

Beyond Anti-Bullying Legislation: A Call for More Strategies

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Here in Massachusetts we have been shocked and deeply saddened by the recent bullying-related suicides of South Hadley freshman Phoebe Prince and New Leadership Academy middle-schooler Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover. The state and local responses of task forces, legal investigations and legislative action are moves in the right direction. But responsiveness and effectiveness don't always go hand in hand. We ask policy makers and other respondents to bullying—in and out of schools—to consider multiple angles to intervening on this issue. We think a multipronged strategy will increase our effectiveness to this widespread and underreported social problem.

Beyond Vertical Strategies

Federal, state or school district-wide strategies are vertical (“top-down”) strategies towards intervention. We think that a certain amount of vertical response is necessary, especially for raising awareness and setting clear accountability for both staff and students in regards to bullying. However, vertical strategies *alone* are not sufficient to address this complex social issue.

Horizontal Strategies

If emergent behavior like bullying is to be reduced, it requires a commensurate amount of horizontal strategy because bullying is a form of horizontal violence. Horizontal violence is generally non-physical inter-group conflict that is manifested by overt and covert behaviors of hostility (Freire, 1972, Duffy, 1999). It is one arm of the submissive/aggressive syndrome that results from an internalized self-hatred and low self-esteem as a result of being part of an oppressed group (Glass, 1997). We believe horizontal violence like bullying is a natural result of youths' desire to assert power for themselves within a very adult powered environment, like a school.

We know that a primarily horizontal problem requires horizontal strategies and responses. These have to involve the populations out of which the problem emerges and can't be given to populations vertically to implement horizontally. (One example of a horizontal response that has occurred in South Hadley is the Facebook memorial page.) Horizontal *strategies*—more than just responses in the wake of tragedy—have to be imagined and deployed horizontally, even if they are also supported vertically.

Spatio-temporal Strategies

The site of school itself has to be seen as a kind of actor in the production of bullying (even as we are increasingly seeing the bullying spread beyond the walls of the school, into virtual spaces, etc.) We as adults and practitioners need to look at how schools are spatially and temporally organized, particularly at the spaces and times that frequently are the sites of bullying. If we understand bullying as horizontal violence, then it makes sense that it would pop up most in spaces/times that have the least vertical control, like

hallways and lunch periods. As adults in power, our impulse is frequently to find more ways to tighten and control those spaces and times (a vertical strategy), even if bullying is an emergent response to that very control. It's not common to link the social arrangement of a context to the problems that emerge within it. We believe if we can do this with young people and without defensiveness, we will find less explored variables that either lend to or challenge the act of bullying.

Emotional / Expressive Strategies

How much attention and time is placed on helping youth become better at feeling and expressing their feelings in and out of school space and time? One way to look at bullying is as an attempt to constrain the social space for certain kinds of people to be who they are. What is that kind of social policing of subjectivity about? We have a hunch it's about everyone (even the "bullies") lacking the kind of emotional range and sophistication needed to make sense of their lives. This emotional complexity won't be gained through interventions like anti-bullying workshops, even those that are horizontal or peer-led.

Conclusion

We assert that opening up our range of possibility for response and combining these kinds of strategies will start to point us in the right direction. With careful attention, open minds, and ongoing youth-adult dialogue, we will figure out how to make schools safer, more nurturing environments for all youth. We can't wait.