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# Democracy & Education

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## Martin Buber's I-Thou Perspective as an Alternative Approach to Antibullying Efforts.

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### Abstract

The paper "Exploring Prosocial Behavior through Structured Philosophical Dialogue: A Quantitative Evaluation" ambitiously made the argument that a pedagogy grounded in dialogical inquiry as part of the Philosophy for Children program will positively affect incidents of bullying in schools. This response to the author's work includes a brief overview of her main argument and subsequent study and proceeds to suggest one possible alternative that she did not consider, namely Buber's perspective on the I-Thou relation and the potential this holds in regards to bullying. Making the argument that bullying is a normative issue stemming from how people receive each other, the response authors claim that if we met each other as we should, by identifying the other as inherently valuable and worthy of empathy, then bullying would not result. In other words, bullying is an outcome of acting as we shouldn't. Rather than focusing on responding to that action through a form of intervention, as the author did, this response emphasizes teaching children about how to better receive each other, thereby preventing bullying.

### A response to:

Glina, M. B. (2015). Exploring Prosocial Behavior through Structured Philosophical Dialogue: A Quantitative Evaluation. *Democracy and Education*, 23 (2), Article 5. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol23/iss2/5>

**T**HE PAPER "EXPLORING Prosocial Behavior through Structured Philosophical Dialogue: A Quantitative Evaluation" ambitiously made the argument that a pedagogy grounded in dialogical inquiry as part of the Philosophy for Children program would positively affect incidents of bullying in schools. The author made this argument and then set out to test her conclusion that a pedagogy of philosophical dialogue would lead to achieving the goal of students capable of "critical examination and reinvention of more empathetic, caring and just ways to treat one another" (Glina, 2015, p. 10). There are few who would read her argument without cheering for this goal. Many proponents of engaged classrooms would be

heartened by the pedagogical approaches she suggested, believing these approaches are likely to lead to less bullying and more ethically just classrooms with caring students. But we redirect these celebrations by revealing a different way of understanding bullying and its prevention.

Our response to the author's work includes a brief overview of her main argument and subsequent study and proceeds to suggest one possible alternative that she does not consider, namely Buber's perspective on the I-Thou relation and the potential this holds in regards to bullying. We argue that bullying is, in part, a normative issue stemming from how people receive each other. If we met each other as we should, by identifying the other as inherently valuable

and worthy of empathy, then bullying would not result. In other words, bullying is an outcome of acting as we shouldn't. Rather than focusing on responding to that action through a form of intervention, as the author did, we emphasize prevention by relating with children in ways that increase their skills in better receiving each other. To make this case, we draw upon Buber's work on dialogic relation and I-Thou encounter, which provides a foundation for addressing one underlying problem in bullying, that of treating each other wrongly, and explicates how to receive the other well.

It should be noted that bullying is a multifaceted issue. It includes political aspects, where structural inequalities in society can become manifest in ways that make it challenging for marginalized students to meet and be well met by others. Those political inequalities may also influence the learned behaviors of bullies, which they may adopt through observational learning or which may be deeply reinforced by operant conditioning or transference. The complexity and contextual dimensions of bullying are not addressed in their entirety in this paper. In providing an alternative perspective in our response to the question of how best to teach children not to bully, our contribution opens different curricular and pedagogical answers to the problem of relating.

In brief, the author defined bullying as "unrelenting, willful and malicious physical or psychological abuse that results in physical or psychological harm to the victim, the bully and the bystander" (Glina, 2015, p. 1) and outlined deleterious effects of bullying. Given the stated harmful effects of bullying, including absenteeism and socioemotional issues, the author contended that "it is critical to identify an effective response to this very serious and pervasive problem" (Glina, 2015, p. 3). She is not alone in calling for and working on just such a response, as she outlined antibullying interventions meant to "increase awareness of bullying and reduce or eliminate instances of bullying in schools" (Glina, 2015, p. 3). Most antibullying interventions involve schools and communities in the creation and implementation of antibullying policies. Many interventions also include what the author identified as a "second tier of elements" (Glina, 2015, p. 4) that revolve around creating conditions to foster more socially positive interactions. Strengths and weaknesses of various programs were then examined.

The author concluded that the program that seems to hold the most promise for achieving the goals of both awareness building and bullying reduction is Philosophy for Children (P4C), as none of the other programs "offers students the opportunity to extensively, critically and intersubjectively explore issues, such as caring, respect and empathy, with the members of their community" (Glina, 2015, p. 6). To many, it would seem to make sense that a learning opportunity that provides space for and facilitation of critical thinking and reflection through dialogue and community would have a bigger effect than learning opportunities based on problem-solving or transmission models in which the student either works to address a problem or passively listens to a teacher. What held our fascination in this article is that this author not only made this claim, a seeming truism held by many people, but set out to test it given one area of need: bullying.

The author expanded her claim that democratic, participatory, and dialogical pedagogy has greater potential to influence attitudes and understanding than other pedagogies, such as problem-solving or transmission based, by grounding her P4C approach in a community of inquiry. To test her claim, the study took place in "4 fourth-grade classrooms at a suburban elementary school in northern New Jersey . . . with 73 students" (Glina, 2015, pp. 17–18). Of these four classes, two were assigned the P4C approach and the other two regular instruction. Pretests regarding normative beliefs about aggression were administered to examine student beliefs about one another, including NoBags and the Empathy-Teen Conflict Survey followed by implementation of a sociometric instrument. During the intervention stage, students either received regular instruction or discussion sessions led by a P4C expert. The same three quantitative measures were used postintervention.

The study, intriguingly, did not show any statistically significant difference between the two control groups. Stepping away from the content of the article and study for a moment, we want to commend the author for sharing her study that indicated her hypothesis was wrong. When we first read the article, we were a bit awestruck and also let down. Too often, researchers seek confirmation of their views. Instead, though admitting the results were disappointing, this author saw the results as an opportunity to ask questions and suggest further study, as we should when we encounter answers that surprise us. She suggested that duration and challenges capturing attitudinal changes and transferring the learning to action could all be factors that led to no significant differences between the study groups.

The author began her paper with the statement that "the problem of bullying is one of the most significant problems in schools" (Glina, 2015, p. 1). Indeed, we agree that bullying and its subsequent detrimental effects are injurious, individually and societally. But what if bullying is a symptom of a problem and not a problem in and of itself? What if the serious and pervasive problem that calls for an effective response is not bullying? If we treat only the symptoms, the problem is going to manifest itself in other, harmful ways.

We want to supplement the author's explanations for why positive change was not seen by suggesting that her initial focus on interventions for addressing bullying might be misplaced. Perhaps rather than focusing on antibullying education, our classrooms should be setting a stage where students interact more ethically and empathetically to begin with, rather than in retrospect or in reaction, with the aim of reducing infractions. Rather than simply teaching antibullying content in a more critical and dialogical way to reduce bullying via P4C, what if we readied students to engage others as subjects in a world of objects? What if, rather than aiming to "reduce bullying" (Glina, 2015, p. 6), we aimed to increase caring, as conceived by Noddings? By doing so, we would aim to cultivate the types of Deweyan habits the author describes, habits of interaction that help us to function together fruitfully. Buber (1947/2002) would point to dialogic relation, characterized by inclusion, which he defined as "the extension of one's own concreteness, the fulfilment of the actual situation of life, the complete presence of the reality in

which one participates” (p. 115), as a means to this end of readying students to engage one another as subjects.

Despite our call to focus on the underlying conditions of treating others with care, we do not want to suggest that antibullying pedagogies are not worthwhile activities; we need such interventions in the face of pervasive bullying. We don't wish to throw the baby out with the bathwater or to derail the author's fine efforts to strengthen the quality of antibullying interventions and education. But we also wonder if, through these approaches, we are mistakenly giving more airtime to bullying, decidedly negative happenstances in our communities. What if antibullying efforts are actually serving to increase bullying? It is an interesting intellectual exercise to consider the possibility that in treating something we claim is a symptom, we are only exacerbating and perhaps even propagating bullying.

We need education that helps us learn to encounter and relate to one another well. Buber devoted his work to considering how individuals might better relate to each other and the world. While we recognize the current value of justice-oriented approaches that address bullying retroactively, we employ Buber's views to offer primary and complementary approaches from an ethical and proactive stance. Buber (1947/2002) made an important point about his approach to ethics in his philosophy of dialogue:

*If I am concerned with the education of character, everything becomes problematic. I try to explain to my pupils that envy is despicable, and at once I feel the secret resistance of those who are poorer than their comrades. I try to explain that it is wicked to bully the weak, and at once I see a suppressed smile on the lips of the strong. I try to explain that lying destroys life, and something frightful happens: the worst habitual liar of the class produces a brilliant essay on the destructive power of lying. I have made the fatal mistake of giving instruction in ethics, and what I said is accepted as current coin of knowledge; nothing of it is transformed into character-building substance. (p. 123)*

While idealistic, educating for the dialogically relational approach, out of which an ethical stance emerges, will help eradicate the need for retroactive programs and policies, we hope, as bullying will be significantly reduced.

### **Relating to the World in an I-Thou Manner**

Buber focused much of his work on what he saw as a problematic relation between the world and the individual. Bullying is an indicator of this problematic relation. When bullying is common, it is clear that relations are broken or were never made in the first place. Skills and effort are required for the relation between a person and the world to be realized in a healthy manner. Toward this end, Buber began his consideration of the relation between an individual and the world by considering what it means to identify oneself as an “I.” When you recognize yourself as an “I,” you recognize yourself as distinct from everything else. Buber placed this “everything else” in two categories, the categories of “It” and “Thou.” “It” is the category of objects where anything, living or otherwise, is objectified in the world of the “I” to be used or experienced as desired by the “I.” “Thou,” on the other hand, is the

category of subjects who may not be objectified but rather related to as others, wholly, inherently valuable, existing not in isolation. Whenever a person says, “I,” there is one of two possibilities actually being said: either I-It or I-Thou (Buber, 1958). Thus, Buber characterized “I” or self by kinds of relation (Noddings, 2002). There is never an “I” without the presence of an “It” or the presence of a “Thou.” This relation indicates the two ways in which a person relates to the world. The world, distinct from us, is either a world of objects or a world of subjects.

These two ways of relating to the world, I-It and I-Thou, play out in all educational settings. A student will necessarily view others as objects, actors on the stage of his or her life, there to play a role in his or her life and education. When the student understands that these others are subjects as well, in that they are leading characters of their own stories, not merely part of a backdrop to the student's own life and stories, the students are ready to receive each other as “Thou.” Teachers should facilitate opportunities for subject-subject or I-Thou encounters to help build students' capacity for relating; for in building capacity for encounter, a momentary happenstance, capacity is also built for relations, an ongoing connection.

We suggest that bullying is, in part, a symptom of an inability to see others as “Thou.” Whenever I is said, either I-It or I-Thou is being said. If we want to reduce the incidents of bullying, we need to teach students to meet one another as “Thou” because incidents of bullying are often meetings between an I and an It. Bullies place others, including inanimate others, in the category of “It,” as if this other can be utilized by the bully as he or she wishes, including for the entertainment of the bully or for the bully to feel more powerful. When people see other people as objects rather than subjects, they feel free to use others as they wish. Additionally, bystanders who take some pleasure in witnessing bullying or who do not overcome concerns with their own well-being to speak up on behalf of others effectively treat the bullied student as an object as well, an object that serves their needs or purposes. We suggest that seeing others as a “Thou” to be used at will is the core of the problem that bullying indicates.

Rather than antibullying interventions, we wonder if the author would consider applying a similar dialogical and philosophically rich pedagogical approach to content that is focused on learning to meet and relate to others as “Thou.” The aim would be to foster relations with another person that recognizes the other as a being independent of utility to oneself. Part of this involves recognizing the other to have inherent value and identity, not just in the way one values and identifies (or not) with this other. But more than just recognition, this involves “the desire to shoulder responsibility . . . for everything essential that he meets” (Friedman, 1976, p. 182). Included in “everything essential” are others, for instance, fellow classmates. Shouldering responsibility for Buber means holding a sense of moral obligation to care for all others whom one meets. Bullying would not take place if each person could shoulder responsibility for every “Thou” he or she meets. Certainly, the author mentioned teaching caring as part of various antibullying approaches, including P4C, for which she advocates. The main thrust of our questions and suggestions is

not novel, in that most antibullying education wants people to treat others better; what is novel is an approach that removes this learning from the primary retrospective context of bullying to proactively address the problem of relation, rather than the symptom of bullying.

When one recognizes that a person distinct from oneself is indeed more than a thing in one's world, rather an "other" who can also speak "I," the potential for an I-Thou relation exists and the potential for bullying reduces. When we see others as subjects of their own lives, we cannot bully, for recognizing the other as "Thou" means ascribing inherent value to those others that excludes them from our use or misuse of them. To have an I-Thou encounter occur, we must meet the other as an "other" with openness, directness, and presence. "This person is other, essentially other than myself . . . I confirm it; I wish his otherness to exist, because I wish his particular being to exist" (Buber, 1947/2002, pp. 71–72). This recognition of an "other" is both straightforward and demanding to achieve. Recognizing otherness is recognizing difference, and accepting that this being is different and separate from ourselves can be difficult. Accepting this and willing this other to exist is the challenge and achievement of an I-Thou relationship, for recognizing an "other" means relinquishing our ideas of this person and receiving him or her wholly, with his or her own will, ideas, and values. If we are unable to do so, we relegate all relations to the realm of I-It.

I-It is a necessary way of seeing and interacting with elements of the world, but when this becomes the default way of relating to most of the world, it is harmful, as is the case in the manifestation of bullying. In Buber's perspective, it is out of I-Thou that I-It should arise. This happens when we understand that others are not just objects, and when we recognize that, even though we are not meeting them as Thou at this moment, it does not exclude the possibility of them as Thou. But when we only meet them as objects, there is no possibility of meeting them as "Thou." An I-It attitude is not wrong; what is wrong is when that way of thinking and being is separated rather than rooted in I-Thou encounters. For instance, the majority of the time when purchasing groceries at the store, we have an I-It meeting with the cashier, which is harmful to neither of us (nor beneficial in the realm of relation). When, however, I-It encounters are the most common way, or a way separated from I-Thou meetings, the results are hardened humans incapable of relating to others as subjects rather than as merely objects—humans capable of engaging in bullying.

A dominant theme throughout Buber's ideas on education is that of the educator meeting the student and subsequently building and teaching through relationships. One of the most fundamental attitudes for educators to model is recognizing "each of his pupils as a single, unique person, the bearer of a special task of being which can be fulfilled through him and through him alone" (Friedman, 1976, p. 181). In each student there exists a struggle between becoming this unique person able to bear his or her special task and all that would oppose this becoming. The pupil comes in many forms: "the misshapen and the well-proportioned, animal faces, empty faces, and noble faces in indiscriminate confusion, like the presence of the created universe; the glance of

the educator accepts and receives them all" (Buber, 1947/2002, p. 112). A necessary precondition of education, as Buber conceived it, is an educator receiving or accepting a student in a manner of genuine mutuality, where the child trusts that the educator is really there for him or her. This primary relationship is essential in helping a student grow in a willingness to take responsibility for others.

## Implementation

To move from Buber's more abstract analysis back to the account of the author's paper and the realm of creating better relationships and social settings in schools, we are led to ask: how would we achieve Buber's I-Thou relationships in schools? This is where the author's project comes back into this discussion. We are aligned with the author's beliefs that engaged, dialogical approaches to learning that emphasize critical and connective thinking are perhaps supportive ways of helping students learn to encounter themselves, others, and the world in an I-Thou manner. It can also help them to develop dispositions and habitual ways of acting, not just ways of thinking about moral dilemmas. It would potentially be enlightening to build on the author's study in general method, while focusing more on generating initial conditions that prevent the rise of bullying in the first place. In addition, it would perhaps be beneficial to track incidences of reported bullying preintervention and postintervention or, better yet, to refocus research on the development of I-Thou relations.

In addition to P4C, we might suggest the inclusion of such classroom practices as the Classroom CARE model. The author asserted that because P4C has "reason, logic, and a foundation for solid judgment as the main arbiters of philosophical inquiry, students should arrive at the philosophically sound conclusion that it is ethically unacceptable to cause harm to one another" (Gina, 2015, p. 6). This approach relies heavily on abstract conversations about principles of care and ethics. While still recognizing the value of those approaches, we aim instead to achieve a caring setting where students habitually interact with each other as real and unique individuals well, while also engaging in philosophical inquiry into their relations and how they might be improved. The Classroom CARE model comes from Nolan's efforts to implement the work of Buber, along with Dewey and Noddings (Nolan, 2012). An educator who attends to the Classroom CARE model focuses on four pedagogically interrelated strands: community, action, reflection, and environment, each of which is grounded in an ethics of care. By focusing on the four aspects of CARE, an educator has the potential to enhance the abilities and attitudes of his or her students in regards to meeting each other well, both within the classroom and in their lives beyond the institution.

Choosing the acronym CARE was deliberate: developing community in an active and reflective classroom that is a welcoming environment depends first and foremost on care as conceived by Noddings (2003); to Noddings, care is recognizing a need, acting to meet that need, and receiving recognition that the care was received. Not only is the educator meant to care for students in this manner but the educator is meant to encourage such care to be lived out by all in the classroom. Noddings's robust conception of

care matters as the foundation because it helps us grapple with what it means to care.

In attending to *community*, educators must take responsibility for building community in their own classrooms, connecting with their students' communities and building bridges to the community within which the school is located. As Buber (1947/2002) said, "Genuine education of character is genuine education for community" (p. 138). An *action-oriented* classroom is one that relies equally on intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, spiritual, and physical modes of learning where students are engaged in a participatory manner. "Sharing in an undertaking and . . . entering into mutual-ity" (Buber, 1947/2002, p. 103) are active and necessary parts of education. Action should not be directed to the end of individual achievement, however, or the world will not be met. *Reflection*, as part of this classroom, means integrating encounters as the relational aspect of experience with deliberate consideration for what is taking place, what the meaning of this is, and how it influences what is ahead. *Environment* refers both to the internal environment of the classroom—constructed so as to be a welcoming space within which community, action, and reflection may easily take place—and to the external environment within which the classroom is located. I-Thou encounters happen in a time and place. As educators, attending to the learning environment is one of the means at hand to foster dialogical relationships.

The Classroom CARE model functions on multiple pedagogical levels. It serves as an assessment tool. Educators can look to the model and consider whether their classrooms operate according to CARE. The model also serves as an implementation tool as educators can consider how to operate according to CARE. Finally, the model serves as a communication of aims for education as it happens, ensuring it be caring, community building, active, reflective, and welcoming. The goal is that when students leave the classroom and school they are able to participate in and build community, act and reflect for growth, and participate in and build welcoming environments, as well as be able to connect with other environments. The achievement of this goal would foreseeably serve to reduce incidences of bullying by means of Buber's philosophical foundation on relation.

## Conclusion

If each of us were prepared to meet and relate to others well, problems such as bullying would not be as prevalent, but how do we teach ourselves and young people to meet the world well? What Buber provided to the current work in this regard is a particular understanding of the two ways in which I meet the other: I-It and I-Thou. Considering that I-Thou encounters help negate the possibility of bullying by helping us meet one another well, effort should be made to increase understanding and capacity for these types of encounters and relations. The author, in her study, asked how we can best reduce bullying and how we can best teach antibullying curriculum. We have suggested a different focus for a similar end, with the focus being on learning to navigate a world of objects by building skills and attitudes through the Classroom CARE model that are helpful in relating to others in an I-Thou manner. Within this approach, when we meet another, we meet him or her as a subject, and as such, someone we hold ourselves responsible for treating well.

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