

A Relational Pedagogy

A Call for Teacher Educators to Rethink How Teacher Candidates Are Trained to Combat Bullying

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Abstract

Bullying is a tremendous problem in schools. As such, teacher preparation programs must begin rethinking how they prepare teacher candidates so that candidates will be able to address the problem in their schools. In this article, the authors advocate for teacher preparation programs to consider how a relational pedagogy could become the conduit for eradicating bullying behaviors in educational settings.

Introduction

Bullying is the repeated targeting of an individual and it continues to be an epidemic in schools. In a recent study, 45% of students engage in bullying behaviors, and 25% of students are bullied on a regular basis (Bullying Statistics, 2013). Social media is contributing to the growth of the bullying epidemic. According to the Center for Disease Control (2011), 16% of students are students are cyberbullied. Bullying is also more problematic among students with special needs and non-heterosexual students.

Students with special needs are two to three times more likely to be bullied than their classmates. 47% of surveyed parents stated that their children had been hit by peers, and 50% reported that their children were scared of their peers (Abilitypath, 2014). Potter (an actor who has special needs on the television show *GLEE*) recounts this event in her life: "I remember as a teenager walking through a department store

and someone behind me yelled ‘Look at that [R Word]’...It was hurtful. I remember turning around and saying, “That’s just not okay! What you called me was just not ok.” (Abilitypath.org).

Similarly, non-heterosexual students also experience large amounts of harassment. According to the most recent data from the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN), “84.9% of students heard ‘gay’ in a negative way frequently, 91.4% reported feeling distressed because of the language, 71.3% heard other homophobic remarks, and 56.9% of students heard homophobic remarks from their teachers or other staff members” (GLSEN, 2011). For one student, high school was an extremely difficult time.

[Madison] grew up in a middle class family, one where he was expected to attend college. Although he had not come out in high school, everyone knew he was gay. They constantly harassed him, and he avoided sports because of the harassment and possible locker room assaults. He learned how to skip school without his parents finding out. To him, high school was not about having fun, but rather it was about survival. (Jones, 2014, p. 3)

Researchers (Olweus, 1993; Pepler, Craig, & O’Connell, 1999; Jones & Augustine, 2015) have postulated teacher intervention is essential in creating safe places for all students to learn. Specifically, “knowledge about one’s own students raises awareness of the problem” (Jones and Augustine, 2015, p.80). Awareness is an important first step in combating bullying behaviors and is best attained by developing quality teacher-student relationships. In this article, we posit moving beyond simply a cursory knowledge of one’s students to a model where teachers and administrators are establishing positive relationships with students, an approach which we and others (Aspelin, 2014) term relational pedagogy. Further, we postulate teacher preparation programs should prepare candidates to implement relational pedagogy into their classroom practice. In doing so, relational pedagogy becomes a catalyst to address the bullying epidemic. Thus, in this article we first discuss the theoretical underpinnings to relational pedagogy, and then discuss how teacher education programs should prepare pre-service teachers to utilize a relational pedagogy to help combat bullying in schools.

What is Relational Pedagogy?

To begin this discussion, it is necessary to first define what we mean by “relational pedagogy.” In simple terms, relational pedagogy is the systematic construction of appropriate relationships embedded within the schooling process. Such relationships develop organically through

social interactions and through deliberate instructional methods. A relational approach to teaching has implications not only for the regular, unstructured social interactions at school but on academic instruction as well. Construction and maintenance of positive teacher-student relationships is the foundation of relational pedagogy.

Relationships are central to all aspects of human existence. As such, the significance of relationships extends beyond the classroom and to the metaphysical level. A relational ontology posits that all of human existence occurs in relation. Wildman (2006) asserts that: “the basic contention of a relational ontology is simply that the relations between entities are ontologically more fundamental than the entities themselves” (p. 55). Even the self is always a socially-situated self. There can be no conception of an “I” without a conception of “other” or “not I.” In this manner, the acquisition of knowledge happens in relation to others. Wildman (2006) proceeds to develop a causal theory of relation which he applies at the atomic level of physics, human social relationships, and to metaphysical, and theological realms.

While specifically considering human social relations at a metaphysical level, Buber (2002) articulated distinct categories of human interaction. His conceptualization is a dichotomy between relationships characterized either as “I-it” relations or “I-Thou” relations. (Buber, 2002). The “I-it” relationship features interactions in which humans regard one another essentially as objects. No relation is fixed and two people may enjoy both types of interactions between them in different circumstances, however, the “I-it” type of relational interaction characterizes most human exchanges. In contrast, the “I-Thou” relation is poetically described as a circumstance in which one person turns away from themselves and toward another person metaphorically and then opening to fully acknowledge and accept the other. Buber (2002) classifies interactions between individuals as either “monologue” or “dialogue.” The monologic action occurs in an “I-it” relation; there is a single direction for communication with little regard to whom one is speaking. This type of exchange may occur when ordering a meal from a fast food restaurant - words are spoken but rarely in the form of genuine human acknowledgment described by Buber. In an “I-Thou” relationship Buber advocates for “dialogue”—interactions in which “each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them” (Buber, 2002, p. 19). These types of interactions should constitute the majority of teacher-student interactions within schools.

Moreover, relational pedagogy embraces a social constructivist view of knowledge. Thayer-Bacon (2003) asserts that: “we become knowers

and are able to contribute to the constructing of knowledge due to the relationships we have with others” (p. 2). Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) “zones of proximal development” situate learning and development firmly within a social context. Furthermore, Vygotsky emphasizes the importance between adults and children (or pairings between persons stronger and weaker in a general area) for growth. Unlike Buber’s (2002) assertion that relations must be mutual to have genuine “dialogue,” Vygotsky provides a framework which more naturally adapts to a specific educational context. Relatedly, Bandura’s (1977) *Social Learning Theory* outlines a process by which external social stimuli become internalized as knowledge. He states,

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (p. 22)

If ontologically “all of human existence occurs in relation and knowledge is, at minimum, heavily influenced by social context, then the significance of relationships and their existential primacy and educative potential must be acknowledged, studied and harnessed towards great humanistic purpose” (Crowner & Jones, 2016). As such, a teacher’s ability to relate to students and to make positive, caring connections plays a significant role in cultivating a positive learning environment and promoting student achievement (Boyd, MacNeill, & Sullivan, 2006).

An understanding of the significance of positive relationships might be traced even to Socrates, who advocated for mentor/mentee matching based on compatibility of personalities (Mintz, 2007). Education occurs not in the mind of the student or the actions of the teacher, but in the relational space that connects them. The relationship is the site of and the medium through which education occurs. The premise that relationships have potential to aid or hinder the educative process is one not likely to be disputed by any individual who has spent time in a classroom and loved or hated a teacher. Certainly any educator with a larger data set across different ages and subjects and students can speak towards a pattern of cooperation and success or conflict and a lack of success for students. Still, it is worth reviewing the literature about the potential impact relationships may have on the educative process and student experience.

Recognizing the importance of relationships, a growing number of researchers suggest that a relational capacity in teachers is an important feature of education (Aspelin, 2014). This capacity is particularly important because of the potential benefits of positive connections with

students. According to meta research by the American Psychological Association (2015), “positive teacher student relationships...have been shown to support students’ adjustment to school, contribute to their social skills, promote academic performance and foster resiliency (Battstich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004; Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001, 2005; Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic, & Taylor 2010). Further research suggests that students in close relationships have better attendance, show more individual initiative, and are more cooperative and engaged (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004). Positive relationships have also been linked to an increase in motivation (Wentzel, 2009). Students who reported positive relationships also reported liking school more (Birch & Ladd, 1997). This body of research suggests that teachers able to build strong relationships may witness a number of positive effects in their students and classrooms.

The teacher-student relationship is unique. These are relationships with an agenda, sometimes opposing agendas, relationships which inherently include an imbalance in power. This asymmetry has often served as a barrier towards construction of the most productive kinds of learning relationships, as many teachers are unable or unwilling to modify the power dynamic, which is predicated upon institutional authority invested in the teacher (the ability to punish the student), power over the student’s academic outcomes, and a disparity in age and relevant knowledge. That said, it is possible to establish rich relationships with students. In education or otherwise, trust is an important component to the relationship which allows the student to accept the information or advice or care of the teacher (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Noddings, 2005). Positive classroom relationships are characterized by “low self-conflict, a high degree of closeness and support, and little dependency” (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2015). They are “emotionally close, safe, and trusting [and] provide access to instrumental help and who foster a more general ethos of community and caring in classrooms” (Wentzel, 2012, p. 19). Furthermore, “relationships with a personal sense of power and agency, predictability and safety, useful resources and reciprocity are believed to be optimal for the internalization of social influence (Wentzel, 2012, p. 20). Teachers with a strong relational capacity can relate to a student’s actual person and potential existence (Buber, 2002). On the other hand, negative relationships lead to increased levels of anxiety and depression in students (Murray & Greenberg, 2000). In further defining relational pedagogy, it is necessary to discuss its connections with humanistic pedagogy and a curriculum of care.

Relational Pedagogy's Connection to Humanistic Pedagogy

Historically, humanism was an intellectual movement with European roots, specifically Italian, from the 14th Century. Generally speaking, humanism grew contrary to the predominant philosophy of learning: medieval scholasticism. Humanism brought with it an appreciation of "classical" knowledge and texts surviving from Ancient Greece and Rome. These texts and their gradual dissemination in the vernacular had a dramatic impact on European thought. Unlike medieval scholasticism, which was largely Biblically-focused and adamant about the sinful nature of man, the classical texts offered an optimistic view of human nature and human capabilities in a wide variety of subject matter, from law to drama to poetry. This movement provided an intellectual foundation for the Renaissance, which continued to celebrate human form, human emotion, and a new sort of education in the "humanities." This historic movement is loosely related to the modern day philosophy of humanism as it connects the emphasis on the individual to the importance of learning, the ultimate goal of which was to enable a human flourishing.

Today, "humanism is an open worldview that stresses personal autonomy and humanity...education from a humanist perspective focuses on developing rationality, autonomy, empowerment, creativity, affections and a concern for humanity" (Veugelers, 2011, p. 1). While there are many variations upon humanism, it is no longer married exclusively to a curriculum of classical, liberal education and has come to be interpreted more generally as a worldview concerned with the agency, potential, and value of human beings.

Of interest to us is the modern manifestation of humanism encompassed within critical theory. The works of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren are of particular interest for their emphasis on critical pedagogy; or, a re-imagining of the system of education which might lead to the liberation or empowerment of students. The notion of using education as a medium of dramatic social change is at the heart of our discussion. Specifically, we postulate relational pedagogy is premised on the notions of student autonomy and empowerment. As such, this critical, pedagogical shift has the promise of creating positive change in classrooms and students, and our future society. In addition to humanistic pedagogy, relational pedagogy also maintains a connection with a curriculum of care.

Relational Pedagogy's Connection to the Curriculum of Care

Nell Noddings is a champion of refocusing the mission of education. She describes her approach to education through caring as "pre-theoretical," by stating, "my particular philosophy of education is important

to me... *but the living other is more important than any theory*, and my theory must be subordinate to the caring relationship” (Noddings, 2005, p. xviii). Noddings (2005) postulates for a reconceptualization of the purpose of education. She laments the “single-minded emphasis” on academic achievement as interpreted by test scores. Others have echoed this sentiment regarding the “trivialization of education” (Ibid, p, xiii), that an overemphasis on cognitive learning as the primary focus of modern education leaves students with a “deficit of emotional skills” (Boyd, McNeil, & Sullivan, 2006). As such, Noddings suggests that the cornerstone of education be the ideals of a caring and relational approach.

If polled, surely most teachers would answer in the affirmative with regard to concern or care for their students. Noddings is careful to distinguish between a type of care which is patriarchal, predetermined, controlling—a sort of “father knows best” approach to schooling and care which truly identifies and responds to individual student attributes and aspirations and challenges. To her, the “soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive the other” (Noddings, 2005, p. 16). Thus, this type of education involves the dismantling of the self-focus approach in order to fully contemplate the needs of the student.

More importantly, the caring assertion of any teacher is less important than the acknowledged care on behalf of the student. Without the feeling of care by the cared-for, there can be no “caring relation,” and the end result is an incomplete circuit of caring. Noddings (1992) cites a disheartening statistic from a Girl Scouts of America survey in which only one third of the students felt that their teachers care for them. This survey was administered in a pre-No Child Left Behind era, and one might imagine a re-administration in this “age of accountability” might yield an even lower figure. As class sizes have grown and assessments dominate teacher concerns, education has taken great strides towards sterilizing and standardizing the student experience. This trend towards dehumanization must be reversed. Regarding explicit and reductionist academic objectives tied to standards created by distant policy-makers, Noddings (2005) noted:

Teachers are not interchangeable; they cannot be regarded as delivery systems or treatments. Nor are children interchangeable. One impish grin in the middle of a lesson can change what follows...people are not reducible to methods... this form of reduction is called automation and it simply does not apply to interpersonal activities. (p. 8)

At minimum, teachers must be prepared for the relational aspects of teaching. As noted above, positive relationships have tremendous potential to improve schools and the lives of young people. Neglected or poorly-managed, unhealthy relationships can be utterly destructive.

In the above sections, we have discussed our definition of relational pedagogy. In this capacity, we have examined its ontological aspects, and discussed its connections to social constructivism, humanism, critical pedagogy, and the curriculum of care. In doing so, it is our hope to establish a broad understanding of relational pedagogy so that one may see how relational pedagogy can help combat the bullying epidemic. In the next sections we discuss the intersection of relational pedagogy, teacher preparation programs, and bullying within schools.

Relational Pedagogy, Teacher Preparation, and Bullying

Schools are the most powerful force in the normalization of students' lives (Jones, 2014). As such, teachers must "conceptualize how their pedagogy and their interactions with students can reinforce or dismantle the hegemonic practices that engender students' beliefs about difference, which impacts the rates of harassment and bullying practices in schools" (Crownover & Jones, 2016). Therefore, we posit relational pedagogy can dismantle bullying behaviors, and teacher preparation programs should utilize relational pedagogy when preparing future educators. In this capacity, we provide three considerations that teacher educators may want to consider.

Relationships over Academics

Relational pedagogy creates a classroom environment that positions the importance of relationships in the classroom. This type of pedagogy values student-student relationships and teacher-student relationships equally; in doing so, it values relationships over academics. In many cases, educational settings dehumanize children in that academics, classroom management, and test scores have removed the reality that teachers are teaching children not content areas. We argue that relational pedagogy engenders a classroom environment that is premised on respect and caring for all individuals in the classroom. In doing so, the primary focus of pedagogy shifts to the student as a human being, not the student as an academic competitor.

In our postulation, we do acknowledge the criticism that such restructuring of teacher preparation programs may be viewed as a negative movement away from academic instruction. However, our modern educational process places a greater importance on academic content, which sacrifices the humanity of learning. The mission of education is far grander. "If the school has one main goal, a goal that guides the establishment and priority of all others, it should be to promote the growth of students as healthy, competent, moral people. This is a huge task to

which all others are properly subordinated” (Noddings, 2005, p.10). The neglect of this charge in recent decades has been to the great detriment of students, the reputations of schools, and the teaching profession because it dehumanizes all involved.

Empathy

In addressing bullying practices, all school members must be empathetic. We posit relational pedagogy helps to create empathetic citizens because it is premised on human interactions. According to Schachter (2011), many teachers assume students have the ability to empathize with others. However, most students do not possess empathy toward others, and empathy is vital when attempting to eradicate bullying in schools (Jones & Augustine, 2015). Further, as Jones (2010) discovered, teachers and students who realize the personal pain that bullying causes an individual are incredibly powerful and necessary to create safe places for all students. Rock, Hammond, and Rasmussen (2002) discovered that when students are taught empathetic traits, bullying practices drop significantly. As such, the connection between relational pedagogy and empathy could impact how marginalized students are treated within educational settings.

Power

Bullying is premised on the notions of power and how power functions within society. Bullying cannot exist if power structures are dismantled. Because relational pedagogy disrupts the traditional power structures in schools, it can be an effective approach to eradicating bullying. Relational pedagogy dictates a shared relational commitment between all involved. In doing so, it equally values the contributions of each student and each teacher involved in the community. The main principle of relational pedagogy is the value of humanity; thus, in a classroom that is premised on relational pedagogy, no member of the classroom has more worth. In this manner, relational pedagogy disrupts the current system that values the highest grade, the best behaved, the quietest, the most popular, or any other category into which students are classified. Without classification, there are no comparisons; therefore, the power of binary oppositions is diminished and bullying practices will decrease. Specifically, if individuals do not see and construct their beliefs about others within a binary, then the power of difference no longer exists. Relational pedagogy asks individuals to care for and respect each other as individuals and not see classmates as “the other.” Classrooms characterized by a relational pedagogy will be necessarily student-centered.

Conclusion

In the current system, the homogenization of education fails to consider the unique human variables involved in education and this approach continues to dehumanize our students. The current educational system has become an institutional regime that strips the human qualities from students and teachers because the focus is removed from the individual and placed on standardized test scores, funding priorities, and other bureaucratic processes. In teacher education programs, we teach our pre-service teachers to maintain appropriate classroom management that involves a set of rules (designed arbitrarily in a vacuum without student input), a process for attaining a hall pass, a process to receive permission to use the restroom. Pre-service teachers are taught the importance of academic achievement and appropriate teacher evaluation systems. Grading has become a mass of scantrons. All of these actions remove the humanity from each student whom we teach. In this manner, the dehumanization of students becomes one of the types of hidden curriculum that P-12 students learn from the schooling process. As such, bullying becomes easier because the child being harassed is no longer viewed as a human, but rather is now seen differently because of the dehumanizing influence of schools that society and teacher preparation programs continue to perpetuate.

Therefore, we argue, teacher preparation programs should utilize relational pedagogy in their curriculum. This means a distinct emphasis on the social aspects of teaching, a stronger focus on psychology, and likely greater overlap between the types of courses taken by education students and those taken by counseling students. A reimagined, relational program of teacher education will also include field experiences to expose future educators to different populations of students. Experiences working with economically and socially diverse populations are vital to building empathy and understanding in future educators. More than mere, brief exposure to different schools and classrooms, student-teachers should work closely with students in structured, sustained, mentorship situations.

Relational pedagogy opens up the possibilities of educating the whole child in every aspect, not simply academic content. This approach holds that academic content should only be approached from a solid relational base—that when students feel empowered and safe, the pathway to academic success becomes possible and enjoyable. When such a base is not constructed, academic success is not only made more difficult, it becomes irrelevant. A relational approach to schooling can become the catalyst that causes students to restructure how they view differ-

ence and otherness because relational pedagogy insists on empathy, a requirement for combating bullying. Relational pedagogy can dismantle the hierarchical structures that dictate how beliefs about difference are formed and understood; thus, relational pedagogy can engender more accepting schools, and by extension, a more accepting society.

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