

Recognize the Signs: Reading Young Adult Literature to Address Bullying

Bullying is the most prevalent form of school violence (Batsche, 2002), with approximately 3.2 million students bullied yearly (Cohen & Canter, 2002). To address this, schools are implementing anti-bullying programs that often identify teachers as the first line of defense. But while students are instructed to seek out a teacher if bullying occurs, many teachers do not recognize bullying situations (Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001).

In a three-year longitudinal study, Swearer and Cary (2003) found that 80% of middle school students believed their teachers were unaware of bullying.

Teachers can be armed with facts about bullying, but they also need to notice the subtleties that often occur with these incidents. Teachers need to know that isolation or spreading vicious rumors can be just as harmful as physically hurting someone. Prospective teachers also need to know this so that they can be aware of and look for incidents of bullying in practicum situations or during student teaching (Frey & Fisher, 2008). As teacher educators, how can we help preservice teachers understand and recognize bullying before their teaching careers officially begin?

Literature offers one way to bring bullying to preservice teachers' awareness. Reading provides "imaginative rehearsals" for the real world (Burke as cited by Gallagher, 2009, p. 66). The stories within the pages of a book allow readers to wrestle with issues, to experience up close

how words and actions shape and influence main characters and events. Readers see firsthand how a comment can cut, an action can damage, or a rumor can destroy. Many preservice teachers may have had experiences with bullying as students themselves, and these stories will resonate with them. However, there might be those who have not experienced bullying, or who do not understand how prevalent it is today. In a complex world, students are in "desperate need of these rehearsals" that books offer (Gallagher, 2009, p. 66).

What more important rehearsal can we offer future teachers than helping them become more aware, attuned, and sensitive to bullying issues? If they are to address it, they must be aware of it on the most subtle level. To help develop this sensitivity, we invited English language arts preservice teachers (certification 7–12) to self-select young adult (YA) literature concerning issues of bullying (see Fig. 1) and then join us in a voluntary discussion group that was not a course requirement.

Prior to reading, preservice teachers responded to three questions about bullying (see Fig. 2). Eleven preservice teachers (1 male, 10 females) volunteered to further explore this topic and joined one of the two group conversations that best fit their schedule. From their responses and audiotaped conversations, four findings emerged that speak to the possibilities literature can offer preservice and, we believe, inservice teachers in

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Young Adult Literature Booklist

- *Alexie, S. (2009). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
Determined to change his future, Junior leaves his Spokane Indian Reservation's school for an all-white rural high school and realizes the only other Indian is the school mascot.
- *Anderson, L. (2003). *Catalyst*. New York, NY: Penguin.
Senior year for Kate Malone, science and math whiz, is a challenging one. Awaiting her acceptance letter into MIT, she must deal with her neighbor nemesis, being a preacher's daughter, and an unexpected death.
- *Asher, J. (2007). *Thirteen reasons why*. New York, NY: Razorbill.
After Hannah Baker commits suicide, selected classmates receive a box containing 13 cassette tapes. Through her narration, each tape recounts events (13 reasons why) that she claims led to her death. Clay, a supposed friend, receives the cassettes and must figure out why he is among those reasons.
- *Brown, J. (2009). *Hate list*. New York, NY: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
High school senior Valerie struggles to understand how her boyfriend, Nick, could open fire in their school cafeteria, intentionally shooting people on a list they co-wrote together: a "hate" list.
- Donley, J. (2010). *The side door*. Midway, FL: Spinsters Ink.
Fifteen-year-old Melrose Bird stumbles upon a pair of Alex Weber's pants. Inside the pockets, she discovers secrets as to why he committed suicide five years ago. Determined to reveal the truth to adults in her small town, she must also confront peers who may not approve of her assertion of her own identity, which consists of a buzz cut and pants.
- Flinn, A. (2005). *Fade to black*. New York, NY: HarperTeen.
An HIV-positive high school junior, Alex Crusan, is hospitalized after being beaten in his car with a baseball bat. His long-time tormentor, Clinton, claims innocence. However, Daria, a teen with Down Syndrome, witnessed Clinton at the scene of the attack. The story unfolds through alternating narration between characters.
- Garsee, J. (2007). *Before, after, and somebody in between*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA.
Martha tries to overcome an alcoholic mother fresh out of rehab, the high school bully, and living in the wrong part of town in Cleveland, Ohio. Thinking dreams do come true, she is taken in by a wealthy family. However, she quickly realizes problems exist on both sides of the "tracks."
- Giles, G. (2007). *What happened to Cass McBride?* New York, NY: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
Kyle Kirby holds Cass McBride, the most popular girl in school, responsible for the death of his brother. He plans to exact revenge through kidnapping and burying her alive.
- Howe, J. (2003). *The misfits*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
Seventh-grader Bobby Goodspeed and his unpopular friends, known as the "Gang of Five," decide to run for student council to represent the "No-Name-Party"—students who are the victims of name-calling and stereotyping, such as Joe, who is accused of "acting more like a girl than a boy."
- King, A. S. (2011). *Everybody sees the ants*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
To escape his dysfunctional family and a classmate's bullying, Lucky Linderman dreams of rescuing his grandfather, a Vietnam War veteran who never returned from the war-torn jungles of Laos.
- Lyga, B. (2006). *The astonishing adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl*. San Diego, CA: Houghton Mifflin Books for Children.
Overwhelmed by bullies, his pregnant mother, and his dislike for his stepfather, Fanboy's sophomore year has become unbearable. His only saving grace is his love for comics, a work-in-progress graphic novel, and a developing friendship with Goth Girl. He is convinced that all will take him away from the small town in which he resides.
- Portman, F. (2008). *King Dork*. New York, NY: Delacorte Books for Young Readers.
Tom Henderson, noted as an American high school loser, finds his deceased father's copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* and his world begins to change. Several conspiracies unfold around him, which may reveal the mystery of his father's death.
- *Spinelli, J. (1996). *Crash*. New York, NY: Yearling.
Star football player "Crash" Coogan has enjoyed tormenting Penn since first grade. However, his aggressive behavior changes when his grandfather has a stroke. He soon realizes that family and friendship are more important than playing practical jokes on an easy "target."
- Valdes-Rodriguez, A. (2008). *Haters*. New York, NY: Poppy.
Sophomore Pasquala "Paski" moves to a new high school in Orange County, California, and has psychic visions of the most popular girl in school, aka the queen of the haters. She must confront her feelings of isolation and the queen's endless cruel and unusual tormenting.
- Wittlinger, E. (2007). *Parrotfish*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
Angela, who now goes by Grady, has never felt comfortable being a girl. With this new name comes the decision to cut her hair and start wearing men's clothes. However, without a support system in place, will Grady be successful in confronting unexpected nastiness from peers?

Figure 1. This booklist was provided to preservice teachers as a resource about bullying and tolerance. Those books with asterisks (*) were read by the preservice teachers.

Three Questions Preservice Teachers Were Asked Prior to the Book Club

1. Have you thought about how you would address any bullying that might occur in your classroom? If yes, please explain how you might address bullying.
2. How might you build tolerance in your classroom?
3. Can you provide 1 or 2 examples of bullying that you might see in the classroom or in a middle/high school?

Figure 2. Three questions for preservice teachers

developing an awareness of and sensitivity to bullying in schools.

Guiding Questions for Discussions about Bullying

Who Is a Victim?

Preservice teachers held preconceived notions of a traditional bully victim: those exhibiting weak or unusual characteristics, or outcasts who do not fit the “norm.” Preservice teachers who read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2009) discussed how Arnold Spirit, aka “Junior,” describes himself as the epitome of a victim, even belonging to the Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club because he is beaten up so frequently. They discussed how his having a stutter, a lisp, and Native American heritage at an all-white school made him an easy target for bullying. Because Junior described himself as a victim of bullying, the preservice teachers easily recognized the bullying he faced in the novel.

However, less easy to recognize was bullying that did not follow stereotypical norms. Preservice teachers who read *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2011) were surprised to discover that Hannah, an attractive student and winner of the “best butt” award, could also be considered a victim. Courtney (all names are pseudonyms) explained,

It made me look at bullying from a completely different perspective because Hannah did not seem like the typical victim of bullying. Hannah was made out to be pretty . . . the pretty girl doesn't get bullied.

Preservice teachers' stereotypes of victims expanded through discussions. They came to realize how a “popular student” might also fall prey to bullying.

What Is Bullying?

Prior to reading, preservice teachers identified bullying as incidents of shoving, name-calling, laughing at others, and cyberbullying. Through reading, they recognized more subtle forms of bullying that could go unnoticed by teachers. For example, preservice teachers said *Thirteen Reasons Why* helped them understand the detrimental effects of gossip. In the book, malicious rumors contribute to the downward spiral and eventual suicide of Hannah, the main character. Lana said, “It really hit me hard that gossip needs to be addressed. . . . It is something you can be more aware of.” These preservice teachers realized that gossip was incredibly harmful, even though it wasn't physically hurting another person. Courtney explained, “You're spreading words tarnishing their reputation.” In their eyes, gossip was bullying because it was done to make a person feel inferior.

Through reading and discussion, our preservice teachers became empathetic to characters living through bullying, even when initially the incident did not seem like bullying. The character's response to or feelings about the event helped the preservice teachers realize that the event was indeed an act of bullying. For example, in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Chelsea commented on Hannah's winning the “best butt” award by saying, “This sounds bad, but if I got voted best butt . . . I probably wouldn't have taken it badly. And just the fact that *she* did makes you think about it from a completely different perspective.” These preservice teachers recognized that “compliments” that make another person feel uncom-

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fortable in a large social situation are a form of bullying.

Reading YA literature helped preservice teachers think about bullying through the characters' eyes. This new perspective made it easier for them to recognize how instances of gossip, rumors, or attention to physical attributes can make a person feel insecure or threatened.

Can a Teacher Be a Bully?

As preservice teachers began to reconsider who might be a victim of bullying, they also discussed who might be a bully. At first, they assumed a bully would have a "difficult" life or be insecure. However, they came to realize that they might actually be stereotyping bullies.

The conversation took an interesting turn when Natalie reported seeing "teachers being bullies." The rest of the group agreed and began to discuss and question instances of teacher actions that could be described as bullying. Natalie described a "sickening" event when a teacher publically displayed a student's failing paper. They also discussed teachers talking about students in the teachers' lounge. Jamie said, "They are talking about students with complete names."

Courtney added, "This kid is condemned for life." Preservice teachers wondered if such incidents could be considered gossip and thus a form of bullying. Sherry said, "We say we want to address bullying in our classrooms, but then we talk about students. We need to address it in ourselves first before we can address it with students." From this conversation came the decision to be "more conscious" of what they say in front of colleagues and students.

Although none of the YA literature depicted a teacher as a bully, reading and discussing the books allowed the preservice teachers to reflect on personal experiences and observations. They thoughtfully considered how their actions and words as teachers might affect students.

What Does This Mean to My Teaching?

These preservice teachers considered their roles as teachers when dealing with bullying. They worried that it may be challenging to discern instances of bullying outside the classroom. In reference to *Crash* (Spinelli, 1996), Tracy related a scene in which Crash, the bully, and his friends pick on Penn by pretending to be nice to him, giving him a handshake, and then mocking him

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Raising Awareness about Bullying

Sharing literature about bullying often helps raise awareness. The following podcasts provide young adult literature recommendations:

"Books about Bullying": Tune in to hear insights on bullying from bullying expert CJ Bott, author of *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom* and *More Bullies in More Books*. You'll also hear about a variety of fiction and nonfiction books for teens that explore the problem of bullying.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/books-about-bullying-30778.html>

"A Conversation with A. S. King": Tune in to hear about the seeds behind her newest novel, *Everybody Sees the Ants*. We'll discuss how several of the novel's key elements came about during Amy's writing process, how *The Vagina Monologues* connects thematically to elements of the text focused on bullying and torture, and how satire helped her to make a key point about Lucky Linderman's process of coming to terms with the adult world.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/conversation-with-king-30815.html>

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behind his back. Tracy stated, “If a teacher didn’t see them mocking, it would be really hard to say that’s bullying.”

Our preservice teachers believed they could make a difference by creating an open and low-risk environment in their classrooms, and they viewed YA literature as integral to this work. Lana commented, “As teachers, we have the possibility to keep an eye on our classroom and make an effort to make it a free zone . . . [to] create an area where students feel comfortable expressing themselves.” The preservice teachers viewed YA literature as a way to open conversations with their students (Fisher, 2005). Sherry explained, “We need to find literature so we can talk about the issues. . . . we have to find books that get through to students.” Lana recognized the power of knowing the literature in order to recommend a particular title to a student. The preservice teachers discussed the “power of books” and a “trusting teacher” to help students through difficult times or to help students understand the consequences of their actions.

These preservice teachers also identified the necessity of developing interpersonal communications, forging relationships, and paying attention to students’ needs. For instance, Sherry mentioned the potential importance of a small act, such as asking, “How are you today?” In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah cut her hair and no one noticed, prompting Jamie to state, “Just [noticing] those little things . . . that’s so easy.” Our preservice teachers felt that all students need a trusted adult in their lives. “We need that one teacher students can confide in, like with *Hate List* [Brown, 2009]. If only Valerie had somebody to talk to,” Courtney said.

Conclusion

These preservice teachers said they joined our reading group because bullying was a topic that “scared” them, but they wanted to “address the elephant in the room, rather than ignore it.” Adam explained, “It is one of the most important factors to consider as a teacher and I want to be ready for it.”

YA literature offered preservice teachers unique views into the lives of young adults, allowing the teachers to experience bullying as either a bully or as a victim through the characters. Through their reading and subsequent conversations, the preservice teachers developed an awareness that allowed them to reconsider their preconceived notions of the “victim” and “bully” labels. They also examined the teacher’s role in bullying.

These literature conversations provided preservice teachers with imaginative rehearsals for their future interactions and conversations with students. Chelsea felt that this kind of literature “opens the barrier” and “breaks down the wall” between teachers and students. Although bullying is the most prevalent form of school violence today, it doesn’t have to be. Preservice teachers and, in turn, teachers committed to addressing this important issue can help students navigate middle school in a nurturing and tolerant manner.

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Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE's Conference on English Education offers this award to support teacher research projects that further the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett. Moffett, a great champion of the voices of K–12 teachers, focused on such ideas as the necessity of student-centered curricula, writing across the curriculum, alternatives to standardized testing, and spiritual growth in education and life. This award is offered in conjunction with the National Writing Project.

Applications for the Moffett Award should be in the form of a proposal for a project that one or more K–12 classroom teachers wish to pursue. The proposal must include:

- A cover page with the applicant's name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant's current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).
- A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher's practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the connection to the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett; initial objectives for the study (realizing these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the researcher and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).
- A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant's teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2013 recipient of the CEE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to \$1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project.

Submit proposals to CEE Moffett Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010 or cee@ncte.org, Attn: CEE Administrative Liaison. Proposals must be postmarked by **May 1, 2013**. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett's scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.
