Using Young Adult Literature to Combat Bullying
Young adult literature is the centerpiece of one program designed to give students the tools they need to help confront and prevent bullying.

by Carol Hillsberg and Helene Spak

Bullying is serious business. More than 160,000 students skip school every day because they are fearful of being bullied, and almost one-third of students between the ages of 11 and 18 say they have experienced some form of bullying while in school (Nansel 2001).

To address the problem in Illinois’ Northbrook School District #27, we created a schoolwide anti-bullying program with young adult literature as its centerpiece. The details of the program have evolved since its inception in 2002, but its principal component remains the use of literature.

Because most incidences of bullying occur in school, logic dictates that school is the venue in which to tackle these problems. Additionally, if a schoolwide effort to combat bullying is to be effective, it should involve many forces that exist at the school, including the content taught in the classrooms.

Middle school students are well suited for dealing with the affective domain in the classroom because they see school as a place for learning about themselves and their peers, as well as for learning about the subject matter. Young people are building a sense of identity during the middle years, much of it in reaction to those around them. If students are isolated, unsupported, or victimized, their ability to create a healthy identity is diminished. Students so preoccupied are not available for learning.

A Literature-based Program

Developmentally appropriate literature that addresses the topic of bullying can be a critical component of a program to combat bullying. The literature not only must be readable, it also must be relevant to young adolescent lives. An increased understanding of the text can lead to changes in behavior. If the literature deals with the terrible consequences of bullying, for example, it might help both the victim and the bully. The victim may derive comfort or coping strategies from reading about another young person in a similar situation, and the bully might begin to empathize with the fictional victim.

We considered this premise as we created learning experiences in literature for students in grades 6-8. Our goal was to develop a schoolwide campaign against bullying that featured reading, discussion, and writing as its main components. Fortunately, there are many young adult stories that deal with bullies and their victims.

The stories we choose for this program must contain memorable protagonists, engaging plots, and thematic material that empowers the bullying victims. After much searching and discussion we decided on six stories—two for each grade level—each written by a renowned author of young adult literature.

Grade 6. The two stories for sixth grade are “A Letter from the Fringe,” by Joan Bauer, and “Tuesday of the Other June,” by Norma Fox Mazer. In the former, an ostracized victim receives a powerful letter of support in a birthday card from a stronger student who is also on the fringe socially. In the latter, a victim is victorious in her struggle with a bully who shares the same name.

Grade 7. One story for seventh graders is “Muffin,” by Susan Cooper. Set in England during World War II, it tells how a girl is comforted by a dog named Muffin as both prove to be survivors. In “Shortcut,” by Nancy Werlin, victims of bullying find confidence and power in their alliance.
Grade 8. In a story for eighth graders, “Your Turn, Norma,” by Gary Soto, Norma derives comfort from Amber, a doll that she cares for as a surrogate baby in a social studies class where both are tormented by a bully. In “Satyagraha,” Alden R. Carter describes how the nonviolent philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi can be effective against a bully on the football team.

Collecting and Researching Ideas

Selecting the literature was just the first step. We collected and researched our ideas about best practice in reading and offered the teachers pre-, during, and post-reading strategies. For example, we developed materials to activate schema and make predictions both before and during reading. We included graphic organizers that featured story elements such as setting, characterization, plot, and theme.

We culled other ideas from Mosaic of Thought, by Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmermann, including suggestions on questioning, drawing inferences, and using sensory images. As there are two stories per grade level, there also are organizers for comparing and contrasting those stories. We suggested writing prompts that deal with the characters, events, and ideas in the stories because it is crucial that students reflect in writing and discussion on the ideas in the stories and how they connect to bullying incidences at our school.

Many students related positive outcomes through the reflections written after reading and discussing the stories. For example, a sixth-grade student felt the story gave her courage and showed her how to act when a bully attacks. Another girl felt the story helped her realize that speaking out can stop bullying behavior. Many boys also said that the story helped them confront bullies.

Effective Solution

Students in middle school are capable of taking a story to a higher level and turning it into something personal and meaningful. Therefore, a program such as the one we are using in Northbrook, which combats bullying through the use of good stories, can be an effective means to reducing the power and presence of bullies at school.

References


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