

Bullying in Schools

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1. Introduction

Bullying has been a part of schooling for as long as children have been congregating. To some it seems like a natural, though uncomfortable, part of life and school experience, while to others it can mean terrifying experiences which spoiled and characterized otherwise happy years in school. Dan Olweus, a pioneer in bully behavior research documented that 2.7 million children are affected as victims, and that 2.1 children act as bullies (Fried, 1997, as cited in Aluedse, 2006). With bullying cited as the reason for violent, gun-related crime in the past few years, school districts as well as national governments have put anti-bullying policies in place. Bullying is a complicated phenomenon, involving more than one child demanding lunch money from a smaller child. It is a worldwide epidemic hitting schools everywhere. Virtually everyone has seen or experienced bullying. With technological advances, bullying is even hitting the internet. Parents, teachers, students and governments agencies alike are attempting to put a stop to bullying practices.

I chose to write about bullying because I experienced it first hand while working in Japan. As an English teacher at Tomobe Junior High School in Kasama, Japan, I witnessed how one twelve year old boy routinely abused not only his schoolmates, but physically assaulted teachers as well. At times when all students were seated, he walked around the classroom and picked on the other students; I saw how the classroom teacher glanced at him then turned his head so he would not bear witness and need to act. I saw how this boy verbally bullied his classmates by yelling and making comments in a hostile, insolent tone; I saw how he would often get physical and smack, shove, push and punch the children in his class. He walked with an aura of aggression and hostility and even I felt I needed to be on guard for what he was capable of doing. I had been warned that he kicked a teacher and left a large bruise. One day, while working with that teacher I saw him get out of his seat, charge towards the teacher and punch her repeatedly in the ribs. When we calmed him down and had him sit, he clutched scissors and angrily mumble to himself. Though in that incident he did not direct any physical or verbal abuse towards the students, his actions terrorized his classmates and several were shaken

and crying. I did not understand what caused him to be so angry, day after day, and act out so violently. I raised attention to the issue and the safety implications for all involved, though the school refused to act on it aside from advising me to leave the room when he acted up. I was helpless because I was a guest teacher in a foreign country, but as a teacher here I will be prepared and willing to act on bully behaviors. The focus of my paper is what are bully behaviors and what are strategies for addressing these at school?

2. Findings

Identify bully behaviors: Bully behaviors can be as blatant as physical violence or as insidious as manipulating friendships and spreading gossip. Bullying is more complex than an aggressor and a victim as everyone involved, from the supportive or non-supportive bystanders to the teacher who might not notice, plays an important role to the perpetuance of aggressive bully behavior. Researchers and authors on the subject like Berkowitz, Dodge & Coie, Olweus, Smith & Sharp have defined bullying as having three specific characteristics: frequency, the intention to hurt, and an asymmetric relationship between the bully and the victim. This kind of aggression can be direct or indirect; it can be expressed in words (threats, mocking, teasing, name calling), via physical contact (hitting, shoving, kicking, pinching, holding someone back), or by way of social relations (ostracizing, manipulating friendships)

(as cited in Houbre, Tarquinio, & Thuillier, 2006).

Sullivan, Cleary, and Sullivan (2004) further clarify the types of bullying by categorizing bullying into physical or nonphysical acts. Physical aggression can include hitting, tripping, and hands-off spitting, and nonphysical aggression can be verbal or nonverbal. Nonverbal bullying is broken up even further into direct nonverbal bullying which includes “rude gestures and mean faces” (p. 5), and indirect nonverbal bullying includes manipulation of friendships, social relations, and reputations. Bullies’ stages and playing fields are classrooms and schools whether class is in session or not. Some bullies depend on an audience of their schoolmates to dominate over a particular student, the victim. Sullivan, et al. refer to the “bullying triangle” in one of their diagrams (see attached appendix, Figure 1) which depicts the bully, victim, and bystander

on each apex of an equilateral triangle. Such depiction connotes that each party has equal standing during an incident of bullying. Instead, Juvonen and Graham (2001) depict bystanders as divided into those that support or do not support either the bully or the victim; furthermore within supporters and non-supporters there are those who are or are not willing to act. A fourth dimension are the bystanders who do not care or give an incident any importance. This more complex model is realistic and reflects different dynamics of social relations (see attached appendix, Figure 2).

What are the causes of bullying? The roots of bully behavior have to do with the manner in which a child grows up. The home environment and model behavior the child observes play a great role in the behavior the child projects. Factors such as the parents' attitude towards the child or others, ways in which the parents model behavior, the parent's marital status, and income level have a daily, direct influence on the child (Newman, Horne, & Bartolomucci, 2000, p. 52-53). The Concentric Circle Model illustrates all the influences a child may have; the child is surrounded by family, then school, then community, and finally culture (see attached appendix, Figure 3). All of these entities have an impact on the child. The Bully Development Model is an extension of the circle diagram and goes into further detail as to the type of relationship a child may have with parents or peers, for example, and how that may foster bullying behavior (see attached appendix, Figure 4). In both models the parents and home are the closest to the child. Generally there is an overall lack of resources in bullies' home environment - be it affection or physical resources. The one having most effect on children is attention and positive reinforcement from the part of the parents. Bully behavior may start very early in development, "having effective social skills represents a high level of cognitive and behavioral development" (Newman, et al., 2000, p. 15). This is the classic behaviorist model of development, as bullies watch, learn, and imitate aggressive behavior. John Locke's theories of a *tabula rasa*, or a clean slate apply here as well, since aggressive behavior is not innate, but learned. In a psychoanalytic approach, Erikson's theory of development is excellent for decoding bully behavior. As a child grows he or she goes through stages like Trust versus

Mistrust, Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt, Initiative versus Guilt, and Industry versus Inferiority. At each stage the child negotiates new cognitive and emotional experiences and passes the stage with either a positive or negative outcome. The negative outcomes of the stages alone begin to describe bullies.

Why do children bully other children? Children who lack social skills turn to bullying because it might be something to achieve in, as bullies are often doing poor academic work. Bullies have an uncanny sense in picking out weak attributes in other children. Ross (1996) stated that bullies gain self-esteem by dominating others, and therefore feel superior (as cited in Newman, et al., 2000, 58). Finally, bullies themselves may have poor self esteem and there is no need for friends or social approval. Bullies can take many forms, and boys and girls generally bully in different ways; while boys can be more physical, girls will resort to verbal or nonverbal bullying. For parents and teachers, it is important to be aware of the signs and symptoms of bullying. Sullivan, et al. (2004) list that physical injuries, torn clothes, lost or damaged belongings, mood changes and reluctance to participate or go to school are classic signs of bullying (p. 12-13). Many people went through school and experienced bullying in a very mild or indirect form. It is important to remember that others might have a more extreme experience or will take bullying more seriously.

Bullying is adapting to new technological developments. A new form of bully now includes the “insidious development of phones and computers. In addition, youths also create hate-filled web pages about a victim, including personal information” (Aluedse, 2006). Recent headlines in the San Francisco Bay Area include cases of fights taped on middle and high-school student's cell phone cameras. In an interview with CBS correspondent Mike Sugeran, Ray Jimenez, a 13 year old student at Richmond High School said that one of the reasons for taping the fights were as proof that “things” were taken care of. These things could be misunderstandings such as a comment about a person or a look. Teens have also been ganging up on unsuspecting victims and beating them while taping, just for fun. The victims include other teens and even a 60 year old man. Taped fights are sent to the perpetrator’s friends or

posted on the internet, the humiliation, therefore, is augmented (CBS Broadcasting Inc., 2006). Hopefully this terrifying and humiliating method of bullying will come to a quick end, since police are saying that recording the involved party greatly facilitates pressing charges and leaves no doubt as to exactly what was done.

How Schools React to Bullying: Anti-bullying programs have been implemented in schools around the world. In 1983 Dan Olweus, a leader on the topic of bully behavior research implemented a nationwide anti-bullying program in Norway. This program consisted foremost of awareness, with parents, students, and teachers alike instructed on bullying behaviors, signs, and symptoms. Students then took a questionnaire regarding if they themselves had ever, or were, bullying, or if they were victims of bullying. O'Moore and Milton (2005), write that although Olweus' evaluation credited the program as being a success, a reevaluation three years later by Roland and Munthe (1997) claims that while awareness and attention yield effects, true success lies in maintaining the program. Adults have the most power and influence in applying anti-aggression programs, and if bullying is not taken seriously, as a grave matter, then this same attitude will affect the students as well. Having laid the groundwork for such a momentous program, improvements were made in 1996 which included prevention instead of just intervention (O'Moore & Milton, 2005). Anti-bullying programs are administered worldwide in a small and local scale, Norway is a pioneer for having implemented a worldwide program. This raises more questions for me: how bad does it need to get before schools, let alone governments, react? Another factor coming into play, as illustrated in the Concentric Circle Model is culture. This is crucial when comparing policies in different countries, as one culture's threshold of pain, for example, is different than another's. In my experience, the violent incident in the Japanese classroom and the manner in which it was subsequently handled was dismaying. The teacher who was hit treated me with hostility and ignored me for weeks because I had reacted and let school authorities know of what happened in the classroom. For her and the Japanese culture, I had brought shame upon her, as any misbehavior from her students is seen as

a failure on her part. This was completely new for me as I was living in a culture where denial was best way to handle the situation.

I found nothing written on the subject of advice as ignoring aggressive behavior. The sources I studied all involve taking an active stance against bullying. Any teacher or administrator who willingly ignores bullying may be conforming to societal or cultural norms, so as to not bring shame or attention to that classroom or teacher. Sullivan, et al. (2004) list a range of responses that schools might have towards bullying, they also mention what type of school would have each of the responses. An authoritarian school might have a 'zero-tolerance policy' while schools that are disorganized might deny a problem altogether, or state that there is not enough time or resources to deal with it (p. 61-61). A teacher who ignores the problem might be doing it because of the hassle of getting involved, or might take pity on the child because of the belief that nothing good can come from intervention. Teacher's manuals on the subject mention that teachers must believe in their students and that the work they are doing in anti-bullying will count for something. Furthermore, in their book entitled Bully Busters, Newman et al. suggests forming an anti-bullying task force which also acts as a support group for all involved adults. It is expected that in implementing and maintaining anti-bullying programs there will be setbacks and discouraging situations.

Strategies for maintaining anti-bullying policies focus on awareness. Like the improved program in Norway, being informed is the key to prevention. The aforementioned Bully Busters manual (Newman, et al., 2004, p.132-133) suggests creating an open-door policy, taking all incidents, even minor ones, seriously, acting appropriately and quickly. Having class discussions about bullies and outlining behavior facilitates student discussion and perhaps allows students to be more willing to approach an adult about bullying incidents.

3. Conclusions

Although I made the connections that there is bullying in the United States, and in Japan where I taught, and in Peru where I am from, I did not fully realize that bullying is a worldwide epidemic. It is just something I had not thought of before I looked for articles and found papers

about bullying in Australia, Ireland, South Africa, and elsewhere. From my particular experience I have found out that culture was the the largest factor contributing to this child bullying others. The school had already failed to take the appropriate measures and culture norms prevented them from shining more light on the issue than I already had. From the Concentric Circle diagram on bullying, culture then takes a more important perspective, instead of being a circle far away from the child, with seemingly little consequence or implication, in this light it now becomes what encompasses everything in it - society, school rules, teacher's and peer's reactions, and finally the bully.

I had not known that cognition is different between bullies and other people. That really points to bullying being more of an illness instead of just a behavioral problem. I learned that bullies perceive things such as a bump like a shove, or take a look the wrong way. This coupled with that bullies have different cognitive abilities comes together and makes sense that the home life is critical to the development of bullies. To me, bullies exhibit survival skills in their behaviors, their insecurities are revealed when they feel they are being attacked socially or otherwise and strike back.

I have learned a great deal about bullying behaviors, signs, and symptoms, but I still do not understand why anti-bullying programs are not at the forefront of school policies when school shootings are becoming more common and bullying is a serious, worldwide crisis. Other issues seem to take precedence over avoidable social interactions that have serious implications on the health and well-being of children.

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