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Nassem, Elizabeth

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# Why do Children Bully? A Child's Perspective

Dr Elizabeth Nasseem

[E.M.Nasseem@hud.ac.uk](mailto:E.M.Nasseem@hud.ac.uk)

# Individual Approach

- Focuses on identifying typical characteristics of bullies.
- Bullies are more likely to lack empathy, be violent, and involved in crime (Olweus 1993; Ofsted 2003).
- Fixed, stable and internal characteristics that are stigmatised.

# Criticisms of Individual Approach

- Humanity is changeable (Foucault 1980).
- Morita (1996) Bullying is 'generated in the tissues of everyday life', it involves a spectrum of behaviours ranging from mild to severe e.g. teasing (lightness and suicide) (314).
- Bullying involves '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 between individuals. It is 'never in anybody's hands'. However, there are imbalances of power such as social class 'certain positions permit a supremacy to be produced' (Foucault 1980, 159).
- McLaren (1995) asymmetrical power relations and struggles in school reinforce inequalities in society.
- Power operates through normalisation and surveillance-the more observed people are, the more they are expected to conform to norms and are punished and excluded.
- Power 'produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse' (Foucault 1980, 119).
- Bullying can achieve power, status and leadership, and be perceived as 'socially competent' (Sutton 2001).

- Foucault (1979) Boredom is symptomatic of the power of time where people become objects of control and manipulation.
- Breidenstein (2007) boredom refers to being detached and empty.
- Newberry and Duncan (2001) found that delinquent children (mostly males who engaged in substance abuse and theft) had a higher tendency to experience boredom than non-delinquents.
- Some studies suggest boredom is associated with bullying they do not explain why. Rigby (1997) associates boredom with bullying but does not thoroughly investigate it. Owens et al (2000) found that adolescent girls reported that alleviating boredom was a motivator for using indirect aggression.

# Conceptualising Bullying

- Examined characteristics of bullying e.g. fear, humiliation, name-calling.
- Different severities and modalities of bullying (pupil-pupil, pupil-teacher, systemic bullying), children's feelings and grey areas were examined.
- The emphasis was on the mundane and everyday experiences of bullying.

# Methods

- Children from different educational settings and backgrounds (five state schools, a private school and a pupil referral unit i.e. a PRU).
- Observations (sixteen-each setting) and 42 interviews (ten focus groups and 32 individual interviews).
- Eighty four children were interviewed (nine were interviewed twice).
- Participants: children in secondary school (except one in primary school)-emphasis on child's voice and experience.



# Popularity

- Children bully to be popular.
- Popular children are usually admired, respected and exercise social power.
- Children can be placed under surveillance and excluded if they are not accepted by the popular group 'if they're popular, if you start on them, you'll get the whole group on you', as Foucault (1980) indicates.
- Popularity fixes children into positions and an abnormal, shameful class is created:
- "I play for the football team and everybody treats me better with teachers. Sometimes when they're [people who are not good at P.E] by themselves you tend to feel sorry for them when you're just watching them and there's no one talking to 'em."

(Luke, 4<sup>th</sup> focus group, Woodlands school)

- Popular children do not have the sole power to abuse, as Foucault's (1980) suggests. Despite not being friends with or 'saying anything' to 'geeks', Kimberly does not consider herself as a bully 'I've never bullied before, it's awful' 'the popular people don't mix with the other ones'.

# Boredom

- Most children reported experiencing boredom.
- Boredom creates a sense of emptiness, as suggested by Breidenstein (2007) and children's minds 'switching off', 'it turns to jelly and we think about anything'.
- A vicious cycle develops where children who do not conform to social and educational norms (as implied by McLaren 1995) such as working-class boys who have learning difficulties find it harder to engage with learning, and experience more punishment and boredom:
- "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)

- Being targeted and punished (through surveillance normalisation) increases children's anger 'all detentions I had, they were all piss taking bastards' and disruptive behaviour: 'every time I get bored I misbehave':
- Several children reported that boredom is a reason why children bully. When children are bored they lack control and stimulation, and have 'nothing to do'. Bullying gives them control and something to do, for example, they have 'a laugh':
- *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)

# Conclusion

- Normalisation and panopticism operate through principles of popularity and boredom; and are beyond the control of individuals.
- Popularity and boredom operate by placing all children under surveillance.
- Children who do not conform to social and educational standards are usually excluded. They are often punished, ostracised and bullied.
- Popular children tend to be frightened of being ostracised and are conforming to the norms expected of them, they do not consider themselves as bullies.
- Children who have difficulties in engaging in learning are most likely to experience boredom and punishment which increases their feelings of being 'picked on' and engagement in bullying.
- Bullying operates in a more complex and fluid way than the individual approach takes into account.

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