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The Blind Spot of Bullying Prevention

"Far from being a sign of intellectual inferiority, the capacity to err is crucial to human cognition . . . Thanks to error, we can revise our understanding of ourselves and amend our ideas about the world."

—Kathryn Schulz (2010, p. 5)

I once had a minor fender bender accident because I failed to adequately check my blind spot while driving my car. It was an accident that could have been easily avoided with a quick and simple glance backward. Why didn't I do this? I know that checking is important, and I usually do check, but there are times when I don't. For over forty years of driving, this lapse in the habit of *checking* caused no accidents. Ironically, it was this *success* at not having an accident that caused the accident. Now I always check and double-check the blind spot before changing lanes. I just wish I didn't have an accident to learn this lesson.

This anecdote serves as an analogy to the current state of affairs regarding bullying prevention in our schools. Most schools keep students safe every day. School staff, like competent and safe drivers, are conscientious and skillful in managing student behavior. Schools have policies and procedures for dealing with student misconduct and rule infractions. School staff are effective in implementing the rules and maintaining an orderly school environment. When a student acts violently toward self or others,

school staff feel shocked and *blindsided*, wondering why and how it hap-pened. When persistent and frequent bullying is revealed to be a major cause for that act, they say they were unaware of the extent of the bullying. If they were aware, they say that they didn't have enough evidence to do anything about it. They didn't know what they did wrong or what they could have done differently: everything was working as it should work.

Like competent drivers experiencing many accident free years, school staff become victims of their many years of success in providing a safe envi-ronment for students. Unlike a driver who knew about blind spots and forgot to check them, school staff don't know that there are blind spots: places where bullying flourishes beyond their detection. They think they see everything that they need to see to keep the school safe. For them, checking their blind spot was not a habit they forgot; it was a habit they never had nor thought they needed.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND REACTION

A school's highest basic priority is its responsibility to keep students safe. In the eyes of the public, any failure to meet this responsibility is unfor-giveable and weakens trust and respect for public education. Bullying in schools has been a prominent issue for many years now, so the public expects schools to be able to prevent and reduce it. The public can interpret any failure to keep students safe as a sign of indifference or incompetence, or both. To ensure that schools are safe places for students, more federal and state laws are enacted with mandates for addressing the problem of bullying and consequences for failing to do so.

These laws provide guidance and direction for schools to develop policies and regulations that define the problem and require specific actions for a school to take in addressing bullying. Laws, regulations, and policies are necessary and serve a useful purpose; however, they alone are not sufficient in effectively addressing the problem. Laws and policies do not keep students safe: people do.

THE MISSING PIECE

The people who work in schools care for students. They are skillful and competent in doing a difficult job. They do not want nor approve of bully-ing and would do whatever is necessary to reduce or prevent it. Parents and students do not want bullying in schools. If the school community feels like this, why does bullying persist to the degree that it does in schools?

The school community shares a collective sense of "we would, if we could, but we can't" when trying to answer that question. The blind spot, where bullying thrives undetected in schools, is the missing piece of

knowledge that school staff need to reduce and prevent bullying. They need to know the blind spot exists, where it is, and how it works. When they know this, they can check it and address the problem in an effective way. It is as simple or hard as that.

THE BLIND SPOT DESCRIBED

Although the blind spot is invisible, it can be described through the data that have been collected in schools. The blind spot is also a product of how schools traditionally function in lives of students and school staff.

Numbers Tell the Story

- Adults are aware of about *4 to 5 percent* of the bullying that occurs in schools, or *95 percent* of the bullying that occurs in schools goes undetected by school staff (Cohn & Canter, n.d.; Kazdin & Rotella, 2009).
- Adults think that they are aware of over 70 percent of the bullying that occurs in schools and that they intervene all the time (Olweus, 1993).
- Only 35 percent of students who are bullied tell an adult about it. This percentage decreases as students age (Petrosino, Guckenberg, DeVoe, & Hanson, 2010).
- About 60 percent of the students who witness bullying think that sometimes the bullied student deserves to be bullied. Many of the students who are bullied think they have brought it on themselves (Hoover & Oliver, 1996).
- Bullying *is* observed by over 85 percent of the students (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001).
- Twenty-seven percent of bullied students report that it happens in the classroom with the teacher present (Olweus, 1993).
- Many students who bully are well liked by others, including the staff. Staff can often not believe that these students bully other students (Rodkin, 2011).

Other Factors to Consider

- Students learn how to bully in those blind spots and become more skillful in not being seen or heard doing it by adults.
- Many acts of bullying are not against the typical school rules.
- The longer bullying goes unseen and unheard by school staff, the more frequent and prevalent it becomes. School staff can easily give tacit approval to bullying.
- School staff and students often don't know what bullying is; they confuse it with other inappropriate behaviors.
- Traditional consequences do not act as deterrents because students feel confident that they won't get caught (95 percent of the time they won't).

- The social rewards gained by students from bullying outweigh the potential consequences of getting caught.
- Peer pressure is such a strong force developmentally that students are emotionally driven to bully without thinking of the consequences involved.
- Bullying is a "crime" that is easy to commit; easy to deny; and hard to prove. If it is only seen as a crime, and a *criminal justice* approach is the *only* one used, adults will not do a good job in policing it.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE BLIND SPOT

Students and school staff share the same space and time, but they have extremely different experiences in that shared time and space. For students, bullying in schools is front and center, loud and clear. For school staff, bullying is unseen and unheard, not central to their experience, and a minor problem competing with many more pressing and prominent issues. The existence of these two separate experiences of school have consequences that only strengthen the existence and persistence of the blind spot:

- If students perceive adults as being out of touch with what happens in school, thereby, failing to keep them safe, then they will be less likely to trust those adults. Students can also interpret the adults' apparent obliviousness to bullying as a lack of caring.
- Students feel disconnected from their school if they think that most adults don't care about them.
- Student will not report bullying to people they don't trust. They will not trust adults who don't seem to care or are perceived to be ineffective in keeping them safe. They may also be afraid that they might get in trouble for reporting bullying.
- If students do not feel supported and empowered by school staff to intervene or report bullying, they will be more inclined to support bullying or be indifferent to it. They stay quiet because they are afraid of being a target of bullying themselves. They also lack the skills to handle bullying situations as bystanders.

THE UNDER/OVER BARRIER

This blind spot and its consequences create a barrier that keeps a school from taking effective action against bullying. I have termed this the *under/over barrier*:

> School staff tend to underestimate the amount and prevalence of bullying in schools and overestimate the frequency and success of their intervention efforts in addressing it.

This barrier creates an immunity against the changes needed to effectively prevent and reduce bullying. This immunity against change works for the following reasons:

- If staff don't see or hear the problem of bullying, it is hard for them to believe that bullying is a problem in their school. Tragic events happen in other schools. School staff will resist efforts to address a problem they don't think exists.
- School staff could be skeptical of programs or initiatives that come from laws, mandates, or high-level administration. They could be seen as only a reaction to a problem created in the media and designed to placate the public.
- If school staff think they are doing their best, and bullying persists, they could attribute the cause and solution to the problem to external factors, e.g., the failure of parents to teach their children not to bully.
- There are many other real problems that are seen and heard that also require time and energy.
- It is hard to admit to *not* seeing such a serious problem or to be wrong after years of feeling right.
- If administration mandates that a bullying prevention program be implemented, school staff can interpret such actions as an implicit criticism of their current efforts.
- School staff need sufficient autonomy and input into any initiative that will require their own time and effort and investment. Without a true commitment and investment from school staff, any plan or program will ultimately fail.

SCHOOL LEADERS' ROLE

Since so many of the issues related to the under/over barrier are about how staff perceive the problem, a school leader is in the best position to create the conditions for the staff to break through the barrier to change. These conditions require a high level of trust between administration and staff and a sense of shared leadership.

What school leaders can do about blind spots and the under/over barrier to effective responding to the problem of bullying is the following:

- Invest time in learning about the elusive and insidious nature of bullying. Lead staff in learning about blind spots.
- Act on the assumption that staff do want to prevent and reduce bullying. Attribute resistance to them not understanding the complexity of the problem and the blind spot.
- Acknowledge and accept how dependent school staff are on the *eyes and ears* of the students to get an accurate picture of how much bullying is happening. Help others learn this fact.
- Make trust and communication a priority in bullying prevention efforts. Students cannot be forced to trust—*adults must become trustworthy*.

- Welcome complaints of bullying. Thank those who complain for helping the school meet its responsibility.
- Reframe the problem of bullying so that any new efforts to address it are perceived as a continuation of the current efforts rather than a criticism of them.
- Make "being wrong" understandable given the complexity of the problem of bullying.

SUMMARY

- Bullying happens in the blind spots of adults. Most adults, however, don't know this and think that they have the problem of bullying under control.
- Bullying is not in the blind spot of students—it is loud and clear, front and center.
- School leaders must know and understand the elusive nature of bullying and how it thrives in blind spots.
- Adults in a school must become trustworthy to students. When students trust enough to share what they see and hear with adults in the school, the blind spot starts to fade, and bullying weakens it grip on a school environment.
- School leaders play the key role in connecting the student experience in school to the adult experience so that they can work together to make their school safe. They must facilitate the change of how bullying is understood and the approach to addressing it.
- School leaders are in the best position to reveal the blind spot to staff in a positive and safe context. They have the best knowledge of what conditions their staff need to build their knowledge and capacity to effectively address bullying.

ACTIVITIES TO ADDRESS THE BLIND SPOT PROBLEM WITH STAFF OR OTHER MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Staff might have difficulty accepting that they are not accurate in their perception of the problem of bullying. Merely telling staff that they are not seeing it all is not enough for them to change their beliefs about the problem of bullying in the school.

These activities can help staff to accept being wrong as something to be expected and an opportunity for adjusting their view of this problem. This adjustment is an important first step in addressing the problem of bullying more effectively. These activities will provide a soft landing for making this necessary adjustment in perceptions and actions.

ACTIVITY 1: LOOKING BUT NOT SEEING

Purpose

Have staff experience *blind spots* in a safe environment. *Show, not tell*.

In staff meetings, use a visual phenomenon that simulates the experience of looking at something without seeing it.

Content

Put the FedEx logo up on the screen.

Procedure

Ask your staff to find the arrow in the picture. Some will and some will not. They are all looking at the same thing, yet some see it and some don't.

(The arrow is between the uppercase *E* and lowercase *x* in the *Ex* part of the logo.)

Allow for discussion about why some can see it and some can't. What of the implications of this phenomenon in school?

ACTIVITY 2: THERE IS TOO MUCH TO SEE

Purpose

There are many things happening is a school besides bullying. There are many students interacting in many ways at rapid speeds. Adults in charge of supervising students have many things to observe besides bullying. Even with the best intentions and a determination to spot bullying, bullying can easily blend into the busy environment of a school.

Content

To illustrate this, use a film clip from the Marx Brothers' *A Night at the Opera* (Wood, 1935). The clip is available on YouTube at www.youtube .com/watch?v=l0xHIFtLzp0&feature=youtu.be.

There is a scene in Groucho's room on the ship. It is a very tiny space. Over the course of three minutes, a variety of people come knocking at his door, and he welcomes them in. Soon, there are twenty-five to thirty people, including plumbers, janitors, waiters, manicurists, as well as the other brothers, all jammed into the small room. They are all doing their jobs, so this is a chaotic scene that ends abruptly when someone opens the

door from the outside, and the entire mass of people literally pour out of the room.

This is obviously an exaggerated view of the busyness of an environment. To even exaggerate it more, I used the IMovie application to speed up the three minutes into less than thirty seconds and put a loud crowd noise as the background sound.

Procedure

When the scene is over, ask how many actions in that room would have been against the rules or how many actions could be considered as acts of bullying. It is almost impossible to answer.

This would be a good starting point to discuss what parts of the school are hard to monitor because of the number of students, the noise level, and degree of movement. Staff could be broken up into small groups with a recorder, reporter, facilitator, and timekeeper for the discussion. Each group would be asked to agree on that time and place and then list three to four descriptions of what is going on in that environment.

ACTIVITY 3: THERE IS TOO LITTLE TO SEE

Purpose

This activity explores how bullying happens under the radar and is often not against the rules. It illustrates how traditional disciplinary approaches often fail to sufficiently address the problem of bullying.

Content

Use a clip from the movie *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994), also available on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=nK ubwgJK8q8), to illustrate this point. It is the scene where the young Forrest Gump gets on the school bus for the first time. As he walks toward the back of the bus to find a seat, different students, some nonverbally and others verbally, indicate that he can't sit next to them. He is clearly being excluded, which is a type of bullying. Finally, a young girl welcomes him and invites him to sit.

This video clip can be used in various contexts. In this activity, it would illustrate the subtlety of bullying and how bullying is not against most typical rules. (This same clip could be used to show how discipline alone cannot manage bullying, and it can also be presented emphasizing the empathy shown by the little girl toward Forrest.)

Procedure

Following the clip, ask staff to discuss (break into small group and assign roles as in the previous activity) the following:

Why does the bus driver have a difficult time spotting bullying?

How would a parent of the one of the students excluding Forrest react if his or her child were disciplined for bullying him?

To whom did they pay more attention? To the students who did the excluding or the girl who welcomed him?

ACTIVITY 4: SOMETIMES YOU JUST CAN'T SEE AT ALL OR THE INVISIBLE GORILLA

Purpose

This activity allows staff to dramatically experience not seeing something blatant and obvious even when they are looking right at it.

Content

To experience this before using it with others, go to the www.invisible-gorilla.com website or YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGQmdoK_ZfY. It is also called "The Monkey Business Illusion." Initially, refer to it as "The Monkey Business Illusion" and avoid the *invisible gorilla* term until after the activity (Chabris & Simons, 2009; Simons, 2010).

Procedure

There is a brief video to watch that shows two teams of people passing a basketball. The directions to the audience are to count the number of times the white team passes the ball. (These directions are given as an introduction right on the video.)

SPOILER ALERT! Do not read until after you have viewed the video and followed its directions.

About halfway through the video as the basketball is being passed, someone in a gorilla suit walks through the circle where the two teams are passing the basketball. The gorilla even stops and pounds his chest and then walks out of the scene. When the video concludes, staff are asked to share the number of times the white team passed the ball. The viewers offer answers like fifteen, sixteen, or seventeen, and the correct answer is sixteen. After asking for the number of passes, the viewers are asked if they saw the gorilla. About half of the group typically sees the gorilla; the other half looks puzzled by that question: they did not see the gorilla.

Many find this hard to believe, so it is important to show the same video clip again and tell them not to count the passes. This time everyone sees the gorilla.

This is a vivid and dramatic example of how we miss so much that is right before us. If the gorilla is unseen, it is not surprising that bullying can easily fly under the radar, unseen and unheard.

Have staff sit in small groups and respond to the following:

What does the Monkey Business Illusion tell us about bullying in schools?

How did it feel to not see the gorilla? If you saw the gorilla, were you surprised that others did not see it? What are the implications of half the people seeing it and the other half not seeing it when applied to the school environment?

What can we do about overcoming the problem of not seeing even when looking?

OUTCOMES

1. Staff share a common learning experience and engage in the discussion that follows.

2. The activities are designed to stimulate thought and discussion. They illustrate the importance of thinking differently and sharing that thinking. This problem of perception applies to issues other than bullying, so allow for a wide-ranging discussion, should it develop.

3. The principal is established as a leader of learning rather than an imposer of policy or program.

4. Activities like these will play a role in changing the hearts and minds of staff just by stimulating thought and discussion. They can be an effective first step in building the knowledge and capacity for staff to commit to working on this problem.