How Democratic Practitioners Can Address School Bullying

An Imperative for Educational Leaders

CAROLINE R. PRYOR
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

There are various ideas about the root causes of bullying, such as the bully's prior victimization or perception of a student's position in a perceived popular peer group. Remediation suggestions include using various types of literature (e.g., biography, fiction, poetry) to help students gain interpersonal perspective from the lives of others. Some research notes that parental and community involvement in school problems can help change a culture of school bullying. Less discussed in the literature about bullying are calls to provide K–12 teachers *a deep structure* of the principles foundational to the ways in which we communicate cultural expectations for participation in American democratic society.

Studies of teacher beliefs indicate that knowledge of democratic ideals is a strong predictor of teacher integration of these ideals into their classroom practices (e.g., classroom management; Pryor, 2006). In this brief essay I posit that administrators as educational leaders are central to communicating the importance of teachers understanding the principles of a democratic society, and teaching the ideals of liberty, justice, and equal opportunity. However, in a practical sense—these well intentioned leaders appear to have abandoned advocating for the very real curricular space it takes to support *the act of teaching* about citizenship and social responsibility. Citing concerns such as the lack of affirmation that citizenship education can either produce good citizens, or in fact has any lasting effect on phenomena such as bullying, citizenship education remains marginalized in teachers' professional development (Davis, 2003). Others note that preparing teachers to teach about the principles of democracy is so potentially

contentious politically—that discussion of democratic ideals has disappeared from the content taught in initial teacher preparation (Pryor, 2006).

The Imperative of Teaching for Democratic Citizenship

Dewey (1910) urged teachers to view their role as central to students learning dispositional habits useful in evaluating how their behaviors might align with socially just values. Others more pointedly define democratic education as that which addresses a society's discussion of equality or a somewhat more nuanced perspective framed by constructions of individuality such as liberty and freedom. Suggestions that teachers should teach using democratic *practices* are long-held and popular. For example, in educational methods courses teachers often learn what constitutes a democracy so they can either develop activities such as teaching students to vote on classroom issues, or so they can teach about political outcomes such as adult voting rights (e.g., Parker, 1996). Critical examination of what might be contentious about the construct of a democratic society and the imperative to evaluate the roles and responsibilities of its citizenry is most typically avoided (Jenlink, 2009).

We are not unprincipled leaders. We continue to advocate that teacher preparation must include principles of democratic thought as a priority. For example, Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002) urge teachers to view student achievement as both an intellectual and moral endeavor suggesting that historical knowledge is composed of both the content selected (to teach) and the principled foundation that guides the underlying selection of this content. Where then, among the testing and accountably mandates, is the mandate for *a more powerful space* within the K–12 curriculum for teachers to help students examine their expected role as a citizen in a democracy?

Schools often outsource these responsibilities to consulting organizations that provide citizenship or character education programs. Ruth Marcus' 2010 essay noted one school's (failed) effort to use such a resource to direct students' learning about bullying; an effort she suggests must begin with an adult (teacher) who is familiar with the students. This familiarity, allows teachers to use their knowledge of students' lives to more fully engage students in discussions such as how to secure a (social) place for oneself. Teachers can craft discussions that lead students to understand that a single action (e.g., poking, shoving, or texting) can be intimidating. Others suggest that a (teacher-led) character education curriculum can address behavioral conflict and improve school climate.

Research supports the idea that student adoption of behaviors based on democratic beliefs (e.g., fairness) happens at the classroom and building level, as teachers use language central to understanding the importance of democratic citizenship in their students' daily lives. Parker (1996) writes that students " . . . learn about a democratic society in the place in which they live and work" (p. 89). Curricula are available to support the social skills students need to end victimization. At

minimum, educational leaders must provide for a *teacher-led* curriculum which situates acts, such as bullying, within a school community's imperative to teach the characteristics of democratic citizenry and social responsibility.

References

Davis, O. L. (2003). Does democracy in education still live? *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision, 19*(1), 1–4.

Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. New York: Heath.

Jenlink, P. M. (2009). Transforming the school into a democratically practiced place: Dewey's democracy as a spatial practice. In P. M. Jenlink (Ed.), *Dewey's democracy and education revisited,* (pp. 274–296). Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.

Marcus, R. (2010, April 9). Criminalization of bullying. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. St. Louis, MO: Lee Enterprises.

Parker, W. (1996). Curriculum for democracy. In R. Soder (Ed.), *Democracy, education and the school*s, (pp. 182–208). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Pryor, C. R. (2006). Preservice to inservice changes in beliefs: A study of intention to become a democratic practitioner. *Theory and Research in Social Education, 43*(1), 91–118.

Sergiovanni, T. J., & Starratt, R. J. (2002). *Supervision: A redefinition*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

About the Author

Caroline R. Pryor is an associate professor, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She earned her doctorate in secondary education and masters of arts in higher and adult education at Arizona State University. She earned the baccalaureate of arts in anthropology at California State University, and holds K–9 and community college teaching credentials. Dr. Pryor is a Wye Fellow of the Aspen Institute and Editor of *Learning for Democracy: An International Journal of Thought and Practice.* She has published numerous chapters and articles using two scales she developed, a Philosophy of Education Scale and Democratic Practice Attitude Scale. She is the project director of four National Endowment for the Humanities grants for training teachers in history. Her research focuses on citizenship education and student engagement. She may be reached via e-mail at: capryor@siue.edu