

Mythology of the Norm: Disrupting the Culture of Bullying in Schools



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The mythology of the “norm” has direct repercussions for schools, and its ideological reinforcement is the primary cause of bullying today. Though it is difficult to pinpoint an origin for “the norm,” the medical model and its systemic structural power is one powerful institution that perpetuates this mythology. The medical model has a biological orientation that focuses on the binary identifiers of sickness and mental health, which are considered as abnormal, unhealthy, or which require intervention or something in need of fixing. Any deviation from “health” or that which cannot be found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* is considered unhealthy and/or pathological.

Deviation from the norm may pathologize the individual who then must bear the weight of its consequences, which sometimes manifest in the form of a diagnosis, a pill, a hospital treatment, being bullied, internalizing negative self-constructs, or, even worse, *suicide/bullycide*. An acceptance of the myth of the norm generates oppressive and dichotomous beliefs such as normal/abnormal, superior/inferior, desirable/undesirable, and inclusion/exclusion. When it is legitimated by dominant social ideologies and laws, the norm gains more structural power to marginalize anyone who does not fit into the status quo. Unless interrupted and disrupted institutionally, this concept will continue to have power to provoke and reinforce bullying behavior in schools.

Through institutional practices or policy gaps that reproduce inequities, this mythologized norm represents desired behaviors, appearances, stances, and statuses. When left unchallenged, a social environment is created that enables bullying behavior and marginalizes any student who does not fit into

the norm. To challenge the norm might “marginalize” those who have benefited from it and who may, by default, lose the benefits they have gained or been granted. It is much easier for some to live in accordance with the norm—because of its power—than to find the courage to live a life outside of it with personal integrity.

The Norm and Its Relation to Bullying

Because of the social power of the norm, any deviation away from it might agitate social and relational aggression. When a person cannot be readily understood or identified, there may be a psychological need to minimize, hurt, or make the person disappear altogether. Bullies are attuned to these differences because of their own inadequacies, shortcomings, or personalized experiences. Perhaps we might see a decline in the beliefs that lead to bullying behavior if teachers and students alike were taught to understand the complexities of how the norm is enacted through different types of bullying. Drawing from the table in Figure 1, teachers can design lessons that help students (1) understand the ideology of the norm and its social power; (2) recognize and understand how the norm manifests in different classifications of bullying behavior; and (3) develop strategies to stop bullying at its core.

Bullying can also be understood as *microaggression*, a concept borrowed from the field of critical race theories that focuses on how people of color experience unconscious and conscious affronts throughout the course of daily interactions. Microaggressions are “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate

FIGURE 1. The Manifestations of Direct and Indirect Bullying through Verbal, Physical, Material, Relational, Hate-Motivated, and Cyberbullying Behavior

	Direct Bullying	Indirect Bullying
Verbal Bullying Using verbal threats to intentionally inflict social cruelty on someone	Threats, insults, teasing, taunting, name calling, snickering, laughing at someone out of cruelty	Rumors
Physical Bullying* Using physical force to intentionally inflict pain on another person	Hitting, kicking, pushing, stealing, sexual misconduct, killing someone	Physically moving away from someone as means to be hurtful
Material Bullying Taking away belongings to intentionally cause another person duress	Damage to belongings, extortion of money	Hiding belongings or pawning and playing “keep away”
Relational Bullying* Participating in behavior that intentionally positions the victim as the scapegoat	Back-stabbing, setting someone up to take blame, blackmail	Social exclusion, breaking confidences, manipulating friendships, micro-aggressions, looks and stare-downs, slander
Hate-Motivated Bullying Any manifestation of bullying that targets another because of race, national origin, ability, religion, sexual identity, gender expression, and physical or mental abilities	Hate-motivated bullying could include any aspect of the different types of bullying in the chart and in some cases can legally constitute a hate crime when taunting is about race, national origin, ability, religion, sexual identity, gender expression, and physical or mental abilities	Witnessing the hateful acts of others silently
Cyberbullying The intent is to inflict online social cruelty on victims by threatening, harming, humiliating, and engendering fear and helplessness in the victim through the use of electronic and communication technologies	Text messages, emails, social networking sites, mobile phones, chat rooms, blogs, IM, pictures, video clips, forwarding confidential emails or messages	Sending lewd or nude images to others (<i>sexting</i>), blogs

*Boys tend to engage in more physical bullying than girls, while girls tend to engage in more relational bullying than boys (Markow and Fein).

hostility, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue 3). The expression of microaggressions may invalidate the targeted persons and may suggest that they do not belong with the majority group. Targets in schools are often those students who are not part of the dominant ethnicity, whose gender expression is nonconforming, whose ability is perceived as lesser than, whose accent sounds different from others, whose size and/or weight doesn’t conform to the norms, who might be poor or working class, and/or whose sexual orientation is LGBTQ. Microaggressions, when not identified, can lead students to continuing bullying behavior.

How to Disrupt the Culture of Bullying in Schools

Tobin Siebers, in *Disability Theory*, explores how damaging the medical model has been to people who are disabled. He takes a counter-narrative approach through which to explore the perception of people with disabilities. He introduces the *social model*, which challenges the medical model and defines disability as “relative to the social and built environment, arguing that disabling environments produce disability in bodies and requires interventions at the level of social justice” (25). His view is that the *environments* that surround people are disabling; if the world were built for all people

equitably, there would be no disability, just people with conditions that might require extra support to navigate the world (see also Dunn). If people had a different view of disabilities altogether, to lose a limb, to lose one's eyesight, or even to lose some type of mental capacity would not be to relegate an individual to lesser or inferior status, nor would it feel like the end of the world. Siebers's social model can help us explore the ideology of the norm that is sustained and embodied in school today.

While it appears that little is being done to disrupt the norm from the top-down, exposing the damages of the norm through curriculum, classroom discussions, and social justice projects can shift the environment that sustains bullying. Taking a cue from Nancy Mack, who has guest edited this compelling and potentially life-saving issue of *English Journal*, perhaps future leaders in NCTE will devote an entire conference to bullying where educators at all levels can demonstrate what they are currently doing to disrupt bullying and generate a wish list of statements that can thrust an anti-bullying policy into law.

Our country, through our profession and the students we teach, will grow collectively stronger when we all become more educated about how social environments sustain bullying through acquiescence to the "norm." Even some of the most well-

intentioned people, including myself, may enact bullying in the form of microaggressions when not intended. Dedicating ourselves to understanding how bullying is perpetuated and even self-scrutinizing our own behaviors and beliefs must be more than an ideal; it must be a promise that we make as the moral custodians of our students' lives and futures. Ending bullying cannot be a pipedream or a wish; it must be foregrounded throughout all of our pedagogies. 

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