Sex Roles

Book Review: At the Core of the Curriculum - and the Community Brinkman, B.G. (2016). Detection and prevention of identity-based bullying: Social justice perspectives. NY: Routledge Press

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	SERS-D-16-00228
Full Title:	Book Review: At the Core of the Curriculum - and the Community Brinkman, B.G. (2016). Detection and prevention of identity-based bullying: Social justice perspectives. NY: Routledge Press
Article Type:	Book Review
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AT THE CORE OF CURRICULUM—AND THE COMMUNITY

***Detection and prevention of identity-based bullying: Social justice perspectives.* By Britney G. Brinkman, New York, Routledge Press, 2016. 144 pp. $160.00 (hardcover) ISBN-13: 978-0415719520**

Over the past 10 years, the level at which researchers examine school bullying has been critically appraised, with a number of new voices stepping away from the more traditional focus on the pathology of the perpetrator, target, or on the role of the bystander towards more holistic approaches that take account of the group dynamics that underpin bullying on school playgrounds worldwide. These researchers conceptualize bullying not as a dyadic problem, but rather as one for which resolution lies with an understanding of group identities—a resolution that needs classes', schools', and communities' involvement. Brinkman's text represents a timely, clear, and refreshingly reflexive approach to tackling bullying from a group-dynamics perspective. Specifically, Brinkman explores a social constructivist approach to bullying, arguing that everyone in a society needs to work towards social justice reform if we are to deal effectively with identity-based bullying.

Brinkman's explanation of her approach is both lucid and logical. The book will be most accessible to academics and professionals with knowledge of research in the area of school-based bullying. From the opening chapters, which outline the theory and previous research, Brinkman goes on to consider wider cultural factors and educational policies that impact upon identity-based bullying. She then considers potential barriers to implementing a social constructivist agenda and makes recommendations for best practices, taking account of what we know about identity-based bullying thus far. When it comes to putting research into practice, for example, a notable point Brinkman makes concerns a certain (lack of) adherence to anti-bullying policies, despite having these policies in place by law in schools. Perhaps, Brinkman argues, this

lack of adherence is because these policies were not co-created, and thus are not owned by the

communities to which they pertain. What is needed are communities where everyone is engaged

in reducing identity-based bullying, and in addressing the social systems that allow for it to

thrive. According to her social constructivist model, adults are just as much potential bystanders

as are children, and they need to recognize the barriers that prevent their own intervention. The

book ends with a helpful chapter dedicated to enabling school staff to bridge the gap between

awareness and helpful action. These recommendations are drawn from research primarily taking

place in the United States and United Kingdom. Embedded here is a challenge and a call to

action for readers to determine how such recommendations will play out globally.

It is important to note at this juncture that this text is not about all forms of bullying.

Rather, one of the key strengths of Brinkman's approach is its focus on identity-based bullying,

which Brinkman defines as "any form of bullying related to the characteristics considered unique

to a child's actual or perceived social identity" (p. 3). Of course, within that definition scholars

may still wrestle with what counts as "bullying," but boundaries are set concerning the target of

that bullying: It is about the child's group membership, be that imagined or real.

In the opening chapters, Brinkman provides the reader with an up-to-date review of the

literature on identity-based bullying in schools. One might expect that because "identity" is a

broad concept, such a sweeping review would be beyond the scope of a text such as this one.

However, because approaches looking at group dynamics are in their infancy, this is not the case.

Rather, most of the work that has been done in this domain has focused on sexual and gender

identities, with other smaller bodies of research looking at racial and religious identities along

with a smattering of studies on people with disabilities. And, as a whole, the majority of this

research was conducted adolescents. Thus, Brinkman highlights comprehensively where research

has been done and where there are gaps in this literature. Most notable is her observation that

identity-based bullying does not emerge fully-formed, as if from nowhere, during adolescence;

thus we need to focus our research on understanding the developmental origins of bullying.

To address the underpinnings of identity-based bullying in her social constructivist

perspective approach, Brinkman conceptualizes bullying as a social justice issue because it is

rooted in social inequalities. Brinkman's approach to bullying implicitly addresses issues of

importance to feminist psychology and sociology. Brinkman argues that children are active

agents in society who create their reality and learn prejudiced attitudes and group stereotypes

through their development. And while one might groan at the thought of yet another model

designed to address the "bullying question," Brinkman does seamlessly link this approach to

previous research on the group dynamics of school bullying. Moreover, unlike other models in

the area (e.g., developmental subjective dynamics; Abrams, Rutland & Cameron, 2003; social

identity development theory, Nesdale, 2001) that focus on children's developing understanding

of an adults' world, Brinkman explicitly situates the school and school staff as part of a system

that maintains the dynamics that permit bullying to take place. That is, schools and communities

actively seek to maintain a status quo that puts certain groups at the bottom of a pre-determined

hierarchy. Nevertheless, the bridge between the social and the developmental aspects of the

social constructivist approach remain largely unbuilt in this text. Although Brinkman does link to

other research by key players in the field, the reader would need to turn to other authors in order

to further develop their thinking along these developmental lines.

In conclusion, this text gives a succinct, clear, and well-grounded account of the social

constructivist approach to identity-based bullying. Gaps in our extant knowledge, with a focus on

research drawn largely from U.S. and U.K. education systems and on certain group identities

rather than on others, become readily apparent. There is also sufficient scope for increased

enmeshment of the approach with a feminist perspective and with what we know of children's

cognitive and developmental psychology. Overall, the central message of the book is ultimately

convincing: We all need to be ready to upend the status quo and work towards social justice

reform if we are to deal effectively with identity-based bullying.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

I can confirm that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this manuscript.

There was no research done involving participants.

There was thus no need for informed consent.