

Book It, Bullies: Using Children's Literature to Address Bullying in the Classroom

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## Abstract

Bullying is an ever-present issue rampant in schools and society today. It is incredibly eye-opening to consider the striking rates, harmful effects, and possible coping mechanisms associated with bullying. When considering this heavy topic from an educator's point of view, it is critical that children's literature be discussed as a powerful weapon to combat bullying. Educators should utilize literature to address bullying and initiate discussions concerning this challenging subject within their classes; prepare their students for being in an inclusion classroom among peers with and without disabilities; inform their students about disabilities that some of their classmates may be diagnosed with; and offer a cathartic experience for students to properly cope and find connections within literature. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers, specialists, parents, and other school officials are well-informed and adequately prepared to address bullying in their classrooms and to especially guard their students with disabilities from harassment.

*Keywords:* bullying, children's literature, students with disabilities, schools, bibliotherapy, harassment, catharsis, inclusion, coping

### Book It, Bullies: Using Children's Literature to Address Bullying in the Classroom

Schools have become the center of a significant amount of bullying and harassment. It is pivotal that school staff and faculty take the initiative to educate themselves on signs that bullying is occurring, prepare steps to minimize bullying in the classroom, and identify the students who populate the primary target groups of this harassment. Not only do school administration, staff, and parents need this education, but so do the students who are in these schools and will likely be exposed to bullying during their schooling. Students need to be made aware of how to treat one another with kindness, edification, and sincerity through the integration of character education principles in the curriculum. Students must also be instructed on ways in which their classmates may differ from them and how to overlook these differences to serve as better friends and peers. An excellent way to approach anti-bullying education is through the application of children's literature. Books can be utilized to inform educators and parents about bullying, provide children with practical ways to be kind, educate students on different types of disabilities, aid students in accepting their peers with disabilities in the class, and provide healthy ways to respond to and process bullying. It is essential that students and educators are knowledgeable about bullying, various types of disabilities, and the importance of accepting and loving everyone; an efficient, beneficial way to go about this is through the integration of children's literature.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Bullying Theoretical Framework**

It is critical that bullying is considered within many different scenarios and perspectives to be holistically understood and recognized. Thomas, Connor, and Scott

(2018) have stated that “bullying arises out of a complex interaction of both systems and individual-level factors” so bullying should be examined from a variety of perspectives and theories (p. 448). When considering bullying from a general standpoint, it is clear that equifinality is applicable, because not all bullies and bully victims have endured the same life events to lead up to the bullying (Thomas, Connon, & Scott, 2018). There is not one mold or set of characteristics that apply to those who play the instigator or the victim in bullying scenarios. It is also important to consider bullying from a social-ecological perspective, to examine how an individual involved in a bullying scenario will respond based on the impact of those around them (Thomas, Connon, & Scott, 2018). There are risk factors and protective factors that impact students’ reactions to being bullied, such as their families, environment, or peer groups. Much can be learned from approaching bullying from a biological or social cognitive theory as well, because individuals are impacted by their genetics and their observations of others (Thomas, Connon, & Scott, 2018). Parents play an especially large role in the way students interact within bullying situations, because children will mimic the words and actions modeled by the respected adults in their lives. Bullying can stem from a variety of etiologies and impact children in an array of manners, so approaching this difficult topic from multiple perspectives is advantageous.

Another group of researchers has considered bullying within schools; however, they grounded their research on a sociocultural perspective, examining the cultural values of people. Maunder and Crafter have identified bullying as being “based on an interpretation of the situation in which the activity occurs rather than being an objective phenomenon that translates equally across all settings” (Maunder & Crafter, 2018, p. 14).

This perspective has illuminated the impact of individuals' personal beliefs and experiences on their response to a bullying situation. According to the social schema theory and the social identity theory, teachers often assess bullying situations based on the students' typical behavior and the relationships they have with the involved students (Mauder & Crafter, 2018). The students directly involved in the bullying incident - the bully, the victim, and the witnesses – are likely to respond to the harassment based on their previous experiences, their peer relationships, or their sense of personal responsibility (Mauder & Crafter, 2018). Thus, these researchers have posed that “the most effective school-based interventions are those which adopt approaches operating at a whole-school level, classroom level, and individual level, whilst also involving parents and the wider community” (Mauder & Crafter, 2018, p. 19). Therefore, informing and preparing teachers, faculty, community members, parents, and students on the negative impact of bullying and how to properly handle bullying situations is pivotal.

### **Bibliotherapy Theoretical Framework**

There are several researchers who have scrutinized the subject of bibliotherapy, and they have found it to be effective, especially in the classroom. Sridhar and Sharon (2000) have stated that bibliotherapy is able to “improve reading comprehension, enhance self-esteem, and improve behavior for students with learning and behavior problems” (p. 74). Ultimately, incorporating literature into the classroom will not only benefit students academically, but also socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. Their research has also theorized that exposure to literature provides opportunities for catharsis and insight among students, primarily for those who find personal connections with the main characters (Sridhar & Sharon, 2000). As children are reading books, they make

associations with the characters and recognize ways that they could respond to different situations or positively interact with their peers. It was also emphasized that bibliotherapy is not simply reading books, but requires discussion, deep thinking, and creative activities to be fully effective (Sridhar & Sharon, 2000). As literature is incorporated into the classroom, it is essential that there is thorough discussion and a vast amount of activities to ensure students' full comprehension of the topic at hand. Literature opens many channels for students to grow academically and relationally, and it is of the utmost importance that teachers responsibly handle their role of facilitator.

Another researcher, Tukhareli (2011), found that by "reinforcing a 'child-book' connection, bibliotherapy reveals the power of a book to a young reader: a book might be a friend, a companion, or just a safe place" (p. 10). Books are beneficial in that they provide an outlet and a safe haven for students of all ages and backgrounds. Through this research, it was also discovered that bibliotherapy is an excellent tool for helping children cope with issues and problems occurring in their own lives, as well as, providing children with a better understanding and more sympathy towards issues occurring in others' lives (Tukhareli, 2011). As students begin to understand that others are enduring tough scenarios, they will also begin to develop compassion and kindness for those around them. Children will also use bibliotherapy as a means of peace and reassurance when finding themselves amidst hurt or chaos, for they will connect with characters who are going through similar situations to them, and they will recognize that they are not alone in their suffering (Tukhareli, 2011). Students are often unaware that there are others who have endured similar challenges and suffering as they have, so with this recognition comes an overwhelming perseverance. Incorporating children's literature into the

classroom provides ideal cathartic and healing opportunities for the students involved in the reading as well as an awareness of the suffering others have undergone.

Lastly, Shechtman (2017) has studied the influence of bibliotherapy on groups of students with moderate to severe bouts of aggression. When working with these groups of students, it is essential to focus on the therapeutic attributes of the literature to support any catharsis, social learning, or group cohesion that could stem from the reading (Shechtman, 2017). Sharing or reading literature aloud, as well as the discussion that follows will require students to be more aware and vulnerable about their emotions and actions. Shechtman (2017) also theorized that bibliotherapy assists “children [to] model the skills of self-disclosure, pro-social behavior, and conflict resolution” (pp. 63). As they are sharing and discussing, students will find connections and form unbreakable bonds with others who have experienced relatable situations. As students process, understand, and share about their emotions, actions, and experiences, the class as a whole will grow closer and develop tighter bonds.

### **Experimental Design**

One particular study recognizes that schools need to take a stance against bullying to create a supportive, safe learning environment for their students. The researchers, Andreou, Paparoussi, and Gkouni (2013), have recognized that bibliotherapy has been effective since the 1980s in helping students process their problems, understand their feelings, develop more self-confidence, and become more self-aware. More specifically, children's literature can be integrated into the curriculum to quickly and effectively discuss issues concerning bullying, promote bystander intervention, and encourage proactivity in bullying situations (Andreou, Paparoussi, & Gkouni, 2013). As a result,



these researchers are examining the effectiveness of an anti-bullying program that uses literature to introduce a variety of perspectives of those directly involved in a bullying situation.

The intent of this particular study is to assess the effectiveness of anti-bullying bibliotherapy on elementary aged children's behavior in bullying scenarios, their attitudes towards bullying, their intent to intervene when witnessing bullying, and the impact they believe they can have with intervention (Andreou, Paparoussi, & Gkouni, 2013). The researchers worked with four 5<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, 2 of which were the control and the remaining 2 classes incorporated literature and instruction directly related to the anti-bullying program (Andreou, Paparoussi, & Gkouni, 2013). In the experimental class they read the story, *Froxylanthi's Flag* by Dikaiou; then, for the remainder of the school year, they completed a variety of activities that directly corresponded with this literature (Andreou, Paparoussi, & Gkouni, 2013). The students shared their thoughts on school bullying and participated in activities such as role playing, in-depth discussions, diary entries, rereading, and making personal connections with the literature (Andreou, Paparoussi, & Gkouni, 2013). Students from both classes were then evaluated on a variety of scales to assess if they related more as a bully, bully victim, bully assistant, victim defender, or an outsider in harassment situations (Andreou, Paparoussi, & Gkouni, 2013). These activities and surveys provide valuable information to assess how effective this anti-bullying program was for the students and how their understanding of bullying had shifted.

After completing this study, Andreou, Paparoussi, and Gkouin (2013) found that this anti-bullying program is effective at reducing the likelihood of individuals serving as

a bystander in a bullying scenario, but instead empowers students with self-efficacy and personal responsibility to intervene in such situations. Although the program did not directly reduce the occurrence of bullying in the classroom, changing the students' perspective and attitude towards bullying will ultimately reduce bullying (Andreou, Paparoussi, & Gkouni, 2013). Additionally, this particular study was not effective in switching student attitudes towards bullying into action against bullying through interventions; however, it would be beneficial to combine bibliotherapy with other programs that provide intervention strategies such as "creative problem solving, seeking adult help, joining with the victim and developing empathy for victims" (Andreou, Paparoussi, & Gkouni, 2013, p. 111). There are numerous ways to address and minimize bullying in the classroom, and one highly effective way is the incorporation of children's literature, especially when in tandem with other methods. From this study, it is evident that using literature to address bullying within the classroom is a beneficial way to handle this difficult topic with children. It is especially advantageous to utilize the literature in a way that provides practical ways for students to respond to or minimize any harassment that may arise in their life.

### **Bullying**

Bullying has been an ever-present issue within schools and among students of all ages. No matter the manner in which bullying occurs, it is considered "a specific type of aggression in which behavior towards others is intended to harm, occurs repeatedly over time and involves an imbalance of power in which the person with power attacks the less powerful victim" (Flanagan et al., 2013, p. 692). Ultimately, bullying occurs when one individual causes another person to feel inferior, weak, and unimportant. This imbalance

of power could be demonstrated through one of four types of bullying: verbal bullying, emotional bullying, physical bullying, or cyberbullying (Rettew & Pawlowski, 2016). In a school setting, verbal bullying could be exemplified through name-calling, demeaning insults, or any other method of attacks expressed verbally. Emotional bullying, also referred to as social bullying, would be represented through the exclusion or ignoring of those seen as inferior. Examples of physical bullying include kicking, pushing, punching, or other aggressive actions. The last type of bullying, cyberbullying, is one that is increasing in frequency with technological advancements, because it is performed through channels such as online sites, social media, or messaging outlets. Thanks to a large study performed on middle schoolers, verbal bullying and emotional bullying are identified as the most common methods of victimization, followed by physical bullying, and cyberbullying as the least common ("Facts About Bullying", 2017). This study also revealed that the majority of bullying occurs in the school setting, whether it is in the classroom, the cafeteria, or the school bus ("Facts About Bullying", 2017). As a result, school should be the primary location for contending and eradicating bullying. All in all, it does not matter the manner in which someone is bullied; all forms of bullying leave a brutal sting and great pain that traumatizes the victims for much of their lives.

### **Current Rates of Bullying**

Even though many schools have taken action to limit bullying and prevent it from occurring on their schoolgrounds, it is still a pressing issue that influences an abundance of children. Research shows that "80-90% of adolescents and preadolescents will at some point in their school life face ongoing psychological and physical harassment, characterized as bullying" (Oliver, Young, & LaSalle, 1994, p. 137). Even more

concerning statistics state that certain subgroups of students are targeted within this bullying, for example, “21.6% of students with disabilities report being victimized as compared to the 14.5% of students without disabilities” and these percentages are continuing to rise (Rose & Gage, 2017, p. 299). Schools should be dissatisfied with where these statistics stand and the rising rates of bullying in their schools.

It is especially troubling that certain subgroups of students are being targeted within this victimization. Students who are different from the social norm due to their skin color, their gender, their intellectual or academic abilities, or their disability are seen as inferior, thus becoming victims to the harassment of bullies. When gathering information and statistics on these maltreated groups within the student body, it is important to understand what characterizes an individual with one of the disabilities identified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. IDEA identifies disabilities in accordance with their thirteen disability categories: autism, deaf-blindness, visual impairment, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech impairment, and traumatic brain injury (“13 Disability Categories”, 2019). Students with disabilities who are most commonly represented as victims of harassment or bullying include those with learning disabilities, autism, intellectual disabilities, and emotional disturbances (Rose et al., 2015). These high rates of bullying need to propel educators into action against maltreatment in their school districts.

### **The Traumatic Effects of Bullying**

The effects of being subject to harassment are detrimental for both a student's mental and physical well-being, regardless of the style of bullying, the intensity of

bullying, or the age of the bully victim. For example, some common side effects of bullying include: lowered academic performance, limited social adjustment, inadequate social skills, depression, aggression, loneliness, health issues, anxiety, or low self-esteem (Flanagan et al., 2013). It is essential to note that not all of these side effects of bullying are easily identified in bully victims, just as not all forms of bullying are easily observed. This explains why it is critical for educators, parents, and students to be made aware of the symptoms and signals of bully victims, so that the sufferers can receive the help and care that they need.

It is also essential that educators and parents are able to recognize signs and symptoms of bullies and of bullying scenarios, because abuse is one of many risk factors that could influence a child. Risk factors are events that put individuals in danger of struggling developmentally or entering into an unhealthy, dangerous lifestyle (Parritz & Troy, 2018). Bullying by itself will not instantly put students on this unhealthy life path; however, depending on the timing and other risk factors occurring in the student's life, they could easily follow this negative trajectory (Parritz & Troy, 2018). Educators must remain observant and mindful as to all that their students are enduring, both in school and at home, so that these children are guaranteed their classroom teacher as an advocate and a supporter. As students recognize the love and encouragement that their teacher provides, they will demonstrate more dependence and vulnerability with this trusted adult which will lead to healthier coping and processing of any bullying or trauma they may be bearing. It is also of the utmost importance that students are prepared with how to respond to their bully and the harassment in a healthy manner, in order to minimize the detrimental effects that often ensue from bullying.

### **Coping with Bullying**

When bullying is prevalent in an individual's life, it is essential that they are equipped with healthy coping mechanisms and strategies to minimize the detrimental effects of harassment. Coping is recognized as the "purposeful cognitive and behavioral efforts undertaken to manage internal and external demands of a stressor with the goal of stress resolution or alleviation of emotional reactions" (Flanagan et al., 2013, p. 693). However, it is essential to recognize that not all coping strategies are healthy or beneficial for the victim to practice. Therefore, educators should present positive coping approaches to their students, starting at a young age, to help prepare them to be kind friends who both treat others well and understand how to cope when someone mistreats them. For example, some short-term techniques could include: avoiding or ignoring the problem, distracting the bully, seeking protection from a friend or sibling, conforming to the actions of the group, attempting to humiliate the bully, using humor, or seeking reconciliation with the bully (Oliver et al., 1994). These methods of coping may only be healthy in particular situations and to a certain extent; ergo, teachers should clarify when and how to apply these strategies. It is also important that educators also prepare their students for steps to take when the bullying continues for an extended period of time and critically impacts the student. When the students have taken the proper strides to healthily combat the bullying on their own but have failed to minimize the occurrence of the bullying, it is essential that they contact an adult to take further action against the perpetrator. It is important to note that schools' primary goal should not be to prepare their students on how to cope with harassment, but instead they should aim at eradicating bullying altogether. Since this is not an easily attainable goal, it is important that students

are prepared with how to handle being bullied until their school is a completely bully-free zone. An ideal, efficient way of going about this would be to incorporate children's literature that discusses bullying and coping with bullying into the curriculum.

### **The Value of Literature**

Children's literature plays a powerful role in the classroom and can be extremely advantageous, if used thoughtfully and appropriately. One benefit of the proper application of children's literature in the curriculum would be to counter bullying among students, especially harassment targeted towards students with disabilities. Using literature to encourage emotional healing and release is also known as bibliotherapy, a concept that would greatly benefit all schools, no matter the age level of the students (Flanagan et al., 2013). There are four primary counseling uses that stem from applying books about bullying to a curriculum and a classroom, and these include: identifying with the characters, gaining insight into problems, finding emotional catharsis, and joining in group counseling (Oliver et al., 1994). By reading children's literature that addresses such issues, students who have undergone bullying will be able to connect with the characters and find comfort in knowing others have experienced a similar victimization as they have faced, and they are not alone in their sufferings. On the other hand, students who play the role of the bully will gain insight into the viewpoint of the victim and how being mistreated drastically impacts their lives. Students may use children's literature to place themselves in another's shoes to get an accurate representation of the emotions associated with bullying, which will propel them to stand up to bullies and not fall into the role of passive bystander. Emotional catharsis is an additional benefit of children's literature, because students may be able to better understand what they are suffering

through when hearing about it from another's perspective. Bully victims may not be able to put words to the pain and suffering that they are feeling but reading about this hurt from another's perspective will be enlightening and liberating. Readers may also be able to better cope with their harassment by witnessing how others handled a similar situation, and then either mimicking or negating various coping options presented. Lastly, reading books centered around bullying with the entire class paves the way for a more vulnerable class discussion on such a weighty subject. Through the use of bibliotherapy, negative effects of bullying, such as depression, anxiety, or aggression, will be minimized and combated (Flanagan et al., 2013). It is vital to remember:

Bibliotherapy is essentially personal. Behavioral results are not always readily perceived; attitudinal changes are not subject to standardized measurements. For those reasons it is difficult to offer more than suggestions of possible approaches and sources from which the teacher might choose, according to the situation.

(Corman, 1975, p. 936)

There is a variety of literature, and more specifically, children's literature, that could be applied to a curriculum to address different needs and subjects within the classroom.

**Using Literature to Keep Educators Informed: *Bullying and Students with Disabilities: Strategies and Techniques to Create a Safe Learning Environment for All***

One critical field of literature to include in the planning and execution of the curriculum includes textbooks and resources that are targeted towards teachers and educators. It is crucial that teachers are informed on managing their classroom, handling bullying among their students and including students with disabilities in their class.

Teachers must take a firm stand against bullying in their classroom by establishing clear



rules opposing such behavior, as well as following through on the agreed upon consequences for these actions. Students will greatly benefit from having character education lessons interwoven into the curriculum of their school day (Zerillo, 2012). Through this integration, students will learn how to be kinder, more encouraging members of society, and the classroom will be a more peaceful, uplifting learning environment. In terms of students with disabilities being welcomed and included in the classroom, teachers must have a thorough understanding of the disabilities represented among their students and how to better meet the individual needs of each of their pupils. This knowledge will thus minimize the frustration and opposition that often accompanies teachers of students with disabilities, as well as reducing the isolation the students with disabilities in such a classroom may feel (Lea, 2015). By reading explanations and information on students with disabilities, teachers will better understand and apply various accommodations and differentiation techniques in their classroom.

One piece of literature that would greatly benefit educators of students with disabilities who are facing opposition and bullying, is the reference book *Bullying and Students with Disabilities: Strategies and Techniques to Create a Safe Learning Environment for All* (McNamara, 2013). This particular resource addresses bullying, understanding students with disabilities, identifying bullies and bully victims, enforcing a school-wide anti-bullying program, thriving as a teacher, managing as a paraprofessional, and functioning as parents in regards to bullying (McNamara, 2013). As educators and parents read resources such as this, they will become more informed about bullying and how to minimize it. Being well-informed will propel them into creating a welcoming, safe learning environment where all students feel valued and important. Also, the more

knowledgeable professionals are regarding bullying and disabilities, the more comfortable students will feel approaching them with concerns or questions about harassment or students with disabilities in their lives. Teachers will serve as a model for their students without disabilities, so as these students observe their teacher loving, appreciating, and encouraging their students with disabilities, they will begin to mimic and replicate these behaviors in their own interactions. Parents will also be a model for their children through their honesty and vulnerability concerning any disabilities that they have or any bullying that they may have witnessed or experienced. As a result, the classroom and the home will become more inspiring and accepting environments for all students.

**Using Literature to Promote Kindness in Schools: *Have You Filled a Bucket Today?***

***A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids***

Another type of literature that could be incorporated into schools and classrooms to tackle bullying would be books that are part of an anti-bullying program. Some schools establish a school wide program that addresses bullying and aims at bettering the character and morals of their student body. A prime example of this sort of literature is *Have You Filled a Bucket Today? A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids* by Carol McCloud. This story encourages kindness and thoughtfulness in order to fill one another's buckets with happiness and good thoughts (McCloud, 2006). It is explained that every individual has a bucket that is either filled or emptied. Bucket filling includes performing kind, encouraging acts for others, while emptying buckets is demonstrated through being a bully and hurting others' feelings (McCloud, 2006). Through the reading of this book, students will gain awareness of practical ways in which they could treat one

another with kindness and care, such as writing thank you notes, smiling at others, or telling a family member how much they are appreciated and loved (McCloud, 2006). If a school incorporates this work into an anti-bullying program, they could encourage their students to be bucket fillers.

It is critical that schools prioritize fostering a bully-free environment so that students recognize the great value and importance of their kindness towards others. To extend the anti-bullying program past simply reading *Have You Filled a Bucket Today? A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids*, schools could host a variety of school-wide activities to elaborate on what was discussed in this read. For example, the school could provide each student a bucket that their classmates will fill with kind, uplifting notes that they will then get to read at the end of every week. Another idea could be initiating a school-wide wall decorating competition that includes examples of kindness from the book or from each classes' students. Schools could also invite guests to speak at assemblies and pep-rallies about being a caring, benevolent individual. Literature such as *Have You Filled a Bucket Today?* is an excellent channel for spreading the message to students about how to be a good friend and help one another, which will ultimately reduce the appearance of bullying in this school system.

#### **Using Literature to Explain and Discuss Bullying: *Enemy Pie***

Elementary age students may not even be aware as to what bullying is or how to handle any mistreatment or conflict that arises in their relationships. As a result, teachers should feature literature in their lessons that breaks down this prevalent issue to make it more relatable and understandable for a young audience, while also offering positive, healthy coping mechanisms. An excellent piece that could serve this purpose would be

*Enemy Pie* by Derek Munson (2000). This children's book centers around a young boy who has a new child, Jeremy, move onto his street; however, he becomes quite bothered and upset when Jeremy throws a party, but does not invite him (Munson, 2000). After he expresses his feelings to his father, his dad promises to make the family recipe of enemy pie if he spends an entire day with his enemy (Munson, 2000). As the two boys play basketball, jump on the trampoline, and hang out in the treehouse, their relationship grows into friendship and the boy no longer wants to serve his neighbor this enemy pie (Munson, 2000). When his dad calls them inside for dessert, the boy panics and tries to keep everyone from eating this deceptive treat, but when Jeremy and his dad take their first bites, the boy realizes that enemy pie is actually delicious, even though he no longer has an enemy to serve it to (Munson, 2000). This wonderful story presents a familiar situation that many young children have likely already experienced or will undergo someday in the future.

By reading this out loud to students, they will be able to better process what they have previously experienced, as well as how they could handle a similar situation in a healthy way. There are two primary coping mechanisms represented in this children's book that students should be able to recognize and remember for the next time they are facing conflict: telling an adult and befriending the bully. It was effective that the boy informed his dad of the discouragement and loneliness that he was feeling, so that he could seek help and grow from this disheartening situation. This may not be the natural instinct or habit of children who are under stress and maltreatment; however, it is the best way to move through a bullying scenario. Also, it was helpful for the protagonist to attempt to befriend his supposed enemy, because this is how he made a new friend.

Bullying reports do not always result in an exciting, new friendship; however, there are many occasions where miscommunication, misunderstandings, and misconceptions hinder friendships from developing, which was the case in *Enemy Pie*. By reading such a story with a classroom of students, they will be made aware that others experience similar situations to them, and they will benefit from hearing new mannerisms to minimize or even avoid the bullying.

**Using Literature to Discuss Physical Bullying: *Pushing Isn't Funny: What to Do about Physical Bullying***

Literature is an excellent way to promote healthy conversations and dialogue among students concerning their personal experiences with bullying. Those who have suffered from harassment may struggle to openly converse about this mistreatment and the significant pain that accompanied it. When students find themselves in a familiar, trustworthy environment, such as being read to in a safe classroom, they will be more likely to discuss what they have undergone and seek emotional healing and release through this vulnerability. Sharing the illustrated, nonfiction work, *Pushing Isn't Funny: What to Do about Physical Bullying* is an incredible way to begin conversing openly with students about bullying, and more specifically, physical bullying.

One special characteristic of this piece of literature is the note to educators and parents that is found at the beginning of the work. Through this note, Higgins (2016) is able to explain her intentions and encourage the adults reading this work to properly apply her writings. She specifically explains that parents and educators are expected to read this book alongside children to ensure that youth have a channel to discuss their personal experiences with physical bullying (Higgins, 2016). Higgins (2016) writes:

While reading, encourage the child to volunteer his or her own experiences about a time when he or she was physically bullied, acted as a bully, or saw physical bullying taking place. Use the text and illustrations as a jumping-off point for conversation and problem solving. (p. 2)

It is critical that students have opportunities to share and process their own experiences. After reading through this work, educators could foster these conversations through reflective journal entries, conferencing with the students, or drawing activities where students can express and release their emotions.

*Pushing Isn't Funny* follows the life of Bailey the Raccoon who is now subject to great anxiety, discouragement, and distractions due to the harassment that he has been undergoing in school (Higgins, 2016). He no longer finds joy in his favorite things, like participating in math class or eating lunch with his classmates (Higgins, 2016). Despite his best efforts to avoid his bully, he still must face the physical harassment that some of his classmates deliver (Higgins, 2016). Bailey applies various coping methods and eventually seeks advice from the trusted adults in his life, which is used as a spring board for further discussion among the students reading this work (Higgins, 2016). Parents are encouraged to ask students their take on the advice Bailey was provided as well as how they would have suggested Bailey to respond to his bully (Higgins, 2016). Ultimately, this book is one that will promote excellent conversations among students, and will require educators to prepare for the questions, discrepancies, and ideas that will arise within these discussions.

**Using Literature to Promote Inclusion and Acceptance: *Strictly No Elephants***

Children's literature could also be incorporated into a classroom's curriculum to inform students about disabilities that their classmates may have and why it is important to include and welcome these students with disabilities into their classroom. This type of classroom environment is called an inclusive classroom, and this is when all students, those with and without disabilities, are participatory, present, and accepted within the classroom (Humphrey and Symes, 2010). The most dramatic and detrimental downfall of inclusion is often the occurrence of bullying between students without disabilities and students with disabilities. Therefore, if students have a better understanding of what inclusion is and how they can welcome all of their classmates into their learning environment, bullying rates will plummet.

One piece of literature that does an excellent job of portraying the concept of inclusion is *Strictly No Elephants* by Lisa Mantchev. This heartwarming story follows the experiences of a young boy who has an elephant as a pet (Mantchev, 2015). He desperately wants to take his elephant to a local pet club; however, when they finally reach the door of this club, there is a sign clearly stating, "STRICTLY NO ELEPHANTS" (Mantchev, 2015). They begrudgingly walk away from this elite club, and as they are returning home, they pass a young girl with her pet skunk who was also denied from the pet club (Mantchev, 2015). They decide to start a new pet club where all are welcome: elephants, skunks, hedgehogs, penguins, armadillo, giraffes, and bats (Mantchev, 2015). By reading this story with a classroom of students, these children will recognize the great pain associated with exclusion and rejection; however, they will also understand the joy and community that follows inclusion and acceptance. *Strictly No*

*Elephants* also breaks down inclusion into a few simple steps that will be easily understood by young children: lift each other up, overcome scary things with each other, leave no one behind, and direct others towards welcoming, kind friends (Mantchev, 2015). This story, among others, would be excellent to read to students in preparation for being in an inclusion classroom and to provide them practical ways in which they can be kind and helpful to their classmates who may be different from them. Noticeably, literature is extremely beneficial in braving difficult topics and simplifying them into words and stories that are easily understood by children.

**Using Literature to Explain Disabilities: *All My Stripes: A Story for Children with Autism***

Educators could incorporate children's literature to address specific disabilities represented in their classroom and how they may be exemplified in the students. For example, if there is a student with autism in the classroom, the students in the classroom without disabilities may be confused as to why their peer is different from them and what this label of autism means. It is the educator's responsibility to inform the class, clarify any confusion, and answer any questions that arise. Statistics express that individuals with autism are more likely to be victims of exclusion, bullying, and mental health issues than other students (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). As students become more informed about autism, they will likely minimize the mistreatment and bullying that they direct towards a classmate with autism, and replace this with acceptance, kindness, and friendship.

An excellent resource for educating young students on a disability such as autism is *All My Stripes: A Story for Children with Autism* (Rudolph & Royer, 2015). This



illustrated story follows the life of a young zebra who feels ostracized, misunderstood, and alone at his school, and he seeks comfort and encouragement from his mom (Rudolph & Royer, 2015). As he is describing a school day, he explains how he paints with a paintbrush rather than his hooves like his classmates do, he gets scared during a fire drill and has to get rescued by a firefighter, and he attempts talking to his classmates but is unsure how to initiate the conversations (Rudolph & Royer, 2015). He is upset that everyone treats him differently because of his autism and that this is all that they know about him (Rudolph & Royer, 2015). His mother then takes the time to highlight the other stripes that he has and that she loves: his pilot stripe, his caring stripe, his honesty stripe, and his curiosity stripe (Rudolph & Royer, 2015). This story concludes with Zane, the young zebra, learning to love himself and appreciate the parts of his character that make him uniquely special (Rudolph & Royer, 2015). This story does an impeccable job of explaining what it is like to have autism and how it feels to be different and excluded from one's classmates.

After reading through this story, individuals who do not have autism would gain insight and perspective into aspects of what their peers with autism are undergoing and how they can better love and appreciate these friends. On the other hand, students with autism may find peace in knowing that they are not alone in their feelings, and they can find encouragement and self-love through this story. Another unique aspect of *All My Stripes: A Story for Children with Autism* is the information included in the back of the book: a reading guide and a note to parents and caregivers (Rudolph & Royer, 2015). The reading guide elaborates on autism and some of the characteristics common to those with autism that are incorporated into this work: being different, sensory processing

challenges, socio-communicative challenges, literal and concrete thinking styles, and individual strengths (Rudolph & Royer, 2015). This would prove useful for students with disabilities who are seeking an explanation or a connection for their feelings. It would also be advantageous for those without disabilities, such as classmates, teachers, or family members, who want to better understand and aid those whom they love with autism. The note to parents and caregivers takes this a step further to better inform families of children with autism on symptoms that arise at various ages, treatments and therapies that are beneficial for those with autism, and additional steps to take to ensure a child is receiving the most efficient and thorough help possible (Rudolph & Royer, 2015). *All My Stripes: A Story for Children with Autism* is just one of numerous children's books that center on the topic of autism, and there are countless works that focus on other disabilities. Incorporating this style of children's literature is a favorable and valuable means of improving a classroom's environment and minimizing bullying in this classroom.

### **Using Literature to Appeal to All Audiences: *El Deafo***

It is also pivotal to remember that children's literature comes in all styles and genres to appease audiences of all ages, genders, and personalities. For example, the graphic novel, *El Deafo*, illustrates the life and background of the author, Cece Bell, through the drawings and experiences of a young bunny (Bell, 2014). This bunny was born without any disabilities; however, at a young age she became very sick and lost her hearing (Bell, 2014). She had to wear a big, bulky hearing aid, learn how to speak in sign language, and switch schools to attend a program directed towards students with hearing impairments (Bell, 2014). There are numerous challenges that Cece must face throughout

*El Deafo*, especially when she transfers back into her school with hearing classmates, and some of these challenges include: not being able to watch movies or tv shows without subtitles, struggling to understand her friends when the lights are off at a sleepover, being treated differently by classmates because of her hearing aid, or struggling to understand the teachers' instructions (Bell, 2014). To combat all of these difficulties, Cece imagines herself as a superhero with impeccable hearing as her superpower, thanks to her hearing aid (Bell, 2014). She then develops a close friendship with one of her classmates, trusts her with vulnerable information concerning her deafness, and treats this cherished friend as her sidekick (Bell, 2014). Some students will greatly connect with these illustrated, superhero characters, or this book will spark the interest of students who especially love graphic novels. It is important that educators provide a wide variety of literature in their curriculum and their classroom library, so that all students find reading that is age-appropriate, exciting, and relatable.

Another reason *El Deafo* is an excellent choice of literature to incorporate into the classroom, is because the author, Cece Bell, includes a note at the end of her work elaborating on her life with a hearing impairment. She uses this author's note to express how she used this work to truthfully and accurately represented her feelings and experiences growing up (Bell, 2014). She confesses that, "[she] felt different, and in [her] mind, being different was not a good thing. [She] secretly, and openly, believed that [her] deafness, in making [her] so different, was a disability. And [she] was so ashamed" (Bell, 2014, p. 236). Bell then elaborates on how this perspective shifted so that she now sees her "deafness as more of an occasional nuisance, and oddly enough, as a gift ... And being different? That turned out to be the best part of all. [She] found that with a little

creativity, and a lot of dedication, any difference can be turned into something amazing” (Bell, 2014, p. 237). This rawness and vulnerability create such a real, eye-opening moment for readers. *El Deafo* would be an excellent book recommendation for those who are interested in graphic novels, those with hearing impairments, or those who are directly involved with someone in the deaf community.

### **Using Literature to Provide Multiple Perspectives on Bullying: *Wonder***

There are some examples of children's literature that would be advantageous for teachers to read to the whole class while others would function best as an independent read for students to dive into in their own time. Topics can be much more impactful when students research them on their own, rather than having parents, teachers, or administrators broaching such issues. It is often explained that children's morals begin by being mandated and controlled by the adults in their lives; however, at some point they make a switch and start claiming their morals and standards as their own (Zerillo, 2012). As children spend more time engrossed in books, they will begin to recognize what they deem as right or wrong and how they will allow these morals to penetrate and influence their actions.

The novel *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio is an excellent book that, while it could be read aloud in some classes, would be more beneficial as an independent read for most students to spark these thoughts and conversations concerning morality. This novel follows the life of a young boy named August who has a facial deformity and is often victimized and bullied because of this difference (Palacio, 2012). *Wonder* starts out with Auggie explaining how he was born with his atypical facial structures and how this has impacted his family dynamics (Palacio, 2012). Auggie continues narrating to express his

feelings about switching from being homeschooled to attending a new, private school (Palacio, 2012). It is at this school that Auggie meets some of his greatest bullies and opponents, and he must show great character and maturity to overcome this harassment (Palacio, 2012). It is also at this school that Auggie meets some of his closest friends who are able to see past his differences and spend quality time with him (Palacio, 2012). This novel would be an excellent read for students who have a disability and are feeling alone or misunderstood in their differences. They could read and gain perspective in how others endure and cope under similar situations and environments. Another amazing aspect of this novel is that it is narrated from multiple perspectives; some chapters are written from the point of view of Auggie, Auggie's sister Via, Auggie's friend Summer, Auggie's friend Jack, Via's boyfriend Justin, and Via's friend Miranda (Palacio, 2012). It is enlightening for the reader to hear different voices throughout this story to gain insight into why certain characters acted in the ways that they did and how this, unknowingly, impacted those around them. The many advantages of incorporating *Wonder* into the curriculum demonstrate the power that this novel could have to address bullying in the classroom.

#### **Using Literature to Provide Healthy Coping Mechanisms: *Thirteen Reasons Why***

Literature can also be woven into the curriculum to make students aware of the costly effects that their words, actions, or unhealthy coping mechanisms can have on others. A book that provides channels for such a difficult conversation would be *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2007). This novel is targeted towards a young adult audience who can maturely handle rather severe, weighty conversations. As a result, this may not be ideal to incorporate into the curriculum; however, teachers and educators must remain

conscientious of the students who opt to read this novel to ensure that they process the story in a healthy, proper manner.

This young adult's novel describes the story behind a high school girl who is enduring bullying and ridicule within her new school, so she commits suicide to cope with this harassment (Asher, 2007). Before killing herself, Hannah Baker records thirteen tapes to clarify the thirteen people who played a role in her bullying and her eventual suicide (Asher, 2007). Through these tapes, she proceeds to explain the harsh bullying that she endured: verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and physical maltreatment (Asher, 2007). Although it is a challenging, heartbreaking read, this novel does an excellent job of offering the viewpoints of both the bully and the bullied, so that readers better understand the individuals' justifications and reasonings behind their behavior.

Reading through this novel proves beneficial for readers who are themselves a bully; they will find connections between their situation and the experiences of characters within the novel, which will aid them in processing and seeking help in their circumstances. Readers of this novel who are prone to bullying others, will gain insight into how much weight and power their words and actions can have on their victims. They may also begin to understand why they feel the need to bully others, whether it be insecurity, jealousy, or self-doubt, and then begin to address and minimize their bullying at its root. On the other hand, those who are victims to such harassment will understand how their unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as hurting themselves or committing suicide, can seriously upset and wound those who love them dearly. This is when it is critical for educators to be cognizant of the students reading this novel, so that discussion can arise to promote healthy coping mechanisms that one could choose instead of suicide,

such as seeking help from parents, teachers, or a therapist. It is pivotal that students recognize the ways in which their words and their actions influence one another, so that they will then understand the value of kind-heartedness and compassion.

### **Downfalls of Bibliotherapy**

Incorporating children's literature into the classroom is often regarded as an excellent way to initiate difficult discussions, prompt catharsis, and improve understanding among students on tough topics such as bullying and students with disabilities. However, there are also skeptics who suggest hesitations and warnings about using children's literature to address various struggles that students may be facing. It is important to remember that reading literature in a classroom is unpredictable and does not always have the impact on students that it is expected to (Corman, 1975). Books should be chosen with the aim of best meeting any physical, emotional, or mental needs of students; however, it is challenging to foresee how students will actually respond. These critics say that people only understand or appreciate literature and scenarios that they personally have experienced (Corman, 1975). Also, when topics are considered too intense or heavy, individuals tend to avoid and reject conversations or emotions centered around these subjects (Corman, 1975). On the other hand, those who continue reading literature that addresses weighty topics may be struck by apprehensions, worry, or a number of other negative emotions (Corman, 1975). Although these results could stem from being exposed to difficult conversations, classes can be eased into such discussions, so they are prepared for what is to come. Before reading a work that addresses a new perspective or topic, educators could prime students and provide them with prior knowledge or prompt them to approach the story with an open mind. There are numerous

ways to avoid any rejection, repression, or withdrawal that may overlap with bibliotherapy.

Another adverse effect of incorporating children's literature into the classroom is the common decline in students' enjoyment and pleasure that they once gained from reading (Corman, 1975). Since bibliotherapy includes much analysis, discussion, and study of a book, students easily become drained and disheartened by all of the work that accompanies this reading. To combat this discouragement and unenjoyment, teachers can be sure to incorporate a wide variety of literature in an array of manners into the classroom. As a result, students will understand that there are times when literature is read for enjoyment and pleasure, times when it is read for instructional purposes, and times it is read for catharsis and discussion. This will also encourage students to read all genres of literature, because one variety will not be solely associated with one purpose. The negativity and dissatisfaction that some critics share in regards to using children's literature in the classroom to address tough topics can be strategically avoided and minimized to best aid students in the cathartic release that accompanies reading these books.

### **Conclusion**

Bullying and exclusion are two of the many social issues that plague today's schools. This mistreatment is typically directed at students who are different than the school norm, which results in students with disabilities being the main target of bullying. It is crucial that schools take action against this harassment and negativity to harvest a safe, encouraging, and accepting learning environment for their students. One key way to do this is through the application and integration of children's literature into the



curriculum. Books can be utilized to inform educators on the warning signs and tragic effects of bullying, introduce students to a school-wide anti-bullying program, address the topic of bullying with those of all ages, equip children with various coping mechanisms to handle being bullied, prepare students who will learn in an inclusion classroom, educate students on various disabilities, or provide connections for students so they do not feel alone in their experiences. Overall, children's literature can be extremely powerful and life-changing when incorporated into a child's classroom and home.

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