

Of Bullies and Bullying

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“It is difficult to pay attention when you believe that you may be assaulted in the classroom. It is difficult to concentrate if you know that you will be extorted on the way to lunch.”

(Quarles, cited by Bluestein, J. (2001). *Creating emotionally safe schools.*)

“What engages them emotionally takes their attention; the lesson becomes an afterthought.”

(Frey, cited by Bleustein, J. (2001). *Creating emotionally safe schools.*)

Recent newspaper articles—one which reported on the use of "cow itch" in a secondary school, and the other on a study done by Professor Ramesh Deosaran—have again brought the problem of bullies and bullying within the school system into the public domain. According to the newspaper article (*Newsday* 15/06/03), Professor Deosaran's research has shown that "too many students are being taken advantage of in school, often beaten, insulted and chased for their lunches money, or other possessions. Extortions are rampant. And the young one are mainly the victims."

However, no one who works within, or is closely associated with, the educational system would have been surprised at these revelations. Although the newspaper reports seem to suggest that only certain types of schools are involved, the phenomenon of bullying and the presence of bullies are not restricted to any one type of school within Trinidad and Tobago. I have received information from teachers who work in "prestige" schools that the problem is quite prevalent in their schools. The absence of similar reports on these schools in the media should not lull the society into a false sense of security that it does not exist throughout the system, and at all levels of schooling—primary, secondary, and tertiary.

There are various definitions of bullying. Some focus on the intent of the aggressor, while others point to the "how to" of the act. Incidents of bullying may range from continuous teasing (verbal/psychological) to physical violence. In flagrant incidents of bullying (usually involving some physical act) at the primary and secondary level, the authorities react. Parents are summoned and the students are suspended and, within recent times, they are also counselled by professionals. In less severe cases, milder forms of punishment are meted out.

Sometimes, the reports of bullying are ignored as teachers and administrators have become frustrated by what appears to be no let up and the seeming dearth of ideas on strategies to prevent bullying. Sometimes too, in frustration, the victims are chastised and encouraged to believe that bullying is something which all students must endure as a part of growing up. However, the tacit acceptance of this culture can impact negatively on emotional health and well-being and undermine the learning process. Since learning is the business of schools, bullying is a problem that must be addressed. Some researchers

believe that promoting social and emotional development in children is the "missing piece" in efforts to improve schooling.

However, in order to promote social and emotional development, we need strategies that can correct and cure some of the very serious problems that already exist and at the same time prevent new incidents of bullying. There is no doubt then that a multifaceted approach is needed—professional counselling for aggressors and victims, parental and community programmes, teacher education, suspension of students, intervention by the agents of the law, and curriculum reform.

This article attempts to show how Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) policy can be translated into action within a supportive and safe school environment—one with clearly defined rules and disciplinary procedures that are broad-based and fair—and can serve as one vehicle by which the social and emotional health issues related to the problem of bullying can be addressed proactively.

HFLE is a life skills-based programme that provides learning experiences in which students have opportunities to develop skills of (i) decision making, (ii) problem solving, (iii) critical thinking, and (iv) communication. They also learn to develop (i) interpersonal relationships, (ii) self-awareness, and (iii) empathy, and learn to cope with emotions and with stressors.

There are various means by which HFLE can be included within the curriculum. One approach can be termed a "stand-alone" programme in which the focus is on development of life skills only. In another model, HFLE is infused within the subject disciplines. This latter is suggested because the students learn the life skills while they are engaged in learning the subject and, hence, they are exposed (a) consistently, (b) for longer periods, and (c) over a wide range of contexts to experiences that facilitate the acquisition of the skill selected.

The infusion model is recommended to students who are currently enrolled in the post-graduate Diploma in Education programme, and these student teachers have all planned and implemented HFLE lessons during the period of training. Among the issues addressed by science teachers this year were: alcohol and its effects (physiological, emotional, societal), cigarette smoking, and safety in the science laboratory. However, the vast majority of teachers have not yet had opportunities to examine these ideas, nor have they all yet been convinced that there is support for the participatory methodologies that are suggested when dealing with these issues.

The following are three examples of HFLE lesson ideas in which issues related to bullying can be discussed, and in which different life skills are highlighted:

1. One teacher may select the HFLE life skill: problem solving.

Introduction: Role-play or story (Use a scenario in which there is extortion of lunch money, coercing others to do homework or to lend already completed homework,

or any practical example as substance for a role-play). Students can be taught the skill of problem solving as they (a) identify/redefine the problem, (b) establish causes of the problem, (c) analyse consequences of various solutions, (d) choose appropriate solutions, (e) take action, and (f) evaluate actions/outcomes.

2. Another teacher may choose to focus the lesson on the life skill: Decision making.

Introduction: Use the same role-play but develop to include the "victim's response" (e.g., succumbing to the aggressor or not; reporting to authorities or not). Students can become engaged in the process of decision making, as in collaboration with teacher, they (a) determine the question, (b) examine the choices, (c) collect information, (d) investigate consequences, (e) decide, and (f) evaluate.

3. A third teacher may use the topic to develop the HFLE life skill: Interpersonal relationships.

Introduction: Same role-play as above. Teacher may assign the same student to act out assigned roles from different perspectives.

In learning to deal with other students through participation in the role-play and subsequent discussions with the teacher and peers, students can have experiences that allow them to: (a) vary presentation of self, (b) choose appropriate way of expressing emotions/feelings, (c) choose suitable language, (d) work cooperatively, and (e) resolve conflict.

Based on the policy document that emanated from consultations with stakeholders, it is evident that many educators are rediscovering the notion that emotional health and well-being impact on learning and is intimately tied to cognition. It has also become clear that creating emotionally safe and peaceful schools through strategies that facilitate conflict resolution, accommodate various learning styles, and develop relationships that are based on mutual respect and trust is an important goal.

This is the challenge that we now face, but teachers cannot and should not work in isolation. The implementation of an HFLE programme along with the necessary systemic supports—education, training, material and human resources—and community linkages may help us to face up to the challenges and to change the culture of schools and the experiences of schooling.

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