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Battling the Myths of Bullying: A Rhetorical Analysis of Arne Duncan’s “The Myths About Bullying”

Introduction

Most individuals who have made it through their educational career can testify to having experienced some form of bullying, some more severe than others. 9th U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan served under President Barack Obama from 2009 to 2016. During this time, Duncan oversaw a variety of educational dilemmas including the “encouragement of common academic standards among the states,” (Education Week Library). Prior to this role, he was the CEO of the Chicago public school system from 2001 to 2008 in which he “dealt every day with the issue of school safety,” (Duncan, 2010). His speech, titled "The Myths About Bullying," took place on August 11, 2010, at the Bullying Prevention Summit, an event that gathers federal agencies, national organizations, parents, teachers, and students with a common goal of discussing and sharing progress on anti-bullying efforts. Duncan’s purpose is to not only define bullying for all who are present but offer a solution to this problem that effects schools nationwide. Duncan builds credibility by citing specific facts to boost the meaning behind his words and justify them while also imposing a level of guilt amongst his listeners.

Methods

To effectively analyze Duncan's speech, several elements of rhetorical writing need to established: ethos, pathos, logos, and dicto simpliciter.

Ethos is the appeal of ethics; it establishes “the speaker’s or writer’s credibility and trustworthiness.” The appeal demonstrates “goodwill toward the audience, good sense or knowledge of the subject at hand, and good character” (Glenn, 2016).

Pathos is the appeal of emotions; it “stirs the audience’s feelings” and helps the “writer (or speaker) connect with the audience.” This is done in order for the writer or speaker to “move the audience to a new way of thinking or acting and evoking feelings that people on all sides of the issue can share” (Glenn, 2016).

Logos is the appeal of logic as it is rooted in “reason and supporting evidence to build on an argument.” This can be done through the use of “facts, statistics, observations, interviews with authorities, or survey results” (Glenn, 2016).

Dicto Simpliciter, otherwise known as Hasty Generalization, is a logical fallacy that is "a conclusion based on too little evidence or on exceptional or biased evidence" (Glenn, 2016). Through the use of this fallacy, the writer (or speaker) is manipulating their evidence to serve their purpose. An example is something like stating that all men are bad based on a single individual's experience(s).

Considering the Audience

When considering the audience to whom Duncan was speaking to, he tells us specifically that there is a “range of NGOs, corporate leaders, state and local officials on hand, as well as the members of the Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Working Group” (Duncan, 2010). However, we can assume that any individual involved in the education field will find value in his speech and the points he makes. Teachers, administrators, and school board officials can find value in what Duncan is preaching and apply it to their schools. He then addresses that their purpose for being there is as a result of months of working collaboration, as an opportunity to launch a "sustained commitment to address and reduce bullying," (Duncan, 2010). What Duncan means by this is that all of the background work is coming to the surface and being presented, that now it is time to join forces as a cohesive unit to address bullying and how it can be prevented to protect students and other teachers and faculty members in the education system.

The Reputation of the Speaker: Ethos

Beginning with the appeal of ethos within the speech, this appeal is the least present. Ethos is “based on the character of the speaker” and is responsible for building the “reputation of the author” (The Art of Rhetoric). Duncan bases his ethos on his experience in the education field – from CEO of Chicago Public Schools to U.S. Education Secretary (Education Week Library). He states the purpose of his speech as follows: "No student should feel unsafe in school,” (Duncan, 2010).

However, there is another example of ethos in which Duncan appeals to his audience's personal ties to bullying by sharing the story of a young girl. At eleven years old, Ziainey Stokes experienced bullying and eventually got tired of being treated poorly. She wrote a letter to President Barack Obama, who wrote her back. His response displays the fact that preventing bullying is on the radar and is something even young children have taken into account. Not only that, but someone like the president taking time to respond to a child serves to the credibility that this matter is of mentioning and is important for all to consider.

Playing to the Audience’s Guilt: Pathos

Moving into the appeal of pathos, the speaker relies heavily on the emotion of guilt. Pathos is how the speaker plays to the audience's emotions. When it comes to addressing school safety and bullying, Duncan does an excellent job of playing into his audience's guilt. He also plays into bringing together a sense of encouragement and teamwork when he says, “as educators, as state and local officials – and yes, absolutely at the federal level – we simply have not taken the problem of bullying seriously enough,” (Duncan, 2010). By playing to the audience’s guilt and at the same time, manipulating his words to bring them together and raise them up as a group, he’s easily able to grab the audience’s attention. Another example of Duncan bringing the audience together is when he said “the department of education stands ready to assume a role of leadership. But we need your help,” (Duncan 2010). However, he tops it off at the very end with his final line: “With your courage, with your imagination, with your leadership, let this summit be a turning point where America finally tackles the problem of bullying with tenacity--and leaves the myths of bullying behind, once and for all,” (Duncan, 2010). This statement alone is enough to grab his audience’s attention. Duncan is crediting the audience with imagination and leadership skills and using that credibility to justify his reliance on their participation in preventing bullying.

Defining Bullying & The Use of Statistics: Logos

When considering the appeal of logos, Duncan utilizes this appeal the most. He uses statistics and defines the concept of bullying – all leading to not only justify that his credibility, but to back up what he is saying. One of the most effective examples of this is when Duncan moves to define what bullying is. He gives four different statements of what bullying is:

Bullying is not the occasional bad joke or the child who gets a bit too aggressive.

Bullying is deliberate. The bully wants to hurt someone. Bullying is usually repeated, with the bully targeting the same victim again and again--and the bully takes advantage of an imbalance of power by picking victims that he or she perceives are vulnerable.

Bullying can occur through physical, verbal, or relational means where bullies try to destroy their victims' relationships through vicious rumors and social exclusion.

Bullying, in other words, is not just a "boy" behavior or a "mean girl" behavior. It is a problem that often has an impact on children who are neither bully nor victims.

This is a good use of the speaker’s words because it completely addresses the topic at hand and covers multiple aspects of the term “bullying.” The speaker leaves little room to argue. He addresses different areas and types of bullying and different motives.

 The next area of logos appeal worth mentioning is the usage of statistics. The speaker chose his statistics wisely, as they all serve to back up the points he is trying to make when it comes to the effects of bullying. The central statistic Duncan uses to boost the importance of what is he addressing is “In 2007, nearly one out of three students in middle school and high school reported that they had been bullied at school during the school year. That means that 8.2 million students a year are suffering at the hands of bullies in school," (Duncan, 2010). By utilizing this statistic in his speech, he encompasses multitudes of people. Following that statistic, Duncan goes into more depth on the types of bullying experienced by students including physical bullying, threats, property destruction, and cyber-bullying:

One out of nine secondary school students, or 2.8 million students, said they have been pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on during the last school year.

Another one-and-a-half million students said they were threatened with harm, and one million students reported they had their property destroyed during the school year.

In 2007, more than 900,000 secondary students reported being cyber-bullied.

By giving statistics on the specific types of bullying, the speaker if further justifying his abilities to speak about bullying prevention and school safety. By giving statistics he is building his credibility and building up his points on bullying.

Defining Bullying: Dicto Simpliciter

When considering logical fallacies presented in Duncan's speech, the main one I recognized was a hasty generalization, otherwise known as dicto simpliciter. Richard Nordquist defines this fallacy as “a general rule observation treated as universally true regardless of the circumstances or the individuals concerned,” (Nordquist, 2019). I believe this is the case when Duncan says, “bullying is definable” (Duncan, 2010). This is because there are so many different perceptions of what bullying is and is not. It depends on the person, the situation, the medium it’s taking place on, etc. By saying that bullying is definable, the speaker is considering a sample of bullying instances and generalizing them into a single definition of bullying.

In Conclusion

 Through his 2010 “The Myths About Bullying” speech at the Bullying Prevention Summit on August 11, 2010, Arne Duncan brings many qualified points to the table when it comes to the problems the education field experiences with bullying. Through his work as U.S. Education Secretary and CEO of Chicago public schools, his reputation is built. His credibility is also built, not only based off of his experience but by his use of statistics and facts. However, he grabs his audience and brings them in through the emotional appeal. With the combination of appeals, and bringing in the logical fallacy, Duncan is able to capture his audience and address his point efficiently.

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