When depression turns ugly: A look at relational aggression and its effects on youth depression

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Introduction

Adolescents. The mere mention of the word fills many with dread. More than once have I seen adults move from train carriages where a 'gang' of youths were laughing and talking. Through the doors of my office, there passes an amazingly varied troupe of characters. Each and every one of them has a story they want to tell, a history they want noticed and acknowledged, and an identity they are struggling to find. They can appear brash and conceited, shy and distressed, or even surly and hard. The girls in particular from Years 8, 9, and 10 still stream through my door with a regularity and at the time of the application for this award I felt I needed to explore why.

I ran Girls Talk groups by withdrawing the girls from every English class, one class at a time over a period of several weeks. I started with Years 8 and 9 and then continued with the Year 7 group. I opened discussion with the girls, with varying degrees of success and then gave them an anonymous questionnaire to complete about their experience of school and friendships and bullying of any kind. Finally I completed a Thematic Analysis of the responses (a qualitative research method used in psychology) that allowed me to draw out the main themes and common element from the girls' words. The results of this analysis were fairly simple and the basis of the application I put forward to attract this Award.

Relational Aggression (RA) is seemingly prolific in schools and very difficult to include in anti-bullying policy–making, as so much of the harm done is dependant on the personality and individual resiliency of both the perpetrators and victims. This type of aggression is most often cyclic in nature and irrevocably intertwined in the group nature of girls' relationships. It is not a new idea that girls define themselves by their relationships; that they attack each other using weapons designed to destroy each others' relationships; and that they emulate character traits they perceive as most socially effective. Girls as a rule, use their relationships as a weapon; and the girls who could be described as having behaviour problems were susceptible, even more so than the 'good girls,' to threats to their relationships through RA.

The conversations I had with girls, particularly in Years 8 and 9, suggested that the girls' defined themselves by the relationships that they had, in particular, with their female friends or their boyfriends. They had very little sense of self, and the girls who agreed to participate in clinical assessments often had clinically significant levels of depression. It was this that first raised my levels of concern, as youth depression is becoming more and more apparent, and its manifestation is becoming more and more varied. It is one of my concerns that youth depression in girls is starting to look like conduct disorder, as girls become more desperate, more hysterical, self-harming and performing riskier and riskier behaviours around substance abuse, violence and promiscuity. At the beginning of 2008, four girls had already been suspended for physical violence; their behaviour while they were escorted to the Principal's office was terrible, and unfortunately will be remembered for a long time.

These girls were clearly desperately unhappy, with chronically poor ideas about self-worth. They had never thought to analyse the quality, nor consider the pros and cons of maintaining sometimes very unhealthy relationships. Whenever any or all of their relationships were threatened, their whole world felt as if it was tumbling down around them. The very mechanism that makes 'gang' membership so powerful, the tantalising lure of belonging, makes the threat of exclusion hanging over their heads so very powerful. This is the power of RA. Adolescents, particularly girls, learn early on exactly how to hurt most effectively.

Focus of the Study

The focus of this study was to better understand the mechanisms of RA and to try to find different ways of combating it within a school setting. Originally I felt that the focus of my

research would lead to intervention at about the year 8 or year 9 age level as this was the group who accessed me the most. As part of my investigation, I established girls Circle Time groups whereby girls in years 7, 8, and 9 had the opportunity to openly and safely talk about their experiences with relational aggression and risk-taking behaviours like drinking and smoking. The primary issues that came up were confusion around identity, self-concept and self-esteem, combined with a propensity to accept any and all relationships as preferable to none. Depression and anxiety seemed equally apparent, and the girls cited difficulties in asserting their independence whilst still wanting to ask for guidance. Interestingly, they all acknowledged RA as a form of bullying, and, perhaps most importantly, echoed the research in the United States that surveyed children and adolescents about what hurt them most in schools. Universally, the young people describe the decimation of trust to be the most painful thing to ever happen to them. The bitching or back-stabbing and rumour-milling by supposed friends, hurt much more that fists or name-calling by the bullies on the play-ground ever could.

It was always my intention to combine two separate conferences, believing that I would glean different types of information from each that I could then transmute into possible intervention foci once back at my High School. The fist conference I attended was the Ophelia Project's 2008 conference that was held in Evanston, Illinois, United States of America. The conference was entitled 'The Bullying Crisis; exploring Dimensions of Relational Aggression'. The second conference I attended was held in Melbourne; the 7th Annual Australian and New Zealand Adolescent Health Conference entitled 'My Space, Your Space, Our Space: Exploring the Future of Adolescent Health Together."

The United States
The Ophelia Project's conference confirmed much of what the girls have told me themselves, but also highlighted how damaging this type of interpersonal behaviour can be:

- When children are victims of multiple forms of aggression, their risk for having adjustment problems increases (Craig & Peplar, 2003).
- Social rejection in elementary school is associated with later antisocial behaviour (Dodge, Lansford, Burks, Bates, Pettit, Fontaine & Price, 2003).
- Children who are victimized by relational aggression also experience higher levels of depression and loneliness (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996).
- Relational victimization has also been linked to anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem and depression (Austin & Joseph, 1996; Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Price, Sloman, Gardner, Gilbert,. & Rohde, 1994).
- Research has also found that youth being victimized have contemplated suicide (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000), and many other papers by these Australian researchers [see references].

Perhaps one of the most frightening revelations of the research that is being carried out, is the age at which relational aggression appears to start. Children as young as 3 and 4 years of age have been recorded at pre-school hurting each other by exclusion, taunting, and the forming of cliques. Nicki Crick and her team at the Crick Social Development Lab in Minneapolis, USA, have done extensive research into physical and relational aggression in the early years, even in the Pre-school age bracket.

Dr Charisse Nixon and her team through the Ophelia Project in Pennsylvania use the words 'trauma', 'post-traumatic stress', 'depression', 'anxiety', and 'discrimination' when describing victims of on-going relational aggression. So the research is telling us that children are struggling to relate to one another in positive ways. Dr. Alina Nikopoulous, the Counsellor at Haven Middle School in Evanston also commented on the difficulties that her students were having

figuring out how best to connect with one another. When one student is having an horrific time of life, how much easier must it be to make everyone else feel as bad, if not worse.

Research by Diana Baumrind tells us that most parenting styles can be viewed as one of four types: permissive, neglectful, authoritarian or authoritative. In the United States particularly, there seems to be a plague of well-meaning but misguided 'permissive' parenting that enables children to do what they like without any concern for consequences because 'Mummy and Daddy will sort it out'. Here, the phrase 'helicopter parenting' has been coined describing the hovering, over-protectiveness that such permissive parenting styles often manifest as, resulting in children who have no abilities to recover from unfortunate situations – in other words, have no understanding of resiliency or problem-solving.

Melbourne

The intention of my attending the conference in Melbourne was more about the fall-out of RA, and the challenges of youth depression. I was made aware, during my time in the US, of the proclivity of RA to encompass severe cyber-bullying. The Melbourne conference opened my eyes to an utterly new way of seeing the world and the technology we now have access to, that challenges perceptions of borders, communication and even language. It examined topics relating to young people and crime; violence prevention; maintaining relationships for children and young people with chronic illness; barriers to help-seeking for young people; utilising technology within the arts; what is meant by communication; the organic nature of the creation of young people's own language, that of abbreviated text messages; the amount of fascinating information I learnt was phenomenal. My only regret was that of having to be in one place at the one time, when multiple lectures were held simultaneously. The amount of information from the lectures I did actually attend will take me years to assimilate.

According to the conference, the 'youth' or 'young people' see the world as their community. They are online, in chat rooms, on social networking websites. I was talking to a young man who described growing up as one of the two 'goths' in Ballarat. The other one was a 'loser', so he found an entire network of people who loved and shared the same music online. It didn't matter to him WHERE they were, only what they liked and shared and compared. Yet I can almost guarantee that his school counsellor, teachers and parents were probably worried sick about his 'social skills' and 'depression' and that his music was 'some sort of rebellion'. He now, by the way, is considered one of the most successful young people in Australia in his field working at the ABC and specialising in alternative music. He was a pleasure to talk to and an entertaining public speaker. In his wisdom, he found a new way to be the person he wanted to be.

In our 'Western Society' it is ever important to 'pursue dreams', 'be the best you can be', and generally, work hard to achieve the lifestyle that will make you 'happy,' presumably collecting ever more material possessions. In schools we teach children to pursue individual excellence and reward them for it. But what if we didn't? What if we instead considered that a community is a network of relationships; that we all have skills and talents that can mesh with the skills and talents of others in order to create a society that functions better, and that actually fulfils our most basic needs of belonging, feeling that whether we exist or not actually matters to our community, that we have something important to contribute – ourselves. How much more powerful might that be to a generation of young people who have grown tired of our world of geographic boundaries? Our schools still view the brain as the repository of information; but young people know that there is a much better and efficient machine designed to do just that in their phone, on their PC, and even these days on their televisions. Information can be sourced anywhere – what is it that the human brain can actually do better than the technology we have created? The importance of this different way of looking at the world leaks into every aspect of

who we are. These young people who listen with disdain to what we try to teach them, nevertheless require guidance. Contrary to their opinions, they don't have all the answers. There are still some things that simple human experience can answer better than a computer.

My conclusions and challenges as a result of this research

I believe that not enough is expected of children and young people. I believe they have been coddled and cosseted long enough. I believe that children and young people need to have a voice, to have something to believe in and that they can and indeed currently are, changing the world. During the conference in Melbourne I heard many different presenters, researchers and workers in the field of adolescence all talking about a new way to view the world. They talked endlessly about the world free from geographic barriers where young people don't go to find out information, they go to start a conversation, to engage, enquire and become involved. This world I am talking about, we call the Internet. According to researchers, young people are almost always interacting with some form of technology, whether it is their i-pod, mobile phone, computer, television, home phone or stereo. The time they spend online is interesting too – not for the amount, but for what it is they are looking at. Young people are not interested in information for information's sake. They want to engage with their information, ask questions, leave a blog and generally be a part of the information process. They want to affect the world, have a voice that is heard, and connect with others in a way that doesn't require the latest fashions, or getting rid of their stutter. Online they can be whomever they are without pretence. It is important that schools understand this. We spend so long on programs trying to improve the 'social skills' of the students we have but can't acknowledge that there is more than one form of friendship, more than one type of relationship. The most important issue, to my mind, is the disintegration of what it means to have a relationship; it requires giving and taking, a two-way system. Relationships exist between students, but also between staff and students, between teachers and the executive, between the varied members of the school community. We need to learn how to have healthy relationships, we need to distance ourselves from others who make us feel bad about ourselves, and have the faith in ourselves to figure out which piece of the puzzle we actually represent – in other words where it is that we belong. More importantly, schools need to hear the 'voice' of their students because these guys want to take on the world. They want to explain their opinion, and argue, and question and effect change.

The Challenges

In trying to formulate some coherent response to all that I have learnt over the last few weeks, I have come up with a 'wish-list' of projects that I would like to undertake that I feel would suitably utilize the knowledge that I have amassed. Firstly I would like to re-visit the Peer Mediation program, incorporating aspects of restorative practices. I think that Peer Mediation could be a highly effective way of listening to the student voice at Gymea Technology High School and allowing them to effect change within the school. I would love to encourage better interconnectedness and a real sense of community through the opportunity to debate and to create and analyse surveys of the school community, and allow student–driven insights into potential social clubs and groups. I have found a girls program that looks specifically at relationships called M-Power Girls written by a company called the Stride Foundation that operate primarily in Victoria and South Australia. I intend to run two trial groups, a Year 8 and a Year 9 one next year. I intend to return to my favourite format, that of 'Circle Time' and withdraw the Year 10 girls as they were my original Year 8 group and challenge them with a discussion about 'Ladette' behaviour – what do they really think about it and how prevalent is such extreme anti-social behaviour by groups of girls?

Youth depression is a beast we have yet to fully understand. It can manifest itself in multiple ways, many of which result in anti-social behaviour. It is difficult to have compassion for

perpetrators of violent, drug-fuelled attacks on the world we live in and even more difficult to comprehend as adults the perceptions that have led to that rage. For all the progress of the gender equality in the last century, the fact that increasingly such attacks are perpetrated by young women has alarmed and frightened the media and consequently the population. Assertiveness is good, but drunkenness, promiscuity and physical violence in our girls is deemed to affect the moral fabric underpinning our society. More work needs to be done to help young women rediscover their intuition, their instinct. We need young women to find a better sense of self – warts and all, to find acceptance and the peace to make better decisions. We have an opportunity to re-think the purpose of the classroom, and perhaps even let go of the notion that within our schools, students need to learn facts and truth and the way of our forefathers. Global voices, communities in need, and young women becoming more 'thug-like' than the young men; I just keep coming back to the phrase 'it takes a village…'; and what are our schools if not part of that village?

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