

Democracy as Morality: Using Philosophical Dialogue to Cultivate Safe Learning Communities

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In order to begin to cultivate safe learning communities, serious social problems that manifest themselves in school settings and threaten its constituents need to be addressed. One such problem is bullying. Bullying is a type of peer aggression (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1996; Whitney & Smith, 1993) defined as unrelenting, willful and malicious physical or psychological abuse (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993) that results in physical or psychological harm (Smith & Thompson, 1991) to the victim (Smith & Sharp, 1994; Underwood, 2003), the bully (Batsche & Knoff, 1994) and the bystander (Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco, 2004). Approximately 160,000 students stay home from school each day because they are afraid of being bullied (Vail, 1999), and an estimated half a million students nationwide are marked absent every 30 days because of bullying (Sampson, 2000). Thus, bullying clouds the school setting with fear and anxiety, which adversely affects a student's ability to learn (Greenbaum, Turner & Stephens, 1989).

Despite the negative effect that bullying can have on the entire climate of a school which can, in turn, create a mortally unpleasant experience for all students (Hoover & Hazler, 1991), many schools have failed to create a bully-free environment (Shakeshaft et al., 1995; Unnever & Cornell, 2003). In order to cultivate safe learning communities, schools need to create bully-free environments. To accomplish this, research suggests that it is imperative to cultivate and nurture a safe school environment within which individuals know and interact with each other (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Finn, 1998) and within which a culture of trust exists amongst students (Stone and Isaacs, 2002). In this paper, I will make a theoretical argument for the promise that a pedagogical approach called Philosophy for Children, which features key tenets of democracy, like philosophical dialogue and deliberation, has as mechanism for cultivating and nurturing safe learning communities.

Bullying in Schools

Research indicates that most bullying occurs in schools or on school grounds (Garrett, 2003; Rigby, 2003). Hoover, Oliver & Hazler (1992) found that over 75% of middle- and high-school students reported being bullied at least once during the course of their time in school. Because of the frequency and severity of the aggression, bullying may be one of the most common and potentially serious forms of violence in schools (Batche and Knoff, 1994; Espelage and Swearer, 2003). A major study by Vossekuil et al. (2002) of school shootings reported that the common denominator amongst students who had murdered their classmates was that they had been chronically bullied (Vossekuil et al., 2002). In its recent analysis of 37 school shooting incidents, the U.S. Secret Service learned that a majority of the shooters had suffered "bullying and harassment that was long-lasting and severe" (U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center, 2000). Thus, research shows that bullying can be a significant reason why school children do not feel safe in school. Until the problem of bullying in schools is addressed, it will continue to serve as an obstacle to creating a safe community for learning, an implication that extends beyond just the bully and the victim to all the community's constituents.

Historically, researchers suggested that bullying involved at least two participants: a victim, who is the target of frequent episodes of physical and psychological abuse, and a perpetrator who is responsible for administering the abuse (Perry, Kusel & Perry, 1988; Farrington, 1993). Recent studies redefine the bully/victim relationship

by featuring the bystander in as integral a role as the bully and the victim (Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco, 2004), suggesting that the bystander is an active participant in the “social architecture” of bullying (Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco, 2004) who may play a more significant role than previously recognized. Furthermore, researchers who have examined the problem of bullying in schools from a variety of perspectives, have found that bullying has serious short- and long-term physical, academic, psychological, social or emotional effects for the bully, the bullied and the bystander (e.g. Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hazler, Hoover & Oliver, 1991; Olweus, 1991, 1993; Rigby, 2003). For example, the bully, the victim and the bystander can all manifest responses that range from depression, low self-esteem and adult psychosis to suicide and violence towards others (such as school shootings) to problems that extend well into adulthood (Olweus, 1993; Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Hazler, 1996; Ballard, Argus & Remley, 1999; Harris, Petrie & Willoughby, 2002), where they are manifested as elevated levels of aggression, attentional difficulties, anxiety, depression (Clarke and Kiselica, 1997; Hawker & Boulton, 2000) and low self-esteem (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Thus, the research suggests that all students in the school environment are affected in one way or another by bullying, hence, amplifying the urgency for the recognition of and effective response to this very serious and pervasive problem.

Empathy and Bullying

There is a strong correlation between low empathy and bullying (Endresen & Olweus, 2002; Olweus, 1993; Smith & Thompson, 1991; Rigby & Slee, 1999; Sutton, Smith & Swettenham, 1999). Empathy is defined as sharing the emotions of another person (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987). Research suggests that bullies lack empathy for their victims, have difficulty feeling compassion (Olweus, 1992) and are unable to understand and sympathize with another individual’s feelings (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). In addition to the absence of empathy, bullying is characterized by a disequilibrium between an individual who has power over another individual who is incapable of counteracting the aggression (Roland & Idsoe, 2001; Horne et al., 2004). Thus, it is critical to attempt to recalibrate the disequilibrium that exists amongst students by cultivating and nurturing a safe school environment within which individuals interact with one another (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Finn, 1998) and by creating a school environment within which a culture of trust exists amongst students (Stone & Isaacs, 2002, Olweus, 1996). Therefore, any proposed intervention to reduce bullying should (1) promote empathy, respect and caring (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Olweus, 1993; Rigby & Slee, 1999; Smith & Thompson, 1991) and (2) recognize the power relations that exist between school children (Roland & Idsoe, 2001). I am proposing that an instructional approach that features democratic tenets such as dialogue and deliberation as core pedagogical values holds promise as a mechanism by which to accomplish these objectives and is an approach that departs from that used by many of the existing bullying interventions.

Existing Interventions

There are existing interventions that utilize an instructional model of “knowledge transmission” in which students are told what bullying is, what the characteristics of a bully are and what one should do if one encounters a situation in which bullying occurs (e.g. Olweus, 1993; Smith, Ananiadou & Cowie, 2003; Smith, Schneider, Smith & Ananiadou, 2004). Using Paul’s (1986) terminology, these interventions are ‘monological,’ since they do not offer students the opportunity to explore bullying on a deeper intellectual and emotional level, become conversant with and arrive at their own understanding of concepts, such as empathy, power, caring, respect, and justice. Philosophy for Children (P4C) is a unique pedagogical approach that uses philosophical dialogue to allow children to explore these concepts, to formulate their own understandings of the complex issues involved in bullying and aggression, to engage in structured dialogue with their peers and to reach judgments about how to make their experiences more meaningful.

The empirical evaluations of anti-bullying interventions have yielded mixed results. Some studies report only modest improvements (e.g. Olweus, 1993; Smith, Ananiadou & Cowie, 2003; Smith, Schneider, Smith & Ananiadou, 2004), while others fail to show any significant improvement (e.g. Rigby, Smith & Pepler, 2004). Thus, empirical research supports the assertion that interventions based largely on transmission may lack the

qualities necessary to affect change and make an impact on the problem of bullying. Because existing interventions have not significantly or successfully impacted the problem of bullying, a new approach may be necessary. I am proposing an instructional method that could offer students the opportunity to move beyond being mere recipients of information presented to them by adults and engage, instead, in a substantive examination of essential issues underlying aggression, such as fairness, respect, caring, justice and empathy using two key features of democracy: dialogue and deliberation.

Democracy as Morality

A theoretical argument can be made for the significance of a democratic approach. Dewey (1916) explains that democracy is more than the processes and procedures associated with politics and government. He argues that democracy is also comprised of a moral component, or “an ethical way of life,” that informs the way in which individuals should think about issues that affect their communities and the people within them. Dewey (1916) further argues that individuals have a moral obligation to others in their community, and the decisions and actions that they make must be understood in terms of the way they influences the lives of others. “A being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of other into account, for they are indispensable conditions of the realization of his tendencies. When he moves, he stirs them and reciprocally” (Dewey, 1916, 14). Thus, democracy for Dewey is a political process mediated by the moral consciousness of its participants, who are committed to making unbiased, nonrepressive, nondiscriminatory decisions. Dewey recognizes the importance of educating all citizens so that they understand how to participate as moral agents responsible for deliberating over political issues and suggests that it is the role of schools to facilitate this education.

Democracy has many meanings, but it has a moral meaning. It is found in resolving that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contributions they make to the all-around growth of every member of society (186).

According to Dewey, it is the role of social institutions, like schools, to establish conditions such that all their constituents are educated to actively participate in, deliberate about, and contribute to the development of each other as well as the development of their school community. “A society is undemocratic...if it restricts rational deliberations or excludes some educable citizens from an adequate education” (Gutmann, 1999, 95).

Gutmann (1999) argues for the importance of deliberation in a democracy as “a means of reconciling differences” and “an important part of democratic education” (11). Thus, dialogue and deliberation informed by a moral consciousness are means by which citizens in a democracy can negotiate issues underlying aggression, such as fairness, respect, caring, justice and empathy so that they support an ethical way of life.

Philosophy for Children

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is an established instructional approach that features philosophical dialogue and opportunities for deliberation. Lipman (2003) argues against telling students what is right and wrong. Instead, he suggests that children should learn to arrive at their own conclusions by engaging in exploratory dialogue with one another. P4C’s inquiry-based, dialogically-driven group setting offers students precisely the kind of forum that allows students to benefit from social interaction with their fellow participants and engage concepts collectively. As argued by Vygotsky, individuals are social and cultural beings who learn through interactions with others (Wertsch, 1981). The ideas that are generated during the sociocultural exchange are reflected upon, cognitively accommodated and then internalized (Vygotsky, 1978). It is through this process that children learn to think for themselves.

Understanding the descriptive parameters of dialogue is critical for understanding the transformative power that dialogue can have. Lipman makes a clear distinction between conversation and dialogue, arguing that a

conversation involves stability while dialogues involve instability (Lipman, 2003). A conversation involves turn-taking, but the turn-taking neither advances nor enriches the conversation. On the other hand, a dialogue manifests instability, which represents a series of arguments and counter-arguments that continually propel the dialogue forward. Each turn taken by an individual is a logical, purposeful “move” to both actuate and substantively elevate the dialogue.

The descriptive parameters of dialogic inquiry need to be expanded beyond purposeful moves to encompass the central role that dialogic inquiry plays in establishing and nurturing dispositions. Dialogic inquiry serves as the vehicle that facilitates the way in which the community sets acceptable parameters for social interaction. Participants, learn, for example, to acknowledge the opinions of others, respect the rights of others to be heard in a fair and equitable manner and entertain multiple perspectives. Therefore, dialogic inquiry and social interaction together constitute good inquiry. Doing good inquiry is not just a way for students to explore concepts in a deeper, more meaningful way; because there are certain ways individuals act when they are doing inquiry, it becomes the way that students learn to behave toward one another. “Individuals not only internalize the methods of collaborative performance, they also internalize the characteristic behaviors that come from engaging in a community of inquiry” (Burgh et al., 2006). This has significant implications for a successful bullying intervention since doing good inquiry requires a commitment to the dialogue and its participants. Engaging in a deeper, more meaningful exploration of issues underlying aggression implies more than just the act of dialogic inquiry but necessarily includes social attributes, such as fairness and respect, which constitute good inquiry.

The process of inquiry and dialogue, therefore, are insufficient if a sensitivity toward and understanding of another’s values, interests and beliefs is absent (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980). Philosophy for Children helps students, “both understand and practice what is involved in violence reduction and peace development. They have to learn to think for themselves about these matters, not just to provide knee-jerk responses when we present the proper stimuli” (Lipman, 2003, p. 105). Caring thinking is the component of P4C that requires individuals (1) to “care for the other” through love and respect, (2) to “care for his or her own beliefs” by valuing his or her own personal beliefs and values and (3) to “care for the inquiry” by taking judgment seriously. “If thinking does not contain valuing or valuation, it is liable to approach its subject matters apathetically, indifferently, and uncaringly, and this means it would be diffident even about inquiry itself” (Lipman, 2003). Caring thinking empowers students to establish a value system which leads them toward making sound and compassionate value judgments (Lipman, 2003).

The dialogic and intersubjective features of P4C necessitate an interaction between students and their classmates. Research suggests that learning in small groups supports students’ abilities to work with others in a democratic society (Dillon, 1994, Gastil, 1993; Parker, 2001). Cohen (1992) and Johnson, Johnson and Stanne (1989) argue that constructive peer interaction promotes tolerance, diversity and communication in a democratic society. By virtue of the rules of inquiry and an experienced facilitator, students are restricted to well-reasoned exchanges directed toward advancing the dialogue, thus severely limiting or eliminating attempts at or displays of aggression. The social disequilibrium that students feel as victims of bullying can translate itself into a dialogic disequilibrium, which can open the door to discussions of empathy and understanding. Thus, students use specific rules of inquiry, such as reasoning and concept clarification, to debate reasonably with one another as they analyze questions of morality and mediate their notions of complex issues, such as caring, empathy, fairness and respect.

Recent research shows that children are developmentally ready to participate in dialogic discussions and engage in abstract thinking about issues such as fairness, respect, caring, justice and empathy at an early age (Reznitskaya et al., in press; Crowhurst, 1988; Stein & Trabasso, 1982), although many educators have previously underestimated this ability in young children. Students, though, are not only developmentally ready to handle these concepts but come to appreciate that only by participating in a thinking community where it is incumbent upon them to clarify and defend their ideas with good reasons, where they are helped by others to articulate their ideas and where their ideas are addressed, extended and strengthened by others, can they make judgments that

are meaningful for them. They recognize that these judgments are the result of multiple and diverse perspectives and begin to realize that even those who disagree with them and with whom they disagree are valuable resources for their own inquiries (Gregory, 2004).

Democracy is not a low-maintenance endeavor. Among its requirements is a system of education that prepares people for it—not only to operate it, in the sense of knowing civics, but to constitute it, in the sense of practicing civility (Fenstermacher, 1999, 14).

In order to begin to cultivate safe learning communities, schools need to address serious social problems, such as bullying. In order to do so, it is incumbent upon schools to provide opportunities for students to critically examine social practices, reflect on what they learn and put that learning into action. Philosophy for Children is an instructional method that offers students a mechanism by which to accomplish this.

Conclusion

If an educational intervention centered around philosophical discussions, such as Philosophy for Children does, in fact, have the potential to impact the way students approach each other and the conflicts that arise among them, the implications for reducing instances of bullying in schools and, in turn, cultivating safe learning communities are significant. Philosophy for Children, or a similar environment centered around a philosophical dialogue, offers a practical, pedagogical vehicle by which participants in a school community can address the attributes essential for a successful bullying intervention by (1) promoting empathy, caring and respect and (2) working toward rectifying the imbalance that exists between bullies and their victims in an effort to begin to redress bullying behavior. While committed to the procedures of inquiry, Philosophy for Children pedagogy holds discussion participants equally and simultaneously responsible for adhering to conditions such as mutual respect, fairness and an absence of indoctrination. These are the attributes which have implications for school children whose lives are impacted by bullying each and every day (e.g., Smith & Thompson, 1991; Batche & Knoff, 1994; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 2001; Rigby, 2001; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Garrett, 2003; Rigby, 2003) as well as for educators who strive to create and nurture safe learning environments.

Because of the short- and long-term impact that bullying has on the lives of children, there is a clear urgency to identify a successful educational intervention. Previous approaches focused on didactic teaching and have yielded disappointing results (e.g. Olweus, 1993; Smith, Ananiadou & Cowie, 2003; Smith, Schneider, Smith & Ananiadou, 2004). None have used philosophical dialogue as a means by which to affect change in attitudes of violence and aggression amongst schoolchildren. While P4C has been evaluated in relation to other outcomes, such as gains in reasoning skills (e.g. Camhy and Iberer, 1988; Banks, 1989), self esteem relative to family relationships (Pålsson et al., 1998) and gains in academic performance (Meyer, 1988; Jackson, 1993), its impact has not been assessed in relation to issues underlying aggression. The proposal that I have set forth makes a theoretical argument for the potential that philosophical dialogue has for addressing this significant social problem and invites research that will provide concerned educators with practical and empirically-supported suggestions for addressing bullying in their schools as a step toward creating environments that promote safe, democratic and caring communities of learning.

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