

The Use of Literature to Combat Bullying

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Abstract: Bullying is a pervasive phenomenon. This study examined what teachers think encourages bullying among young people, and what effects teachers believe reader response strategies would have on their students. The study found teachers implementing reader response strategies in discussing literature were able to influence behavior in students and reduce bullying.

Bullying is a pervasive phenomenon in our society that negatively affects today's youth. Research on the phenomena of bullying is relatively new and has left many holes for educators who seek assistance with dealing with these behaviors (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005; Olweus, 2003). Teachers are providers of counseling, serve as surrogate parents and are role models for students (Cornell, 2006; Mishna et al., 2005). As a result, teachers are in a unique position to observe bullying and model how students should handle bullying (Jenson, Dieterich, Brisson, Bender, & Powell, 2010). It is because of this power of influence that teachers have in terms of molding students' thoughts and behaviors that it is imperative to be informed of the increasing prevalence and danger of bullying (Jenson et al., 2010; Mishna et al., 2005). Considering these circumstances, knowledge of the bullying phenomenon will equip teachers with effective interventions (Olweus, 2003). Literature is a powerful tool that teachers can utilize as a means to model positive behaviors to students and deter bullying (Hayakawa, 1939; Rosenblatt, 1968). Using effective reader response interventions will assist in stopping the bullying cycle whenever teachers are witnesses to such actions (Jenson et al., 2010; Olweus, 2003). Additionally, teachers will be able to educate other teachers on how to use reader response interventions to stop the bullying cycle (Mishna et al., 2005; Naylor, Helen, Cossin, de Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

According to Moustakas (1994), "the first challenge of the researcher, in preparing to conduct a phenomenological investigation, is to arrive at a topic and question that have both social meaning and personal significance" (p. 104). We each desired to have a better understanding of this bullying phenomenon. With literature being at the core of our investigation, we decided to interview language arts teachers for our study. We probed for experiences the individual teachers have had with bullying, and what each teacher believed encouraged bullying behaviors. Additionally, we explored the teachers' experiences with teaching literature that included bullying themes. This study examined the following questions: (a) How do teachers define bullying? (b) What do teachers think encourages bullying among young people? (c) What effect do teachers believe that using reader response strategies would have on their students?

Method

This study was driven by the theoretical perspective of phenomenology. As phenomenologists, we gathered data through "first-person reports of life experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). Prominent in the field of phenomenology, Van Manen (1990) explains that a phenomenological interview is conducted in order to explore and gather "experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding

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of a human phenomenon” (p. 66). It is this deeper and richer understanding that Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explain that phenomenologists “attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions of ordinary people in particular situations” (p. 25). In this study, we interviewed teachers and asked them questions that pertained to their personal experiences with bullying in their classroom.

Description of the Researchers

Annika, Ilisa and Olga are K-12 classroom teachers. They witness bullying in their classrooms. Annika is a social studies teacher. Ilisa is a language arts teacher who is interested in using literature to combat bullying. Olga is an elementary teacher. Kurt has two school-age children who are witnesses to bullying in their schools.

Description of Participants and Settings

The researchers interviewed four language arts teachers. Pseudonyms were used for the identification of the participants. L.F. was a first year reading/language arts teacher at a charter middle school in South Florida. She primarily taught eighth grade. Amanda was a seventh grade language arts teacher at a middle school located in an urban area in South Florida. She has taught for eight years. Ana was a reading/language arts elementary school teacher in a suburban area of a large city in South Florida, who taught for four years. Kendra was an eighth grade language arts teacher at a charter school in South Florida, where she taught for eight years.

Data Collection

According to Merriam (2002b), there are two essential components to the phenomenological methodology: (a) the research focuses on direct experiences and the meaning that the participant derives from that lived experience, and (b) the researchers must bracket, or put aside, their personal thoughts and feelings about the subject. As part of monitoring our subjectivity, as researchers, we each reflected on our definitions of bullying in order to bracket our thoughts prior to beginning the study. Moustakas (1994) refers to bracketing as *Epoche*: “In the *Epoche*, we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas of things” (p. 85). In order to assist us with bracketing, we kept reflective journals (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

By writing and discussing our definitions and understandings of bullying, we thought reflectively about the phenomena. This allowed us to bracket our thoughts prior to conducting the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Maintaining reflective journals allowed us to continuously be mindful of our personal connections with the bullying phenomena (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

An additional application of the reflection journal was to enhance the trustworthiness of our study (Merriam, 2002a). As part of our groups’ process for collecting data and maintaining reflection journals, we frequently engaged in peer review (Merriam, 2002a). The researchers used purposeful sampling at multiple sites (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Interviews

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) write, “Good interviews produce rich data filled with words that reveal the respondents’ perspectives” (p. 104). The additional component of the use of literature in the classroom led us to interview language arts teachers. We concluded that the language arts teachers’ knowledge base and familiarity with the literature in addition to hands-on experience with bullying would vastly improve our study’s credibility (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Annika, Ilisa and Olga each selected a language arts teacher personally known to them. Kurt was introduced to a language arts teacher to conduct the interview. In accordance with phenomenological methods, we used long interviews to collect data (Moustakas, 1994). In order to prepare for the interviews, we developed a series of questions aimed at inducing the participant to explain fully his/her experiences with bullying (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Analysis

Merriam (2002a) asserts that a component of trustworthiness is conducting an ethical study. The participants in the study were given full disclosure as to the scope and sequence. All participants were offered confidentiality. All of the participants consented to these conditions. As part of the research process for interpreting data we frequently engaged in peer review. We discussed our findings and interpretations from the interviews and participant observation during bi-weekly meetings and through e-mail. Additionally, Annika and Olga used member checking to address trustworthiness.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researchers coded the transcripts by identifying specific statements, and clustering similar statements. The clusters were collapsed under larger themes. The researchers used the constant comparative method to analyze the transcripts. Merriam (2002a) describes internal validity as the relationship that one's findings has with reality. We infused the research findings of other studies to evidence our own study's connection to the real world. To augment our trustworthiness, we have included "use of rich, thick description" and direct quotes from our interviews and observations (Merriam, 2002a, p. 30).

Findings

Based on our constant comparative analysis the following themes emerged: (a) defining bullying; (b) what encourages bullying; and (c) the influence of reader response strategies on behavior.

Defining Bullying

Kendra's definition of bullying was the most abstract. Kendra felt that bullying reminded her of a statement "freedom stops where someone else's begins" (personal communication, June 1, 2011). She explained that this meant once students felt that they were in a situation where they had to ask another student to stop their behavior, that this was bullying (personal communication, June 1, 2011). Mishna et al. (2005) found that one of the major issues concerning teachers and bullying was that they only had a general idea of what it was. Usually bullying definitions include a component where the victim was abused through either physical or verbal actions (Andreou & Bonoti, 2010; Jensen et al., 2010; Mishna et al., 2005).

The other participants described aspects of both physical and verbal abuses in bullying. L.F. stated bullying was "the act of one person tormenting, either physically or verbally another student or person" (personal communication, June 10, 2011). Amanda described several examples of bullying which included physical and verbal acts (personal communication, June 6, 2011). An example that Amanda gave for verbal bullying was for one student to tell another "Oh you live in the triangle" which is considered a bad area to live in (personal communication, June 6, 2011). Studies suggest that although verbal and physical assaults are harmful, an aspect of bullying that is seen as possibly the most psychologically damaging is isolation (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000).

Both Ana and Amanda included isolation in their definitions. Ana expressed isolation as a girl saying to another, "I'm not her friend" (personal communication, June 9, 2011). Amanda stated, "There have been cases where a student or two were not included in a group" (personal communication, June 6, 2011). Adler and Adler (1995) write of the dramatic effects that isolation has on students: "Being ejected from the clique thus represented the ultimate form of exclusion, carrying severe consequences for individuals' social lives, appearance, and identity" (p. 157). Owens et al. (2000) explain that isolation causes "loss of self-esteem, anxiety, loss of self-confidence and fear for future relationships" (p. 366). Kendra, L.F., and Amanda all

included in their definitions that bullying caused psychological harm. Isolation is an implementation of power imbalance (Naylor et al., 2006).

Both L.F. and Amanda brought up the discussion of power in bullying. L.F. explained it as “it’s like to put the other person in place, you know, like I’m stronger than you, so you know, stay in your place” (personal communication, June 10, 2011). Amanda explained this in terms of “taking advantage of other students, like always asking for a pencil and paper, materials from a student that they know is not going to say no ‘cause they are intimidated” (personal communication, June 6, 2011).

What Encourages Bullying

Part of understanding how the teachers try to deter bullying required an understanding of what they believe encourages bullying or the reasons why individuals bully (Mishna et al., 2005; Naylor et al., 2006). Both Ana and Amanda believed that personal vulnerability is part of the reason why individuals bully. Ana states, “Bullies usually feel vulnerable by things that would make them different. They do not want anybody to find out about certain things because they, themselves are afraid to be bullied” (personal communication, June 9, 2011). Similarly, Amanda states, “They bully because they don’t want to seem weak so they bully others to seem like they’re stronger” (personal communication, June 6, 2011). Amanda believed the bully is trying to seem strong, while Ana described the individual as needing to be the bully instead of the victim. According to Ana, a bully’s vulnerability can manifest into indirect aggressive behaviors towards an individual. Kendra and L.F., on the other hand, focused on the social context as a component that encourages or deters bullying. For example, L.F. discussed the impact media has on encouraging bullying, while Kendra described how role models could deter bullying in the social context.

The Influence of Reader Response Strategies on Behavior

Reader response emphasizes that students should be able to make personal connections with the text in such a way that they can describe how the literature has altered them in some fundamental way (Rosenblatt, 1968). The reader relates to the text on a personal level and is able to enter the text (Bakhtin, 2004; Fish, 1980; Hayakawa, 1939; Rosenblatt, 1968). The reader then becomes immersed in the story and everything in that individual’s life that has come before the text is brought to the forefront for understanding (Bakhtin, 2004; Rosenblatt, 1968; 1978). Simultaneously, all prior knowledge is applied to the unfamiliar text to formulate predictions and inferences based on the new knowledge (Bakhtin, 2004; Rosenblatt, 1968; 1978; Smith & Sharp, 1994).

When asked about how she felt literature can influence students, Kendra stated:
It influences them especially if they can, um relate to the character. So I would say, stories like *Raymond’s Run* you know where the child is in middle school and also stories like um, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, where they can relate to it because once they find out that she died at their age, they relate to that. It can influence them a lot. *Flowers for Algernon*, even though the main character is 37 years old, they still relate to it because his intelligence was lower than theirs. So because of that they sympathize. (personal communication, June 1, 2011)

Kendra explained that when the students first started reading *Raymond’s Run*, they laughed and mocked the main character’s brother. As the students began to read how devastated the main character felt when others deride her brother, they stopped laughing. The students said that they began to understand the main character and the negative effects of bullying. The students

expressed a newfound realization about how to treat individuals and discussed how they would act in the future.

When L.F. was asked how she felt the literature can influence students, she stated, “they have to relate to it” (personal communication, June 10, 2011). She furthered her explanation by discussing a book *The Bully*, and how the content emphasizes that if someone is bigger than you, they are not necessarily overpowering or dominant. She went on to state that, “it was good because it gave them something to reflect [on], that even though you go down a path you can always change your mind and switch” (personal communication, June 10, 2011). Both of these educators described in action what Rosenblatt (1968, 1978) discusses in reader response theory.

Amanda also believed that there was a relationship between the reader and the text. The author can try to persuade the reader. Amanda stated:

It depends on the writer’s goal. The writer can use all kinds of things to influence you one way or another. Persuasive techniques, they use them to make you feel one way or another way, or to convince you to believe one thing over another. So yeah everything you read influences you. (personal communication, June 6, 2011)

Amanda used several novels that contain the theme of bullying, and the examples of bullying in the books were varied. She has used the novels *Touching Spirit Bear*, *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, and *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* in order to make an impact on students’ behavior. Amanda discussed the bullying in each book, and had her students identify positive and negative behaviors. Additionally, Amanda had the students reflect on how they could act in the future as a result of the lessons in the novels. Amanda states, “There is a slight change for a limited time. It’s not something permanent with them” (personal communication, June 6, 2011). However, Amanda explained that students would describe their behavior in terms of a class novel. Amanda expounds on their behavioral interactions as, “Something of what’s going on here that they’ll reference back to the book and make a connection between, you know something they learned, you know, as far as behavior” (personal communication, June 6, 2011). According to Smith and Sharp (1994), what Amanda explained is the students’ process of creating meaning from the story by internalizing the lessons they learned from the literature. Jenson et al. (2010) found that when interventions put into place to combat bullying were stopped, some aggressive bullying behaviors resurfaced. Assisting students with the development of morality is an ongoing process (Jenson et al., 2010).

When Ana was asked about using text to assist with bullying, she stated, “I do use books that have a problem solution theme, you know realistic fiction. We talk about how the people involved feel and how we would deal with it” (personal communication, June 9, 2011). In accordance with reader response, Ana seeks to use lessons within literature to alter students’ behavior. When asked how the students respond to these experiences, Ana noted similarly to Amanda’s idea that there is a slight change when the students finish a novel: “They easily find the problem and give good suggestions on what the person should do” (personal communication, June 6, 2011).

Implications

Our study concurred with similar studies that showed teachers’ definitions vary depending upon their personal understanding of the phenomenon (Mishna et al., 2005; Naylor et al., 2006). Kendra defined bullying as when “your freedom stops [and] where someone else’s begins” (personal communication, June 1, 2011). Both L.F. and Ana discussed how bullying involved teasing; however, L.F. included the term tormenting. Amanda’s definition incorporated similar ideas of the previous teachers: “Bullying is using power to make someone else feel bad,

or scared, or I guess left out” (personal communication, June 6, 2011). Ana and L.F. experienced bullying as children and now incorporate role playing techniques into their classrooms in order to deter bullying.

The teachers perceived that bullying was present in their classroom. Since the teacher could be the bridge that moves conflict to resolution, it was important for the teacher to understand what constitutes bullying, the effects of bullying, and strategies for deterring bullying. The interviewees agreed with Ana’s statement that “the fact that there is not anything effective in place for dealing with bullying...essentially promotes bullying” (personal communication, June 9, 2011). An obvious connection between action and consequence can be attributed to this. In the absence of punishment, there is nothing to deter the bully from continuing the behavior. What Ana described was a feeling shared among teachers. In the Mishna et al. (2005) study, teachers reported feeling distressed after reporting bullying to administration and receiving assistance. Ana stated, “Until there is an effective method to deal with bullying, the victim of bullying is the one who has to figure out how to end their bullying” (personal communication, June 9, 2011). This finding is in agreement with Olweus’ (2003) Bullying Cycle, which depicts that if no intervention takes place, the bullying will continue.

Another result of this study indicated that the use of literature in addressing the topic of bullying needs to be at a level that students can understand and relate to. Smith and Sharp (1994) explain that literature can cause one to become aware of bullying and empathize with the victim. Through literature, there is a connection that can be made between the reader and the text which enables the composition to affect the reader’s thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a truly personal way (Barthes, 1975; Rosenblatt, 1968; 1978). It is believed that this connection enables the reader to open his/her mind to new ideas (Bahktin, 1994; Barthes, 1999; Fish, 1980; Hayakawa, 1939; 1990; Rosenblatt, 1968; 1978 ;). It is during this process of the fusion between the reader and the text when meaning is constructed (Bahktin, 1994; Barthes, 1999; Fish, 1980; Hayakawa, 1939; Rosenblatt, 1978). Bahktin (2004) and Rosenblatt (1968) expressed the text is only given life through its usage by a reader within a new text. It is the act of responding to a text that is the catalyst for understanding and attainment of information (Bahktin, 2004).

Most poignant to the pedagogy of language arts is that it imparts knowledge that is more precisely attained through reading rather than experiences (Hayakawa, 1939). Bakhtin (2004) drove this concept further by including a moral component. He asserted that there is a moral obligation to form these bonds between themselves and the experiences they share with the text (Bakhtin, 2004). As his later philosophical essays projected the novel as being the most significant form of literature, it is not difficult to make a connection between those assertions and the use of the novel as text in the classroom (Bakhtin, 2004). Additionally, Bakhtin (2004) expressed that there is a true intensity between the reader and the text such that an alteration in time and space occurs. Important in this is that students have the flexibility to discuss scenarios that are salient to them and have an outlet where they can identify options to resolve unique situations. Even though Ana believed she did not use literature to assist with bullying, she did note that she used realistic fiction that contains problems that her students can relate to and use as a learning tool. Kendra and L.F. also used the term “relate” when asked about the possible influences of literature. Amanda used the term “influences” when discussing the incorporation of literature. Kendra, L.F., and Amanda were able to provide specific titles of literature used that helps them deter bullying in the classroom.

Conclusion

This study illustrates teachers' need to recognize their tremendous influence on students' cognitive developmental progress. They also should acknowledge that they are seen not just as a mere disseminator of information, but as confidants and persons of authority (Mishna et al., 2005). While they are in the classroom, students look to their teachers for guidance on how to act, think, feel, believe, and react to the world around them. They test boundaries and assess limitations based on what their teachers tell them and what their expectations are for them. When teachers ignore, or cannot identify bullying behaviors, the victimization of the student continues and heightens in intensity. It also becomes increasingly psychologically damaging to the student.

When teachers have a solid understanding of the phenomenon of bullying, they implement strategies within their classroom that create a safe environment for all students (Mishna et al., 2005; Olweus, 2003). They also understand that maintaining an environment that nurtures strong social values and community is an ongoing process. L.F., Ana, Amanda and Kendra's clearly defined behavior expectations for their classrooms provide environments that deter bullying and foster positive interpersonal relationships among students. They are also able to identify bullying when it happens and can stop it from continuing.

When teachers utilize literature with bullying themes in their classroom, students learn the social constructs of empathy and compassion for others through their relationship to the literature. The literature models positive behaviors in ways that students are able to relate to, internalize, and apply this new knowledge in their everyday lives. The same way that people learn behaviors in general is applied to teaching students how not to be bullies. This process needs to be continuous and repeated in order for the students to maintain the positive social behaviors. The student needs to be exposed to a multitude of texts. They have to constantly be engaged in conversations about literature that includes situations that explicitly model for them appropriate behaviors so they can adopt the behaviors for themselves and apply them to their lives. In essence, using literature that models appropriate behaviors as a vehicle to drive students' cognitive development will transform students into positive contributors to society.

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