

## Bullying and the philosophy of shooting freaks

*Gerald Walton*

**T**he audience sneered and sniggered. Susan Boyle strutted toward the microphone on the stage of *Britain's Got Talent*, a televised talent contest.<sup>16</sup> It was April 2009. Alone on a vast and empty auditorium stage, she faced hundreds of people in the studio and the gaze of millions of television viewers around the world. On display was a middle-aged woman lacking refinement and sophistication, wearing a plain, muted-yellow housedress, her grey hair curled in an apparent home-perm.

Awkwardly, Susan prepared to perform for an audience that dismissed her the minute she emerged from backstage. Scorn abounded. From the recorded reactions, a panel of three judges were as dubious about her capacity for talent as was the audience. Simon Cowell, one of the three judges, rolled his eyes when she reported her age to be forty-seven. The audience revelled in derision, aghast that such a simple, ordinary women would appear on a show that was ostensibly meant for younger, more attractive contestants.

For one 18-year old audience member, sneering at Susan had an unfortunate ricochet effect. Jennifer Byrne faced online and in-

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxPZh4AnWyk>

person backlash after her scoffing was caught on camera and was broadcast to the world<sup>17</sup> “It was a split-second reaction that changed my life,” she said. “All I did was roll my eyes and I'm targeted by a hate campaign for months”<sup>18</sup>. After a few more moments of uncomfortable questioning by Simon Cowell, Susan began to sing. Instead of anticipated boos and quick disqualification from the panel of judges, eyes widened and jaws dropped in shock when she sang the first powerful notes of “I Dreamed a Dream” from *Les Misérables*. An outburst of cheering and applauding, accompanied by a standing ovation, replaced mass ridicule. Even Jennifer Byrne said, “The moment Susan started to sing I did what everyone else in the audience did. I jumped to my feet and started cheering because her voice was so unbelievable.” Accompanied by billowing orchestral music, Susan’s powerful voice built to a crescendo to rouse full emotional impact.

In his post-performance feedback, Piers Morgan, a second judge, said, “When you stood there with that cheeky grin and said, ‘I want to be like [English musical theatre star] Elaine Paige,’ everyone was laughing at you. No one is laughing now. That was stunning, an incredible performance! Amazing! I’m reeling from shock!” Amanda Holden added from the judges’ panel, “I honestly think that we were all being very cynical . . . and I just want to say that it was a complete privilege listening to that!” Even the infamously acerbic Simon Cowell swooned. From that one performance, Susan became an international sensation. To date, she has released six studio albums and her concerts sell out around the world.

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, 2009

<sup>18</sup> Smith, 2009

The Boyle story is an example of a true-life fairy tale that delights those whose worldview centres upon contrived Disneyesque happy endings and the American Dream ideology. She faced mass public condemnation in the form of classism and ageism, but was ultimately vindicated. For many, she triumphed not just over a televised moment of adversity, but also over a lifetime of it in relation to her plain looks and material poverty. Susan Boyle is celebrated not just because of her vocal talent, but because she is the proverbial ugly duckling-turned-swan. Her story tugs at heartstrings, personifying much-beloved fairy tales and feel-good happy endings. It became a musical titled “I Dreamed a Dream” that was produced in 2012.<sup>19</sup>

Not begrudging Susan her sudden fame and fortune, I throw cold water in the face of the usual interpretation of the story, which is that adversity yielded to triumph. The story is bought and sold as a celebration of underdog dreams coming true against all odds. Regrettably, the packaging of the Susan Boyle story is a superficial interpretation and, for me, far from heart-warming. What happened to Susan was an event that played out in a drama of two acts. Thematically, the first act is about the rejection of those deemed inferior or unworthy based on surface appearances and the negative stereotypes that are associated with them. The second act, by contrast, is about celebrating and embracing her only when she proves herself worthy. Contrived though they were to incite heightened emotional responses, the dramatic moments captured before she began to sing are a harbinger of unbridled social prejudices. Simply put, Susan Boyle was bullied on a mass, international scale. She was judged instantly as ugly, awkward, and stupid, as

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<sup>19</sup> Tartaglione, 2012

different and thereby inferior to the rest of us. That is, until she started to sing.

But, what if her voice had met the initial grim expectations that were so evident as she advanced towards the microphone, namely, that she would sing as plainly as she looked? What would have happened then? As many other contestants have experienced on such televised contests, Susan would have been driven from the stage, shamed by the unpleasant *blaaaat* as the judges pounded their “X” buzzers, and scolded her for her mediocre talent, or lack of it, entirely. The sneers and sniggers of mass derision would have been valorised. Eager for the next contestant, the audience and judges alike would have delighted in seeing her walk off the stage into obscurity.

I do not use the word “bullied” lightly to describe what happened to Susan Boyle on *Britain’s Got Talent*. I do not employ the word liberally to describe everyday emotional injuries, affronts, or abuses. Rather, I use it in a very specific sense and in a very different way than do most researchers and educators such as Olweus<sup>20</sup> who focuses on behaviour, Harris<sup>21</sup> who examines bullying in the context of interpersonal dynamics, and Hazler, Carney, and Granger<sup>22</sup> who promote theory on the neurological factors that influence bullying. While such accounts offer valuable multidimensional angles from which to consider factors that give rise to bullying, the issue of social difference is, broadly speaking, given short shrift. I know this in part because I was bullied as a child; I was deemed, and mistreated as, different. Many years later and through the eyes

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<sup>20</sup> Olweus, 1993

<sup>21</sup> Harris, 2009

<sup>22</sup> Hazler, Carney, and Granger, 2011

of a researcher, I have to wonder about the validity of scholarship on bullying that glosses over difference.

Initially, Susan Boyle was also bullied for her social difference from the younger, evidently more sophisticated audience. To put it in scholarly language, she was “Othered” and thus subjugated (for a more in-depth discussion about Othering, see Jensen<sup>23</sup>). For me, her experience mirrors what happens in schools, except without the happy ending that she enjoyed. Children and youth bully each other predominantly because of social difference on any number of grounds, including race, gender expression, real or perceived sexuality, class, physical ability, mental ability, physical attractiveness, body size and shape, social competence, and so on. These are aspects that have social status, meaning that they are, as McMullin<sup>24</sup> puts it, “differences that matter”<sup>25</sup>. Such differences matter because, beyond surface variation, they represent allocations and intersections of social power, privilege, and disadvantage.<sup>26</sup>

Attempts to grapple with bullying have, in general terms, failed.<sup>27</sup> As long as they stay the present course of modifying individual and interpersonal behaviour between and among students, they will continue to fail. Jeong and Lee<sup>28</sup> make the point even stronger in their argument that, from their research sample of 7001 students across 195 schools, anti-bullying programs may even *increase* bullying. They theorize that bullies may actively choose to disregard and adapt around what they

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<sup>23</sup> Jensen, 2011

<sup>24</sup> McMullin, 2004

<sup>25</sup> McMullin, 2004, p. 6

<sup>26</sup> Dhamoon, 2009

<sup>27</sup> Swidney, 2010; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, and Isava, 2008

<sup>28</sup> Jeong and Lee, 2013

learn through anti-bullying programs. Anti-bullying work constitutes an overall failure, even when limited and temporary success of particular approaches are considered, because, despite all of the research and programs that are purported to reduce bullying, it remains a widely misunderstood phenomenon. The Susan Boyle video offers instruction to a better understanding, but only if we can move past the sensational and struggle with the difficult issues of prejudice, discrimination, and social difference that are integral, yet largely ignored, components of bullying. The question is: Why is there so little struggle in the first place?

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Stepping away from the glitz and glamour of televised talent shows, bullying in schools plays out for many children as a story devoid of triumph. Portrayals in news media are predictable: An incident garners attention from journalists, usually because a bullied child has committed suicide. Shock ensues, followed by the inevitable question, “What can we do to stop bullying?” So-called talking heads are called upon to give their opinion, as I have on numerous occasions. Typically, the issues that we are asked are about how to reduce aggression, what to do about cyberbullying, and how bystanders might be key players in both stopping and supporting bullies. After a flurry of coverage over a few days, each story fades and rarely sees the camera spotlight again. Later, another tragedy captures media attention and the cycle of bullying discourse begins anew.

As I have argued elsewhere<sup>29</sup>, an additional problem is that teacher education and educational research are enamoured by

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<sup>29</sup> Walton, 2011

evidence-based solutions to any sort of problem that adversely affects students, teachers, and pedagogy. Bullying experts have told us that, based on their analytical “findings” that are achieved through methodological technologies, bullying happens between and among students and is harmful to them. But to offer such findings, bullying had to be operationalized in the first place so that it could be measured, analysed, and ultimately regulated. This meant identifying a particular realm or expression that constitutes “bullying” through social science methods. In short, bullying was discursively created. Bullying behaviours and their scarring effects – both of which are real – were allocated by social scientists to a discursive realm, and that realm was, and continues to be, “bullying.” Dan Olweus is principally known as a pioneer of this research in Norway during the 1960s, even though Frederic Burk explored the particulars of bullying much earlier, in 1897. Burk suggested that bullying involves “some form of . . . inborn tendency of the strong to oppress the weak, etc.”<sup>30</sup> Olweus later offered an idea that extends that of Burk. Translated to English in 1993, Olweus operationalized bullying as when a student “is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students.”<sup>31</sup> Such conceptualizations are what Neil Duncan refers to as the “bullying orthodoxy, meaning adherence to the discursive norms, which are repeatedly reinforced, of how bullying is defined, explained, and addressed.”<sup>32</sup>

Drawing lines around what bullying means – that is, building discursive terrain – was a highly successful project, if success is measured by influence. All over the world, bullying has been

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<sup>30</sup> Burke, 1897, p. 366

<sup>31</sup> Olweus, 1993, p. 54

<sup>32</sup> Duncan, 2012

added to the “thou shalt not” list of school conduct codes, while social science researchers continue to mine it for its capacities to make change in schools. The utility of findings is to design policies and programs, the purpose of which is to mould and modify student behaviour so that bullying is reduced to rare occurrences, if it happens at all. Yet, bullying persists as a prominent feature of schools and school life, despite efforts to contain it. How, then, do we make sense of the rupture between problem solving and problem-persistence? Have researchers, as holders of elite knowledge, failed to see what is directly in front of them? Are they wilfully ignorant, electing to not pursue a more difficult investigation into the grounds of bullying?

And, what counts as knowledge? If we take anti-bullying policy at face value and recognize that children and youth of today continue to bully each other viciously and unremittingly, not unlike the behaviours of many adults when grouped together, then we have to admit that the knowledge that anti-bullying policy hinges upon, and bullying discourse itself, is either faulty or partial, or both. Perhaps it is prudent to consider not only what counts as knowledge in the regime of evidence-based metrics for policy-making, but what forms of knowledge constitute that which we, to put it in Deborah Britzman’s words, “cannot bear to know.”<sup>33</sup> Taking a psychoanalytic approach to knowledge, Britzman asks how it is that “difficult knowledge” remains largely unclaimed in teacher education.<sup>34</sup> She asks, echoing German sociologist and philosopher Theodor Adorno, how teacher education managed to leave behind difficult knowledge that arose from Auschwitz and what ethical

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<sup>33</sup> Britzman, 2000, p. 201

<sup>34</sup> Britzman, 2000, p. 201



responsibilities might be held by education after the fact. She asks,

How is it that so much of our past century remains unclaimed in education? How can teacher education come to make itself relevant to . . . ethical obligations? If teacher education could begin to reclaim difficult knowledge, what would be the work of teacher educators?<sup>35</sup>

If Adorno were alive today, he might be asking the same questions of education, post-Bosnia-Herzegovina, post-Rwanda, and post-Darfur. More generally but pointedly, Britzman asks how the world might come to matter in teacher education. It is not that educators do not teach about genocides and other horrors of human design, but, as Adorno noted after World War II, students come to know facts and figures in a technical and mechanical way, but lack the understanding of their profound philosophical and ethical implications. Britzman asserts that, in an age of professionalism and managerialism, education is gripped by an incapacity to reconcile its own vulnerabilities and failures.

We have yet to grapple with what knowledge does to teachers, particularly the difficult knowledge of social catastrophe, evidence of *woeful disregard*, experiences of social violence, illness, and death, and most generally, with what it means to come to terms with various kinds of trauma, both individual and collective. What makes trauma traumatic is the incapacity to respond adequately, accompanied by feelings of profound helplessness and loss, and a sense that no other person or group will intervene.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Britzman, 2000, p. 201

<sup>36</sup> Britzman, 2000, p. 202

Such helplessness is expressed poignantly by one of the school administrators in the 2011 U.S. documentary film *Bully*.<sup>37</sup> Patrolling the halls of her school, Assistant Principal Kim Lockwood says, “Tell me how to fix this.” She repeats it for emphasis. “Tell me how to fix this. I don’t know. I don’t have any magic.” Later, upset parents complain to her about how their son is bullied ruthlessly and repeatedly on the school bus, events that are documented by the videographer over several days of shooting. Lockwood replies that many kids have a difficult time on the bus and that she can have their son take a different bus to school. She then follows up with the rather astonishing and contradictory claim that “I’ve ridden [that bus]. I’ve been on that route . . . They are just as good as gold.” Through glib cliché, she invalidates the parents’ claims and ignores the fact that most children are likely to behave better in the presence of authority figures.

Lockwood’s first statement was more honest than her subsequent defence. Echoing the sentiments of many educators, to be sure, Lockwood really does not know how to protect kids from bullying. But the effect of her statement that kids on the bus are as “good as gold” negates their son’s video-documented experiences. It constitutes administrative disregard in the guise of concern and promises of action. At least Lockwood admits that bullying is a problem when she says, “Tell me how to fix this.” Such recognition is quite unlike Superintendent Vickie Reed who said,

The perception that the school is a haven for bullies is just not true. Do we have some bullying problems? I’m sure we do. All

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<sup>37</sup> Lowen, Hirsch, Waitt, Warren, and Hirsch, 2011

school systems do. But is it a major overarching concern in our high school? No, it is not.

Protecting the school, as she must in her administrative role, Reed denies the extent of bullying with certainty. Her *woeful disregard* aside, Lockwood's intentions were undoubtedly good. The problem with good intentions is that everyone seems to have them and they are easy to claim; they can also hinder seeing the problem for what it is, namely, a broader social problem at its core, and not a behavioural one. Claims of good intentions can protect us from having to face or grapple with difficult knowledge that defies comprehension. What is even more problematic is what amounts to administrative disregard in the guise of concern and promise of remediation that will never take place. "I'm sorry about this but we will take care of it," Lakewood assures the parents as they leave her office. The mother expresses doubt as they walk back to their car. "What did she say when we were leaving, that she'd take care of it? I'm pretty sure that's what she said [last] fall. She politicianed us. She's not going to do anything." Lockwood, like many of her counterparts, does indeed not know what to do, but she has to appear and act as though she does when she meets with upset parents.

For Britzman, Lockwood might be an example of how it is that between education and the world lays a rupture of conscience. She asks, "What inhibits our capacity to respond ethically to others, to learn something from people we will never meet and to be affected by histories that we may never live?".<sup>38</sup> If we can bear to learn from histories that are not ours, if we can grapple

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<sup>38</sup> Britzman, 2000, p. 202

with difficult knowledge, if the world were to come to matter in pedagogical industries, then perhaps education might become less about administrative management of teachers and children, and more about truth that matters in and to the world. But as Britzman acknowledges, “there is nothing easy about encountering histories of woeful disregard.”<sup>39</sup>

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I empathize with Assistant Principal Lockwood. I, too, do not have magic or formula that would eliminate bullying from schools. No one does. Bullying is a tenacious problem and its antidote for schools eludes researchers and educators, alike, despite claims to expertise and knowledge. Careers, including mine, have been built on investigating, analysing, and theorizing how bullying happens and what can be done about it. There are no policy approaches, intervention strategies, legislative regulations, criminal laws, or blueprints for administrative and pedagogical leadership that would incite such widespread change in schools that bullying would be reduced to being a minor problem, perhaps not even a problem at all. Preventative and interventionist tactics can resolve bullying incidents and bring about change in school cultures, but only in the short-term. A long-term solution remains as elusive as the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, despite the sheer volume of programs, policies, and practices aimed at finding it.

I propose, then, that admitting our collective failure is the first step to addressing why and how bullying in schools persists. Perhaps this admission is a pre-requisite for entering the realm of difficult knowledge. By “our” failure, I mean researchers,

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<sup>39</sup> Britzman, 2000, p. 204

educators, parents, and others who, with commitment, sincerity, and good intentions, have invested much work for positive change for children and youth in schools. I fully expect resounding opposition to the contention that, despite efforts, we have failed to win the “war on bullying,” to use common jargon found in mainstream journalism.<sup>40</sup> Investments of time and energy are at risk, and much-loved worldviews about triumph-over-adversity are threatened. Yet, the evidence is clear that bullying persists despite widespread and sustained efforts against it. A small cadre of researchers and theorists has said as much<sup>41</sup> including leading anti-bullying researcher Dorothy Espelage who said, “It’s a mess. I want to bang my head against the wall”.<sup>42</sup>

Step one, then, is to admit defeat. The next step is to look very closely and openly at why and how bullying persists. Most teachers, parents, and school administrators care about the safety and welfare of students and would like to see bullying become a social problem of the past, the social equivalent of polio or diphtheria, all but eliminated in so-called developed countries. However, neither lack of care nor lack of industry is the issue. On the contrary, the work being done to address bullying is both continuous and fervent. Nevertheless, the news is grim; revamped programs, new pedagogical approaches, updated policies, and innovative research methodologies have not changed the discouraging status quo, nor have cutting-edge metrics on how to measure bullying and its effects. The issue is not that the social science is flawed, though an overabundance of it is certainly tedious, derivative, and compounds the problem with oversaturation. The pivotal issue, one that

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<sup>40</sup> For instance, see Alcinii, 2013

<sup>41</sup> See elaboration in Walton and Niblett, 2012

<sup>42</sup> Quote in Swidney, 2010, p. 23

remains undertheorized, is that bullying as a phenomenon remains misunderstood. Elsewhere, I refer to this as the “problem trap”<sup>43</sup>, meaning that we think we know what bullying is (behavioural, interpersonal) and, like centrifugal force, anti-bullying approaches gravitate around it. It is not the specific approaches that are necessarily faulty; rather, it is misguided collective knowledge about bullying that informs those approaches in the first place.

The paradoxical problem is that we do not know what we do not know. Given the prominence of the issue in public discourse and journalism, it would seem that most people think that they understand bullying perfectly well, that it functions as necessary character-building, or that it is harmful behaviour that should be stopped. In academic contexts, the widespread and prevailing notion seems to be that more research is needed and that more research is always better. The common refrain is that we need to keep finding gaps in the knowledge and fill them with better research-based approaches and strategies. In the case of bullying, more research is not better, contrary to research industry ideology. In fact, I would argue, based on my many years of adjudicating proposals on bullying for major international educational conferences, that instead of doing more research, we need to stop our industry, take a step back, look at the problem in broad contexts rather than micro-moments, and go back to the drawing board. A disavowal of the bullying orthodoxy is called for. In short, we need to stop before we continue to think.

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At Coney Island in New York City, an open-air paintball game stood on the boardwalk until its demolition in 2010. Called

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<sup>43</sup> Walton, 2010

*Shoot the Freak* (see Figure 1), contestants would shoot paintballs at unarmed “Live Human Targets” (see Figure 2) who were clad in hard plastic protective-wear.



Figure 1: Shoot the Freak paintball gallery, Coney Island, 2006.



Figure 2: Close-up of "Live Human Freaks."

I stared in fascination when my partner and I stumbled on it during a visit to New York in 2006. Though merely a game that is meant to be fun and amusing, it represents for me the primary way that bullying plays out and harkens the difficult knowledge that is unbearable to know. If we can get past the resistance that it exists as mere entertainment, we can draw parallels between “shooting freaks” and bullying in schools. Freaks are the outsiders, those who do not fit in with the norms of the majority, those who are different or perceived that way. Such Othering is represented in pop culture, such as FX Network’s *American Horror Story: Freakshow* where “freaks” are targeted and persecuted.

Bullying reveals similar and obvious patterns of persecution. Losers. Retards. Geeks. Bitches. Fags. Fatties. Chinks. Ragheads. Such *live human targets* exist in every school. The patterns of persecution are neither new nor revelatory, just disregarded. In typical educational policy and research, lip service is paid to “diversity” but addressing social difference in any meaningful way gives rise to criticism and termination of discussions.<sup>44</sup> I have witnessed such resistance on numerous occasions at teacher conferences and on social media. “Too theoretical! What about practice?” is a tedious but common response. Still, my view remains that, if we were to engage with the messy realities of difference and grapple with the dynamics of privilege, stigma, prejudice, and hate – and how they shift in accordance with wider social and political contexts – we might come to see that anti-bullying discourse and its industry have missed the mark.

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<sup>44</sup> For elaboration, see Walton, 2011



We might also be able to move beyond the stultifying mountain of research that has largely been for naught. Then, we might begin to have a very different conversation about bullying. Documentary films such as *Bully* might be able to address social difference meaningfully, rather than function as a venue for hackneyed notions of “Let’s stop bullying.” Maybe then we might be closer to being able to say that the world matters in education and education matters in the world.

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