

Confronting Bullying: It Really Can Get Better

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For years, I've been discussing issues of social justice including bullying. I've written articles and a book, conducted research in classrooms about literacy and bullying, and presented at conferences on this topic. Yet, here in 2012, the problem remains. I've long talked about how we can use literature and writing to help students deal with bullying issues. Using the lessons from history, we can read the past and help students think through critical issues before they find themselves in bullying situations.

In 2010, a number of suicides resulted in part because of bullying and cyberbullying. They include Tyler Clementi, Asher Brown, Seth Walsh, Justin Aaberg, Eric Mohat, Meredith Rezak, Raymond Chase, and Billy Lucas. These students were gay and lesbian and felt that they had no other option than to take their own lives. Fort Worth city councilperson Joel Burns was so upset about these suicides that on October 12, 2010, he publicly shared that as a gay teen, he thought life was hopeless and he considered suicide. He shared his personal phone number pledging to support gay teens in distress, and he assured them that life does get better and won't always be so hard. The "It Gets Better" campaign started by Dan Savage features videos by gay and straight people, celebrities, and President Obama, sharing their message to stay hopeful because life gets better.

Research shows that because adolescents are discovering themselves, they are especially vulnerable to the peer pressure that often takes the form of bullying. The pressures of fitting in and finding a place in the world can often go awry when one is perceived as being different. Whether as victim or bystander, students can be hurt, often with

tragic consequences. Cyberbullying complicates this issue even more. In a study of 1,500 Internet-using adolescents, 20% were bullied electronically while 28% did not tell anyone, although 41% told a friend (Hinduja and Patchin 50). As educators, we need to make it safer for students so they see adults as allies.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) students don't feel safe in schools. Students who are questioning their sexual orientation also have difficulty in school. In fact, "nine out of 10 LGBT students (86.2%) experience harassment at school" and "sexual minority youth, or teens that identify themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual, are bullied two-to-three times more than heterosexuals" and are "up to four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers" ("Some Facts about Suicide"). The situation is critical. We can no longer afford to be passive, to give lip-service, but not take action.

Teachers have valid reasons for not getting involved. Although many school districts have non-discriminatory language and anti-bully measures in place, enforcement is uneven. Teachers have little real power to teach for justice and fear losing their positions if they support their LGBTQ students. LGBTQ people are often treated as second-class citizens, lacking basic civil rights including protections in the workplace. LGBTQ teachers are doubly vulnerable fearing job loss if they try to protect LGBTQ students from bullies. So the burden for protecting bullied students falls heavily on straight teachers. Yet, straight teachers who want to help find themselves vulnerable and not sure what to do. Because of this, bullied students often have no

allies. How can all teachers, no matter their sexual orientation, support all bullied students and witnesses, LGBTQ or straight?

The research literature is clear about the damage done to bystanders who witness a bullying attack. The posttraumatic stress they experience as “either victims of or witnesses to violence includes intrusive imagery, emotional constriction or avoidance, fears of recurrence, sleep difficulties, disinterest in significant activities, and attention difficulties” (“Violence”). This is often overlooked. The research literature is equally clear about the importance of allies. Alice Miller writes that one person can make a difference in the life of a child who is bullied and subjected to violence. How can we help our witnesses who are our students and ourselves to become productive allies?

After Joseph Jefferson committed suicide in 2010, his community organized a march to Stop the BS—the bullying and suicide—in his honor. Mr. Jefferson was a 24-year-old activist living in Brooklyn. Clearly he was someone who might have been able to resist the bullying and negative comments. Yet his last Facebook message read: “I could not bear the burden of living as a gay man of color in a world grown cold and hateful towards those of us who live and love differently than the so-called ‘social mainstream’ Belonging is one of the basic human needs, when people feel isolated and excluded from a sense of communion with others, they suffer” (qtd. in James).

There are many reasons for suicide, but being gay certainly contributed to Joseph Jefferson’s death. What this illustrates is how difficult it is to be LGBTQ as an adult and how much harder it is for an adolescent. LGBTQ students face a dangerous world. They can feel threatened and less safe than their heterosexual classmates. They are more likely to face bullying and violence and more susceptible to dropping out of school. While some of this bullying and harassment is overt, much of it is done under the teacher’s line of vision.

Teacher Steve Ham (personal communication, November 20, 1999) recalled his high school student who was perennially late for class. Tom was a good student but was continually losing points because he couldn’t seem to show up to class on time. Steve discussed this with Tom, who was respectful and apologetic and promised to be

punctual in the future. But he never was able to carry out that promise. Years later, Tom returned to his well-respected, suburban high school and found Mr. Ham. He told him that the reason he was late for class was because he was hiding out in his gym locker until the other students left. This was because he was gay and the victim of relentless bullying in the locker room. He found that if he hid, he could avoid the confrontations, but this meant he could never be on time for English class. Tom told Mr. Ham that he liked English and that he was his favorite teacher. Still, while Tom was in high school, he never felt safe enough to confide in Mr. Ham.

This is a problem. If we’re not able to create safe schools for our vulnerable students, they will continue to suffer. Mr. Ham would have wanted to help, if only he had known. There is some research that suggests that LGBTQ faculty members are more likely to recognize bullying because of LGBTQ issues, but if the bullying isn’t observed at all, if it is under the radar, what can any faculty member do?

Steve Ham and his colleagues, including his wife, who was a guidance counselor at the school, decided to do something. They never wanted another student like Tom to suffer in the same way. They decided to educate themselves about the issues and eventually created a readers theater piece. They talked about creating safe spaces for LGBTQ students and the suffering they endured in schools and society. They presented the readers theater piece to the faculty in the school and to other schools and school districts. They took the show on the road and presented at conferences. For these teachers, there would be no more excuses and no going back.

So many of the bullying programs and safe schools initiatives are inadequate and don’t address the realities that LGBTQ and bullied students face in high schools and middle schools today. This work of fighting bullying and discrimination is organic and can’t be dealt with on just one level. Iris Young talked about the dilemma of working to fight injustice in just one area. She said that there are five factors of oppression and that if a group experienced any of these factors, they need support. The five factors of oppression include exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (64). Young states that groups can experience

one or more of these factors, but violence also reminds them of what might happen if the groups were to resist the oppression. She reminds us that rather than facing discrimination by themselves, groups that experience any of these factors of oppression should work together to fight it.

Gerda Lerner takes this analysis of discrimination one step further. She says that race (or sex, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) is a social construct on three different levels: "(1) as a tool for dominance which has become institutionalized in the United States and some other countries; (2) as a historic experience, a force shaping the lives of the designated group; and (3) as a distinguishing marker for the oppressed group, transformed into a mark of pride, resistance and a tool for liberation" (189). Lerner explains that race, class, and gender oppression are all part of the same system and need to be confronted together rather than independently. She cautions us to work together to fight all forms of oppression.

Oppression against LGBTQ people is widespread. As second-class citizens, LGBTQ persons are also denied the basic rights in the United States to marry the person they love, inherit from each other, be treated as spouses on each other's insurance policies, and to receive pensions and social security from each other. It's estimated that by not being allowed to marry, LGBTQ people lose more than 1,400 federal and state protections by law.

School districts have an obligation to protect all students including LGBTQ students. An insurance agency executive says that school districts can lose their insurance if they can't show that all students are safe and protected. Even though this is not the most important reason to protect these children, it may force school districts to take positive action. Forty-seven states now have some kind of anti-bullying law and there is even an anti-bullying law being considered in Congress. Clearly, we can do more.

So what are some steps that teachers can take right now to make a difference?

1. Open your eyes. Once you become sensitive to all bullying, you may begin to see it everywhere.
2. Take action. Don't just tell students that you are an ally, but prove it. Middle level students complained that as teachers, we didn't do what we said. The students reported bul-

lying instances to adults who didn't follow up (Henkin 62).

3. Help your students who are witnesses become allies for the students who are bullied.
4. Open/Support a Gay/Straight Alliance in your high school. Students need a safe place to be themselves. If you are straight, the straight in Gay/Straight alliance is really important. If you are an LGBTQ teacher, your presence could be so helpful. Both straight and LGBTQ teachers can choose to become club sponsors, attend meetings, and go to the club's events. Your physical and emotional support is invaluable.
5. Use literature to help students think through issues of injustice and bullying, and responses that could be used to combat it. "The stories, themes and lessons of history and modern life can be used to examine how people have dealt with bullying and harassment in productive ways" (Henkin 13). For a list of bullying resources including professional articles and lists of literature that can be used in the classroom, go to the website I created with the help of Will Banks and Paula Ressler: <https://sites.google.com/site/henkinbanks/>. You can also go to my Confronting Bullying website at <https://sites.google.com/site/confrontingbullying/>.
6. Form a study group with your faculty. Choose articles from the above website to begin inquiry into how you can support your bullied students and LGBTQ students and faculty.
7. Use NCTE resources to help you with your Confronting Bullying work. In 2011, NCTE unanimously passed the Resolution on Confronting Bullying and Harassment.¹ The resolution states that NCTE will support teachers as they work to have safe classrooms, confront bullying, and use "the thousands of books and digital and multi-modal sources" to confront bullying and to help students. NCTE is committed to supplying resources such as book lists and literature for teachers to use in their classrooms.
8. Use writing to help students investigate issues of injustice and bullying. Bully, victim, and bystander narratives are powerful genres for students to use to explore their identities and identify what they know about

bullying and injustice in their lives. Through literature and writing, “we can help students develop a rich array of strategies” to deal with bullying (Henkin 13).

This list is just a beginning, but it represents a strong start to becoming allies for all your students. As teachers, we need to do more. When we really see and act, we’ll help our students confront bullying and see that life for all bullied and LGBTQ bullied students really can get better. 

Editor’s Note:

1. NCTE’s Resolution on Confronting Bullying and Harassment may also be found on pages 16–17 of this issue of *English Journal*.

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