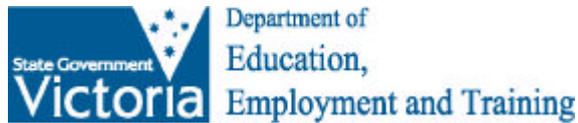


BULLYING. NO WAY! A NATIONAL INITIATIVE TO EXPAND THINKING ABOUT BULLYING, HARRASSMENT AND VIOLENCE AND THEIR RESOLUTION

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Introduction

Teachers and young people are facing significant challenges in the new millennium. Many young people are resistant to schooling which they see as increasingly disconnected from their lives given rapidly changing political, economic, social and cultural circumstances including new communication technologies, changing employment patterns, a growing gap between rich and poor, and increasing local diversity and global interconnectedness. The multiplicity of lifeworlds and overlapping subcultures that young people are part of are alien to many teachers. The inability of traditional schooling to engage with such factors in meaningful ways can be seen in resistant behaviour of students and frustration on the part of teachers.

Education systems are recognising the agency of the school in equitable – and inequitable - power relations and students' life opportunities. Systemic initiatives are emphasising the importance of reinventing schooling beyond its traditional control and custodial functions. Key endeavours include the democratisation of schooling and classroom to engage students as active, empowered learners able to critically read and negotiate the politics of daily life; to develop respect, understanding and bridge-building with regard to diversity; and to participate positively and fully in family, community and civic life.

Effective responses to bullying, harassment and violence need to be whole school curriculum responses that take these factors into account.

This paper is designed to stimulate discussion about the complexity of the issues. The paper will advocate for the development of a discussion in relation to bullying that includes an appreciation of the ways in which social attitudes and values impact on the behaviour of students in school communities. Such a discussion would facilitate an appreciation of the need to build social capital in the community and to address issues of discrimination such as homophobia and racism through school policy, practices and the curriculum.

In developing this thesis, I draw on learnings from the development of the *Bullying. No way!* website project.

Background

Bullying. No way! is the result of a *Safe and Supportive School Environments: finding workable solutions for countering bullying, harassment and violence in schools* project collaboratively developed and funded by Commonwealth, State and Territory Government, Catholic and Independent education authorities for the benefit of all Australian school communities. Initiated by the Conference of Education Systems Chief Executive Officers (CESCEO) in 1999, it was a response to data that indicated high levels of bullying, harassment and violence in schools; and a coordinated effort to provide school communities with cutting edge theory and resources to address the issues. The project now sits under the auspices of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) Student Learning and Support Services Taskforce. The project has included:

- a national scan of local and systemic resources aimed at minimizing bullying, harassment and violence in schools.
- the development of a framework for identifying and sharing effective practices and workable solutions in the process of building safe and supportive school environments. These practices are informed by and linked with local and systemic policies, guidelines and strategies.
- dissemination of materials and awareness raising in all states and territories through a national website.

Launched in June 2002 following consultation with all education sectors, and with school communities, the website provides Australian school communities with case studies of how schools have effected change, and networking opportunities likely to contribute to the development of supportive school environments free from bullying, harassment and violence. It is ongoing, a work in progress, a space for further development and sharing, created by and for Australia's diverse school communities. The target audience is the whole school community: all school staff, students, carers and the wider community.

The website is overseen by a national working group, and managed by Education Queensland until June 2003 when an evaluative report and recommendations will guide decisions regarding the project's continuing status, management and funding.

Website Focus

The website seeks people who are looking for solutions to 'bullying' in their school communities, and engages with the complexity of the issues surrounding bullying, harassment and violence. Many of the school case studies included in the website illustrate the efficacy of whole school approaches in addressing issues of bullying and harassment through a range of approaches. They demonstrate the centrality of effective curriculum and teaching and a democratisation of the school and the classroom in any successful efforts to build safe and supportive school environments. Examples include core curriculum critical literacy programs focused on gender, race, class and power; student-led Health Promoting Schools action; community bridge-building endeavours; and staff professional training in culturally-appropriate teaching and support strategies.

The focus on a coordinated, multi-dimensional approach is consistent with education sectors' strategic directions, and crime prevention research recommending a coordination of preventive approaches (National Crime Prevention Consortium, 1999).

Presences and Absences

What emerged through a scan of resources, research, educational sector directions and case studies was that, when the subject is 'bullying', the dominant discourse is one of management often with a focus on the individual(s) as deficit – as needing to be 'fixed up'.

Meanwhile, discourses and research in effective school reform argue for a sociocultural approach (for example, see School of Education, University of Queensland, 2001). This acknowledges that schools' practices themselves can be instrumental in marginalising and causing resistance in particular groups of students who, along with their families, are seen as deficit or deviant. Such research also argues that individual behaviours are shaped by broader social constructions, for example, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status and race. Intrinsic to such understandings is an appreciation of the need for educators to be able to identify and interrogate the ways in which power relations within the school itself may develop and maintain oppression, and the importance of critical pedagogy and curriculum that strives towards a more socially just and equitable society.

Research, the daily media and school stories such as the following have reinforced that students are bullied on grounds of class, 'race', gender and sexuality (Collins et al., 1996). Homophobic behaviour, identified as playing a significant role in the construction of boys' and girls' identities and aggressive masculinity (Hillier et al., 1998), implicates both gender and sexuality.

“We get so much pressure to wear the right brand name clothes. People who can't, they're isolated, criticised for not being like the cool trendies” (Student, *Bullying. No way!* website).

“At other schools where girls wear scarves on their head they are teased and the scarves are pulled off” (Year 10 girl, *Bullying. No way!* website).

"I usually get a hard time about talking with and playing with girls in class and at lunchtime. Because I spend time with girls, I get called faggot and a tryhard... When I get called names it makes me feel like I have been excluded from the boy race" (Year 7 student, *Bullying. No way!* website).

“I became aware of put down of gays, socially and within the family. I stopped playing piano. I stopped ballroom dancing at a very young age, cause I was frightened of, you know, being labelled gay” (Participant, *Homophobia – Get Over It! Conference*).

School authorities have recognised that constructions such as these play a significant role in the creation of educational risk and marginalisation and thus cannot be discounted as silly or meaningless; that schools are involved in creating and maintaining these constructions, and that ‘schools must work directly with diversity and complexity to make sure all students have a successful experience of school’ (Director-General, Education Queensland, 2001). The acknowledgment of these power relations is largely absent from the school bullying discourseⁱⁱ.

Examining the Silence and its Implications

Over the last couple of decades, increasingly fine-tuned behavioural definitions of bullying (generally treated as discrete from harassment) and taxonomies of those considered to be involved as perpetrators or recipients have fostered interventions on an individual and small group withdrawal basis, and, increasingly, within the mainstream class, year level and whole student cohort. Examples of such approaches include controlling sanctions, mediation, protective behaviours and the encouragement of group processes and students’ relationship skills through assertiveness training, conflict resolution skills and bystander behaviours.

While appreciating the role of these approaches, and the increasing interest in developing connectedness and positive relationships, it is also important to acknowledge the way in which the underlying psychological/ behavioural discourse, as with any framework, has positioned our understanding of and responses to the issues in specific ways. Our use of the labelling terms ‘bully’, ‘bullies’ and ‘victims’ serves to maintain the individualistic focus, while masking the differentials in power between for example, males and females, poor and rich, able and disabled, gay and straight. The term ‘bullying’ has come to signify behaviour divested of its social and cultural significance. The modus operandi tends to be one of control and training. Without shared identification, critical analysis and challenging of existing social constructs, power differentials will continue to inhibit some groups; for example, some boys will feel unable to choose conflict resolution skills that run counter to the dominant forms of masculinity. As Dally and Lindstrom (2001:3) observe:

‘In a culture where there is a focus on individual behaviours, our capacity to review the impact of social forces on groups is limited. Greater possibilities for analysis and action occur when individual behaviours are viewed as shaped by diverse social constructions such as gender, socio-economic status and school culture enacted in the relations between student, educator and school’.

Whether spoken about or not, these social constructions and their impact are challenges for students at school and in their future. They are also issues within the wider community. For sustainable change to occur, young people need awareness of the social and political world about them; the knowledge and skills that will allow them to engage as autonomous learners in exploring how

individual and group identities are shaped by social and cultural factors; and the knowledge and skills necessary to positively interact with and shape that world and actively pursue justice on behalf of themselves and others.

When the aforementioned student needs are addressed early and centrally within the democratic goals of schooling, coordinated across year levels and across key learning areas, there is potential for a sustained positive approach that encourages students to value diversity and to challenge and resist narrow ways of being that impact negatively on their own and others' lives.

This work is central to the development of safe, supportive, respectful and inclusive school environments free from bullying. School communities are already contributing to understandings of how this might look in practice. The website's 'strategies map' summarises some of the approaches. The 'Schools in action' case studies indicate some of the ways in which communities have accepted these challenges with strategies that are locally relevant.

The task is far from easy for schools to even begin, particularly when popular media discourses are quick to locate blame and call for quick retribution, but silent on the ways in which bullying is a complex societal issue in which we are all implicated. Beckett (2001:33) for example, alerts us to 'concerns about the image of schools in these new times of marketing schools. Some school principals and district officers are reluctant to acknowledge [issues such as] homophobia much less the need for anti-violence work lest it draw attention to controversial and sensitive issues and tarnish the school's image'. To move beyond the scapegoating of schools willing to address the full range of issues will require many voices educating and supporting our communities.

Moving Forward

This paper has attempted to delineate some of the ways in which the discussion of bullying has been constrained by a particular set of agendas, and the importance of extending current notions to recognise and address broader complexities in ways central to curriculum and the full life of schools. It has been argued that bullying needs to be seen both as a social and cultural phenomenon.

The paper's advocacy for an expanded discussion does not negate the value of psychological or behavioural components. Rather, it is a call to work together to locate our work within a cohesive, coherent larger framework; a framework with the capacity to inform constructive social change and guide schools in building social capital. In current language, this means ensuring that understandings associated with 'harassment' are not only incorporated rather than silenced, but are used to guide decisions about all action to address bullying.

It will take time and the active, democratic and critical engagement of the whole school community if we are to achieve equitable relations in our schools and communities. The issues are complex and they intersect. In the opinion of this author, failure to engage with the full range of issues will lead to further student disconnectedness and increased levels of student behavioural resistance and teacher frustration.

I invite you to join in a discussion that will further an understanding of bullying which includes the importance of factors such as gender, class, race, sexuality and the agency of schooling in the development of safer and more equitable environments free from bullying and harassment. Early deliberations in this process could include questions such as:

- How might current conceptualisations about bullying be impeding school communities in understanding and responding to the full range of issues?

- In what ways can our discourse and practice engage with systemic educational imperatives that ‘place central emphasis on the need to understand and respond to social advantage/disadvantage; privilege/marginality; and the differential access to power play in meeting the social objectives of diversity and opportunity for all students’ (*South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework:19*)?
- How may models of evaluation be flexible enough to move beyond identification, measurement and comparison of anti-bullying work in terms of discrete clinical components; to the complexity of multi-dimensional whole school curriculum and social change approaches and the building of social capital; ‘data collection systems which allow things to be seen in context, not just isolated responses to questions’ (Cox, 2001).
- How might the positioning of bullying as largely a student problem prevent attention to the ways in which the actions of all players maintain abuses of power? For example, Hepburn (2000) has asked the question, to what extent is bullying by teachers minimised as a necessary aspect of the job of maintaining control and ‘good discipline’?
- How may we, in our various positions, assist the wider community and media to understand and actively support the work of schools in addressing the full range of factors that maintain bullying; and enable schools to undertake this work towards a more equitable society without fear of punishment?

To contribute to these deliberations beyond the present conference, you are invited to participate in an email discussion list. For details and to join the list, email chris.henderson@qed.qld.gov.au.

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ⁱ *Bullying. No way!* school case study submissions were initially often limited to discrete activities specifically entitled 'anti-bullying'. When the website's broader positive goal was recognised, many schools were keen to expand their case studies to include coordinated efforts that engaged with all groups through curriculum and pedagogy, relationships and school organisation. Similar patterns emerged in departmental responses regarding their systemic resources. *Pathways to Prevention* (1999:36) notes both the difficulty and 'fundamental importance of coordinating policies and decisions ... that might initially appear somewhat removed from the prevention of crime'.

ⁱⁱ For example, The Australian's recent article citing data from Rigby on the reluctance of male high school students to report bullying (DiGirolamo, 19 August 2002) might benefit from reference to the ways in which many boys learn to 'do' masculinity at school and the powerful role of the group in shaping, enforcing and restricting appropriate masculine behaviours.