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Setting the Scene

At an induction evening for new pupils, a parent in a same-sex relationship asked me if her son would be bullied when the other pupils discovered he had “two mums”. I was unable to give her any guarantee that her son would not fall victim to a bully. She was, naturally, disappointed and anxious. As you might fear, he was indeed later bullied and teased. “Well what does she expect?” said the parent of the alleged bully. “She’s brought it on her son.” It was not the reaction I was expecting, but it does illustrate the complexity of the issues surrounding bullying. In some minds at least, bullying appears to be justified, as evidenced by the parent whose daughter had been bullying another girl for taking her place in the netball team. “She’s been in the team since first year,” she argued in defence of her daughter, “and that girl’s just come to the school. My daughter’s been humiliated in front of all her friends.” Or nearer the truth, I thought to myself, perhaps it’s the mother who feels humiliated in front of the other mums.

I have been in teaching for more than twenty years, but I have to admit that, despite the good work taking place in most schools, a solution to bullying appears to be as distant now as it was in my own schooldays. A whole raft of pastoral strategies have come and gone but bullying remains stubbornly steadfast in our schools. It has adapted and evolved from the school playground to the virtual – but nonetheless real – world of social media. Once, there might have been some respite from the bully at the end of the school day. Now, the bully can reach right into the heart of every home. Nowhere is out of bounds, no one is beyond reach.

With global issues such as world poverty and child exploitation, it is often much easier to raise funds through charitable extravaganzas and to feel good about having done so, but to leave others to expose and eradicate the root causes of hunger, poverty and exploitation. I contribute. I recycle. What more can I do? In the same way, finding a comprehensive and lasting solution to bullying is exhausting and might take us where we would rather not go.

Bullying does not resound with the same terrible sense of urgency and desperation as alleviating world poverty or tackling climate change, but it is, nonetheless, of grave concern for all of us, rich or poor, developed or developing – no one is immune from its pervasive and destructive effects. As the American psychologist Erik Erikson (1902–1994) pointed out in a June 1988 interview with the *New York Times*, “Life doesn’t make any sense without interdependence. We need each other, and the sooner we learn that, the better for all of us.” Perhaps, on a simple relational level, a bully cannot yet see how they need the other person. They have no sense of what it means to be interdependent, to rely on others. Perhaps they have mistaken power and dominance for such things.

All too often in my teaching life I have dealt with bullying at what might be called the sharp end. On reflection it was, more often than not, merely an exercise in conflict resolution, dealing with the fall-out and after-effects of bullying. Seldom did I or my colleagues have sufficient curriculum time to address the root causes of a child’s behaviour which was invariably ingrained in them before they had even entered the school grounds.

What I hope to do here is to offer some insights and pastoral strategies and to explore the role of parents and carers in educating and developing in their children the necessary skills and strength of character to *resist* bullying and, more significantly, to *desist* from bullying. We might still fail to stop bullying, but failing is quite different from not trying.

Personal story...

I didn’t like Andy very much. He was a real hanger-on, couldn’t join in our games, looked different, was dead slow in everything and his silly smile irritated me. I said some pretty nasty things to him. One day, when I had made a very cruel joke about his weight, he burst into tears. He told me that he had been in a road accident in which he nearly died. Although he had suffered brain damage, his hat had saved his life and prevented much more serious injury. The brain damage was responsible for his weight and everything else.

I felt so guilty. No matter how many times I said sorry, it didn’t feel as though it was a big enough apology for my bullying. I’d never meant to hurt him: he was just such an easy target. I didn’t realise he was lonely and that was why he had hung around all the time. After that, I always made a point of talking to Andy and trying to be nice to him. I never ever bullied anybody else.

Andy taught me some really important lessons: not to be nasty and also to try to get to know people instead of judging by appearances. I will never forget my own cruelty and I am bitterly ashamed of it.

Mike, aged eighteen