

## COMMENTARY

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### Sticks and Stones Can Break My Bones and Words Can Really Hurt Me

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Lawrence King (15 years old) was shot twice in his head on February 12, 2008, by a 14-year-old classmate at E. O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard, California. The eighth-grade classmates of the perpetrator and the victim described the “bad blood” that existed between the two because of the victim’s openly gay appearance. Classmates admitted that the victim, a child from a foster setting, had been the target of harassment because of his feminine dress, hair arrangements, and other mannerisms that were gender non-normative. Gay-baiting and taunting turned deadly with the announcement that he was brain dead by February 14 (Saillant & Covarrubias, 2008).

Although extreme, this example provides a sinister punctuation to the articles making up this special issue. The lead authors of this group of articles (Poteat, 2008; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Rivers & Noret, 2008) describe a disturbing picture. According to the authors’ reports and the most recent publication from the National Center for Education Statistics on school safety (Nolle, Guerino, & Dinkes, 2007),

43% of middle school educators report that student bullying occurs at school daily or weekly. Twenty-two percent of high school and 21% of primary school educators report this same frequency. Victims appear to be chosen based on their physical appearance (e.g., weak or obese), clothes, high grades, non-normative looks or behavior (e.g., weird or geeky), and non-normative gender behaviors.

Within a social context that enforces behavior standards through threats, taunts, and physical attacks, young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT), or who look like they may be LGBT, or may be questioning their sexual orientation, are at some special risk for bullying with the accompanying threats to their physical, academic, and psychological well-being (Poteat, 2008; Swearer et al., 2008). Although school bullies are not modern inventions, the effects on individuals and the moderators and mediators of effects are now better understood and open to scrutiny through modern methodological approaches apparent in several of the articles in this special issue (Espelage et al., 2008; Rivers & Noret, 2008).

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### **Schools: Safe Havens or Trial by Fire?**

Of some special note is that the social context within and across various friendship groups of young people appear to influence both the frequency of bullying behaviors and the ways in which the bullying is internalized (Poteat, 2008). Further, victimization seems to affect some students' perception of the entire school climate, with victims predictably reporting less favorable climates than nonvictims. Interestingly, as young people progress through school some of their attitudes toward bullying actually become more positive, as they interpret the bullying as teaching others how to behave in their particular organizational contexts (Swearer et al., 2008). These findings illustrate that both the behaviors associated with bullying and the effects of being bullied on young people are not merely the products of individual histories.

These investigations of system-level forces that operate to promote or mitigate bullying occurrences and effects suggest the need for further inquiry about how the adults in school settings are involved in bullying. Assertions in several of the articles suggest that teachers are not perceived to intervene or do not intervene, especially when the victims are or are perceived to be LGBT. However, a reality is that some educators may not know how to intervene effectively (Whitman, Horn, & Boyd, 2007). They may normalize physical bullying as gender specific to males and relational bullying as specific to females, and therefore part of normal development. Further, adults may believe that children learn to be tough and resilient by dealing with same-age bullies and thus resist intervening as a way to promote self-confidence in victimized children. Finally, and of most concern, some may allow bullying, especially of children from certain minority groups, as a way to satisfy their own aggressive impulses toward those children or groups (Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006).

How can adults be educated or recruited to be leaders in creating safe environments for all children? The preparation and socialization of teachers to have both the skills and values

to protect all children from bullying depend in part on their teacher education programs and on the norms set within school organizations. University-based programs to some extent do focus teacher candidates' attention on pluralism in the classroom and social justice issues involved with guaranteeing every child equitable access to educational attainment. However, teacher education programs are getting shorter and more prescribed by state regulations toward content standards as pressures to "produce" more teachers escalate. Opportunities to explore a future teacher's values about bullying in general and values toward non-normative sexual behavior or LGBT status in particular are now limited by the pressures to meet increasing state requirements related to content standards. Programs that may be helpful are available (e.g., Finkel, Storaasli, Bandle, & Schaefer, 2003), but learning experiences that explore candidates' professional obligations to victims may not occur except through mentor-teacher example.

Teacher education graduates often report back to their university programs that lessons learned at the university are not well supported in the field (Sleeter, 2001). Some of these disconnections likely deserve university adjustments, but others illustrate the power of negative organizational norms on novice behavior. For example, if principals and teacher leaders do not demand and model a zero tolerance policy for bullying behaviors, novice teachers may be unlikely to take the lead. Novices that enter organizations that tolerate homophobic humor among the adults may find it difficult to be publicly supportive of LGBT youth.

Colleges of education also educate principals and superintendents. These relationships provide a fertile ground for influencing school climates given the well-documented effects that principals have on setting standards for teacher and student behavior (e.g., Jones & Jones 1995). Of course, it is likely that specific learning experiences related to preventing and responding to school bullying must be provided so that leadership personnel have the opportunity to expand their skills in this area. Without a particular focus, it is likely that

unhelpful attitudes will persist (e.g., boys will be boys; just ignore the teasing and it will stop; or fight back to prove you are strong). Recent research illustrates that much of the historical advice given to victims is actually not very effective in reducing the frequency of bullying (Bias, Conoley, & Castillo, 2005).

Bullying motivated by homophobic attitudes appears to be a particular problem within the larger challenge of creating safe schools. Homophobic attitudes are among the last utterable prejudices among adults. With the certitude of religious conviction or state statute as supports, many adults continue to tolerate and participate in denigrations of LGBT individuals. Their behaviors provide negative models for young people and, at least, tacit encouragement to punish non-normative gender behaviors among peers. There is little reason to assume that educators are immune to these negative values and stereotypes unless they have specifically explored their values related to sexual orientation and all children's rights to safe school environments for learning. In fact, given public concern about LGBT adults' access to youth, it is likely that educators may be particularly reluctant to endorse practices that appear to welcome or offer special protection for LGBT students. Such public concern exists despite a lack of evidence that LGBT teachers or students pose any particular sexual or attitudinal risks to heterosexual students (Russo, 2006).

Teacher educators and school leadership university faculty could (and should) exert influence in this area by arming educators with relevant research findings and with dispositions and values that focus on the needs of all children. Of particular note in this special series are findings from Rivers and Noret (2008) illustrating the high degree of similarity between heterosexual and LGBT youth on several of the dimensions being measured (e.g., use of certain drugs). Educators must resist the societal error of stereotyping a person by a sexual orientation label. There are many variables that contribute to a child's learning and behavioral tendencies (e.g., education levels of parents, socioeconomic status, qualifications of teacher, temperament). Using sexual

orientation to predict anything but sexual behavior is patently imprecise (e.g., Athanases, & Larrabee, 2003; Harbeck, 1994).

University faculty must be courageous to facilitate academic discussions that demand the protection of LGBT youth. Introducing and pursuing these concepts among preservice and in-service educators is likely to invite criticism and, occasionally, censure from various stakeholders (parents, school board members, alumni of universities). Failure to specifically address school bullying and the disproportionate burden of violence borne by LGBT youth, however, is unacceptable.

Educators can engage in fairly simple strategies to reduce the frequency of school bullying. For example, they can be present in hallways and staircases during class transitions and on school play yards (Conoley & Goldstein, 2004). Adult monitoring and supervision are powerful deterrents to bullying. Adults can "catch bullying behavior low" to prevent high levels of violence by adopting zero tolerance for name calling, teasing, pushing, shoving, taunting, vandalizing, and so on (Goldstein, 1999). Despite the high status enjoyed by many bullies, teachers must sanction negative behaviors and seek administrator and parent support for such sanctioning. Teachers, counselors, and school psychologists can offer victims special training in how to protect themselves through social support networks and can manipulate peer groups to lessen the power of negative norms. Further, teachers can contribute to victims' social status in a variety of ways, for example, by identifying the victim's strengths, positioning the victim with positive peers, and anticipating the victim's success in managing difficult social situations.

A busy teacher or school administrator may rationalize ignoring early warning signs of bullying, but events such as the death of the California eighth-grader described in the opening paragraph can serve as a clarion call that our society is struggling with conflicting forces of intolerance and more open displays of sexual orientations, of declining levels of adult supervision and greater access to deadly weapons. These forces find expression in our

schools and demand that adults engage in universal as well as targeted strategies to build environments that enhance the learning and the safety of all children.

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