

Unpacking Anti-Bullying Discourse: Beyond Binaries of Safety and Danger

A review of *Queer Kids and Social Violence: The Limits of Bullying*

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This book review discusses Queer Kids and Social Violence: The Limits of Bullying, edited by Elizabethe Payne and Melissa J. Smith, which unpacks the anti-bullying framework that depoliticizes and individualizes LGBTQ+ youth in schools. Thirteen chapters with different methodologies and critical perspectives on social violence against queer youth focus on better understanding the experiences of queer and trans youth and disrupt the simplistic and individualized intervention to create “safe space” in schools. The book emphasizes how bullying is a structural mechanism through which gender privilege is (re)produced in different forms, by different agents, and in different directions within schools.

Key words: *bullying, queer, safety, gender, sexuality*

In the current surge of anti-LGBTQ+ political action and the cis-heteronormative system inside and outside the school system, there has been resistance and backlash to LGBTQ+ inclusive practices at school. Even if the experiences and presence of LGBTQ+ children and youth are discussed, the main conversations have circulated mainly around anti-bullying and suicide prevention, such as centering on mantras of “be kind” and “be respectful.” *Queer Kids and Social Violence: The Limits of Bullying* (Elizabethe Payne & Melissa J. Smith, Eds., University of Minnesota Press, 2025) brings up the question of what safety is in schools. Without challenging the structures that marginalize LGBTQ+ children and youth in school, school cannot be a safe space for queer beings.

The request to create a safe educational space—a space without bullying, sexual violence, or

traumatic experiences and one characterized by a welcoming ethos, a sense of community, and respect—has led to the development of violence prevention education, sex education, and safety education. However, what does it mean to have a safe space when dealing with systemic cis-heteronormativity? How have anti-bullying policies and programs functioned as mechanisms for excluding students who are perceived as potential “at-risk” beings? At the same time, we need to remember that book bans, anti-trans laws focused on schooling, and prohibitions on teaching gender identity and sexual orientation have been enacted under the notion of making schools “safe” spaces, treating discussions around gender and sexuality as dangerous knowledge. Thus, danger in educational spaces is framed as something to be prevented in an individualized form—a framing that is, in turn, used to justify the banning of certain topics in schools that are considered difficult, to depoliticize marginalization, and to emphasize an individualistic approach. In alignment with these questions, *Queer Kids and Social Violence: The Limits of Bullying* keeps pushing beyond the safety framework and offers next steps while addressing LGBTQ+ children’s and youths’ experiences. The book continually questions what safety is and for whom a safe space exists, emphasizing that there is no final achievement of safe space but that the conversations need to be continuous.

Throughout its thirteen chapters, the book invites readers into a careful systematic analysis of bullying as a power system rooted in cis-heteronormative norms and explores the intersectionality of queer and trans children and youth of colour, including the experiences of Black girls’ bodies (Chapter 4). On one hand, the book unpacks

the frame of anti-bullying discourse, confronting readers with the uncomfortable reality of adults engaging in violence—such as blaming victims, regulating bodies through dress codes, and reinforcing cis-heteronormativity in schools. On the other hand, it calls for a rethinking of children's and youths' agency, encouraging thinking beyond bully/victim binaries in which victims are seen as passive. These nuanced ways of rethinking bullying—through social and cultural norms, systemic power structures, and complex forms of agency—invite readers to imagine reparative possibilities for the system, including the roles of educational leaders, educators, policymakers, and researchers.

Reframing of anti-bullying framework

The authors highlight that bullying is a tool for the preservation of the existing structure, privileging cultural systems of power alongside gender and sexuality. In Chapter 1, Payne and Smith challenge the predominant trend in bullying research, strongly influenced by the work of Dan Olweus, which defines bullying as an individual behavioral problem. In engaging with Olweus's definition, anti-bullying research and programs have focused on the bully/victim dyad and are designed to “correct” the dysfunctional behaviours of bullies—who are imagined to be aggressive and lacking the ability to empathize. Furthermore, the success of interventions is evaluated through measurements, failing to question how systemic privileging and marginalization foreground bullying.

The book is strongly grounded in calls to foreground the cultural and systemic norms of cis-heteronormativity and to rethink the responsibilities of schools and communities in relation to them. Especially in relation to violence against LGBTQ+ and gender-nonconforming children and youth, the book extends its critical discourse into how schools and communities have regulated young bodies into categories of the “normal” and the “other” in terms of gender and sexuality. The continuum of regulatory practices emerges from systemic, discursive, and material realities—of sexual harassment (Chapter 2), administrative bullying (Chapter 3), hypersurveillance (Chapter 4), the normalization of ableist systems (Chapter 5), zero-tolerance policies (Chapter 6), organizational inequalities (Chapter 7), the subtle dynamics of humour and laughter (Chapter 8), religious ethos (Chapter 9), parents' conservative perspectives (Chapter 10), autonomic school protocols (Chapter 11), essentialist framings of violence (Chapter 12), and the material-discursive-affective organization of conditions (Chapter 13).

Thus, rethinking violence against LGBTQ+ children and youth disrupts the narrow focus in which queer and trans identities appear in school environments solely as vulnerable and at-risk beings, regarded only as potential victims. Instead, by centering the political nature and everydayness of bullying—reinforced and reproduced by embedded mechanisms of normativity—the book provides a deeper understanding of LGBTQ+ children's and youths' experiences and creates space for “sustainable change.”

Messiness of the relationship between childhood and sexuality

The book offers significant contributions to childhood studies as it directly argues against the notion of childhood innocence and deficit-based perspectives, which construct children as asexual and passive subjects. Discourses of childhood innocence regulate children's access to knowledge and create fears around discussions of gender and sexuality—reifying notions of age-appropriateness. Sexuality has been considered the opposite of childhood innocence, leading to the regulation of sexuality in young people through a curriculum that promises to create “non-sexual” children (Lesko, 2010). Thus, sexuality has been a prime focus of surveillance and regulation both inside and outside of school, producing gendered and racialized forms of innocence (Meiners, 2016). Drawing from critical childhood and youth studies, which challenges the idea of normative, rational, and developmentally staged individuals, the book invites readers to attend to multiple matrices of power relations that are interrelated

and entangled.

At the same time, the book introduces critical frameworks to explore the lived experiences and systemic issues of bullying among children and youth. Sexuality is racialized, gendered, able-bodied, and classed—dimensions that cannot be flattened into individual issues. For example, in Chapter 4, Callier and Hill engage a Black girlhood studies framework to highlight how gender regulation functions as both a form of anti-queer violence and of anti-Black antagonism. This framework helps illuminate the mechanisms of hypersurveillance while offering alternative storytelling—finding subtle spaces between celebration and harm. Chapter 5 draws on crip theory to analyze experiences of bullying and to understand the hegemonic normativity that sustains able-bodied, cis-heteronormative realities. Consistently, the book keeps asking how social violence operates both inside and outside of schools, where vulnerability reveals the intersectional power relations enacted upon different bodies.

The methodologies offered in the book also open up new ways for researchers to engage with the messiness of and resist the flattened representation of LGBTQ+ children's and youths' stories, such as through sonic ethnographies (Chapter 6) and arts-based research methods (Chapter 13). For instance, in Chapter 8, Søndergaard focuses on ridicule and humour in relation to gender and sexuality, examining how humour entangles with and troubles relational practices among children. The chapter explores how humour creates subtle and complex dynamics, serving as a force of both cohesiveness and exclusion and thereby disrupting rigid boundaries between safety and danger. The arts-based methods presented in Chapter 13 invite ways to “linger on” (p. 374) the spatial, material, and affective dimensions of gendered and sexual violence in schools. Here, these methods provide possibilities for queer youth to find belonging, creatively communicate, and attune to their lived experiences, making space for them to be “marbled with a queer and creative response-able praxis” (p. 385).

Safe space and anti-bullying

The book rigorously positions bullying on a continuum of everyday violence. Lesko et al. (2024) also point out that schools have never guaranteed safety for either teachers or students—violence remains as ordinary as atmospheres, according to Stanley (2021). Beyond the idea that schooling and education are based on innocence—presented as a dream of safety—“the affective connections of marginalized groups” (Lesko et al., 2024, p. 622) have been revealed. Moreover, such groups are labelled as potentially “at risk” when they are understood “as a chaotic or disruptive threat to the social order” (Butler, 2020, p. 4). Indeed, it is impossible to arrive at a stable semantic distinction between safe and dangerous when that very distinction is used to conceal violent systems of oppressive norms.

Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind* (1981) challenges the kind of thinking that assumes certainties: “The notion that there exist dangerous thoughts is mistaken for the simple reason that thinking itself is dangerous to all creeds, convictions, and opinions” (p. 176). In other words, challenging the rigid categorization of safety and danger has always been a difficult, disruptive, and even dangerous act, where even raising questions to critically address bullying has not been welcomed and has been labelled as dangerous.¹ In this context, the book makes a significant contribution by questioning the mythologies of safe schooling embedded in bullying discourse, particularly those based on the binaries of bully/victim and bad/good kid. Moving beyond individualized frameworks that uncritically uphold systems supporting existing power structures, the book resists cis-heteronormativity and shifts the focus of the problem. Throughout the text, readers will encounter moments where unexpectedness and precariousness cohabit with affective intensities, destabilizing the notion of safety—revealing it as something that can be mobilized in multiple directions of experiences. It is time to respond to the authors' urgent call for schools and researchers to support and reimagine approaches to queer children/youth and social violence—opening up possibilities for change while emphasizing collective responsibility.

1 In the acknowledgments, the editors reflect on how, fifteen years ago, their efforts to address bullying were labelled as dangerous.

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