

Book Reviews

Cyber-Bullying: Issues and Solutions for the School, the Classroom and the Home.

Shaheen Shariff.

London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2008, 299 pages.

Reviewed by: *Teddy Moline*
University of Alberta

From its heart-wrenching beginning to its resolutionary conclusion, Shaheen Shariff's book is a valuable read for educators, preservice teachers, and parents. Shariff begins her crusade against bullying in our schools with the tragic suicide note of 14-year-old bullying victim Hamed Nastoh. His posthumous message is a plea to educate others about the harmful and hurtful consequences of bullying. Shariff attempts to meet his request by examining various types of bullying and offering guidelines to education stakeholders such as staff, students, parents, media, administrators, government, school boards, and district offices for changing the culture of coercion in schools into a culture of collaboration.

Shariff urges parents and educators to address the root causes of bullying, "a form of abuse that is based on an imbalance of power" (p. 11), and rejects anti-bullying programs that focus on the symptoms, not the disease. She cautions that zero tolerance policies do not work because they do not contextualize the harassment, but provide a generic totalitarian solution regardless of circumstances. To Shariff such approaches, although well meant, are ineffective because they simply overlie rather than address the underlying causes. Readers will find that her presentation prompts review of their own standards and responses to bullying and of the role that educators, parents, and other education stakeholders play in creating safe and caring learning environments for children. The author first introduces the topic and then devotes a chapter to each of the following: traditional views of bullying, cyber-bullying worldwide, gender and bullying, the ineffectiveness of adult-in-control or top-down solutions, the roles of education stakeholders in resolving this problem, liability and responsibility of stakeholders, and "harmonious solutions" (p. 226).

Shariff's interest in counteracting cyber-bullying and traditional bullying began with an incident involving her teenage daughter, continued during her teaching and administrative experience, and eventually led to her doctoral research on bullying and its legal implications for schools and teachers. She notes that the root causes of bullying remain unchanged and strongly suggests that teaching education stakeholders about the ramifications and legalities of bullying, especially cyber-bullying, is the first step in counteracting this in-

Teddy Moline is completing her doctoral research in the Faculty of Education. Her current research interests include technology integration and cognitive self-efficacy and video gaming. She has worked as a teacher and administrator at the school, district, and provincial level.

sidious behavior that negatively influences the learning atmosphere in schools. The second step is to involve these stakeholders as partners in resolving the issue. Shariff's intent is not to be a harbinger of techno-fear, but to explain why schools and parents must take bullying seriously.

Traditional bullying can be physical (overt actions), verbal (overt actions), or psychological such as excluding or isolating a victim (overt and covert actions). The author explains that teasing can be a form of verbal bullying, and yet most teachers do not regard teasing as bullying, a response that often triggers further bullying.

Cyber-bullying or harassment through technology takes the form of either verbal or psychological bullying through overt means (e.g., video, e-mails, messaging) or covert means (e.g., rumors, rankings). Incidents of cyber-bullying are far fewer than positive online communications, but have been known to occur in the form of electronic threats; on ranking pages (e.g., rankmyprofessor.com, rankmyteacher.com, freevote.com); on postings containing malicious rumors; and on social networking sites such as MySpace and FaceBook. Without doubt, whatever the form, bullying negatively affects the learning environment of a school.

Assessing occurrences of school bullying, whether traditional or online, is difficult for a number of reasons including the code of silence that is the common response of victims and bystanders; the recursivity of victim and perpetrator; and the overall hierarchical structure of schools. Shariff believes that the incidence of bullying is high and that most children have experienced bullying in one of its forms in school even from teachers, who can be perpetrators as well as targets. Girls are more often the target than perpetrator or bully, but their role as instigator is increasing. Perpetrators are often classroom leaders and popular with both peers and teachers, whereas targets or victims may be perceived as different in some way such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or intelligence. Shariff identifies two types of cyber-bullying in schools: peer to peer and anti-authority. She notes that more attention is paid to the latter because teachers' unions and administrators are involved and because the reputations of both the school and teachers can be damaged. In cases where a teacher, school, or administration has been libeled or slandered, the courts value the reputation of schools and their staff over freedom of expression.

Shariff next provides an international perspective on cyber-bullying and on access to communication technologies. In her exploration of e-bullying in the United Kingdom, Asia, India, North America, New Zealand, and Australia, she encountered cultural differences such as group bullying; the use of cell phones rather than the Internet for harassment; varying parental responsibilities for their children's bullying; and online bullying based on social class. She also describes the solutions used in diverse jurisdictions. For example, New Zealand has formed an effective educational stakeholder organization called NetSafe that emphasizes educating teachers, students, parents, and schools. (In Canada, the Media Awareness Network uses a similar collaborative approach.) Australia, on the other hand, implemented an ineffective and expensive nationwide Internet filter to protect children from cyber-bullying and other damaging online materials. A 16-year-old former cyber-bullying victim hacked into this new filter within 30 minutes and then told politicians that educating

“children on how to protect themselves and their privacy” (p. 87) should be the goal, not controlling access.

Shariff continues with a discussion of biological and environmental influences on bullying behavior. She found that physiological factors may influence behavior patterns, but that the home and social setting play a much greater role. Overall, boys tend to favor physical bullying whereas girls engage in more psychological and covert forms such as rumors and ridicule. Shariff points out that the media often exacerbate bullying by sensationalistic reporting that frames a perspective of *us versus them*, implying that society is fighting a battle against bullying rather than working to resolve this offence. Confrontational attitudes, Shariff states bluntly, will not reduce bullying, and changing the status quo is a “slow, but worthwhile process” (p. 111) that requires systemic changes to the power structures between adults and children in our school systems

Today in Canada, adults control or supervise most places of childhood play, and virtual playgrounds such as the Internet are for many children the only places with limited, often unfettered supervision. Once adults had almost total control over the sources that children could read, listen to, or view, but in this era of ubiquitous online information, almost 95% of Canadian children can access the Internet, and adults can no longer control and manage the data that youth experience. This control shift is one influence that circumvents adult-control methods of censorship and punishment to combat bullying, but many other factors constrain the zero-tolerance model.

For one thing, Shariff describes schools as centers of conflicting ideologies such as individualism, socialization, hierarchical power structures, situated learning, and standardized assessment. These diverse philosophies undermine both the top-down control strategy and the cooperative approach that is needed to overcome bullying in schools.

Shariff suggests that another determinant is the difference between the technological mindsets of adults and children. As Prensky (2001) explains, adults are primarily “digital immigrants” and view technology as a tool, whereas children, “digital natives,” see technology as an opportunity for interaction. Many adults see technology as a problem, whereas children see its benefits. Adults perceive literacy as reading, writing, and arithmetic; children view literacy as the “ability to understand information no matter how it is presented” (p. 126). These opposing mindsets, then, undermine attempts to censor or restrict access to technologies and also create barriers for partnerships.

Shariff advocates collaborative problem-solving to eliminate bullying from our schools. This approach is not a quick fix, but requires underlying philosophical changes to attitudes about responsibility. European communities, for example, are jointly developing conflict resolution strategies, promoting Internet literacy, holding public consultations, and expanding research into Internet safety. In the UK, Becta (British Educational Communications and Technology Agency) provides an e-safety site that advocates that schools work together with the school community to develop policies, supports, and technology training. This organization also condones a contextual approach to cyber-bullying rather than a zero-tolerance tactic.

Bullying court cases that have legal implications for Canadian schools, in particular individual rights of free expression compared with individual rights of privacy and safety, are reviewed in chapter 7. Shariff maintains that educators must increase their understanding of the liability issues of online libel (e.g., messaging, Internet postings) and slander (e.g., oral communications) because the educational environment is now both the virtual and physical worlds where learning takes place. In today's world, it is not easy to separate in-school learning from out-of-school learning because students are expected to use their computers for school assignments, are encouraged to contact teachers outside school hours, and access Web pages posted by teachers. If bullying moves into this virtual school setting, the effects on the school learning environment can be devastating.

Court rulings on cyber-bullying of both students and teachers have been arbitrary and send mixed messages about whether harassment can be considered to have a substantial effect on learning in school. Nevertheless, the courts do uphold the right of students to learn without fear of harassment, and a case of harassment by fellow students would be decided against the perpetrators. As well, if intimidation tactics foster an atmosphere of fear in school for any child, educators have the responsibility to take action. Victims, though, do not often complain due to inaction by the staff and administration and a general lack of mutual trust and respect between school staff and students.

Schools, then, are obliged to meet the legal standards of no material and substantive disruption to learning and of a school milieu that provides equal opportunities to learn without fear of harassment or bullying.

In sum, Shariff's guidelines for eliminating cyber-bullying and bullying call for schools to become collaborative communities of learning (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008) that involve all stakeholders, including students, in developing and implementing the common goals of achievement, respect, and responsibility. She proposes two models for establishing synergetic schools, one that addresses legal literacy and the other the atmosphere of harassment currently evident in schools. Her first model on legal literacy recommends training educators in technology and legal responsibilities, in particular substantive law. The second "harmonious solution," the stakeholder model, is embedded in the first.

Practical strategies for implementing legal literacy, which encompasses multiliteracies, are provided and include training preservice teachers in legal issues and technology integration. Some suggestions may be more naïve than intended. For example, although I wholeheartedly endorse that teachers become learners and learners become teachers (Davis, 2004), it seems simplistic to suggest that children know how to use the Internet and can train teachers in its use. Undoubtedly youth can teach most educators and parents much about social networking sites, but they have yet to develop effective searching, organizing, and evaluating skills. Information literacy is not innate, and students need to learn how to use the Internet without filters and without fear. I agree with Shariff that the door to cooperation can be opened by technology, and this partnership among learners (i.e., teachers and students) leads to the development of multiliteracies. But teachers are lifelong learners who rely on them-

selves and on ongoing professional development, not just their students, to keep abreast of technology.

The author's stakeholder model calls for education partners to work together to create safe and caring schools. She proposes that developing and implementing Acceptable Use Policies is one way for stakeholders to collaborate in pursuit of this ideal.

As with all texts addressing a complex issue, minor quibbles arise. Google is a search engine, not a portal. Profiles on Facebook, a social networking site, are rarely left open for public scrutiny. And because Shariff often alludes to substantive law, I did not expect to have to search outside sources for its definition.

I also noted three omissions in this otherwise inclusive resource: the lack of acknowledgment of the roles that curriculum and teacher-librarians play in addressing this issue, and lack of acknowledgment of existing holistic programs for developing collaborative learning environments.

Recognizing diversity and promoting respect for others must be infused in provincial and classroom curricula if the ideals of schools as ecologies of learning are to be realized. Including values and ethics in curricula is key to changing existing practices. Technology standards must also be embedded in curricula in order to effect changes in pedagogy. Developing communities of learning is a slow process, as Shariff says, but worthwhile.

The second omission is lack of recognition of the information literacy specialist in schools. The teacher-librarian promotes multiliteracies, is the catalyst for cooperative planning, and plays a leading role in the integration of technology with curriculum and in the development of information literacy policies (Asselin, Branch, & Oberg, 2003).

Third, Shariff does not discuss Canadian projects such as the grassroots Safe and Caring Schools (SACS) initiatives adopted by Alberta (1996), Newfoundland and Labrador (2001), Manitoba (2004), and Saskatchewan (2000). Programs such as SACS and Developmental Assets (Search Institute, 2006) are grounded in Noddings' (1984) research on caring and education and are jointly developed by education stakeholders. Other Canadian provinces appear to emphasize safe schools from the control perspective, a strategy that Shariff claims models punishment and intolerance. Research into the effects of these various perspectives would be of interest and use to educators.

Based on her analysis of data primarily from Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia, Shariff found that schools are not communities of learning, but hierarchical compounds that foster bullying. Shariff lays out clearly and succinctly why censorship and didactic control in schools contribute to bullying. Her proposals are not the band-aid solutions of some anti-bullying programs, but focus on proactive ways to involve, not control youth in resolving all forms of bullying. I recommend this book as a welcome addition to the anti-bullying literature. The process of changing top-down hierarchical relationships in schools into constructionist partnerships is a long-term undertaking that will ameliorate the negative effect of bullying on the world's most vulnerable resource: its children.

References

- Asselin, M., Branch, J., & Oberg, D. (2003). *Achieving information literacy: Standards for school library programs in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian School Library Association and Association for Teacher-librarianship in Canada.
- Davis, B. (2004). *Inventions of teaching: A genealogy*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Dufour, R., Dufour, R., & Eaker, R. (2008). *Revisiting professional learning communities at work: New insights for improving schools*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring*. Berkely, CA: University of California Press.
- November, A. (2008, May). *Creating a new culture of teaching and learning*. Paper presented at TLt Summit 2008: Learning in a digital world, Saskatoon.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants, part II: Do they really think differently? *On the Horizon*, 9(6). Available: <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca>
- Search Institute. (2006). *What kids need: Developmental assets*. Retrieved September 15, 2008, from: <http://www.search-institute.org/assets/forty.htm>