Changing social understandings of bullying

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THE TWO PARADIGMS

PARADIGM ONE seeks explanations and causes in the single individual and in personality traits.

PARADIGM TWO understands bullying as an effect of social dynamics produced through a complex set of social forces.
eXbus: exploring bullying in school

- eXbus-team started 2007
- 8 researchers
- interdisciplinary team: psychology, law, statistics, philosophy
- empirically based research:
  - interviews with students, teachers, parents, school principals and pedagogues
  - observations in class rooms, after school institutions, school yards and teacher staff rooms
  - survey 1054 students from 7. and 8. grade: ‘Vestegnsundersøgelsen’
PARADIGM ONE

➢ Defines bullies as particularly aggressive and impulsive, as persons having a positive attitude towards violence, a need to dominate and little empathy with their victims

➢ Defines victims of bullying as passive, submissive, anxious, insecure and weak

➢ Points to dysfunctional families and mothers

This understanding of bullying produces a particular traffic of the problems:

- INTO THE CHILD
- OUT OF THE SCHOOL
- HOME TO THE PARENTS
PARADIGM TWO

- Teachers' didactics and approach to children and parents
- Children's relational practices, online and offline life
- School principals understanding of children, culture in among teachers, school class history, norms, public discourses
Sees bullying as a complex social dynamic

Focus a range of interacting forces such as

- the practices of school professionals and parents
- experiences and histories in the social group
- the virtual experiences and practices of children
- the norms connected with gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, social class – and local norms of gangs or particular groups etc.

All such factors and forces interact as part of a complex social machinery that produces the school class culture, from which bullying practices may emerge.

Culture produces positions for children as bullies, victims, bystanders - sometimes as both bullies and victims interchanging.

Personality traits play a role but are malleable depending on the context in which they interacts.
Understandings are crucial - they form our thinking, they form our ways of asking questions and they also form the horizon within which we are capable of creating responses.

Our ideas about potential interventions are formed and limited by our understandings.

With an individualistic approach, we’d ask:

What is wrong with Peter

– and next step would likely be to ask:

How can he be punished?
How can we regulate and discipline his behavior?
SOCIAL APPROACH

With a focus on complex social forces we would ask:

How did those actions become necessary or obvious to engage in?

What in the culture of this school class makes it an obvious choice to produce aggression and contempt?

And next step would be to ask:

How can that culture be transformed – so as to make the production of mutual acknowledgement and dignity a taken for granted way of relating to each other?
WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

Intervention is formed along many different dimensions simultaneously, involving, for instance:

- teachers, school principals, pedagogues
- parents
- students
- structure of space
- planning of activities
- didactic practices linked to classroom management etc. etc.

Work is done on the school as a complex machinery/organism – it is done through many simultaneous entries and transforming endeavors.

Kristine Kousholt and Tine Basse Fisker (2014) *Approaches to Reduce Bullying in Schools – A Critical Analysis from the Viewpoint of First- and Second-Order Perspectives on Bullying.* (Journal: Children and Society)
A COMMON GOAL

- The whole school approach can make successful intervention programs – when conducted with the common goal: to increase the production of dignity for everybody – not just for some.

- The production of dignity for everybody is very central. If you only increase dignity for some (e.g. the victims) but increase contempt in relation to others – the classroom culture won’t change: You have simply moved the problem.
DEFINITION OF BULLYING

- Bullying is an intensification of the processes of marginalisation that occur in the context of dynamics of inclusion/exclusion, which shape groups.
- Bullying happens when physical, social or symbolic exclusion becomes extreme, regardless of whether such exclusion is experienced and/or intended.

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One of the central mechanisms of bullying is social exclusion anxiety, which may be alleviated by the production of contempt. This contempt for someone or something may be expressed by behaviour that, for example, humiliates, trivialises or makes a person feel invisible, involves harm to person or property, abuses social-media profiles or disseminates humiliating messages via technological communication.
DEFINITION OF BULYING III

- Although some members of the social group may experience these marginalising processes as positive, robbing an individual(s) of the social recognition that is necessary for dignity can be a form of psychic torture for those who are targeted.”

(Schott & Søndergaard, School Bullying. New Theories in Practice, 2014)
All people need community belonging
When social embeddedness and belonging are threatened – social exclusion anxiety intensifies
Social exclusion anxiety emerges in relation to communities of belonging

SEEKING ALLEVIATION

- Social exclusion anxiety is unpleasant – if it intensifies, people will seek alleviation.
- Apparently the production of contempt works as a common and widespread strategy of alleviation.
- The strategy holds a promise of gaining control with the terms of social exclusion.

SOCIAL PANIC

The alleviation of anxiety that results from contempt production seems to last only temporarily. In fact, the production of contempt, which should relieve social exclusion anxiety, may exacerbate it.

The more contempt the group produces, the more control of the terms for in-and exclusion seems to be needed, and the more social exclusion anxiety will intensify.

With social panic, a shift seems to take place from this state of relative empathetic understanding to a situation where the dignity-producing empathy closes down.

At this intersection, contempt strengthens and dehumanisation increases to acts of bullying.

ADDRESS THE CULTURE

Intervention here is not about making these children point out the victim’s clothes or interests as annoying. It is not about putting pressure on the victim to make him adjust. Such interventions address only the surface.

Intervention has to address the culture in the school class.
READ THE SIGNS

- For school professions and other responsible adults it is important to be able to read the signs, to take the temperature of the tensions, and to watch the level of social exclusion anxiety in the school classes and groups they are responsible for.

- An awareness of the practices of ‘contempt production’ and of ‘dignity production’ and the transition between them is crucial.

- Both children and adults take part in such processes.
Avoid contempt as a strategy of authority

Some teachers and pedagogues use contempt to try to regulate and discipline their students – but in doing so they contribute to an increase of tensions in the class room, in the day care institution among the children.

They contribute to the formation of norms and standards that legitimise contempt among the children and youth they work with.

This is a contempt production that is dangerous to the culture in the day care institution and the school class.
MULTI-PERSPECTIVE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

- Understanding marginalisation and bullying as part of intricate social patterns and dynamics calls for less of a technically standardised approach to intervention.

- We need an analytically informed, flexibly implemented and socially sensitive way to meet these complicated social processes.

- That is why whole school approaches or multi-perspective intervention strategies often work more efficiently – if they are organised in ways that seek the common goal of increasing dignity for all inhabitants in the school or in the institution.
Work in the same direction

- Reduce the level of contempt
- Increase dignity for all
- Increase including and containing approaches to relating
- Enhance and support accept of diversity
The situations of classes and groups invaded by bullying practices vary

To intervene and to work with the local culture in a group you need to analyse the specific situation and to develop a situated intervention strategy

Such work calls for points of focus and analytical attention that will guide flexibly implemented praxes

KEY FOCUS 1 & 2

1. Keep a clear focus on the school culture, and more specifically on the classroom culture as the target of intervention. In doing so, don’t neglect the suffering and needs of those individuals, who are in trouble because of that culture. However, don’t lose the culture as a target.

2. Remember that intervention strategies which exclusively focus on single individuals merely address the symptoms of a dysfunctional school culture.
KEY FOCUS 3 & 4

3. Avoid intervention strategies that produce new targets of contempt; avoid strategies that move contempt around and which demonize particular groups of children or adults.

4. Keep in mind that bullying can take many forms – sometimes bullying practices position particular children as victims and bullies over long periods of time, sometimes the positions are interchanging and the practices shift among the children.
5. Keep in mind that bullying practices move across virtual and ‘real life’ interaction, on- and offline; that bullying may take many forms; and that bullying may change expression when addressed.

6. Be aware of the dilemmas involved in the group positionings pervaded by bullying practices: e.g. the victims may have to deny what happens in the hope of gaining respect; the contempt producers may not dare change their practices because they fear losing control.


Kristine Kousholt and Tine Basse Fisker (2014 ) *Approaches to Reduce Bullying in Schools – A Critical Analysis from the Viewpoint of First- and Second-Order Perspectives on Bullying*.. (Journal: Children and Society)