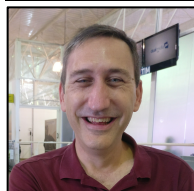# Bullying and interpersonal conflict from a "dialogic event" perspective

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Abstract

Through discussions in class meetings of "concrete situations" experienced by students in their lived experience in and out of the classroom, educators have been encouraged to guide students to understand how bullying applies to their lives, and to learn the degree to which bullying is present or absent in their relationships with their peers (Olweus, 1993). In observations of and interviews about the class meetings at a private, progressive U.S. middle school, student and teacher discourses in response to students' interpersonal dynamics are found to exist within separate, parallel universes. The teachers' discourse universe presumes that the lived experience of students can be understood through and guided by abstract, Kantian-like moral universal imperatives – specifically, the imperative to "feel good" and the imperative not to bully. These imperatives supplant dialogue on the events of students' experiences toward a focus on who the students are becoming rather than who they are now. This discourse of "half-being" maps the students' experiences upon what is known, predictable, universal, unsurprising and imagined, and assumes that students are not fully responsible for their own or each other's well-being. By contrast, the students' discourse on their interpersonal dynamics is characterized by Bakhtin's (1993) notion of "being-as-event" discourse, which is highly contextualized, unpredictable, and focuses upon everyone's responsibility to ongoing dramatic and ontologically charged events (either immediate or recursive in nature). The students' discursive universe is conducive to dialogue, whereas the teachers' discursive universe supplants the students' messy, unpredictable and dialogically responsible discourse, thus arresting the possibility for teachers and peers to provide meaningful and authoritative guidance to dialogic events. The reasons for teachers' attraction to Kantian-like abstract moral universals as well as the consequences of the supplanting of students' event-filled discourse with the discourse of bullying are discussed.

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Introduction

"We will not bully other students; we will try to help students who are bullied; we will make a point to include students who are easily left out." Such are the classroom rules discussed in the context of class meetings in the Olweus anti-bullying program, a program which has been undertaken in schools all over the world (Limber, Nation, Tracy, Melton, & Flerx, 2004, p. 62; Olweus, 1993, p. 82). In this program, knowing about bullying and its consequences, defining what "bullying" is, and learning how to reduce the prevalence of bullying in the school are considered to be endpoints of these class meetings, with "concrete situations" experienced by students helping to uncover the presence or absence of bullying in the students' lives (Olweus, 1993).

The goal of this paper is to problematize the discourse of anti-bullying and its related techniques to explore what is left unaddressed by it. "Anti-bullying" is seen here as a modernist, moral universal educational "project" (cf. Sartre, 1963) for intervening in children's interpersonal conflicts. In Kantian-inspired moral education, ideas such as "one should not bully" are unquestionable principles achieved through following decontextualized universal moral principles which are not presumed to be readily found within children's lives without "determined and consistent" adult intervention (see Olweus, 1993, p. 71). The goal of anti-bullying campaigns, akin to that of a Kantian vision of education, is to supplant uninformed and "imperfect" desires with *informed, commonly-held, rational moral reasoning:* "Rather than simply choosing to satisfy our own desires, we should cultivate our capacity to set ends and choose between them, and respect our capacity as rational value-conferring beings" (Klas & Suprenant, 2012, p. xxii). In turn, students are expected to become better people in the future than they are now or would otherwise become.

In Kantian-inspired educational discourse, the engagement and reflection in class discussions on policies and rules with standards such as "one should not bully" is itself a virtuous and praiseworthy duty (Surprenant, 2012). As Løvlie has stated, initially quoting Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace* on the value of rational ideas:

> [Kant states:] 'Human virtue is always imperfect. For this reason, we must have a standard, in order to see how far this imperfection falls short of the highest degree of virtue' (Ak: 28:994) … Ideas are not figments of the brain, then, but inherent parts of a common moral and political household. In addition to ideas as standards of judgment they can be treated as ideals to be sought for in the future. At the very end of *Toward Perpetual Peace* we find the idea of peace [or anti-bullying – MPS] as "regulative" in the sense of a projected future to be approached in time. Kant thinks that the hope for universal peace [or anti-bullying – MPS] can actually serve as a motivation to bring it about (Ak: 8:386). In that sense ideas have force and are brought into play by our ability to imagine and project our dreams onto an impossible future situation (Løvlie, 2012, pp. 118-119)

The endpoint of the anti-bullying educational project is to impose a system of decontextualized, self-contained, universal rationality upon students, to presume that they will thus *become* more rational beings. The rational, modernist view of education underlying bullying "derives from the conviction that if man [sic] is not a wholly rational animal, he ought to be; and since he ought to be motivated solely by rational considerations, we might as well proceed as if he were" (Bettelheim, 1960, p. 69). The emphasis in anti-bullying on a rational, Kantian ideal is noted in the following conclusion from a study of adolescent girl friendship networks:

> Conflicts among girls need to be considered as possible acts of bullying rather than petty squabbles. Girls need to be aware that this may be the case and to have a repertoire of strategies they can use to address these issues… We need to understand why girls place such importance on their friendship bonds and why this can lead to the jealousy and suspicion leading to conflict (Besag, 2006, p. 549).

It is notable here how girls' "friendship bonds," "conflicts" or "petty squabbles," "jealousy," and "suspicion" – the substance of many girls' experiences with their peers – become the *means* to operationalize "bullying." What is notable in this discourse is an emphasis on the *ought-to* or the *ideal* rather than the realities of lived experience, the imperative to "imagine and project our dreams onto an impossible future situation" (Løvlie, 2012, p. 119). This oughtness discourse is well articulated by an unidentified anti-bullying researcher who stated in an interview: "'We have to think, "What is a good man or a good person? That's where we start. "What should a person be?" … I think you have to make some kind of dogmatic statement about what a person ought to be'" (Dixon, 2011, p. 186). Similarly, Olweus raises the work of addressing bullying to the level of a "fundamental democratic principle" expected to be agreed upon by teachers and students as important to uphold (Olweus, 1993, p. 48).

However, some of these idealistic *oughts* seem impossible to achieve and may also be undesirable for many children. For example, in the case of the push to promote the rule "You Can't Say You Can't Play" among the kindergarten "play bosses" in the US preschool educator Vivian Paley's (1992) classroom, the "play bosses" argued that the effort to include everyone (especially the excluded children) in their friendship networks did not "feel good" and made them "sad" (Matusov & Smith, 2009a, pp. 264-265). Despite this, Paley imposed an inclusion rule on the children, noting that once she discussed it with her kindergarten students and some older elementary students in the school, she was satisfied in the unilateral certainty of her resolve:

> Sarah [Paley's teacher aide – MPS] and I can't believe that the transition to the new rule is so straightforward and easy. 'You can't say you can't play' has been in place for a week and there are only minor mishaps, quickly resolved. It is indeed a ladder out of the trap we've been in. Exclusion is still practiced, of course, but when it is someone will say 'You forgot the rule,' or a teacher will be brought over to say it. What joy to be rid of the burden of indecision" (Paley, 1992, p. 93).

Paley's idealistic hope that social inclusion will be practiced among her students appears to guide her decisions, as well as a deep-seated belief of what ought to be rather than what is. This may well be the only explanation for how she could claim success while at the same time reporting that her children continue to socially exclude each other. Note below a similar degree of idealistic oughtness, as noted in the bolded text below, in a bullying researcher's arguments for ensuring the success of anti-bullying efforts:

> …**reducing the frequency of all aggressive interactions** would likely reduce the frequency of bullying interactions at the extreme of the continuum. Alternatively, **pulling more children into the friendship networks of the classroom** would increase the likelihood that aggressive peer interactions, when they occur, will be among friends and so easier to resolve. It might be possible to diminish the frequency with which aggressive interactions escalate into bullying by **increasing the successful resolution of peer conflicts before these escalate.** Finally, it might be possible to discourage intimidation by **equalizing the distribution of power in a classroom** or providing the classroom's students with a protective sense of confidence. Thus, the continuum

suggests that there might be multiple alternative pathways towards controlling bullying within a classroom (Doll, Song, & Siemers, 2004, p. 164).

What is notable here are idealistic visions of who a child *should* be rather than who they are now. It is questionable to what degree any of these goals are achievable outside of a *totalitarian* vision of education. By totalitarian, I mean the excessive presence of discourse characterized by *tertium non datur* (Bakhtin, 1999), by which I mean the idea that all particularities of existence can be understood as the negation or affirmation of a particular truth: the student is either "bullying" or "not bullying." Modernist, moral universal discourse assumes it has a *perfect* answer to resolve social conflict, and it employs the technical concept of bullying to attempt to realize a fantastic vision of social relations among the students. But how realistic (or even desirable) is it for students to be free from discomfort, aggression and even exclusivity in friendships?

Anti-bullying education is also concerned with lofty goals and ambitions for the betterment of children's peer relations. Such goals can include **"for children to feel safe and valued at school, and to have friends**," a goal which "does not simply equate to the absence of bullying behaviours," but rather implies "a **qualitatively different pattern of relating to that witnessed during bullying**" (Dixon, 2011, p. 187). Yet another ideal expressed in anti-bullying initiatives is to take advantage of the "ideal time" in elementary school "to instill **anti-violence values and peaceful conflict strategies** within all students" (Horne, Orpinas, Newman-Carlson, & Bartolomucci, 2004, p. 300). Such goals hold questionable applicability to children's social interactions, which are frequently characterized by exclusivity. The achievement of such ideals may require unilateral enforcement to be achieved over objections and concerns from the children who are targeted by them.

Decontextualized moral universals may thus regularly lead to projects to influence and control the lives of students which fail to fully consider the power and control which underlie their techniques (Bettelheim, 1960). Much anti-bullying research appears to unproblematically assume that "the teacher is the natural leader of the group" (Olweus, 1993, p. 88), who can and should continually surveil "risk areas," such as certain areas of the playground (Olweus, 1993, p. 73). Some anti-bullying researchers (cf. Dixon, 2011; Rodkin, 2004; Schott and Søndergaard, 2014b) have indeed noted that the field has been dominated by a behavioral orientation which has given too much emphasis to bullying as a conscious, intentional abuse of power rather than a sometimes unconscious by-product of group dynamics (cf. Lewin, 1943). They have noted that Olweus clearly calls for the need for two "units of analysis" in the study of bullying: the unit of analysis of the group and of the individual (Olweus, 1993). However, either an individual or group-focused unit of analysis can still be an effort at social engineering which can ignore the influence of unilaterally imposed classroom management techniques themselves in the development of aggressive peer climates (cf. Lewin, Lippit & White, 1939). The prevalence of monologically imposed instructional demands may also play a role in peer aggression. For example, "erratic and inconsistent marking of students' work" has been argued to "contribute to a climate that makes [bullying] more likely to occur" (Galloway & Roland, 2004, p. 38). Heightened degrees of horizontal peer aggression could also be a response to a "crisis" or weakness in vertical teacher authority to uphold arbitrary demands (Graebner, 1990; Sidorkin, 2002). There is indeed a provocative literature on peer aggression from the 1930s, which noted a decrease in horizontal peer aggression and scapegoating among boys as a result of a change in the dynamics of authoritarian-run informal afterschool programs toward greater democratic decision-making (Lewin et al., 1939).

To address concerns with the imposition of unilateral power onto the students in anti-bullying programs, researchers and educators have attempted to turn more power over to the peer group to address social conflict in the classroom setting. As a result, some anti-bullying educators advocate for student-led

class meetings during which discussions of bullying are expected to become a "natural and important topic" (Olweus, 1993, p. 89) which will emerge in the meeting and become authoritative for the students. Researchers have also recommended utilizing peer support programs and peer mediator programs to reduce instances of bullying (Rigby, Smith, & Pepler, 2004) since students are argued to be more direct participants in the peer culture and are more intimately familiar with the peer environment than the teachers (Pepler, Craig, O'Connell, Atlas, & Charach, 2004, p. 137). However, concern has been raised among some educators that insufficient vertical adult authority is present in peer mediation programs (Rigby et al., 2004). Furthermore, utilizing peers has been found to result in increased victimization and some students who experience bullying have not preferred such approaches (Mishna, 2012). What is notable here is that the alternatives to addressing bullying are portrayed as a "pendulum swing" between vertical adult-led control (surveillance, imposition of rules) or horizontal child-led control (peer mediation) (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996). Collaborative and community of learners approaches, which would be more conducive to generating teacher-student and student-student dialogue, are not readily considered, most likely because they are not as familiar to students or teachers (Rogoff, Turkanis, & Bartlett, 2001).

Another critique that can been levied against anti-bullying efforts, as in other modernist projects of moral education, is that they tend to prioritize rationality over emotionality for well-being (cf. Bettelheim, 1960). As will be discussed further in this paper, this prioritization appears to be due to a desire to sanitize the lived reality of students in order to promote safety and management of risk. Bullying discourse may sanitize students' lived reality by *reframing* the problems of children's peer relations *away from more taboo topics* that may generate controversy, concern, or emotional discomfort among students, teachers, parents, and/or the public to discussions focused on the rational definition of bullying itself. Some bullying researchers have indeed raised concerns that sensitively addressing issues of peer relations in school may sometimes require exploring more thorny and taboo issues with students, such as stigmatization (Dixon, 2011), "forms of abuse such as sexual harassment, dating aggression, workplace harassment, and marital, child, and elder abuse" (Mishna, 2012, p. 24), class inequalities (Due et al., 2009), teacher bullying or victimization of low-achieving, or low-motivated students (Delfabbro et al., 2006), the anxiety associated with social exclusion (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014b), or politically-charged bullying against non-mainstream groups (Barchay, 2018). It has also been noted that bullying programs fail to directly address feelings of shame, given the fact that expressing this emotion in public (even with therapists) is taboo, as it is associated with weakness, childishness, and social exclusion (Best, 2016). In turn, children and adults tend to act out inappropriately rather than face their shameful feelings. This has led to some scholars arguing that what is called bullying could be best thought of as a form of "weaponized shame" (Best, 2016, p. 7).

I argue here that anti-bullying initiatives reframe the complexity of student discourse around a single universal topic, bullying, instead of addressing such ontologically charged "hot topics" of concern within the interpersonal relations of children, teenagers, and young adults. Since the concept supposedly has universal application and relevance, anti-bullying discourse can engender discussions on interpersonal issues that do not address the specifics of lived events in children's lives, thus prioritizing lessons that stay "on script" and do not delve into unexpected issues for which teachers may be unprepared (Kennedy, 2005). Through anti-bullying discourse, as will be noted from the results of this study, teachers can also prioritize safety and comfort over unpredictable (and sometimes uncomfortable) investigations of the lived experience of students.

After presenting my analysis of the anti-bullying efforts at an innovative middle school, I will argue against the necessity for general, abstract moral universals – and universal epistemic notions of the truth in general (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2001) – in order for students to "learn" how to act morally in society and with each

other. From the Bakhtinian perspective developed in my analysis here, the notion that a child's lived experience can be mapped upon a set of predictable, known universal trajectories is highly problematic in that it does not fully recognize the unfinalizability of the concrete other and the dialogic nature of our lived relations with each other. Application of epistemic thinking to social relations – which "concerns universals and the production of knowledge which [are] invariable in time and space, and which [are] achieved with the aid of analytical rationality" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp. 55-56) – could in fact lead to an over-procedural and totalitarian utopianism, concerns raised by those who have tried to apply Habermas' ideas to social problems (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Authoritative moral universal discourse like anti-bullying also appears to block the testing of important ethical issues within internally persuasive discourse and students' (and teachers') emergent and ever-changing responsibility to others within dialogue (Morson, 2004).

My analysis of student discourse within the class meetings of a progressive, private middle school in the United States below presents an alternative approach developed from Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic event which does not presume the need for universal moral discourse to address interpersonal conflict. In the conclusion of this study, I will return to my concern with the validity of moral universal discourse for sensitively and meaningfully addressing human relations.

Purpose of this study

This research focuses upon the *parallel discourse universes of teachers and students* in response to interpersonal events in a school setting. The patterns in discourse were serendipitously discovered from qualitative analysis of observations of class meetings at a small, progressive, private elementary and middle school I call here the Creative Learning Center (CLC). CLC is located in a suburban college town in a mid-Atlantic U.S. state. The class meetings were initially analyzed for the purpose of a broader study on pedagogical dialogue; since the focus was on pedagogical rather than informal dialogue, I observed the formal curricular spheres of the school day, rather than informal events such as recess and lunch (Smith, 2011).

The data collected for this study included both interviews and observations during the 2006-2007 school year within two multiage classrooms at the school, grade 5/6 (called "Group 3" at the school) and Grade 7/8 ("Group 4"). I was encouraged by the teachers in an initial interview in September 2006 to observe the school's "Choices" life-skills classes, among other classes, since I would be able to observe the role of dialogue in the school as they saw it. The Choices class was held weekly and was designed for students to give advice to each other about interpersonal issues as well as general life concerns, including issues in their lived experience relating to friendship issues, family issues, sexuality or puberty. Similar to what is recommended by Olweus (1993), the teachers utilized the student-led class meetings as a forum upon which to "intervene… in a determined and consistent way" to hold "discussions upon bullying" with the students (Olweus, 1993, pp. 71, 88).

In the analysis of the class meetings, the teachers' discourse is characterized by Kantian-like abstract moral universals, while the students' parallel discourse is characterized by what I term "ontological dialogic event discourse." Unlike bullying discourse, this latter discourse takes seriously the lived experience of students and trusts that through dialogue participants can take responsibility for their own and each other's actions, making it possible for everyone to transcend troublesome (and sometimes highly recursive) ontological circumstances they have experienced with one another. The notion of ontology I refer to here emerged within existentialism in the 19th century (Heidegger & Stambaugh, 1996) and differs from a metaphysical approach to ontology primarily concerned with the origins of being and of the universe ("Ontology," 1989). By *ontological* dialogue, I mean that our responsible deeds and the relations in the world emerging from our participation in never-ending dialogue *define our existence and the world we create with*

others (Matusov, 2009); through such dialogue, participants can transform what is given in the world through their efforts or deeds in concrete, situated action (Sartre, 1963). Through my analysis of the Choices class meetings, I note how the teachers' modernist, Kantian-like discourse existed within a "parallel discursive universe" from the students' dialogic event-focused discourse on their interpersonal conflicts, and *supplanted and sanitized* the students' messy, unpredictable and dialogically responsible discourse focused upon "events of being" (Bakhtin, 1999). A major purpose of this comparison is to explore the value and the authoritativeness of concepts emerging within the students' ontological event discourse and the teachers' abstract moral universal discourse for both the students and the teachers.

Setting for the data

The CLC is a small, private elementary and middle school with 90 students located in a predominantly middle class, suburban area located in a mid-Atlantic U.S. state. The name of the school, its location, and the names of all participants in the study are pseudonyms. There are approximately 20-25 students in each class in the school, which the school calls "Groups." Each Group is multi-aged, comprised of two grades; there are 2 teachers in each Group, one of whom usually teaches math and science, the other writing and reading. Within each group, some lessons are broken into individual grade groups – notably in math, science, writing and reading. However, class meetings and social science are regularly whole Group lessons (involving two grades and two teachers). In this study, I focus on the "Group 3" (Grade 5/6) and "Group 4" (grade 7/8) classes. In the 2006-2007 school year, there were 23 students in Group 3 (15 boys and 8 girls) and 21 students in Group 4 (11 girls and 10 boys). One female student in Group 3 had to be omitted from the data because her parents refused permission for the study.

Demographics of the school

The ethnic composition of the school reflects the predominantly Caucasian population in the immediate area; the suburban city in which the school is located is 87.3% Caucasian, according to 2000 U.S. Census data (http://quickfacts.census.gov, accessed 23 October 2010). The tuition of the school in the 2006-2007 school year was about $7,500 per year. This places the school's tuition at about the nationwide average at the time for elementary-level private school tuition (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Compared to its nonsectarian school peers (with an average tuition of $15,945 in 2007-2008), CLC's tuition is considerably lower than average. The school keeps down tuition by having students do "jobs" for the last 15 minutes of the day such as putting away books or sweeping the entryway. Parents also perform jobs for the school or can opt out of these jobs by paying an additional fee.

The history of the school

The school was founded in 1971 as a parent co-operative, and like many schools at the time, the curriculum was heavily influenced by ideas to have students to explore their own interests rather than be controlled solely by the teacher (Dennison, 1970; Holt, 1964, 1970, 1972). While it quickly established itself as a more conventional school, it holds many practices in common with progressive schools. Indeed, the desire of the school to be categorized as "a progressive school" was confirmed by a more recent visit to the school by Eugene Matusov with Russian educator Alexander Lobok (Matusov, personal communication, October, 2018). At CLC, there is no grading of students' work, but rather quarterly narrative-based written evaluations made of the students' performance from the teachers' point of view. Any homework that is assigned is designed to be, in the words of one teacher who was interviewed for prior research, "specifically targeted and meaningful," or as a former student of the school described it, "minimal" but "constructive and helpful." The school environment is also more informal than most conventional schools. For example, students refer to their teachers by their first names. Graduates of the school, when going to more conventional high schools in the area, find themselves to be different from peers in that they have developed

a love for learning (Matusov, DePalma, & Smith, 2010). The school has also specialized in educating students with mild autistic spectrum disorders, notably Asperger's syndrome (see Smith, 2011 for more information).

The teachers

The four teachers observed and interviewed for the bigger study on pedagogical dialogue upon which this study is based were the Group 3 teachers Melinda and Steve, and the Group 4 teachers Karen and Ralph. Melinda regularly teaches math, science, reading and spelling. During the summers, she works as an instructor for a teacher development organization which provides mathematics education training workshops for in-service teachers. Ralph, Melinda's husband, never had formal training in teacher education, and graduated from a local university with degrees in aerospace engineering and anthropology. He joined CLC's teaching ranks in its first year, and is particularly passionate about science. He also regularly leads Group 3 and Group 4 students in combined history lessons. Steve and Karen are siblings, and both specialize in teaching writing. Karen was trained as a social worker, and went back to college to obtain a degree in elementary education. She taught at CLC from 1991-1997 and returned in 2006. Besides teaching writing, Karen also regularly teaches reading classes. Steve started teaching at the school in 1998. He learned of the school from his sister, and started working at the school in its child care program. Steve is a camp counselor during the summers, an avid off-road bicyclist, and a writer. In his writing classes, he shares many stories with his students about the outdoor adventures of himself and his campers. Steve also teaches social science and politics lessons.

Data collection

Throughout the 2006-2007 school year, approximately 20-30 interviews were conducted with teachers, 15 interviews with students, 30 observations of Group 3 lessons, and 20 observations of Group 4 lessons. Most interviews were conducted with teachers during the school day, and were not formally arranged. In seven instances with students, I pulled groups of students out of the classroom to conduct interviews about my observations. Most other interviews with the students were very short, and were conducted in between lessons, just before lunch, or at the end of the school day.

Lessons were videotaped with one video camera. I also carried a pocket-sized digital audio recorder to record teachers' and students' comments during the lessons and to conduct pre-arranged and impromptu interviews with students and teachers. When observations attracted my attention, I conducted post-observational interviews with students and teachers. I showed the transcripts of the lessons to the students and teachers and asked for their comments. I was particularly interested in *events* of "internally persuasive discourse" within the lessons at the school (Bakhtin, 1999). I operationalized IPD as a search for and testing of "the boundaries of personally-vested truths" within pedagogical dialogue, in which everything becomes "dialogically tested and forever testable" (Morson, 2004, p. 319), including everyone's responsibility to their own and one another's ideas and values (Bakhtin, 1999).

Students and teachers were interviewed separately because I came to suspect that the students would not frankly discuss the events in the transcripts with the teachers present, and vice-versa. Students more frankly and openly discussed the events of their lives when they were aware that no teachers could hear them, and when they were discussing issues of ontological significance with their peers. Teachers frequently discussed concerns with specific students in a low voice, as they were apparently concerned about the students hearing their evaluations. In interviews with the teachers, I asked them to describe what they liked and did not like in the particular lesson, the typical nature of what was observed, what they would like to improve in the lesson, and why they made certain decisions in the lessons. Students were asked to

describe what they learned in the particular lesson, what they thought of the lesson in general (whether they liked or disliked it), what they thought of the school in general, and what suggestions they would make for the teachers. Because the bigger study focused on pedagogical dialogue and authority, I also asked specific questions to the teachers and the students about the presence or absence of dialogue in lessons. I was also interested particularly in comments that the students made about the teachers' demands, what they thought of these demands, and why they followed them.

When formally interviewing participants, I presented transcripts of class observations related to a topic of interest that emerged within the data. When conducting more formalized student interviews, in three instances, I invited specific students for an interview during the school day because there was an event of interest that I wished to discuss with them. The students were selected because, from the transcript, I sensed that these particular students were the most involved in the issue or the lesson. However, friends of these students would also regularly request to come along, which I encouraged. Except in one instance, this practice led to an unexpected intimacy in the interviews, which also revealed differences in perspective across different peer groups in the school. These relational dynamics between the students became especially important for analysis of the Choices life skills class. The students ended up talking about the lessons, the teachers, and their peers in more or less the same way that they would discuss the issues among themselves, with one notable exception: the students were, at times, cautious to reveal the names and identities of students with whom they were having difficulties. This appeared to be a consequence of the practice during school lessons to be anonymous when referring to interpersonal issues.

Context: The Choices life skills class (class meetings) at CLC

In the Choices class at CLC, students are encouraged to give advice to each other about interpersonal issues raised mostly by their peers (the problems occur both in and out of school), as well as general life concerns, including issues relating to sexuality or puberty. As with many lessons in the school, particularly social studies and reading lessons, the students sit on the carpet, or on chairs or couches in the classroom. Unlike most lessons in the school, however, the Choices class is officially student-led. In the Choices class, students and teachers usually sit in a semicircle; the student moderator of the class sits at the apex of the semicircle. This student moderator leads the Choices lesson; his or her tasks include taking out and reading pre-written questions or comments out of the "Choices box," and then calling on students who raise their hands to respond to the question or comment.

Figure 1: Group 3 Choices class (November 10, 2006): Overview of setting and participants

Figure 1 shows a picture of a Group 3 (Grade 5/6) Choices lesson. The student moderator is sitting in a chair in front of the whiteboard (see the central arrow). Some students can be seen raising their hands to be called on by the moderator. One of the teachers, Melinda, is visible in front of the window on the left side (arrow on the left of the page). The other teacher, Steve, is sitting on the couch, out of the circle and out of the frame of the picture (see the arrow on the right side by the window).

During the November 10, 2006 Choices class, the majority of the questions in the Choices box were from the students themselves. Students could have placed these questions in the box at any time, although the Group 3 students had been asked by the teachers to write two questions at the beginning of the year so that there would always be questions for students to discuss in the Choices class. As the teachers noted in interviews, pre-written questions allow for the identities of the people who wrote the questions as well as the identity of anyone who is being referred to by the question to be hidden from public scrutiny. The teachers guide the students to write questions related to their peers in an ambiguous way; many questions asked in the box were written to anonymize the participants of the referred events with "someone," "everyone," and "people" as the subjects of the utterances. The Group 3 teachers also reported that they began in the 2006-2007 school year to regularly pre-screen the questions in the Choices box prior to the class in order to ensure, as Melinda stated, that "inappropriate stuff" which included situations "where the thing [incident] was described… [in which] the person's having problems with someone else in the class" were not revealed. Melinda was particularly concerned about a message related to a girl in Group 3 class which "was described so that it would be obvious who that person was" [Interview, Melinda, 2007-05-02]. These issues were sensitive enough that the student's participation in this study was not granted by her parents.

The discussion of the questions is mostly student-to-student, with minimal teacher involvement. The teachers participate mostly by raising their hands and being called on by the moderator, just like a student would be called upon to speak. The teachers also physically position themselves in the classroom to minimize their influence over the dialogue. As noted above, reading/writing teacher Steve is participating in the discussion from a corner of the room (which actually made it difficult for the student moderator to even see when his hand was raised). In interviews about the Choices class, the teachers discussed the value of giving students the floor to speak to each other:

> *Teacher Steve*: We want them to be hearing from each other, it's more important that they hear from each other, than it is from us, but it's also important that they're hearing from another adult besides their parents, [which is] giving some perspective on some very complex social issues. [Interview, Steve, 2006-11-27].

The teachers also stated that they sometimes write questions of their own for discussion and sometimes pose questions during the Choices discussion for student reflection. The teacher's questions seem to function to help guide students to discuss certain moral universals such as bullying and gossip. For example, on November 10, 2006, the question "What's gossip?" had been written by the teachers and the question "What's bullying?" was asked by the teachers in response to the ongoing student discussion.

Findings: The students' dialogic/ontological event universe: The dialogic event between Andrew and Ben

During the November 10, 2006 Choices class, after a discussion of two questions that were pulled from the Choices box, Andrew spontaneously raised his hand and stated that he had to tell the class something that was bothering him. The discussion which followed was unusual in that everyone listening knew undoubtedly that *Andrew* was having a problem:

> *Andrew*: I have something to say.
> [Danny, the student moderator of the Choices class, points to Andrew]
> *Andrew*: Well, sometimes in [American] football, when I make a mistake, people start
>   yelling at me, and it kind of makes me feel bad…
> [Group 3, Choices class, 2006-11-10]

As is evident in the voicing of his concerns, Andrew followed the anonymizing norm of the Choices class not to reveal the identity of the person or people with whom he was concerned (stating that "people" are "yelling" at him). Later on in this class, he noted that these "people" had been telling him, "What were you thinking!? Don't catch a pass if you don't think you're able to catch it!"

In my judgement, Andrew's utterance to the Choices class is an ontologically relevant problem – i.e., a problem which deeply affects/bothers Andrew and his local relations – for which Andrew demands other students to take responsibility. The tone of his utterance "I have something to say" sounds as if Andrew needs *urgently* to say something to significant others here-and-now. Andrew's relations with others in the class appear, based on my unsystematic observations, to be strained, and the teacher Melinda stated that one student even complained to his mother about Andrew annoying him at school. Furthermore, the teacher Steve stressed the amount of effort that the teachers had been making to address Andrew's emotional and relational needs.

Just under five minutes after Andrew's initial utterance, Ben, who is a new student in the school and who appears to be still unfamiliar with the anonymizing norms of the Choices class, responds to Andrew in a conversational, honest and forthcoming way. His approach violates the anonymizing norm of Choices class set by the teachers not to directly address anyone to whom he refers. Ben directly and sympathetically demands Andrew to take responsibility for his own problem, situating the problem within a familiar chain of ontologically charged and meaningful *events* in Ben, Andrew and other students' daily lives within the school to which he, Andrew and others are responsible and interested participants. Furthermore, Ben addresses Andrew's problem in such a way that he admits that he himself personally has experienced it:

> *Ben*: Andrew, I mean this like in like no offense, but sometimes *you* yell at other people,
>   and then they start yelling at *you,* and I know how it feels. Like, when you get upset,
>   and it wasn't and [unclear - MPS] … and then if you yell at somebody 'cause they did
>   something wrong, and they start yelling back, and it gets kind of like, it doesn't feel
>   good. 'Cause like even though you're the one that started yelling, sometimes, like they
>   want to yell back. And then, when it happens, when *I* do it, it makes me upset, and I
>   end up always losing. Like, it… [Ben starts speaking softly as Andrew starts audibly
>   crying] [Group 3, Choices class, 2006-11-10]

Notice in the text above Ben's multiple uses of "you" rather than "people" or "someone," as expected by the anonymizing norm of the class. In the first two instances of the use of "you," Ben directly addresses Andrew. His later use of the term "you" – after uttering "Like, when you get upset" – could be taken as either as directly addressed to Andrew, or to a more general "we." It could be interpreted that Ben's direct addressing of "you" *blames* Andrew for the problem. In such a situation, there would be no dialogue possible, since the responsibility for the problem would rest *solely* on the individual's transgressions. However, what is notable here is that Ben makes an effort to address Andrew as one who has *equal rights in being* with others (Bakhtin, 1999).[1] There is a sense here that Ben desires and wants Andrew to respond to the utterance. He addresses Andrew from the beginning of the utterance in a friendly, respectful and

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[1] This does not imply, however, that the relations are symmetrical (Bakhtin, 1999).

conversational way, "Andrew, I mean this in like no offense…" When Ben notices that Andrew begins to cry during his utterance (this starts happening about midway through the utterance), he begins to shift his utterance from addressing Andrew to addressing himself, ostensibly to empathize with what Andrew is experiencing ("And then, when it happens, when *I* do it, it makes me upset, and I end up always losing"). Thus, rather than *blaming* Andrew in an "objectivizing" and "finalizing" way as a yeller or as a wimp (Matusov & Smith, 2007), it seems best to say that Ben *respects* Andrew while exploring Andrew's, and eventually others (including his own) *responsibility* for the problem. The teacher Steve expressed in an interview a few days after this event that he valued Ben's empathetic response:

> *Teacher Steve*: Part of what I think Ben was doing here was really focusing on his feelings, and you know, kind of, helping to reinforce this idea of empathy among the kids. It's important to be thinking about how Andrew was feeling right now [Interview, Group 3 teacher Steve, 2006-11-27].

Ben also analyzes Andrew's responsibility for the problem, analyzing *who caused* the pain that Andrew experienced (this is indicated by my underlining of the presence of 'cause – i.e., because –in the transcript above). First, Andrew *yells* at people. However, this is *because* someone *did something "wrong"* to Andrew, to which Andrew *yells* at them again. The problem, however, is furthered by the *yelling* that others make in response to Andrew. Yelling follows yelling, and Andrew, and potentially others, are hurt and frustrated. By the end of the utterance, Andrew has his head down, looking down at the floor, sobbing. Andrew's crying appears to be essentially a cathartic emotional response to Ben's sympathetic accusation that it was Andrew himself who must take at least partial responsibility for instigating the problems he received; this cathartic response appears to be a consequence of Ben having led Andrew out of an *ontological trap* (see the next section).

Figure 2: Group 3 Choices class, November, 10 2006: Andrew's cathartic crying in response to Ben's utterance. Andrew (underneath the arrow) has his head down, and is sobbing. Everyone appears to be directing their gaze at him, apparently expressing concern. While this scene is occurring, another student, George, has the floor, and is providing advice to Andrew.

The incident between Andrew and Ben is nicely illustrated by Bakhtin's (1993) notion of the "being-as-event" reality of human dialogic life. Events such as those discussed here between Andrew and Ben are highly contextualized and unpredictable and demand that everyone – the students themselves, their peers and friends, their teachers, their parents and siblings, school administrators, the media, bullying experts, and so on – focus upon their responsibility to them. Dialogue leads to engagement with others in a discourse "of ultimate questions and ultimate life decisions" (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 74), through which all participants can

assume *responsibility* for their own and one another's ideas and deeds, transforming their messy, situated and particular "unique places" in the world in response to others (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 53).

Ben draws attention to the fact that there is a conflict over responsibility to lived events. While Andrew claims that he is being *teased* on the field, Ben reevaluates and revoices this problem as Andrew being *frustrated* and *angry* when playing football. Ben is insisting that Andrew cannot have an "alibi in being" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 42), demanding that Andrew himself take responsibility for the problem; it is as if Ben is saying, "Andrew, I mean this like in like no offense, but sometimes you yell at other people, and you can't hide behind this idea that you are simply being teased. You must accept some responsibility for the problem." Since Ben has "surplus of vision" over Andrew (Bakhtin, Holquist, & Liapunov, 1990, p. 12), Ben's utterance could be seen as a "dialogic gift" to Andrew (see prior work analyzing Vivian Paley's classroom in Matusov & Smith, 2009a, 2009b). In the spirit of problematizing, Ben appears to have never intended his utterances to be the last word, but instead hopes that the Choices class will help Andrew to take responsibility for his deeds.

Later on, during the discussion of Andrew's problem in the Choices class, the teacher Steve asks questions which further expand the relational network of responsibility for Andrew's problem:

Teacher Steve: I just have a couple of clarifying questions for Andrew. One, is it a particular individual, or it is several people?
Andrew: It's like two or three.
Teacher Steve: Two or three. Is it the same people every time?
Andrew: Not always. But… well, usually it's like one or two… and then [?]
Teacher Steve: And is this something that happens on a regular basis, or when I'm not out there?
Andrew: It's usually when you're not out there, yeah.
[Group 3, Choices class, 2006-11-10]

While the specific persons responsible are not revealed, what is most interesting here is that the teacher Steve's responsibility for the problem is revealed, in that the problem is worse when he, a teacher, is not outside playing football with the students. This discussion shortly thereafter provokes Ben to yet again respond to the problem, further expanding the zone of responsibility for the problem:

Ben: I have two things, one, Andrew, what I said before, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings or anything. So, I'm sorry… Sometimes, sometimes, and I noticed, it's not just happening when Steve's [the teacher] not out there. 'Cause like, yeah, when Steve's *not* out there. 'Cause yesterday when Steve *was* out with us, when I fumbled that kick, D- [begins to state a students' name, but stops himself from doing so], or somebody, came up to me and said, hey Ben, that's OK, just next time don't go after the ball, don't go after the ball if you're not going to be able to catch it! [Group 3, Choices class, 2006-11-10]

Ben refers specifically to Steve's presence or absence on the field, the unnamed student's remarks to him yesterday, and so on. This utterance addresses *specific*, ongoing dramatic events in the lives of Ben himself and the others in the class, gaining its internal persuasiveness through referring to these events. The addressivity in Ben's utterances can be characterized as *being-with* others, addressing one's own and one another's responsibility for ongoing events. It is notable that Ben's discourse appears to be difficult to articulate without mentioning specific names (notice Ben needed to stop himself from revealing the name

of the student beginning with the letter "D," apparently to comply with the anonymizing classroom rule). Responsibility within ontological dialogic event discourse seems difficult to assert anonymously and may be truncated by the norms of anonymity within the Choices class.

Transcendence of ontological circumstances

One of the characteristic aspects of ontological event discourse is that it creates the opportunity for transcendence of one's ontological circumstances (Bakhtin, 1993, 1999). Ben has laid bare to Andrew and to others that Andrew's anger seems to cause his peers to be frustrated and strike back at him. The recursive nature of such a pattern – "yelling" when making a "mistake" on the field – can confine Andrew (and others) in an *ontological trap,* and Ben reveals to Andrew a way to get out of this trap. This is the "gift" of an outside perspective which "reveals… ontological conditions of one's being that provides an opportunity for the addressed person… to deal with his or her ontological confinement… and eventually transcend it" (Matusov, 2009, p. 238).

This possibility of transcendence of circumstances is evident five months after this Choices class in interview with Andrew, Ben, and other students, where the transcript of the Choices class discussion from earlier in the year was presented. Andrew responded solely to a general question to talk about "the Choices class when you brought up what happened on the football field":

> *Andrew*: …it prevented me from yelling at people, and made me understand why people yell at me.... It was what Ben said made me realize actually. Now everyone thinks I'm a *wuss*! [Interview, Group 3 students, 2007-04-06]

Ben's "dialogic finalization" thus seems to have touched Andrew in much the same way that Socrates is noted to have affected the recipient of his ideas like a torpedo fish paralyzes its prey (Matusov, 2009; Plato & Bluck, 1961).[2] Andrew's crying during the Choices class can be seen as a cathartic response to this provocative "torpedo touch" introduced by Ben (Matusov, 2009, p. 25). Because of Ben's utterance, Andrew can no longer innocently express that he is being teased on the football field, without recognizing his own responsibility for the problem. Ben's utterances seem to open up and problematize enquiry for Andrew, rather than to close it, as is evidenced by Andrew's reply that Ben's utterance appears to have helped him to "understand why people yell at me."

While Andrew seems to continue to struggle relationally with his peers at the end of the school year – notice particularly his concerns of being called a "wuss" – he appears to have been led by Ben out of an ontological trap with others. These "imprisoning ontological circumstances" (Matusov, 2009, p. 261) were characterized by Andrew starting to yell, making others yell back at him and become upset with him, thus furthering the relational tension between Andrew and the other students (which, in turn, gave Andrew a reason to become angry at and yell at his peers). If Ben had been accusatory of Andrew, without respecting him as having equal rights, Ben's utterance could have continued to mire Andrew (and others) into this ontological trap. Through the dialogic event with Ben, however, Andrew recognizes that these conditions are modifiable through his deeds.

A transformation of Andrew's deeds would have repercussions not only for Andrew but also for others. Such a change, over time, appears to have occurred between Andrew and another Group 3 student,

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[2] In the *Meno* dialogue, Plato writes, "if the torpedo fish is itself numb and so makes others numb, then I resemble it, but not otherwise, for I myself do not have the answer when I perplex others, but I am more perplexed than anyone when I cause perplexity in others. So now I do not know what virtue is; perhaps you knew before you contacted me, but now you are certainly like one who does not know. Nevertheless, I want to examine and seek together with you what it may be" (Plato & Bluck, 1961, p. 279).

Donald. While there is no direct evidence linking the transformation of Donald and Andrew's relationship to Ben's utterance, the connection is not out of the question. At the beginning of the school year, Melinda mentioned that Donald was significantly frustrated and angry with Andrew:

> *Teacher Melinda*: …Andrew, who's kind of on the outskirts, it's easy for the kids, Donald's made him a scapegoat a lot this year, and we've had to watch that. Donald's just very irritated with Andrew all the time; he goes home and complains to his mother... [Interview, Group 3 teacher Melinda, 2007-05-02]

Melinda commented later that Donald had become less and less annoyed with Andrew over the course of the year, and that these complaints stopped. It could be because of Ben's dialogic "gift."

What has transpired between Andrew and Ben has emerged from their messy, situated and particular "unique place" in the world, built and transformed through their deeds with each other (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 53). In this sense, the dramatic events described between Ben and Andrew are unique and unrepeatable. Furthermore, any proposed solution offered by Ben to the problem takes into account the imperfect world of discursive responsibility; in essence, there is no response in the ontological discursive universe which can sanitize or put an end to the problem. Most of the teachers' discourse on Andrew's problem, however, exists in a parallel discursive universe from that of the students, as will be revealed in the next section.

The teachers' parallel discursive universe

In this section, I present through observation and interviews the practice of the teachers' translation of students' lived realities into abstract moral universals and the rationale for their practice. At this end of this section, I present the authoritativeness and persuasiveness of moral universal discourse and the consequences that this discourse has in resolving the interpersonal issues at the school. There are two categorical imperatives in the teachers' discourse: the "feel good community" imperative – which promotes comfort, safety, and civility above all other discourse – and the imperative of bullying. The teachers' focus on the "feel good community" imperative appears to prepare the grounds for the imperative of bullying, which was a pre-set curricular endpoint for the teachers. Underlying both of these discourses is an assumption that the children are "half-beings," not yet fully responsible for their own or one another's well-being (Sidorkin, 2002).

The moral imperative to "feel good"

Seconds after Andrew raises his hand to describe the issues he is having on the football field, and before Ben first responds to the discourse (resulting in Andrew crying in response), the teachers focus students upon imperatives of "feel good" comfort and safety, a discussion which appears to prepare the groundwork for having the students later reflect upon the definition of bullying later in the class:

> *Teacher Steve*: I just have a couple of clarifying questions for Andrew. One, is it a particular individual, or it is several people?
> *Andrew*: It's like two or three.
> *Teacher Steve*: Two or three. Is it the same people every time?
> *Andrew*: Not always. But… well, usually it's like one or two… and then [?]
> *Teacher Steve*: And is this something that happens on a regular basis, or when I'm not out there?
> *Andrew*: It's usually when you're not out there, yeah.

Teacher Steve: OK. So that's, that's an issue then... Um… 'cause we've talked about it, I have a real concern that, I mean, **the play out there needs to be healthy**. **It needs to be comfortable for people. Just as we wouldn't want somebody in our classroom…** Like, imagine, imagine if we were teaching if somebody in class would say to another student after they asked a question, "that's was a really stupid thing to say!" Imagine how that would feel for the student. And, how would that feel? …

[Kids raising hands]

Teacher Steve: **It's pretty obvious, right?**

Danny [raises hand]: Well, they'd feel mad or something [?]

Teacher Steve: They would feel completely shut down, you know, like a turd.

[Laughter from students]

Teacher Steve: So, I mean, you know, when we say **when things really need to be comfortable here in school, we're not just talking about in the classroom, things need to be comfortable in other situations and in other places, and the football field during the football game is one of those times and places.** And I'm sort of concerned… you know because I, uh, Melinda and I can, um, be, be sure that that kind of thing wouldn't happen um, when we're there. But also, I don't think people are talking to each other necessarily that way when we're not there… I'm not hearing people talk in a way that's a put down to make them feel bad. So, I'm kind of curious to know why that seems to be happening on the football field, and why people feel like that's OK.

Ben: Andrew, I mean this in like no offense…

[Group 3, Choices class, 2006-11-10]

What is notable here is the teacher Steve's prioritization on comfort and safety which deflects students' attention from the (sometimes uncomfortable and divisive) realities of their lived experience to a hypothetical, posited reality and a fantasy future (note the use of "imagine" and "would" in the above utterances from Steve). The focus on how "it needs to be comfortable" in school intends to posit an alternative reality *sanitized from* conflict. It seems that Steve's discussion of comfort and safety was intended to be the "last word" in response to Andrew's problem (that is, until the new student Ben decided to reply). To indicate the fantastic and unreal nature of this universe of "comfortable" football playing, when I presented a transcript of this discussion at a conference (Smith, 2008), two colleagues from the U.S. laughed at this part of the transcript, arguing that the students were being overly protected from the realities of playing football and from life itself. We can see how the teacher Steve attempts to search for a consensus for his ideas among the students by focusing on how "obvious" it is that someone would feel bad as a result of what transpired on the football field. Steve is thus recruiting students to act with rational intentions focused upon "feel good" comfort.

The teacher Steve confirmed in an interview that making Andrew feel better about himself and ensuring others felt better about Andrew was a priority for the Choices discussion. According to Steve, this prioritization was also ultimately behind the discussion of bullying as well:

Teacher Steve: So, it sounded like we had been on the football topic, and it was really the issue that was being brought up was **getting on somebody's case when they made a mistake on the field, and how that feels**. So **[Teacher] Melinda tied bullying into that**. In other words, **if you're [a student is] getting on somebody's case and making them <u>feel bad</u> because of their performance, then you know that kind of fits into that idea of bullying**, and yes, I think [Melinda, the other teacher] did want to

bring it up because it's something we've been concerned about [Interview, Steve, 2006-11-27].

"Bullying" is equated here with making someone "feel bad." The discussion of bullying which will later take place in the Choices class is, in essence, triggered by Andrew's crying, and is set in motion by it.

While the new student Ben saw an opportunity to investigate the responsibility of everyone for the "events" associated with Andrew's problem, other students in the class were arguably more familiar with the norms of the Choices class, and responded directly to the teacher Steve's appeal to the "feel good" imperative rather than to Ben's utterance, as is seen in George's response (Figure 2 above visually shows what is happening in the classroom exactly when George is speaking):

> *George*: If you have tried telling the person to stop doing that because it's just a game or something, whatever you want to say, then they don't listen to you and they keep doing it, then **you can just tell them to stop, and if they don't, then you have every right to go tell a teacher, and that would certainly make you feel better** [Group 3, Choices class, 2006-11-10]

George interestingly connects the need to "feel better" with the "right to go tell a teacher," implying the teachers' tendency to enforce the "*feel good*" imperative discourse. The other students in the class (except apparently Ben) seem to be well aware of the imperative discourse and are well socialized in the way the teachers prefer them to respond to students' relational issues.

A deeper concern of the teachers Steve and Melinda behind the "feel good community" imperative may be for the students to come to a mutual agreement on a more civil way in which to interact toward their peers. In relations characterized by civility, students engage in actions which can be interpreted as "reasonably… respectful, tolerant, or considerate" toward others (Cormier & Brighouse, 2019, p. 70). Civility is thus concerned with the promotion of positive "we" feelings, care for and empathy toward others, placidity in social relations, and mutual understanding and with the diminution of hostility, defensiveness, lack of trust, or psychological distress (Cormier & Brighouse, 2019; Mayo, 2002). However, unlike "being-as-event" discourse, as Mayo (2002) argues, the discourse of civility may effectively stifle the voice of students – "mov[ing] to the private sphere anything that impedes smooth social action" (p. 174) – in order to promote a "fragile 'we'" feeling which is built upon the substance of ontologically meaningful dialogic events. While the power of civility lies in enabling possibilities for relations between students who may ignore/exclude, not trust, or be hostile to each other, it is important to note that it ultimately

> maintains the distance it initially appears to bridge. Civility, in other words, is not the way people build close relations. Instead it is a way people can maintain civil and personal distance in order to appear to abrogate the very social and political distance that poses the problem for their relations (Mayo, 2002, p. 171).

In essence, then, the "feel good" community imperative may serve to promote civility but at the risk of sanitizing the events of being in the students' lives and distancing students from the events within their peer relations, a topic which I address further in another paper in regard to addressing social exclusion among teenagers (Smith, 2019, in preparation).

The discourse of "half-being"

To reinforce the "feel good" imperative of comfort, the teachers inserted their voices again in the student-led class just after Andrew started crying after Ben's first utterance. In doing this, another important feature of the teachers' moral universal discourse is revealed, the discourse of "half-being" (Sidorkin, 2002):

> *Ben: …*'Cause like even though you're the one that started yelling, sometimes, like they want to yell back. And then, when it happens, when I do it, it makes me upset, and I end up always losing. Like, it…
>
> [Andrew is crying at this point]
>
> [Two students make comments at this point; the teacher Melinda interrupts a student who states she wishes to make an "off-topic" remark].
>
> *Teacher Melinda:* OK, hold on to it a minute. Try to get it some place in your mind so you can remember it. I have a question. Andrew, how are you feeling right now?
>
> Andrew: Lousy.
>
> *Teacher Steve:* What are you feeling lousy about?
>
> *Andrew:* [inaudible on recording]
>
> *Teacher Melinda:* I think [the teacher] Steve wants to elaborate on that is, why are we, why is this happening, is that what you asked? Is it the football field where it's happening and why would that be?
>
> *Andrew:* And also, why it's always happening when [the teacher] Steve's not around?
>
> *Boy:* I have a question, is it people in here?
>
> Andrew: No.
>
> *Jamal:* The reason why it's happening is because people know they can get away with it.
>
> *Teacher Steve*: And see, here's the thing. I mean, what I would want to say to that person, is not whether you can get away with it. But what are you getting away *with?* You're making somebody else feel rotten, and **what is that doing to you, and your life and the kind of choices you're making, where you decide that it's an OK thing to make somebody feel rotten and I can get away with that**. It's not going to matter **in the end, it's going to affect** the person saying those things as much as it is the person who is getting them said to. **Because it's going to end up hurting their relationships with people** if that's the way they talk to people and deal with people.
>
> [Group 3, Choices class, 2006-11-10]

With this dialogic turn, the teacher Steve attempts to deflect the discourse of the class away from Ben's utterance focused on here-and-now responsibility to ongoing *events of being* and toward the imagined future "choices" the students *could* make. For the teachers, who the students are *becoming* (what they *may* or *will* experience) matters more than who they *are* (and what they experience) *now*. In this sense, the students are "half-beings," not yet considered to be fully responsible to themselves, one another or others in the world/society by virtue of the fact that they have not yet fully developed as adults (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 43). The students thus cannot truly be expected to "take care of each other's feelings," as is noted in Melinda's interview response to the event with Andrew below:

> *Teacher Melinda*: Part of our job is **not just to let kids go off, a lot of our job is to help kids take care of each other's feelings, and they don't often know how to do that with their peers**, especially for someone like Andrew, who's kind of on the outskirts… when you have a peer that's crying, sometimes people don't know what to do. They want to avoid it and move on, but our job is to say, "No, you can't! We've got to stay with this person now, we've got to stay and see if we can help him sort this out!" What

are we going to do if it's [inaudible – one word] that the community make sure one of members is feeling lousy, what can we possibly do?!... [Interview, Melinda, 2007-05-02]

In reviewing the transcripts of the Choices class, the teacher Melinda values how the teachers seized the opportunity to provide a *model* for students to *become* more sensitive to each other's feelings than what they are able to do *now*.

Sanitization of risk in students' peer relations

It appears that a major reason for the concerns with "feel good" imperatives in response to problems like Andrew's is that the teachers are avoiding the *risks* associated with directly discussing the students' ontologically-loaded events. There is a risk that Andrew may be being *publicly scrutinized:*

> *Teacher Steve*: … this thing with Ben and Andrew, I don't remember where things shifted, but if it was getting sort of like, they were talking to each other about the problem in front of the whole group, like Ben might have felt comfortable saying something, Andrew may or may not feel comfortable, you know, getting um... he might've felt frustrated with Ben because of his portrayal of the situation. And then that's uncomfortable with everybody watching you, having this disagreement with somebody in class, so, it's not bad to have things out in the open sometimes, but both people should be comfortable with it, um... but usually the practice is to deal with that separately.
> *Researcher Mark*: Why is it important for them to be comfortable with that?
> *Teacher Steve*: Well, imagine if you're in a group, and you're having an issue with somebody, and you didn't want to deal with that in out in front of your peers, because you had some things that were maybe embarrassing for you, or just uncomfortable because you're upset about it, but you don't want everybody watching you. So, for me, it's just an issue of fairness, it's just an issue of keeping this a safe place emotionally for kids. And if a kid feels like their dirty laundry is going to get dragged out in front of the whole class…
> [Interview, Steve, 2006-11-27]

Thus, concerns with comfort and safety appear to outweigh the benefits of students directly hearing from their peers; the students' open-ended responses are considered to be "appropriate" as long as the discourse stays at a level of "generality" and "comfort." The risk and concern, as the teacher Melinda stated in an interview, is that no student would "single somebody out" in the public space of "the class" [Interview, Melinda, 2007-05-02]. Similar concerns with public scrutinization of students also led the teachers Melinda and Steve to go through the Choices box "almost… every time" to check for messages which may reveal the identity of the person who is being referred to in the posting.

The teacher Steve raises a similar concern with the risks of student-to-student discourse which could become too "personal" and "particular," leading to fears of out-of-control shaming and blaming discourse. The teacher Steve argued that Andrew "was talking in generalities," but Ben started "making it particular" and a "more personal thing" [Interview, Steve, 2006-11-27]. The teacher Steve appears to prioritize the safety of the moral imperative of "feel good" comfort even if he believes that the discussion between Ben and Andrew could ultimately have been safe. The assumption Steve makes is that Ben's discourse could only lead to shaming and blaming rather than a constructive discussion of interpersonal issues:

> *Teacher Steve*: I don't know, I'm not saying that that conversation couldn't be had **in a safe way**; maybe Ben would just need sort of some gentle reminders to be **tactful** when he's talking to Andrew. But Choices is supposed to be a place where kids could bring things up, and even when you bring up things **openly** as Andrew did, he **wasn't calling anyone out by name**, he was talking about like "there's some people [who have called me names on the football field]," and there's **some safety** in doing that for everyone. You know, I imagine if he said, "well Danny does this," and "Alex does that," then we get into "Well, no I didn't!" and then you have these kinds of conversations that are, when there's **a lot of heat**, but there's **not a lot of light**, you know [Interview, Steve, 2006-11-27].

The teacher Steve further assumes that Choices class will not "work" if students do not feel "comfortable and safe" because children "will never want to bring things up, they won't want to talk about, or it will all be things that are all distant from them." He then claims:

> *Teacher Steve:* I don't think they're comfortable with their having classmates dissect their behavior that's already occurred, but they are comfortable with getting suggestions about what they could do in the future [Interview, Steve, 2006-11-27].

Steve assumes that "forward-looking" nature of the teachers' discourse, with all its emphasis on an imagined future, comfort, and safety is more desirable to students.

Regardless of the veracity of this claim (which will be tested shortly with the students in an interview), there is little doubt that the "comfortable and safe" discourse is more desirable for the teachers. It sanitizes risk and reduces the uncertainty of delving into students' lived realities. It may also allow for a civil "niceness" to be promoted, which may be attractive to parents. The teachers' concerns with risk and discomfort are arguably ontological for them, in that the teachers are held accountable for the safety and welfare of the students in the eyes of the parents. The parents are paying money for their students to attend a *private* school, and I hypothesize that the parents, or the parents as imagined by the teachers, wish the teachers to provide individualized instruction, create an environment in which their children are excited and motivated about going to school, feel safe, and so on. Ultimately, the teachers would want the parents (prospective, current, former, or imaginary) to be attracted to and pleased with the private school, not concerned about the risks with attending it. As I did not interview the parents to confirm this, I am unable to determine if they (or some of them) are in agreement with the teachers regarding these concerns and risks. It is possible that the "parents" to whom the teachers address these concerns might well be a fruit of the teachers' imagination. The focus on the parents might also be a phenomenon of the way in which we talk about what concerns us through looking "into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another" (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 287).

The moral imperative of anti-bullying

The discourse of "feel good" comfort ultimately became the basis for teachers to focus students upon the abstract moral universal of anti-bullying. Just a couple of turns in the discourse from Ben's second contribution to the Choices class, in which Ben further problematizes Andrew's situation by recognizing the responsibility of an unnamed student to the problem, the teacher Melinda abruptly shifts from Ben's contextualized, ontologically eventful discourse toward an abstract, de-ontologized discussion on "bullying." Notice below how the teacher Melinda introduces "bullying" with the students by stating, "this is actually a good place to pose a question." The tone of her utterance sounds as if she means, "this is actually a good

place to switch the topic of the conversation and to pose a question which *I* have been wanting to discuss with you for some time now," especially given the context of her statements later on in the utterance:

> *Teacher Melinda* [Group 3 teacher]: This is actually a good place to pose a question, because it has to do with this, I'm going to ask it, and I want you to go into groups to talk about it, just like a minute and a half. What is bullying? How would you define bullying, what does bullying look like? What is it? Just form, you know, talk with some people around you.
>
> [Students form small groups of 2-3 people with each other, and discuss the question with each other]
>
> *Boy* [in a perplexed tone]: What's bully-ing?!
>
> *Teacher Melinda*: When I ask you to talk with someone, I really do mean that you need to talk about it. OK, I would like you to do that.
>
> [Students discussing the question in groups for about 30 seconds; I overhear Ben's discussion with his group]
>
> *Ben* [talking to his fellow group members]: Bullying, is that what we're talking about?! Bullying is like mostly having fun at somebody else's expense. Like having fun with [?] during a [?] and getting someone upset.
>
> *Teacher Melinda*: OK, if we could just break out of our groups for a second, because I heard a couple of interesting things that went on with that. So go ahead Danny [student moderator who then calls on the students to answer the question posed by Melinda].
>
> [Group 3, Choices class, 2006-11-10]

The abrupt and awkward nature of the transition to the discussion of bullying is evident by the fact that the teacher Melinda must repeat twice that she really intended for the students to "go into groups" and talk about the question. Furthermore, when entering their small groups to respond to the teachers' question, the students (notably including Ben) appear to be confused or to forget what it is that they were expected by the teachers to discuss, apparently because the discussion of bullying is alienated from the life issues and relational problems of the students. Nevertheless, it is indeed quite remarkable how students so readily and unconditionally follow teachers' directions (Sidorkin, 2002).

From interviews with the teachers, the teachers noted that they chose to discuss bullying with the students in response to Andrew's problem primarily because they had been planning for some time to discuss it with the students, and saw that Andrew's problem appeared to be something that they could "tie bullying into." As the teacher Steve stated in an interview about this class about two weeks after the Choices class:

> *Teacher Steve*: So, it sounded like we had been on the football topic, and it was really the issue that was being brought up was getting on somebody's case when they made a mistake on the field, and how that feels. So [the teacher] Melinda tied bullying into that. In other words, if you're getting on somebody's case and making them feel bad because of their performance, then you know that kind of fits into that idea of bullying, and yes, I think she did want to bring it up because it's something we've been concerned about [Interview, Steve, 2006-11-27].

The teacher Steve does not question the relevance of the idea of bullying to Andrew's problem. He sees Melinda's instrumental use of ongoing lived events to discuss a pre-set concept of bullying as unproblematic; Andrew's problem was one of many possible "opportunities" to introduce "bullying" to

address since, as he says just afterward, "kids tend to have a very monolithic view of what bullying is" (cf. Olweus, 1993). The problem of bullying is seen as something which exists universally and can be understood regardless of context.

Steve's comment here thus makes clear that there is a value for the teachers on moving students away from their discussion of specific, lived events (which can make people "feel bad"), toward an understanding of the abstract, universal, pre-set, emotionally detached concept of bullying. The characteristics of this discourse are evident in this discussion of the difference between emotional and physical bullying:

Teacher Melinda: Would you consider it bullying when a person says one nasty thing about someone?

At least 2 students: No.

Susie: It's when it's on-going.

Marla: Consecutive.

Teacher Melinda: Yeah, so, so, it has to be over a period of time. Like it's constant? So, if I said to Steve, "Geez Steve, you know, you, I can't stand it when you do such and such!" If I said that to Steve once and then it was over, would that be bullying?

Students: No.

Teacher Melinda: OK, that has to be, it has to happen over and over again. OK? And, you know, it can be verbal or physical, that's what I'm hearing you say, social. It can be a social-emotional bullying or physical bullying. …Right? Whack-o. And again, like it wouldn't be like I punched Martin once, but every time I saw Martin, I sucker-punched him, especially if nobody was looking, that would be bullying. Which is worse physical bullying or emotional, mental, or let's call it emotional bullying? How's that?

Students: They're like the same. The same. They're equal.

George: Unless the physical bullying is really, really bad, emotional bullying is worse.

Andrew: 'Cause it can scar you, can't it?

2 students: So can physical!

[One student laughs]

Joseph: What I have to say for the difference is that emotional bullying can sometimes be worse, because sometimes if it's not that much, you can kind of ignore it, physical bullying, it's pretty much, you can ignore it, but it's not going to help.

Student: Yeah!

Susie: I think emotional bullying is worse because … [inaudible] freckles or something, and you do, oh yeah, Oh yeah, you know, it's OK, don't worry about it … physical bullying can sound really, really bad. And physical, yeah, it can really hurt sometimes, but [inaudible], …

Andrea: [mostly inaudible] … Mostly … want to do something.., a person or something…

Teacher Melinda: Is [it] the person who is being picked on [who] doesn't have friends, or the groups that are doing the bullying?

Girl student: The person that's [?]

Teacher Melinda: The bully?!

Girl student: That's physical …

Unknown student: I think that they're kind of equal, because I think that physically bullying someone can hurt just as much as that other one, yeah, emotional, cause they both hurt really bad, they can really hurt even though it's not like emotional bullying, isn't like actually hurting you, it feels pretty much like punching somebody's stomach …

Jamal: I think emotional bullying is worse 'cause it lasts a lot longer than a punch or two.

Boy student: I think emotional bullying, depending on what they say, it makes you feel bad about yourself, and like, maybe a bruise or something,

Unknown student: I think emotional bullying is worse, verbal bullying, if you get hit in the arm or something, it doesn't hurt as long as if your friends are sort of joking around, and they keep saying that if you do something, you do it really stupidly, um, it sort of hurts because it just, they're still your friends, but you feel sort of hurt all over, and you feel sort of sad because you know they're joking, your friends are your biggest bullies.

Dan: Like Ben was saying, saying something that [?] really bad.

Teacher Melinda [sense of recognition about the issue]: Um!

Danny: Melinda

Melinda: Two things that I wanted to follow-up on what people said, I wondered is it always, is the bully always a person who doesn't have a lot of friends. Can it be someone who has a lot of friends?

[Some discussion]

Martin: …Gossipping…

Melinda: Or gossipping, Martin just said, I don't know if you heard him say, can you say it louder?

Martin: Gossipping is bullying.

Melinda: Gossipping can be a form of bullying. Um… also, I wanted, I wonder, I don't know what your experience has been, so I'm kind of interested in knowing. Physical bullying, punching, hitting, that kind of stuff, do you think that that's stopped, noticed more than emotional bullying?

[Some students are heard saying yes, and some no]

Unknown student: Well, not in this school.

Melinda [laughs slightly]: Not in this school!

Unknown student: Not in this school.

Melinda: Well, I don't know, even in this school. Do you think that, that it's easier to notice and identify physical bullying or emotional bullying?

Student: Emotional.

Boy: Notice for?

Student: Physical. Depends if they cry.

Student: It depends if you hurt them emotionally so much that they start to cry.

Student: It depends how hard…

Student: There can be a whole bunch of…

Melinda: It seems to be that you're saying that sometimes physical bullying is sometimes more noticeable. [Begins to tell the students that educators have recently become "awakened" to the problems of emotional bullying]… But why do people bully was the question? Why would somebody bully? I think this is a pretty important question to ask ourselves, because we want to be able to identify bullying, and we also want to have some idea of what bullying looks like in a community. And also what might be going on with the bully-er, the bully-ee. Whatever… I'd like us to think about taking on the role of a bully. Where we would actually be, each of us would be a bully, what does it *feel* like to be a bully, and also, what does it feel like to be a victim of that bullying? So maybe we could, next week, we could have a little bit of that.

[Group 3, Choices class, 2006-11-10]

The problem of bullying appears to be taken seriously by the teacher Melinda and has significant educational import to her, as is evident by Melinda's prolonged and patient effort to have the students say what it is she would like them to say (the desired answers being repeated by the teacher Melinda or verbally approved with an audible "Um!"). However, the context under which these classifications are expected to apply is not delineated, and any discussion of the specific context appears to have been supplanted by the discussion of the classificatory scheme itself. This classificatory scheme exists in spite of the students' and teachers' interested and emotive participation in the events around them. The discussion of bullying shuts down further discussion on specific aspects of the students' ontological events (and everyone's responsibility to these events), since it moves discussion onto a purely *de-ontologized, abstract*, *decontextualized* conceptual plane. Any specific lived situations implied by the discussion are purely hypothetical, abstracted and alienated from the lived reality of the students to which they are meant to reply. The bullying discourse of the teachers focuses upon agreed upon, typified and normalized societal phenomenon, whereas Ben's situated concept of "anger" is potentially contestable and open for reinterpretation.

Bullying also appears to be a pre-set curricular endpoint for the teachers, a ready-made idea toward which the teachers were leading the students. Indeed, as one of the CLC teachers commented to me informally at some point during the school year, some of the teachers at the school had recently attended a professional lecture about the problem of bullying among U.S. youth. Thus, Andrew's problem could just be the "opportunity" or vehicle through which the problem of bullying was expected to be eventually discussed. Such a situation appears to be a quite common phenomenon; a very similar case of a nine-year old student who annoyed others when playing sports is rather unproblematically labelled as an example of "bullying" by Mishna (2012, pp. 67-68). The CLC students sense the fact that there is an expected endpoint to the discussion, and follow along in moving toward it. In the discussion of bullying, rather than engaging in discourse which judges their experience in an open and contestable manner, the students engage in "guessing" what the teacher wants from them (cf. Jackson, 1968).

In an interview about why she decided to discuss bullying at this point in the class, the teacher Melinda stated – with notably circular logic – that it was important to address "[be]cause one's person's idea of bullying is not another person's idea of bullying, and so we need as a group to decide, what is bullying?!" She also argues that bullying discourse gives the students an "opportunity" to discuss "general things" and invariant, universal "bigger idea[s]." The events of the students' lives thus become incidences of an abstract universal concept:

> *Teacher Melinda*: To try to get them to look at the specific, we want to make generalizations from specifics. There are sometimes specific issues that have to be dealt with head-on, and also, there are often those specific things come up over and over again, because they're part of the more general thing that has to come up. So I think that's, if we see an opportunity to, to give kids a more general, a bigger idea than they're thinking about.
> *Researcher Mark*: So here the opportunity for bullying was the issue that Andrew was raising on the field?
> *Teacher Melinda*: He was being verbally bullied out there on the field.
> [Interview, Melinda, 2007-05-02]

Effectively, then, the students' lived experience is conveniently considered to be insignificant when compared to the unquestioned generalizations which the teachers wish to promote among the students. Any uncertainty over the meaning of what is happening is also reduced ("he was being verbally bullied out there on the field"). While the students may debate (perhaps endlessly) about Andrew's problem, the

discussion of bullying places a full stop on the discussion, silencing alternative perspectives and voices (Morson, 2004).

The Kantian bullying discourse also justifies its relevance based on untested beliefs of social influences impacting students out of the classroom:

> *Teacher Melinda*: He was being verbally bullied out there on the field. And again, it's sort of close to the beginning of the year, it's [American] football season, kids are watching a lot of football, they're seeing that that's what they're being, football players are modelling, they're doing it. And Steve noticed, too, when he was out there with them, there wasn't that, but the minute he couldn't go out, the days he couldn't go out with them, then there were more complaints about that verbal abuse happening [Interview, Melinda, 2007-05-02].

No evidence is provided for the "modelling" hypothesis except that children are watching American football games. There is no example provided for this influence within actual events of the students' lives. The teacher Melinda also does not provide any specific example of "verbal abuse" in the events of the students' lives; nor does the teacher Steve backup the claim of "verbal abuse on the field" that he makes to the students during the Choices class in response to Andrew's problem. Any responsibility for the problem of "bullying" is *externalized* and placed upon the broader society or abstract others rather than specific deeds within the students' and teachers' daily reality within the school.

It could be argued that the teacher Melinda's focus on bullying may just indicate her lack of familiarity with the relational dynamics surrounding Andrew's problem. The teacher Melinda did not play football with the students during recess time, so her relationship with the events on the football field is quite peripheral. In addition, as noted earlier, the teacher Steve, unlike Melinda, questioned whether or not his presence or absence on the field has an effect on Andrew's problem. However, lack of familiarity with the events around Andrew's problem appears not to explain why bullying is discussed with the children. In an interview response regarding Andrew's problem, Melinda recognizes that *Andrew's* crying would be responded to differently than another student's crying in the Choices class:

> *Teacher Melinda:* What are we going to do if it's [inaudible – one word] that the community makes sure one of members is feeling lousy, what can we possibly do?!. Especially if there's a kid who has been annoying, there's that tendency to get- If Susie had started crying, everybody would have been focused on Susie, "Oh, Susie, what's the matter, what's the matter?" But *Andrew* crying and feeling lousy, they're more likely to say, "Oh well, we'll just ignore it." So I think that was probably the dynamic that was going on there. Now, at this point in the year, he's [Andrew's] much stronger, he's really come into in his own a lot in many ways, he's got friends, he's, um, although he can still be *annoying,* most of the time he's not, he's not as impulsive as he was, so kids are more concerned about him, except for Donald [Interview, Melinda, 2007-05-02].

In this interview with me, the teacher Melinda clearly contextualizes and ontologizes the students' problems in their relations with one another. However, I could not find evidence that she ever did this with the students directly within the space of the Choices class, a pattern which can similarly be noted within Vivian Paley's (1992) classroom (Matusov & Smith, 2009a, 2009b). Melinda also recognizes here that Andrew is "*annoying*" to other students, but this did not call her attention away from the presupposition that Andrew was being "bullied."

Presuming then that bullying is not discussed in the classroom because of its helpfulness (for the teachers and students) as a lens for revealing and understanding students' relational dynamics, there may be other plausible reasons for the emergence of this discourse at this particular place and time. Bullying has a status of being a phenomenon discussed by social scientists, which can increase the status and authoritativeness of the teachers' ideas over the students' ideas, making it possible for teachers to transition easily from "messy" uncontrollable discourse to discourse with a clear endpoint that is safer and less risky. Alternatively, the teachers may also just wish to "move on" to what they had pre-planned for the day; discussions of the problems Andrew and Ben raised would take significant time to discuss, and there would not be a clear endpoint to these discussions. Finally, bullying may have been discussed simply because it was a desired curricular objective (for at least Melinda) to classify the students' relational problems as bullying problems.

The persuasiveness of bullying for the students outside of the classroom context

From my interviews with the students, it is notable that the discussion of bullying is not persuasive for the students themselves as a way of framing or understanding their interpersonal realities outside of the classroom context. This is seen in the following interview, in which Andrew and five other Group 3 students, including Ben, were present:

> *Researcher Mark*: I'm trying to understand how we got from what Andrew's talking about to bullying.
> *Ben*: Because [?] was bullying Andrew.
> *Researcher Mark*: Is that true?
> *Marla*: Wait, someone was bullying Andrew?
> *Andrew*: Somebody was bullying me?
> *Matthew*: Oh yeah, when you walked into that tree, you were like yelling at everybody when you were like walking off the football field, you turned around and hit the tree!
> *Ben*: Oh, yeah, when we were playing football! Oh yeah, you turned around, you catched the ball, and you ran into the tree.
> *Andrew*: Oh yeah, I turned around to the catch the ball, and I hit the tree, and Larry started, yelling, and laughing, not yellin' at me. *Laughing* at me!
> *Researcher Mark*: Was there bullying involved in what you… ?
> *Susie*: Oh yeah, bullying.
> *Andrew*: What *I* was doing, no. What *Larry* was doing, yes.
> *Ben*: Really?
> *Marla*: Especially here.
> *Susie*: I think sometimes you just laugh. Sometimes that happens, I don't know if that's my family and I'm just kind of used to it, but when I [?] my dad laughs. And I don't really think about it too much, maybe because I know that he's joking, but I think sometimes you just gotta not be, not like talking to like Andrew, like some people they just got to be not so sensitive to things, and that's I think one of the problems with our thing in school. Like our class this year, I think. Everyone's really sensitive to things, that's just our class. That happened two years ago when our classes were together, everyone was always, there were always problems and stuff, it was just a mix of kids, or...
> [Boys, except Andrew, are fussing around in the back]
> [Interview, Group 3 students, 2007-04-06]

The students here express ambivalence with regard to the labeling of the dialogic event between Andrew and Ben as "bullying." This is notably different from the teacher Melinda's unquestioned view on

the relevance of bullying. It is also notable how students utilize different ideas such as "laughing" within their dialogue to pass judgements on the meaning of the events which bother Andrew (and possibly others as well). In turn, the students' discourse reveals and promotes further analysis of Andrew and the others' responsibility to the problem, whereas the discourse of bullying appears to deflate further discussion of these issues.

Other Group 3 students, in interviews, also questioned the relevance of discussing bullying in the class. They reported that they do this questioning indirectly during the Choices class by making comments about its irrelevance or meaninglessness under-the-breath and/or quietly to their peers. This is noted from this interview of six Group 3 students:

> *Marla*: Maybe the teachers brought it up 'cause they thought it was a problem for us in 5th grade and 6th grade. Next year, we might be going to middle-slash-high school, there might be bullies there, so we want to be able, and even here, so we know what's bullying so we can stop it before it gets too big.
> […]
> *Matthew*: 'Cause it was the same thing almost over the whole time period.
> *Marla*: I think they just read out of a thesaurus, they kept saying the same exact thing!
> *Susie* [slightly admonishing, surprised tone]: Marla!
> *Marla*: Over and over. Using different words.
> *Susie*: I think it went on a little too long. Like it was good at first, and a lot of people were saying stuff, but it sort of kind of started repeating after a while.
> [Interview, Group 3 students, 2007-04-06]

In another example of the perceived irrelevance of bullying, a group of Group 4 (Grade 7/8) teenage girls commented in an interview how they prefer to apply concepts other than "bullying" to their lived experience, such as "drama," "teasing," or "name calling." For them, bullying appears to be something that happens "not very often," but the other concepts regularly emerge with ongoing discourse to judge their experience:

> *Researcher Mark*: I see, for example, the bullying thing kept coming up.
> *Katie* [with a frustrated, painful expression]: Uh!!!
> *Researcher Mark*: Is that a problem that keeps coming up in Choices about bullying?
> *Jacob*: That's like a girl problem.
> *Katie* and *Kim*: Not very often.
> *Kim*: It's a lot of girl drama.
> *Katie*: Yeah, girl drama.
> *Jacob*: And no one really bullies, except when *I*—
> *Katie*: Yeah, no one really bullies at our school, they [she seems to mean the teachers] just try to come up with their own versions of bullying. Which is like.
> *Alena*: Yeah, teachers say that they see bullying, when it's really not, it's just teasing, name calling. And it's a *joke!*
> *Kim*: It's a joke… and they [teachers or students?] know it's a joke, and they're *laughing!*
> *Katie*: And some people [students] are overdramatic about it. That's how a lot of us think, it's just overdramatic.
> [Interview, Informal interview of Group 4 students, 2007-06-05]

The concept of "bullying," in Alena and Katie's responses, is judged – along with other concepts – in terms of its internal persuasiveness to the events of being in the students. The girls wish to demand that the teachers take the context of the students' problems into account. Engaging in "drama" and being "overdramatic" have currency in their discourse, but "bullying" does not (Smith, 2019, in preparation).

The concept of bullying and inarticulateness in response to "events of being"

Regardless of its relevance to the here-and-now, we might still imagine that the idea of bullying may be employed by some students in discourse in the context of their lived interactions with each other to help them address problems emerging in their social relations. Yet, in another interview with Group 4 boys, the student Jared becomes inarticulate when attempting to apply the concept of bullying to his lived experience:

> *Jared* [after having read a transcript I prepared of a social studies lesson in which the problem of bullying was discussed]: When I heard that [Ralph, the Group 4 teacher, leading the social studies lesson, wanted to give us the tools to help us with bullying], it was like, great! [slightly sarcastic] That's good! That's really good, I want to be able to stop bullying, that's always helpful. But, yeah, I lost my train of thought.
> *Researcher Mark*: I just wondered, when you hear that, what are you thinking?
> *Jared*: First, I was like good, yeah, that's good. But then I thought, how in the world is *he* going to give us the tools to deal with bullying! Because, I know, I was like, yeah! *I* can stop it. But now I'm like, it doesn't really work so well […] They definitely pay attention to it, but I don't know if they do the best job of preventing it.
> *Paul*: It's definitely that kind of environment –
> *Dennis* [in a puzzled and surprised tone]: I don't understand what you're saying about that! There's not really bullying!
> [Interview, Group 4, Grade 7 students, 2007-04-30]

Jared claims that the teachers should be "preventing" bullying more, but the tools do not "really work so well." He then states that *"I can stop it,"* but then places the responsibility for "stop[ping]" bullying on the teachers. It may be that in this interview I conducted with Jared, Paul and Dennis, I did not open up the social conditions for which Jared could become more articulate about the issues he was experiencing (cf. McDermott, 1988). Unfortunately, I did not pursue this discussion further, by asking Jared to provide a specific example of what "bullying" means in his daily life. However, it is also telling that he did not provide this example, as Jared's discourse appears to lie squarely within the discourse in which bullying exists, a discourse which universalizes lived experience, places students' lived reality on a plane of "half-being" and becoming, and diminishes the value of the specific, ontological event discourse in his life or in the lives of his peers in favor of risk prevention and sanitization of students' lived realities. It is intriguing here how Dennis directly rejects the assertion of the relevance of bullying to Jared's life in favor of demanding contextualization of this problem through specific events.

The recursivity of bullying discourse versus the recursivity of being-as-event discourse

As noted in the section above, in both the Group 3 and Group 4 student interviews on bullying, students report being frustrated and irritated with the frequency in which the topic of bullying emerges in the Choices class. For the teachers, however, such recursivity is essential to ensure that students are thinking of the more advanced abstract moral universal thinking rather than their own ways of conceptualizing their experience:

Teacher Melinda: There are often those specific things come up over and over again, because they're part of the more general thing that has to come up. So I think that's, if we see an opportunity to, to give a kids a more general, a bigger idea than they're thinking about" [Interview, Melinda, 2007-05-02].

Interestingly, however, some researchers share with the children a frustration with the recursivity of the discussion of bullying and its questionable relevance to students' lives, as noted in this anonymous interview of a bullying researcher:

Some people [have] found the ongoing debates sterile and of limited use in improving the lives of children in schools. 'You know, they keep saying, "How do we define bullying?" I think, "Well, we could go on like that forever and ever but meanwhile there's a big problem out there"' (Dixon, 2011, p. 184)

Recursivity of discourse was also noted within the students' event-focused discourse. However, when present in this context, recursivity of discourse is a sign that students may be stuck in an *ontological trap*, such as Andrew being caught up within a recursive yelling-anger-blaming cycle with his peers. Andrew's frustration with this recursivity appears to be behind Andrew deciding to discuss the problem with the class. The recursive "yelling" may be considered to constrain relations between the students, and be a cause for further investigation through dialogue.[3]

Bullying as an ideal discourse imposed upon students' real lived experiences

It is important to emphasize that the CLC teachers are making *instructional* decisions – to discuss "bullying" and "gossip" with the students – on the basis of *imagined* student problems and dilemmas that are based in the teachers' consciousness of the world, which may or may not be shared by the students (Matusov & Smith, 2007). Thus, teachers do not "problematize" or "subjectivize" the problem of bullying within the daily, being-as-event reality of Andrew or any of the students (Matusov & Smith, 2007).

In fact, in interviews, the teachers discuss a need to *supplant* the students' lived being-as-event reality with a more detached and de-subjectivized lens which places the students *above* their responses to one another, which are "immediate" and "reactive," and their "developmental" way of responding to problems would contaminate objective logic with the emotional intensity of conflictual relations:

Teacher Steve: It [bullying] is a Group 3 [Grade 5-6] issue in the sense that I think kids are really examining their behaviors, stepping out, they can start **stepping outside themselves,** and have some perspective, when they get to this age, that is much, much harder for them to do when they're [younger]… to take a look at their behavior **in a more objective way**. To be able to kind of look at how they're behaving and see it as if somebody were treating them in that way. To kind of, be able to kind of **examine themselves** and … look at their role in a more global way. As it relates to the way that they're dealing with people and their relationships. I mean, when kids are in Groups 1 and 2 [Grades 1-2 and 3-4], *everything's so immediate*, *everything's reactive*. And that's **developmental**. That's to be expected. When kids get to Group 3 and 4 [Grades 5-6 and 7-8], they're able to **pull back and distance themselves,** and reflect on their behavior a bit, which is one of the things that Melinda [the other Grade 5-6 teacher] and

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[3] For further discussion of this issue, see the Summerhill School "makeup case" presented in Allen, Getzels, and Getzels (1991), which is analysed in detail in Smith (2019, in preparation).

I write in our [quarterly written] reports [to parents] under [the] socio-emotional [category], "ability to reflect on behavior and accept responsibility." So when kids get, you know, some kids, some *adults,* never quite get there. But you would hope, and kids can start to do that [reflection], when they get to be about 5th, 6th grade. So, anyway, just the idea of the kids to be thinking about these issues about bullying in a more global way, that they can be subtle, kind of looking at their own behavior, we're asking them to start examining those things now in a way that they hadn't been really [Interview, Steve, 2006-11-27, bold and italics are mine].

From the teacher Steve's perspective, a student like Ben cannot really make valid judgements and reflections upon recursive events. The teacher Steve here seems to presume that it is impossible for the students to become responsible for one another within being-as-event discourse (*being-with* addressivity to others), since they do not "examine" their lives from the more "global" and "distance[d]" perspective that "reflect[ion]" on abstract moral universals like bullying would provide.

Bullying is seen in the teacher Melinda's utterance below as an abstract, universal truth (*istina*) which is *likely* to emerge within the students' lived experience with one another (although apparently not the teachers' lives). *Istina*-truth (Russian word, "истина") can be compared with *pravda*-truth (Russian word, "правда"), and is a distinction in the Russian language made use of by Bakhtin. *Istina*-truth refers to the universal, abstract, de-personalized, objective truth of how things really are, while *pravda*-truth is "more than rational, it is answerable [or responsible]. Rationality is but a moment of answerability [or responsibility]" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 29).4 This *istina*-truth is rooted in Melinda's justification for discussing bullying with the students below:

Teacher Melinda: …[We teachers] try **to get them [the students] to be beyond themselves in the moment**. And we know it's impossible to some degree, you know. It's impossible to, the kids are going to be kids, and this is going to happen behind parents' and behind adults' backs. But I think it irks all of us here when you hear this "boys will be boys," or bullying happens, and bullying does happen, but especially middle school is a real area where bullying can get tough. So, what as a community can we do to help bring the awareness – 'cause you can't just say, "stop it!" Although we do. We say "no, you can't do that!" I mean there is a bottom line, we won't let you punch somebody in the face, and we're not going to let you verbally abuse somebody. But, you know that "just say no" isn't the answer… [Interview, Melinda, 2007-05-02]

The teacher Melinda appears to argue above with the voice of students, parents, people in the community, or other educators that might reject the truth claim that "bullying" has much at all to do with the ontological problems faced by the students (this voice could be an imaginary interlocutor, and/or could also have been intended to address concerns that I had raised with Melinda in the interviews). The teacher Melinda responds to this voice by stating that the issue is not whether bullying is relevant or not to the students now or in the past, but whether bullying is *likely* and *possible* for the students to face in their lives. The teacher Melinda appears to argue that the severity of the *possible* "bullying" problems with which students could be faced with is one of the rationales for addressing the problem and not ignoring it.

In an e-mail communication (2010-12-06), the teacher Melinda states that bullying discourse provides a "vocabulary" and "explicit strategies" which help students to identify and deal with bullying, which is presumably more effective than the students' own way of responding to these problems. If students are

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4 See Sidorkin (2009, p. 150) and Smith & Matusov (2009) for further discussion.

left to their own to resolve their problems, their methods are "most often not productive." Procedures which the students are expected to "practice" appear to lie "above" the students' lived experience, and, again, do not address the specific, underlying relational issues and dynamics which result in interpersonal conflict. The specific recursive and immediate circumstances which lead to the situation appear not to matter, as much as the identification of bullying and the resolving of it.

One anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this text submitted to this journal critiqued the argument presented here that the teachers' moral universal discourse cannot be sensitive and responsive to the needs of the students, writing that:

> teachers have the right to recontextualize a lived story in more general terms, for the sake of [children] learning from the details. This is what mainstream families usually do in their literacy practices (cf. Heath, 1983)…

The reviewer subsequently argued that the problem presented with the relevance of bullying to the students' lives presented here is not with the relevance of abstract moral universals in themselves as applicable to education, but rather may be more an issue with the "weakness" or "underdeveloped analysis of bullying" present in Melinda's instruction. As the reviewer argues:

> Bullying is more than agreeing on a definition, it is also [concerned with] the roles involved, the strategies each role should follow, i.e. avoiding self-victimization, promoting whistleblowing of bystanders, treating bullies as persons with "concrete needs" as well (cf. Benhabib, 1987)... This [would be] a more sophisticated general conversation of a theory of human violence which could be useful for the students as well useful to discuss in first-person [in response to] a concrete event (DPJ reviewer comments, June 2019).[5]

In response to the reviewer, I assert that the broader concerns with bullying discussed by the reviewer – bystander whistleblowing, for example – appear also to be concerns of the teacher/adult which come from outside the children's eventful discourse on their lived experience. It is reasonable to presume that these discourses would also lie in a "parallel discursive universe" to that of the children's eventful discourse. I suspect to find in the efforts to address bullying presented by the reviewer a similar moral imperative to "feel good," the discourse of "half-being," sanitization of risk, and a discourse of ideality imposed over the events of children's lived experience. For example, recent research has questioned the authoritativeness and analytic power of the bystander perspective of bullying in wrestling with the concrete realities of children's social lives; researchers have noted that there are "several participant positions" within peer relations and thus a great difficulty in defining and abstracting "bystanders," "bullies," and "victims" within the relational field of the children (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014a, p. 8). This recent anti-bullying research has also questioned whether children's peer relations can and should be decontextualized from the specifics of the situation in which they are grounded and whether bullying or other aspects of it should be discussed at all without specific reference to the "patterns of interaction" – and I would add the "being as event" discourse – in the lives of the children (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014a, p. 8).

In the discussion which follows, I will summarize main arguments in this paper on moral universal discourse and its relevance to addressing the lived experience of children in schools. I will return to the

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[5] The references presented in this set of the reviewer's comments (Heath and Benhabib) were recommended by the reviewer, and I have taken the liberty of including the references in-line in the text for the sake of brevity.

ontological dialogic event perspective presented earlier in the text, and I will leave it to the reader to decide what position(s) they see as more ethically responsible in addressing children's interpersonal conflicts.

Discussion

This research has explored the tensions between the abstract moral universal discourse of bullying and the ontological "being as event" discourse of students in an innovative school, which I have argued exist within parallel and disparate discursive universes. As discussed earlier, the unit of analysis of ontological event discourse is the specific case or event. Time in ontological event discourse is event-and-deed based; Andrew is not the same person before Ben's utterance as he is after it, Andrew's responsibility for the events having been revealed as a dialogic "gift" from Ben (Matusov & Smith, 2009a). I have argued that ontological event discourse is not bereft of concepts. Rather, concepts can emerge as nodes which can reveal new connections between events and people's responsibility to these events, offering new possibilities for the taking of responsibility and transforming existing relations (e.g., through nodes such as "girl drama" or "managing anger"). What is important to understand here, in comparison to anti-bullying discourse, is that there is not a *pre-set* application of a concept nor an endpoint toward which the dialogue is going. The nodes instead emerge within dialogue, transform existing networks of relations, and can become "penetrating words" which become difficult for involved participants to ignore (Bakhtin, 1999). For Andrew, the node of "anger" allowed him to take responsibility for the problem he posed in the Choices class even months later (the "torpedo touch" discussed earlier). In essence, concepts in ontological event discourse are objectivizations and finalizations of lived experience, but are partial and negotiable within dialogue.

These discourses do not just exist purely in theoretical or philosophical realms, but also exist ontologically as "projects," efforts or deeds to transform what is given in the world (Sartre, 1963). Unlike decision-making valued in total institutions like schools, where decisions are based on discrete, bounded, rational goals, participants engaged in ontological event discourse make many contextually based decisions and prioritizations (cf. people's decisions about what to purchase in a supermarket, see Lave, 1988, 1992). In this regard, the project of ontological event discourse is to trust in and have hope for transformation of ontological circumstances in a messy, imperfect world of responsibility with others. By contrast, the project of modernism – under which Kantian-like moral universal ideas like anti-bullying fall – focuses on the normative expectancies of who the person is becoming, promoting a "right path" upon which students are to follow, a fantastic future of a world sanitized from risk, "negative actions" and negative feelings (Olweus, 1993). This modernist discourse is characterized by its universality, predictability, rationality, and even irrelevance to lived events and contextual decisions.

I have noted that the pedagogical discourse of abstract moral universals like bullying operates through translating students' lived experience from beings fully responsible for themselves in the here-and-now toward beings who are *becoming* fully responsible to themselves into "half-beings" (Sidorkin, 2002). As Sidorkin writes:

> Childhood is… an experience of becoming rather than that of being. We really come to existence through the experience of childhood, which is an experience of not quite being, of half-existing, and of movement toward full-existence. Acquiring an identity of a child means understanding that you do not quite exist yet. It is an identity oriented toward the future, and therefore an identity that undervalues the present (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 42).

In turn, the messiness of students' presently lived experience is ignored in favor of a "bird's eye view" of where the students are imagined to be going. Abstract moral universal discourse like bullying treats students' relational problems as predictable consequences of the students' membership in a particular "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991). This community is an assumed normed group within the society, such as "teenagers" or "pre-teenagers," who are expected to face certain problems in the immediate or distant future. These imagined groups exist outside of any intentions of their members, and outside of any lived events or experiences. What matters for the teachers about the students is what is typical and *representative;* the experience of "bullying" is thought to be part of the "representative body, not the personal life" (Anderson, 1991, p. 32). It is not seen to be part of the "specific" (and I would add eventful) relationships between individuals; such relationships become "not in the smallest degree problematic" (Anderson, 1991, p. 28). Any focus on relevance of the abstract moral universals of "bullying" and "feel good community" to the lives of students may not even matter so much for the teachers, since the teachers end up addressing the students' imagined, normative, and expected problems through discussions of abstract universals, not through the discourse of lived reality.

Since anti-bullying discourse translates students' reality in terms of an imagined future and envisions that they are coming-to-be people different from who they are now, students are arguably less likely to question the relevance of bullying to their lives. Yet, at the same time, the authoritativeness of anti-bullying discourse appears to be constrained to the classroom context, as students appear not to grant legitimacy to this discourse within the hallways of the school or on the picnic table next to the playground.

The Bakhtinian "being as event" perspective I have focused upon here is indeed not alone in critiquing abstract moral universal discourse in educational contexts. Feminist scholars have critiqued such discourse for denying the existence of the "concrete other" and minimizing the role of non-rational decision-making. For instance, Benhabib (1987) has argued that the dominant universal approaches to moral education – what she calls "substitutionalist" forms of moral universalism – presume only the existence of a rational, "generalized other" and concomitantly deny the existence of a concrete other whose specific "needs, talents, and capacities" are deserving of recognition and confirmation (Benhabib, 1987, p. 87). One's responsibility to the other is said to emerge instead from accepting an "interactive" form of universalism which focuses on "right" moral action through the values of sympathetic acceptance, caring, and love of the other as a concrete person, developing social bonds with the other, sympathizing with the other's needs and desires, and acting in solidarity with the other. This interactive universalism is argued to be a corrective to traditional moral universals. Benhabib thus claims, in contrast with what I argue here, that generalized moral universals are essential but not sufficient for right moral action.

Benhabib argues that moral education should connect students with "the *unthought,* the *unseen,* and the *unheard"* (Benhabib, 1987, p. 92), essentially the "oppressed" or the "forgotten" others. Thus, she argues for an "interactive" form of moral universal discourse that sees "care" and "sympathy" for others' needs as an unquestionable value that has value in all contexts and situations. Yet, as with any other type of moral universal discourse, the rightness and value of caring pre-exists any testing within internally persuasive discourse. The truth of caring is thus not dialogic; it attempts to influence students through suppression of dissenting voices, violence, and manipulation. Through the lens of any moral universal, students are seen as immature "half-beings" whose ways of thinking about the world and others presumably do not fully account for the lived experience of the other. The moral universal discourse grants justification for teachers to unilaterally "correct" the students' way of thinking and their presumably uncaring or inharmonious peer relations. Unilateralism can thus be justified on a social justice basis in order to elevate the voices of those on the margins (cf. Matusov & Smith, 2009a, 2009b).

It is interesting to point out that "interactive universalism" and a regime of caring, like substitutionalist universalism, supplants students' responsive and responsible discourse on specific events in the lived experience of themselves and their peers toward what is considered to be "right." It can also lead to an even more unilaterally imposed world of "feel-good community" comfort and sanitization of children's lives than what was noted at CLC; a student negating the idea that she or he is a "bystander" of "bullying," for instance, may need to confront the idea that she or he is not "caring" enough about the other and denying the other's existence as a "concrete" person. If a student attempted to acknowledge everyone's responsibility to each other in dialogue and to ongoing "events of being," this protest could be summatively ignored on account of the universal need to understand and account for the lived experience of the "unheard" or oppressed other. In reflecting on Benhabib's position it seems important to ask: who accounts for what is "unheard" and who is "unseen" or "unthought" about? Is resistance against "caring" possible or desirable? Are social bonds and solidarity negotiable or not, and why? Does caring as a moral universal patronize those who need "care" compared with those who do not? What alternative discourses may exist to "caring" and how is suppression of these discourses justified?

Thus, although Benhabib offers moral education a warning to be concerned with the needs and experiences of the concrete other, I differ with her in my call for critical ontological engagement of students in dialogue with the views and perspective of their peers in regard to ongoing "events of being," where a value is placed on critically testing one's own and others' dearly held ideas and values in response to the sometimes inconvenient or challenging ideas and views of the other. Bakhtin calls for *responsibility* to the other within dialogue rather than solidarity/singularity of purpose through shared universal values of social justice. I argue that the ontological dialogic ethics of Bakhtin radically denies the validity of the application of moral universals to human relations, including those of "caring." Within dialogue on the "events of being" of students' lives, it is not possible to finalize the other or oneself; all actions and ideas are responsible to ongoing discourse. Through dialogue, participants engage in a testing of their responsibility to each other without an endpoint. Through such dialogue, there is a possibility for interlocutors to transcend their ontological circumstances with one another.

The Bakhtinian "being-as-event" ethical position also considers that moral universals applied to human interaction violate the principle of "reflexivity" in human interaction (Soros, 1995). Reality, Soros argues, is transformed by people's decisions, by their participation in the world. A discursive statement about an object does not change an object, but a discursive statement about a person can change the person. As Soros writes, "a reflexive interaction can change both the participants' thinking and the actual state of affairs, [and thus modernist] timeless generalizations cannot be tested," at least with people (Soros et al., 1995, p. 216). This may be a good explanation for why, as has been noted in this paper, the discourse of moral universals and bullying feel forced and alien when applied to the events of being of the students' lives. This may also explain the findings here that students can easily become inarticulate, at least outside of the purview of the teacher or the official discourse of the school setting, when they attempt to persuade their peers that they themselves (or someone else) is being "bullied."

Anti-bullying discourse thus appears better suited to focus upon typologizing and defining student interaction (or typologizing and defining political oppressions) than it does in making judgements and reflecting upon everyone's responsibility within ongoing events. This discourse of anti-bullying and systematized "interactive" universals of caring are wider projects of social engineering designed to reduce or eliminate the unauthorized assertion of asymmetrical power among students. Through being objectivized and finalized as "bullies" or "bystanders," children become subjects of the teacher efforts at engineering their social relations to help them "become" more inclusive, caring, and empathetic that what they "naturally" are. This is arguably the "espoused" theory of anti-bullying and caring (Schön, 1983). However, there

appears to also be a "theory-in-use" of anti-bullying (Schön, 1983). *In practice,* anti-bullying discourse is employed to ensure that the teachers and the school are not liable for any emotional harm or trauma brought upon students by their peers in the school. Teachers can point to discussions of abstract moral universals as evidence that efforts were made in the curriculum to address students' interpersonal problems, all the while sanitizing the students' being-as-event discourse, removing the impurities of social exclusion and negative emotions like anger, hatred, and so on. The discourses of the "feel good community" and anti-bullying are thus ontologically important for the teachers in that it can, for instance, make the school feel more inviting to parents (who in the case of CLC are paying tuition).

However, I am concerned that the ontological event discourse of the students is suppressed and left unguided by anti-bullying (and perhaps by interactive forms of universalism as well), rather than transformed and supplanted (as is the espoused hope of such discourse). In turn, possible discord and interpersonal problems may be left unresolved and unguided under the surface. A similar dynamic is found in the modernist efforts at classification in the medical field, in which "one may get ever more precise knowledge, without having to resolve deeper questions, and indeed, by burying those questions" (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 24). As Bowker & Star make apparent in the medical field, the discourse of classification is also intertwined with efforts to reduce alternatives in order to limit perceived harm to others (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 25).

As discussed earlier, anti-bullying derives its truth from its status as an Aristotelian *episteme,* which "concerns universals and the production of knowledge which [are] invariable in time and space, and which [are] achieved with the aid of analytical rationality" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp. 55-56). It is reasonable to expect that one could employ epistemic thinking – promoting invariant, universal knowledge – without being excessively certain about the truth of that episteme, but this pattern was not observed in the data here. Instead, at least at CLC and in the review of the anti-bullying literature presented at the beginning of this study, modernist, moral universal discourse too readily assumes it has a *perfect* answer to resolve social conflict, the last word on interpretation, an unquestioned right to the truth. It is then employed to establish a fantastic vision of social relations onto the students' lives.

By contrast, ontological event discourse expects *imperfect* and *always testable* responses to conflict, prioritizing continued dialogue over "solutions" to those conflicts. The truth of ontological event discourse is best characterized by *phronesis,* loosely translatable as prudence, or the pragmatic wisdom which emerges within participation in events (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In ontological event discourse, participants hope and trust that through dialogue they will be able to transcend any "ontological traps" in which they are caught (as was seen in the example of Andrew's anger and the other students' response to it, and Andrew's and others' response to the responses). Teachers who engage in ontological event discourse with their students relax or give up pre-set curricular endpoints, and attempt to become, along with the students, *learners* of the lived experience of their students and the way students frame their understandings of the issues and concerns in their own lived experience. From the ontological event perspective, teachers cannot teach if they are not open to learning about what they are teaching with the students.

The ontological event perspective also further opens up the truth of the concept of moral universals like bullying, for bullying cannot be "true" outside of the response of participants (teachers and students) to it within ongoing dialogue. The *internal persuasiveness* of anti-bullying should thus not be taken for granted, and the notion of bullying may or may not have currency within the discourse of the students' interpersonal experience. In an ontological event-driven perspective on interpersonal conflict, educators trust that dialogue would uncover what is "true" and persuasive for the students' lived reality.

It could be argued, however, that bullying discourse and other moral universal discourses are necessary to "mediate" the "contact" between students giving them "sufficient psychological distance and feelings of control to promote true empathy and perspective-taking" (Mar & Oatley, 2008, p. 181). From this perspective, ontological event discourse is a form of "direct contact" which "may be experienced as too threatening or otherwise emotionally arousing for a great deal of empathy or even sympathy to take place" (Mar & Oatley, 2008, p. 181). Indeed, the process of engaging in ontological dialogue regarding interpersonal issues can lead to personal discomfort, and to potential social conflict. It may sometimes lead to students feeling that they may be coerced to speak and to "confess" to others (Lefstein, Pollak, & Segal, 2018). Such concerns with direct ontological event discourse being too threatening or arousing, however, appear not to be borne by the data presented here, as Ben clearly was empathetic and concerned for Andrew's emotional needs, while at the same time sensitively working – through the node of "anger" – to find a way out of the ontological trap in which all were caught. Additional research is needed on the perceived threat (for students and teachers) of "dialogic finalizations" and the "torpedo touch" phenomenon which was noted in Ben's dialogue with Andrew. There appears to be a need for policies for ontological event dialogue which give students the right to pass or remain silent when discussing certain interpersonal issues (Lefstein et al., 2018).

It could be that one of the challenges to the realization of ontological event discourse in education is simply that it is less familiar, as most of us in our schooling have experienced only more traditional forms of instruction that do not invite student agency in developing the curriculum. In turn, the notion that curriculum could emerge through messy dialogue without an endpoint may not be valued or promoted as readily (Rogoff et al., 2001).

Table 1 summarizes the key comparisons between moral universal and ontological event discourses discussed in this analysis:

Table 1: Characteristics of the anti-bullying discourse and ontological event discourse universes

Characteristics of discourse	Anti-bullying; Kantian moral discourse universe	Ontological event discourse universe
Participants' unit of analysis	Purified, universal concept	Specific or recursive case or event
Notion of truth	*Episteme:* truth as universal, analytical, invariant across all contexts; truth is pre-defined	*Phronesis:* wisdom *in practice of events*, pragmatic, context-dependent; participants search for truth in discourse
Mediation	*Purified concept:* Case/event becomes a trigger ("opportunity") for discussion of purified concept	*Concept as nodes:* Concepts as nodes of similar events and counter-events used to analyze responsibility, make judgements of events
Addressivity	*Being above others:* Employing the universally right procedure; taking a bird's eye view over events; use of authoritative discourse which objectifies, pre-exists and transcends ontological events	*Being-with others:* Analysis of my-you-our-their responsibility (dialogic addressivity); internally persuasive discourse (Bakhtin, 1991); participants with equal rights
Emotion	Detached, no risk taking, suppress drama, concern with "feel good" comfort, civility	"Torpedo touch" and catharsis (e.g., pain of Andrew, sympathy of Ben)

Time	Imagined, universal future, focus on normative expectancies of the future; predictable; students as "half-beings," rather than fully responsible for themselves, others (Sidorkin, 2002)	Event-and-deed based (e.g., Andrew before Ben and after Ben)
Concept of the person	Excessively finalized and objectivized (Matusov & Smith, 2007)	Inconsistent, unpredictable, participant in ongoing events; "spirit" (Bakhtin et al., 1990)
Vision	Totalitarian, sanitized perfect future world (e.g., free from social exclusion)	How to become better in an imperfect, messy world of responsibility

Final questions for consideration

I leave the reader with suggestions for research and questions for consideration. It seems that one of the biggest appeals of bullying for teachers lies in a fear of intimacy (of "getting too close") in dealing with children's conflicts. How justifiable are teachers' concerns and prioritizations with students' comfort in addressing interpersonal problems? What degree of embarrassment and discomfort for students may be acceptable to educators, and what are the limits of discomfort for most teachers, for most students, and for most parents? Is some degree of "indecision" necessary for sensitively guiding students' interpersonal relations? What might the prioritization on students' comfort say about particular cultural and educational priorities? Is prevention of social exclusion a desirable end for students, or is a certain degree of exclusivity in relations (i.e., friendships, etc.) not only expected, but also desired by some students (Matusov & Smith, 2009a, 2009b)?

Finally, are there situations where the modernist, abstract moral universal discourse of bullying, "feel good" comfort, and "interactive" caring are more or less advisable or authoritative to students? What are those situations? It is possible that bullying discourse is more authoritative under more traumatic or extreme examples of "weaponized shame" that I did not investigate here, such as extreme taunting, intensive cyber harassment, homophobic intolerance, intolerance toward transgender people, domestic violence, sexual abuse, or racial harassment (Fast, 2016, p. 7). This would need to be further investigated. It is hoped that this study will spark further study of educational practices which value and promote dialogue as an end in itself to investigate and understand everyone's responsibility for interpersonal problems of concern to students.

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