

# *The Notion of Bullying Through the Lens of Foucault and Critical Theory*

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**ABSTRACT:** Bullying is a high profile topic of discussion among educators, administrators, researchers, parents, and students. Empirical research on bullying and resulting intervention and prevention programs provide understandings of a specific set of behaviours of children that has come to be known as bullying. These understandings, and related programs and policies, are limited by an emphasis on individualization and behaviouralism. I advocate for a broader framework of understanding, one that also provides analyses on power relations of political, historical, and ideological contexts that give rise to environments in which bullying occurs. I discuss the application of Foucault's discursive analysis, in combination with critical theory, to enhance empirical conceptualizations of bullying.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Chez les enseignants, directeurs, chercheurs, parents et étudiants, l'intimidation est un sujet brûlant de discussion. Grâce à la recherche sur l'intimidation, à l'intervention qui en résulte, ainsi qu'aux programmes de prévention mis en place, il est possible de comprendre un ensemble spécifique d'agissements chez l'enfant que l'on connaît sous le nom d'«Intimidation.» Il est à noter que l'accent mis sur l'individualisation et sur le comportement limite cette perception, ces programmes et ces lignes d'action. Je suis favorable à une plus large perception; une de celles qui analyse le pouvoir des relations dans des contextes politique, historique et idéologique. Ces contextes favorisent un milieu dans lequel l'intimidation arrive. Je traite de l'analyse discursive à partir de l'observation de Foucault qui est associée à la théorie critique, pour intensifier les conceptualisations empiriques d'intimidation.

## *On Two Conferences and What I Learned*

In 2001, I attended a one-day symposium called, "Understanding and Preventing Bullying: An International Perspective," at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. A few months later, I attended a three-

day conference in Ottawa called “Fear and Loathing,” publicized as Canada’s first national conference on *bullying*. At each of these conferences, I listened intently as theories about bullying, stories of particular incidents of bullying, statistics on the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs, and descriptions of the widespread nature of the phenomenon were presented. The purpose of each conference was to provide information for the audience, most of whom were educators and youth service providers, and to promote safety in schools for all students.

Both confronting bullying and promoting safety are laudable intentions and I am quite sure that each presenter was sincere in her or his concern about bullying among children. Admittedly, I attended both of the conferences with particular expectations in mind, specifically that some of the presenters would attempt to grapple with homophobia as one of the most pervasive forms of bullying (O’Conor, 1995). I wanted at least one of the presenters to directly state that words such as “fag,” “queer,” “dyke,” and “gay” are powerful tools that are routinely used by children and teens to marginalize, abuse, put down, and otherwise torment each other. Considering the mandates of each conference – to confront bullying and to promote safety – I felt perplexed that homophobia was not a highlighted topic of discussion.<sup>1</sup> Whereas other forms of bullying are certainly prevalent among children, homophobia remains one that is seldom addressed by educators because of fears that they might be perceived as gay or lesbian, or that parents, particularly those who hold conservative views about sexuality, might complain. To the degree that bullying is generically defined as a specific set of characteristics evident in violence incidents between and among students, homophobia in schools, as a prominent form of bullying, remains largely unacknowledged.

I had presumed that the conferences would be sites where the usual silence on homophobia in schools and on issues of concern to gender / sexual minority youth would be broken. Yet, even as I listened in each workshop and conference session, I was also aware that the mere insertion of homophobia on a bulleted list of bullying typologies was too simplistic to address the overlapping and intertwined complexities of politics and ideology to which I was becoming attuned. The exclusions of homophobia from venues in which hundreds of people *conferred* about bullying was the lynchpin from which I began to problematize not only research on bullying, but also the dominant notion of bullying that informs such research.

I also felt uneasy about other political dimensions of discussions about bullying, such as the implication of neo-conservative ideology that good kids don't bully, bad ones do; and that research-based solutions were in large part implicitly predicated on rooting out the bullies, like pulling noxious weeds from an otherwise aesthetically-pleasing garden. After much thought and discussion on the matter, I eventually realized that these conferences were instrumental in helping me to recognize that the dominant way in which bullying is conceptualized misses the larger context in which bullying arises, and that related policies and programs are compromised as a consequence. I therefore began to consider the implications of a critical analysis of the notion of bullying, especially for educational policy on safe schools, and of the relevance of such an analysis for administrators and educators.

The increased focus on bullying over the past two decades has provoked me to ask many questions related to educational administration. Why, I wondered, does bullying persist even while journalists often sensationalize bullying incidents as fodder for human-interest stories, even while anti-bullying programs proliferate in schools; even while so-called safe schools policies have become standard features of school district policy manuals, and while conferences draw large groups of people together to share and celebrate programs and strategies? Moreover, I began to wonder about whose interests might be served through the proliferation of discourse on bullying, given that common forms of bullying, such as homophobia, are steadfastly ignored in educational policy on safe schools in school boards across Canada, with few exceptions. Given the widespread nature of homophobia in schools and dearth of educational leadership to challenge it, I lost confidence that safe schools policies are written, adopted, and implemented to facilitate safety for all students, even though doing so is their explicit mandate.

Research studies, too, are problematic. Through the lens of scientism, bullying has become defined, objectified, categorized, and psychologized. The ideas presented at the conferences were framed in discourse that implies objectivity, rationality, and scientific validation, apparently divorced from ideological underpinnings. The tenets of empirical research are an inadequate framework from which to address the disjuncture between the persistence of bullying and considerable resources that have been, and continue to be, utilized to reduce or even eliminate bullying in schools. However, the problem is not the

quality of the research as assessed against pre-set scientific standards, but rather the very conceptualization of bullying that informs such research and educational policies and programming.

How to shift focus from static to dynamic conceptualizations of bullying is what I explore in this paper. Thus, I begin with a brief discussion of empirical research on bullying and then turn to Michel Foucault's analysis of relations of power at the level of discourse to help provide historical and political contextualization. I then draw from critical theory as a framework with which to think about bullying that is not limited by the empirical and that challenges perspectives that individualize and psychologize. Finally, with perspectives of Foucault and critical theory in mind, I then consider ways that the notion of bullying might be *read otherwise*.

### *Foucault, Applied*

Foucault did not theorize about schoolyard bullying. However, his analysis of discourse as a site of relations of power is useful for reconceptualizing the notion of bullying. Before delving into his theoretical analysis and implications for conceptualizing bullying, a discussion of research on bullying is warranted.

One of the most influential researchers on bullying is Dan Olweus. Since the mid 1970s, Olweus' research focus has been on the particular behaviour among children that is routinely classified as "bullying." From his survey research in Norway, he formulated a definition of bullying that has become standard and is used routinely by researchers and educators today. In his 1993 book called, *Bullying at School: What We Know and What we can do*, he said that, "a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (p. 9). Subsequent researchers and educators have followed suit: Craig, Peters, and Konarski (2001) suggest that the key elements of bullying are power imbalance, the bully's intent to harm, distress of the victims, and repeated incidents over time. Several other studies employ similar conceptualizations, such as Coloroso (2002), Smith and Shu (2000), Weinhold (2000), Brookman (1999), and Batsche and Knoff (1994). Collectively, all of these researchers promote the notion (without stating so explicitly) that bullying is empirically measurable as specific acts; that certain criteria are required for certain behaviours to be classified as bullying; and that solutions to bullying are found at the level of the individual – which is to say, by addressing

issues of bullying and victimization to specific implicated children – even while it is perhaps also framed as a school problem. Strategies that are purported to reduce or even eliminate bullying are designed accordingly.

Even from a strictly empirical point of view, recent research indicates that anti-bullying initiatives are largely ineffective (Shariff, 2003) and merely shift the venue of violence outside of the boundaries of school property (Wortley, 2002). In addition, bullying often takes place out of view of adults and therefore statistics are problematic for what is unseen and unrecorded by the researcher. However, rather than extol the merits of particular empirical studies over other studies, my intent here is to highlight empiricism itself as problematic in relation to the question of bullying and our understanding of it. Empirical research is a process of deciding what to investigate, what measurement tool to use to gather data, how the questions will be phrased, how the data will be analyzed, and how the results will be presented.

It stands to reason that conference presentations that are based on research would mirror such decisions. At each of the conferences on bullying, my attention was drawn in part to what was presented, but also to what was not presented, namely, discussions about homophobia as a pervasive form of bullying. Such an omission was an early indication to me that standard conceptualizations of bullying, and the pedagogical practices that arise accordingly, reflect a politics that is not openly acknowledged by empirical researchers.

I am not suggesting that such researchers conceal willful homophobia and participate in a conspiracy of silence concerning homophobic bullying, although this is indeed not impossible. Instead, I think of bullying as a concept with political and historical antecedents, or, in Foucauldian terms, a “discursive practice,” which Foucault describes as practices of technical and methodological purpose and process, disseminated by institutions that have interests in imposing and maintaining them (1977, p. 200).

Notions about what bullying is and what to do about it incorporate the systemic practices, as relations of power, of which Foucault speaks. For example, technical processes that investigate bullying are such that conceptualizations are generic. They focus on behaviour but do not delineate forms of bullying, nor describe how those forms arise in the public sphere. Actions taken in bullying cases arise accordingly; victims are often sent for assertiveness training or other such

confidence-building strategies, while bullies are taught how to feel empathy for others. Such actions may benefit individual students, but institutional complicity at reinforcing negative associations with difference remains unchallenged.

Furthermore, technical processes fail to address why homophobia is pervasive in schools, while related information and discussion is absent in policies in almost every school district in North America. For Foucault, technical processes are one form of discursive practice that guides and shapes what is produced as knowledge. Such processes are the purview of the privileged who have status and authority through membership in particular institutional sites. The notion of bullying can be thought of in similar terms; that is, as a discursive field within relations of power rather than as a static category of violence.

Through language, discourse is channeled through modes and fields of power. For Foucault, science was one such field. In his conceptualization of discursive practice, Foucault implies that empiricism disguises – indeed, is unable to address – historical, cultural, political, and ideological antecedents of that which is placed under the scrutiny of science. Influenced by this argument, I am not contending that the notion of bullying is problematic because standard definitions result from research that has failed to be scientifically rigorous. I am instead suggesting that the ways in which the notion of bullying is articulated in journalism, research, and educational policy, to name only three sites, are discursive practices. Foucault might argue that a continued focus on empiricism to promote better definitions continues to obscure the importance of history, politics, and ideology that are implicated in such definitions, as well as in policies that employ them. Elucidating these problematics is a complex task but I draw from Foucault to help shift, rupture, and otherwise destabilize dominant understandings of those sets of behaviours, particularly among children, that are now routinely called bullying.

Definitions of bullying are not mere objective realities. Claims of objectivity are a conceit of Enlightenment rationality. Significantly, definitions carry the *status* and the hegemony of being objective truth discovered through the methodologies of science. A Foucauldian analysis emphasizes such status as an outcome of relations concerning the hegemony of science as the most *legitimate* knowledge, the role of the *expert* to disseminate such knowledge, and the institutional contexts in which experts are situated. Filtered through a Foucauldian screen,

conceptualizations of bullying shift from the definitional (stable, ahistorical, and apolitical) to the discursive, the contingent, the contextual, and the ideological. Foucault rejects humanist conceptualizations of discourse, what he calls, "the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking, subject" (1972, p. 55). He accepts historical inventions of discursive typologies – the "bully" is the example that I highlight – "only to subject them at once to interrogation" (p. 26) through what he called archaeological investigation. An archaeological approach, according to Marshall (1990, p. 13), identifies "changes in the rules for the production of discourse" that facilitates possibilities to speak about particular discursive realms.

To analyze the notion of bullying as discursive practice, then, is to focus on its invention as a concept by elucidating the ways in which speech and text, as modes of discourse, arise in the context of processes of meaning-making that shift over time. Foucault interrogates the status of knowledge, its standing as a uniform body of supposed truths, discovered and articulated, as though they were points of humanist light on a Cartesian plane. Such knowledge accumulates, but is never quite complete, thus compelling the production of further knowledge, in perpetuity. Research on bullying, as a continual project of acquiring new knowledge, seems to find its purpose this way.

From a Foucauldian perspective, educational research constructs a discourse on bullying that appears to reflect objectified, coherent, and uniform propositions. However, it becomes clear that bullying is a construction embedded in discursive practice that arises from a network or system of institutional, historical, social, and political relations. The interplay of these relations provides a complex platform from which discursive enunciations are proclaimed. Foucault's methodological emphasis on archaeology, then, refers not to the dispassionate mining and dissemination of knowledge, but rather to the elucidation of knowledge as a complex accomplishment of institutionalized authority, language, and practice.

Referring to the discourse on psychopathology, Foucault argues that "psychiatric discourse finds a way of limiting its domain, of defining what it is talking about, of giving it the status of an object – and therefore of making it manifest, nameable, and describable" (1972, p. 41). Research on bullying, extrapolating from Foucault's analysis, has accomplished precisely the same objectification, complete with prescriptions on how to cure what ails society in the form of identifying

bullies (and victims) and administering anti-bullying programs and strategies supported by anti-violence policies.

The two conferences I attended exemplify the construct bullying as a complex achievement of discursive practice. As far as I could tell, all of the conference delegates *knew* what was being spoken of and analyzed, knew the importance of research to provide the basis of anti-bullying programs and policies; knew that such programs have helped to identify causation (or at least, correlation); and knew that more research is needed to maximize interventionist and preventative strategies. *Knowledge*, itself, is a hierarchically arranged concept in which discursive practices filter knowledges, only some of which are legitimated. Scientific research is taken to be the most valid form of knowledge. Accordingly, speakers who present their research findings are often described as experts. The speakers appeared to be deeply invested in the humanist notion that research, program development, program implementation, and reduction of bullying are necessary pieces of a linear path of knowledge, truth, and resolution.

Eventually, I came to think of these conferences not as disseminators of programs that purportedly provide answers to problems, but as disseminators of hope. I began to think of bullying as a discursive invention, employed and deployed by researchers, parents, educators, and youth service providers, which contains and appears to make manageable a particular subset of violence that seems otherwise uncontainable and out of control. It is that very appearance that necessitates the proliferation of discourse on bullying in educational policy.

Foucault's methodological enterprise and my application of it to the notion of bullying confront dominant conceptualizations of bullying, specifically those offered as objects of research scrutiny. Extrapolations of his analytical frameworks instead provide ways of describing bullying as an achievement of discursive enunciations, and as an accomplishment of a network of social and institutional relations in which enunciation takes place. His analysis of relations of power at the level of discourse is a powerful tool with which to re-think the notion of bullying. However, he had little to say about politics, ideology, and social activism. Critical theory, however, provides a basis from which to further unpack the dominant notion of bullying.

### *Critical Theory*

In addition to Foucault's insights on the construction of knowledge, I draw from other theoretical frameworks that assist in my critical interrogation of the notion of bullying and related programs and pedagogical practices. One such framework is critical theory, particularly as it has been applied to the realm of education (see, for example, Wink, 1997; Carr, 1995; Young, 1990; & Gibson, 1986). Critical theory focuses on the ideological and the political; critical pedagogy focuses on, and seeks to undermine, the ways in which teaching practices and school administration perpetuate hierarchical arrangements of power and privilege.

The example of multicultural education is a useful conceptual bridge to the issue of school-based violence. I will not attempt here to elucidate the "extraordinary range of views about the central issues of culture, diversity, identity, nationalism, and politics" (Giroux, 2000, p. 149) that is threaded throughout the notion of multiculturalism. Suffice it to say, borrowing from Aronowitz and Giroux (1991, p. 196) that multicultural education typically concerns representation of cultural diversity through learning how to read, write, and produce culture. Typically, multicultural education is also framed within a context of race and deployed through curriculum.

From this (admittedly simple) description, multiculturalism *sounds* nice. When the problems of racial discrimination and prejudice are posited as a lack of sensitivity, awareness, or understanding about human diversity, the application of educational initiatives to promote multicultural awareness appears reasonable if not necessary. The presumption behind diversity education is that knowledge provides conceptual tools from which individuals learn to tolerate individual differences (Britzman, 1995). Such a presumption reflects liberal humanist values of individuality, equality of representation and opportunity, and human progress exercised and realized through reason. It sounds nice because these values are ideologically foundational and entrenched in Western democratic societies today.

It is useful here to provide some brief details about liberal humanist philosophy. John Gray's (1995) description serves as a convenient summary. Gray contends that liberal humanism is:

Individualist, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against any collectivity; egalitarian, in that it confers on all human beings the same basic moral status; universalist, affirming the moral unity of the species; and meliorist, in that it asserts

the open-ended improvability, by the use of critical reason, of human life (p. 86).

Another more colloquial and commonly heard expression is: "we're all just people," a sentiment based on the humanist tenets of equality, tolerance, and individuality.

With Donna Jeffery (2002, p. 91), I am critical of humanist philosophy insofar as it erases historical contexts of domination and power that are repeated and reinforced through discursively based concepts such as diversity and difference. Put another way, the regime of political correctness espouses the virtues of celebrating cultural diversity, but consequentially, it depoliticizes pedagogy by concealing issues of power and privilege (Giroux, 2000, p. 96) and paradoxically encourages competition among various subaltern groups for representation (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 341). Within the context of diversity and multicultural education, humanism provides an ideological framework in which related school policies are proposed and implemented as though innocent of inequities concerning race, gender, sexuality, physical and mental ability, and other markers of difference. The erasure of power in educational policy disables marginalized students from finding themselves "within the sentence," as Homi Bhabha metaphorically puts it (cited in Giroux, 2000, p. 96).

Postcolonial critics and critical pedagogy theorists have described the ways in which humanism underlies "diversity management" (Giroux, 2000, p. 64). For Giroux, diversity management is conflated with plurality, which erases the politics of difference and cultural elements that define a group as a community. Moreover, postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha (1994) argue that cultural difference is a seemingly stable construction of otherness, a discursive product of power and politics, even though it is rarely presented as such (p. 67). Difference, Giroux (p. 67) argues, is deployed especially when power and authority come under challenge. Significantly, diversity management not only avoids the messy business of institutionalized and discursively constructed power relations but also circumvents complicity in the perpetuation of Eurocentric bias in educational institutions (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997, p. xiv). Put succinctly, multiculturalism is a euphemism that disguises racism (Jeffery, 2002, p. 113).

Two implications of multicultural and anti-violence education are significant for discussion here, namely, individualization and the perpetuation of inequalities of power through an emphasis on the application of knowledge. These implications are not mutually exclusive;

they are related but also different. One of the outcomes of the ideological underpinnings of multicultural education is that racism is conceptualized as a specific event (or events) that is (are) perpetrated by someone (or a group) against somebody else (or some other group) (Jeffery, 2002, p. 127). Less awkwardly and in short, some people are purported to be racists who enact racially-motivated violence while others – allegedly the majority – are non-participants.

In the context of school-based violence, a parallel process of individualization is evident. Such violence is typically considered to be a widespread problem resolvable or minimized through the application of anti-violence education for individuals. For instance, a manual for educators called, *Focus on Bullying: A Prevention Program for Elementary School Communities* (BC Ministry of Education, 1998a) aptly illustrates the point. The manual states that bullying is a pervasive “phenomenon” (p. 5) and yet defines bullying as a dynamic between bully and victim. “Children who bully cause a great deal of suffering to the children they bully,” the manual points out (p. 5). To call something a *phenomenon* but then reduce it to a micro level of violent interactions among only some children is a contradiction that exists apparently unchecked and unnoticed.

I doubt that the authors of the manual are knowingly negligent or lack the intelligence needed to grasp the contradiction. Rather, I am suggesting that the concepts, phenomenon (macro) and bully-victim (micro) seem non-contradictory when viewed through particular ideological lenses. Ideology provides conceptual lenses through which we see the world. The dominant notion about bullying is an individualist one, that it is a problem of some children who often behave aggressively, misuse power against their peers, and have an intent to harm. In *Focus on Bullying: A Prevention Program for Elementary School Communities*, power is acknowledged but limited to immediate interactions between or among particular students. Like multicultural and diversity education, anti-violence education renders invisible the power and privilege imbued within social dynamics on the playground. Conceptualizing such interactions only as individual behaviour that potentially has effects upon other members of the school community leads to the application of anti-violence education as a rational response. The justification for such educational initiatives is that individual students will get help for *their* problems, supposedly making the school community and society as a whole a safer place.

Such application of reason and the implication of consequent human progress are central notions of humanist philosophy.

Absolution of guilt for everyone else is related to individualization. While some people are deemed to be racists because of overt behaviour, others are absolved of complicity in racist culture through the cultural denial of white privilege. The fiction is that all people are equal and those who think otherwise are therefore racist. In the context of multicultural education, racism is conceptualized as an individual pathology rather than as an outcome of a complex construction of power relations that are rooted in historical colonialism and perpetuated through public discourse. White privilege and racism are ideologically erased from educational and social policy through an emphasis on multicultural and cultural diversity (Jeffery, 2002, p. 137). Such emphasis on plurality perpetuates the tale that people are different but equal, what bell hooks (1992) calls “universal subjectivity” (p. 167). Furthermore, classifications of people along racialized, sexualized, or gendered lines are implicitly essentialized as determinate and fixed, a cultural practice that Foucault observes as a discursive *effect* of power and knowledge (1980, p. 133).

Similarly, when school-based violence is conceptualized as the result of an individualized pathology of only some students – the noxious weeds – it follows that educational administrators would treat it as such. For instance, problem children (or those deemed to have “challenging behaviours”) might accordingly be enrolled in special remedial programs or counseling to work through anger issues and to be equipped with strategies for behaving in ways that are more socially appropriate than enacting physical or verbal violence. This is precisely the *raison d'être* of anti-bullying programs as stated plainly in a BC Ministry of Education news release from November 16, 1998:

Characteristics of a successful school-based [anti-bullying] action plan will include ... clear and logical consequences for those children who bully; support to those children being bullied; and instruction to all children that emphasizes respect and compassion for others, and positive ways that children can resolve disagreements or conflicts. (1998b)

Such characterizations reduce school violence to disagreements between and among specific children that are purportedly remedied through immediate intervention and prevented through instruction. One result is that issues of power and privilege as precursors of school violence are circumvented.

What seems to ultimately propel educational programs such as prescriptive anti-bullying initiatives is the ideological *seeing* of the problem through the lens of humanist individualism. Seeing requires the deployment of particular discursive constructs. Foucault reminds us that, through discourse, objects are codified, identified, and objectified (1972, p. 32). Initiatives of the BC Ministry of Education demonstrate Foucault's observation. Through empirical research on school violence, the Ministry perpetuates the notion that bullies and victims can be objectively identified. In the educational context, behavioural evidence leads to essentialist typologies of students. Interventionist strategies such as anti-bullying programs contribute to such objectifications.

The application of knowledge in the form of anti-bullying programs and diversity education is a key strategy employed by teachers, school administrators, and educational bureaucrats. Deborah Britzman (1995) and Susanne Luhmann (1998) each describe the problematic nature of this particular strategy for resolving issues such as school-based violence. These theorists critique the repetitions of normalcy as a structure in pedagogical practice. The regime of normalcy – pernicious in binary oppositions such as self / other, inside / outside – subjugates the Other because otherness lies outside of self-recognition. Critical pedagogy moves beyond normalcy to address the ways in which binary oppositions are *normalized* (Britzman, p. 153). Pedagogies of inclusion and diversity are problematic because curricula that purport to be inclusive actually produce new forms of exclusivity through reliance on constructs of normalcy. For Britzman, curriculum offers teachers and students the possibility of exceeding discursive selves through new “modes of sociality” (p. 158) that facilitate rather than restrict the proliferation of identities. The type of curriculum to which Britzman refers is not mere knowledge dissemination; it is about confronting the exclusivity and historically-rooted power relations of discursive representations. Reading the world, Britzman argues, is about risking the self to exceed the “injuries of discourse” (p. 165).

Such injuries are a consequence of discourse, as Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux (1991) point out. They argue that the value of critical pedagogy is in its focus on discourse as a function of language and power. A critical examination of discursive practices, “provides a theoretical framework for pedagogy that reconceptualizes the ways in which historically specific relations of power and textual

authority combine to produce, organize, and legitimate particular forms of knowledge, values, and community within ... curriculum" (p. 93). *Mere* multiculturalism does not examine such power relations, unlike "insurgent multiculturalism" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993, p. 197). Such insurgency exposes privilege in social space. Insurgent multiculturalism, as Aronowitz and Giroux describe it, harkens the new "modes of sociality" that Britzman (1995, p. 158) advocates. Examinations of power more effectively blur the slash between self / other so that economies of race, gender, sexual orientation, mental and physical ability, among other markers of difference, are less able to sustain production and exclusion of the Other.

Returning to the realm of school-based violence, proponents of critical pedagogy confront standard anti-violence strategies that claim to make schools safe for all students. The emphasis on mere knowledge acquisition through sensitivity training, multicultural and diversity training, anti-bullying programs, and the like, reinforces the position that school-based violence is only a problem of individuals. Programs such as anti-bullying initiatives are justified as preventative in nature; the rationale is that awareness about respect for human diversity and the provision of knowledge about alternatives to socially unacceptable behaviour will prevent individual students from perpetrating acts of physical or verbal violence. Such resources and information designed to prevent school violence unwittingly promote the individualization of problems that are actually rooted in complex and overlapping constructions of power, language, culture, and history. *Focus on Bullying: A Prevention Program for Elementary School Communities* is a case in point, but it is only one example among a plethora of similar resources (BC Ministry of Education, 1998). Critical pedagogy, by contrast, is less prescriptive. It is precisely because historically rooted patterns of racism, heterosexism, and patriarchy (among others) are complex and difficult to see that ideological frameworks which attempt to subvert their continued power are improbable in standard pedagogical practice. Joan Wink (1997), however, describes and advocates the ways in which critical theory is woven throughout her pedagogical practice.

The propensities of individualization and reliance on knowledge as a safeguard against violence are not individual failings of educators. I presume that most educators are caring and competent individuals who are concerned about school violence even though they may not know what to do about it. Anti-violence policies and curricula are

offered in part to alleviate such uncertainty among educators. If my intent here were merely to criticize individual educators, I too would be guilty of diminishing the significance of power and privilege and repeating the humanist myth of individualism. Instead, I have sought to indicate what empirical evidence cannot see and does not acknowledge, namely, the ways in which ideological frameworks inform and shape educational practice. The humanist project of individualism, entrenched in educational policy and programs on bullying, encourages denial of individual complicity in structures of power and privilege.

Critical pedagogy, however, opens up possibilities for examination of such structures. Pedagogical practices that interrupt normalizations of Other (founded on postcolonial activism) are insurgent, radical, and deconstructive of binary oppositions. Such critical pedagogy provides strategies from which to challenge complex historical patterns of power and privilege that tend to be ignored or not noticed in standard pedagogical practice. Anti-violence policies and step-by-step manuals for educators that describe and prescribe how to reduce or eliminate bullying, for instance, resist engagement with such complexities and thereby retain power relations imbued within social markers of difference. It leaves little wonder, then, that some researchers and educators describe strategies purported to facilitate safety as “ineffective” (Shariff, 2003), “dangerous” (Wortley, 2002), and “a sham” (Casella, 2001, p. 170)

### *Reading Otherwise*

Politically, anti-bullying initiatives are *actions* designed to remedy a *problem*. Ideally, these initiatives are implemented, in part, to alleviate the anxiety of parents, students, and school staff about youth violence that are fueled by media preoccupation and exploitation. In short, such media incite moral panic about youth violence. In knee-jerk response to pressure to “do something” about bullying, administrators refer to anti-bullying initiatives and so called Zero Tolerance policies as evidence that all children are safe at school.

Public relations aside, many children continue to be unsafe, both emotionally and physically, while at school and also while traveling to and from school. Here, I have highlighted homophobia as one example of discursive exclusions evident in generic conceptualizations of bullying. I have not argued here that strategies adopted by schools to re-

duce bullying are wrong. Determinations of what works repeat the problematics of empirical research methods that I have highlighted. However, it is essential that curricula and policies on bullying acknowledge, foster, and support the proliferation of difference at the same time as they enshrine codes of conduct. Research on bullying has yet to fully explore and address the ways in which bullying is characterized and fueled by negative associations with difference, such as those of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Such negative associations filter throughout the social sphere, including schools.

A re-reading of bullying would work to subvert social hierarchies that perpetuate negative associations with constructs of difference. Rather than maintain normative gender scripts, for example, schools could be locations where the proliferation of gender identities and possibilities is supported, and thus, the pervasiveness of homophobia in schools would be challenged. More generally, schools are valuable sites from which to dismantle the power and privilege of some at the expense of others. Here, I have highlighted homophobia as a pervasive and articulated form of bullying, yet one that paradoxically dares not speak its name in educational policy. Educational leadership on this issue, of which there is currently a dearth, is therefore crucial to address issues in schools such as homophobia, thus rectifying where generic conceptualizations of bullying fail.

#### NOTE

1. Although the *Fear and Loathing* conference offered two small workshops on homophobic bullying, homophobia was mentioned twice – by youth delegates – in the plenary sessions.

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