Addressing Bullying & Harassment Matters

Introduction

The complexity and significance of problems associated with school bullying and harassment has recently received an onslaught of national attention, including news stories, YouTube videos, and national awareness campaigns. Our understanding of the problem of school bullying and harassment has increased dramatically over the past decade or so. Although uncertainty still abounds about how best to address the problem, we are beginning to unravel the many facets of bullying that contribute to the victimization of students. With this knowledge, we are also beginning to find effective ways to reduce bullying; but it will require the understanding and effort of all members in the community and all layers of the system in order to eradicate the harmful effects associated with this type of discrimination.

Bullying and harassment in schools often includes violations of federally protected civil rights. Many organizations have put forth information regarding bullying and harassment as it relates to the LGBTQ community of youth in our schools, yet the harassment of all other marginalized groups deserves attention as well. This is a pervasive issue that requires collective and immediate action by educators, and a culturally responsive approach is necessary to tackle the problem head-on. If school staff and parents could better understand and be equipped to address the issues around bullying and harassment, then students might experience an increased sense of belonging and support.

Students as young as grades 3 and 4 have reported that they have experienced some form of bullying or harassment. A nine year old student from Augusta, GA, during bullying prevention awareness month for Richmond County School, admitted to being bullied. The boy spoke against bullying to give other students the courage to speak out as well. Intervening in instances of bullying before they have an opportunity to escalate will help enormously, particularly if adults are vigilant about identifying, naming and addressing all forms of harassment and bullying. Teaching students to value difference from an early age will help strengthen the development of positive community within and across classrooms.
7 Students Arrested on Bullying Related Charges

A 13 year-old student was left suspended from the seven-foot-high fence on Jan. 11 after being dragged, punched, kicked and placed upside down in a tree by seven attackers on his way home from school in a Philadelphia suburb. The attack on the boy, whose family came to the United States to escape the war in Liberia in 2000, was recorded on video by one of the suspects. The suspects, whose ages range from 13 to 17, face terroristic threats and conspiracy charges. If convicted, they face probation or time in a juvenile detention center.

A 6th Grader’s Suicide Brought on by Bullying

An eleven-year-old student became a target of bullying soon after he began sixth grade at the New Leadership Charter School in Springfield, Mass. School bullies taunted him - even threatened to beat and kill him. His mother said that she immediately contacted the school to address the issues; however her intervention did not prevent the tragedy of April 6, 2009. The boy hanged himself with an extension cord - just 10 days shy of his 12th birthday.

What is Bullying?

Bullying can be defined as repeated exposure over time to negative actions or acts of intimidation on the part of one or more students (Olweus 2001). Bullying occurs when someone keeps doing or saying things to exert power over another person. It is a form of violence that is hurtful to others. Bullies’ power can come from their physical size, strength, age, financial status, popularity, social status, technology skills, or by association with others.

This definition includes three important components:

1. Aggressive behavior that involves unwanted, negative actions
2. A pattern of behavior repeated over time
3. An imbalance of power or strength

What is Harassment?

Harassment includes any conduct (verbal, written, graphic, digital, or physical) relating to another student’s race, national origin, religion, color, disability, sexuality, or gender that is sufficiently severe, pervasive, or persistent.

School harassment can manifest itself in many ways:

- Interfering with or limiting the ability of students to participate in or benefit from school programs and activities;
- Creating an intimidating, threatening, or abusive educational environment;
- Substantially or unreasonably interfering with a student’s academic performance; or
- Otherwise adversely affecting a student’s educational and social opportunities.

Bullying can take on many forms:

- Verbal intimidation including derogatory comments and bad names
- Rejection, exclusion, or isolation
- Physical mistreatment such as hitting, kicking, shoving, spitting, pinching, or excessive tickling
- More violent forms include stabbing, choking, burning, and shooting
- Singling out through lies and false rumors
- Ranking, rating or humiliating
- Manipulating friends and relationships
- Demanding money or other property or service
- Stereotype provocation including inconsiderate, insensitive or unkind remarks based on skin color, language spoken, national origin, or religious affiliation, ability or physical attributes
- Mockery of religion and religious practices (clothing, diet, customs)
- Sexual pestering including physical acts or lewd remarks that are based on a person’s sexuality or gender
- Cyber intimidation including writing hurtful or threatening emails, text messages, etc., or posting on websites

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We’ve got to dispel the myth that bullying is just a normal rite of passage, or an inevitable part of growing up. It’s not,” said President Obama for the It Gets Better Project. “We have an obligation to ensure that our schools are safe for all of our kids. Every single young person deserves the opportunity to learn and grow and achieve their potential, without having to worry about the constant threat of harassment.”

What do Civil Rights have to do with Bullying and Harassment?

The federal government is taking a stronger and more intricate role in how local school districts report and respond to bullying. Their positions and emphasis on a civil rights approach to bullying and school safety were revealed in comments during a two-day “bullying summit” in Washington D.C. (2010).

The Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights is proactively investigating civil rights violation complaints specific to harassment and bullying claims and is encouraging students and parents to file such complaints. As a result, bullying and harassment has been reframed as a federal civil rights issue. These federal civil rights investigations, along with new federal data collection on harassment and bullying and formal policy guidance for local school districts outlining schools’ civil rights responsibilities to protect students, will be part of the Department of Education’s offensive against bullying.

“I am not sure that many educators and parents realize that bullying can constitute racial, sexual, or disability harassment prohibited by the civil rights laws enforced by our department’s Office for Civil Rights…

OCR will be issuing policy guidance to schools explaining the relationship between bullying and discriminatory harassment, and it will be outlining schools’ civil rights responsibilities to protect students from discriminatory harassment. As part of the enhanced civil rights data collection that OCR has instituted, we will also be gathering new and better data on harassment.”

- Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education

Some common myths about bullies:

- Bullies are loners: Research shows that bullies are not socially isolated; have an easy time making friends; have a small group of friends who support the bullying behaviors
- Bullies have low self esteem: Research shows that bullies have average or above average self-esteem; interventions that focus on building self esteem in bullies are not effective
- Bullies are looking for attention: Bullies are looking for control, and the behavior will not stop even if they are ignored
- Most bullying happens off of school grounds: Most bullying actually occurs in classrooms, hallways, and playgrounds
- Bullying affects only a small number of students: Research shows that 25% of students are victims of bullying and 20% are engaged in bullying; bullying affects everyone involved, even bystanders
What are the consequences of school bullying and harassment?

School bullying and harassment impinge upon the safety and collective well-being of the entire learning community. Equity is compromised as student belonging and empowerment are violated. Students need and want to belong at school. Put-downs, embarrassment, physical harm, rejection and intimidation at school on a regular basis are hurtful for students at any grade level.

Students who are targets of bullying and/or harassment often spend their energy at school worrying about when and how they might be bullied again, which takes the focus away from learning. In many instances, they begin to distance themselves from school activities and areas on campus where bullying takes place. Absence from school may become a problem. In dire cases, some students become ill, depressed and even suicidal. In other circumstances, a number of students have taken a vigilante approach by fighting back with weapons or in other dangerous ways.

Students who harass and bully may think that the only ones being harmed are their victims. However, bullying and harassment also hurts the one who does it. Many students who harass and bully are less likely to be respected or trusted by peers and teachers. Acts of bullying can result in suspension or expulsion from school and the loss of valuable learning time. Bullying behaviors that continue into adulthood can turn into child abuse, domestic violence and hate related criminal activities.

Students who observe bullying and harassment at school may begin to think the behavior is acceptable. They may presuppose lack of care or helplessness from the adults at their school who don’t stop it. Some students may join in on the bullying and harassment. Others might worry about becoming the next target, particularly if they share common traits with the victim. Some students may jeopardize their own well-being to mediate the situation.

Bullying and Harassment Data

One of the challenges associated with gathering accurate data about bullying and harassment occurrences is that these acts are often secret activities or go on under the “radar” of adults. Therefore, researchers have relied on self-reporting and accounts from other students, teachers and parents to gather such information.

In many instances, statistics show a broad picture based on numbers, but do not give all the details of individual bullying cases. It is hard to get current numbers on bullying because it takes time to collect, analyze, and report information. Bullying statistics can also vary from one study to another. This may be because of:

- The way the study was conducted, which can influence how honest people are in their answers or what they do and do not remember or report
- The number, age, gender, and ethnicity of the people polled
- How bullying was defined in the survey
- The location of the survey

Why are bullying and harassment addressed together?

- They are both persistent and sometimes subtle forms of behavior that can carry on for extended periods of time
- Bullying is a type of harassment
- Power and control are central elements of bullying that do not always fit in other areas of harassment
- Harassment is a behavior that is meant to offend or alarm an individual
- Both behaviors can create uncomfortable, oppressive, and unsafe learning environments for students

With these facts about statistics in mind, bullying statistics from 2009 can be a valuable tool in understanding bullying. The 2009 Indicators of School Crime and Safety collected statistics from a variety of studies, which showed that:

- One third of teens reported being bullied while at school;
- About 20% of teens had been made fun of by a bully; 18% of teens had rumors or gossip spread about them; 11% were physically bullied, such as being shoved, tripped, or spit upon; 6% were threatened; 5% were excluded from activities they wanted to participate in; 4% were coerced into something they did not want to do; and 4% had their personal belongings destroyed by bullies;
- Most bullying occurred inside the school, with smaller numbers of bullying incidents occurring outside on the school grounds, on the school bus, or on the way to school;
- Only about a third of bully victims reported the bullying to someone at school;
- About 2 of every 3 bully victims were bullied once or twice during the school year, 1 in 5 were bullied once or twice a month, and about 1 in 10 were bullied daily or several times a week; and
- 44% of middle schools reported bullying problems, compared to just over 20% of both elementary and high schools.

Culturally Responsive Ways to Address Bullying and Harassment

Parents and Teachers

Bullying is an issue that must be addressed by all members of the school community. Parents and teachers need to be aware of when bullying in schools typically begins, so that they can equip students with tools for handling and diffusing situations of bullying or harassment. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2009), almost 43% of sixth graders are bullied. This tends to be an age range where incidents of bullying and harassment are at their highest. Another important data trend to note is that the overwhelming majority of bullying from grades six through twelve takes place inside of school, instead of the areas in which many people attribute to, such as the playground or school bus.

Since the majority of bullying takes place inside of school, educators must work with students and parents to examine the school climate. Bullying and harassment in school need to be assessed before any form of intervention can be introduced. Bullying prevention and intervention should be a collaborative effort and not the responsibility of one individual, therefore teacher and parent buy-in is an essential component. There should be a team that coordinates anti-bullying and harassment efforts made up of an administrator, teachers from various grade levels, paraprofessionals, counselors or mental health professionals and parents. Due to the sensitive and self reporting nature of the issue, safety has to be a priority in prevention and intervention planning. A basic plan usually includes the development and consistent enforcement of simple rules, increased supervision in high incidence areas, constant, immediate, and appropriate monitoring and intervening in incidents of bullying and harassment by adults, and the incorporation of bullying and harassment prevention into the classroom. The most important component of successful bullying and harassment prevention and intervention is the ongoing nature of learning about and adapting to change as it occurs.

How Culturally Responsive Schools Address Bullying and Harassment

Historically, schools have responded poorly to bullying and harassment. The reasons they’ve responded inadequately are due largely to misunderstandings, ignorance, or apathy. Traditional consequences for students who bully include detention, suspension, and expulsion, all of which punish students by excluding them from school and limiting opportunity to receive positive support for behavior change. One of several problems with reactive, exclusionary approaches to discipline is that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students tend to encounter such punitive practices at disproportionately higher rates than cultural and language majority students (Skiba, 2001). Instead of reactive approaches to bullying and harassment, proactive and preventative approaches are preferred by culturally responsive schools.

Cultivating an Inclusive School Culture

Culturally responsive approaches to bullying include developing a culture and climate designed to promote children’s positive social and behavioral development in order to create a sense of safety and belonging for all students. In addition to being proactive, culturally responsive approaches also simultaneously focus on students’ cultural characteristics, as well as language needs. Yet, all too often, published bully-prevention programs do not address how cultural norms and stereotypes differently impact children’s sense of safety and fairness, feelings of belonging and meaningful inclusion in the school, nor do they address the extent to which teachers offer support or openness.

In culturally responsive schools, educators recognize that bullying is fundamentally about the imbalance and abuse of power. These schools strive to move beyond targeting student-to-student bullying and move toward an appreciation of the ways in which gender, race, class, sexual identity, religion and ability position some students over others. They examine school practices that inadvertently support divisiveness among students, and eliminate practices that privilege some students over others. They recognize that when informal norms and/or formal rules enhance the power or clout of some students over others, schools can feel particularly unsafe. These situations often create inequities that can have a direct influence on the degree to which bullying and harassment occur.

Creating Safe, Fair, and Responsive School Environments

Students who are most often at risk for bullying include those who struggle with fitting in. Often, these students differ from the majority of their classmates with regard to race, ethnicity, religion or economic status. Sometimes these students present with differing social or physical abilities, and many times these students are perceived to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning youth. Students are more likely to feel a sense of safety and belonging in their schools if the school is inclusive and reflective of their realities. Responsive and approachable teachers and staff work to establish high expectations for all students, treat all students fairly, tap into student strengths and interests, and in turn help foster connection to the school. In a sense, the school becomes a community of learners where all individuals are valued for their contributions, and incidents of bullying and harassment are minimized as a result.

Culturally responsive schools intentionally focus on safety for all students, and teach both formally and informally about the dynamics of power, privilege and difference. They also explicitly teach skills related to empathy and compassion. Teachers and staff have an unequivocal commitment to social justice that is reflected in an inclusive curriculum that incorporates the background and experiences of all students. Understanding the social context of bullying and harassment, and how power differences between cultural and social groups give rise to discriminatory or other unwanted behaviors, teachers and staff develop clear social norms and rules that respect all students. They provide opportunities for students to participate in the development of such school norms and rules, and design supports that help students to feel safe, respected and comfortable approaching an adult with problems. Additionally, they help students, teachers, and staff members confront their personal biases. By looking at patterns in their own relationships and reactions, individuals are often more likely to identify and confront injustice.
Courageous Leadership

By communicating the importance of students’ cultures, language and experiences, culturally responsive educators seek ways to help students understand themselves and others throughout the shared community. Culturally responsive teachers overtly teach the skills necessary for students to work collaboratively with their peers, and as a result, students are better able to connect to classmates, teachers, and ultimately the school. This focus on communication processes and their benefits and inherent challenges allows for healthy disagreement and group problem solving by students. It also helps students acknowledge different communication styles and patterns which often lead to misunderstandings, conflict, and hostility. By promoting and providing an inclusive and engaging environment where diverse ideas are celebrated, the school gives “voice” to all students, including those students often feeling disenfranchised. When schools engage students meaningfully, while acknowledging difference, opportunities for student leadership and empowerment emerge and students are better prepared to confront issues of bullying and harassment.

Professional learning in culturally responsive schools is ongoing, embedded in daily practice, and is predicated on inquiry for equity in education. Teachers and staff learn collaboratively about the differing needs of students, and engage in reflective dialogue around ideas of difference, including gender, race, ethnicity, language, ability, and sexuality as they relate to differing communication styles and social interactions. Examination of the role gender plays in bullying or harassing behaviors and how gendered behavior varies within social and cultural contexts is an important area of professional learning for schools wishing to eradicate bullying and harassment. Schools concerned with creating a safe, fair, and responsive environment will spend time learning about the motivations behind different forms of bullying, and provide tools for teachers to use to respond to indirect and direct forms of bullying and harassment.

Finally, courageous school leadership is required to create culturally responsive environments where all students feel a sense of safety and connectedness. A clear willingness to stand firm on behalf of fairness and justice for all students is imperative and necessary to prevent the unwanted consequences of bullying and harassment. In essence, a concerted effort from all members of the community, at all layers of the system, is fundamental in re-shaping schools to be a place where all students feel they belong, are included, and empowered.
References


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