The Hidden Costs of Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying

Staff members may not be aware of it but there is often a climate of fear in our schools. Although it is possible that just a few students feel it, it is more likely that many or most do. Unchecked discrimination, harassment and bullying instills fear not only in those being harassed but also those who wonder if they might be next – the close friends of the bully and even the bully herself are likely to be afraid. Conventional wisdom is (or at least was until the last few years) that there is nothing to be done about the problem; that those who are discriminated against, harassed and bullied just have to get tough and figure out how to deal with it. But in this climate of fear many do not toughen up and long-term misery is the result. In a school that accepts harassment, adults are not likely to have heard about even the most terrible instances. And all students affected:

The Targets – Targeted students are the most directly affected and there are many for whom the scars are deep and remain raw. School shootings are often at least partially blamed on long-term mistreatment of the shooters by peers. Dropping out of school, depression, inability to adjust to social situations and withdrawal are among the problems caused by being the recipient of long-term discrimination, harassment and bullying in school and these problems often persist long after school days end and even for a lifetime. Bullied students are often and justifiably reluctant to report incidents because they feel nothing will be done and they will be told to “toughen up” or “get over it” or, worse yet, that they will be blamed for instigating the behaviors. Those who are harassed and bullied never “ask for it” and great care must be taken when discussing incidents and solutions with them to avoid stating or implying that their behaviors were a cause. If there are skills or techniques that would better equip victims to handle these situations or make them less likely targets, the skills must not be taught to show students what they should have done but to empower them for future incidents should they occur. It is advisable to delay teaching these skills to keep the skill deficit from being connected to the incident being investigated - thus putting some of the blame on the victim. In addition, the needs and desires of the targeted student should be determined and considered in any options that are proposed.

Those Who Bully and Harass - For those who do these things the outlook is bleak. If not steered away from harassing and bullying others bullies are at great risk of eventually being removed from school and of becoming involved in criminal activity - especially partner abuse and assault. Harassment meets needs, often for peer attention (either positive from those who enjoy watching the humiliation of another or negative from the person being abused or the dismayed onlookers). Less frequently it is a call for help, a desire to extort money, food or other objects, or even a desire to escape schoolwork by getting caught and suspended. Suspension and expulsion seem a logical consequence of harassment and may make the school a more comfortable place in the short term but these measures don’t correct the problem. They just delay or even make it worse in the long run - or just transfer it to the harasser’s next school or hangout.

Bystanders - Bystanders also suffer from these behaviors. In the drama “When You Comin’ Back Red Ryder?” strangers in a diner are terrorized by a disturbed man. The victims could easily work together to stop him but as long as someone else is the target, though guilt-ridden, they are unwilling to act. There are also frequent examples in news stories about witnesses to brutality who do nothing to help the victim or even report the crime.
"In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me, and by that time, no one was left to speak up."
- Pastor Martin Niemoeller

Although it is possible that bystanders are paralyzed by fear or mesmerized by what is happening, many psychologists believe they don’t act because they do not know that the societal norm is to help or get help. Standing by is not a neutral act. The bystander is an audience for the peer-attention seeking person who is harassing another – the medium that makes the behavior rewarding. As much as they feel powerless and guilty as they watch and do nothing, they may also be angry that the school isn’t doing something about it. So add to the victims of these behaviors the self-esteem and sense of well being of the bystanders.

**What can we do** to avoid the hidden costs of discrimination, harassment and bullying? First we need to make a clear statement to students that these behaviors are not tolerated at our school. This can only be done, however, if we put in place systems that allow and expect students to report bullying and harassment with the knowledge that they will be kept safe and the problem will be dealt with. We need to work with those who harass to help them find acceptable alternative ways to meet their needs and to teach students what to do when they witness harassment and bullying.

With commitment and consistency the costs of harassment and bullying can be avoided. The school that works to correct this problem is a better place for all students, a safer place, and a better place to learn. And if we don’t correct the problem a climate of fear will exist and the social climate of the school will be the fourth victim of discrimination, harassment and bullying.