On bullshit and bullying: taking seriously those we educate

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School bullying continues to plague students around the globe. Bullying research to date has largely employed empirical methodologies, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Using a philosophical lens, this paper seeks to better understand the intentionality of bullying by considering the satisfaction derived in the tears of another. Specifically, current bullying research takes seriously the notion that bullying is primarily a problem between a bully and a victim (i.e. that the bully does not like the victim). In this paper I suggest that the bully is bullshitting us and her/his project is far bigger than the victim s/he targets. In the final analysis bullying prevention, as well as education itself, requires us to take seriously not only the activities of students, but the desires (i.e. the ‘I likes’) that help us understand when we are being bullshitted and when we are not.

Introduction

Hans-Georg Gadamer, the German hermeneuticist, makes a rather curious statement when discussing the nature of understanding. In speaking of the I–Thou experience (i.e. an encounter between two people), Gadamer (1996) contends that, ‘since here the object of experience is a person, this kind of experience is a moral phenomenon—as is the knowledge acquired through experience, the understanding of the other person’ (p. 358). In other words, for Gadamer, what counts as moral (or at least one aspect of morality) is the experiential or relational encounter between two people. On this view, when two people understand, or misunderstand for that matter, each other, it is a moral occurrence. Following a similar line, the prolific educational philosopher John Dewey (1944) argues that we must avoid:

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Here, like Gadamer, Dewey argues that ‘morals’ are wrapped in human relations. Moral life, Dewey contends, is situated in entering into ‘proper relations with others in a unity of work and thought’ (Dewey, 2002, p. 95).

Without question, for children a significant part of their relational experience and training happens within schooling. From the age of 5 to the age of 18 (within the USA) children are gathered together for instruction in schools around the world. This instruction certainly includes academic content, but also involves both implicit and explicit efforts toward moral education. Why moral education? Because part of the training of the next generation of citizens involves equipping them to enter into proper relations with others in a unity of thought in the market place as well as the home. Living well with each other is a moral endeavour, one in which schools are certainly involved.

One area within the realm of schooling that continues to be a site of ongoing moral education involves the phenomenon of school bullying. In their research, Kasen et al. (2004) argue that ‘the school setting is the primary context in which most childhood bullying and victimization by peers occur’ (p. 187, emphasis mine). On Gadamer’s view (and Dewey’s as well) bullying is a moral issue because it involves the experience of two, or more, human beings; i.e. it is a relational activity. It is also a moral issue because it causes ‘harm’ on a number of levels to victims, families and schools (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). As with most moral educational programs, schools have sought to instruct, to train, to create rules and to watch in efforts to bring about the moral transformation of a bully. But, we are finding increasingly that such efforts have fallen short of the results we had hoped would transpire within schools (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). In this paper I explore the nuances of moral life within schools as it pertains to the activity of bullying. I begin with a short vignette to set the stage for our discussion.

**Bullying on campus**

Jake was a popular sixth-grader at Southside K–8, a local public school. He had attended Southside since kindergarten, had plenty of friends and admirers, made good grades and had adequate social skills. Matthew was an unremarkable sixth-grader, also at Southside. He, too, had attended Southside since kindergarten and, up until his sixth-grade year, had cultivated good friendships and adequate grades.

About half way through Matthew’s sixth-grade year he became a target in the members-only bump game. Jake and two friends (Sammy and Jeff) made a pact. They determined to purposely miss shots to keep each other in. But, also in the plan was a decision to always try to knock Matthew out first. The ploy began with three boys, in the midst of 20 to 30 other children, seeking to eliminate one boy first. Matthew was frustrated by their targeting, but the impact of the scheme was mitigated by the sheer number of people involved.

But the targeting took a turn. The three boys began to recruit others in the bump game to join in until the impetus of the game became singly focused upon knocking Matthew out first. Matthew continued to play because of his desire to fit in, but after
being knocked out first each day he would walk away in tears as the crowd of 20 to 30 peers would roar with triumphant laughter, proclaiming their approval at his elimination. Jake, Sammy and Jeff became celebrities within the group. Classmates would smile knowingly at Jake as the bump game began (anticipating the ‘real game’ focused in eliminating Matthew) and then pat him (Jake) on the back as Matthew was relegated to the sideline each day. Sammy and Jeff were also smiled at and congratulated for their role in this humiliating ploy. Matthew, on the other hand, was left confused. What had he done to cause this, or, better, to deserve this? Why had these boys decided to target him?

The bullying of Matthew soon moved beyond the bump game to other parts of his day. He was shunned during class group projects, he was no longer invited to birthday parties, he was ‘accidentally’ tripped at soccer practice, he began to eat lunch alone. The bullying of Matthew became pervasive. Matthew had become a pariah not only with the trio, but with a significant population of the school as well.

The school administration was quick to respond. They corralled the perpetrators, reprimanded them, required them to undergo training (aimed at building empathy and better aggression management skills) and began to intensively monitor them. The bullying simply moved to more covert means: a look here, another form of exclusion there. Matthew finally decided to transfer to a new school. Though adjusting well to his new school, he still carries the emotional scars of that sixth-grade nightmare. The next year, in the absence of Matthew, the trio simply picked a new victim: Trent. One of the perpetrators when asked why he targeted Matthew, matter-of-factly replied, ‘because I like to make him cry’.

To date bullying research has largely employed empirical methodologies, including qualitative and quantitative approaches. This research has posited several reasons ‘why’ Jake bullied Matthew, reasons that Southside took seriously, and thus incorporated into their attempts to mitigate the bullying of Matthew. First, research tells us that Jake’s activities were motivated by misunderstanding (Olweus, 1993, p. 84; Eslea & Smith, 1998, p. 205; Kaukiainen et al., 1999, p. 83; Espelage & Swearer, 2004, p. 58; Horne et al., 2004, pp. 308–309). Here, Jake either did not know or understand the Southside policy regarding bullying or simply did not understand the impact of his bullying on Matthew. He needed to be given the proper information, information which would lead to an ‘aha’ moment and the cessation of bullying. Second, research posits that Jake’s activities may also have been motivated by a lack of skill (Olweus, 1993, p. 35; Hoover & Oliver, 1996, p. 81; Juvonen & Graham, 2001, p. 306; Rigby, 2002, pp. 239–244; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002, p. 42; Horne et al., 2004, pp. 304, 318). Here, it was imagined that Jake had poor social skills, was unable to pick up the social cues of others or simply lacked the self-control to regulate aggression. If he could be ‘socially trained’ Jake would be able to interact more pro-socially with Matthew. Third, the literature finds that Jake’s behaviour may have been motivated by a propensity toward delinquency (Olweus, 1993, p. 35; Hoover & Oliver, 1996, pp. 70–72; Rigby, 2002, pp. 128–130; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002, p. 32; Orpinas et al., 2003, pp. 436–437). On this view Jake maintains a desire, whether fostered by family or elsewhere, toward rule-breaking or harming others.
Here, Jake must be reprimanded, systems of reward and punishment should be established and Jake should be watched to ensure compliance. Jake would be rehabilitated and brought back within the circle of democratic citizenship.2

Employing a philosophical lens, I will argue in this paper that such answers do not account for the ‘I like’ expressed by Jake and the intentional nature of bullying more generally. In fact, I will contend that these approaches take seriously certain views of Jake and bullying that miss the mark. I will argue that bullying is quite literally akin to bullshitting and seeing it so opens up new approaches to this persistent educational dilemma and to moral education more generally. I begin with a brief discussion of Jake and his ‘I like’.

‘I like to make him cry’

We are first led to believe that Jake may have misunderstood that his actions were hurting Matthew. Thus, it was explained to him that Matthew was a person and that his (Jake’s) actions were both humiliating and hurtful. It was believed that if one could help Jake ‘stand in Matthew’s shoes’, he would get it; he would understand and stop bullying. But this view does not square with Jake’s reason for bullying, i.e. ‘I like to make him cry’. It is apparent that Jake was not only aware of Matthew’s tears (and certainly the pain that precipitated them) but that he actually found satisfaction in those tears. If Matthew were to ignore Jake (as he was advised to do), then one imagines that the allure of always knocking Matthew out first would fade. It was precisely from the fact that being knocked out first bothered Matthew that the satisfaction was derived.3 Further, when it was explained to Jake that his actions hurt Matthew, did Jake stop? No, his actions simply became more covert. It seems, then, that the ‘I like’ of Jake undermines our ability to take seriously the notion that Jake’s bullying of Matthew was motivated by a lack of understanding. Instead, it is reasonable to conclude that Jake understood all too well the reaction he sought in Matthew, taking pleasure in the tears of pain exhibited by his victim.

We are also led to believe that Jake may have lacked the social skills necessary to live well with others. Either Jake lacked the ability to pick up social cues or, perhaps, he lacked the ability to manage relational aggression. Hence, Jake underwent skill training aimed at helping him to better ‘read’ those around him, better manage aggression and, thus, live more democratically. But this view also does not square with Jake’s satisfaction derived through Matthew’s tears. If Jake was simply relationally incompetent, deeming in some sense that his bullying of Matthew was accidental (i.e. due to missing relational cues or unmanaged aggression), why would he revel in the tears of Matthew?4 In fact, the bullying literature also informs us that bullies often display an ability to draw others into their activities, exhibiting superior and nuanced social skills (Kaukiainen et al., 1999, p. 84; Espelage & Swearer, 2003, pp. 365–383). Here, one notices the adeptness that Jake displayed in subtly leading 30 students in the midst of a bump game to target one student. The skill and subtly necessary for such a process is considerable.5 Hence, the ‘I like’ of Jake, and the intentionality that it portrays, undermines our ability to take seriously the notion that his bullying of
Matthew was motivated by a lack of skill. Instead, Jake displayed great social dexterity as he intentionally arranged for the tears of Matthew.

Finally, we are also led to believe that Jake may have simply been a delinquent kid, perhaps coming from a bullying family, in need of rehabilitation and surveillance. Here Jake is a rule-breaker with a propensity to harm others. Hence, Jake was reprimanded, the bump game was outlawed, a reward and punishment system was enacted and the staff were put on the alert to ‘keep an eye on Jake’. While the notion of delinquency may account for Jake’s ‘I like’ (e.g. taking satisfaction in the destruction of another), it does not account for Jake’s specificity. In other words, why did Jake not show aggression in other ways? He was a popular student, he achieved good grades and he was respectful of teachers (even liked by teachers) and fellow classmates. Further, why did Jake only target Matthew? If Jake was simply a rule-breaker, a boy out to cause trouble, then could we not assume that he would break other rules or bully other kids? Matthew was Jake’s only target that year and the next year, only Trent assumed that role. Again, it seems that the specificity of the ‘I like’ of Jake undermines our ability to take seriously the notion that his bullying of Matthew was motivated by a fundamental delinquency. Instead, Jake specifically targeted one student, finding satisfaction in the tears of Matthew, while maintaining strong standing and relationships with the rest of the school community.

At first glance Jake may seem to be acting out of a lack of understanding, skill deficiency or delinquency, but his ‘I like’ requires one to question whether we can take such notions seriously. I would like to raise a second possibility in our efforts of moral education: that Jake is in a sense bullshitting us. I now turn to the work of Harry G. Frankfurt.

**On bullshit**

In his brief text *On bullshit*, Frankfurt (2005) asks a simple question: What is one doing when one is bullshitting? Is a bullshitter lying? Is s/he deceiving us? Is s/he simply confused? Frankfurt begins by depicting bullshitting as misrepresentation.6 Yet, considering an anecdote related by Fania Pascal involving an encounter with Wittgenstein, Frankfurt argues that this misrepresentation falls short of lying. Pascal, who knew Wittgenstein at Cambridge in the 1930s, reveals:

> I had my tonsils out and was in the Evelyn Nursing Home feeling sorry for myself. Wittgenstein called. I croaked: ‘I feel just like a dog that has been run over.’ He was disgusted: ‘You don’t know what a dog that has been run over feels like’. (Frankfurt, 2005, pp. 28–29)

Wittgenstein found exception to Pascal’s comment because she certainly was not a dog and, hence, would have no idea what it felt like to be a dog, let alone one that had been run over. But, argues Frankfurt, Pascal is not lying. ‘Let us assume’, asserts Frankfurt:

> that he [Wittgenstein] is correct about the facts: that is, Pascal really does not know how run-over dogs feel. Even so, when she says what she does, she is plainly not lying.
She would have been lying if, when she made her statement, she was aware that she actually felt quite good. For however little she knows about the lives of dogs, it must certainly be clear to Pascal that when dogs are run over they do not feel good. (pp. 27–29)

Hence, Pascal was not saying something that she knew not to be right (i.e. lying). Her misrepresentation was of another sort. ‘The trouble with her statement,’ continues Frankfurt, ‘is that it purports to convey something more than simply that she feels bad. Her characterization of her feeling is too specific; it is excessively particular’ (p. 29). Frankfurt argues that Wittgenstein is not so much troubled that Pascal has misconstrued how she feels or that she has made a careless mistake. ‘Her fault is not that she fails to get things right, but that she is not even trying’ (p. 32). Frankfurt summarises this argument, equating such activity with bullshit:

He [Wittgenstein] construes her [Pascal] as engaged in an activity to which the distinction between what is true and what is false is crucial, and yet as taking no interest in whether what she says is true or false. It is in this sense that Pascal’s statement is unconnected to a concern with truth: she is not concerned with the truth-value of what she says. That is why she cannot be regarded as lying; for she does not presume that she knows the truth, and therefore she cannot be deliberately promulgating a proposition that she presumes to be false. Her statement is grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in a belief that it is not true. It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit. (pp. 33–34)

Here, according to Frankfurt, what is at issue in bullshitting is not falsity, but fakery. ‘For the essence of bullshit’, concludes Frankfurt, ‘is not that it is false but that it is phony’ (p. 47). The bullshitter is not trying to deceive us about the facts involved in his or her activities, but instead ‘misrepresents what he is up to’ (p. 54). Frankfurt argues, then, that:

the fact about himself that the bullshitter hides…is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it….He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose. (p. 56)

Hence, the bullshitter is up to something, but according to Frankfurt, that something involves misrepresentations aimed at manipulating an audience. The bullshitter is not lying; s/he simply is not concerned with the truth of things. Therefore, rather than taking seriously the statements of a bullshitter, we must ask ourselves more deeply of her/his intentions. We do not inquire into what a bullshitter is saying, but instead what s/he is up to. I now consider bullying through the lens of bullshitting.

**Bullying as bullshitting**

A brief caveat is appropriate to interject here. As we think about discerning the intentions of another, or even of ourselves for that matter, we enter onto a slippery slope. Why do we do what we do? The answer is myriad, as well as mystery. But, though the answer is nearly impossible to discern in complete clarity, the question is yet valid.
Seeking to understand motivation, whether another’s or our own, can help us better understand behaviour and, thus, hone our own responses. My attempt in this paper is certainly not to psychoanalyse Jake, nor to map on him a complete understanding of his intention. Even in Jake’s ‘I like’ there remains a sense of uncertainty (i.e. does Jake understand why he likes to make Matthew cry?). Rather, my intention in using Frankfurt’s thoughts as a foil is to open up new space for dialogue surrounding the perennial moral issue of school bullying. I ask the reader to indulge me in this endeavour and to consider this analysis as a tool for pushing our anti-bullying dialogue a bit deeper. With this caveat in mind, I now continue by considering bullying through the lens of Frankfurt’s discussion of bullshitting.

As I have argued above, taking seriously the notion of misunderstanding, skill deficiency or delinquency as motivators of bullying does not square with the specific intentionality of the bully (i.e. with the ‘I like’ that often is inherent in bullying activities). We have taken seriously that who the bully is talking to, who s/he is being aggressive towards, who s/he is humiliating is the focal point of bullying. In other words, the victim is the centre piece. Here the bully misunderstands the victim, or the bully lacks the skill to act democratically toward the victim, or the bully’s ‘delinquency’ is focused upon the victim. But what if, as in the case of the bullshitter, the bully does not necessarily care about the victim? What if the bully is a phony, acting as if she ‘hates’ the victim, when actually she is doing something else?

The literature also describes bullying as a social event, most often enacted within the purview of onlookers, accomplices and bystanders (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999, Appendix). It is interesting that Jake began the bullying of Matthew at a point when students were gathered in the ‘members-only’ bump game. He recruited Sammy and Jeff, believing that they would be interested in such an endeavour. And, one might contend, he calculated that the larger bump crowd would roar with laughter each time Matthew was eliminated. In fact, one might argue that the real point, the aspect of that day on the Southside playground that one might take seriously, involved the knowing glances and slaps on the backs exchanged by the bump participants and Jake. The tears of Matthew brought status to all who participated in Matthew’s demise.

We often believe that bullying primarily has to do with the victim, the target of its activity. But, I would suggest that bullying has more to do with the perception of others. It is bullshit aimed at manipulating perception. For as Frankfurt (2005) argues, the bullshitter is not interested in whether he’s lying or not (truth is not the point), ‘what he cares about is what people think of him’ (p. 18). Likewise, I am suggesting that the bully does not truly care what people think of the victim, his actions are not aimed there. Instead, the bully’s actions are aimed at manipulating what others think of him or herself, the bully. The public tears of the victim solidify the status of the bully.

But, if the victim is not mainly what bullying is about, then we are confronted with the question of status itself. Status, established publicly before a watching bump crowd (the who’s who on the Southside campus), provided Jake, Sammy and Jeff with notoriety, a valued sense of self offered by the watching crowd. Status was
secured in the knowing smiles and high-fives of peers, solidified and displayed in the tears of one who could not stand as an equal before Jake. Jake became somebody of importance, as did Jeff and Sammy and the entire bump crowd as they roared with laughter at Matthew’s elimination. They were not him, they were better. Bullying here becomes a means of attempted self-construction through public domination. The publicly displayed tears of the victim are essential to the project, the project of establishing a preferred self-image by rising above, providing a privileged sense of self for the bully as well as the watcher.

Implications

In a follow-up volume, On truth, Frankfurt (2006) briefly summarises his claim laid out in On bullshit. ‘My claim’, concludes Frankfurt:

was that bullshitters, although they represent themselves as being engaged simply in conveying information, are not engaged in that enterprise at all. Instead, and most essentially, they are fakers and phonies who are attempting by what they say to manipulate the opinions and the attitudes of those to whom they speak. What they care about primarily, therefore, is whether what they say is effective in accomplishing this manipulation. Correspondingly, they are more or less indifferent to whether what they say is true or whether it is false. (pp. 3–4)

One might ask what is at stake in deciding what to take seriously in bullying activities and what to call bullshit. Several important points arise. First, I have argued that taking seriously the ‘I like’ of bullying allows us to move from accident to meaning. The ‘I like’ in Jake’s statement, the ‘I like’ in any statement speaks of care, of desire, of emotional commitment, thus making bullying (or any moral endeavour) fraught with meaning. Seeing bullying as misunderstanding or as a lack of skill, or even a specified delinquency robs it of that meaning. Bullying and, thus, bullying prevention, becomes much more mechanistic (i.e. if we can give information, if we can hone skill, if we can rehabilitate a student’s will using proven behavioural transformation models, then we can eradicate bullying). Seeing bullying as an expression of satisfaction in the tears of another allows us to investigate wide new avenues of understanding and response.

Second, shifting what we take seriously in bullying allows us to re-imagine anti-bullying strategies. According to the literature, the effectiveness of current anti-bullying strategies can, at best, be considered spotty. In specific situations a certain strategy may work, but generally current strategies find varied and, at times, minimal effect (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). Again, these strategies are based on taking seriously the actions of the bully as directed toward the victim. In this paper, I have suggested that taking seriously the ‘I like’ of bullying allows us to consider the meaning of bullying to the bully (what she is up to using Frankfurt’s language), meaning that is typically wrought within a public and social situation. This, then, raises a third implication.

In taking seriously the ‘I like’ of bullying we move from the question of skill or understanding, to the question of how status is negotiated within schooling. If bullying
and its ‘I like’ is centred in establishing a privileged sense of self for the bully and, subsequently, for those watching, then we are led to ask why dominance offers such status within school culture. Here one might ask, who is it that is valued, pointed out or heralded within schooling? Is it not the one who rises above? (i.e. the ‘star’ athlete, the exemplary student who achieves the highest grade, or constructs the ‘best’ project, or gives ‘the most’ engaging presentation). If status (who is valued and who is not) is perceived as given to those who rise above within school culture, could one not argue that the bully has, indeed, simply taken such a discourse seriously? S/he has logically determined that who counts equates with who rises above, who dominates. Thus, the tears of Matthew were proof to all that Jake had risen above. Interrogating the ways that value and status are established, the ways selves are constructed within school culture may allow us to better understand the ‘I like’ of bullying.

A final implication involves the notion that bullying (again, as does most moral behaviour) seems to be much more complex than simple, one-size-fits-all solutions may indicate. Here, I have not meant to contend that I have finally found the ‘true cause’ of bullying, nor the ultimate solution. I have also not meant to portray the current literature on bullying as one-dimensional (in fact research reveals the complexity of school bullying as a phenomenon—hence, it continues to persist in schools). My hunch is that bullying is as broad as education or as human experience itself. What this brief essay points to is the notion that critically wrestling with what a bully is taking seriously is at the heart of bullying prevention. What is being taken seriously by the bully may shift from case to case. In other words, bullying activity may and likely does at times stem from a lack of social skill, uncontrolled aggression or even a lack of understanding. But, on that Southside playground such notions simply did not fit the ‘I like’ that seemed central to Jake’s motivation. Here, then, is an argument to listen to, to know our students, taking seriously not only observable actions or researched explanations, but the conversations from which the ‘I like’ of student activities become evident. Moral education moves here from a program or a set of tools, to a conversation, a relationship between student and teacher; a relationship that involves listening, knowing and learning.

**Conclusion**

In our age of standardisation and accountability in education, telling, directing, training and enforcing have moved to the forefront. This is no less true in our efforts of moral education as it is in our academic training of students. Typically, based upon some transgression, we formulate, articulate and post a new rule. We teach and train and watch toward helping our students ‘make the grade’ morally. But we rarely see listening as an effective mode of moral education. Returning to John Dewey (1944), he argues that ‘the development within the young of the attitudes and dispositions necessary to the continuous and progressive life of a society cannot take place by direct conveyance of beliefs, emotions, and knowledge’ (p. 22, emphasis mine). If not through teaching and training, how does Dewey believe that moral education most effectively takes place? ‘Moral education’, Dewey (2000) writes:
centers upon this conception of the school as a mode of social life, that the best and deep-
est moral training is precisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper rela-
tions with others in a unity of work and thought. The present education systems, so far as they destroy or neglect this unity, render it difficult or impossible to get any genuine, regular moral training. (p. 95, emphasis mine)

Here Dewey not only argues that moral life is expressed relationally, but argues that the mechanism, or curriculum, of moral education is also relational. In other words, in Dewey’s view, it is not through command (direct conveyance) that moral transformation most effectively takes place, but through the reciprocity of relationship. It is in being together in certain ways that attitudes and dispositions are transformed. And relationship always involves listening.

Perhaps the most significant implication of this look at the bullshitting of bullying is that deep listening must be at the heart of our morally educative efforts. We must ask (not simply know) what a student is up to. Where is s/he looking in her activities of bullying? What is s/he really paying attention to when s/he cheats on an exam? Not only the actions, but the words (especially those which express desire) of students allow us to understand (in and of itself a moral act) the nuances of behaviour. In listening to Jake’s ‘I like’, we are able to better understand the needs which may motivate his actions. That kind of deep listening requires a reciprocity in moral education; not only students listening to teachers, but teachers listening to students. Moral education means taking seriously those we educate, living in reciprocal relationships with them. And, again, relationship always requires deep listening. No less is true of our educational efforts aimed at shaping the moral lives of our students.

In this age of standardised testing, empirical data collection and best teaching prac-
tices, it is easy to miss the ‘I like’ of education. We can easily equate passing a test or reciting memorised information as an undeniable sign of the success of an educational endeavour. In other words, we take seriously that a student who produces what we say they must produce is learning. But, what if they are simply bullshitting us? What if our students, are not caring about learning at all, are faking us and, thus, in such bullshitting, are simply manipulating those watching, taking seriously something altogether different than we imagine? Here we move beyond formula or technique. Education itself finally requires taking seriously those we educate, listening to their ‘I like’, responding freshly to what they are taking seriously and learning to recognise when we are being bullshitted and when we’re not. Here, paying attention, waiting and listening become as foundational to moral education as telling, punishing, rewarding or watch-
ing. When we fail to listen, we often overlook the desire which motivates behaviour, desire that is often hidden by the bullshitting played out in front of us. Taking seriously the ‘I like’ of those we educate allows for more reflective and, I contend, more effective efforts in ‘educating’ a bully and, more generally, in moral education itself.

Notes

1. Bump is a recess game in which a long single-file line of participants forms facing a basketball hoop. The first person in line shoots from the free throw line. As soon as he or she shoots, the
next person in line also tries to make a basket. If the person behind makes a basket first, the lead shooter is relegated to the sidelines. So it goes on until one player is left, thus winning the bump game.

2. Recent research has also focused discussion on school culture itself. Yet, often this research considers teacher modelling and overt dialogue (e.g. having staff discourage bullying), but largely fails to consider the more hidden motivational discourse and practices that are implicit in modern schooling (Jacobson, 2007).

3. On this point Adam Phillips (2002) in *Equals* argues that the mockery at the heart of making a joke out of someone else becomes effective because it matters to all involved: the mocker, the person being mocked and to those who witness the mockery. Jake intentionally targeted Matthew and in that targeting the satisfaction, at least in some measure, was embedded in Matthew's tears; i.e. it mattered to Matthew, hence, it provided satisfaction to all involved.


5. The bullying literature indicates that bullying activities often are centred in intentionality, establishing dominance status with peers (Long & Pellegrini, 2003, p. 402).

6. The reader will notice that in this discussion of Frankfurt's notion of bullshitting I generally take an uncritical stance. This does not mean, however, that there are not alternate understandings of bullshitting. Certainly, calling Frankfurt's notion of bullshitting into critical account would be a potentially profitable discussion, but one that lies outside the scope of this project. Instead, I employ Frankfurt's work as a foil through which to raise critical questions surrounding our understanding of school bullying, particularly considering the aims of any given bully. Hence, I proceed with Frankfurt's lens, acknowledging that his understanding is not uncontestable, but employing his view to gain deeper insights into my main focus in this article, i.e. better understanding what is being taken seriously by a bully as he or she targets a victim.

7. Vivian Paley used to place tape recorders around her kindergarten room to eavesdrop on her students. Her intent was not to 'catch them in something' so she could morally mould them. Instead, she listened to hours of these free flowing conversation so that she could know her students. Thus, when she did implement a rule (e.g. *You can't say you can't play* [1992]) it was always based upon a reciprocity of listening, understanding then telling. Moral education for Paley could not happen with the first two aspects of this trio.

**References**


