

Waging War on Social Injustice Greg Wetterstrand

Is it possible to wage war on bullying? If we use words such as ‘waging war’, are we in fact becoming bullies by using language that involves violence? Can acts of bullying, social injustice, and stereotyping be ‘fought’?

The aim of this paper is to facilitate dialogue about social injustice in Canadian elementary schools and to explore the use of Educational drama to counter the impact acts of social injustice have on our children and communities. Identifying social injustice in Canada will occupy the first portion of this paper, followed by an examination of Educational drama as a strategy to help school aged children deal with the problems manifest by social injustice.

Is social injustice an issue in Canada? Canadians are confronted daily with media accounts of social injustice characterized as acts of discrimination, social rejection, prejudice, harassment, intimidation and bullying that appears in all strata of Canadian society and infests our homes, our communities, our schools and our places of work.

In the March 5, 2008 edition of the British Columbia newspaper *The Province*, reporter Clare Ogilvie describes an effort by Canadian teachers to try and stop retailers from selling the video game *Bullying: Scholarship Edition*, that reportedly exalts bullying. Ogilvie quotes Canadian Teacher Federation spokesperson Emily Noble who states, "The concern is that it [the video game] is glorifying violence, [that] it is glorifying bullying . . . It is a story about a young lad who goes to school and his way of dealing with situations is to bully others."

In a Canadian Press article (*ID 936814* – ‘Workplace bullying takes ‘huge toll’) published in the *Okanagan Sunday*, March 9, 2008, writer Lauren LaRose describes how workers “who are subjected to putdowns, continuous criticism or off-colour remarks while on the job” have been found to develop psychological and physical ailments directly related to their experiences at work. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University finds that in a national survey (2000), 33% of workers have reported abuse at work and subsequently developed anxiety, nervousness, depression, and sleep disorder distresses more severe than a comparison group of subjects who recently returned from a war zone in the Middle East.

The March 2008 edition of *University Affairs* (published by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada) publishes a similarly themed article. In a professional magazine that typically reports on issues related to the work of universities and its people, noting developments within academe, offering critical book reviews, insightful editorials and scholarly work, the headline “Anti-racism rally led by faculty draws huge crowd at Queen’s University” seems strangely foreign. In the article, writer Celia Russell reports on a demonstration by more than 700 university students, professors, administrators and staff who gather to rally against racism. The expression of concern by rally participants is in response to an incident where a faculty member is forced off a sidewalk and is taunted with racial slurs by four male students wearing college of Engineering jackets. Rally organizer David McDonald states, “Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident at Queen’s . . .” According to anti-racism activist Audrey Kobayashi, racism is an issue on every campus and indeed her words ring true

as 10 days after the rally graffiti insulting to blacks is found on the office door of the York University Black Students' Alliance and in a nearby bathroom.

Are these accounts of social injustice isolated instances where aberrant individuals depart from societal norms or is there a more endemic cycle of violence repeatedly surfacing in Canadian society?

For the past twenty years Statistics Canada researchers have examined instances of social injustice, in particular instances of bullying. Researchers polled children to discover the number of 'bullying events' experienced by Canadian children, both as victims and as bullies. It is estimated that within the last five years approximately half our Grade 1-3 children report that they have been bullied. Four out of ten Grade 4-6 children report instances of bullying. Perhaps even more worrisome, 30-40% of school aged children report that they have bullied others. According to the research of Statistics Canada and others (Craig, et al. 2000), bullying may occur every seven minutes across Canada, with teachers aware of a fraction of these occurrences. These findings are not the results of just one investigative endeavor as independent researchers Pepler, Craig, Yuile, & Connolly (2004) discovered that their research replicated the findings of Statistics Canada.

According to a World Health Organization (2001/2002) survey documenting reports of bullying and victimization by school-aged children, Canada ranks a dismal 26th out of 35 countries reporting bullying and victimization. Although Canadians take pride in our public and collective belief that diversity and community building is highly valued, it appears that our society is far from being accepting or being socially inclusive.

The realization emerging from research on bullying is bleak. It is not unreasonable to venture that the lessons learned in bullying, the lessons of power and aggression, often arise in other relationships as sexual harassment, dating aggression, workplace harassment, marital abuse, child abuse, and elder abuse. Some researchers tentatively posit that while there is not a clear cause-effect relationship, it is estimated that bullying may be a significant factor in childhood suicide in Canada.

According to the National Anti-Racism Council of Canada website, 60% of Canada's ethnic minorities report discrimination from the period September 2001-September 2003, while 80% of respondents know some one who has been discriminated against. It seems that even though the federal Canadian government announced its policy of multiculturalism in 1971; and enacted Bill C-93 in 1988, making the Canadian Multiculturalism Act the first formal legislative vehicle for Canada's multicultural policy, not all Canadians seem willing to embrace difference.

After investigating the impact of multiculturalism in Canada, Joshee (2004) writes, "the evidence suggests that while there is support for the principle of multiculturalism, this support exists alongside assimilationist and racist attitudes" (p. 110).

Bahdi, (2003) suggests that since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 Canadians have legalized racism by implementing racial profiling practices and that this legal form of discrimination operates

on the assumption that one's behaviour is primarily dictated by race. The assumption goes further to align good behaviour with certain (good) races and bad behaviour with other (bad) races. According to Bahdi racial profiling is essentially about discrimination – which results in selective treatment, not on the basis of investigated evidence, but simply on the basis of prejudice.

According to a 2003 Ipsos-Reid survey commissioned by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada and the Globe and Mail found on the Government of Canada multiculturalism website, (http://www.pch.gc.ca/multi/plan_action_plan/overview_vue_e.cfm), 74% of survey respondents express the view that there is still considerable racism in Canada. Other research, including the Ethnic Diversity Survey and Statistics Canada census data, identifies a variety of concerns: 36% of visible minorities feel they have experienced discrimination and unfair treatment because of ethno-cultural characteristics; nearly 50% of Blacks report discrimination or unfair treatment; 33% of South Asian and Chinese respondents report discrimination or unfair treatment. According to a 2003 Ekos survey, 46% of Aboriginal people living off reserve lands report being a victim of racism or discrimination at least once over the previous two years. Researchers with Ipsos-Reid (2002) suggest that more than six-out-of-ten Canadians (61%) think that racism separates Aboriginal peoples from the rest of society; and roughly the same proportion (59%) felt that Aboriginal peoples are discriminated against by other Canadians.

If one is reasonably open to our daily news media, if one takes time to speak with persons of color, or interact with any individual who is 'different', it is clearly evident that acts of social injustice as evidenced by discrimination, social rejection, prejudice, harassment, intimidation and bullying are part of daily life for many Canadians. Unfortunately our children are not impervious to these realities as our schools reflect the broader society.

What does social injustice 'look' like in Canadian elementary schools?

In a recent article (January 2008), researchers Peck, Sears and Donaldson (2008) reveal some startling realities about some Maritime youngsters. According to their findings the researchers discovered that grade 7 students in New Brunswick have very little knowledge about or experience with ethnic diversity. What knowledge the students did have was superficial at best and non-existent at worst.

Peck, Sears, and Donaldson (2008) discovered that the majority of students' conceptions of ethnic diversity were incorrect, inaccurate or naïve. In some cases students' responses to their questions reflected hostile tendencies. Some students describe difference as weird or people of various cultural groups as criminals or spousal abusers. When the researchers asked about clothing or head wear of ethnic groups, the responding students were judgmental and judged ethnic clothing in a negative, hostile manner. They said things like:

. . . his head could have been, when he was born, it could have been deformed and he might want to have it covered. . . . Like, he could have been deformed at birth or something . . . it could be a bad haircut . . .

When asked what one student knew about "Indians" (the word she used to correct the interviewer's use of the term Aboriginals) she replied, "*They wear feathers.*" When pressed, she could not add anything to that description.

Peck, Sears, and Donaldson (2008) were struck by the degree of hostility to diversity evident in some replies. In response to a picture of an Aboriginal Medicine Pouch (meant to carry ceremonial tobacco), one student stated that it was probable that First Nations students would want not only to smoke the tobacco at school but were likely also to take drugs. When asked if all First Nations people did drugs, the student replied, "*Most of them*" and went on to explain, "*we have a few in our neighbourhood and I saw them down there doing drugs. Mostly every weekend they have a big drug party.*" In a similar vein, another student said of people who wear turbans, "*sometimes they hit their wives in the country they are from. . . .*"

What is alarming, say the researchers, is that the reality of difference seemed to spawn negative emotions and confrontational sentiments. For example, students who thought that people who were different, were bad or depraved. Further, these students were found to have increased levels of hostility to people who were different. Peck, Sears, and Donaldson (2008) write, "*we were struck by the degree of hostility to diversity evident in some participants' responses.*"

Peck, Sears, and Donaldson (2008) are careful about applying their findings to a broader population. The authors make no claims that the results of their research can be generalized to other populations. Nevertheless, the findings are consistent with other work on children's ideas about diversity in Canada, as well as with work on prior knowledge that demonstrates that children's conceptions of social ideas and concepts are often incomplete and disconnected (Brophy & Alleman, 2002; Brophy, Alleman, & O'Mahony, 2003).

In a project similar to the research conducted by Peck, Sears, and Donaldson (2008), Varma (2000) found that grade 5 students in New Brunswick describe a typical Canadian as being purely white. Furthermore, white Canadians have positive attributes, while non-white Canadians are described in a derogatory fashion.

It is startling how our children replicate the same views as the wider society and how easily injustice seems to appear in the hearts and minds of our children. Although education aims at nurturing respect for difference and helping the young to develop a respectful and inclusive society, Hughes and Sears (1996) reach a different conclusion. After completing a national study of citizenship education Hughes and Sears conclude that, "*Although evidence from the official curricula suggests that conceptions of citizenship education in Canada may constitute leading-edge practice, we suspect that the actual practice of citizenship education in the nation's classrooms remains closer to the trailing edge*" (p. 138).

It is evident that children beliefs and behaviors are similar to, and represents a connection with the broader Canadian society. There are some who believe that bullying is nothing more than a right of passage – there are some who believe that all Canadians should be white, that all citizens should adhere to the same beliefs, that difference is dangerous. These people are in the minority. The overwhelming majority of Canadians see differences among its people not as a deficit but as an asset. For the majority of Canadians the diversity of its peoples is something to

be embraced and that discrimination, social rejection/ostracism, injustice and prejudice and their offspring of stereotyping, intimidation, harassment, and bullying are to be confronted, overcome and eradicated. Nevertheless, these vile offspring (stereotyping, intimidation, harassment and bullying) continue to flourish in our elementary schools and keep on edging evermore relentlessly into the minds and hearts of our children. What can be done to address these issues?

The British Columbia Ministry of Education is trying to address issues of social injustice through the introduction of a new curriculum initiative. In September 2008 the Health and Career Education curriculum will be officially implemented and will, in part, set out to address issues of social injustice. Among the wide ranging learning outcomes identified in the new curriculum are: goal-setting, decision-making, personal attributes, work habits, transferring skills from home to work to recreation, work/occupations/careers, healthy living (physical/emotional), emotional well-being, healthy living, nutrition, puberty, sexuality, reproduction, healthy relationships, friendships, bullying, stereotyping, discrimination, safety and injury prevention, and substance misuse/prevention. As is evident, bullying, stereotyping and discrimination are part of the new curriculum and indeed serve as separate 'units' of study. The course of study aims to help learners develop the intellectual, psychological, and emotional structures to deal with issues of injustice as enacted through instances of discrimination, bullying, social rejection/ostracism or prejudice.

The curriculum document offers teachers guidance and suggestions for implementation. A section of the document explains in some detail how the teacher can realize cognitive domain learning outcomes. However, it provides very little information about teaching/learning in the affective domain and it is this domain where students most readily begin to understand issues of social injustice.

In the curriculum document one learns that the cognitive domain deals with the recall of content or recognition of knowledge. The cognitive domain, it is explained, can be further divided into three cognitive levels: knowledge, understanding and application, and higher mental processes. Knowledge includes those behaviours that emphasize the recognition or recall of ideas, material, or phenomena. Understanding and application represents a comprehension of the literal message contained in a communication, and the ability to apply an appropriate theory, principle, idea, or method to a new situation. Higher mental processes include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The higher mental processes level subsumes both the knowledge and the understanding and application levels.

Over the course of the curriculum (K-7) students:

- are helped to understand what it means to be a good friend;
- come to recognize both positive and negative behaviors and how they influence friendships and cause 'injustice';
- are taught to recognize positive and negative language and behaviors and learn to communicate effectively to build relationships;
- learn to develop strategies for dealing with interpersonal conflict;
- develop the ability to describe the nature and consequences of various forms of bullying behaviour (physical, verbal, psychological, emotional, social, cyber);

- are helped to recognize and understand the harmful effects of stereotyping, discrimination, gossip and disrespectful language;
- are provided opportunities to recognize, define and understand peer pressure.

These are laudable goals, but the curriculum lacks an instructional plan that goes beyond teaching in the cognitive realm. The teacher is invited to transmit knowledge to the learner. The teacher talks and the students listen; after some time the students are asked to regurgitate what has been presented by writing a story, drawing a picture, completing a work sheet or finishing a test. On occasion the teacher and students might engage in discussion, small group work or role-play. By designing learning in this way, much of what the students gain is in the form of abstractions; knowledge they own but seldom get the chance to use.

Educators need to be cautious when engaging children in a consideration of abstract virtues, for instruction will be meaningless if it is unrelated to the child's experience. Using direct instruction, especially transmission, lends itself to "preaching" rather than action and may easily degenerate into a series of formal lessons. In order to understand complex and abstract issues like those we typically find surrounding issues of injustice, children benefit most productively from a mix of intellect and experience. Children need combined opportunities to talk about, think about issues, but also opportunities for experience. For example, Smiley & Huttenlocher (1989) demonstrate that significant correlations can be found between children's understanding of what they call 'emotion-understanding tasks' (we would call them disputes, fights, disagreements) when they combine intellect (verbal interactions) and experience (role-play and reflection). These correlations were also demonstrated through understanding of conflict with family members (Slomkowski & Dunn, 1992), communicative competence (Manstead & Edwards, 1992), shared pretend play (Youngblade & Dunn, 1995), and classroom interactions with peers (Denham, Zoller, & Couchod, 1994).

Dunn and Hughes (1998) report that children as young as 4 years are able to give coherent, complex and plausible accounts of the causes of not only their own emotions, but also their mothers' and friends' emotions when the 4-year olds were able to 're-play' (role-play or dramatize) their interactions. Levine (1995) demonstrates similar results in a study with 5 and 6-year olds. There is clear evidence that children can understand issues of injustice particularly if part of the learning experience involves experiential learning, but can children understand the injustice of bullying?

Madsen (1996) examined age trends in the perception and understanding of bullying, asking participants aged 5 years to adulthood, '*What do you think bullying means?*' Madsen found that very young children understand bullying. Smith and Levan (1995) investigated children's perceptions of bullying at 6–7 years and found that children at this age have a clear understanding of bullying and develop complex definitions for what constitutes bullying. Smith, et al. (2002) report that younger children (aged 8 years) develop distinctive definitions for bullying and found that younger definitions differ from older children (aged 14 years) in their understanding of terms such as bullying.

When teachers engage children in learning contexts where injustice is the topic, the following principles should guide the teacher when carrying out instruction:

- there should be ample opportunity for the discussion of problems in order to clarify situations and develop an understanding of the principles of right and wrong;
- care should be taken that each child does his/her own reasoning and has the opportunity to make his/her own decision;
- wherever possible, activities should be undertaken with a view of habituating (act out) good conduct;
- self-expression should be encouraged and pupil initiative utilized to the utmost;
- the emphasis should be on doing rather than being good.

In order to help young learners deal with complex issues such as injustice, rather than employ lectures, demonstrations, audio-visual presentations, or programmed instruction, children should be offered opportunities for active discovery learning environments where they may explore, manipulate, experiment with, question, and search out answers for themselves – activity is essential. Learning is much more meaningful if the child is allowed to experiment on his/her own rather than listening to a teacher's lecture. The teacher should present students with materials, situations and occasions that allow them to discover new learning. This is where educational drama is most valuable.

What is educational drama? Educational drama is an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered form of drama where participants are guided to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experiences. Educational drama is a cooperative, inquiry-centered, non-prescriptive process of learning. In educational drama the group improvises action and dialogue appropriate to the content that is being explored, using the elements of drama to give form and meaning to the experience. In educational drama the primary purpose is to facilitate learning for the participants rather than to train actors for the stage. When children engage in educational drama they do not follow a script, for if they did they would be following another's vision or understanding, it would be similar to learning via direct instruction. Conversely, in educational drama participants create the dialogue, the characters, the plot and most importantly, the learning that the 'characters' experience as a result of being in the created scenario. Participation in educational drama has the potential to develop problem-solving skills, encourages question and debate, and helps to clarify values and attitudes. The value for the child when participating in educational drama lies in the attempt to put oneself into a different situation or to identify with a person other than oneself. The ability to do this successfully and sincerely leads to a better understanding of the topic at hand.

Learning in educational drama is notably different from learning in a typical classroom. In a traditional instructional event the teacher talks and transmits knowledge to the learner who passively receives the knowledge. As the knowledge is received from the teacher, the student intellectually or cognitively places that 'data' in his or her own knowledge structures. As the data is sent the receiver must attend to the aural nature of the data and simultaneously process what is being sent and translate it into terms, which fit with the prior knowledge. Where the information is completely new, new scaffolding or cognitive structures are created. The difficulty with this approach is that the data received by the learner is in an abstract form, which makes understanding a challenge, especially so with young learners. In contrast, when drama is the learning medium, the learner is provided with the opportunity to actually create the context – the background, from which the content gains its meaning. For example if the

teacher talks about hate and does so using a direct instructional, transmission mode of teaching, the content, the ‘data’ is presented in an abstract form. The learner must receive, translate and interpret the data. Simultaneously the learner creates a picture in his or her head wherein the data would most logically fit. In drama that ‘mind picture’ is created in real time and in real space – the abstract nature of the data is given a concrete form. For younger learners, having the concrete picture lived out, in real time, with the student in the middle, provides the means by which meaning can more readily assigned. The learner can ‘see’ hate lived out, can see where it came from, how it might be ‘packaged’ and can be assisted in creating his or her own understanding. Moreover, educational drama can be replayed as many times as is needed, changing as many variables as required, in order to support understanding.

As well as providing learners with a concrete and experienced context, learners gain a much stronger sense of ownership over the learning through a drama medium. Rather than receive, what may be characterized as another’s knowledge, in educational drama the student is the ‘creator’ of the knowledge and thus feels that he or she ‘owns’ the knowledge. Dramatic play permits children to fit the reality of the world into their own interests and knowledge.

In the following example, a drama plan or ‘lesson’ is provided to demonstrate how a teacher might help learners create their own understanding of the social injustice of bullying.

When the teacher sets out to explore issues of social injustice through educational drama s/he may use role-play, improvisation, mime, tableau, puppets, dance, choral theatre, readers theatre, or video production.

Step One The instructor begins with the following elements in place. The teacher has openly communicated with parents, guardians, staff members and school administration that a drama unit on bullying is to take place and all necessary permissions have been obtained.

Step Two The teacher creates an environment where students’ ideas and perspectives are respected. The teacher establishes an atmosphere where students feel they can offer ideas, where respect is established and where a general sense of community is created.

Step Three The teacher creates both an interest and a context from which understanding might take root. Creating interest may take many forms and are dependent on personal preference and class dynamics, but may include a class discussion, viewing a collage of relevant pictures, watching a video or a drama produced by other students.

Step Four A clear, working definition of bullying is created. While definitions differ, it would be helpful to develop an understanding that bullying happens when someone or a group, has a desire to hurt another person and intentionally hurts another person. As the definition becomes more complex the learners understand that bullying takes on many different forms. Bullying can be overt or covert. Bullying involves a power imbalance, where aggression towards another is repeated and where the bully enjoys seeing someone else victimized.

Step Five Once a general definition or understanding is formed the teacher should involve the students in documenting the kinds of behaviors that a bully might use during an act of bullying.

The teacher can lead the class in a brainstorm session to list the kinds of behaviors that might constitute bullying. For example, hitting, tripping, or pushing are characteristic of physical bullying and represent easy ways to understand what a bully does. Physical characteristics are easy for children to ‘act out’.

Step Six With care for the safety of all and with effective behavior management plans in effect the group may be led through basic re-enactments of hitting, tripping, or pushing. *Please note that the motivation to injure or to humiliate represent different kinds of bullying tactics and represent more complex insights. At this early stage these motivations do not need to be examined, but these are mention so that it is possible to see how bullying may be explored to significantly greater depth if needed. As a group or with a demonstrator, children practice hitting, but the children do not hit one another. The children simply practice hitting an invisible foe. Care is taken to ensure no one hits another.

Step Seven When the children have a ‘sense’ of the mechanics involved in hitting, they can move to partner work. None of this is undertaken without a clear statement of behavior, what is acceptable, what is unacceptable and the teacher needs to be in control. The hitting is never done actively, but is done in tableau form – freeze frame action.

Step Eight Once students have a ‘sense’ of the actions involved in bullying, a story is introduced with beginning, middle and end. As the students act-discuss-act-discuss, the teacher brings the children to a gradual understanding of the ‘story’ that accompanies not only this small drama, but accompanies all human action. Children begin to see ‘the story’ behind all actions. The teacher’s goal is to move to the development of a constructed story, where the children create a scenario from which a ‘hitting’ incident might occur.

Step Nine In pairs or small groups the children re-play their stories using tableau.

Step Ten Through cycles of playing-talk-playing, the teacher can lead the children to an understanding where they can see ‘reasons’ behind the actions in stories.

Step Eleven Once understanding is established the teacher can expand the children’s insight by examining/re-enacting a range of bullying actions including tripping, pushing, name-calling, insults, verbal abuse, property damage as forms of direct bullying. Indirect bullying actions such as lying, spreading rumors, mimicking, playing nasty jokes, social exclusion or cyber-bullying can all be explored and examined using education drama.

As children become more proficient in their ability to shape a story they can use tableau, mime, role-play, puppets, readers theatre, choral theatre, video to demonstrate their understanding. When children have gained proficiency in these drama structures, the teacher can have the students ‘teach’ other classes by performing their own work.

Over a period of time the teacher can lead the students to explore:

- (1) Where bullying takes place
- (2) How bullying begins
- (3) How different ‘players’ react

- (4) How bullying incidents might be resolved
- (5) How to deal with bullying situations

The teacher can expand the instructional plan to include explorations of all manner of injustice actions including, but not limited to discrimination, social rejection/ostracism, prejudice, stereotyping, intimidation, and harassment.

The result is the educational drama affords the child the opportunity to sort out complex issues in a manner that is user friendly, delivered at a pace that fits learning styles, builds on the child's own experiential base, builds confidence and addresses issues of injustice.

Using educational drama is an excellent strategy for studying topics of social injustice, particularly when addressing personal and emotional issues. Educational drama provides opportunities for examining various points of view, experiencing new situations, allowing for the interaction of people and the sharing of information in a manner qualitatively different from normal classroom interactions.

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