



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 Interactive 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 fourth 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, & Connolly, 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

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