Editorial

In search of a pedagogical perspective on school bullying

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As early as 1969, the Swedish physician Peter-Paul Heinemann introduced the Swedish term *mobbing* and then later on, *mobbning* (translated as “bullying” in English), in Sweden through a debate article (Heinemann, 1969) and then later, and in greater depth, in his book *Mobbning: Gruppvåld bland barn och vuxna* (Heinemann 1972). With reference to the ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1968), from whom he also borrowed the term *mobbing*, Heinemann assumed that bullying was a form of group violence toward deviant members. The term and his ideas became widespread in Sweden in 1969 through a series of articles in one of Sweden’s most influential daily newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter* (Larsson 2008; Nordgren 2009).

A couple of years later, the first research on school bullying took place in the Nordic countries – first in Sweden, then in Norway – as it was initiated by the work of the Scandinavian developmental psychologist Dan Olweus (1973, 1978). Olweus (1993) defines *bullying* as repeated aggression directed at individuals who are less powerful. He conducted the first series of empirical studies on bullying among schoolboys in Stockholm in the early 1970s. Olweus (1973, 1978) was critical towards Heinemann’s focus on the group and the idea of collective violence toward a deviant member, as it could result in inappropriate expectations and a failure to consider the importance of individual explanations. As he put it later, “the role of particularly active perpetrators or bullies could easily be lost sight
of within this group framework” (Olweus, 2010, pp. 9–10). He was more concerned with the individual characteristics and the psychological development of those who bully and those who are victimized. During the 1980s, Olweus developed and evaluated one of the most known anti-bullying programs, the so-called Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), in Norway (see Olweus & Limber, 2007, 2010). Thus, international school bullying research field has its origin in Sweden followed by Norway in developmental psychology, and from the very beginning in its particular field of aggression among boys through the novel and pioneering seminal work of Olweus.

In addition to developmental and educational psychologists, interest in school bullying has been growing among social psychologists, sociologists, criminologists, health scientists, social anthropologists, philosophers, and others (e.g. Horton, 2011; Modin, Låftman, & Östberg, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Schott & Søndergaard 2014b; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Whereas Olweus began the research by examining the individuals who bully and those who are bullied, during the nineties, the Finnish developmental psychologist Christina Salmivalli and colleagues developed the participant role approach, arguing that our understanding of bullying could not be confined to the binary roles of the bully and the victim (Salmivalli, 1999; Salmivalli, Lagerqvist, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). According to Salmivalli (1999), participant roles emerge in social interactions, and are generated by the interplay between individual dispositions and the needs and expectations of the peer group. Besides victims, who are the targets of bullying, and bullies, who are the active and initiative-taking perpetrators, other peers who are present could be involved in bullying, in various ways. Assistants refers to students who eagerly join in bullying when someone has started it, and thus assist the bully. Reinforcers refers to students who offer positive feedback to the bully by acting as an entertained audience, such as laughing and cheering on the bully. Outsiders refers to those who remain passive, stay away, and do not take sides with anyone. Defenders refers to students who try to help and support the victim in different ways. One of the merits of the participant role approach is to expand our understanding of bullying beyond the limited focus on those who initiate and lead bullying and those who are victimized.

Today, both individual and contextual factors, and how they might interplay to produce bullying, are considered and examined in the international field of the mainstream research on school bullying and cyberbullying, in which developmental and educational psychological perspectives are still dominant, but in dialogue with scholars and frameworks from other disciplines and fields such as criminology, social work, health sciences, educational research and sociology (e.g. Hong & Espelage, 2012; Zych, Farrington, & Ttofi, 2018). In contrast to the quantitative methods that dominate this research field, sociological traditions of social psychological (or micro-sociological) and anthropological perspectives have, among other things, contributed to the field by focusing on how bullying can be understood in relation to peer and school culture, everyday life, and interaction patterns of school and peer groups, by adopting qualitative and ethnographic methods (Adler, & Adler, 1998; Cagigal, 2002; Duncan, 1999; Eder, Evans, & Parker, 1995; Kinney, 1993; MacDonald & Swart, 2004; Søndergaard, 2011, 2018). Sociological and anthropological perspectives have also drawn our attention to the broader culture and the macro-level, and demonstrated how bullying and power relations among students can be linked to ideologies, hegem-
onies and societal power structures, such as gendered power structures/discourses and heteronormativity (Cadigan, 2002; Duncan, 1999; Duncan, & Owens, 2011; Eder et al., 1995; Lahelma, 2004; Payne & Smith, 2013; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Ringrose & Renold, 2010).

In Denmark, scholars within a multidisciplinary research project on bullying called the eXbus project (Kofoed & Søndergaard, 2009; Schott & Søndergaard 2014b) represent an example of a critical alternative to the more traditional developmental and educational psychological perspective, and include even a rejection of the original traditional definition of bullying. They suggest another definition of bullying, in which they also have built in a theoretical understanding of why bullying happens. Their definition emphasizes the ongoing social process of constituting informal groups through the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion as providing a social context for bullying; changes in positions that threaten the group order as a source of fear and anxiety; and how bullying is a response to this fear and the risk of being excluded by projecting the threat to group order onto particular individuals, who become systematically excluded as the “other”; the victims are deprived of the social recognition necessary for human dignity (Schott 2014; also see Schott and Søndergaard 2014a).

In particular, they criticize the so-called first paradigm, which refers to theories explaining bullying in individual terms, such as individual dysfunctions, traits and intentions, and advocate a second paradigm, which refers to theories explaining bullying as part of social processes contextualised in the particular situation (also see Kousholt & Fisker, 2015; Slee & Mohyla, 2007). However, instead of putting these two “paradigms” or perspectives against each other, it would also be possible to consider them as more or less complementary, and to invite a dialogue between them, and thus, between all these various disciplinary, theoretical and methodological perspectives that they all together encompass (Thornberg, 2015b; also see Horton, 2016), not as a simple add-on approach (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014), but as a community of inquiry (cf., Dewey, 1929, 1938; Pierce, 1955), engaged in a curious, open-minded and honest discussion in which all parties actively listen to each other and make serious efforts to try to understand the perspectives of others. Thayer-Bacon (2001) argues that there is a need for pluralism (i.e. a conversation between perspectives in order to reach a more qualified understanding), to accept fallibilism (i.e. that we can never attain knowledge that is certain because we are fallible, limited, and contextual beings), and to recognize that knowledge is a cultural embedded social process of knowing that is continually in need of re/adjustment, correction, and re/construction (also see Thayer-Bacon, 2000, 2003).

If we are relational social beings who are fallible and limited by our own embeddedness and embodiment, at a micro level as well as a macro level, then none of us can claim privileged agency. None of us has a God’s eye view of Truth. Our only hope for overcoming our own individual limitations, as well as our social/political limitations (cultural and institutional) is by working together with others not like us who can help us recognize our own limitations /—/>. Given our fallibilism, then we must embrace the value of inclusion on epistemic grounds in order to have any hopes of continually improving our understandings. Inclusion of others’ perspectives in our debates and discussions allows us the means for correcting our standards, and improving the warrants for our assertions.

(Thayer-Bacon, 2000, pp. 11, 12)
For instance, the social-ecological perspective assumes that bullying has to be understood as a social phenomenon that is established and perpetuated over time as a result of the complex interplay between individual and contextual factors (Espelage, 2014; Espelage & Swearer, 2004, 2011; Hong & Espelage, 2012). Even though it is provisional, partial and fallible (in line with all other theories), the social-ecological perspective embraces both the first and second paradigms, and thus, might be a possible meeting space for a dialogue between them as well as within them, as suggested by Thornberg (2015b).

I do not view the social-ecological theory as the Truth or the unified theory of school bullying but as an invitation to theoretically and empirically embrace the complex interplay between individual and contextual factors. A serious theoretical dialogue like this would very likely challenge and revise the social-ecological framework. The main concern of theoretical development and empirical investigations should be to examine bullying as an open, ambiguous, complex, and multifaceted concept and phenomenon in order to refine, challenge, and revise theoretical perspectives, to develop a more qualified yet provisional understanding of the complexity of school bullying, and to generate, challenge, revise, and improve tools to act upon school bullying in more qualified ways.

(Thornberg, 2015b, p. 187)

Although Olweus’ definition is the most widespread in the world, there are various definitions of bullying in the scientific literature, and debates about what bullying is and how it could be prevented are still going on (e.g. Canty, Stubbe, Steers, & Collings, 2016; Carrera, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2011; Ellwood, & Davies, 2010; Fränberg & Wrethander, 2011; Kousholt & Fisker, 2015; Ringrose, & Renold, 2010; Schott, 2014; Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014). In particular, the intention of harm has been problematized. Bullying might for instance take place among students who interpret actual bullying as a harmless joke or play. Thus, there are cases in which it is problematic to determine “where the joke ends and the abuse begins” (Carrera et al. 2011, p. 486). Others argue that bullying should be defined as a goal-directed behaviour focused on social dominance, reputation, and resources, rather than simply intentional harm-doing (Volk et al., 2014).

Twemlow and Sacco (2013) focus on social context and state school bullying as triadic, consisting of three roles: a student who bullies, a bullied student, and a bystander. The triadic definition of bullying has complex internal meanings. Twemlow and Sacco (2013) define school bullying as “the repeated harmful exposure of an individual or group (the victim) to multiple episodes of harm by many different individuals and groups (the bullies), perceived as stronger than the victim, and facilitated mainly by the active or passive role of the bystanders linked with the bully and victim in complex social interactions and group dynamics. Often the pupil who bullies will only do what the bystander social group allows” (p. 291). In line with this, research has shown that bullying tends to be more prevalent in school classes in which it is more common that bystanders reinforce bullying and fail to defend victims (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010; Nocentini, Menesini, & Salmivalli, 2013; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018).

School bullying is a complex behaviour with multiple causes and risk factors, ranging from individual characteristics to school settings to broader social contexts (Barboza, Schiamberg, Oehmke, Korzeniewski, Post, & Heraux, 2009; Espelage, 2014; Espelage & Swearer, 2004, 2011), and bullying preven-
tion and intervention programmes need to target the complexity of individual, peer, school, family, and community contexts in which bullying unfolds (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Thus, there are many different factors which affect this phenomenon. Therefore, bullying is often analysed from different perspectives, such as psychological, sociological and anthropological perspectives, as well as through various methodological approaches. Although research on school bullying is dominated by quantitative research methods with a huge range of merits, Patton, Hong, Pater and Kral (2017) argue that qualitative research methods have the crucial potential to expand our understanding of school bullying, by exploring the insider perspectives and the subtle contexts and discourses of bullying and peer victimization (also see Thornberg, 2011). There is a growing body of qualitative research on bullying and peer harassment and victimization conducted by Nordic scholars (e.g. Arneback, 2012; Berne, Frisén, & King, 2014; Bjerekl, 2018; Eriksen, 2018; Fors, 1194; Forsberg, 2017; Forsberg, Thornberg, & Samuelsson, 2014; Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Hein, 2017; Helgeland & Lund, 2017; Horton, 2011, 2018; Hult & Lindgren, 2016; Lunneblad, Johansson, & Odenbring, 2017; Lyng, 2018; Mathiassen, 2013; Osbeck, 2006; Søndergaard, 2011, 2018; Teräslho & Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2015a, 2018; Thornberg, Håldin, Bolmsjö, & Petersson, 2013; Wrethander, 2007).

Current research on school bullying in the Nordic countries represents various disciplines and an immense range of different theoretical and methodological perspectives as well, and can be found in Norway (e.g. Breivik & Olweus, 2015; Olweus, Solberg, & Breivik, 2018; Eriksen, 2018; Ertesvåg & Roland, 2015; Lyng, 2018), Finland (e.g. Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012; Peets, Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2015; Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015; Turunen, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2017), Sweden (e.g. Ekerwald & Säfström, 2012; Forsberg, 2017; Hellström, Persson, & Hagqvist, 2015; Modin et al., 2015; Thornberg, 2018; Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2017), Denmark (e.g. Briixval, Rayce, Rasmussen, Hosteen, & Due, 2012; Eriksen, Nielsen, & Simonsen, 2014; Hansen, 2014; Hein, 2017; Obermann, 2011; Søndergaard, 2011, 2018), and Iceland (e.g. Garny, Vilhjálmsson, & Kristjánsdóttir, 2018; Mann, Kristjanson, Sigfusdottir, & Smith, 2015; Sigfusdottir, Gudjonsson, & Sigurdsson, 2010).

Despite of all the perspectives described above, the pedagogical perspective has largely gone unexamined, in public debates and in research. It is important to stress that bullying in school is a complex phenomenon, which requires a broad focus on different systematic factors, including the pedagogical perspective. Teachers play an important role in creating a positive school environment, and directly influence students’ educational, social, and emotional outcomes (VanZoeren & Weisz, 2018), including the prevalence of bullying (Roland & Galloway, 2002). Researchers also observed that teachers are “key agents of change” (Kallestad & Olweus, 2003, p. 19), and should be considered as the most crucial professionals in bullying intervention (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O’Brennan, 2007; Hektner & Swenson, 2012; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huizing, Sainio & Salmivalli, 2014; Yoon & Kerber, 2003; Yoon & Bauman, 2014; Yoon, Sulkowski, & Bauman, 2016). The whole professional culture in schools has been linked to bullying (Roland & Galloway, 2004), and how policy, school, classroom, teachers and peer groups in school may be associated with bullying can be further examined and analysed from a pedagogical per-
The current special issue of this journal calls for a pedagogical perspective on school bullying, and aims at presenting a comprehensive account of the role and impact of pedagogy in relation to bullying.

There are five articles in this special issue engaged in contributing to outline a pedagogical perspective on bullying. In the first article, “Towards a critical educational perspective on school bullying”, Paul Horton proposes a critical educational perspective on school bullying, inspired by critical pedagogy and the sociology of education. Traditionally, the definition of bullying includes a power imbalance, and Horton argues that a critical educational perspective offers us the opportunity to go beyond the individuals involved in bullying, to consider the relations of power and resistance linked with organizational factors and political structures of compulsory schooling as a system of domination. In these relations of dominance, students produce disorderly subversion, and their resistance is exercised in various ways, including mockery, teasing, fighting, and bullying. Horton highlights four political instituted features of schooling outlined by Duncan (2013), namely compulsion, compression, control, and competition, to theorize how these environmental aspects of schooling can orchestrating bullying as a part of students’ resistance in the everyday life of school.

In the second article, “Bullying, social exclusion anxiety and longing for belonging”, Dorte Marie Søndergaard and Helle Rabøl Hansen discuss bullying as a social dynamic by first problematizing the individualizing approach that has been strong in the research field as well as in schools, and which can be understood in light of new public management in the researcher community and in Western society in general. They criticize the privileging of quantitative research methodology, and the lack of interdisciplinarity favouring the individualizing way of thinking, and they point to the need of knowing bullying in many ways, and thus, the need for theoretical as well as empirical research based on qualitative as well as quantitative methodologies, and interdisciplinary collaborations. Søndergaard and Hansen emphasize two mutually intertwined mechanisms to better understand the social psychology of bullying: (a) longing for belonging, which is about the human desire to belong to social communities, and (b) social exclusion anxiety, which “circulates and smoulders in all social groups due to the ever-present risk of someone being judged unworthy to belong to a community of deemed to be an illegitimate participant” (p. 327). The basic need of social belonging and the collective fear of contempt and exclusion can push the group’s engagement into bullying.

In the third article, “Why does violence never end and what can we do about it? A Philosophy of Education analysis of the phenomena of bullying”, Elisabet Langmann and Carl Anders Säfström offer a philosophy of education-based analysis of bullying. In common with Horton in the first article and Søndergaard and Hansen in the second article, the starting point is that bullying should not primarily be understood at the individual level. In addition, Langmann and Säfström argue that bullying should be understood as a result of school as a socializing institution, rather than a deviation from its ordinary activity. They point to two logics of schooling: (a) the time logic of “not now – but later”, and (b) the hierarchical and deficit logic of “the more you become like the teacher (as representing the adult), the better”, and how these logics create a parallel of a real world and an unreal world. Bullying tends to occur in the unreal world of school. Further, Langmann and Säfström criticize norm-critical pedagogy as a way of dealing

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with school bullying as it still risks confirming the hierarchical and deficit logic of schooling and placing bullying in the unreal world. They highlight a need for a pedagogical and political perspective that both exposes and dissolves the power structure that excludes certain people from the societal community, and establishes and conceptualizes a universe that allow everyone to take their equal and rightful place as complete living subjects. Langmann and Säfström advocate a pedagogical theory based on equality, that creates opportunities for ethical and political acts in students’ everyday school lives, and makes room for political subjectification.

In the fourth article, “Relational rehabilitation: Reducing harmful effects caused by bullying”, Johannes Finne, Erling Roland and Frode Svartdal problematize a one-sided individualizing approach in relation to bullying as well, but also in relation to rehabilitation in healthcare. They argue that bullying is heavily influenced by the classroom community and is facilitated by the popularity structure in the school class, peer pressure, group norms, passive and bullying-supportive bystanders, poor teaching and classroom leadership, and the presence of moral disengagement. Because bullying is relational, appropriate interventions need to include repairing wounds, focusing on the relational practices rather than on the individual victims. Finne and colleagues propose a model of relational rehabilitation that consists of three steps: (1) ensuring teacher authority based on authoritative teaching and classroom management (high level of control and warmth) to establish and sustain a positive classroom climate conducive to academic learning and to enhance students’ social and moral growth; (2) redistribution of social power and promoting a supportive class community, including screening roles and relational structure, building alliances, and promoting social support and higher acceptance of deviance, and (3) providing social and emotional learning to the whole class.

In the final article, “Professional responsibility and accountability? Balancing institutional logics in the enactment of new regulations and practices against bullying and degrading treatment in Swedish schools”, Joakim Lindgren, Sara Carlbaum, Agneta Hult and Christina Segerholm report a study in which they have examined how four schools in one municipality work against degrading treatment and bullying. With reference to a theoretical framework on juridification and institutional complexity, they demonstrate the dilemmas with juridification, and the conflict between the logic of professional responsibility and the logic of accountability in these schools. Drawing on institutional theory, they show how filters, segmenting, bridging and demarcating can be used as analytical tools to better understand what is going on at the local governing body and at the school level in their enactment of policies and practices to counteract bullying and degrading treatment in school. Lindgren and colleagues reveal how the logics of accountability and professional responsibility create tensions but also how these can be kept apart, coexist and even complement each other. According to the findings, teachers made a lot of effort to balance these coexisting and conflicting logics in their everyday work.

Taken together, these five articles that comprise this special issue suggest that we need to lift our eyes off the individuals who bully and those who are bullied for the moment, to take seriously the societal, political, legal, institutional, social and pedagogical dimensions of school bullying. In particular, a pedagogical perspective on school bullying has to address all the processes that go on in school, and how these processes may produce but also counteract bullying. A peda-
pedagogical perspective has to consider national and local school policies; school as an organization and as an institution; teachers as role models, their classroom management, and efforts to influence students’ social and moral growth; and social processes and mechanisms in school classes and peer groups. Such a perspective focuses in particular on school, classroom, teacher, school class and peer group factors, and how these factors contribute to our understanding of bullying in school and the pedagogical possibilities that we may have to counteract it.

References


