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Suzanne SooHoo

It does not matter whether one is 13, 33, or 53 years old, but if you are female, chances are that other girls have bullied you sometime in your lifetime. Bullying is not the kind of abuse that leaves broken bones; rather, it is a dehumanizing experience that manifests itself in the form of rumor spreading, name calling, psychological manipulation, character assassination, and social exclusion. Female teachers who are former victims of girl bullies or who themselves have been complicit with girl-to-girl bullying, consistently casting a blind eye to this ritualized social degradation, allowing it to continue generation after generation. The purpose here is not to blame teachers, but rather to seek an answer to "What are the social or institutional forces that prevent adults in the schools from seeing what they may have experienced themselves?"

Throughout generations, girls have been bullied. The dehumanizing rituals and practices, passed on from mother to daughter, have survived even when the victims have not. Damaged young girls become damaged adult women. Mothers who did not know what to do when they were girls still do not know how to handle girl-to-girl bullying as women (Simmons, 2002). Many are unable to intervene when their daughters are bullied and they continue to be victims of adult female bullies.

Through the process of "othering" (SooHoo, 2006), girl bullies determine who is valued and who is not and, as such, girl-to-girl bullying contributes to a social hierarchy of privilege and oppression. Girl-to-girl bullying is described as psychological warfare characterized by name-calling, gossiping, character assassination, and banishment from social circles or activities (AAUW, 2001; Chu, 2005; Meadows et al, 2005; Simmons, 2002). Also known as relational aggression, girl-to-girl bullying is a psychological and emotional form of abuse that uses relationships to inflict injury upon another (Dellasega & Yumei, 2006). Bullying among females, unlike boy bullying, is more difficult to study in that it is not easily identified because it is not physical and therefore more difficult to see. However, upon close inspection, girl-to-girl bullying can be found in the halls, locker rooms, girls' bathrooms, lunch tables, the back of classrooms and on cell phones, and in cyberspace chat rooms.

Second to males in society's hierarchy, girl bullies establish their own hierarchy by determining who is "in" and who is "out"-who counts or does not count on any given day. They denigrate and ostracize those perceived to be "losers." The bully's objective is to lower the social status of the victim. The victims often succumb to the bully's behavior, as evidenced by attendance problems, school transfers, bulimia, acting out, depression, a decrease in school achievement or bullycide (suicide as a result of bullying)(Rigby & Slee, 1999; Schrader et al., 1999; Smith & Shu, 2000, as cited in Sullivan, Cleary, & Sullivan, 2004, p. 20). A study of bullying, teasing, and sexual harassment in school by the AAUW (2001) revealed a strong relationship among hostile school environments and (a) self-confidence, (b) attachment to school and (c) diminished academic outcomes for girls "Girls who are caught up in these dramas are not thinking about their grades" (Vail, 2002, para. 8).

A study funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that 16% of US school children in grades 6-10 have been bullied (Nansel et al., 2001). In a survey commissioned by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 8- to 15-year-olds identified teasing and bullying as bigger problems than drugs, alcohol, racism, AIDS, or sex (Children Now, Kaiser Family Foundation, & Nickelodeon, 2001). Not only are these statistics striking, but the survivors of bullying report having lifelong scars and haunting memories of psychological wounds (SooHoo, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2004). Girls have stockpiles of unresolved conflicts on their emotional landscapes (Simmons, 2002). The trauma of girl-to-girl bullying in childhood can endure a lifetime (Chesler, 2001, as cited in Vail, 2002). Wiseman (as cited in Vail, 2002) has "talked to women who are today in their seventies who vividly remember the names of girls who tormented them years ago" (para. 10). Some girls have committed suicide as a result of school bullying that spilled over into cyberspace (http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Story?id=3882520). Vail (2002) claims, "These frequently covert acts of aggression affect school climate and culture" (para. 4). One might add, what is it in the school culture that maintains this cruelty? What keeps girl-to-girl bullying strongly entrenched in schools and adults so blind to its prevalence and the damage it does to girls and young women?

Bullying as Normal

Girl-to-girl bullying is ignored because the social and cultural forces that influence and maintain the phenomenon are often outside our awareness. Dealing with girl-to-girl bullying requires us to reflect critically on what makes us unable to recognize the negative consequences of this kind of aggression (Hass, 2006). Many people believe that bullying is normal and intrinsic to the process of developing friendships. Adults may believe that kids grow out of "it" and that

bullying is a rite of passage. The dominance and oppression of bullying have been passed off by phrases such as "kids will be kids."

In general, our society's lack of acceptance of girls' expression of physical aggression as a manifestation of hostility paves the path for girls to act covertly. "Girls are socialized to be nurturing and sweet, which forces them to express their aggression in backhanded ways" (Gilligan, 1993). They have incidental opportunities to learn how to assert themselves and stand up for their rights. They lack role models and allies who will challenge the tyranny of girl bullying and propose a different social order; one that builds on the girls' sense of inclusion and community building.

Hidden Curriculum

Girl-to-girl bullying is part of the implicit curriculum (Eisner, 1994), the unofficial curriculum conducted in the hallways, locker rooms, back of classrooms (Lea & Griggs, 2005), the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1990), or the unintentional ways of teaching (Kumashiro, 2004). Ironically, in the hidden curriculum of girl-to-girl bullying, girls build a replica of the very same power structures from which they are excluded in the larger social order. Within the culture of girl-to-girl bullying, they learn about competition, unequal self-worth and psychological warfare. They also learn that covert relational aggression is a viable and useful strategy to take with them into the adult world. Girl bullying is a curriculum of dominance and oppression in which some students (both perpetrators and witnesses) have learned that bullying is an acceptable form of dehumanization, while other students (both victims and witnesses) have learned docility and silence.

Bystanderism

One way to deal with social issues such as racism, homophobia, and bullying is to simply ignore the issues. The age-old panacea doled out by adults to bully victims is 'just ignore it'. The act of ignoring leads to indifference and bystanderism. Bystanderism is the "response of people who observe something that demands intervention on their part, but they choose not to get involved" (SooHoo, 2004, p. 200).

Indifference is heavily influenced by teachers' duty schedules and classroom geographic boundaries. A common code of conduct often expressed in the teacher's lounge is, "If it is not on my watch or in my classroom, I am not responsible." Responsibility for students' behavior in transit during passing periods, nutrition or lunch breaks or in areas such as hallways, locker rooms, and lunch quads are relegated to other adult supervisors, leaving classroom teachers not only duty-free but also absolved of any responsibility for incidences of bullying.

The failure of female teachers to address girl bulling is, in part, due to internalized oppression as bullied females. Women often accept their role as models of civility, which further prevents them from addressing the harmfulness of girl-to-girl bullying. Teachers, who were once victims of girl-to-girl bullying, by their silence have internalized the oppression, thus granting silent approval to bullying as a rite of passage and consequently have contributing to the perpetuity of domination. Moreover, teachers who were once perpetrators of girl-to-girl bullying, by their silence, continue to have power over girls and their social destinies. They are still the oppressors by witnessing and doing nothing to stop the violence. Such oppression dehumanizes both the oppressed and the oppressor (Freire, 1970).

As adults, female teachers make up the majority of adults in school, especially in elementary schools where the role models are predominately female. Because of their former held membership as either victims or perpetrators of girl bullying, they are both insiders and outsiders of the bullying culture. For those teachers who do nothing to help their younger gender sisters, they hold what Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997) describe as horizontal hostility. Horizontal hostility occurs when members of the same group, who have newfound power that they did not have previously, do nothing to help those who need help. They act as bystanders and due to their inaction, they perpetuate the oppression of girls on girls (SooHoo, 2004). When teachers, whether female or male, do not act on the behalf of victims, they in essence become covert bullies (Schrader, 2004).

"More Important Things"

Teachers reported they did not deal with girl-to-girl bullying because their days were filled with other priorities that needed attention.

When you have 180 students a day and more that you advise or coach, you can get overwhelmed. You start looking at what is essential, like finding parking, take attendance, and just showing up. With behavioral issues, many of them go on before or after school, at lunch, in the bathrooms, or after sporting events. We have 'supervision' during most of these times, except the bathrooms. If I took kids by the jacket (which I have) to the office every time I heard some

student verbally assaulting another student, I would never eat lunch or use the restroom. (High School teacher , 2004)

Teachers reported girl-to-girl bullying made them lose precious instructional minutes. Teachers who were interviewed in an alumni study on the long-term impact of diversity education reported that they had no time to address girl-to-girl bullying (SooHoo, forthcoming). "I choose to ignore girl-to-girl bullying because there are more important things to attend to, like state mandates" (High School teacher, 2004). This type of reaction is echoed by other researchers such as Simmons (2002), "Girls bullying each other is the farthest things from our minds" (p. 227).

Maintenance of Girl-to-Girl-to-Girl Bullying

Simmons (2002) claims that schools are systems that refuse to classify girl-to-girl bullying as genuine aggression and trivialize reports on girl-to-girl bullying. She reports that some counselors view girl-to-girl bullying as harmless teasing because it is not physically violent and there are no procedures for advisors and counselors to address hurt feelings. She concludes that schools prefer to focus on the physicality of bullying and the misconduct of boys rather than the covert action of girls. Therefore, girl-to-girl bullying flies below the radar.

Birkinshaw and Eslea (1998) surveyed and interviewed 76 primary school teachers. They found that physical bullying was perceived by teachers as more significant than indirect forms of bullying such as social exclusion. Because teachers perceive physical bullying as more serious, they were more likely to take disciplinary action, such as calling parents. Teachers, however, tended to ignore female on female violence (Galen & Underwood, 1997). Yet, students in the Birkinshaw and Eslea (1998) study who had experienced bullying felt that social exclusion was the worst form of bullying. These data suggest a disconnect between adult and students' perceptions regarding the seriousness of different kinds of bullying on school campuses. For adults, girl-to-girl bullying can be left invisible, undefined, and unmarked. Ultimately, one cannot address that which one chooses not to see.

When Will Teachers Intervene?

As external mandates for standardized curriculum grow stronger, teachers become increasingly hesitant to exert professional autonomy on matters of learning and schooling. External mandates often result in unquestioned compliance to state and federal policy. Scripted curriculum and "faithful implementation" of accountability practices deskill teachers. These conditions decreased the chances that teachers will act as advocates against social injustices even when acts of bulling might be observed. It is expected teachers will not intervene in girl-to-girl bullying because the perceived cost of intervention is too high (Schrader, 2004). They risk being ostracized if they break the implicit cultural code of indifference (Simmons, 2002).

There is however evidence that indicates that teachers will intervene in bullying incidents depending on their similarity to the victim and their ability to identify with the victim emotionally (Schrader, 2004). However, teachers' identities are also shaped by their experiences as learners within school cultures (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). They have learned to be bystanders, to witness harassment, and not to do anything. Social mores of systematic indifference overpower the rare, ad hoc advocacy of saving a victim. To act differently by taking responsibility, or to act morally in an apathetic environment, deviates from school norms. Avoiding such risk leaves room for bullying.

Moving to Action: Making Girl-to-Girl Bullying Visible

There is an assumed normalcy of bullying in the schools which results in a self-imposed silence that contributes to the inaudible presence of girl-to-girl bullying. However, what is learned can be unlearned and critically examined (Kumashiro, 2004). To deconstruct girl-to-girl bullying, we can examine the conditions in schools that cultivate girl-to-girl bullying. Kumashiro (2004) suggests that we can conceptualize alternative models by which we can begin to repattern ourselves and our social order. We can imagine more socially just alternatives (Leistyna, 2001). We can create a counter position to girl-to-girl bullying instead of merely ignoring it.

There are at least two questions we should ask ourselves: What prevents us from changing and challenging long ignored social conditions in the schools? Why is oppression invisible and unchallenged in our lives? Both questions disturb and challenge the status quo. However, simply recognizing girl-to-girl bullying will not necessarily dismantle the abusive social phenomenon. We need to first take responsibility for our complicity in maintaining the conditions that breed bullying and then take action to address these dehumanizing conditions. Teachers, counselors, administrators and teacher educators must find ways to integrate opportunities to teach socially responsible actions in

order to replace apathy as a response to girl bullying. It means that we, as a learning community assume the roles of allies to girls so that they can have an opportunity to reauthor their identities; from victims, bystanders, or perpetrators to self-defining, responsible young women. We have a moral duty and a public responsibility to ensure schools are safe places. Therefore, we must bring girl bullying out of the dark side of schooling experiences into places illuminated by thoughtful alternatives to girl relationships, and we must develop mindful strategies to support these new relationships.

Mindful Strategies

One way for teachers to observe the frequency and severity of girl-to-girl bullying on school campus is to develop an internal antennae for such occurrences. This means being mindful of the areas where girl bullying takes place e.g. elementary school playgrounds, middle school hallways, high school locker rooms. It also means being accessible to girls who may want to discuss relational issues. Keeping an Open Door Policy during lunch or before and after school is a signal to students that teachers are possible resources to help them through troubled times. Topics that are typically "off-limits" in the classroom can be discussed by having lunch with students.

There are many library and curriculum resources available to schools on girl bullying. Top on the list are the speakers, books, curriculum for teachers, and workshops

Provided by the Ophelia Project (OP). The OP is a non-profit organization that "focuses on long-term cultural change, which can be achieved by standing up against destructive social norms that perpetuate the cycle of covert aggression in children, youth and adults" (Ophelia Project, 2008). In addition, there are fiction and non-fiction books that appeal to children of all ages. These materials can be used as a resource for teachers to provide to students when experiencing bullying or they can be used as part of an anti-bullying curriculum for those teachers who may choose to address the issue more directly. Particularly promising is the regular use of problem posing discussions (Freire, 1970) that encourage students to name and challenge oppressive conditions in our schools. From these discussions, students develop alternative ways to interact with each other, disrupting the status quo. This practice is not confined to classrooms. Both teachers and other school personnel, including administrators, can easily convene student focus groups to discuss the conditions of learning and schooling. As a former school principal, I see faculty school-wide approaches as the most effective strategy to interrupt the culture of bullying. The relationship between a sense of safety and academic achievement cannot be underscored enough. It is imperative that we drag the hidden curriculum of bullying out of the dark corners of the school and expose it to an enlightened community that strives to cultivate human dignity and respect.

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