School bullying exists as a societal epidemic that affects millions of school-aged students (Espelage & Holt, 2012). Youths involved in bullying—whether perpetrating, witnessing, or being victimized—face inequitable access to school-based resources and opportunities aimed at academic growth and empowerment. This article conceptualizes school bullying as a social justice issue and explores the concepts of culture-based intolerance and bullying. We offer a discussion highlighting how researchers and practitioners may move forward to work with students and stakeholders in the educational setting to promote tolerance and, ideally, acceptance for children and adolescents of all cultures and creed. We posit that, to effectively and meaningfully engage in prevention and intervention programming, professionals must be willing to aid students in building awareness and understanding the injustice of discrimination according to inherent characteristics while nurturing openness and acceptance of all cultures.
These students face inequitable access to school-based resources and opportunities aimed at academic growth and empowerment—a social justice issue across many unique and varied societies within our global community.

This article explores the concepts of culture-based intolerance and bullying and the social justice issues that inevitably arise. We offer a discussion highlighting how researchers and practitioners must move forward to work with stakeholders in the educational setting and, most important, students, to promote tolerance and, ideally, acceptance for students of all cultures and creed. If educators are truly committed to providing equal opportunities for all students, it is critical that they first recognize school bullying as a social justice issue.

**School Bullying: A Review of the Issue**

Approximately 30% of American students are involved in some form of bullying behavior (Nansel et al., 2001). These destructive behaviors may occur on a one-to-one basis, within a group of people, or as a result of societal structures in place (Sullivan, 1999). The adverse influence of school bullying is tremendous for those involved (Espelage & Low, in press) and researchers have argued that bullying oftentimes occurs within a group context, involving the action or support of bullies, cobullies, and bystanders (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). As high as 85% of peers may be involved in bullying episodes, either by providing attention or aiding the bully (Craig & Pepler, 1997). Thus, the effect of bullying on the large majority of students, bystanders who are not directly involved, should neither be minimized nor ignored.

Students who endure harmful psychological effects are at risk for subsequent perpetration or victimization (Juvoven, Nishina, & Graham, 2000). Indeed, children’s involvement in school bullying—whether it be as a bully, victim, bully/victim, or bystander—has the potential to influence negatively their physical, social, and emotional well-being. Engaging in efforts aimed at preventing bullying and victimization would create an opportunity for schools to address issues that undermine learning and healthy development (Cohen, 2006), while creating a more socially just community.

**Social Justice**

Social justice is a rigorously debated concept in a variety of fields. Social justice and injustice have inextricable links to mental health and well-being (Vera & Speight, 2003). Even though various definitions of social justice exist in theological and philosophical writings, notions of equity and liberty are at the heart of the concept (Stevens & Wood, 1992). The goal of social justice, in one definition, is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. (Bell, 1997, p. 3)

A variety of underlying circumstances can create conditions of injustice. Typically, marginalization is the main process by which social injustice is maintained. Young (2011) argued that in the United States (although this is also true in many other parts of the world), a large proportion of the population is expelled from full participation in social life, including people of color, the disabled, women, gay men, lesbians, and people who identify as bisexual. Such a conceptualization of justice, then, is logically related to issues of multiculturalism and diversity. Human diversity cannot flourish without notions of justice and equality (Albee, 2000).

A more contemporary approach to social justice embraced by many scholars within the field of psychology is referred to as a Communitarian model of justice (Young, 2011). In this model of social justice, the process of decision-making and interaction that occurs at both an individual and systemic level, as opposed to the equitable distribution of resources, is the focus of interventions and policies. In Young’s (2011)
conceptualization of social justice, social organization and processes are evaluated to elucidate practices of domination, privilege, and oppression. Hence, the processes that facilitate unequal outcomes must be scrutinized and transformed. Even though many processes contribute to inequity, the literature most often cites examples of policies that are largely under the control of adults (e.g., school funding laws, discrimination in hiring practices). The literature has been less direct about identifying processes or practices that contribute to the perpetration of injustices prevalent in the world of children.

Many definitions of bullying highlight the imbalance of power between the bully and victim (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2009; Olweus, 1991; Pepler, Craig, & O’Connell, 1999). Because bullying may be considered the exercise of perceived authority or superiority in a cruel and unjust manner, it exists as an example of oppression in society. In fact, Rigby (2007) defined bullying as “the repeated oppression, psychological or physical, of a less powerful person by a more powerful individual or group of persons” (p. 15). In addition, a denial of physical and psychological safety is at the heart of bullying, which indubitably echoes Bell’s (1997) characterization of injustice.

By examining the core definitions of both social injustice and bullying previously discussed, it is arguable that bullying is one particular manifestation of social injustice in society (Shriberg, 2011), and a process of oppression that may be particularly relevant for school-aged children within society. In fact, bullying may be one of the primary mechanisms through which children learn about oppression. Without having to be directly taught messages of intolerance (e.g., homophobic attitudes, racist beliefs), children learn, by both participating in and witnessing bullying, that certain groups in society possess power based on inherent characteristics (e.g., nationality, race, ethnicity, etc.). They also learn that these groups can utilize their power to create physical and psychological threats toward those who do not have power.

This argument is further supported by research indicating that youth from historically marginalized groups—such as children who have a disability or gay, lesbian, bisexual adolescents—receive proportionally more bullying attacks than do children who are part of the cultural majority (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2010). For example, Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, and Koenig (2011) found that although both heterosexual and homosexual youth are subjected to homophobic peer victimization, gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were found to suffer more significant academic and mental health consequences compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Notably, these effects were not moderated by the presence of supportive parents. Hence, being culturally different can identify a child as a target for oppression and bullying by peers.

When youth possess unfavorable and stereotyped attitudes toward groups of children, they may engage in acts of culture-based intolerance. Examples of such intolerance include race-based bullying, the use of homophobic epithets, or social exclusion based on socioeconomic status. When youth combine prejudiced attitudes with perceived power and the sanctioning of discrimination against individuals from another cultural group, this can be viewed as culture-based bullying. By engaging in and witnessing purposeful exclusion and abuse of individuals due to inherent characteristics such as race, children learn that it is acceptable to marginalize others according to group memberships. Thus, bullying participation represents a form of social injustice.

**Culture-Based Intolerance**

Although not the only place in which bullying occurs, schools serve as a microcosm of the broader society and culture (Merrell, Guelndner, Ross, & Isava, 2008). American society has become increasingly multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual (Sue & Sue, 1990) and, as a result, many urban schools house students who represent a wide variety of races, ethnicities, cultures, and languages. For example, between 2010 and 2050, the Hispanic population will
almost double, from 16% to 30%. In addition, 20% of the nation’s population aged 5 and older speak a language other than English at home (Center for Public Education, 2012).

Of concern, research indicates that children harbor prejudiced and stereotyped attitudes by the time they are 4 years old (Katz & Downey, 2002). Culture-based intolerance becomes an issue when students combine these attitudes with the power to discriminate against others from another racial, gender, ethnic, socioeconomic, or cultural group. Because the creation of in-groups and out-groups is central to bullying dynamics (Hargreaves, 1973), utilizing already-formed cultural groups seems a likely trajectory. Gini (2007) extended previous findings indicating a clear in-group bias in that participants favored their own group, especially when their in-group was victimized, by attributing more blame to the out-group. In other words, students possess a tendency to prefer peers similar to them.

It may be argued that engaging in conversation about culture-based bullying is more controversial and complex than discussing the seemingly less charged concept of general bullying. Loach and Bloor (1995) hypothesized that bullying is a way for institutions to acknowledge the conflict, but not the meaning of the conflict, thus dealing with symptoms rather than the underlying issues of prejudice due to group membership. Instead of dealing with the convoluted -isms, dealing with surface-level characteristics of bullying helps one to avoid these topics (Sullivan, 1999). However, in this process, culture-based bullying is ignored and illegitimated.

Disentangling prejudicial motives and bullying behaviors is both an arduous and perplexing task, thus limiting a comprehensive understanding of the issue (Sullivan, 1999). School leaders who deal with bullying behaviors in the classroom are left to determine, for instance, whether an act is motivated by racism, sexism, homophobia, or ableism. Although explicit derogatory name-calling is perhaps easiest to detect, identifying other forms of bullying as motivated by cultural intolerance is more difficult. Because bullies need to maintain power and control over their victims, it is likely that they will mask the deep structure of discriminatory or intolerant ideals with convenient reasons to bully (e.g., cheap shoes/clothes, ugly hair, etc.). As such, it is proposed that students’ increased cultural awareness skills may be key to further prevention programming success.

**School-Based Interventions**

Prevention and intervention techniques aimed at reducing prejudice in students, such as learning techniques, are regarded by some as one of the most effective manners by which to improve relations among children (Slavin, 1996). One such strategy is called the jigsaw classroom (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1999). In this type of classroom, students first work together on a project to master a particular concept. Students break into what are labeled jigsaw groups, comprised of one student from each of the initial mastery groups; students who have come from different mastery groups are responsible for teaching members of their new group about the information they learned. This model engenders the active participation of isolated, more reserved students and the cooperation of more competitive, domineering students and may be particularly useful for English-language learners (Walker & Crogan, 1998). Several researchers found the program to improve students’ attitudes toward classmates and school, self-esteem, cooperative learning, and school performance (Zirkel, 2008).

Banks and Banks (2004) advocated, similarly, for the use of additive approaches in which multicultural themes are added to regularly-scheduled, traditional class curriculum. These approaches are based on the assumption that learning more about other cultures will reduce students’ cultural biases. Examples include incorporating library books featuring culturally diverse characters (Athanases, 1998) and adding multiethnic textbooks rife with counterstereotypic information. This technique incorporates positive traits, usually assigned to the White majority, to African American and other minority groups (Litcher & Johnson, 1969). Banks (1995) utilized a transformative approach that involved teaching via
experiential learning. Thus, via activities such as games, art, drama, cooking, and dance, students learn to appreciate other cultures. Other scholars have advocated for programs to explicitly address stereotyping, racism, and discrimination (Espelage & Poteat, 2012; Ponteotto & Pederson, 1993; Short & Carrington, 1996).

Another strategy aimed to reduce prejudice is empathy training. This strategy relies on children’s developed perspective-taking skills and focuses on understanding others’ plights and the experience of emotions (Underwood & Moore, 1982). Children’s attitudes about race and ethnicity are quite malleable and open to change through direct and explicit discussion and antibias curriculum (Derman-Sparks, 2004). One intervention has been used to train children to recognize differences among members of the same group (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999) by teaching White children to discriminate between pictures of either Black (experimental) or White (control) children. Similarly, Levy et al. (2005) found that a combined similarities-differences message in which leaders emphasize both similarities and difference between groups to be most effective with school-aged children.

Finally, one broad-scale approach is the implementation of dual-language immersion programs. These enrichment programs serve to contribute to the development of bilingual proficiency for all students—both native and nonnative English speakers. In this way, both groups serve as resources to each other in the process of learning language, which exists as an important method to reduce prejudice (Alanis & Rodriguez, 2008). The programs profit both groups of students via promotion of native language retention, academic success, and cultural appreciation (Thomas & Collier, 2003).

We readily acknowledge that, even under the best of circumstances, the aforementioned interventions are processes necessitating substantial time and effort to realize positive effects over time. In addition, these interventions may be variably understood and internalized by students who perpetrate and observe bullying. In more complex and extreme scenarios, more intensive interventions are warranted. In the meantime, victims of bullying need immediate attention and relief. Thus, to address bullying that is occurring and ongoing, we recommend several immediate interventions.

First, a clear definition of bullying that all students understand must exist. Subsequently, specific and fair consequences for bullying behaviors should be created: These consequences must be enforced consistently by all school staff. For example, to increase presence within the building, school leaders could establish a Bullying Monitors program led by teachers, school staff, and parents so as to closely supervise students in trouble zones in which bullying frequently occurs (e.g., hallways, stairwells, cafeteria, bathrooms, recess, etc.) during passing periods or before/after school hours. These actions communicate the important message that bullying is unacceptable and will not be tolerated in the particular learning environment. It is absolutely critical that school administrators value a zero-tolerance policy for bullying incidences and are committed to prioritizing bullying issues for all students. Once students involved in bullying are recognized, they should be connected to counseling services either within the school or in the broader community, so that more deep-seated issues may be addressed.

In addition to attending to established bullying issues, administrators should partner with teachers, school staff, parents, community members, and student leaders to communicate about what bullying is, its harmful effects, and how to intervene as a bystander. For example, administrators could create a Bullying Initiative Leadership Team composed of representatives from all of these groups to tackle bullying issues with ideas, feedback, unique perspectives, support, and encouragement from all relevant stakeholders. Mediums include all-school assemblies/pep rallies, visuals throughout school building, video/audio school announcements, psychoeducation sessions led by counselors in individual classrooms, programming during professional development days for teachers, and informational meetings for parents/guardians. Finally, gathering data from students, teachers, parents, and school staff in regard to school climate and
specifics about bullying behaviors is an excellent way to guide intervention goals/strategies and track changes in desired outcomes (e.g., decreased fighting, decreased perceived victimization, etc.) over time.

**Conclusion**

What will it take to make progress in thwarting the school bullying epidemic that infringes the rights of students? We believe that, in order to contribute to the solution, people must first comprehend bullying as socially unjust behavior—that which has been reinforced by generations of attitudes supporting the notions of cultural superiority (Spoonley, 1988). It is imperative that people recognize that children’s involvement in bullying, whether as participant or perceiver, largely influences their ideology on marginalizing others. What results is a pervasive pattern of school bullying that threatens equitable access to a safe, productive learning environment for all students. As Olweus (1999) vehemently petitioned, “It is a fundamental democratic right for a child to feel safe and to be spared the oppression and repeated, intentional humiliation implied in bullying” (p. 21). This is at the heart of social injustice.

To effectively and meaningfully engage in prevention and intervention programming, professionals must be willing to aid students in building awareness and understanding the injustice of discrimination according to inherent characteristics while nurturing openness and acceptance of all cultures. These efforts will require a commitment to the recognition of the dignity of each student as a human being as well as the assurance that every student is afforded equitable access to the educational rights that belong to them.

**References**


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Emerging Issues in School Bullying Research and Prevention Science


