

## Editorial: The Problem of Bullying

The front cover of this issue of *New Era in Education* is a nineteenth century engraving from Edouard Girardet, translated into English under the title “Rude Art”. A boy is drawing a crude caricature, eagerly watched by his friends; another boy is kicking him under the table to draw attention to the teacher, who has spotted what is going on and is scowling at the children, clearly about to intervene. So much is denoted in the artist’s representation; but what is really going on is left to our imagination. Are the boy and his friends engaged in making fun of a fellow pupil by their crude drawing? Is it the teacher who is being caricatured? Or is the boy simply doodling and the teacher about to vent his wrath? Do the expressions on the onlookers’ faces, or on that of the teacher enable us to tie down the meaning? The ambivalent nature of the situation being depicted – or, in today’s poststructuralist parlance, the polysemic quality of the picture – reminds us of the difficulty we have in ascertaining the truth when dealing with human interaction.

Making fun of other people is one of the ingredients in the complex concept of bullying. It is a strange euphemism, since the ‘fun’ can be excessively hurtful to its target. As Gavin Fairbairn reminds us in his article “Suicide and Bullying in Schools”, most of us have experienced some element of bullying, whether as participants, targets or observers, at some point in our lives. He discusses the dangers and whether children should be taught about them. The sort of bullying that can lead to such extreme measures is not exclusive to Europe or ‘Western’ culture. Pramila Kudva provides a graphic account of the systematic “ragging” that takes place in some Indian colleges. Masako Kamijo likewise describes similar bullying in Japan and suggests that its prevalence stems from traditional Japanese cultural values.

The empirical accounts they describe will be reflected in many people’s experience, but we all know that educational institutions should not be places of fear. Their work cannot be carried out successfully if students and, increasingly, staff go in fear of what they might expect from bullies’ behaviour. Helen Cowie has worked and published widely on the advantages of peer support schemes, and in her paper, she shows how peer support has been able to cut the incidence of bullying in schools which practise such schemes. Mildred Masheder, who has published several books for children and parents, aimed at overcoming and preventing bullying in schools, describes a seminal example of how a well-run school can obviate the problem.

Increasingly, however, bullying can be found in the staff room, with debilitating effects upon morale and efficiency. Malcolm Lewis shows how victims of workplace bullying are often targeted because of their professionalism and commitment to clients, which they continue to prioritise in spite of the stress they are forced to endure. His examples are drawn from research in the health service, but he makes clear how applicable the conclusions are for the teaching profession.

Despite a wealth of empirical data, very little work has been done to provide an adequate explanatory theory which fits the evidence. The article on the Burgher and the Villein attempts to step away from the dominant psychological paradigm and tackle the problem from an examination of interactions and power. In all the contributions to this issue, it is shown to be a mistaken approach to concentrate on individual personalities. In particular, the suggestion that the personality of the victim invites the bullying that he or she experiences needs to be recognised as the latter-day scholasticism which it clearly is. Hedwig Petrie reviews the arguments about the personality approach, in her article on the legal and ethical issues surrounding bullying in the workplace. She shows how there is a serious flaw in the tendency for complaints in courts and employment tribunals to be settled without a hearing.

Those who are experiencing bullying or whose children are being bullied at school need advice on how to handle the experience, and most of all they need to understand why it is taking place. As our book reviews indicate, there are very few good books on the subject. All the articles in this issue of *New Era in Education* have been chosen because they add to our understanding of bullying or the ways it can be tackled effectively. All share the view that the subject is worthy of serious impartial investigation.

Research which proves the obvious, that victims of bullying share certain traits as a result of being bullied, cannot be used teleologically to suggest that they had a prior disposition to be bullied. Such a *reductio ad absurdum* argument contrasts markedly with the work of the founders of psychology, whose theories were grounded in experience and experiment. An example of the writing of Carl Jung, a contributor to *New Era* in our early years, illustrates this in our “Last Word” column.

**Dave Hinton**