Student Voice and Bullying

A SoundOut Focus Paper by Adam Fletcher

ORIGINALLY WRITTEN FOR ASCD'S WHOLE CHILD BLOG.

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Introduction

With the renewed concern about bullying in schools across the country, educators, administrators, and students are looking for effective ways to address the challenges bullying presents.

My experience working in hundreds of K-12 schools across the U.S. and Canada over the last decade has shown me that adults in schools can capture the power of bullying. This brief highlights three conclusions from my experience.

- Bullying is a form of student voice.
- Bullying can be transformed into learning.
- Every adult in every school has the capacity and responsibility to address bullying.

Conclusions

- Bullying is a form of student voice.
- Bullying is a symptom, not a cause.
- It takes more than listening to students.
- Bullying can transform into learning.
- Every adult in every school has the capacity and responsibility to address bullying.

This brief examines the relationship between student voice and bullying, and proposes bold, deliberate steps educators, administrators, support staff, and parents can take to end the bullying crisis facing our schools.

Bullying is Student Voice

Roaring waves of hopeful obligation have rumbled into schools across the country, crashing learners into desk chairs for another year of education. Standing on the shores of learning adventures, many educators look out and see oceans of hope and possibilities, but

seasoned sailors know the sea is a friend that can turn enemy. Among the waves are storms and shipwrecks, and the lull may be the calm before the storm. However, rather than ending the journey before it begins, classroom ships venture onto the high seas of learning, knowing that while there are perils ahead there are great rewards, too. Bullying is one of those perils. Student voice is a beacon in the water that can help educators see what is coming.

After working with hundreds of K–12 schools across the United States and Canada over the last 10 years, I have come to define student voice as any expression learners make about education, schools, or learning, including their ideas, wisdom, and actions. Student voice addresses learning, teaching, and leadership in schools every day. Central to any conversation about student voice and bullying, I have found student voice comes in two primary forms in schools:

- **Convenient Student Voice** does what adults want, when we want it, how we want it, and in ways we want it to. Examples of this form of student voice include the school newspaper and student government, voting on classroom rules, and completing teacher evaluation forms.
- **Inconvenient Student Voice does** not do want adults want. This comes from the student whose graffiti declares "School SUX!" on the bathroom wall, the kids swapping test answers via text messages, and the student protest outside the cafeteria.

> "Ethically responsible educators are obligated to go beyond simply name-calling students who perpetuate bullying."

It is that second form of student voice that shows how bullying affects learning as it reveals bullying to be a form of repressed expression. That expression is student voice- albeit, one of the most perverse forms, but student voice all the same. Rather than passively waving red flags on the sidelines of the classroom, bullying paradoxically challenges educators by actively screaming for attention and smoldering quietly in the recesses of the learning environment.

Ethically responsible educators are obligated to go beyond simply name-calling students who perpetuate bullying. They must move to a higher plane by going deeper into the heart of bullying. The acts of bullying, whether psychological, physical, emotional, or social, are demands for acknowledgment. That is the place where identifying bullying as student voice becomes essential.

Framing bullying as a type of student voice can allow schools to address the problem in a more effective way by showing the roots of bullying. This allows educators to redirect the energy and emotion of perpetuators towards learning, teaching, and leadership in schools. This requires schools to reposition students from being the problem to becoming the solution. Framing bullying as student voice also shows how it affects both students and adults in schools and clearly shows it's affect on learning. By providing opportunities for students to share their ideas, wisdom, and actions to improve their educational experiences, educators can redirect and transform inconvenient student voice into a learning device, thereby making it convenient student voice.

We Must Accept Responsibility

Research continuously shows us that bullying has its roots in adult behavior: Children and youth replicate the actions and words they see and hear in their environments. If not parents, then teachers; if not teachers, then television—somewhere, somehow, young people learn they can use intimidation to get other people to do things. Despite the temptation to say otherwise, not just "bad" adults perpetuate bullying. Almost every single one of us has relied on intimidation to get a student to do something, and that behavior is at the heart of bullying.

Adults have routinely disrespected students in schools for years. Treated as less than adults, teachers rarely take the experiences, opinions, ideas, and actions of young people seriously. These expressions constitute student voice, and that explains why student voice is rarely included in planning, teaching, evaluating, or decision making throughout schools. Sure, it is relatively easy for adults to hand over school dances, classroom fundraisers, and other student-focused activities to young people, but when it comes to matters of curriculum making, school improvement, or teaching hiring and firing, students are not seen as having valid roles as partners in schools. Excluding students from the decisions that affect them most teaches them they are of lesser value than adults are; this awareness, however unconscious, allows them to

accept and perpetuate their sense of not being valued. That allows them to both accept and perpetuate bullying.

But just as bullying by students does not always take wide, broad gestures to make itself felt, neither does this discrimination of students by adults. Instead, it is felt in everyday comments such as:

"You're so smart for fifteen!"
"When are you going to grow up?"
"As long as you are in my classroom, you'll do what I tell you!"
"You're being childish."

It is the combination of both systematic exclusion and cultural discrimination that forms a straight line from the desire to stop bullying and the necessity of engaging student voice throughout education.

Working across the United States and Canada over the last 10 years to promote student voice, I have found that in order to defeat bullying we must focus on transforming relationships between students and adults in schools. Students who bully rely on their peers to passively receive whatever treatment they are dishing out. Adults in schools have done the same thing for too long, relying on students to readily accept the treatment they dole out every day. By positively changing the way every adult treats every student in schools, we will change the way students treat each other. We know that students must be empowered to combat bullying, and by exposing the role adult treatment has in perpetuating bullying, we can see what is next in schools: we need student/adult partnerships.

These powerful relationships actively stop the treatment of students as passive recipients of adults' decisions about learning, teaching, or leadership in schools. They do not seek to treat students as equals to adults, either. Instead, they build equitable relationships between students and adults by acknowledging the appropriate boundaries and evolving capacities of students while providing them with meaningful opportunities to become involved as partners throughout schools. Student/adult partnerships engage

students as partners, and this type of relationship is the cure to bullying.

Student/adult partnerships are for every student. In countless cases across the country, research shows that these relationships transform the cultures of every grade level and every skill set, every cultural background and every resource level. All adults in all schools must see their personal responsibility for fostering student/adult partnerships, not only for the purposes of defeating bullying or engaging student voice, but for the future of education and democracy, as well.

Bullying is a Symptom

Bullying is a symptom, not a source. Adults often address student voice as a singular phenomenon. We see it as something that stands out or is exceptional because it confirms what we think or otherwise is acceptable to us, either positively or negatively. This causes us to accept one person as representing all students, positively or negatively, leaving our worst suspicions confirmed when something bad happens, or lifting our greatest hope when something good happens.

However, my research and work to stop bullying in schools has taught me that it is important to understand that bullying is not only an expression of a single student voice. Each incidence of bullying is a symptom of an entire system and culture. Students who express themselves through bullying are reflecting a larger education system and broader cultural experience that allows and encourages them to express themselves that way. Their homes, neighborhoods, towns and cities, and nation encourages them to behave in desperate ways in order to get the attention they need. Bullying is an act of desperation on the part of the bully.

Charges to "help kids affected by bullying" are merely band-aid approaches to dealing with issues that reach far beyond the victim/perpetuator model. Instead, we must create opportunities for engaging young people throughout the entirety of their educational experiences. This includes learning experiences in communities and throughout social structures. Infusing emotional, social, cultural, and service-oriented learning throughout schools is a step toward the larger transformation that must happen.

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The symptom of symptom has to do with a larger crisis of violence that has infiltrated humanity. We must create nonviolent learning, teaching, and leadership opportunities for students throughout society that engage student voice in powerful, positive, and sustainable ways.

Starting the starting point, though, is within each of us. Following are concrete steps any adult in schools can take to engage student voice.

It Is Not Enough to Listen

Listening to student voice is not enough. Adults working to stop bullying in schools have learned that it is important to engage students as self-advocates and peer teachers, behavior monitors and student body cheerleaders. As schools become more informed, they effectively teach more students who bully to challenge bullying themselves, working with their peers to create safe and supportive learning environments. However, after more than 15 years of national interest in bullying, many schools are not effectively addressing the problem. This paper proposes that bullying is a form of student voice, and suggests student/adult partnerships are essential in challenging bullying. However, student voice is not enough.

Most people, young and old, value action. From our hunter/gatherer roots to present, there is often nothing more important to us than getting things done. Somewhere along the way, though, society decided that the loudest or most eloquent person in the group be given a place to talk separate from everyone else. From Socrates to Abraham Lincoln we have created pedestals and mantles upon which we place these individuals, and we call that place "leadership." Many schools perpetuate that idea.

The problem with many schools' conceptions of student voice is that it is automatically associated with this traditional student leadership model. Nurtured to become adult leaders, many typical student leaders perpetuate a misconception that student voice is only for certain students. Occasionally, well-meaning educators will try to engage non-traditional student leaders in traditional student leadership activities. When those experiences do not work out, educators feel justified shrugging their shoulders and simply give-up on non-traditional student leaders. However, this very reality, coupled with our hunter/gatherer roots, shows us exactly why student voice is not enough: Non-traditional student leaders do not sit passively and wait for their turn to speak up. Instead, they take action, whether it works for adults or not.

Effective bullying prevention and intervention requires direct action. It is important that everyone working to stop bullying see student voice as a piece of that action, but not the whole pie. My experience working with schools across the country and research on student voice has shown me that there is a five-part process for meaningfully involving all partners.

Fletcher's Cycle of Engagement

Following is an examination of how my Cycle of Engagement can address bullying:

- **Listen to partners.** Teachers, parents, counselors, and other adults have a direct stake in the health and well-being of students in schools. However, the most important partner is often the least connected: connecting students as partners and hearing their voices, at par with other partners, is essential. Adults must hear students' experiences with bullying, their ideas about resolving bullying, and their wisdom about creating safe and supportive schools, and their beliefs about learning, teaching, and leadership in general. They are essential to effectively engaging not only students, but all other partners, as well. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote that educators must learn to "speak by listening"; bullying opens the door for adults to demonstrate to students that they are our priorities.

- **Validate perspectives.** The historical structures of schools require people in positions of authority to give permission to students, parents, and others who wish to help stop bullying. This does not always mean saying, "yes"; instead, it is important to sometimes say, "no" or "maybe," and always to ask more questions. Inquiry is acknowledgement,

and it builds relationships, and allows teachers, principals, and others to connect with partners across the board.

- **Authorize change.** Sometimes the straightest path to creating change is the one that looks wiggly. To authorize is to give people permission to tell their own stories, and partners want that permission. They need the education and the positions that will allow them to stop bullying.

- **Take action.** Not only students require action. With demanding modern schedules, parents and community members want to hear more than just words – they want to do something. However, one of the points of this Cycle is that action does not happen in a vacuum; instead, it has to have context. The other parts of this Cycle provide that framing.

> "Bullying requires more than student voice- it demands action."

- **Reflect on learning.** Reflection allows all partners to look back on what they have done, make meaning from it, and apply what they have learned to the next rotation of the Cycle. An easy framework for reflection is What, So What, Now What: What happened? So, what was the point of that, and Now what do we do with what we have learned?

Keep in mind that these different parts are a cycle though, so as they come around to completion we use our reflections on learning to re-inform our process of listening to partners.

Bullying requires more than student voice- it demands action. The Cycle of Engagement is one tool in the SoundOut Student Voice Toolbox that can engage educators, students, and others as partners in stopping bullying. Are you ready for something more?

Capture the Power of Bullying

Capturing the power of bullying suggests that we can redirect and reuse the negative energy of bullying for other purposes. Student voice always faces this challenge: Rather than being a negative force that challenges the success of learning, bullying, which is a form of student voice, can be used to improve schools.

The first step of the process of capturing the power of bullying is understanding our own personal roots with the problem. Either as the perpetrator, the recipient, or as an intervener, we all have a role. Following is part of my journey:

> When I was in elementary school, my family moved from my native Alberta, Canada, to Omaha, Nebraska. Being a low-income family in need of a cheap house, we moved to Omaha's north side, a predominately African American community of low-income and working class families. As a white kid from the country, I quickly learned that my corduroy pants and cowboy boots were not going to cut it in hallways where many kids wore parachute pants and Air Jordan shoes popular in my inner-city neighborhood. I also found out about bullying.

> It was a snowy day in the fifth grade when three boys I thought I was friends with brought me behind the school building during recess. Setting up a complex scheme, a group of kids surrounded us suddenly, and before I knew it I found myself face down in the snow and the crowd laughing. This example, and others, introduced me personally to bullying.

> Later, as a teenager, I volunteered to work with students in my old school and role modeled positive behavior. As an adult, I have worked in a variety of positions to engage "non-traditional student leaders," many of whom have expressed their voices through bullying. It is from this personal and professional place that I have learned the power of engaging student voice, and how student voice can defeat bullying.

Bullying is an expression of repressed student voice. My personal experience above shows two distinct ways student voice could have been engaged to defeat bullying:

- **Learn About Your Students' Diversity.** As a Canadian, I was different from my American peers, with a slight accent, different word spellings, and rural clothes. A teacher committed to engaging student voice could have used students' innate curiosity to build a lesson about global awareness.

- **Make Meaning of Daily Life.** With the pressing realities of "living without" imposed on many of my peers, there was solidarity of experience that our teachers did not address. Commitment to student voice allows educators to encourage students to identify their differences and similarities, reinforcing the democratic purpose of public schools.

In school after school, I have seen even more creative examples than what I imagined. I have trained elementary schools where students researched the climate of their building, identifying how and why students themselves think bullying happens. I coached middle school students who facilitate training for teachers focused on how to identify bullying and what they thought schools could do. I worked with high school students on student advisory boards that regularly help district and state education decision-makers learn about student perspectives on a variety of issues, including bullying.

Capturing the power of bullying requires an innate belief that *all* students, not just the nice or conveniently well-behaved ones, have the capacity to be more than we can imagine. Engaging student voice and fostering Meaningful Student Involvement throughout the learning environment and across the education system are keys to demonstrating that belief. The outcomes will be myriad; not least among them is the end of bullying, and a new day for all schools everywhere to celebrate.

Resources

CommonAction Consulting provides powerful professional development for educators and students to learn more about *Student Voice and Bullying*. For more information, email info@commonaction.org or call (360) 489-9680.

Visit the SoundOut website for examples and tools for engaging student voice at SoundOut.org.