to seven ‘Big Fire’ came marching in  
Unsmiling, while the captains stayed outside  
(For this was ‘unofficial’). Twelve to one:  
What chance had Angus? They surrounded him,  
Pulled off his coat and trousers, socks and shoes  
And, wretched in his shirt, they hoisted him  
Into the huge waste-paper basket; then  
Poured ink and treacle on his head. With rope  
They strung the basket up among the beams,  
And as he soared I saw only his eyes  
Look through the slats at us who watched below.  
Seven. “It’s prep.” They let the basket down  
And Angus struggled out. “Left! Right! Left! Right!”  
We stamped and called as, stained and pale, he strode  
Down the long alley-way between the desks,  
Holding his trousers, coat and pointed shoes.  
“You’re for it next,” said H. J. Anderson.  
“I’m not.” “You are. I’ve heard.” So all that term  
And three terms afterwards I crept about,  
Avoiding public gaze. I kept my books  
Down in the basement where the boot-hole was  
And by its fishtail gas-jet nursed my fear.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE KILLING GROUND

In case any readers should suspect me of any undue anti-pathology towards the public schools, let us also include some verse by Adrian Mitchell, who describes a similar situation in a state comprehensive school. He recalls the playground of his school days, which was known as the Killing Ground because of the violence inflicted by bullies there:

Got a mother and a father, they’re a thousand miles away  
The Rulers of the Killing Ground are coming out to play  
Everyone thinking: who they going to play with today?  
You get it for being Jewish  
Get it for being black  
Get it for being chicken  
Get it for fighting back  
You get for being big and fat  
Get it for being small  
O those who get it get it and get it  
For any damn thing at all

Sometimes they take a beetle, tear off its six legs one by  
one  
Beetle on its back rocking in the lunchtime sun  
But a beetle can’t beg for mercy, a beetle’s not half as  
fun

Heard a deep voice talking, it had that iceberg sound;  
‘It prepares them for Life’ — but I have never found  
Any place in my life that’s worse than The Killing  
Ground.<sup>3</sup>

## RACIST VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

This type of coercion is inherent in the nature of the compulsory school. Hundreds of young people are forced to attend institutions where they are all subjected to the same curriculum. Because every individual is different, this imposed curriculum will necessarily be grossly inappropriate to the educational requirements of every individual pupil. So some pupils, forced to attend lessons in which they have no interest, will seek to take out their feelings of boredom and frustration on other pupils. Because the targets are also forced to attend the school, the potential bullies know they have captive victims. They will generally select as a target a pupil who appears to be in some way “different” from the group norm. Where the teachers impose an idea of approved and unapproved attitudes and behaviour patterns — and this is particularly true of the public schools — the bullies will seek to legitimise their aggression by attacking those pupils who fail to conform to these attitudes and behaviour patterns, thus rationalising their coercion by association with the school’s values.

Individuals who are conspicuously lacking in a certain quality are always most vocal in upholding it. Alcoholics criticise other people’s drinking habits; the people who talk most about honour, integrity, honesty and loyalty — such as politicians — have none of these qualities; “queer-bashers” are usually latent homosexuals. British state schools are kept in a permanent condition of “anti-racist” hysteria, with dismissal the penalty for teachers who express dissent from the official line. Yet far more racist violence and abuse occurs in schools than in the rest of society put together. When large numbers of young people are forced together in schools, the “common psychological denominator”, identified by Professor Pikas as the cause of collective bullying, will target any pupil who is seen to be distinctly “different” from this denominator. A pupil from a different ethnic or cultural background from that of the majority will therefore be the most obvious target for violence. In circumstances where the minority pupil’s behaviour or attitudes differ from the pattern imposed by British schooling, the teacher’s “enforcement of discipline” can be interpreted by the bullies as tacit approval of their own coercion. The reader is invited to consider how different each of the following documented cases would be if the educational supplier had to deal with paying customers who had the legal power to walk off the premises at will and to initiate criminal proceedings for assault and civil action at law for damages:

The decision was taken to leave the district by a couple in a small country town in the Home Counties. The mother is German and the father Cypriot. Their 13 year old daughter was subjected to a strange combination of epithets: ‘Nazi’ in relation to her mother and ‘Wog’ and ‘Paki’ in relation to her father. The child and her mother had also been attacked in their home by stone-throwing youngsters from the school. The school response was poor, and the police advised the family to move away. ...

At a primary school in the North-West a black child was forced by the teacher to stand up and spell out the word ‘golliwog’ when the child refused to read it out in class because he found it offensive. ...

A young Sikh published his own account of the regular verbal and physical harassment that he had experienced in the seven years he had spent at schools in the South. Much of that harassment was directed at his hair and

turban, both regarded as sacred symbols. Sometimes teachers would join in or even initiate the jokes. The main effect, he said, was to erode his self-confidence and capacity to concentrate on learning.<sup>4</sup>

Moslem schoolboy Syed Dohan is being forced to do his lessons in solitary confinement because he won’t shave off his beard. Syed, 15, was originally banned from the grounds of George Green School, on the Isle of Dogs, by headmaster James Craig in July. After a Tower Hamlets’ education officer intervened, Mr Craig relented but said Syed would have to study in isolation. Syed, who takes nine GCSEs next year, said: “I have made an intention to Allah that I will not shave off my beard, it will last the rest of my life.”<sup>5</sup>

In situations where two racial groups are of similar size in a school, this factor can lead to racial warfare. The relentless “anti-racist” propaganda imposed on pupils serves to heighten the pupils’ concentration on race as a divisive factor between them. In 1986, Burnage High School in Manchester was the scene of intense racial violence between white and Asian pupils. Ahmed Ullah, a 13-year-old Asian boy, was stabbed to death in the playground by a white boy while trying to protect another Asian pupil who was being beaten up by a white gang. The killing was the culmination of violence between white and Asian pupils which had followed the introduction of “anti-racist” propaganda in the school. Delwyn Tattum, of the South Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education, expresses surprise that “Burnage’s governors and senior management were whole-heartedly committed to anti-racial policies; yet the school had been the scene of great racial conflict and polarization of its students,”<sup>6</sup> without recognising that the two facts were cause and effect.

Whenever young people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds associate voluntarily, whether for play, sports, learning, work or any other purpose, these differences — and others related to economic background, speech impediment, disability or whatever — are ignored and they cooperate for the purpose for which they have assembled. The best qualities of each individual are brought to the fore. When young people are forced together, and compelled to do things they never volunteered to do, the “vertical” violence of the state, which forces school attendance on each individual, translates into “horizontal” hatred and violence between individuals of different groups.

## THE SAME LEGAL RIGHT AND THE SAME SOLUTION

The “solution” to the problem of bullying advanced by Valerie Besag, an educational psychologist working for Gateshead Council is as follows:

Children at risk of being bullied need to develop simple strategies to help them avoid attack. There is a wide range of such strategies, for example, avoid being last in a changing room, leave valuable possessions at home, try not to display anger or distress when bullied as this may encourage the bullies to continue. *As adults we may have learnt to cope with threats and to avoid situations and company where we do not feel at ease.* Some children may need to be instructed in routine safety procedures. ... There are a few critical seconds when voice, posture and display of confidence can tip the balance between attack and non attack so that by instructing the

less confident children on how to behave under threat we may be offering them great protection. Sadly some children may always be vulnerable to attack due to physique, race, poor co-ordination, speech or language difficulties or physical features. Knowing how to avoid and cope with provocation and attack must be part of any programme of work designed to support these children. Most people face provocation, to some degree, throughout their lives. How we respond determines whether or not the bullies elect to continue the attacks. We cannot expect vulnerable children to cope unless we have taught them the appropriate techniques.<sup>7</sup>

So a young person subjected to violence in school must live his or her life in terror, constantly hiding and submitting to violence when it occurs in the hope that the aggressors will be so kind as to stop when they get bored. Ms Besag implies that “sadly” sustained violence and persecution against certain young people, going on for year after year, on grounds of their “physique, race, poor co-ordination, speech or language difficulties or physical features” is unavoidable. Yet the sentence of hers which I have italicised contains precisely the solution to this problem: adults, unlike children in schools, have the right “to avoid situations and company where we do not feel at ease”. Why should young people not have exactly the same legal right and the same solution to the problem of being assaulted?

## MARKET ANALYSIS OF BULLYING

Ken Reid, of the West Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education, describes the case of a boy called Jason, who suffered from asthma and several allergies, and who suddenly started playing truant from his comprehensive school:

The cause, according to him, was that he started to become victimised by the boys in his form. It started because they perceived him as being ‘useless’ at everything — games, work, socialising *et seq.* Moreover, as a loner, and as a boy with a puny frame, he was perceived as fair game by his much larger and stronger classmates. At first, they started blaming him whenever there was an interruption in the lesson. He was blamed for problems such as failing to put up his hand when the teacher asked a question, held responsible for the perceived escalation of litter in the classroom, making smells and throwing pellets during a lesson — charges he vigorously denied to the general amusement of all those around him. ...

After a three week absence, his first of more than three consecutive days, he found his return to school a traumatic experience. First, he felt humiliated by his form tutor’s comments about his mother’s letter which according to the teacher was fictional, badly expressed and full of spelling mistakes. The tutor suggested that it was obvious from where Jason’s educational limitations accrued. Second, his classmates had carved comments about his inabilities all over his desk during his absence. Third, the detrimental comments changed to acts of bullying and victimisation at breaks and lunch-times. In the beginning it was ‘names’ being called out followed by jocular bouts of pinching his bottom and hiding his coat and shoes. Later, after Jason had cried one morning, the bullying increased in intensity and started to include more malicious acts. Immediately, Jason started staying away from school for long periods of continued absence, only returning for short spells after home visits from the

educational welfare officer. By the end of the fourth year, he had been taken to court for truancy and his school report spoke of ‘no progress whatsoever as he is never present’.

Analysis of Jason’s data showed that he had a low academic self-concept, a low level of general self-esteem, felt alienated from school, was of below average intelligence, had fewer friends than most of his peers, showed signs of neuroticism while he generally felt unhappy about attending school.

In his interviews he stated that he would return to school and attend regularly if:

- 1) they stopped the bullying and changed his form;
- 2) they provided him with regular remedial tuition in reading and maths (he was chronically aware of his deficiencies in the basic subjects);
- 3) the teachers stopped making adverse comments about his lack of ability in lessons.

... At no stage did the school acknowledge any institutional dimension to Jason’s problems such as bullying and general unhappiness with his form group.<sup>8</sup>

If we apply elementary market analysis to this case — which is one among thousands — we can begin to understand what a ghastly horror story is being repeated in schools throughout the country. A consumer wishes to obtain the services of being taught reading, mathematics and other skills. In his attempts to obtain these services from a state monopoly supplier, he is repeatedly physically assaulted by his fellow customers. He then attempts to exercise consumer sovereignty by dispensing with the services of the establishment where he has been assaulted, for a period of three weeks. On his return, the supplier of these services — the teacher — insults not only the consumer, but also the consumer’s mother, who is paying the teacher’s salary, in front of other customers. Some of these other customers take the supplier’s insults as a cue to inflict further violence on the consumer. The victim again votes with his feet, and the state prosecutes him in a court of law for trying to avoid his assailants, while the initiators of the violence go unpunished. We are then told that the consumer feels “alienated” from the supplier’s premises and “generally unhappy” about continuing to visit them. I wonder why.

## NOTES

1. Anatol Pikas, “The Common Concern Method for the Treatment of Mobbing”, in Erling Roland and Elaine Munthe, eds., *Bullying*, David Fulron Publishers, London, 1989, p. 93.
2. Sir John Betjeman, *Summoned by Bells*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1960 edition, pp. 14-15.
3. Adrian Mitchell, “Back in the Playground Blues”, in Delwyn P. Tattum and David A. Lane, *Bullying in Schools*, Trentham Books, Stoke-on-Trent, 1989, p. 109.
4. Quoted in Delwyn Tattum, “Violence and Aggression in Schools”, in *ibid*, p. 15.
5. *Evening Standard*, 24 October 1992, p. 5.
6. Tattum, *op cit*, in Tattum and Lane, *op cit*, p. 16.
7. Valerie Besag, “Management Strategies for Vulnerable Children”, in Roland and Munthe, *op cit*, p. 88.
8. Ken Reid, “Bullying and Persistent School Absenteeism”, in Tattum and Lane, *op cit*, p. 93.