

High School Bullying **Angela St. Micheal**

I would like to first offer my condolences to the parents of Joshua Melo, the Strathroy student who ended his life last week. Mr. And Mrs. Melo, I am deeply sorry for your great loss. I agree with Mr. Melo's plea for parents, teachers and students to confront the problem of high school bullying. As a high school teacher, I always teach a unit on harassment, gossip and bullying of my own design, to each of my classes regardless of grade level, as I did last week in my Grade 9, 11 and 12 English classes respectively.

In this unit, I ask my students to reflect on and write two journals: one encompasses popularity and the other teen gossip and bullying. On day one we play a game of telephone in class and inevitably the message whispered to the first pupil is always distorted after it is passed through thirty pupils. We read an article each day for homework on the subject of gossip and teasing in high school and discuss it the next day as a class. In class, we view two film clips, each no more than two minutes in length. One is a carefully selected and screened clip from Michael Moore's highly sensitive and provocative documentary, "Bowling For Columbine", a film about what tragedy can result when teens are teased and ostracized by their peers. The other film clip is from the dramedy "Mean Girls" starring teen queen Lindsay Lohan. That film looks at the modern reality of gossip and peer sabotage. I make the point that in our current high tech world of camera cell phones, text/instant messaging and e-mail, high school gossip spreads faster and farther than ever before, causing irreparable damage to members of a small community the size of London. All this leads to an open and frank class discussion on high school bullying and its potentially tragic consequences.

It is my objective to emphasize to my students that even if high school is really tough socially for them, the students must remember that high school is only four years of their lives, and though it may seem like a long time at the moment, I assure them four years is but a blink of the eye in the landscape of life. The clip I show from Moore's film, is of the discussion Moore has with one of the creators of the cartoon "South Park". He is a graduate of Columbine high school and he says to the viewers that though it may seem that if you are not popular in high school then you'll be a loser in life, the opposite is true. He indicates that it is the so-called "geeks" in high school who go on to great successes after secondary school graduation, while the cool guys are left reliving high school glory days.

After I taught the lessons last week a parent of a grade nine student called me to ask what those lessons had to do with curriculum. The lessons do tie in with curriculum. Her child had just completed a novel study on The Chrysalids, a fantasy thriller by John Wyndham. In that book anyone who does not fit the "true image" of the rigid society, is proclaimed a deviant and ostracized from the community. I tie that theme of the novel to those who are disenfranchised within the high school culture. The parent further expressed that her son was enjoying my classes so much, she wondered if he was actually learning anything in my class. If you stimulate a child and make the learning relevant to his or her own experience, then as a teacher you run the risk of being accused of not doing your job. I assured her that we also do the traditional classes of round reading, answering content comprehension questions, learning MLA format essay writing, doing presentations, and we study poetry and do creative writing, but those are not necessarily the lessons that a child will feel inspired to share at the dinner table.

I tie in the bullying/gossip lessons to Grade 11 curriculum with the novel Lord of the Flies, a book by William Golding about the savagery of youth left unsupervised and stimulated by peer jealousy and competition. I tie it to Grade 12 because we study F. Scott Fitzgerald's, The Great Gatsby, a story about a man who destroys his entire life by trying to be popular with a shallow, unworthy crowd. I didn't teach Grade 10 English this year, but the bullying unit fits in with that

curriculum as well. The students in Grade 10 read Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger, and the protagonist in that novel, Holden Caulfield, is the poster child for misfit teens.

I discuss my own experiences with bullying as a high school student made more relevant perhaps by the fact that I attended the high school in which I currently teach, and I discuss my adult experiences with cruelty and gossip that sadly, never seem to end.

Are we not to educate the whole child body, mind and spirit? Even if the lesson had not fit in with the prescribed curriculum, I still would have set aside a day or two to teach those lessons targeting bullying, popularity and gossip and the damage all can do, the same way I do a unit on gender expectations, Remembrance Day, career choices, and violence against minorities, because it is important to get certain messages across to kids, particularly to grade nine students with four years of secondary education still stretching before them.

Last year, I suggested we do a school wide campaign on Valentine's Day to promote the end of teen gossip and bullying. What if kids sent sweet compliments to other individuals outside their usual circle of friends instead of a Valentine's Day candy-o-gram to their best friends? In my class on Valentine's Day we have a High Tea in a Shakespearean Café, and we read sonnets, eat cakes and drink tea while we write a compliment sheet for every student. Each student pays every person in the class a compliment so that by the end of class each student, many of whom thought they would be left not feeling special on another day set aside for the popular people to outshine the rest, has a red sheet filled with compliments about them entitled: "This Is What We Love About You.....". I suggest they tape the compliment-filled sheets to the inside of their lockers so that on days when they are feeling down about themselves, they can be reminded of all the ways they stand out in a world that insists they fit in. I keep my compliment sheets in my lesson plan binder, and on days when I need a reminder as to why I became a teacher, those sheets deliver exactly that. Imagine then what they can do for the self-esteem of an uncertain teen.

A student of mine committed suicide four years ago. I'll never know why he felt he had no other option or felt he could not come to me, or another, rather than take his own life. I do know I will continue to do all I can to offer an open forum in my classroom for discussion whether parents understand or agree with my efforts or not. It is important to address these issues at home and at school; I am certain other teachers combat bullying in their own way. I will happily share my approach with any interested colleagues.