

How literature can help to address bias-based bullying in a middle school classroom

Using *The Misfits* to discuss sexual orientation issues

by Richard Wilson and Lisa McGilloway

Let's face it. Discussing issues surrounding sexual orientation with early adolescents is a challenge. At best, such discussions can lead to an increased understanding of others, greater tolerance, self-acceptance among students dealing with such issues on a personal basis, and a decrease in name calling and violence. Such dialogue will also increase the energy level in a classroom and lead to a certain amount of giggles and smirks as students try to channel that energy.

At their worst, these discussions can lead to biased statements, arguments that go nowhere, an increase in name calling, and increased fear and anxiety among students dealing with personal issues. The latter can certainly be prevented, but not without some thought and planning to develop a classroom atmosphere where all opinions can be discussed and expressed in a way that is respectful to everyone.

As team teachers in an inclusive sixth-grade language arts class, we used *The Misfits* by James Howe as part of No Name-Calling Week activities (which actually stretched out into a four-week language arts unit around the theme of bullying). Based on this experience, here are some of our thoughts on developing successful strategies when using literature to address bias-based bullying in a middle school classroom.

Use the book after you have developed a relationship with your class. This is not a book to read in September. It requires a teacher's understanding of his/her students. As we prepared, we sensed which students might struggle with the content of the material, so we strategized beforehand how we would deal with each student.

If possible, teach with a partner. We teach in an inclusive classroom. One of us is a general education teacher, the other, a

special education teacher providing in-class support for classified students. We have always worked from a model of collaborative teaching in which we are both responsible for all students in the class. Having two teachers in the room meant that one of us could deal individually with students who were having difficulty with the material, while the other could continue class discussions or

reading. We also found it very helpful to take some time to process what was happening with the class while we worked through this unit. If team teaching is not possible, finding a colleague who is willing to cover the same material at the same time can serve the purpose of providing the support you might need as a teacher.

Do some preparation work before beginning the book. We spent a class period with some pre-reading exercises. We gave the students the title of the book and developed a web on the board of what the word "misfits" might mean. We told them that the theme of the book was about name calling, and prepared them to expect to hear some language that they do not ordinarily hear in a classroom. We also piqued their curiosity by sharing that

we were a little nervous about using the book. We told them that since they were a class that had previously demonstrated the ability to handle mature themes,

we were confident they could deal with this material.

We chose to do the book as a read-aloud. This gave us some control over the pacing of the story and kept students from rifling through the book just to "find the

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Discussions on sexual orientation can reduce name calling and the fear and anxiety some students feel.

dirty words.” In the end, it also heightened students’ interest at suspenseful points in the book (and kept them from reading ahead and sharing any “surprises”). We were also concerned that the reading level would inhibit our challenged readers to comprehend some of the more nuanced parts of the text.

Set the tone for respectful discussion.

Every middle school teacher works on developing a respectful atmosphere in his/her classroom every day—it comes with the territory. But these particular discussions may take a little extra work. There are some scenes in *The Misfits* that can help this process along.

In chapter 10, the “Gang of Five” discusses minorities. (This discussion is also dramatized on the video available from the No Name-Calling Week project). In the course of this conversation, a character named Joe mentions invisible minorities. We found it helpful at that point to have a class discussion about this term. Soon one student named gays and lesbians as invisible minorities. This became key throughout the rest of the book, as we stressed that, as 11-year-olds, most of them were still discovering who they were. Moreover, chances are that some of their classmates just might be privately dealing with issues of sexual orientation.

We also talked about the world of work, and the fact that they might have gay or lesbian coworkers and not be aware of them. Within that context, we discussed how important it is to be careful about how they expressed opinions, and that they should only use language that they would use if a member of the minority they were speaking about were sitting next to them. This became a key point in all sensitive discussions we had through the rest of the book.

Provide a productive place for the energy to go. There are chapters in the book that will increase the level of discomfort and energy in your classroom. In chapter 12, Joe comes out to another character, Skeezie. When he says that he is gay, students will be tempted to giggle and laugh. Here is the strategy we used to deal with this chapter, and it was fairly successful.

Before we started, we told the students that something important was going to happen in this chapter. We also explained that this might elicit a certain response from them, and for some of them, it might bring up uncomfortable feelings. We asked them to take out their writer’s notebooks and open them to a new page. They were instructed to record any reactions or feelings that they had while we read this chapter and explained that later we would have a discussion. As we read, we circulated through the room and redirected students who had some difficulty with the material. One boy in particular had trouble not giggling when the character talked about being gay. I quietly asked him to write down what it was that was causing him to giggle. He was able to quiet himself and reflect on his feelings in his notebook.

When we finished reading the chapter, we asked the students to write in their notebooks how they would have responded to Joe’s disclosure. Before we shared, we reminded them about the concept of hidden minorities, and that while all opinions were accepted and valued, they should be careful to express those opinions in a way that were respectful to everyone.

Another helpful tool in channeling energy is to allow students to draw while you are reading. In some chapters, we gave the students a drawing task. In the early chapters, we asked them to draw their choice of characters as we read. Several students drew characters that included stereotypes that were not supported by the text of the book. This led to an interesting class discussion on our images of others. Aside from the assigned art work, we found that students who chose to draw during the read-alouds were taking in a great deal of information and those who drew the most were often those that participated the most in class discussions.

Allow students time for personal connection and reflection. There are many places in the book that offer the opportunity for students to explore how this material relates to them so they can be more empathic to characters who are different than they are. In chapter 14, the Gang of Five makes a list of all the names they have been called. After we read the list, we asked the students to make their own list of names they have been called in their writer’s notebooks. We *did not* share these lists (for fear that it would become a contest of who can come up with the most “creative” names), but we did ask them to reflect on the feelings they had when they were called these names. We also asked them to keep a record of name-calling incidents they heard in school over the course of one week. Both of these activities gave them a heightened awareness of the effects of name calling on themselves and others.

Allow time for discussion. Students will want to talk about this book. Take the time to do it. We have the luxury of being in a self-contained setting, so we could give students the time to express their ideas completely. If this is not the case for you, be sure to plan in some discussion time to help students process the material.



Having students write in their journals helps them explore and express their emotions.

Support special needs students.

Credit for this strategy goes to one of our students with severe ADHD. From the beginning, he had difficulty not reacting to certain words in the book. Words like “lardo” or “faggot” caused him to laugh out loud when he heard them. When we talked about the problem, he told me that they took him by surprise. When I asked him what we could do about that, he asked if I could tell him ahead of time what words were going to come up in the chapter. For the rest of the book, I tried to



Rich Wilson and Lisa McGilloway found that reading *The Misfits* led to increased tolerance among students.

get to him before class to give him a preview of words or episodes in the book that I thought might be triggers for him. For this particular student, this became a very successful strategy to allow him to be included in the general education class for this activity.

Help students reframe their language. Sometimes students do not have the language to say what they want to say in a non-judgmental way. Moving from “That’s really disgusting” to “That makes me uncomfortable” takes away the value judgment, while still validating and allowing students to discuss their feelings without offending someone else.

Deal with student questions about the appropriateness of the material. We didn’t have any strong objections to the material, but we did have a few students who said that they felt strange discussing these ideas in the classroom. We dealt with this in two ways.

First, we explained that, as teachers, it is our job to prepare our students to be productive citizens in the world outside of school. When they leave us, our students are faced with great diversity in the world around them. It would be unfair of us to not help them explore the full diversity that their worlds will include.

Second, we explained that we have a legal responsibility to make the school as safe a place as possible for *all* our students. In class discussion, they had already expressed that children who appear to be gay can be targets of bullying. We discussed the fact that sometimes children bully others because they are uncomfortable with something. If, through discussion in class, we can make someone less uncomfortable, then we can decrease the amount of bullying in school.

Give the students an outlet for their new understanding. When you have finished working with the No Name-Calling Week materials, some of your students might want to take further action. It is important to give them an outlet to develop a sense of empowerment. We chose two activities to bring closure to the unit.

Since we were not officially recognizing No Name-Calling Week in our school district, the students wrote letters to the superintendent asking for her support of the idea. The letters were powerful, some with stories of the name calling they had experienced over the years, some reflecting on the state of our school district. One suggested that she use her “superintendent powers” to develop No Name-Calling Week and give a speech to the student body to kick off the week.

The second closure activity was to do some peer instruction within our school building. The students prepared skits around some of the themes from No Name-Calling Week. They presented those skits to fifth graders and facilitated discussion with them about name calling in our school.

Take time to reflect. When we began to think about using *The Misfits* to address name calling and bullying, we had no idea where it would go. We were nervous about addressing these topics so openly, and wondered if we had the skills to deal

with whatever arose in the classroom.

Were there ways we could have better addressed some of the issues in this book? I’m sure there were. Were there moments when we were a little nervous and not sure where the class discussion would go? Definitely. Have we cured everyone in this class of name calling and bullying? Certainly not. But in the end, there is not a student in that class who is thinking about name calling in the same way they did before this unit. As a class, we now have a common language and a common experience to come back to and address issues of name calling and bullying.

In the last two days of the unit, about half of the class spontaneously expressed that this was the best book they had ever read. One of the most at-risk students for bullying in the class actually said “You know, I never really thought about how powerful words can be.” It doesn’t get any better than that. 🙏

Richard Wilson is a special education teacher. Lisa McGilloway teaches sixth grade. They work in the Audubon School District. Wilson and McGilloway will be featured in an upcoming segment of Classroom Closeup, NJ, NJEA’s Emmy-winning television show that appears on NJN. Be sure to watch on Feb. 20 and March 27 at 6:30 p.m. or on Feb. 25 and April 1 at 7 a.m. You can reach Wilson at rwilson4@ix.netcom.com.

Cranford takes bullying by the horns

Although bullying occurs most frequently in middle school settings, efforts to stop it should begin before students reach that age. That’s why Leesa Barenboim, a student assistance counselor in the Cranford School District, and a few parent volunteers created an anti-bullying club at the Livingston Avenue School (grades three through five).

Barenboim started by getting administrative support and input for the lunchtime club. Then she mapped out a plan to generate interest in an organization that would empower students and staff to take a stand against bullies and bullying behavior. Soon flyers were sent out and students signed up.

At the first meeting, members learned the purpose of the club and brainstormed possible names; following a student vote, “Bully Busters” was born. Then the group created a definition of bullying. One parent volunteer noted that many students didn’t realize that they had engaged in bullying. With adult assistance, the club developed an anti-bullying pledge.

Bi-monthly meetings are held so students can plan activities. Conflict resolution techniques are taught. Several of the club’s activities became schoolwide events such as a poster contest and “Mix It Up Day” when students are encouraged to expand their circle of friends.

Has it worked? A survey of students indicated they noticed a decrease in bullying. Staff members report changes in behavior, and membership in the club is growing. The results have been so positive that Cranford’s Hillside Avenue School has created its own anti-bullying organization.

“The club has raised awareness of bullying and the children have become proactive in an effort to curb it,” explains Barenboim. “Bully Busters reinforces that not only is it the right of students to speak up for themselves and others, it is their responsibility.”