

The Blame Game or Sharing the Blame?: Hearing Stakeholders Talk about Each Other. A Critical Discourse Analysis on School Bullying

Isaac Karikari, Ph.D.¹ and James Brown, Ph.D.²

Introduction

Bullying impacts people in direct and indirect ways. However, people's experiences of bullying may differ (Frisén, Holmqvist & Oscarsson, 2008; Mooij, 2011; Thornberg, 2010) Therefore, to gain a balanced and comprehensive understanding, it is crucial to examine the views and perspectives of various stakeholders or persons who have experienced bullying (deLara, 2008; Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2006). It is important to take note of similarities and variations in how stakeholders relate their bullying experiences, and their analyses of the anatomy of bullying.

In regards to bullying in schools, several scholars (e.g. Fretwell, 2015; Frisén et al., 2008; Limper, 2000; Stauffer, Heath, Coyne, & Ferrin, 2012; Thornberg, 2010) suggest that people's perceptions of bullying and its related causes can be linked to their positions and roles in the school environment. Compared to students, educators and other stakeholders are known to often make different attributions for the occurrence of bullying (Harris & Hathorn, 2006; Mishna et al., 2006). Investigations of students' perspectives also reveal that students' views tend to differ based on their academic/grade level (Brown & Karikari, 2016; Mishna et al., 2006).

Furthermore, it is needful to examine how stakeholders represent themselves in relation to other stakeholders in bullying incidents. Representation is important because it can be used to modify roles or reorder the social relations between stakeholders (van Leeuwen, 2008). In relation to bullying and bullying prevention, the ways of representing stakeholders may result in cover-ups, apportioning blame, and the denial of responsibility for the occurrence or prevalence of bullying. For example, in bullying discourses, stakeholders can be *backgrounded* or *passivated* to minimize their roles or impact, *foregrounded* or *activated* to accentuate their roles or impact. Further, in examining the representation of social actors, many aspects of the interactions that occur among people can be made visible. One may sometimes find patterns of exclusion and inclusion that reveal underlying power asymmetries and/or disparities (Fairclough, 1989, 1995; KhosraviNik, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2008).

However, few studies exist that examine stakeholders' perceptions of each other in relation to bullying, and bullying prevention efforts. Furthermore, even fewer studies have examined bullying in general, and school bullying in particular through a discursive lens (Beaulieu, 2016; Bethune & Gonick, 2016; Hepburn, 1997).

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Method. Critical Discourse Analysis – Representation of Social Actors.

This study employed purposive sampling (Padgett, 2008). Participants: 18 bus drivers and attendants; 14 school social workers; nine (9) principals; and four (4) parents. To analyze the stakeholders' representation of themselves and others, this study utilized an eclectic analytical framework based off KhosraviNik's (2010) three-level text analysis framework, van Leeuwen's (2008) socio-semantic inventory, and some applications of Fairclough's (1989, 1995) analytical categories for textual analysis. The components of our analytical framework are explained below.

Fairclough (1989, 1995), KhosraviNik (2010), and van Leeuwen (2008) suggest that the choice or use of particular linguistic mechanisms in preference to others is deliberate, and strategic. They help us examine how arguments are made for or against social actors, and also help us duly examine possible arguments that may be kept out or ignored. Van Leeuwen (2008) presents a socio-semantic inventory as a vehicle for establishing the sociological relevance of the representations and portrayals of social actors.

Van Leeuwen's Socio-semantic Inventory

In van Leeuwen's (2008) socio-semantic inventory on the representation of social actors the following categories are utilized:

- Exclusion: Backgrounding and Suppression
- Role Allocation: Passivation/Activation
- Genericization and Specification
- Assimilation: Individualization/Groups (Assimilation)
- Association and Dissociation
- Indetermination and Differentiation
- Nomination and Categorization

Fairclough also presents the concept of intertextuality which examines how discourses may be connected or related to each other (Fairclough, 1995). Intertextuality was applied in this study in examining similarities and connections in the discourses of the various stakeholders.

Findings

There were some variations as well as similarities in how the participants view bullying. The participants spoke of bullying in sociological and psychological terms. Sociologically: Bullying is presented as a function of our social structures. Psychologically: Bullying is related to or linked to children's mental health, emotive and affective conditions.

Each shares views that suggest parents are responsible or have a role to play in the incidence of bullying as well as bullying prevention. Additionally, they share views that suggest students are active agents in the occurrence of bullying. Also, all the groups were involved in some form of *differentiation*. They contextualized bullying – noting that schools, school districts and townships differ from each other. They also noted that, students differ from each other.

In the Bus Drivers and Attendants' Discourse

- Principals are mostly activated, and problematized.
 - They are unwilling to engage bus drivers and appropriately respond to their concerns about bullying.
 - Their lack of action on student conduct exacerbates bullying.
- Bullying can be traced to family dynamics – Societal breakdown.
- Parents are activated, and problematized.
 - Parents bully the schools.
- Children are activated, and problematized.
 - Children with special needs are nominated and differentiated.
 - Bullying and aggressive conduct may be mental health related.
- Social workers were minimally referenced (*Invisibilized*).
 - They are either not present in schools or their impact is minimal.

In the Principals' Discourse

- Parents are activated.
 - They are portrayed as collaborative partners or aides in addressing bullying.
 - They are also problematized. They contribute to students/children's bullying behavior, and aggressive conduct.
 - Some parents are unable to make the clear distinction between bullying and conflict.
- Schools are passivated. They are overburdened with social pressures and expectations.
- Social workers are mostly activated and functionalized.
 - Social workers play critical roles in the operations of the school.
- Bus drivers are largely passivated, backgrounded, and impersonalized.
 - Bus drivers are mostly excluded in discourses about the people/groups who contribute to bullying investigations, bullying prevention efforts.
 - Bus drivers are rendered invisible on the bus.
- Students/children are activated in a way that appears to excuse the failings of school administrators/staff.

- The school district is nominated as a stakeholder with enormous power. Yet, it is impersonalized.
 - Principals indicate they are subject to the power/authority of their school district.

In the Social Workers' Discourse

- Outside agencies are nominated and activated.
 - They violate/invade the space of social workers. In some cases, their bullying prevention efforts are non-complementary of school social workers' efforts.
- Bus drivers are passivated and backgrounded.
 - The social workers mention the bus as a hotbed for bullying. However, they do not suggest bus drivers and/or attendants are directly responsible for bullying. They cite inanimate factors such as lack of structure and organization.
- Students are activated and differentiated.
 - Students with severe emotional disturbances (SED), emotional disabilities, students needing individual education plans (IEPs) often create a lot of problems.
 - Students are unable to make a clear distinction between bullying and conflict.
- Principals are activated.
 - They drive the disciplinary process in schools. Their failings allow bullying to fester.
- Parents are activated and differentiated.
 - Some parents are supportive, others are not.

In the Parents' Discourse

- Children are activated.
 - They are unable to make the clear distinction between bullying and conflict.
- There is the genericization, association, and assimilation (collectivization) of people.
 - The school principal, teachers, social worker, students, and parents are presented as one group.

Recommendations

- Schools need to have an explicit protocol for engagement with other stakeholders or revisit existing protocols.
- We must be intentional about being inclusive – reaching out to additional and diverse stakeholders for transformative collaborations (Kim, 2017; Kurtz & Shimshock, 2011).

- Facilitated Collaborative Inquiries are necessary (Kurtz & Shimshock, 2011).
- Valuing and responding to stakeholders.
- Capacity-building for social workers for work/practice in host-settings (e.g. political savviness).

Limitations

The knowledge gained from the study, though transferable, is not generalizable. Also, the sample of parents was very small, and they were all from the same school. For that reason, saturation may not have been achieved.

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Suggested Citation:

Karikari, I. & Brown, J. R. (November, 2017). The blame game or sharing the blame?: Hearing stakeholders talk about each other: A critical discourse analysis of school bullying. 2017 *International Bullying Prevention Association Annual Conference*, Nashville, TN.



The Blame Game or Sharing the Blame?

Hearing Stakeholders Talk about Each Other:

A Critical Discourse Analysis of School Bullying

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Workshop Objectives

- Illustrating the application of CDA as a theoretical framework and tool for studying bullying.
- Discussing implicit biases and power differentials in relationships among non-student stakeholders.
- Exploring potential remedies for identified challenges/problems.



Introduction and Background

- Bullying has widespread impact - directly and indirectly.
- People's experiences re: bullying differs.
- Studies have compared and contrasted the views of different stakeholders in their perceptions of the anatomy of school bullying.
- Examining the views of multiple stakeholders is a worthy academic and intellectual exercise to provide deep and valuable insights on school bullying, and bullying in general.

(Frisén, Holmqvist & Oscarsson, 2008; Mooij, 2011; Thornberg, 2010)



Introduction and Background

- Few studies exist that examine stakeholders' perceptions of each other in relation to bullying, and bullying prevention efforts.
- The use of discursive frameworks, particularly, critical discourse analysis (CDA) in studying bullying in general, and school bullying is uncommon.

(Beaulieu, 2016; Bethune & Gonick, 2016; Donoghue, Rosen, Almeida & Brandwein, 2015)



Stakeholder perspectives commonly examined:

- ✓ Children's perspectives of bullying.
- ✓ Engaging parents because of the centrality of the home environment in understanding bullying behavior.
- ✓ Incorporating the views of school officials (e.g., Fekkes, Pijpers & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Horn & Hathorn, 2005).
- ✓ Delayed or slow admission of the importance of the perspectives of stakeholders such as bus drivers in understanding school bullying (de Lara, 2008; Evans, 2015).
- The current study asks: *How do different stakeholders refer to themselves and others in bullying discourse?*



Roundtable/Congregational

Image of People Engaged in Discourse

Stakeholders Discourse Ecomap Activity



Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

- A field committed to the critical investigation of social phenomena through an examination of discourses.
- CDA demonstrates how social phenomena is influenced and structured by discourse.



(Fairclough, 1989, 1995; Saichaie, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2009)

Credit: Vahed Qazvinian

Main Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis

- CDA deals with social problems.
- Discourse analysis serves to explain.
- Discourse is historical.
- Discourse constitutes a form of social action.
- Society and culture are composed by discourse.
- Power relations are constituted by discourse.
- There is a mediated link between text/discourse and society.



Representation of Social Actors

- The representation of **social actors** pertains to the ways in which people are denoted in discourse (Davari & Moini, 2016).
- Representation is important because it can be used to “reallocate roles or rearrange the social relations between participants” in an activity (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 32).
- In examining the representation of social actors, many aspects of the interactions that occur among people can be made visible.
 - One may sometimes find patterns of exclusion and inclusion that reveal underlying power asymmetries or social disparities.
 - Again, patterns of exclusion and inclusion that may be tied to ideological goals or reinforcing particular notions may be identified.

(van Leeuwen, 2008)



Analytical Framework

- Eclectic analytical framework based off:
 - KhosraviNik's (2010) three-level text analysis framework,
 - van Leeuwen's (2008) socio-semantic inventory,
 - Some applications of Fairclough's (1989, 1995) analytical categories for textual analysis.



Fairclough's Framework

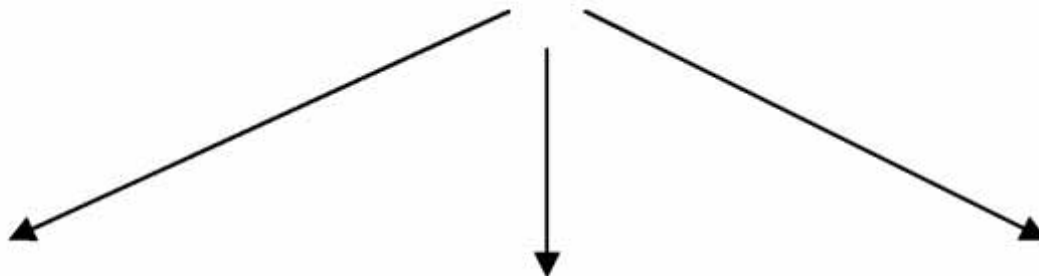
- Critical discourse analysts focus on the vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures of the discourse under examination.
- Fairclough (1989) states that words and verbal forms may be particularly selected or arranged in particular ways so as to promote desired versions of reality.
- The concept of intertextuality: examines how discourses may be connected or related to each other (Fairclough, 1995).
 - Intertextuality was applied in this study in examining similarities and connections in the discourses of the various stakeholders.



The Representation of Social Actors



Text



Level 1: Actor

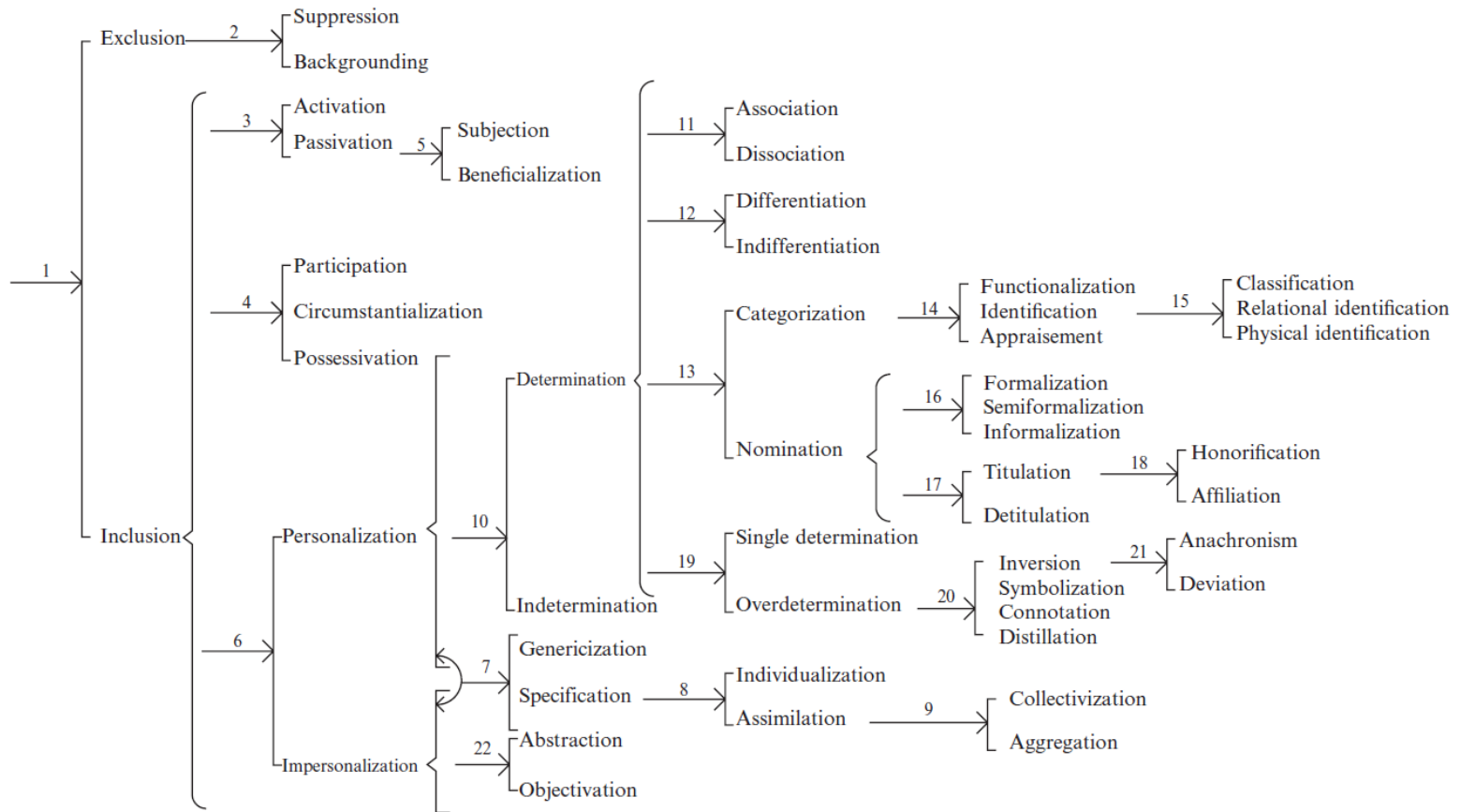
Level 2: Action

Level 3: Argumentation

Van Leeuwen Socio-Semantic Inventory

- Exclusion: Pattern of inclusion and exclusion
 - Role Allocation: Passivation/Activation
- Genericization and Specification
 - Assimilation: Individualization/Groups (Assimilation)
- Association and Dissociation
 - Indetermination and Differentiation
- Nomination and Categorization
 - Functionalization and Identification
- Personalization and Impersonalization
 - Overdetermination





12 Angry Men

- [First Video](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUzp2XUhsKY>

- [Second Video](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqDd06GW76o>

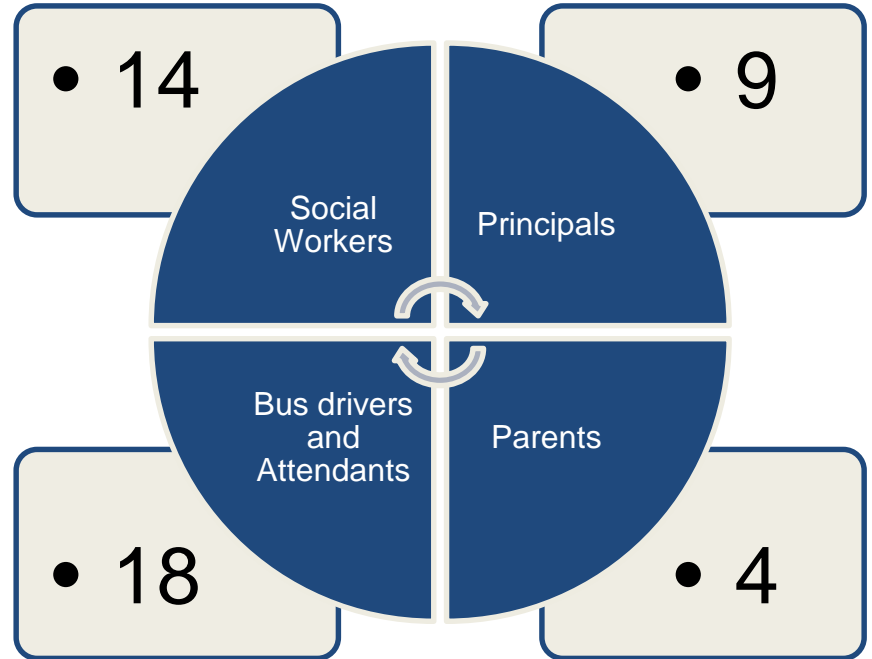


Procedures and Findings

Procedures

The data included seven transcribed focus group discussions with:

- Social workers (n = 14).
- School principals (n = 9).
- Parents (n =4).
- Bus drivers and bus attendants (n = 18).
- Purposively selected for the focus group discussions (approx. 90 minutes) (Padgett, 2008).



Findings from Participants

- Principals, parents, social workers, and bus drivers and bus attendants have convergent/divergent views.
 - They all speak of bullying in sociological and psychological terms.
- Sociological: Bullying is a function of our social structures.
- Psychological: Bullying is related to or linked to children's mental health, emotive and affective conditions.

Bus Drivers and Attendants

- Days and times impact bullying.
- Principals are activated, and problematized.
- Bullying can be traced to family dynamics – Societal breakdown.
- Lack of action on student conduct exacerbates bullying.
- Parents are activated and problematized - lack of parent accountability/parents bully too.
- Bullying and aggressive conduct may be mental health related/special needs.
- Social workers were minimally referenced (Invisibilized).

Ms. Pink:

Because there are no social workers. There is no social workers anymore...And they too, they've been bullied because...and everybody's been bullied by the parents because some schools that you just could see the parents, they just control the whole school and I'm like who is, who is in charge of the school?

Ms. Red:

I had the incident on my bus, special need boy on my bus, he kept bullying another young man, you know, he wasn't special need, but he kept bullying him, you know, saying things to him, talking about him saying words to him...you know, you ain't nothing but a Mexican, you know, bullying him and everything. So the boy just got fed up with him, so the kids said 'are you scared of him?' He said 'I ain't scared of him, I ain't scared of him' you know, so little boy one day get off the bus, gets off the bus, go down the stairs, get to the top of the stairs, go walk down the stair, he take his fist and just 'bom' and hit the little boy, and then he ends all the kids, you know, saying something.

Ms. Leaf:

I am a school bus driver, I drive the school bus, I watch the road, I watch the kids, I don't have attendants so I have to do my I had two students in the front, I'll say, they were probably third or fourth grade and they gotten into it, so I what I did was I moved one of the kids to the back because they were, I couldn't, I can't really hear too much up in the front because I may have the fan, the air condition, the radio and everything going so its hard for me to really hear what's going on in the back of me, you know, sometimes what helps me is my mirror

Mrs. Turquoise:

...I think you guys [Researchers] said you are in some schools...and you're gonna work with the schools. You see, that's what the schools won't do with us and that's where the problem is. You guys can probably go in there and work with them but as far as helping us out - Dead end

Principals

- Principals' discourse on bullying covers social workers, parents, students/children, themselves (i.e., principals), the district, the legislature, other school staff – e.g. behavioral assistants, special ed assistants, teachers, and bus drivers.
- Parents are portrayed as collaborative partners or aides in addressing bullying.
- Parents are also problematized. They contribute to students/children's bullying behavior, and aggressive conduct.
- Schools are overburdened.
- Social workers are mostly activated and functionalized. Social workers play critical roles in the operations of the school.

Principals

- Bus drivers are largely excluded in discourses about the people/groups who contribute to bullying investigations, bullying prevention efforts.
- Bus drivers are largely passivated, backgrounded, and impersonalized.
- Bus drivers are rendered invisible on the bus.
- Students are activated in a way that probably excuses the failings of school administrators/staff.
- The District is nominated as a stakeholder.

Ms. Rosemary:

I don't think the bus drivers see much of anything

Mr. Basil:

Schools have become the "great sponge" so everything that happens in society is absorbed in school, and the social worker is usually the person who is the first point of contact for the building when it comes down to those needs, and those are some fundamental needs that affect learning and teaching on a daily basis...Each school could use at least a full time or probably two full time social workers.

Mrs. Sage:

There is a misconception on part of our community in general about the difference between true bullying and peer conflict. Ninety-five percent of our reported bullying is peer conflict.

Mr. Parsley:

Its [bullying] even more challenging when that behavior is learned from the parent.

Ms. Curry:

The district just mandated that we had something. Whether it was PBIS, restorative justice, responsive classroom, that we had some type of system, some type of program in our building but they allowed us to choose.

Social Workers

- Outside agencies are activated and nominated – they violate/invoke the space of social workers
- Social workers mainly passivate bus drivers. The social workers mention the bus as a site/hotbed for bullying. However, they cite inanimate factors such as lack of structure and organization.
- Social workers background bus drivers. They do not suggest they are directly responsible for bullying.
- Students are activated and differentiated - Students with SED, emotional disabilities, students needing IEPs.

Social workers

- Workforce issues are highlighted. Social workers activate principals, the District, and the school system.
- Parents are activated and differentiated. Some parents are supportive, others are not.
- Other social actors referenced include behavioral specialists.

Mrs. Salmon:

We've had a significant increase in bullying issues but it was primarily due to a change in our principal...the discipline and climate is, ehm, not as consistent as it was previously, ehm, things are...well, inconsistent, I get, its just the inconsistencies of discipline, things are not well communicated in that arena, not the same across the board, so its been a dramatic change especially in our intermediate students... despite my going into classrooms having weekly meetings with those students trying to skill build.

Mrs. Gold:

The principal made it a priority and said, this is what you're gonna do 9.15 to 9.30 and that takes a lot of courage for a principal to do that.

Mrs. Lime:

Some parents will make the comment, you better not be a punk. You better not let somebody get on you or you gonna get it from me. [Participant: My mama told me I could hit them back if they hit me] Right.

Mrs. Bronze:

Today I happen to be in the classroom when [the community agency presenter] was in there. He is wonderful, but he was talking about tattling and the problem is that...that's not the word I use. I don't use tattling because we are talking about small and big, and so the kids, it wasn't making the connection.

Ms. Yellow:

I'm thinking that if there's any way to get the copy of the curriculum or the highlights of the curriculum...I didn't know who you were but you come in my building...I'm like who are they and how are they funded? But in regards to the bullying and any other type of social skills so we can speak the same [language], so there is an interface with that person coming into the building to speak.

Parents

Mrs. Red (On children):

They think everything like, when somebody is just a little mean to them or maybe doesn't want to play with them on the playground like they are being a bully

Mrs. Blue Parent:

The principal, the teacher, our social workers worked with us and also with this girl's parents to document everything and make sure that, you know, nothing was falling through, and I think they were trying to work with her too to help change her behavior and it just didn't work and eventually she was, she left the school.

Mrs. Green Parent (bullying on the bus):

Because they don't travel far, there is not really much time to be bullying. You know what I mean, I hear bullying happen, not here but I mean I know buses can be a real great incubator of bullying because you've got such a range of kids and for such a period of time really early, really late but proximity of travel is so small ehrrm even if there was bullying it certainly wouldn't happen very [much].

Recommendations

Recommendations

- Schools need to have an explicit protocol for engagement with other stakeholders or revisit existing protocols.
- We must be intentional about being inclusive – reaching out to more (and diverse stakeholders) (Kim, 2017; Kurtz & Shimshock, 2011).
- Facilitated Collaborative Inquiries are necessary (Kurtz & Shimshock, 2011).
 - Valuing and responding to stakeholders.

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