

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

The Method of SharedConcern: A Positive Approach to Bullying in Schools

by Ken Rigby

Victoria, AU: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011, 152 pages.

ISBN: 9781742860077 (paperback)

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Fuelled by news media coverage of school violence, the topic of bullying has enjoyed tremendous attention in educational scholarship, professional development for pre-service and in-service teachers, and school administration over the past several years. Articles, books, programs, policies, scholarly articles, and “experts” abound. Arguably, bullying has become an over-researched topic. As one school administrator told me a few years ago, the last thing schools need is yet more research on bullying. When I received Ken Rigby’s *The Method of Shared Concern: A Positive Approach to Bullying in Schools* (2011), I viewed it with a healthy dose of skepticism, despite knowing that Rigby is one of the world’s foremost researchers on bullying.

The Method of Shared Concern describes a multistage process by which a trained practitioner interviews suspected bullies and targets of bullying. Individual interviews lay the groundwork for eventually bringing all parties together to propose solutions that are offered by the students rather than imposed upon them by the practitioner. Rigby argues that the emphasis of anti-bullying efforts must be to promote “positive interpersonal relationships” (p. xiii). Based on a program developed by Swedish psychologist Anatol Pikas, the method is employed in several Anglo-Western countries around the world, including Canada.

The book is not aimed toward scholars, but rather toward teachers and school counsellors. It is written in clear, accessible language, and is organized usefully into three

broad sections. Part 1 explores what is generally meant by terms whose meanings are often taken for granted, such as “bullying.” Rigby suggests that bullying is a systemic and intentional abuse of power in interpersonal relationships. He cites Canadian scholars Debra Pepler and Wendy Craig, whose work explores the notion of bystanders. Pepler and Craig received a New Initiatives grant through the federal government’s Networks of Centres of Excellence to create a national and interdisciplinary anti-bullying initiative called *Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence* (PrevNet.ca). Broadly put, they assert from their research that most students who witness bullying do not intervene. Like Pepler and Craig, Rigby focuses on fostering healthy interpersonal communication and dynamics.

The second section of the book describes how the method works. Specifically, Rigby outlines the purpose of individual meetings and how they should unfold, and the possible pitfalls that could undermine success. For example, instead of teaching and preaching, practitioners should strive to learn how the suspected bully views the situation. Doing so requires employing skills of active listening, such as asking questions that clarify and probe, and paraphrasing to confirm understanding. A meeting with groups of suspected bullies eventually takes place to create an agreed upon plan of action and a satisfactory outcome. A summit meeting is then held, where the practitioner facilitates a discussion with suspected bullies and the target in order to end the bullying and establish acceptable relations in the short and long term. Examples of how such interviews may unfold are provided, which give a good sense of how the theory can be put into practice. The optimal timespan for the entire process to unfold is eight days.

Part 3 focuses on evaluating the method and implementing it in a school. Rigby compares the method with other approaches, such as discipline, mediation, strengthening the victim, and restorative practice. He concludes that a major strength of the method of shared concern over the other approaches is that it is more likely to “ensure a safe outcome for victims” (p. 96). Rigby also claims that changing the hearts of the suspected bullies is a distinct possibility because they are not forced to comply with an imposed solution. Rigby does not disavow other methods entirely but instead suggests that they can be useful as supplementary strategies. This section also provides a detailed discussion on how to establish support among teachers and administrators for bringing the method into a school, why the method should be taught to pre-service teachers, and even how the method might have implications for world peace.

Rigby acknowledges that the method is time-consuming and requires specialized training. I do not doubt that it is useful in addressing bullying situations. Perhaps the focus on “situations” is precisely why I am doubtful about its broader-range implications. More than being a factor of interpersonal dynamics, bullying also reflects social fears of particular forms of difference. It is no accident, for instance, that the ways that students bully each other magnify social anxieties about race, gender, sexuality, and body image, among other characteristics. Students who are targeted for bullying tend to be those whom their peers deem to be different in socially significant ways. For instance, many boys are called “fag” and “queer,” and many girls are called “fat” and “slut.” Furthermore, adults bully each other and often get away with it. Students can see, for instance, how media celebrities such as Simon Cowell, Gordon Ramsay, and Donald Trump have made bullying a very lucrative enterprise. Thinking of bullying as a much more engrained aspect of contemporary culture suggests that the method of shared concern is limited by the theory of bullying on which it is based. Rigby’s volume is a valuable resource for educators, and the method is a demonstrably effective practice, but I cannot help but believe that the social phenomenon of bullying will persist regardless, in schools and out.