

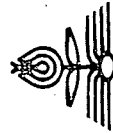


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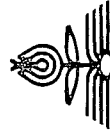


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CRITICAL ESSAYS
on Resistance in Education

EDITED BY

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CHAPTER TEN

The Challenge of Bullying in U.S. Schools

Resistance and Reaction

JO ANN FREIBERG

THE BACKGROUND

On April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado, a tragedy now known universally simply as "Columbine" became the crucible for a targeted awareness on school safety. Schools are by far the physically safest places any person can be in a 24-hour period. Winning the most competitive lottery is actually a better bet than being killed in a school. Schools are not, however, the safest places in our communities when it comes to emotional or intellectual safety. Too many schools foster toxic climates that allow, and in some cases even promote, the unethical treatment of school community members. The phenomenon of the "rampage school shooting" actually began a quarter century prior to Columbine, during which time over 30 such incidents took place, in which dozens of individuals were killed or wounded. Then there was Columbine High School. Schools and communities have not been the same since, but why? Why was the April 20, 1999 tragedy in Littleton, Colorado, the one that so shocked the entire nation? Arguably there are two main reasons. First, it was truly a school shooting of a magnitude never seen, or even imagined, before. But second, it was the first school shooting to happen in an upper middle-class, suburban community. This aspect is central to explaining why Columbine was so significant in raising our awareness. Columbine demonstrated that *no* school in our nation could assume that it was immune to the risks of school shootings. Such

tragedies were no longer just a southern or rural problem. They were a national problem, and one that might occur in any school. Hence, Columbine was a “wake-up” call that the problem of school shootings, and issues related to school climate and safety could no longer be ignored.

Initial reaction and recommended remedies focused exclusively on the physical aspects of school safety: the presence of firearms and other weapons in schools. What has subsequently become clear is that no combination of metal detectors, sign-in procedures, ID tags, clear backpacks, and so on would have stopped these determined and driven young men. Subsequent research has sought to uncover the roots of the problem and combat the knee-jerk reactions. We now know that the real problem was and continues *not* to be about keeping dangerous individuals out of schools; it has always been about ministering to those students legitimately in attendance *within the school* who became outcasts from the school culture in large part because of toxic school climates in which they were treated inappropriately. Such climates saw students alienated and pushed to their limits.

The root causes of these rampage school shootings are now widely known. *All* of the “shooters” were marginalized by their peers by being teased, taunted, excluded and called names mercilessly and maliciously, and this had escalated over time. Most, if not all of the “shooters” were accused of being “gay,” whether or not they were. Such cruelty was overlooked at the very least and condoned in far too many cases. All of the students tried desperately to get help from adults who supposedly were there for them, and sadly, were not. They all had layers of personal problems, from serious mental health diagnoses¹ to depression and anxiety to family issues that none of us should ever have to endure. A feature of their personal psychology in many cases appears to have been some form of psychosis, schizophrenia, or malignant narcissism. The fourth thing they all shared is that they all learned in schools where the cultural boundaries for acceptance were narrow and their differences were simply too great to allow them to fit in. All of these students were too “different” and strange for the school that they attended. Finally, they were all able to acquire guns with relative ease.

Up to this point, I have not yet used this word, “bullying,” choosing instead to use the words “cruelty” or “being marginalized.” I have done this purposefully. It has been widely reported that bullying was a major contributing factor for the rampage school shooters. It is also interesting that in one seminal report, the conclusions were that “most of the shooters were bullied.” It is now well known that they were *all* subjected to unimaginable peer cruelty, but in some notable cases, it just was not called bullying. The word itself is highly problematic both in theory and in practice. This is one of the most critical barriers in managing the problem with bullying and cries out to be addressed.

Research and targeted concern about the arena of bullying began in Scandinavia in the 1970s. The Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus of Norway first studied this phenomenon in earnest (Olweus, 1978, 1993, 1994). His landmark work led to related research other countries, particularly Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. This level of interest and attention did not come to the United States until the post-Columbine era. Immediately after Columbine, the Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center engaged in research that found that most of the “shooters” were targets of bullying (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, and Modzeleski, 2002, p. 31). More recently, a group of Harvard researchers confirmed the same (Newman, 2004). Additionally, *The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* conducted a survey of youth in grades 6 to 10 in all demographic arenas throughout the country in 2001 again to discover the same: bullying is widespread and a serious problem for school-aged youth (Nansel, 2001).²

Throughout all of this well-respected research and in countless other studies, books, and articles, bullying is portrayed as a critical problem in American schools. What seems to be missing from the conversation is any recognition that there is no real consistency in what is called “bullying,” either in the literature or in terms of how the word “plays” in schools and communities, not to mention for the families that comprise them. Until such awareness is taken into consideration, there is little chance that schools will actually become safer places, physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

ANTI-BULLYING LEGISLATION

Effective July 1, 1999, Georgia enacted the first anti-bullying law in the United States, only two and a half months *after* Columbine. Not one state in the country had passed such a law before Columbine. As of the tenth anniversary of Columbine, thirty-seven states had some form of anti-bullying legislation, six more were working their way through their respective legislatures and nearly every other state was considering doing so. *America reacts; we are unfortunately not as good at prevention.* Columbine and the arrival of state anti-bullying laws are analogous to “9/11.” There had been many terrorist attacks on American interests around the world prior to the planes hitting the Trade Towers in New York City; there had even been earlier attempts on the Trade Towers themselves. But such attacks on American soil had not been successful, so lives continued uninterrupted and without concern or sacrifice, and for the most part the nation was not really prepared for such a devastating attack.

The passing of the states anti-bullying legislation is an attempt to react to and “solve” the “bullying” problem that has taken so many lives physically and emotion-

ally over the past few decades. It is often as we believe that merely *having* the law will in some way diminish the amount of bullying in schools. But this is demonstrably false. The number of allegations of bullying being tried in courts of law since 2000 is only increasing. And, of course, bullying seems to have been around as long as childhood has been chronicled. Prior to Columbine, the phenomenon of “bullying” was generally seen as a common part of growing up, which seemed always to have been a part (though perhaps an unpleasant part) of American schooling. Historically, “bullying” was treated more as a childhood “rite of passage” than as something to give to the courts or about which to legislate.

Why is the issue of “bullying” one that has only recently been brought to the forefront and tackled more systemically? The simple answer is that in very recent times, the stakes have become alarmingly high compared to past eras, and the rampage school shootings have brought this into clear focus. Children have access to myriad ways to hurt and kill themselves and others that were not options decades ago (weapons, drugs, technology, etc.). In the 18th, 19th, and first half of the 20th century, a “bully” might break an arm, bloody a nose, or make another feel the pains of marginalization; family members and community neighbors were much more likely to provide the care, connection, and concern that would buffer the harm. The current 21st century social milieu is far different, and there is much more likelihood that the ravages of a “bully” will go untreated.³ However, merely attempting to legislate “bullying” away does not in any way on its own impact the existence or severity of bullying. A fuller understanding of this reality is sorely needed.

THE LETTER VERSUS THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

It is true that laws addressing bullying, which are often tied to relatively severe consequences for the perpetrator, have brought increased awareness for this pervasive childhood “disease.” Any individual state law can be easily read and reviewed to assess the legally required elements to which schools are held to account. This can be described as the *letter of the law*. Ultimately, however, schools must look beyond the legal (and often minimal) requirements to what is the overarching intent in passing and implementing all these individual state laws. The bottom line is that each and every one of these laws is attempting to achieve the *spirit of the law* which is a very simple concept: to legislate that each and every child has the right to learn and socialize in a physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe environment. Throughout the country, in every school district and the individual schools residing in those districts, *all students*, not just some students or a subset of the population, but each and every student has the right to spend his or her time in school in a safe place. And, importantly, the nation, the individual states, school districts,

schools, and the personnel who work within them have important legal and moral obligations to make this happen. Unfortunately, in far too many educational settings, these obligations are not being met, there is real resistance in practice to close the gap between the *letter* and the *spirit* of the law. This resistance can be attributed to certain barriers which can, if properly understood, be removed, with the practical result that bullying really can be diminished if not completely eliminated.

Barrier #1: Understanding the goal: Climate and culture considered

Without a clear destination or goal, it is virtually impossible to travel down the appropriate path. This is true in virtually all settings, inside and outside of schooling. Leaving home to travel to a museum requires knowing where the museum is and figuring out how to get from the starting point (home) to the destination (museum). With classroom lesson planning, the process is no different: educational goals/objectives work in collaboration with specific subject matter, to determine the appropriate methods to employ in working toward reaching the ultimate learning objective. Countless examples of this sort could be provided. The point is that in order to diminish and ultimately eliminate bullying (our goal), a clear map must be provided, complete with the meaningful steps that must be taken to reach the destination. Far too often in practice, the goal of diminishing bullying is dealt with by using the “whac-a-mole” (named after a popular game) philosophy: when a case of bullying pops up, intervene with some form of punishment for the perpetrator. The “punishment” often takes the form of detention or suspension from the regular school setting, which serves to eliminate the problem while that student is not in the setting, but does nothing to change behavior when they return... and the “mole” pops up again. This process of *intervention* with the “bullies” (moles) continues, rarely yielding any significant positive changes over time. Another comparison might be that when dealing with the historical epidemic of smallpox, treating one case at a time did not work to eradicate the disease. Eradication only came when the *system was inoculated*: the road map to eliminate bullying is flawed if the pathway to reach the goal focuses on intervention. Further, the majority of the legal requirements for diminishing bullying throughout the country take this flawed approach: when bullying incidents appear, intervene.

Research points in a clear, single direction: the ultimate remedy for bullying is to have a school culture that is foreign to such behaviors and, simply put, will not allow them. In order to create such a culture an understanding of what is meant by “culture” is fundamental. Culture and climate are often taken to be the same concept. They are not synonymous and, importantly, should be distinguished so that improvement in this wide arena can be achieved.

SCHOOL CULTURE

The culture of a school can be defined in two related, albeit distinct ways: as descriptive goals or as positive goals. In both cases, the “culture” of a school is about the wide standards and norms that embrace what the school stands for. So, in the first sense, a school culture is what is *descriptive* of the school. In other words, when a school community member (student, parent/guardian, faculty/staff member) *describes* what is distinctive of the school, how others might see it or what is characteristic, this would be to understand the school culture *as it is*. For example, it was widely reported in the days after the Columbine High School shooting tragedy, the school supported a “jock” culture, which meant, “sports ruled!” In the words of teachers at Columbine, this was confirmed with the additional description of the school as hosting a “culture of homophobia.” This is definitely a *description* and few, if any, would argue that this is what the culture of this or any school *ought* to be. This leads to the second way in which school culture can be articulated.

In the second sense of the term “school culture,” *description* is not relevant. Instead, the mission or vision of the school is what matters. School culture is not about what the school *is*, but rather *what the school is striving to become*. In 21st century [public] schools, in virtually every school district and school, there is an articulated school mission: a lofty set of goals toward which the district and school is aspiring. In this second meaning of culture, what the school *ought* to be is central. The mission/vision should set the tone for what the school or district hopes *will be* the description and should be working toward becoming reality for each and every school community member.

Most, if not all, schools experience a gap (and often a substantial one) between the *descriptive* sense of school culture and the second sense of school culture as *goal*. The vehicle that is used to close the gap between these two meanings of culture (working toward arriving at the second or *mission* sense) is school *climate*. Often schools embrace district-approved “mission statements,” which may or may not match any kind of *real* goal. Cleverly worded “mission statements” that adorn hallways and offices may represent the outcome of exercises serving to satisfy accreditation requirements but never practically viable or attainable. If school culture is correctly understood as being along a continuum (description at one end and mission/goal at the other), then any real gap between these two meanings can only make sense if the “mission” (goal) sense of culture is not merely a hollow proposition.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

Simply defined, climate boils down to the nature of the interrelationships among

the people in the school community physically, emotionally, and intellectually; *how the people within the school community treat one another* (adult to adult interactions, adult to student interactions, and student to student interactions) through their actions, verbal and non-verbal exchanges, tone of voice, and the use or abuse of inherent power advantages. And, far too often, “[s]chool climate is an ever changing factor in the lives of people who work and learn in schools. Much like the air we breathe, school climate is ignored until it becomes foul” (Freiberg, 1998, p. 22). Climate is the “engine” that functions to close the school culture gap. When school community members treat one another appropriately and with respect, it is possible to have the description of the school culture actually be synonymous with the stated school mission (vision).

Barrier #2: Defining “bullying”

Defining “bullying” is an initial hurdle and without attention, potentially an insurmountable barrier. No matter what definition is used, in schooling *practice*, administrators, faculty, staff, students as well as parents and guardians are hard pressed to describe with clarity what bullying looks, feels and sounds like. Generally, individuals “know it when they see it.” The challenge here is much like that identified many years ago by the historian Carl Becker, who observed that:

Now, when I meet a word with which I am entirely unfamiliar, I find it a good plan to look it up in the dictionary and find out what someone thinks it means. But when I have frequently to use words with which everyone is perfectly familiar—words like “cause” and “liberty” and “progress” and “government”—when I have to use words of this sort which everyone knows perfectly well, the wise thing to do is to take a week off and think about them. (1955, p. 328)

But, in reality this is not good enough. Getting a handle on bullying with an honest intent to diminish it begins with knowing what it is. It is impossible to eliminate something that is ephemeral. In order to tackle this *a priori* element, it is necessary to understand how definitions work.

A standard analysis of the anatomy of definitions rests with Israel Scheffler (1960). Definitions fall into three main categories: descriptive/reportive, stipulative, and programmatic or persuasive. In reality, there are only two categories. There are definitions that describe or report on experience, how people actually use terms in context, and then there are definitions that stipulate how words will be used in identified contexts. Stipulative definitions can be viewed as restricting a definition for the purpose of clarity or to lay out the boundaries of understanding and use. Sometimes stipulating a definition takes the form of a new word or acronym for a particular context.

In practice, all descriptive/reportive and stipulative definitions are *prescriptive*; they guide what one does in practice by adhering to that definition. Even a simple definition such as for “stool” as “A low bench or support for the feet or knees in sitting or kneeling, as a footrest” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 1982, p. 1200) would suggest that standing on a stool is not to be done; only sitting or kneeling are appropriate. This same analysis can be done for all other definitions, be they descriptive of experience or stipulative. Every definition has some kind of implication of what should be done in practice by accepting and living by the definition. In this sense, definitions are a potentially insidious and dangerous form of a statement because they all guide practice implicitly. They are not often clearly and explicitly directive. To that end, there are no definitions that are programmatic or persuasive on their own; they are all either descriptive/reportive or stipulative and programmatic or persuasive.

There is no standard or consistent definition of bullying; all extant definitions are “stipulative” and appear to honor Olweus, who was the first to provide a formal definition: A person is “being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students” (Olweus, 1978). In an analogous way, as Alfred North Whitehead (Whitehead, 1979, p. 39) said about philosophy, “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato,” defining the term comes down to a series of footnotes to how Olweus first laid down the term.

Definitions of bullying seem, not surprisingly, to share a few characteristics. Most include acts of harassment or intimidation that continue with regularity for a certain period of time, often for as long as six months or more. In a schooling context, bullying seems by definition to be restricted to *student* behavior, implying that adults do not engage in such acts, which is, of course, not simply silly but also counterfactual.

Definitions of bullying vary widely in terms of their ambiguity and vagueness. For example, the landmark 2001 study conducted by *JAMA*, defined bullying simply as “intentionally harmful behavior that occurs repeatedly over time” (Nansel, 2001). Contrast this definition with the one found in the Connecticut bullying legislation for example: “any overt acts by a student or a group of students directed against another student with the intent to ridicule, harass, humiliate or intimidate the other student while on school grounds, at a school-sponsored activity, or on a school bus, which acts are repeated against the same student over time” (*Connecticut General Statutes* 10-222(d), 2006). Interestingly, in 2008 this definition was changed once again. The Connecticut definition of bullying thus reads, “any overt acts by a student or group of students directed against another student with the intent to

ridicule, harass, humiliate or intimidate the other student while on school grounds, at a school-sponsored activity or on a school bus, *which acts are committed more than once against any student during the school year*. These progressive changes were made intentionally to try to use the definition to do a better job in practice of eliminating bullying, though simply tightening the definition alone is insufficient as will be discussed.

The *JAMA* definition is overly simplistic and is both vague and ambiguous. The 2002 Connecticut definition, slightly changed in 2006 and again in 2008, is much more restrictive but is still open to a great deal of wide interpretation due to its inherent vagueness. What counts as an “*overt*” act? How is “*repeated... over time*” or “*more than once against any student*” translated into practice? How do you prove “*intent*”? Why should adult behavior be excluded? These are important questions that impact practice in significant ways. Definitions are not just a group of words put together to *describe* practice. Definitions *guide* and in actuality *dictate* practice. In this case, depending upon how vague or restrictive, the definition determines how many individuals are involved in bullying in schools. Empirical studies suggest that anywhere from 5% to 30% of students are determined to be bullies and targets according to the definitional parameters.

Both the *JAMA* and Connecticut definitions were among the earliest to be created and used in the United States. More recently, other states have benefited from the practical lessons learned in these early years. Recent definitions have moved farther and farther away from Olweus’ Consider two more contributions. In 2006, South Carolina passed its “Safe School Climate Act.” In South Carolina, the arena is defined as follows:

“Harassment, intimidation, or bullying” means a gesture, an electronic communication, or a written, verbal, physical, or sexual act that is reasonably perceived to have the effect of: harming a student physically or emotionally or damaging a student’s property, or placing a student in reasonable fear of personal harm or property damage; or insulting or demeaning a student or group of students causing substantial disruption in, or substantial interference with, the orderly operation of the school. “School” means in a classroom, on school premises, on a school bus or other school-related vehicle, at an official school bus stop, at a school-sponsored activity or event whether or not it is held on school premises, or at another program or function where the school is responsible for the child. (Code of Laws: Section 2, Chapter 62, Title 59, 2006)

This South Carolina definition introduces the use of the terms “reasonable” and “substantial” in reference to how a student would *perceive* something. Although open to interpretation, at least there is a standard that would more clearly rule in and rule out certain actions experienced by a student or group of students. It is also important to note that in the case of South Carolina, adults are implicitly held to account.

It is interesting that the focus is not on the negatively charged “bullying” arena but rather on the ultimate remedy for ameliorating bullying which is to create a school climate that does not support these behaviors. Additionally, the South Carolina definition seems to recognize that practice in schools is directly impacted by how bullying is defined in their stipulation. States that are passing legislation at present appear to be less concerned with honoring Olweus and more concerned with impacting school practice.

Finally, in 2008, Delaware passed their “School Bullying Prevention Act.” Expressly,

[T]he goals of this Act is [sic] to provide a safer learning environment for students attending...schools. In their definition, bullying “means any intentional written, electronic, verbal or physical act or actions against another person that a reasonable person under the circumstances should know will have the effect of: (1) Placing a person in reasonable fear of substantial harm to his or her emotional or physical well-being or substantial damage to his or her property; (2) Creating a hostile, threatening, humiliating or abusive educational environment due to the pervasiveness or persistence of actions or due to a power differential between the bully and the target; or (3) Interfering with a student having a safe school environment that is necessary to facilitate educational performance, opportunities or benefits; or (4) Perpetuating bullying by inciting, soliciting or coercing an individual or group to demean, dehumanize, embarrass or cause emotional, psychological or physical harm to another person.” (14 *Delaware Code* §4112(D), 2007)

Delaware’s definition elevates the notion of “reasonable” beyond what the targeted student would perceive to what “any reasonable person under the circumstances would know.” This is a significant change, and one that provides more clarity to assessing whether or not something is considered an act of bullying. This definition also includes a “hostile environment,” which is a central feature of protected class harassment (sexual and racial) but was not considered by Olweus and does not show up in any prior legal definition of bullying in the United States. And, as with the South Carolina definition, adults are held accountable.

As mentioned earlier, one of the hallmarks of most common definitions of bullying is the difficult vague notion articulated in a variety of ways of “repeated over time.” This condition is missing from both the South Carolina and Delaware laws, and the significance of its exclusion cannot be underestimated. Logically, if something is “repeated over time,” or even “more than once,” then there must have been a *first* time. Why would any reasonable person want to wait to intervene until some arbitrary time *after* an initial inappropriate incident of hurtful behavior? Why is *any* number...even *one* act of hurtful behavior satisfactory? Clearly it is not. The earlier in the cycle that “bullying” can be stopped, the better off everyone is. South Carolina and Delaware appear to reflect this understanding. Managing bullying is not merely about *intervention*, but more importantly about *prevention*. Both of

these definitions are objectively superior to early U.S. attempts to define the term in an effort to manage the territory.

Despite the definitional improvements, there still remains a serious flaw in both the South Carolina and Delaware definitions: the word “bully” itself. No amount of restrictive linguistic clarity will change the fact that “bully” and “bullying” are so inherently negatively charged. If the goal really is to create physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe schools where all children can thrive intellectually and socially, then rather than continuing to refine and hone in on better ways to assign the word, “bully” to certain behaviors, why not change the conversation entirely?

Barrier #3: The loaded nature of the word “bullying”

Labels matter. “Bully” or “bullying” is a negatively charged word. No student wants to be called a bully; no parent will claim that his or her child is a bully, and no school happily admits that there is any bullying taking place in that school. This reality stems not from the fact that certain *behaviors* have been experienced but rather because of the connotation of the concept itself.⁴ In addition, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) emotionally paralyzes schools. Aside from worrying about meeting “adequate yearly progress” (AYP), there is language in NCLB that is equally bothersome: schools can be labeled “persistently dangerous” (PDS) and there is a common perception that if the school has any “bullying” that they could be so labeled not necessarily legally but by the communities in which they reside.

In practice, there is a wide gulf between the legal and policy definitions that school lawyers have given to the terms “bullying” and PDS and how families would hope these would be defined. Schools are overly cautious and tend to create vague and difficult to satisfy definitions. For example, in Connecticut, to be labeled “persistently dangerous,” a school would need to “meet the conditions in *two of the following three categories of offenses, in each of three consecutive years*, (1) Two or more gun-free schools violations (possession of a firearm or explosive device that resulted in expulsion from school); or (2) One ‘Other Weapon’ incident resulting in expulsion per 200 students with a minimum of three such incidents; or (3) One violent criminal offense resulting in expulsion per 200 students with a minimum of three such incidents” (Sergi, 2003). Families, on the other hand, want definitions to provide clarity and embrace the goal of achieving truly physically, emotionally and intellectually safe schools.

Another way to say this is that in ordinary language, one might well assume that a PDS is one in which bullying is rampant. Each individual state determines its own legal definition of “persistently dangerous.” As with the Connecticut example, the definitional bar is typically set so high that it would be almost impossible for a school

to be put on such a list. These definitions focus exclusively on *physical safety*. Bullying may or may not be physical and in any case, bullying is not part of states' definitions of PDS. However in practice, there is widespread reluctance on the part of schools to label inappropriate behaviors as being bullying, in part because they worry that such a link between bullying and being a PDS will be made. Further, if a school were to claim that bullying was a common occurrence, public perception would likely be that, legal definitions aside, the school *is* persistently dangerous and thus unsafe.

What is actually happening in the school may or may not reflect what a reasonable person would consider to be bullying or a PDS. The bottom line is that schools, and individuals, are much more comfortable describing inappropriate behaviors *without* assigning a label. Neutral description is palatable; emotionally coloring a behavior with a label that has a negative connotation is not.

On the other hand, schools actively seek to be labeled "Blue Ribbon Schools." The designation is enough to provide the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" into perpetuity, regardless of when the award was given and how many administrative, demographic, or school climate changes have occurred since. Being a "Blue Ribbon School" is another loaded term, albeit one with a positive connotation. Receiving the label of being a PDS or a school that has any bullying is the opposite.

Barrier #4: (The highest hurdle of all) Responsibility and blame

Those who chronically treat others inappropriately generally come by these practices honestly. In other words, as they have moved through their lives from the time they were young and as they have grown, they have observed others—their role models and mentors—interact with others. Everyone learns how to treat others not only by how they were treated but also as keen observers of interactions between and among others. When these individuals come into schools, their behavior patterns come with them. The path of least resistance in dealing with them is to admonish and punish with some form of blind assumption that this will change their habits. It does not take a "rocket scientist" to learn that nothing changes (until something does change). Blame for this inappropriate behavior is placed on the shoulders of perpetrators (He/she did it and must pay!). Faculty and staff in schools are implicitly saying, "this is not *my/our* problem!" In reality, it is our problem, and the solutions rest not on the shoulders of the offending student (or for that matter the targeted student who "just needs to self-advocate").

Return for a minute to the elements that the rampage school shooters all have in common. To date, some states in the country have been spared experiencing a school shooting, although there is no state that has been spared experiencing stu-

dent suicides caused in part by youth who fit the profile but took their own lives rather than those of others. Girls are more likely to do so, which is why the "shooters" are almost universally boys. And, more and more we are experiencing firearms, among other weapons, being brought into our schools by younger and younger students "for protection." We may not be able to change their accessibility to firearms or the fact that their personal circumstances and family situations are lacking, but we *can* impact the other three areas. And yet, traditionally, *this is where the blame is placed which absolves adults in school of any responsibility*. Even the authors of the books published around and after the tenth anniversary of Columbine who argue that the "shooters" mental health diagnoses are true "causes" of the rampage shootings reluctantly admit that "[t]hey lacked resilience, supportive relationships, and other assets that might compensate for their deficits" (Langman, 2009, p. 100). The fact that they experienced appalling treatment by their peers, that adults in school were not there for them and that the perimeters of acceptance within the school culture were narrow is not only useful information but also a loud and very important wake-up call which is as clear a mandate as can be given for what must be changed in schools where it is easy to fall through the cracks and be virtually invisible even though the warning signs were all too obvious. We've seen these "red flags" every time another school shooting happens when we look back and analyze "what went wrong."

It is important to realize that these big events did not start there. The seeds had been planted for all of these young people many years before they ended and ruined so many lives. We all need to manage and stop the little things that hurt while we can. Seemingly innocent instances of "meanness" escalate. We can and *must* debunk the myth that "sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me." The scars from emotional pain last far longer than childhood cuts and bruises. Physically and emotionally scarred brains present identically. It matters. We must become better listeners and observers of the things children say and do, and what is left unsaid. And finally, it must become acceptable to be different, however that looks, feels, and sounds. None of this is easy, but it is doable, and more importantly, if we do not give it our best, rest assured that school shootings and student suicides will continue to happen and ruin more lives needlessly.

RESISTING BULLYING NO MORE: PUTTING THE PUZZLE PIECES TOGETHER

Whether for research or legislative purpose, defining bullying contains an implicit goal: creating safe, respectful and "bully-free" schools. In the decade since Columbine, defining the term has evolved from simplistic and vague descriptions

to increasingly complex and confining ones. What is happening in schools with respect to realizing the goal is likely the reason for such definitional changes. Legislating what bullying *is* has not yielded the hoped-for result. What now? Another way to state this problem would be to ask not how the *letter* of the law can be satisfied, but what must be done to honor the *spirit* of the law?

No amount of definitional refining will ever change the *connotation* of the term. "Bullying" will always be so negatively charged that even with increasingly careful and targeted stipulations, it is virtually impossible to get past how the word "plays" in practice. If we can exchange the term for one less offensive ("mean" or "peer cruelty") there is a better chance of bringing relevant groups together in an effort to ameliorate the phenomenon. Consider the following. Ask any parent/guardian if they are purposely raising a bully and no one will answer "yes." Ask any child if he or she is a bully and the result is the same. However, if you survey the same group of adults and inquire if their children are ever "mean" to anyone else (call someone a name, make fun of someone, laugh at another person or tell someone they can't sit with or play with someone), honest affirmative admissions are common. The very same child who says they don't "bully" will admit that the very same behavior was "mean" and "not nice." *Everyone* is mean from time to time. For some reason, owning up to being "mean" is perceived to be more descriptive and neutral and far less threatening than describing the very same person or act as being "bullying." "Bullying" carries heavy negative emotional baggage; "mean" does not. A crucial additional benefit from eliminating the words "bully" and "bullying" in school settings is that when adults are charged with intervening during inappropriate student interactions, it is patently clear (especially compared with "bullying") what "mean" looks like, feels like and sounds like. If adults should take responsibility, and they *must*, it is far easier to stop the "mean," or "cruel." Adults would be far more likely to provide a consistent and viable front against bullying if they abandoned this unsavory label in practice.

Aside from the issue of the loaded nature of the words, "bully" or "bullying," there are a number of other reasons why abandoning these words in deference to others makes sense. First, "bullying" is an inflammatory label, and that label does not provide a clear picture of the behavior(s) in question. It is highly likely to tell a child to, "Stop bullying!" and for that child to respond by saying, "What did I do?" The conversation might continue with, "You called him a name." And, the child would just as likely answer, "That wasn't bullying!" However, if the conversation began with, "Stop being mean," there would much more likely be immediate understanding. Second, using "mean" avoids the problem of waiting to deal with behaviors until they are "repeated over time." One of the leading reasons why "bullying" is not consistently subject to meaningful intervention is that adults do not know what bullying looks, feels and sounds like. Adults do, however, know what *mean*

looks, feels and sounds like. Adults *do* care about the safety and well-being of children in school and they want to work toward this end. They want to intervene when children are inappropriately treated, but they do not recognize that if they used *mean* as the measure rather than bullying, the goal would be much easier to achieve.

All of the empirical research validates the view that catching the lower level antecedents to bullying and stopping those mean incidents when they are initially experienced, results in arresting the potential pattern of escalating cruelty (Wessler, with Prebble, 2003). Thus, dealing with "mean" in practice is much more helpful in reaching the implicit goal of creating safe and respectful schools.

Words matter and in the case of the terms "bully" and "bullying," this is particularly true. Educators would do themselves a great service if in *practice* these words were treated as are other offensive and inappropriate language, such as "swear" words. Think of them as just another couple of "four letter words" that have no place in school. It is actually quite simple. There is little, if anything to be lost by doing so and a great deal to gain: satisfying the spirit of legislating against bullying to create physically, emotionally and intellectually safe and respectful schools.

CONCLUSION: RESISTANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Resisting bullying requires an assumption and acceptance of responsibility of a systemic sort at the district and school levels. No one person or constituency is singularly responsible, but everyone collectively must share the burden of resistance. The path of least resistance, so to speak, is *not* an option. Educators must resist the urge to deny that mean-spirited ("bullying") behaviors exist in their schools and instead, tackle the problem head on and begin by changing the conversation away from "bullying" toward mean or cruel and welcome and invite open and frequent communication from families. Educators must also recognize that mean-spirited actions happening *outside* the school in community settings directly impact the learning and socializing *inside* the school, and especially what is known as "cyber-cruelty." As long as educators resist embracing this growing arena that has potentially tragic consequences, the longer "bullying" in brick and mortar settings as well as in cyber-space will continue. Educators must embrace rather than resist gaining an understanding about the multi-dimensionality of how individuals are capable of hurting others. In doing so, they must reach out and communicate, inform, teach, and work collaboratively with parents/guardians. Once *real* parent/guardian involvement in the "bullying" arena is achieved, that is when children will benefit on so many levels.

Parents/guardians of those who hurt others physically or emotionally must resist the attitude that their own child does not have the capacity to be mean ("bully") and instead work collaboratively with the school to improve their child's treatment of others and communicate openly and respectfully. Parents/guardians of those who

would be targets of mean-spirited (“bullying”) behavior must resist the desire to demand that their injured children are better off once the label of “bullying” has been attached to their child’s circumstances and instead work as partners with the school to create concrete and realistic safety plans for their targeted children. Without embracing such collaborative communication and problem-solving strategies, schools and the children who inhabit them risk perpetrating the circumstances that have yielded so many anti-bullying laws and little if any progress toward actually eliminating “bullying” in practice.

The rewards of reframing the “bullying” territory by looking down the lens of creating safe school climates are large and incontrovertible. On both practical and moral grounds, children—all children, not just some children—will have the opportunity and ability to soar academically and socially and experience overall success. Resistance itself, both theoretically and practically, presents something of an oxymoron in the context of efforts to eliminate bullying. What is actually being resisted? Are schools and communities resisting the acknowledgment that bullying actually exists? Or, rather, are we talking about resistance to understanding the context and the toxicity of “bullying”? Or, finally, are we concerned with resistance to efforts designed to enable schools to focus on creating safe climates and thus truly eliminate all forms of violence, no matter the severity? I hope that we are trying to address all of these possible senses of resistance.

Parents and guardians send their best children to school every day, and each and every adult school community member has an obligation to make each and every one of these children physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe. At the heart of the historical “resistance” of bullying is the pointing of fingers of blame every other place than inward at the school. Parents and guardians are to blame, the media and technology are to blame, communities are to blame, the wider culture is to blame, a weapons-rich country is to blame, an individual student’s mental health issues are to blame, and on and on. There is definitely plenty of blame to go around...educators must resist the urge to assume all of the causes of bullying are out of their control and make schools safer for children by targeted focus on the school climate: how people treat one another. Doing so will not only diminish and potentially eliminate bullying, but importantly the life outcomes for children will improve exponentially.

NOTES

1. Coinciding with the tenth anniversary of the Columbine rampage school shooting, a number of books have been published focusing primarily on the personal psychologies of school shooters. Three works are noteworthy in this regard: Ceremonial violence (Fast, 2008), *Why Kids Kill*:

Inside the Minds of School Shooters (Langman, 2009), and *Columbine* (Cullen, 2009). The authors collectively come to the conclusion that of those “shooters” studied (the majority of rampage school shooters are not discussed), all have extremely pathological conditions, which fall into three categories: psychopathic, psychotic, and traumatized, and that these personal conditions were the primary causal factor of the rampage shooting.

2. All three authors writing about the psychology of school shooters cite Katherine Newman’s 2004 seminal work *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*, and essentially argue that “[H]ad they been safely maintained through their crises, there is no reason to assume they would have become murderers” (Langman, 2009, p. 154). The thrust of these works, and others, seems to be to place blame on the personal psychologies of the shooters themselves for these tragedies, despite a wealth of information that is more tempered. A question of great practical import ought to be raised. What role does the school, and do school community members play, in either fueling or diminishing the occurrence of rampage school shootings? If “shooters” are psychologically predisposed to commit tragic acts of violence and are on a trajectory that is unstoppable, then schools can really do nothing to mitigate disaster. If, however, as Newman’s more balanced analysis suggests, the personal circumstances of a would-be shooter are just one piece of the puzzle, then schools *can* and *should* be taking their share of responsibility. There seems to be an almost primal need to place blame on someone or something after a rampage school shooting and the tenth anniversary of Columbine was a dark reminder. As one telling example, despite definitive evidence to the contrary, 83% of the public places blame for Columbine squarely on the shooters and their parents. (Cullen, 2009, p. 340). Focusing on access to guns, perceived flawed parenting and serious mental illness deflects blame away from the school and its social culture. From a school perspective it is understandable why this might seem desirable. However, the “blame game” must take a backstage to serious practical efforts to understand that “[S]tudents need to feel safe [physically and emotionally] in school. Although bullying itself does not cause school shootings, anything that contributes to students’ misery, fear and rage can play a part in driving them to violence” (Cullen, 2009, p. 192). At Columbine, for example, “Kids would either assimilate quickly or spend four years struggling to fit in” (Cullen, 2009, p. 273).

3. The harm caused and now recognized by bullies in the post-Columbine era is often less visible to the naked eye and takes the form of insidious injuries of an emotional variety. Thus, “treatment” is an interesting notion. As of Spring 2009, the American Pediatric Association has called for their members to take a more active role in this school-based “disease” primarily through careful and targeted screening as well as direct communicating with educators within their patients’ schools (Sklaire and McInerney, 1990).

4. Throughout Langman’s (2009) *Why Kids Kill*, the words and phrases such as, “teasing,” “harassment,” “picked on,” and “bullying” are used repeatedly. Whenever “teasing,” “harassment,” or “picked on” are used, even if there is clear admission that it was repeated and mean-spirited, this is not considered “bullying,” and is part of growing up, and therefore above reproach. When “bullying” is used this is not the case. Examples include: “At school, Cho (Seung Hui) was made fun of as a foreigner who could not speak English. His older sister was also teased, but she was able to take it in stride” (Langman, 2009, p. 93); “There are multiple reports that Jeffrey (Weise) was teased or harassed by some of his peers, as well as multiple reports that he was not picked on. The evidence is so mixed that it is impossible to know for sure what really happened to him at school.” This is also an excellent example of what happens in many schools with respect to investigations. The conclusion of the multiple and conflicting “reports” often leads away from a label of “bullying” (Langman, 2009, p. 121); “Although Dylan (Klebold) was teased at times, his envy

or normal kids appears to have been more devastating" (Langman, 2009, p. 149). "What about Jonathan's (last name not known) level of social acceptance? Was he picked on or marginalized? Jonathan's sense of insecurity and low self-esteem was not a result of harassment by bullies but of his own troubled identity" (Langman, 2009, p. 157); "He complained he was severely picked on at school, but his reports were vague and the school contradicted his stories. Kyle (last name not known) said that he had been harassed for seven years...he claimed he was picked on whenever he went...Kyle was odd....His strangeness could easily lead peers to avoid him or to tease him....He was so disturbed by the alleged harassment that for a period he was home-schooled to avoid his peers....The school continued to maintain that there was no *significant* (my emphasis) mistreatment" (Langman, 2009, pp. 161-162); "There were mixed reports about harassment. Michael (Carnael) felt like a victim. He reported being harassed about his clothing and glasses, being threatened, and even being spit on. Perhaps the most devastating event was when a gossip column in the student newspaper implied that Michael was gay. As a result, he was called 'gay' and 'faggot' at school" (Langman, 2009, p. 75). Finally, a very interesting passage suggests that whatever mistreatment Dylan Klebold experienced, it wasn't "bullying." "In the videos the two boys made, Dylan complained about the 'stuck-up' kids who hated him, going all the way back to feeling mistreated since daycare....He complained about being picked on by his older brother and the brother's friends. He also said he was put down by his entire extended family, excluding his parents...nowhere does Dylan single out jocks or bullies" (Langman, 2009, p. 66).

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