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The Portrayal of Bullying in Young Adult Books:

Characters, Contexts, and Complex Relationships

Bullying is being increasingly viewed as a critical public health issue affecting too many children in their formative years (Liu & Graves, 2011). This pervasive problem finally has gained the much-needed attention of educators at local, state, and national levels and has resulted in a plethora of resources, including programs for teachers and parents, brochures, and other informational sources addressing this problem. However, bullying is a complex issue that has no easy solutions for educators and parents. This complexity is illustrated in Walton's (2005) definition of bullying as a "construction embedded in discursive practice that arises from a network or system of institutional, historical, social, and political relations . . . . rooted in complex and overlapping constructions of power, language, culture, and history" (p. 61). The issue of bullying is addressed as a theme in young adult literature. In this article, we focus on the representation of bullying in current young adult books with the anticipation that such information can serve important instructional purposes.

Young adult books appeal to adolescent readers by addressing the issues, topics, and concerns relevant to these readers. It is not surprising, then, to find bullying as a theme in both recent and older books. Some problem novels of the 1970s, such as *The Chocolate War* (1974) by Robert Cormier and Judy Blume's *Blubber* (1974), addressed this topic. In *The Chocolate War,* a book geared for older adolescents, bullying is embedded in the twisted, psychological games Archie uses to manipulate and control people. Judy Blume's *Blubber* uses her characteristically direct approach of addressing unspoken issues to highlight the cruelty of name calling to young adolescent readers. The outcomes in both books depict a stark realism that invites serious reflection about the actions of others. The plethora of contemporary young adult novels has continued to confront bullying headlong in realistic ways that also invite serious reflection (Larson & Hoover, 2012). These novels, as well as the many informational books, nonfiction narratives of true stories, and videos depicting actual events, indicate the gravity of this issue and direct attention to finding solutions to this pervasive and long-standing problem.

Many young adult books that feature bullying as a theme adhere to the characteristics of those described by Nilsen and her colleagues (Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013). For example, the books we examined were primarily told from the perspective of the bullied teen. Another characteristic, where the protagonist ultimately is responsible for making changes, is also clearly depicted in the books we examined, especially in light of the negative or diminished role of parents and other adult figures in addressing the issue of bullying. Also, at some point, the character may have a "eureka" moment of self-discovery that sets in motion much needed changes. The fast-paced events, even with the prevalence of numerous flashbacks, as well as the realistic emotions portrayed by the major character in dealing with the bullying, are in line with text features that appeal to adolescent readers.

Bullying in some form or another is pervasive in many young adult books. While bullying may not be the major theme, many contain some minor episodes of bullying or the subject of bullying is casually mentioned or embedded in the storyline. For example,

embedded bullying occurs in *The Private Thoughts of Amelia E. Rye* (Shimko, 2010). While the central theme of the book deals with Amelia's search for love and acceptance by her family, in one episode she and her African American friend Fancy are attacked by three boys who are bullies. In their attack on the girls, they viciously cut off Fancy's braids. Yet, Fancy moves above the bullying and turns the incident around as a way to now have a trendy short haircut. In this case, the bullying appears to be a commonly expected aspect of growing up and serves to strengthen the ties of friendship rather than lead to more negative consequences.

In other young adult books, bullying plays a more central role. To gain a deeper understanding of how bullying is represented in these particular books, we posed the following overarching question to guide our inquiry: *In what way is bullying portrayed in current young adult books with the protagonist as the bullied target?* We limited our analysis to major characters who were bullied victims, given the sheer volume of books about bullying. For example, some young adult books take the perspective of the bully, such as in *Scrawl* (Shulman, 2010), and others provide multiple perspectives (including the victim's), as in *Poison Ivy* (Koss, 2006). We were interested in the bullied character's perspective and how these books might help readers identify with the characters and ultimately develop a deeper understanding of this serious issue. In the following sections, we first explain our project and findings and then provide explicit instructional suggestions for teachers based upon these findings.

The Study

Methodology

Using content analysis procedures, we closely examined 21 young adult books published within the past ten years. We perused lists of books about bullying from a variety of sources, including recommendations from YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association), published articles from peer-reviewed journals, such as *The ALAN Review* and *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy,* and online reviews from reputable websites that promote young adult literature (see Table 1 for the book list).

The analysis consisted of an in-depth examination of each book and involved careful note taking of particular issues related to bullying. We documented information about specific bullying episodes, the types of bullying represented, the characters involved, the reactions, the repercussions, and subsequent outcomes. From this information, we developed a category system for use with analysis across the different books. We then carefully read the notes in each category to find emerging themes about the representation of bullying in the selected books. In the following sections, we discuss what we found about the types of bullying represented in the books, the characters, the different contexts in which bullying occurred, reactions to the bullying, complex family relationships, and outcomes. We also include guiding questions for each theme to help teachers conduct class discussions.

Types of Bullying

It is extremely important that teachers have knowledge about the types of bullying represented in these books. There is evidence that 80% of students claim that middle school teachers are unaware of the bullying that occurs in school contexts (Swearer & Cary, 2003). Bullying comes in various forms, including abuse that is physical, verbal, relational, or cyber (Liu & Graves, 2011). Physical abuse is clearly observable, and verbal abuse can be words that intimidate, threaten, or slander the victim. A more subtle form of aggression is relational bullying—acts that are detrimental to a person's relationship with others. These acts can be spreading rumors, socially excluding someone from group activities, and playing psychological power games to control others. In recent years, verbal and relational abuse have appeared on the Internet through social networking and cell phone bullying (i.e., cyberbullying).

In the 21 books we perused, we found evidence of these four types of bullying—verbal, physical, relational (e.g., spreading rumors), and cyberbullying—with most books containing more than one type. Verbal abuse from name calling was prevalent in the majority of the books, while actual physical abuse occurred in more than half of the books we examined. *Leverage* (Cohen, 2011), *Everybody Sees the Ants* (King, 2011), *The Julian Game* (Griffin, 2010), *Shine* (Myracle, 2011), and *Lessons from a Dead Girl* (Knowles, 2007) contained episodes of sexual abuse, with *Burn* (Phillips, 2008), *Bad Apple* (Ruby, 2009),

Table 1. List of young adult books with bullying themes

Title of Book	Description
Thirteen Reasons Why by J. Asher	After committing suicide, Hannah Baker leaves a legacy of 13 audiotapes for her friends and people in her life to hear about the 13 reasons that contributed to her death.
The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin by J. Berk	Moving from a deaf school to a regular high school, 16-year-old Will Halpin must deal with the adjustment to a new environment, harassment and bullying from some students, and even a mystery to solve when a popular football player is murdered.
Hate List by J. Brown	Sixteen-year-old Valerie is left to pick up the pieces of her life after her boyfriend goes on a shooting spree at school killing others and then himself.
The Truth about Truman School by D. H. Butler	When Zebby, a writer for the school newspaper, becomes annoyed with the writing restrictions of the newspaper advisor, she and her friend Amr create their own online newspaper where anything can be posted—a situation that leads to cyberbullying and serious consequences.
Leverage by J. C. Cohen	Danny, a talented gymnast, and Kurt, a strong football fullback who has deep emotional scars, find themselves embroiled in the despicable hate crimes of three football players and know that they must overcome their own fears to do what is right.
This Is What I Did by A. D. Ellis	When eighth-grader Logan moves to a new school across town, he is bullied for an incident that occurred at his previous school and finds support from a daring, unconventional girl and a professional counselor.
The Julian Game by A. Griffin	Ray, a new scholarship student, and her friend Natalya create an online girl named Elizabeth. Problems arise when popular girl Ella uses Elizabeth to get back at her ex-boyfriend Julian.
Everybody Sees the Ants by A. S. King	Having been victimized by a bully since age 7, 15-year-old Lucky develops a new understanding about confronting the bully through dreams about his grandfather, who was missing in action during the Vietnam War, and from his trip to an aunt and uncle's home, where he meets a new friend, Ginny.
Lessons from a Dead Girl by J. Knowles	Subjected to an abusive relationship with Leah since grade school, Laine recounts the unhealthy experiences of when Leah repeatedly coerced Laine into "playing house" and "practicing" being adults—a recounting done after Leah dies in an automobile accident.
Poison Ivy by A. G. Koss	Having withstood the merciless bullying of three popular middle school girls for a long time, Ivy agrees to participate in a mock trial during the American Government class—a trial in which she is the plaintiff accusing the three girls of their despicable behaviors.
Shooter by W. D. Myers	The involvement of teens Carla, Cameron, and Len in a school shooting unfold through newspaper reports, interviews with psychologists, and Len's personal journal.
Shine by L. Myracle	Sixteen-year-old Cat is determined to find out who brutally attacked her gay friend, Patrick, and left him tied to a pump at a nearby gas station where he worked.
By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead by J. A. Peters	After several unsuccessful suicide attempts, Daelyn, who has been mercilessly bullied all of her life because of her weight, is now determined to get it right by seeking aid on a website.
Burn by C. Phillips	Deadly consequences occur after Cameron is bullied and physically assaulted during his freshman year in high school.
Freak by M. Pixley	Bright, unconventional, and somewhat of a free spirit, 12-year-old Miriam, when bullied by the popular girls at school, finds courage to change this situation.
Bad Apple by L. Ruby	In her junior year of high school, Tola becomes a victim of bullying after she is accused of having an inappropriate relationship with her art teacher.
Okay for Now by G. D. Schmidt	In 1968, when Doug and his family move to a new town in New York, Doug must contend with his abusive, bullying father, a brother who is also a bully, the trials and tribulations caused by the eighth-grade teachers at school, a wounded older brother recently home from the Vietnam War, and his emerging artistic talent.
Borderline by A. Stratton	Faced with constant bullying at school because he is a Muslim, 15-year-old Sami's home life begins to spin out of control when his father is arrested for terrorism.
Some Girls Are by C. Summers	After being sexually assaulted by the boyfriend of a popular girl, Regina is ousted from the popular crowd and then faces bullying and cyberbullying from others.
The Chosen One by C. L. Williams	When 13-year-old Kyra finds out that the leaders of the polygamous cult community in which she lives will force her to become the seventh wife of her uncle, she is devastated and tries to thwart these plans despite the threat of repercussions to her family.
Story of a Girl by S. Zarr	At age 16, Deanna is still facing the repercussions—the name calling from classmates and the suspicions of her father—of being caught by her father with 17-year-old Tommy in the backseat of his car when she was 13.

and *The Chosen One* (Williams, 2009) including some incidents of actual physical violence involving the protagonists.

The aggression shown in the various types of relational bullying was evident in virtually all of the books. Examples include conditional friendships in *Lessons from a Dead Girl* (Knowles, 2007) and *The Julian Game* (Griffin, 2010); relentless taunting in *Freak* (Pixley, 2007), *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead* (Peters, 2010), and *Bad Apple* (Ruby, 2009); spreading of rumors and gossip in *Some Girls Are* (Summers, 2009) and *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2007); and marginalizing and excluding others in the *Hate List* (Brown, 2009) and *The Julian Game* (Griffin, 2010). Cyberbullying was a major issue in *The Julian Game* (Griffin, 2010), *Some Girls Are* (Summers, 2009), and *The Truth about Truman School* (Butler, 2008). This form of bullying is currently the most virulent form because it is always present in the victim's life (Cart, 2010).

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The gravity of relational bullying is clearly illustrated in the emotional abuse experienced by Hannah in *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2007). Hannah Baker's story leading up to her suicide unfolds through a series of audiotapes she recorded before she took her life. The tapes are sent to all the students who Hannah felt played a part in her life. Rumors set in motion a series of events that take Hannah Baker to a place in her mind where she can no longer find the courage and will to continue living.

The emotional abuse suffered by Hannah begins with a simple kiss from Justin and then becomes blown out of proportion as Justin embellishes his conquest of Hannah and ruins her reputation. Other boys in the school capitalize on these rumors, such as Alex who voted Hannah as "Best Ass in the Freshman Class." Then there is Tyler, the peeping Tom outside Hannah's window who makes Hannah feel unsafe, and Marcus, who makes a sexual advance toward Hannah and then calls her a tease. Hannah feels used when girls like Courtney pretend to befriend her only to get a ride to a party. In another event, Hannah rides home with Jenny the cheerleader who runs into a stop sign and knocks it over. Jenny decides to keep on going and not report the incident. Heavy guilt settles over Hannah when she fails to do anything herself about reporting the incident, which ultimately results in someone getting killed at that intersection. The cumulative effect of this constant emotional abuse is too much for Hannah to bear and thus leads her to suicide. The events in this book are representative of the cumulative effects of bullying that often lead to dire consequences—something we have seen in several of these books.

To guide a class discussion about the types of bullying in a book, the teacher can use prompts such as the following:

- What types of bullying did you notice in the book?
- Under what circumstances did a particular type of bullying occur?
- In what other ways could the target (the character who is bullied) have reacted? Would that have helped the situation?

(*Note:* In-text bibliographic information on the young adult novels will not be added after this point in order to avoid unnecessary repetition.)

The Characters

Collectively, the books we examined contained a variety of protagonists representing both genders and an age range from middle school to high school. Across the books, the main characters were not really part of the popular school cliques. One exception was Regina Afton in *Some Girls Are.* Regina was initially part of the popular crowd until sexually assaulted by the leader's boyfriend and then branded as a sexually promiscuous girl and boyfriend stealer.

The main characters in the books we examined were also quite different from each other. Some were just average teens with no obvious reasons for the bullying, such as Lucky in *Everybody Sees the Ants* and Logan in *This Is What I Did.* Other characters were on the fringe of the school culture, but they react in drastically different ways to the bullying. For example, Valerie (*Hate List*) writes a list of those people who treat her and boyfriend Nick badly; the result is a blood bath at school when Nick begins shooting those on the list. On the other hand, Ivy (*Poison Ivy*) comes across as an introvert and loner who just wants to be left alone.

For other characters, physical differences lead to bullying, such as weight problems for Daelyn in *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead*, deafness for Will in *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin*, and Sami's Muslim religion in *Borderline.* In one book, *Shine*, a character was victimized because of his sexual orientation. In still another book, the bullied characters happen to be talented gymnasts tormented because of their size. In *Freak,* 12-year-old Miriam is a bright, free-spirited, unconventional young adolescent who is tormented by the popular girls in middle school. Her interest in Shakespeare and love of poetry seem to set her apart from the rest, and she becomes a target of bullying.

Overall, the characters in the books we analyzed were a variety of adolescents dealing with issues that confront many teens today—issues ranging from self-identity to social and cultural differences. Teachers can help students focus on the characters who were on the receiving end of bullying and those who are the bullies by asking the following guiding questions:

- How would you describe this character?
- Why was this character on the receiving end of bullying?
- When comparing characters across more than one book, how are they alike and how are they different?
- How would you describe the bullies?
- Why do you think they bully others?

The Contexts in Which Bullying Occurs

In our perusal of the books, we paid attention to the situations in which bullying behaviors occurred. As such, we noted that the situated contexts in which the main characters found themselves differed greatly. Given the variability of the contexts, we use somewhat overlapping categories to describe these situations. These categories include: 1) particular events, 2) social and cultural contexts, 3) relationships with peers, and 4) physical appearance.

Particular Events

In several books, a single event changed everything for the protagonist and incited bullying. For example, in *Story of a Girl,* 16-year-old Deanna continues to face the repercussions of what occurred in eighth grade when her father caught her having sex with a 17-year-old. This one single event, made public by the young man, leads to name calling from others and cold contempt from her father. Similarly, the character Tola in *Bad Apple* is bullied by classmates after she is accused of having an inappropriate relationship with her art teacher—accusations based upon one accidental encounter with the art teacher at a museum. Hannah Baker in *Thirteen Reasons Why* also leads us to believe that Justin's simple kiss at the playground is blown out of proportion, resulting in rumors that damage her reputation and hound her relentlessly to the point of suicide.

Social and Cultural Contexts

In addition to single events, particular social contexts gave rise to events that resulted in bullying behaviors in a few of the books we read. In *Leverage,* the football players and gymnasts must share the school's gymnasium and locker rooms, an administrative ruling that angers football players. In this context, three football players resort to unspeakable hate crimes against the gymnasts, who, in turn, find ways to retaliate after one gymnast takes his own life. The social context in which bullying occurs is dramatically different in *The Chosen One.* In this case, the context is a polygamous cult community where the Prophet and his band of leaders control the actions of all the people. Thirteen-year-old Kyra is told that she must marry her uncle who already has six wives. She is threatened, bullied, and even beaten as she tries to thwart the Prophet's control over her family and her life.

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Bullying also occurred for those who were not part of the mainstream culture. For example, in *Borderline,* it is Sami who is bullied because he is a Muslim; in *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin,* Will is bullied because he is deaf. The social context of cyberspace is evident in *The Julian Game.* Raye, who is intelligent and a scholarship recipient, along with her only friend Natalya, an independent, free thinker outside the popular crowd, create a confident "cybergirl" named Elizabeth who interacts easily with boys, ultimately leading to the physical bullying of Julian, a former boyfriend of the leader of the popular group.

Raye herself becomes a target of bullying when Ella and Julian reconcile.

Relationships with Peers

In several books, bullying occurred in relationships with a single character or with multiple characters. In *Everybody Sees the Ants*, Lucky is bullied time and again mainly by one character, Nader. The bullying starts when the boys are seven years old and continues into high school. Lucky is subjected to not only name calling, but also physical, humiliating acts that Nader administers to Lucky. Nader becomes the bane of Lucky's existence, as illustrated in the following excerpt when Nader encounters Lucky in the men's room at the community swimming pool:

> He pushes me onto the concrete and puts his knee in the middle of my back, the way cops on TV do. He turns my face to the side and presses my cheek into the baking cement. I can feel it burn my skin. . . . Nader begins to move my face across it—slowly scraping me against sandpaper. (pp. 50–51)

In *Lessons from a Dead Girl*, the protagonist Laine is also a victim of one character, Leah. In fifth grade, Leah, popular and pretty, befriends quiet and introverted Laine. The basis for this friendship is suspect, however, as Leah coerces Laine to secretly "practice" playing house and having boyfriends in Laine's toy closet. This abusive friendship continues until high school, when Leah still torments Laine with their secret. In both books, the protagonists feel overwhelmed and powerless to change the way in which a single person dominates their lives.

In some cases, the protagonist's relationships with multiple characters lead to devastating endings. In the *Hate List*, for example, Valerie and boyfriend Nick are marginalized students outside the mainstream of high school cliques. Their standing in school thus subjects them to the taunting, bullying, and ill will of other students. As a result of these negative relationships with others in the school, Valerie, with input from Nick, develops a list of those students who make their lives miserable, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> I think at one time we may have had this idea that the list would be published—that we would make the world see how horrible some people could be. That we would have the last laugh against those people, the cheerleaders who called me Sister Death and the jocks who punched Nick in the chest in the hallways when nobody was looking, those "perfect kids" who nobody would believe were just as bad as the "bad kids." We had talked about how the world would be a better place with lists like ours around, people being held accountable for their actions. (p. 135)

Physical Appearance

The protagonists' physical appearance often served as a catalyst for the bullying. In both *The Truth about Truman School* and *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead,* the protagonists at one time were overweight, yet the contexts in these books were very different. Middle school student Lily, in *The Truth about Truman School,* was overweight in earlier grades, but had lost much of the weight by the time she entered middle school. The cyberbullying begins when someone posts an old school picture of her on the online newspaper. On the other hand, the situation with Deanna in *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead,* is far more dire; the teasing and relentless taunting throughout elementary school because she was overweight cause Deanna to make several (unsuccessful) suicide attempts. In contrast, freshman Cameron in *Burn* is a small, slight young man with long hair. At the beginning of the school year, when he and his mother arrive at the sports orientation meeting a little late, the coach mistakes him for a girl and directs him to the girls' orientation with everyone watching. Although the coach apologizes for his mistake, the damage is already done and the bullying is relentless.

To focus on the actual bullying event(s), teachers can initiate class discussion by asking the following questions:

- Where does the bullying come into the story?
- Were there cultural issues involved in the bullying?

Reactions

Across all books, the bullied protagonists had similar reactions to the events that befell them. All experienced humiliation and feelings of powerlessness at the hands of those who bullied them. Furthermore, many of these characters had strong feelings of self-loathing and very low self-esteem leading to severe depression in some instances. Similar across the books were the reactions of others to the bullying events, as well as the advice offered to the bullied targets. Mainly, others characters, even friends, took little or no action and either offered no advice or told the protagonist to ignore or deal with the bullying. We saw this occur

time and again in many of the books where no friend helped and no allies stepped in, such as *Everybody Sees the Ants* and *Bad Apple.*

Class discussion about character reactions to bullying can be initiated with the following questions:

- How did the character react to the bully?
- When comparing characters across more than one book, how were their reactions similar or different?
- How did others in the story react to the bullying? Was this effective?
- Were there innocent bystanders? Were there allies?
- What other actions could have been taken? Who else could have helped?

Complex Family Relationships

Similar to the portrayal of parents in young adult literature in general, the parents in these books about bullying often played less than stellar roles and were not depicted as strong role models or supportive adults. In the books we analyzed, parents as characters fell on a continuum from little, if any, presence to a highly visible presence, albeit not necessarily a strong, supportive one. We categorized the role of parental figures into three somewhat overlapping categories: 1) minimal with little or no advice to the bullied protagonist, 2) overall dysfunctional family, and 3) parents as victims.

Minimal or No Advice and Support

The parents provided little or no support to their bullied child in several of the books we read. In *13 Reasons Why,* Hannah's parents were barely mentioned, with the same occurring in *Leverage*. While the parents of both Leah, the bully, and Laine, the bullied, are visible in *Lessons from a Dead Girl,* their influence on the abuse are minimal. In *The Truth about Truman School,* parents only appeared at the end when Lily, the bullied student, disappears.

Miriam's parents in *Freak* were surprisingly different. At the beginning, we find that the parents have created a democratic family structure where they and their two daughters vote to determine whether or not senior Artie can stay with them for a year while his parents go overseas. In this type of atmosphere, we begin to believe that the parents would provide strong support for their daughters. Yet, that is the not the case as the story moves along. They become involved in their own world of work, and Miriam does not want to bother them with her problems. Even her sister Deborah, who is two years older, serves only to remind Miriam that she needs to "grow up" and become more like everyone else. As a result, the family provides minimal support for Miriam.

Overall Dysfunctional Families

The protagonists in several of the books we examined had dysfunctional families in which the resulting tensions were not helpful in addressing the bullying or, for that matter, rendering the parents aware of the bullying. While the parents in *Bad Apple* and *Everybody Sees the Ants* took action against the bullying, their efforts were not productive. In *Bad Apple*, Tola's mother becomes an outspoken, aggressive parent in trying to get the innocent art teacher fired. In *Everybody Sees the Ants* Lucky's mother, aunt, and uncle all try their best to help Lucky, while his father only tells him to ignore the bullying. Valerie's mother in the *Hate List* becomes overprotective, hovering over Valerie in fear that she might commit some heinous act, such as hurting others or even committing suicide herself.

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In some instances, the parents were dealing with other life issues, such as loss of a job, and were focused more on that than their families. As mentioned previously, in *Story of a Girl*, Deanna's father had caught her in the back seat of a car with 17-year-old Tommy when she was only 13—an incident that rapidly became public knowledge at school. This event occurred at a time when her father had recently lost his job. For the next three years, Deanna's father treated her with hostility, contempt, and much suspicion while keeping conversations with her at a perfunctory level. Now at 16, she continues to face the taunting and crude comments from students at school with no help from her parents. Redemption finally comes for Deanna at the end of the book when her father takes steps to mend their relationship. After a tense conversation at breakfast, Deanna blurts out, "'You're always going to hate me,' I said, really sobbing now,

'for something I did when I was thirteen?'" (p. 158) Nothing changes in their relationship until weeks later when again at breakfast time, her father offers her a spoon, asks about school, and mentions the possibility of buying an old car for her. This turning point in Deanna's relationship with her father and in her own thinking is evident in the following:

> It came down to the smallest things, really, that a person could do to say I'm sorry, to say it's okay, to say I forgive you. The tiniest of declarations that built, one on top of the other, until there was something solid beneath your feet. And then . . . and then. Who knew? (p. 187)

In one book, however, the parent is the bully. Thirteen-year-old Doug in *Okay for Now* by Gary Schmidt is bullied by his father in shameful, despicable ways. For example, at one point in the story, the father, in a drunken stupor, forces Doug to get a tattoo that reads "Mama's Baby." When Doug's gym shirt is ripped off of him in class, everyone around sees the tattoo, adding to his humiliation and hence further bullying.

Parents as Victims

Parents as victims were also evident in some of the books. This was especially apparent in the *Hate List*. After Valerie's boyfriend Nick goes on a shooting spree at school killing students and himself, Valerie is left to pick up the pieces of her shattered life. Her father openly vents his contempt and disgust toward Valerie and becomes involved in an illicit affair with a co-worker. His infidelity toward his wife and his resentment toward Valerie indicate that he himself feels like a victim of the school shooting.

The parents are also victims in *The Chosen One* when the Prophet, the leader of the cult community, threatens dire consequences on Kira's family if she refuses to marry an old uncle. In both of these books, the parents can be seen as victims due to circumstances involving their children. However, in *The Shooter*, there is an episode in which one main character, Len, who is bullied at school, observes his own father being chastised or bullied by his boss. In addition, the father in *Borderline* also can be seen as a victim when he is arrested for being part of a terrorist plot mainly because of his Muslim beliefs. In *Burn,* Cameron's mother, along with Cameron and his brother, are physically and verbally abused by the father. Although the parents eventually divorce, the residual effects of the abuse follow them to a new location.

Guiding questions for class discussion about family relationships can include the following:

- Did family members attempt to help with the bullying issues? Why or why not?
- What else could they have done?
- What other family members could have helped?

Outcomes

The story endings across the books we analyzed were also varied. In some instances, the outcomes were positive for the main characters. For example, in *Leverage* and *Everybody Sees the Ants,* the main characters prevail at the end by standing up to the bullies. In others, the end result was very sobering when characters saw no way out except to take their own lives, as in *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Shooter.* In *Burn,* abused Cameron ends up murdering an innocent young man who happened to witness Cameron being bullied and physically abused. In still others, we are left wondering about the characters, such as in *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead.*

In a discussion about story outcomes, the teacher can use the following questions:

- Was the ending to the book realistic?
- How else could the book have ended?

Teaching Implications

The National Council of Teachers of English recently passed the Resolution on Confronting Bullying and Harassment (2012) in which NCTE strongly supports the use of a variety of resources, including young adult books, to help students deal with these issues. We believe that the books we have read provide a realistic portrayal of bullying and harassment and, hence, can serve as valuable instructional tools for helping teachers address these problems that occur too frequently in the lives of adolescents. In addition to the guiding questions provided for each theme discussed above, there are many effective instructional ideas available for teachers to use in conjunction with these books.

Given the seriousness and complexity of the theme of bullying in young adult books, we believe that teachers should not only capitalize on the use

of classroom discussions, but should also use writing opportunities to help students think more deeply about bullying. If the focus is on one particular book, teachers can use the analysis circle in Figure 1 as a springboard for discussion. The analysis circle directs students to think about the themes that resonated in this study—the character, the contexts, and the complex relationships with others. The circle also directs students to think more deeply about the issues of bullying in regard to real-world applications, especially on a personal level.

Another activity is the responsibility pie chart described by Gallagher (2004). This type of chart requires students to think about who is responsible for the events in the book. Students then illustrate how the responsibility may be shared and weighed across multiple characters in the pie chart. Both the analysis chart and the responsibility pie chart can prepare students to engage in class discussions in which they support their views.

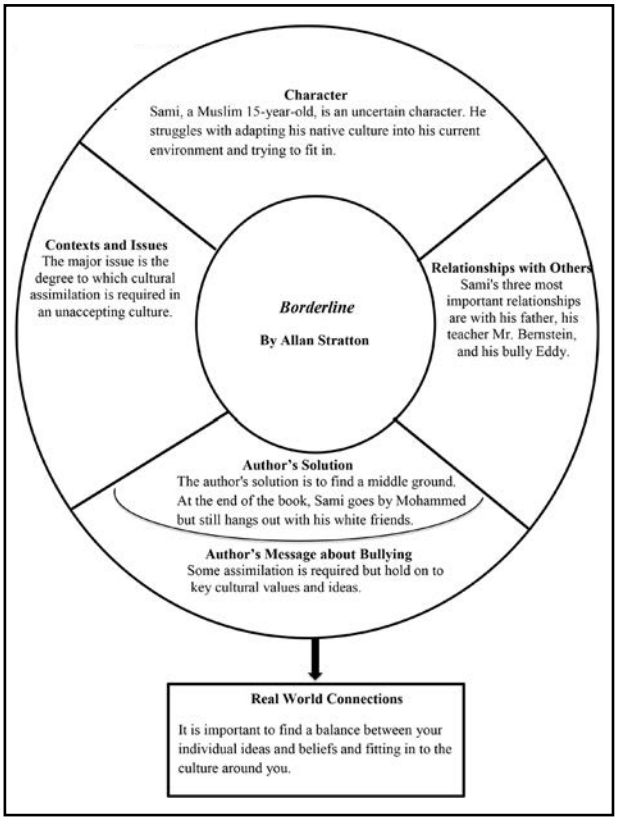

Figure 1. *Borderline* analysis circle; developed by Travis Witsman

Teachers can also have students engage in rich literature discussion groups in which students read multiple books with bullied protagonists. Class discussions can then focus on the critical analysis of many facets of these stories. For example, from a text perspective, teachers can direct students to consider the ways in which the authors capture the bullying events and even the types of bullying represented. Students can engage in talk about the situated context in which bullying arises and even the role of friends, teachers, parents, and other characters in the story and how they react to the bullying. In addition to using the guiding questions mentioned after each theme, teachers can also have students complete a synthesis chart as depicted in Figure 2. The chart enables students to compare and contrast these stories about bullied teens. Suggested questions for the synthesis chart are the following:

Students can engage in talk about the situated context in which bullying arises and even the role of friends, teachers, parents, and other characters in the story and how they react to the bullying.

- How would you describe the bullied victim? The bullies?
- What types of bullying are inflicted upon the character?
- What are the situated contexts or conditions under which the bullying occurs?
- What advice is given to the target of the bullying? How helpful is the advice?
- Who are the allies of the targets of bullying? Who could have been the allies?
- What are the outcomes concerning the bullying? How has the character changed?
- What is the role of the parents?
- What message is the author trying to convey about bullying?

Such discussions can then perhaps lead to a focus on real life and the bullying that the students themselves may have witnessed or experienced. At this point, the teacher can ask serious prompts that ask students to think about assuming the role of ally for a bullied student and role playing ways in which to

Books	*Everybody Sees the Ants*	*Hate List*	*By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead*
Describe the target of the bullying.	Fifteen-year-old Lucky, an average teen, has been bullied by one boy, Nader, since they were seven years old. No reason is given except that Nader needs to feel empowered.	Valerie and her boyfriend Nick are marginalized students dealing with name calling and relational bullying because they do not belong to the popular crowd.	In elementary school, Daelyn was always teased and bullied about being overweight. Now older, she has made several unsuccessful attempts to kill herself.
Synthesis statement: What can you say about these characters? The characters are different and are bullied for different reasons.			
What advice is given to the target of the bullying?	Lucky's father tells him to ignore the bullying and avoid situations that might lead to bullying. Lucky's uncle wants him to build muscles, and his aunt offers to give him anxiety pills.	Before the shooting, no advice seems to be forthcoming about the bullying. After the school shooting, Valerie returns to school. Some students avoid her, but one victim of the shooting and former bully, Jessica, tries to befriend her.	Daelyn receives no apparent advice from anyone.
Synthesis statement: The advice from others does not appear to help any of the victims.			
What are the outcomes concerning the bullying? How has the character changed?	Lucky reaches a point where he realizes that he himself must stop the bullying. At the end, he does stand up to Nader.	The outcome of the bullying was the school shooting, resulting in the deaths of several students and the suicide of Valerie's boyfriend Nick. After the shooting, Valerie has to come to terms with her life. She graduates from high school and then leaves.	Daelyn tries hard to resist the friendship of Santana, a young man with a terminal illness. She cries when he asks her to share his birthday with him—a sign that she may be changing her mind about taking her life. However, the author leaves the ending open for interpretation.
Synthesis statement: The outcomes are somewhat positive, with the hope that the characters will move beyond past bullying events.			

Figure 2. Example of synthesis chart

alleviate bullying situations. Students can also assume these roles as they write a poem in two voices—from the voice of the bullied and from the voice of the ally. In addition, discussions can also be held before or after students write narratives recounting real episodes of bullying.

Final Thoughts

The ways in which bullying is depicted in young adult books are complicated and reflect Walton's (2005) view of bullying as a societal issue deeply ingrained in positions of power, language, culture, and history. We found that the characters, situated contexts, and relationships with others were all complex, yet served as a mirror of the real world. Therefore, we believe that how the characters saw themselves and how they reacted to their situations are worth talking about in classroom settings. The positive outcomes in most of the books can even provide a spark of hope for those who are real victims of bullying. In *Borderline*, for example, a teacher, Mr. Bernstein, offers Sami this advice: "We can't choose what life throws at us. But we can choose what we do about it. Our choices are who we are. And who we are—that, no one can take away from us" (p. 209). Our responsibility as educators to address bullying is summarized in the words of Bott (Bott, Garden, Jones, & Peters, 2007): ". . . for too long we have supported the Don't Look philoso-

phy, and the problem has NOT GONE AWAY. Your assignment is simple: Do Something" (p. 50). We can use young adult books in our classrooms to help us do that "something."

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