

“Bullying, Communication, and Identity: Stories of Harm and Hope”

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Central Ideas

Two central ideas will guide this talk:

- (1) Bullying is a communicative process in which students participate in social interactions and relationships that mindlessly harm the identities and well-being of the students who are being bullied. These students are typically students of “difference” (Berry, 2016).

How has communication shaped bullying in your school? And your intervention efforts?

- (2) Responding to bullying entails mindfully learning from the personal and candid stories of the people who have participated, or are still participating, in the bullying or bullying intervention efforts. This includes stories from students and educators.

What stories of bullying and bullying intervention efforts do you have to share? What stories of successful intervention would you like to be able to tell in the future?

Key Statistics

Statistics vary on the rate of prevalence of bullying. Consider, for example:

- Approximately 30% of youth males and females, especially those in sixth through eighth grade, report moderate or frequent participation in bullying, whether as a bully (13%), victim (11%), or both (6%) (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001; see also Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003).
- In contrast, Glover, Gough, Johnson & Cartwright (2010) contend that between 40% and 80% of youth are bullied, and 7% of youth experience more severe bullying.
- 1 in 3 American school children between grades 6 through 10 are affected by bullying (The Bully Project, 2013). 6 out of 10 teenagers say they witness bullying in school once a day. 64% of children who were bullied did not report it. 10% of students who drop out of school do so as a result of repeated bullying. Nearly 70% of students think schools respond poorly to bullying.

GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network) surveyed 7,898 students between the ages of 13 and 21, and demonstrated distressing conditions of school climate and bullying, primarily regarding sexual orientation and gender expression (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). For instance:

- 56% of students felt unsafe at school due to sexual orientation, and 38% due to their gender expression, leading many to miss school and skip attending school events and activities.
- 71% of LGBT students heard “gay” used in a derogatory way, and 65% heard other homophobic comments.
- 56% experienced negative remarks about gender expression.
- Over 51% had received homophobic and negative remarks about gender expression from teachers and school staff.
- While 74% of students were verbally harassed in the past year due to their sexual orientation, and 55% because of their gender expression, a significant number of students were physically harassed in the last year (74% LGBT, 36% due to gender expression).
- A majority of students reported experiencing policies that discriminated against them based on sexual orientation and gender expression (e.g., being discipline for public displays of affection by LGBT, attending school dance with someone of same sex).
- Climate issues significantly affect transgendered students: 42% reported being prevented from using their preferred names; 59% were made to use only the bathroom or locker room of their legal sex; and 32% were prevented from “inappropriate” clothes based on their legal sex.

Working Definitions

Bullying

“Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm” (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014, p. 7).

“Bullying is understood to be intentional behavior and involves a power imbalance (real or perceived) between aggressors and victims; that is, bullies often deliberately seek to cause harm to their victims, and “the student who is exposed to negative actions has difficulty defending himself or herself [physically, emotionally, and/or relationally]” (Olweus, 2010, p. 11).

Cyberbullying

Also known as “cyber aggression” and “electronic aggression,” cyberbullying is defined as “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, *using electronic forms of contact*, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, & Tippett, 2008, p. 376, emphasis in original).

Relational Aggression

“Relational aggression harms others through hurtful manipulation of their peer relationships or friendships (e.g., retaliating against a peer by purposefully excluding her from one's social group), whereas overt aggression harms others through physical damage or the threat of such damage (e.g., threatening to beat up a peer unless she complies with a request)” (Crick & Bigbee, 1988, p. 337).

Communication

“A symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (Carey, 1989, p. 17).

Identity

The term “identity” relates, at the very least, to who people understand themselves and others to be. For the sake of this keynote, we'll assume identity is a social process; in other words, people make (and re-make) our identities within communication and relationships.

Relationships

“[V]irtually all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship. From this standpoint, there is no isolated self or fully private experience. Rather, we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from relationship; we cannot step out of relationship; even in our most private moments we are never alone” (Gergen, 2009, p. xv).

Culture

“Indeed, my culture is the logic by which I give order to the world. And I have been learning this logic little by little, since the moment I was born, from the gestures, the words, and the care of those who surrounded me. . . . I learned to breathe this logic and to forget that I had learned it. I find it natural. Whether I produce meaning or apprehend it, it underlies all my interactions” (Carroll, 1990, p. 3).

Compassionate Communication

“When we talk of compassion, we usually mean working with those less fortunate than ourselves. Because we have better opportunities, a good education, and good health, we should be compassionate toward those poor people who don't have any of that. However, in working

with the teachings on how to awaken compassion and in trying to help others, we might come to realize that compassionate action involves working with ourselves as much as working with others. Compassionate action is a practice, one of the most advanced. There's nothing more advanced than relating with others. There's nothing more advanced than communication—compassionate communication” (Chödrön, 2002, pp. 101-102).

Shame Resilience

“ . . . [T]he ability to practice authenticity when we experience shame, to move through the experience without sacrificing our values, and to come out on the other side of the shame experience with more courage, compassion, and connection than we had going into it. Shame resilience is about moving from shame to empathy—the real antidote to shame.

If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive. Self-compassion is also critically important, but because shame is a social concept—it happens between people—it also heals best between people. A social wound needs a social balm, and empathy is that balm. Self-compassion is key because when we're able to be gentle with ourselves in the midst of shame, we're more likely to reach out, connect, and experience empathy” (Brown, 2012, pp. 74-75).

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