

# Increasing literacy and decreasing bullying

How a few Camden County teachers used a parent/student book club to change attitudes and improve achievement

by Richard Wilson

“And the saddest part is, the first person to call me that name was my teacher.”

That comment was from a parent on the first night of our sixth-grade parent/student book club meeting, using *The Misfits*, by James Howe.

Over the past three years at Haviland Avenue Elementary School in Audubon, we have searched for effective ways to decrease the teasing and name calling that seem to thrive in early adolescence. Three years ago, we used *The Misfits* as a shared whole-class novel. In the second year, as our district moved to a balanced literacy approach, we used the novel in the same manner, but incorporated other books with bullying themes in student-chosen literature circles. For both years, we supplemented with lessons from the “No Name-Calling Week” kit we had acquired through NJEA.

We taught our children to be upstanders rather than bystanders and helped them discern the subtle differences between harmful bullying and the playful teasing that can occur between friends. But while they learned about the language in New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Law, our principal, Carleene Sowik, was learning that our students’ parents had

less of an understanding of the contemporary issues surrounding bullying and harassment than their children.

At the same time, we were looking for ways to expose our parents to the new approach we were taking to language arts instruction, which included the use of reading and writing workshops, literature circles, shared novels, and independent reading with reflection logs. Gone were our basals and grammar worksheets. Gone were the vestiges of reading instruction our students’ parents might have remembered from when they were in school.

Knowing that we were using state of the art, research-based literacy instruction, and knowing that *The Misfits* is an effective tool to combat harassment and bullying, we decided to invite our parents and students to meet and discuss a shared novel together in a book club format.

## A controversial idea

The idea was not without risks. While we found *The Misfits* to be a powerful piece of literature that had received rave reviews from our students over the past two years, the book has been controversial. Much of the debate stemmed from the inclusion of a character that is a sev-

enth grader and comes out to his friends as gay. This year, we had our first parent refuse to allow his child to read the book.

But we knew that in New Jersey we were on solid legal ground to pursue the goal of eliminating bullying and harassment in our school, and in including the community in this effort. Indeed, New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Law, which specifically includes sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes, states, in part: “Schools and school districts are encouraged to establish bullying prevention programs, and other initiatives involving school staff, students, administrators, volunteers, parents, law enforcement and community members.”

We also had a recent State Supreme Court decision, commonly known as the Toms River Decision. This case dealt with a student who had been harassed based on perceived sexual orientation from the time he was in fourth grade. In its ruling, the court stated that current regulations require boards of education to adopt and implement written “educational equity policies” that: “1. Recognize and value the diversity of persons and groups within the society and promote the acceptance of persons of diverse backgrounds . . . .



Parents share response journals with their sixth-grade children.

“2. Promote equal educational opportunity and foster a learning environment that is free from all forms of prejudice, discrimination and harassment . . .”

### Getting started

We decided to hold our weekly, hour-long book club meetings in January, which ends with No Name-Calling Week.

We began promoting the idea with our sixth graders and sent invitations home to parents. With only 32 students in our entire sixth grade, we hoped for a group that was large enough to be meaningful, while staying small enough to be manageable. We were thrilled when 15 pairs of parents and students signed on to join us.

The day we began reading the novel in class, we sent home copies for parents with a reading assignment for the week. We asked that they only read the section assigned, and requested that if they were tempted to read ahead, not to discuss that material with their children. We would hold each book club meeting with the assumption that everyone had done the required reading at home.

We soon realized that four weekly one-hour meetings was not much time to accomplish our ambitious objectives. Since we had two parallel goals, educating parents about balanced literacy and encouraging conversation about bullying

and harassment, we decided on a focus for each meeting. Given the time limitations, our goal would be to initiate conversations that might continue at home.

We opened the first meeting with some ground rules and explained to the parents that their children had filled out a short survey (six questions) on their experience of bullying and harassment in school. We asked the parents to complete the same questionnaire based on their beliefs about their children’s experiences. We collected these for future use.

Much of our reading instruction in Audubon is based on teaching the seven comprehension strategies outlined in *Mosaic of Thought*, by Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmerman. We would concentrate on one strategy each week, modeling the focus lesson technique used in class. The first skill we chose to work on was visualization. One member of our teaching team held a focus lesson, gathering parents and children together. She read a description of one of the characters, and discussed all the things that go into visualizing characters and events. Parent/Child teams were then given large drawing paper and asked to work together to

create a visual representation (portrait, web, graph, etc) of one of the characters. We gave them only a short period of time, and then had them share their creations.

Next, we organized into small groups, and asked parents to reflect on what would have made one a “misfit” during their childhoods. Many parents almost immediately shared their own personal experiences.

“I was called the fat girl and it was really painful.”

“I was disorganized and messy. The kids called me Pigpen after the Charlie Brown character, but the first person to call me that was a teacher.” This parent’s child then shared how he, too, is disorganized.

One parent shared that her father had died when she was very young, and by the time she was in sixth grade, she was part of a group of misfits. She pulled out a passage from the book where the narrator writes about how misfits often are comfortable with who they are.

One parent confessed to having been a bully and what led her to that experience.

One parent shared how other kids made up rhymes to make fun of her last name.

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Rich Wilson facilitates a discussion with students.

### Keeping parents informed

To close out the evening, we spoke to the parents about a very important part of our language arts program. Each student reads independently a book of his/her own choosing. Each week they write a response log in the form of a letter to the teacher. We handed out journals to the parents and encouraged them to reflect on what they were reading. We indicated that there would be opportunities to share from the journals if they chose, but that mostly they were a personal tool for them to reflect in the same way that we encourage students to reflect on what they are reading.

In the second week, we began the meeting by asking if anyone wanted to share from their journals. Two parents read some of what they had written, which centered on questions they were asking about the book as they read. This



A mother and son read together during a Book Club meeting.

proved to be the perfect segue to our focus lesson for the night—the strategy of questioning. This time, we had the students model the focus lesson with a teacher while the parents observed. They discussed how they use questions before, during, and after reading to help make sense of what they are reading. We then broke up into parent/child teams and they chose a chapter they had read and developed questions. After a few minutes, they joined random groups and used the questions for discussion in a literature circle activity.

For the second half of the evening, we addressed the survey the parents had taken during week one. We prepared some graphs to best explain the information and asked parent/child teams to discuss what, if anything, they found surprising. There were a few notable differences between the reports of children and the perception of their parents. While both parents and students were aware that name calling takes place mostly in less supervised settings, such as the playground and lunchroom, there was a striking difference in the kind of name calling that was taking place. Parents were surprised to learn that much of the name calling centered on issues of race, religion, and sexual orientation. Twenty-five percent of students reported that sexual orientation was the most prevalent source of name calling, while no parents thought this was the case. Both groups, however, agreed, that appearance was the subject of name calling more than anything else.

While 35 percent of students reported having experience with cyber bullying, only one parent reported that they thought this was an issue. This led to a short, but lively discussion.

When we first began planning for the book club, we wondered if an hour was enough time to accomplish all that we wanted. By the second week we realized it was not. At the end of the evening, many parents lingered, wanting to further discuss the book, the bullying survey results, and many other things. The next day, one mother reported that she and her son continued their conversation for quite some time that evening.

Week three began with a large group discussion from reflection journals. One parent initiated the conversation by talking about the concept and power of names, which is an ongoing theme of *The Misfits*. One student described an experiment where her teacher allowed the class to call him by his first name for a day. She talked about how this changed her perception of the teacher, if only for the day.

The focus lesson this week was on the use of “golden lines” within a text, and the way they help us both understand the author’s intent and provide models of exemplary writing. We presented six examples of golden lines from the book, and asked everyone to choose one that spoke to them. This was one activity in which we allowed children and parents to work in separate groups using a jigsaw technique.

We ended the night with a talk about responsibility. We discussed the characters in the book and how they believed they were responsible for ending name calling in their schools. We gave a homework assignment, asking everyone to think about things they could do to put an end to bullying and harassment, not just in our school, but in the entire community.

Again, at the end of the hour, the group broke up slowly as conversations continued into the cold January night.

### A happy ending

As families came in for the last meeting, there were large sheets of chart paper on tables around the room. They bore the headings Home, School, and Community. We asked participants to list ideas they had come up with for ways to make permanent changes to their communities. The results of this activity were slightly

disappointing. We had hoped to come up with some concrete strategies but in the end, this may have been biting off more than our proverbial ability to chew.

We came back to the novel through a video provided by *NoNameCallingWeek.org*, which includes several dramatizations from *The Misfits*. We played a scene in which a character named Bobby, who is a candidate for student council, makes a speech. Bobby relates the genesis of his own experience of name calling for being overweight. Following the video, we had a great conversation about the book and its themes. It took a while for students to speak up, but by the end of the evening, every child spoke.

We ended the evening with evaluations. During this time, there was stone silence—not a sound as parents wrote long comments. Even the students wrote quite a bit. These evaluations offered some interesting insights. When asked which activity was most valuable, most answered it was when everyone was able to share their opinions. The more discussion the better seemed to be the theme. A number of parents listed activities that gave them an opportunity to reflect and discuss. Several mentioned the journals. They also identified specific teaching techniques and activities, which went directly to our goal of educating

parents about balanced literacy. Overall, the evaluations were positive, especially those from parents. All but two participants (those being students) felt that the book club would help reduce name calling and bullying.

In the end, this book club lasted a total of four hours.

Because it was new, there was a lot of time frontloaded in planning and preparation, but the second time around, this will be greatly diminished. Still, we met our goals—we educated parents about bullying and harassment and our literacy program, built alliances between the school and families, and encouraged conversation between students and their parents around issues crucial to their lives. Time well spent?

We thought so. 🏠

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