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# How children's engagement in learning is associated with bullying

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# Individual Approach

- Individual (prevalent approach) - identifies typical characteristics of bullies.
- Bullies – a minority of people. Increased risk of crime and anti-social behaviour (Smith et al 1999; Ofsted 2003).
- Bullies tend to be violent and lacking empathy (Olweus 1993). Stigmatised characteristics (fixed, stable and internal).
- Foucault (1980) argued that humanity is changeable.
- Morita (1996) 'grey zone' and 'tissues of everyday life' (314). Spectrum: mild to severe e.g. teasing (lightness and suicide).
- Bullying in everyday life (broader experiences), 'normal' people and 'grey' areas.

# Bullying: A Foucauldian Perspective

- A clear imbalance of power is required for bullying (Olweus 1993)
- Power is fluid and involves struggles. It is 'never in anybody's hands' (Foucault 1980,159).
- Imbalances of power such as social class 'certain positions permit a supremacy to be produced' (Foucault 1980, 159).
- McLaren (1995) asymmetrical power relations in school such as disability reinforces inequalities in society.
- Power operates through normalization and surveillance.
- Surveillance: everyone is under observation, when people are targeted they become subject to intense forms of observation and supervision.
- Normalization: power is exercised over people by excluding and punishing people who do not conform to norms (educational and social).
- Normalisation and surveillance-The more observed people are, the more they are expected to conform to norms.
- Foucault (1979) School exercises power over its subjects. The body is 'caught up' in a system of constraint, obligations and prohibitions i.e. docile bodies.

# Boredom

- Foucault (1979) associated boredom in school with the 'power of time' i.e. institutionally structured days and no control (objects of manipulation). School time table – divided into segments, end at a specific time, incremental (first, second task).
- Breidenstein (2007) boredom is 'unavoidable component of school' (regiment and foreignness). Derogatory feelings: detached, empty and imprisoned.
- Newberry and Duncan (2001) delinquent children (mostly males who engaged in substance abuse and theft) had a higher tendency to experience boredom than non-delinquents.
- Children who have difficulty engaging in learning, for example, learning difficulties may be particularly susceptible to experiencing boredom (passing onto next activity).
- Some studies have suggested boredom is associated with bullying but did not explain why. Rigby (1997) associated boredom with bullying but did not thoroughly investigate it.
- Owens et al (2000) - adolescent girls reported alleviating boredom was a motivator for using indirect aggression.

# Conceptualising bullying

- Examined characteristics of bullying , for example, fear, humiliation, name-calling.
- Feeling humiliated by another person was usually considered as bullying in this research, although different severities of this and children's feelings were examined.
- Different severities and modalities of bullying (pupil-pupil, pupil-teacher, systemic bullying), children's feelings and 'grey 'areas were examined.
- Systemic bullying - institutional and societal factors which targeted children that were beyond the teachers' control, for example, when children who had learning difficulties were distressed because they felt 'thick'.
- Focus: mundane and everyday experiences of bullying.

# Methods

- Observations, focus groups and individual interviews in five state schools, a private school and a pupil referral unit (PRU).
- Observations (sixteen-each setting) and 42 interviews (ten focus groups and 32 individual interviews) (qualitative approach).
- Eighty four children participated in the interviews (focus groups and individual interviews), nine were interviewed twice.
- Participants: children in secondary school (except one in primary school) - emphasis on child's voice and experience.
- Findings have wider resonance where these processes occur, for example, in other schools (Coffey and Atkinson 1990).

# Experience of Boredom

- Most children reported experiencing boredom ‘what do you think of school?’ ‘it’s boring’.
- Children were disruptive because they were bored ‘when it’s boring loads of people mess about and throw things’.
- Boredom created a sense of emptiness, as suggested by Breidenstein (2007) and children’s minds ‘switching off’, ‘it turns to jelly and we think about anything’ i.e. docile bodies (Foucault 1979).
- As Foucault (1979) implied, time was divided into specific segments and often children did not pass onto one activity until they had completed the other.
- Children did not have control over their time ‘it just makes you feel like you hope when break-time or dinner-time or home-time comes.’
- For children at private school, there was a particular sense of there being no end to school and the ‘power of time’ filtered into other aspects of their life:
- *“Me and my mum on Saturday went shopping and then on Sunday some of my friends came round and they stayed ‘till goodness knows what time and I went to bed and I saw my schoolbag in the corner and I went, ‘oh no’, I had four pieces of homework to finish.”*

(Jessica, 10<sup>th</sup> focus group, private school)

# Resisting Boredom

- Some children discussed trying to overcome boredom but many felt they could not (agency and resistance).
- Children could have resisted boredom by concentrating on their work (occupied).
- Boredom was particularly experienced by working-class children who had learning difficulties and found it harder to engage with learning, as McLaren (1995) suggested.
- A vicious cycle: children who were targeted by teachers became increasingly targeted, as suggested by Foucault (1979). Children who misbehaved because they were bored were punished, this increased boredom and disruptive behaviour:
- *“Can’t do isolation, never done it, never can, I’ve always walked out of it, I can’t just sit there and look at a black-board, you always sit there...you don’t do shit, sit there for six hours, what’s point? ... I get migraines.”*

(Grant, year 11, PRU)

The most damaging forms of boredom were found in the most disengaged, Oliver was not able to do his work because of his learning difficulty:

*I: "Why do you think teachers are expected to control their class?"*

*O: They're in charge of the lesson aren't they*

*I: Why can't pupils control themselves?*

*O: Work that you get given."*

(Oliver, year 10, PRU)

Pupils who were succeeding academically, could see a purpose and an opportunity to achieve at school. Boredom was less of an issue:

*"When you have work set that you have to do then people don't really get bored because you have to get on with the work and get it finished so you don't really get bored while you're doing the work."*

(Paul, year 7, private school)

# Boredom and Bullying

- Boredom was one of the most common reasons children cited for why children engaged in bullying.
- Researchers such as Rigby (1997) just indicated an association between bullying and boredom rather than investigating whether there was one.
- Boredom – lack of control stimulation, and ‘nothing to do’.
- For some pupils, bullying was an outlet of frustration.
- Bullying gave control and something to do, for example, ‘a laugh’.
- Some pupils may bully to resist the systemic powers that are exercised over them, as suggested by Foucault (1979).
- *P: “They should find something else to do instead of bullying people*
- *I: Why do you think they do it?*
- *P: Because they get a laugh out of it*
- *I: Why do you think they want a laugh?*
- *P: Because they’re bored.”*

(Peter, year 10, Parklane School)

# Conclusions

- Children who have difficulties in engaging in learning were most likely to experience boredom and punishment which increased their disruptive behaviour, feelings of being 'picked on' and engagement in bullying.
- Power operated in a more complex and fluid way than the traditional definition takes into account.
- Normalization and panopticism reinforce inequalities in school and can be used to explain why children bully.
- Boredom operates through placing all children under observation and excludes and punishes those who do not conform to social and educational standards. These children are usually punished, ostracised and bullied.
- Normalisation and panopticism operate beyond the control of individuals and being a bully does not typically consume a child's identity.

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