Peer Victimization: Creating a Culture for Learning and Safe Classroom Communities

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Bullying is a complex behavior; it can be direct or indirect, inflicted upon provocative or passive victims, usually by a child who is sustained by a supporting group of peers (Harris and Petrie, 2003). Its etiology has been researched since the 1960s when Heinemann's works were used in Finnish schools (Heinemann, 1969). Bullies scored high on dominance tests and impulsiveness. Bullies of both sexes not only considered themselves to be dominant, they also idealized dominant behavior (Bjorkquist and Osterman, 1992).

Heinemann borrowed the term, "mobbing," from a book on aggression written by the well-known Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1963, 1968). In ethology, the term is used to denote a collective attack. The well-known story behind the current discourse on peer victimization began with Heinemann's (1969) discussion of "mobbing". With its primitive undertones, the term "mobbing" effectively brought to light the seriousness of peer aggressions, which has abounded in both human and animal societies throughout history. The term's usefulness when applied to the classroom is limited, however, because it fails to take into account forms of bullying carried out mainly by one individual against another. The term has fallen out of favor in current discussions about bullying in American schools because "bullying" is not always **a** collective attack; sometimes it is an act carried out mainly by one student (Doll, Song and Siemers, 2003). Dan Olweus (1978, 1993), one of the forefathers of the modern tradition of research on bullying as a behavior, discusses its relevance, concluding that the term is applicable to a degree but falls short of providing a precise definition because it fails to explain some of the other nuances of peer victimization, namely the provocative victim syndrome.

Bullying, is defined by Batsche and Knoff (1994) as a form of aggression by which one or more students physically and /or psychologically (and more recently sexually) harass another student repeatedly over a period of time. Doll, Song, and Siemers (2003) assert that bullying is a distinct form of malicious behavior that usually involves an imbalance of power. These behaviors may range from ostracizing to physical attacks. Children and adolescents who are victimized by their peers experience anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem often avoid school for the sole purpose of avoiding situations where victimization may take place. The impact on academic achievement can be far-reaching. Research indicates that approximately 7% of America's eighth graders skip school at least once per month due to fear of being bullied by their peers (Banks, 1997). Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) assert that peer victimization is a precursor of school avoidance as there is a positive relationship between peer victimization and school avoidance. Results of a further investigation indicated that children who were victimized at the beginning of the school year were more likely to avoid school as the year progressed (Ladd, Kochenderfer, and Colemean, 1997).

The challenge to inculcate a sense of self-efficacy in each student in order to stave off covert acts of aggression between students has plagued classrooms in countries around the world. The fact that aggression and bullying has attracted such interest at this time is no accident as school violence has reached epidemic proportions in America.

THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

According to Walker, Colvin and Ramsey (1995), bullying is an antisocial behavior intended to intimidate and threaten the well-being of others. Intimidation and threatening environments create less than welcoming settings for students. Bowman (2001) asserts that schools may be a frightening place for some students as they worry more about protecting themselves than they do about learning due to threats from bullies and outbursts of antisocial conduct. Efforts to insulate students from bullying behavior and dangers in the school environment are ongoing struggles fought by teachers on a daily basis. Educating teachers about how to make the distinction between healthy and unhealthy forms of

student interaction is essential in addressing peer victimization. The point at which "jostling," or, playfully aggressive overtures, become hurtful, is not always easy for a teacher or an authority figure to recognize. Teachers, must, therefore, listen carefully to students and encourage students to report harmful activity that occurs outside of the teacher's awareness.

Peer victimization must be detected, as best possible by the teacher and strategically mitigated or completely obliterated by the tone of the classroom, which is often set by the teacher at the inception of the school year. Each child must feel socially integrated, safe, and engaged in the networks that comprise the classroom setting. Irvine (1997) emphasizes the significant link between teachers making a difference in students' lives and the social structure of schools. The teacher's role is to create a culture for learning and hedge against social conflicts that arise between peers.   The teacher's first challenge is to legitimize the presence of every member of the group. Failure to generate this often imperceptible emotional atmosphere may lead at-risk students into more treacherous feelings of isolation, discrimination, objection, alienation, or fear, out of which a victim posture may evolve. In a classroom, there may often be no immediate connection between individuals. These connections must be established for the purpose of creating a positive learning environment and a culture of acceptance. A culture inevitably must be fostered and maintained that legitimizes each member so that each member has a sense of belonging and inclusion. **"**Students who are socially included have someone to sit with on the bus, someone to play with at recess, someone to eat with at lunch, someone who chooses them for their team, and someone to talk to during free moments in the classroom" (Doll, Song and Siemers, 2003:**7**).

Diller and Moule (2005) emphasize the significance of teachers familiarizing themselves with a student's culture so that behavior may be understood within its own cultural context. A lack of teacher awareness may inadvertently create the conditions for peer victimization**.** Teachers utilizing culturally responsive pedagogy create safer classrooms because each student is included, engaged, and stimulated. In creating a culture for learning, teachers who are in touch with their students and who are acquainted with their backgrounds, behavioral styles, learning

styles, are better able to detect if they are upset or suffering from some form of peer victimization.

The teacher's role in the prevention of peer victimization is significant as the gravity of the problem of peer victimization impacts behaviors of both the bully and the victim. Acts of physical violence often are the culmination of behaviors that began with more subtle forms of exclusion, name-calling, ostracization, and neglect. Factors such as physical appearance, disabilities, and other abnormalities can place students at risk for peer victimization. While healthy forms of interplay among students are permitted, even minor "crossed-transactions" should be taken seriously between the student who is at-risk for peer victimization and the more socially integrated student. If a student withdraws, adopts a sullen attitude, or develops a complex, the student may fall into the category of a "provocative" or "passive" victim (Olweus, 1993). Such students need protection by authority figures. It is not always a problem stemming from classmates; in many cases a student may adopt this victim posture because of experiences that pre-date the classroom or external factors such as family problems.

Espelage and Sweaner (2004) emphasize the influence of the group as a whole- the family, the classroom, and the society – upon individual acts of bullying. The bully, bully-victim, victim or bystander exists within a family. The teacher must sustain a sense of community and family among students and foster collegiality rather than conflict. In the typical classroom, some students may be less integrated and inclined to engage in class activities as a result of being victims of bullying. Passively isolated students are often easy prey for bullies because they have no one to defend them or retaliate for them in the event of an attack (Doll, Song and Siemers, 2003). The teacher should recognize the heightened risk of victimization encountered by these students and have access to strategies to mitigate this risk.

INTERVENTION

A variety of intervention approaches addressing peer victimization have been designed and implemented in schools throughout America. An umbrella approach to peer victimization may involve character education as the foundation for curriculum development and implementation with focus on ethics, attitudes, and behaviors. The curriculum emphasizes promotion of under-

standing others, accepting others, appreciating others, and respecting others. In addition to character education, zero tolerance of bullying behavior is also a practice utilized by many schools. This policy is implemented to hedge against future outbreaks or manifestations of underlying power imbalances.

Kohlberg presents the Just Community Approach that focuses on schools becoming democratic and moral contexts for the moral development of students (Higgins, 1991). The goal is to enhance students' moral development through participation in a democratic community. Students have full participation in decision-making with equal value placed on the voices of students and teachers. The purpose of student responsibility in identifying and enforcing rules supports prosocial behavior and moral development and thus lessons peer victimization.

Olweus (1993) presents an anti-bullying approach that involves three components with focus on intervention at the school, classroom, and individual levels. The first component includes students, parents, teachers, and school administrators completing an initial survey. The survey includes questions designed to assess information on the extent of the bullying problem, the frequency of teacher intervention, and parent knowledge about their child's school experiences relating to bullying. The second component of this approach involves increasing parental awareness regarding bullying and parental support of anti-bullying efforts. The third component includes teachers working with students at the classroom level in developing rules against bullying.

Ericson (2001) presents a Bullying Prevention Program targeting elementary and junior high school students. The program includes: a) determination of the nature and prevalence of the school's bullying problem by surveying students anonymously, b) increased supervision of students during breaks, school wide assemblies to discuss bullying, c) regular classroom meetings with students to discuss bullying, d) establishment and enforcement of classroom rules against bullying, and e) staff intervention with bullies, victims, and their parents to ensure that the bullying stops.

The Positive Peer Group Approach is designed for students in grades 5-9 with focus on intervention strategies to help alienated and disengaged students. This leadership training program gives students an opportunity to participate in school-oriented service projects and make connections and affiliations with other students through peer group activities. The Positive Peer Group Approach focuses on three key areas within the school community: a) work, b) discipline, and c) responsibility. The program addresses problems of individual students, as well as serves school-wide concerns. Activities are designed to respond to peer victimization including peer tutoring and mentoring activities.

The Child Development Project is an additional intervention program, which focuses on restructuring teaching, learning, school organization, school climate, and the classroom environment. Components of the Child Development Approach involve fostering students' social, ethical, and intellectual development for the purpose of building classrooms that are caring communities. Teachers play a major role in guiding students in peer collaboration, inclusive approaches, and pro-social activities. Teachers involve students in identifying classroom standards as they move students through the process of under-standing that standards are for the common well-being and not simply arbitrary rules designed by powerful adults. Teachers engage students in collaborative approaches involving conflict resolution and non-violent problem-solving. Emphasis is placed on personal commitment to justice, kindness and responsibility. Parent involvement is another component of the Child Development Project focusing on establishing a sense of community. Activities are designed to provide and support meaningful conversations between children and parents. These activities serve as avenues for emphasizing moral teaching and the value of caring communities.

Lumsden (2002) identifies intervention strategies for preventing and counteracting bullying including developing and distributing a written anti-bullying policy to everyone in the school community and fairly and consistently applying the policy. Lumsden also suggests mapping a school's "hot spots" for bullying incidents so that supervision can be concentrated in designated areas; having students and parents sign contracts at the beginning of the school year acknowledging that they understand it is unacceptable to ridicule, taunt, or attempt to hurt other students; and teach respect and non-violence beginning in elementary school. Additional strategies recommended by Lumsden

include teaching bullies positive behavior through modeling, coaching, prompting, praise, teaching students social skills, conflict management, using role-play situations, anger management, character education and having students sign anti-teasing or anti-bullying pledges.

Even though intervention strategies are designed and implemented to address peer victimization, it is essential to recognize that students can be discreet in devising ways to disguise peer victimization in order to escape identification. As such, some form of surveillance may be necessary to detect acts of peer victimization that occur outside the general area of the classroom. Intervention also includes educating students about peer victimization. Students should be informed that any form of bullying they encounter should be reported and channels should be open to allow students to report abuse discreetly, and anonymously. Teachers may also schedule individual conferences with students for the purpose of making students feel engaged in the learning environment. The outcome of creating a safe, welcoming environment by applying effective strategies sets the tone of a classroom's particular rituals, habits, and practices which serve as ways to unify its group of students.

CONCLUSION

While some forms of bullying may appear minor to adults and even to students, every incident has serious implications that should be recognized by the teacher. The need for classrooms to be safe and caring environments calls for a school-wide curriculum design that infuses character education and intervention strategies addressing peer victimization. It is imperative that school personnel implement strategies designed to detect, counteract, and prevent bullying. Furthermore, an atmosphere of open communication and safety in schools must be maintained to reduce the frequency of bullying. Specific strategies should be implemented in classrooms that attempt to thwart potential verbal, physical, and emotional abuse from bullies. These strategies help educators facilitate the development of supportive relationships and safe, caring communities for all students and particularly victims of bullies. In the final analysis, "bullying" has become the center of so much discussion because, along with its predecessor "mobbing", it is symptomatic of a much wider range of behaviors

that occur between groups of people, between societies, and between individuals alike. The same psychological mechanisms that dictate the way people interact on a personal level govern the way large groups of people correspond to and relate to one another. Regardless of the setting or context, individuals are connected to highly evolved networks in which power resides and this power is sometimes abused. Students are part of a system designed to emancipate them from such abuses of power. Peer victimization (bullying) should be discouraged and eradicated completely if possible – otherwise the system has failed in its objective to socialize its members for the classroom community, as well as for the community at large.

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ABSTRACT The most recent research on the topic of bullying reveals a common list of principles and patterns, which identify it. There is little consensus, however, on the relationship between classroom peer victimization and other forms of discrimination and violence in our society. This essay attempts, from a cross-national point of view, to suggest a link between the social atmosphere, and the classroom problem of bullying. It focuses on the classroom as a space where tensions are either harnessed in constructive ways through curriculum intervention or where destructive patterns such as peer-victimization emerge. The teacher transforms the classroom from a collection of individuals into a community. This process of transformation often determines how safe or unsafe each member feels in the classroom community.

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