



Social implications of bullying

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how Biblio/Poetry Therapy can be used as a tool for insight and behavioral change in school settings when confronting the social implications of bullying. It considers conditions that predispose a child to engage in bullying behavior. A three-pronged effort that encompasses the family, the legal community and the educational community is proposed to increase personal and social awareness and assist victims of bullying.

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Bullying

Three words
winged as doves
fly from my phone
after long months
of the window blinds
shut tight as eyelids
eclipsing every day

the disarray of blankets
weeping over the beds edge
are as nothing
compared to the sheets
of sadness covering him
and his father and his mother
full of unknowing
this winter of bullying
sealing him in the blue
cocoon of his room

and their boy's joy
abundant for thirteen years
is subtracted, divided
reduced to zero
keeping vigil
even the stars
pasted onto his ceiling
have come unglued

but today a fragile light
in the house of sorrow

like the first crocus
breaking through
the frost glazed earth
their boy emerging
a crowning like no other

"He's in school"
three words
herald
the joyous re-birth.¹

As a psychotherapist working with varied populations it is not uncommon for an occasional client to catch you in the net of their troubled life; like a fish out of water, you find yourself entangled in ways you have been trained to avoid. This is especially true when the client is not a client at all but a close friend or family member who comes to you for advice. Such was the occasion that prompted the above poem, written in response to the emotions that surfaced in me over Ian, a 7th grader. One October morning six weeks into the term, he simply refused to get out of bed and go to school becoming one of the 160,000 students who are absent each day due to bullying (Bullying Statistics, 2004). For some students the school boycott lasts one day, for others several days and for still others it is the beginning of months of isolation, depression, and home instruction.

Just as the poem that begins this article served as a vehicle for deepening my awareness of the effects of bullying on family, I am proposing that poetry therapy can be used in the classroom or in designated school groups facilitated by guidance counselors, as a tool to increase empathy and promote awareness in both staff and students to combat bullying. The poet James Dickey has demonstrated that the more an individual's encounter with poetry deepens, the more his experience of his own life will deepen. Connections between things will exist for him in ways they never did

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¹ Bullying, Original poem written by author for this paper.

before (Dickey, 1968). It is these emerging connections, brought about by the ability to see things by means of words and words by means of things, that have the potential to foster insight and effect change.

The psychologist Coles (1989, p. xxi) saw literature as containing “reservoirs of wisdom.” He allowed that the moral imagination is enlivened when moments of recognition prompt the reader to examine personal memories.

In the course of writing this article, I spoke to teachers and librarians about their ability to introduce poetry and/or literature that relates to teasing or bullying in school populations. They assure me there is no lack of literature that could be integrated into the curriculum.

The power of poetry and literature to enhance personal growth by achieving insight has been demonstrated with people who have been abused or are chemically dependent, physically disabled, emotionally disturbed, hospitalized or in correctional institutions or simply facing difficult or stressful life situations (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1997). The bibliotherapy model presented in *Bibliotherapy: The Iterative Process: A Handbook* demonstrates how this therapeutic tool promotes greater self-knowledge across developmental stages.

The bibliotherapy model promotes the deliberate use of a pre-selected poem that puts the reader in the shoes of the poet, who having revealed himself, makes it safe for the reader to do likewise. The reader, in this case the adolescent, is immersed in a situation in poetry or literature that resonates on an emotional level with what is being experienced in life (Leedy, 1969).

The juxtaposition of memories and feelings loosened by the poem and shared in dialogue among peers is the third step in the bibliotherapy process, following the initial steps of *recognition* and *examination* of feelings. The exchange of ideas through group discussion can bring about an altered perspective or reframing of experience.

The first two lines of a simple and powerful eight-line poem by Dickinson (1957, p. 133) read:

“I’m nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – Too?”

Because of the universality of its subject matter, almost anyone can relate to this poem, either accepting or rejecting its conceit. As the reader identifies subtle social roles can be uncovered (Goldstein, 1989). Poetry such as this, used in a group format can promote dialogue and elicit feelings concealed under the behavior of both victims and aggressors of bullying.

The forth and final step in the bibliotherapy process is *Application to the Self*. The act of writing about one’s feelings, especially using the symbolic language encouraged by poetry, “can be a vehicle of insight as well as an alternate way of approaching reality” (Goldstein, 1983, p. 173). Since insight precedes behavioral change, the act of writing, following a discussion, allows the participant to further explore his or her feelings on the safety of the page. This is often the first step towards social change.

As a practitioner of poetry therapy I have experienced first hand how a poem, pre-selected for its relevance to a particular issue, can serve as a vehicle of awareness and change in the population for which it was selected. The poem “Minor Miracle” by Marilyn Nelson (Poets.org) is one such example. It is a short narrative poem about a harrowing experience endured by two black children out riding their bicycles.

“a rusty old pick-up truck, ignoring the stop sign,
hurricaned past scant inches from our front wheels.
The truck drive, stringy blonde hair a long fringe
under his brand name beer cap, looked back and yelled,
“You f***** niggers!”

The truck speeds off. The children look at each other and “shake their heads.”

They continue on their bicycle ride

“pedaling through a clear blue afternoon”

When the truck returns and the driver gets out

“in greasy jeans and homemade finger tattoos. . .
The afternoon froze.”

Then stunning the reader as much as stunning the two children in the poem

The driver shouts a question at the children

“What did you say back there?”

They tell him.

“And what did I say? The white guy asked”

They tell him. And then the dramatic conclusion is revealed.

“Well,” said the white guy,
shoving his hands into his pockets
and pushing dirt around with the pointed toe of his boot,
‘I just wanted to say I’m sorry.’”

The reader has been led to expect a murderous ending but that is not what happens. The reader-participant knows that it is not just the ending of the poem but endings in life that can change with an apology. Poems such as this hold the potential for reaching into the adolescent mindset and drawing the group of students into discussion.

Studies indicate that bullying can start as early as 4th grade (Pepler, Jiang, Graig, & Connelly, 2008). Like a stone dropped into a pond, the bullied child sinks deep into the muddy waters of shame, anger, and isolation while the wider social implications ripple forth in ever expanding circles engulfing the family, the school community, and the legal community.

The family, like a mobile hanging over an infant’s crib, loses its equilibrium when one of its members is shaken. Parents, in a cloud of unknowing, are reluctant to leave the child home alone in the depressed state that soon becomes prevalent in the victim. They often lose days at work and are affected financially as they try to understand or to cajole their child back to the classroom. School administrators and teachers spend time investigating bullying claims, counseling victims, and teasing apart the interpersonal web of accusations that embroil a classroom or a school. These diversions from academics negatively affect a quality education (Hoffman, 2010).

Often an act of bullying goes unseen and unacknowledged by the larger community, while for the child it is a cataclysmic event. For the middle school student, peer perception not only informs but also dictates their sense of worth. Already burdened with the challenges of changing bodies, they wear self-consciousness like a scarlet letter. Developmentally unprepared for attacks on their self-worth, many students are too embarrassed to report it to their parents or school authorities. Unwilling to further expose the germ of truth that the bully has latched on to – the large nose, the ten pounds of extra weight, the failed grade, the questionable gender – they suffer in silence. Frequently, it is the bullied child who withdraws from school and is either home schooled or transfers to another school.

There are those who would differentiate between teasing and bullying, finding teasing to be less egregious, perhaps even harmless. However, the unchecked teasing behavior of a second grader affects the development of his victim in untold ways, and the teaser could well be the precursor of the middle school bully. Often it is the perpetrator’s own lack of self-esteem and the will to power that prompt the bullying of another in order to diminish his or her own

unconscious psychological shortcomings. After taunting, harassing, or demeaning another, the bully temporarily feels better; but the feeling doesn't last and so he or she is compelled to do it over and over again.

Recent research (Pepler et al., 2008) suggests that bullying is a relationship problem. Their study, conducted with 871 students ages 10–18 over a 7-year period, concludes that children who bully tend to be aggressive and lack a moral compass. Often there is conflict with parents and conflict with friends. These children are drawn to associate with others who bully.

The study concludes that because bullying is a relationship problem, it requires relationship solutions by focusing on the bullying child's strained relationship with parents and risky relationships with peers. In an article entitled "Bullying: It's Not Just the Kids," Geller (2010) calls attention to toxic parental bullying that parents model not only when they demean or diminish their children but also when they model aggressive behavior in the neighborhood, on the ball field, or on the job. Powerless over a parental barb like "Don't walk like a girl" or "You're stupid," the child learns to model the behavior with peers in order to regain power. Parents who are overbearing and constantly belittling or controlling their children may actually be crossing the line into bullying behavior.

Intervention at the elementary school level could prevent a "career path" that leads to social, emotional, and relationship problems in adolescence and adulthood. At the extreme, the childhood bully becomes the adolescent gang member where the impenetrable wall of resistance and "group think" thwarts intervention.

As a child transitions to the pre-teen and teenage years, the tools for bullying increase exponentially both in opportunity and lethal effects. According to a piece in the *New York Times* (Hoffman, 2010), an imprecise term for a subtext of bullying that has evolved into its most egregious form is "cyber bullying." Defined as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through phones and computers" (p. 1), it is almost impossible to list the myriad ways cyber bullying can be accomplished. It is only restricted by the limits of the perpetrator's imagination. The availability of digital devices that offer instant gratification to adolescent impulses, the anonymous nature of usage, and the ability to reach a widespread audience with the click of a key all contribute to the problem. Further, it has been demonstrated it is not only repeated acts of bullying that are harmful. Newspapers are full of reports where one act of cyber bullying has been so devastating as to push a child to suicide.

A logical question is, "Why can't the schools control bullying?" The answer is complicated and varies across states. Much of the electronic bullying does not take place on school property, and therefore, the school cannot involve itself. A few states indicate that school conduct codes must explicitly prohibit off-campus cyber bullying, others only imply it, and still other school conduct codes explicitly exclude intervention when the event is initiated on other than school property (Hoffman, 2010). Even those states that advocate prevention programs do not address the question of discipline. Judges are caught between questions regarding protection of free speech and school interventions. There are no clear answers or clear directions for administrators to follow. They must rely on their school handbooks, which vary from school to school, and on their own moral code of ethics.

Yet there is often disparity between ethical and legal conduct. There are a few cases where families have been successful in suing a school for failure to protect their children from bullies. In other instances the law upheld the rights of the bully to engage in free expression. In one case (Hoffman, 2010), a parent claimed his daughter's right to free expression was impinged upon when she was suspended from school for 2 days after prompting friends to demean another girl, video taping the session, and then posting the

video on YouTube. The school not only lost the case but also had to pay the legal fees of the perpetrator of \$107,150.

In the fall of 2010, the roommate of a Rutgers New Jersey College student set up a webcam and, unbeknownst to the student, streamed online an intimate encounter taking place in the privacy of his room. The inability of the bullied student to endure the public shame of this one incident led to his suicide. The public outrage over the incident resulted in the state legislature enacting what has been termed the "toughest bill in the U.S." (Livio, 2010, p. 1). The bill (A3466) protects students not only from cyber bullying but also from being bullied at school, near school, on school buses, and off school grounds in cases where a school employee is made aware of such actions. It includes harassment, intimidation, and bullying as conduct warranting suspension or expulsion. Among the bills provisions are a requirement that teachers and administrators complete an anti-bullying training program, disciplinary action against school administrators who fail to investigate an incident of bullying, and a mandate for school superintendents to deliver a report twice a year at an open school board meeting on "all acts of violence, harassment, intimidation or bullying" (Livio, 2010, p. 2).

It is clear that a three-pronged effort to combat bullying must come from the family, the legal community, and the school. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the numerous ways each of these segments of society can contribute to mediating the problem. In general, the family should know the warning signs of bullying and avail themselves of educational workshops that address how parents can respond when they suspect their child is being victimized. The legal community needs to give direction to schools on what they can and cannot do to deal with the problem on a daily basis. It is also the legal community's responsibility to write, publicize, and enforce laws that protect victims of bullying. The school's responsibility is to promote awareness of acceptable behavior and encourage empathy among students and to educate their staff including clearly defining their role in protecting students and disciplining those who do not comply with acceptable behavior.

The inclusion of bibliotherapy in school curricula offers a vehicle for introducing and supporting empathy among students who are both the primary victims and perpetrators of this huge and rapidly growing social problem. A wise man once said, "The right words at the right time mean everything." Poetry may just contain the right words to encourage a victim to come forth and an aggressor to reconsider his behavior.

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