A spotlight on so-called bullying and the Ontario anti-bullying framework

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Nokiiwin Tribal Council Education Gathering

June 23, 2020   1-4pm

- **Introduction**

- **Discussion of the term 'bullying'**

- **Critical evaluation of the term 'bullying'**

- **Overview of the Ontario anti-bullying framework**

- **My dissertation work**
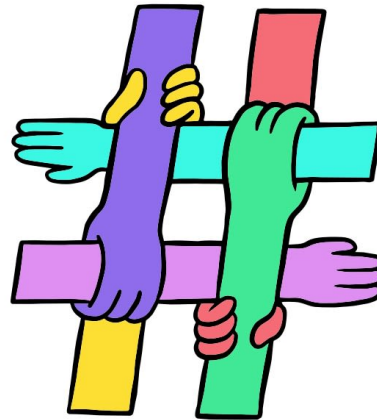
- **Conclusion**

- **Q&A**

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- **Q&A**

What does 'bullying' represent?

Please take a moment to complete the poll.

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- **History of the term**

- **Olweus' view is that "a student 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 other students" (1994, p.1173).**

- **The term is created and supposed to be accepted as it stands without any critique**

- **I argue that the 'bullying' phenomenon is multi-faceted and socially constructed in a context of racism, classism, gender, violence and harassment.**

- **Olweus' main assertion was that bullying is an issue of aggression and an imbalance of power in interpersonal relationships that is outgrown, rather than an issue of situational and socio-cultural dimensions (Olweus, 1994; Boulton & Smith, 1994; Olweus & Limber, 2010).**

- **male aggression vs. female aggression**

- **aggression does not just happen**

- **anger is not socially acceptable, but 'sugarcoating' anger as a form of hostility is accepted**

- **bullying behaviours point to the 'revenge is sweet' belief: bullies may become passive aggressive towards their victims without recognizing the anger they are feeling or because they do not know how to cope with their negative feelings, which may be present due to outside factors, such as problems at home.**

Aggression reflects behaviour that masks broader societal problems, such as racism, violence and classism.

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- **many scholars believe psychological make-up influences a student's behaviour (D'Onofrio et al., 2013).**

- **there is the belief that if psychological factors can be fixed, bullying behaviours will stop.**

These arguments often ignore the fact that racism, classism, harassment and violence exist in these circumstances, often intersecting with each other and making the situation even more complicated. Diagnoses of aggressive behaviour and psychological impairments hide broader societal issues because the individual is targeted to 'fix' their problem.

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- **Learned gendered behaviours are disregarded in bullying**

- **A person's cultural and social surroundings influence how gender roles are created and enacted (also connected to how a person's experiences affect their psychological state)**

- **Students are not provided opportunities to learn about gender fluidity, but rather high value is placed on traditional masculine and feminine roles (Meyer, 2008).**

- **Many students who face gender harassment are told to 'get over it'**

- **it is arguable that bullying is not a social passage as one grows up, but rather there are intersecting frameworks such as school climate, culture, class and gender performance that impact a person's behaviour and experiences in society.**

- **How a person negotiates their everyday life is influenced by factors of social location, class, race and gender**

- **The common factor is that bullies want power over their peers.**

- **Smaller classrooms do not eliminate social and cultural differences amongst peers. It is argued that teachers with smaller classrooms are potentially better able to mediate differences or determine who is engaged in learning**

- **teacher's perceptions, preconceptions, or potential prejudice, racist ideologies and bias are not considered in understanding so-called bullying behaviour.**

- **teachers may label students without recognizing their own outside influences, which impacts how a student views their learning experiences, thus, becoming part of a student's socially constructed reality of school.**

- **Schools are believed to foster community, where children should feel connected. If children do not feel a sense of belonging, their education is potentially at risk (Baker, 1998). Students as young as third graders may be satisfied at school and have perceptions of a better school environment, have support from teachers and appear to have better home to school adjustments than those who are not engaged in learning**

- **schools focus on individual problems of only certain individuals, "over-simplify[ing …] and promot[ing] the conceptualization of bullying as a problem of "good" and "bad" individuals"**

- **school communities are required to maintain the interest of their students. Students who disengage from school could be teacher-nominated 'troubled children' deviating from the 'good student' persona**

- **potential introduction of disciplinary measures**

- **for individuals recognized as minorities, victimization is real**

- **operational anti-bullying frameworks are assumed to support victims of bullying and to lessen negative behaviour on a wider scale**

- **victimization, however, is a symbolic political process of exchange**

- **marginalized individuals are less likely to obtain victim status**

- **Anti-bullying programs mask complex differences among students.**

- **Anti-bullying programs are also believed to help children learn character and become responsible adults.**

- **The problem with this view is that the 'good character' attributes reflect a society where differences are reflected as problems that are curable with intervention and education.**

Bullying is a socially constructed concept that obfuscates violence, homophobia, harassment, racism and classism.

- **after hearing about various critiques of bullying, what are your initial thoughts?**

- **are there any questions?**

- **If so, please unmute your mic or type in the chat box.**

- **Miigwetch!**

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I recognize that this is a lot of information to take in at once; let's break here for 15 minutes.

When we come back, we'll look at how the Ontario anti-bullying framework came to exist and its potential impact on Indigenous youth.

- *Safe Schools Act, 2000*, *An act to increase respect and responsibility, to set standards for safe learning and safe teaching in schools and to amend the Teaching Profession Act* (hereinafter referred to as the *Safe Schools Act, 2000*), which governed the behaviour of all persons in school (301(1)).

- Once passed, 'mandatory suspension of a pupil' was a consequence for certain negative behaviours (s. 306, *Safe Schools Act, 2000*).

Section 306(1) states that,

It is mandatory that a pupil be suspended from his or her school and from engaging in all school-related activities if the pupil commits any of the following infractions while he or she is at school or is engaged in a school-related activity:

1. Uttering a threat to inflict serious bodily harm on another person.

2. Possessing alcohol or illegal drugs.

3. Being under the influence of alcohol.

4. Swearing at a teacher or at another person in a position of authority.

5. Committing an act of vandalism that causes extensive damage to school property at the pupil's school or to property located on the premises of the pupil's school.

6. Engaging in another activity that, under a policy of the board, is one for which a suspension is mandatory. (*Safe Schools Act, 2000*)

- **The language allows school principals the authority, in consultation with other educational personnel, to decide whether standard suspensions and expulsions are necessary in the circumstances.**

McGuinty's Liberal Government amended the *Education Act*, by, among other measures, adding bullying to the list of issues that provide suspension as a disciplinary response.

The definition of 'bullying' in the legislation is broad and ambiguous. The *Accepting Schools Act* defines bullying as,

- aggressive and typically repeated behaviour by a pupil where,

- the behaviour is intended by the pupil to have the effect of, or the pupil ought to know that the behaviour would be likely to have the effect of,

i. causing harm, fear or distress to another individual, including physical, psychological, social or academic harm, harm to the individual's reputation or harm to the individual's property, or

ii. creating a negative environment at a school for another individual, <u>AND</u>

- the behaviour occurs in a context where there is a real or perceived power imbalance between the pupil and the individual based on factors such as size, strength, age, intelligence, peer group power, economic status, social status, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, family circumstances, gender, gender identity, gender expression, race, disability or the receipt of special education; ("intimidation"). (*Education Act, 2019,* 1[1.1])

- **Since this amendment, schools have the authority to discipline students for behaviour believed to be bullying. The personnel who provide the evidence to discipline students are educators, who bring forth issues to the school principal, who then informs parents and, if warranted, the police.**

- **When the *Accepting Schools Act* was debated, it was noted that parents and students "have a responsibility to work together… to make sure that our children are celebrated for their differences and not bullied because of them" (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2011, para. 6). It was also stated that parents and students must feel comfortable in knowing that the school environment is free from harassment, violence, intolerance and intimidation (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2011).**

- **At first glance, the *Accepting Schools Act, 2012*, appears to be beneficial for those concerned for safety at school. However, there is concern that the framework also allows educators, particularly teachers, a great deal of discretion in determining when to treat behaviour as "bullying" in order to trigger the protocols under the framework.**

- **2013, Ontario Ministry of Education published,** *Working Draft: Safe and Accepting Schools Model Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan*. **The document outlines what is required to meet Ontario Ministry of Education anti-bullying standards.**

- **Ontario Ministry of Education revised Memorandum No. 144 on October 17, 2018, outlining the importance of maintaining positive climate and culture in schools. (three approaches)**

- **Policy 144 → Memorandum No. 145, "Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour"**

- **2019 – initiative on bullying prevention and reporting**

- **Provincial Code of Conduct**

- **after hearing about the Ontario anti-bullying framework, are there any questions?**

- **If so, please raise your hand or type in the chat box.**

- **Miigwetch!**

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Bullying™

Change The Culture

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Let's break here for 15 minutes before I start talking about my interviews with teachers in northern Ontario.

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- **explored how educators understood the Ontario anti-bullying policies and whether the framework reinforced colonial relationships.**

- **12 educators (10 teachers, 1 vice-principal and 1 principal) working in northern Ontario.**

- **semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed through a Grounded Theory approach.**

- **participants shared their personal background, their understanding of Indigenous history and politics, and their understanding of the anti-bullying framework.**

"People slap on the word bullying" - Jo

"We've got cameras everywhere now […] big brother is watching." - Miranda

"I feel like it really minimizes what the actual issues are" - Izzie

When Meredith was asked if incidents of bullying take place in the school, she stated, "it definitely happens daily [and that] the police are often at the school, like every week." She acknowledged that part of teaching is managing student behaviours, "even if you might interpret that as bullying, like […] just saying please don't speak that way to each other, let's be kind with our words, or things like that."

- **Arizona expressed her school board's definition of bullying. She stated that bullying is defined as,**

  > **any perceived action or threat or risk of harm […] if a student even perceived that somebody was going to harm them and that this perception was ongoing […] an ongoing perception, umm, that we would consider that a form of bullying and then be looking into how to handle that.**

- **She further stated that, "instead of being in a reactional mode and trying to umm, stop bullying […] it's more about getting at the root cause and helping to support kids before it even happens." Arizona recognized that so-called bullying behaviour is not simplistic but did not provide an explanation on how to 'get at the root cause.'**

- **Izzie dislikes the term bullying; "I feel like it really minimizes what the actual issues are." However, to answer the question, she stated that the school would define bullying as "targeted harassment." She further described her definition,**

> **to me bullying, umm, especially for the high school level, kind of connotes like playground silliness, and you know, my feelings get hurt and […] there's a difference between playground umm, friendly, uhh jabs and harassment and, and that's where I think we need to make a better differentiation at the high school level.**

- **Izzie went on to provide various examples of consequences students have faced when involved in instances of negative behaviour, such as suspensions, expulsions This is another teacher who acknowledges the complexity of the issues at play**

- **When asked for examples of bullying behaviour, Callie described an experience of rape that was so impactful, an entire family moved out of their community. For purposes of anonymity, the description is omitted.**

- **Hierarchies in the school system:**

- **When asked if there was a way that the school tries to eliminate social hierarchies, Mark responded,**

- **through treating students fairly and trying to role model positive interactions […] You learn about it and you know about it, and for example, like blackmailing, including sexting and that sort of thing and they, they're all quiet, I mean, anecdotally, I've had girls tell me that they receive multiple unsolicited sexts every week, photos from boys, so, so that, I mean, that isn't bullying specifically, but that you can probably appreciate how that would lead to any range of social issues in the school, bullying included.**

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- **Five participants were aware of the framework**
- **Meredith has a nice certificate on the wall**
- **Christina: "I've read it […] it doesn't stick that well […] I don't think there's anything that I've thought 'woah, people don't know that.' It just seems like, 'yes, this is how to operate a school.'"**
- **Izzie: "we have the legislation, and we've talked about it, but nothing, no actual training"**

- **Miranda did not know about the framework because it was additional training she did not have time for. She stated,**

  > I don't spend a lot of time working with the framework, like that's, it's just one extra thing, so it's not something that I would spend a lot of time with because I'm very umm, I'm an old teacher, so it's like if I see it, I'm going to deal with it, you know, umm, refer it to the administration if they want it, I prefer not to, I try to handle it with the student myself.

- **Christina revealed that the anti-bullying framework is action oriented. She responded,**

  the Ontario anti-bullying framework forces you to address it [so-called bullying behaviour] and [has] made school a safer place […] it takes the guess work out […] but at the same time, we are still, a small community and where we're not always going to go to the Ontario framework when we know that something will work better for our kids. Like, I'm not saying we are always going to have the right answer, but there are definitely times where we will feel strongly that we know our kids and we know what's going to work better and we're going to ignore it. We're going to ignore the framework, we're not going to ignore the issue.

- Derek: "I am embarrassed to say it, but I don't know that much […] I tried to even do a little bit of research and I didn't really come across much." He completed a search of the framework prior to his interview and still did not come up with adequate information points to the fact that there are issues with understanding this legislation.

- The Indigenous Education Authority is not mandated by the *Accepting Schools Act, 2012*, so there is no legal requirement for this school board to be aware and to be trained.

- **after hearing about some of the responses from my research, are there any questions?**

- **If so, please raise your hand or type in the chat box.**

- **Miigwetch!**

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Let's break here for 15 minutes before I review some of the findings from my research.

- **Once policies are legislated by the Ontario Ministry of Education, school boards ensure the government message is received by all administrative personnel. Those mandated to ensure their school board is adopting the policies are Directors of Education. In each school, the principals and vice principals are responsible, thus they mediate the importance the policy is accorded in the school and how it can be implemented.**

- **some teachers did not recognize the issues with their definitions of what so-called bullying behaviour looks like. Some participants obfuscated serious behaviour as bullying, such as:**

- **sexual harassment**

- **rape**

- **targeted harassment**

- **racism**

- **The Ontario anti-bullying framework may appear to have an all-inclusive, no tolerance to bad behaviour message, however, the fact is that there are students who may be excluded from the framework and anti-bullying initiatives**

- **Indigenous students may be the subject of violent behaviour that is simply characterized as bullying and the incident may therefore be ignored or its impact minimized**

- **Indigenous youth may be labelled as 'bullies' for defending themselves against racist behaviour from others if no evidence is brought forward by a staff member (or an authoritative adult), whether the negative behaviour is from fellow students, teachers, parents or any other personnel involved with the school system.**

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- **a difficult task is to un-learn a term that is believed to be universal**

- **regardless of your position in the school, when navigating behaviours, try not to minimize them to simply bullying**

- **remember to critically reflect on where the behaviour stems from**

- **try to understand any contextual factors that could influence the behaviour(s)**
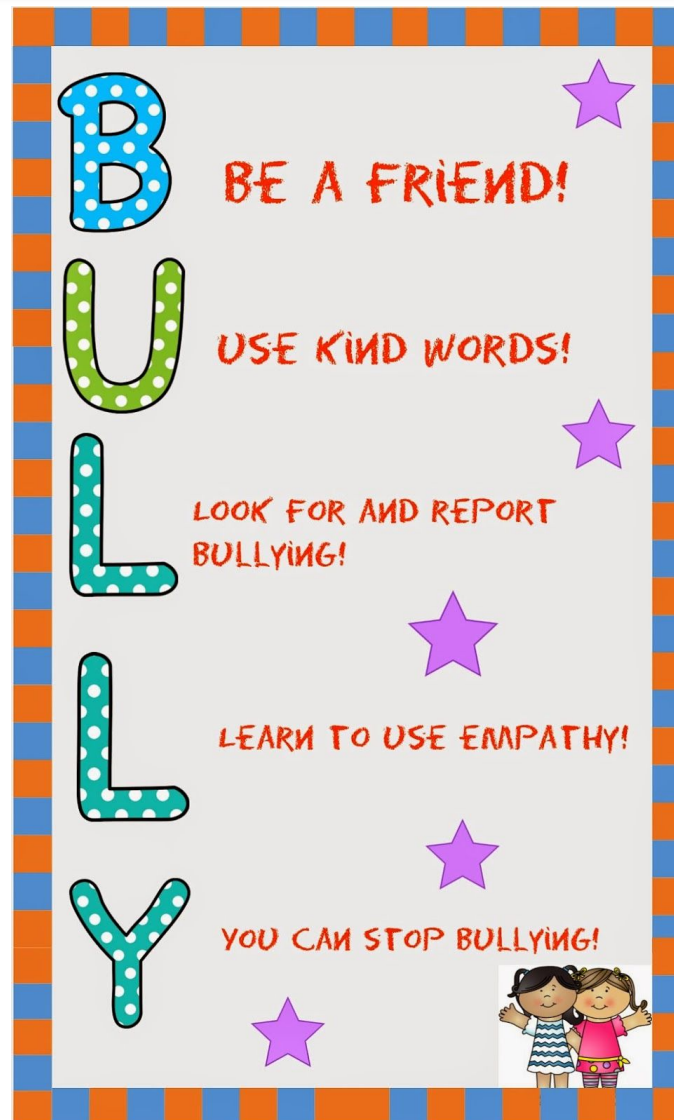
- **I hope that my presentation has opened your mind to recognize that bullying is not as simplistic as it may seem. I hope that you can take this knowledge and utilize it in your every day practice.**

- **If there are there any further questions, I am happy to answer them.**

- **Miigwetch to Nokiiwin Tribal Council for inviting me to give this presentation and to all those who attended.**