

## **An Accessible, Teacher-friendly Methodology For Classroom Teaching To Prevent School Bullying: Story Journey with I AM JACK**

by Susanne Gervay

Bullying is an issue of social injustice and imbalance of power. School is a microcosm of our democratic system where teachers, parents, students create their own society with a fundamental goal of education. This society needs to be fair for young people to grow up with a belief in a just world and in themselves. Bullying stops this process. The Australian Federal Government's announcement that anti-bullying programmes will be mandatory in all schools is recognition of this.

In the Literature Review on Bullying 2005, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, cited that:-

Bullying is the most common form of violence in our society. Studies have found that approximately 30 percent of students in grades 6-10 are involved in bullying as a perpetrator, victim or both.' Bullying tends to peak in middle school and drop off by grades 11 and 12. (pp1)

A survey commissioned by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that more age 8 to 15 years old students picked teasing and bullying as 'big problems; (more) than drugs or alcohol, racism, AIDS, or pressure to have sex.'

As an educator and author, I often ask groups of children - 'How many of you have seen bullying at school?' Most students will raise their hand. Then I ask - 'Have any of you been bullied?' Their can be up to 50 percent of students raising their hands. The most controversial question is - 'How many of you have bullied someone else?' Depending on the trust level they have established with me, more than 30 percent will raise their hands.

Most students will have at school, been bullied or been the bully or witnessed bullying or have been involved at some level. Often bullying starts as a game that gets out of control. It can be caused by a joke that goes wrong. It can be based on self-protection, ego, peer pressure, any number of personal and social reasons.

Who is bullied? Studies by the Educational Research Service, have shown that the bullied are those who are perceived as vulnerable. Those bullied are not selected because of their appearance or social behaviours. They are often targeted because they exhibit sensitive behaviours such as quietness, cautiousness, insecurity. Children who arrive mid year into a school, have been ill, have dropped out of a friendship group and are isolated, are also seen as vulnerable.

Despite common perceptions of bullies, bullies generally have average to high levels of self esteem, may be popular with teachers and students and may do well at school. They also tend to have positive attitudes toward aggression which may come from their home life. Children without these characteristics may also bully when they are protected in a group situation, or because they feel powerless and want to fit in or

because it is a game and/or they are unable or too inexperienced to empathise with the victim.

Some school anti-bullying strategies, while well meaning, do not take into account the characteristics of the bullied or bully. Strategies for the victim such as standing up to the bully, telling an adult, changing behaviour, facing the bully in mediation, can be threatening and further victimize the bullied. Strategies for the bully such as building their self-esteem and providing special attention, can be counter productive.

The ground breaking Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme show that the majority of bullies have healthy self esteem. Therefore when schools engage in self-esteem training for bullies and conflict resolution and peer mediation, they can be inadvertently strengthening the power of the bully.

Those students who are bullied, need school support to re-establish self esteem, while those who bully need school action to immediately stop their bullying and redirection of their behaviours into positive directions.

Bullying causes low self-esteem, anxiety and depression in victims. Bullied students often start to under perform academically, increase sick days, drop out, lose friends, are afraid to go to school and can become severely distressed. Bullying supports the aggressive behaviour of bullies with detrimental effects on the bullies. Often they become less popular and unable to communicate effectively.

Unresolved bullying at school can have long term effects with victims taking low self esteem and depression into adulthood, bullies taking aggression into the workplace and personal life and bystanders experiencing depression, anger and fear.

While strategies need to be in place to heal the emotional and social damage of individuals involved in bullying, the development of a culture of social justice is the key to a fair and safe school.

In any school community, bullying will emerge at times, as power balances change and individuals enter a school with behaviours that challenge justice. While change in behaviour with 'serious bullies' may be unsuccessful, the culture where bullying occurs can be changed by creating a positive school environment. School needs to be a society where power imbalance has systems in place which corrects this imbalance creating a fair and just society. A positive school environment involves adult supportive involvement, positive adult role models, consistent sanctions for bullying behaviours and the development of social justice strategies for all students.

Approaches advocated to deal with bullying are at times reactive such as 'surveillance cameras', suspension of students, zero-tolerance to bullying. Practices where - victims are forced to confront the bullies in conflict resolution and peer mediation without adequate follow-up. These reactive practices can be counter productive.

Successful anti-bullying programmes occur when all members of the school community participate, where the principal leads the school in an anti-bullying environment; there is early intervention; teacher training which is not an additional compliance but integral to teaching practice; increased supervision of children at high

risk times such as lunch time; clear and consistent anti-bullying rules; establishment of trust so that bullying can be reported; support systems for the bullied and redirection of bullying behaviour into positive roles; and involvement of parents and teachers.

Anti-bullying programmes should not be imposed as an additional compliance burden, on teachers who are already over-stretched. Often meeting those compliance criteria lead to ad-hoc implementation, students responding with 'correct' answers while bullying continues on the playground; uncertainty and lack of communication. It is essential that teachers and students become emotionally engaged in the school anti-bullying programme becoming integrated into their teaching practice. It is essential that everyone becomes involved in maintaining a fair and safe school.

### **Story Journey**

One easily applied and successful strategy in countering bullying, is through story journey. Historically, the therapeutic use of books to heal has been used as far back as ancient Greece where the door of the library at Thebes welcomed readers with the inscription: 'The Healing Place of the Soul.' Aristotle advocated reading fiction as a way to purge illness, leaving the reader healthier and sounder of mind. 'The Medicine Chest for the Soul,' is found in the medieval Abbey Library of St. Gall, in Switzerland.

Although the powerful effects of reading have been known since ancient times, it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that youth literature for healing started to become a significant force. Parents and educators began to utilize books for children to help them navigate their sense of the world. There was a recognition that story journey allows readers to identify with character, work through issues, become emotionally involved in the story struggle and ultimately achieve insight their lives.

Relating to a story, or being emotionally engaged facilitates communication, questioning and learning. Readers become fellow travellers in a story journey. Stories can be viewed as a source of comfort, a means to connecting all aspects of life and an opportunity to live experiences rather than know about them according to Nelle Frances. It enables students to work out their own solutions to situations, rather than having solutions imposed on them. Linning, Phillips and Turton in a literature based approach to bullying rationalise that story can allow the reader to empathise with situations that they may not have experienced, can provide the reader with reassurance that other people experience the same problems they do themselves, and can provide a situation where topics can be explored through a third party - the characters in the book.

### **I Am Jack and Story Journey**

By taking students, on a journey with Jack, attitudes, feelings and strategies about bullying can be explored and discussed in a non threatening way. Significantly 'I Am Jack' also engages teachers and parents on this journey.

Life Education Australia commends 'I Am Jack' :-

'I Am Jack' celebrates kids. Unique, valuable kids who deserve the right to take pride in their own special qualities. Bullying takes this right away from them.

In the context of family and school life, 'I Am Jack' sensitively explores how bullying attacks the very basis of a child's self esteem. Bullying isolates and victimises children. 'I Am Jack' shows them that they are not alone and that they can win against bullying.

'I Am Jack' is children's literature at its most effective. Beautifully written, revealing the quiriness of kids, it is funny, loving, moving. It gives adults and children a remarkable understanding into an area that challenges children's belief in themselves.

This is a book children should read because kids are unique.

'I Am Jack' was written when my son was bullied at school. It reaches into real experience, taking adult and children on the journey with all its humour, sadness, realities. It opens the real opportunity for discussion and engagement of students, teachers and parents in effective communication.

A successful cross-curriculum teaching unit using *I am Jack* was conducted with a middle school reading group at Winmalee Public School in New South Wales. The class teacher, working with the teacher librarian, created a unit of work to achieve reading and viewing literacy outcomes, to address values and attitudes of interpersonal behaviours - specifically bullying, and to use the library and computers as tools in student learning. The result was an effective unit of work that generated much discussion and empowered the teachers and students to work towards a safe school.

Through 'I Am Jack' the students and teachers were able to become problem solvers making their own decisions about social justice. They were able to discuss, question and develop strategies to counter bullying. Through the emotional engagement with 'I Am Jack' and a discovery approach, the students emotionally engaged in the process of bullying and were empowered to make choices. Students developed strategies such as group reporting bullying they saw to a teacher, or asking an isolated student to join their game or choosing not to follow a bully. They realised that their actions determined if bullying occurred in their school.

'All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.' (Edmund Burke) Students are empowered to do 'something' through 'I Am Jack'.

Like many books for children, there are layers of meaning in 'I Am Jack'. It is a book that can be viewed as a warm family narrative for literacy and literature purposes. For those who are bullied, it offers understanding of how the bullying developed, help and hope. For students who watch while others are victimised, it empowers them to act. For the bullies it challenges them to consider their behaviours. 'I Am Jack' supports parents as their children's advocates and protectors. It re-emphasises to teachers the signs of bullying and strategies to counter it. It opens essential communication and

establishes that society can work towards a fair and safe school with the support of family, friends, teachers and the children.

### **Study Guide and Teaching Notes**

The freely downloadable teaching units on *I Am Jack*, *Super Jack*, *Butterflies*, *The Cave*, *That's Why I Wrote This Song* is available on the website: [www.sgervay.com](http://www.sgervay.com) under the contents category BULLYING [Teaching Unit on Jack & Anti Bullying](#).

'I Am Jack' is recommended in anti-bullying programmes used in The Better Buddies ([www.buddybear.com.au](http://www.buddybear.com.au)) and Life Education Australia ([www.healthstar.com.au](http://www.healthstar.com.au)) programmes. It is extensively used throughout Australian schools to meet PDHPE outcomes.

'I Am Jack' has been adapted into a play and will be touring Australia in 2008 [www.monkeybaa.com.au](http://www.monkeybaa.com.au)

#### BIO:

Susanne Gervay, MEd, MA, DipEd, BA, is an award winning children's and YA author. 'The Cave' (YA) is a powerful journey into male youth identity while 'Butterflies' (YA) is a powerful journey into female youth identity and disability. 'That's Why I Wrote This Song' (YA) crosses the mediums of music and text and is to be released in August 2007. Her best selling 'I Am Jack' is a significant book on bullying currently being adapted into a play. Its sequel, 'Super Jack' is a valuable insight into changing families. Her books are endorsed by The Children's Hospital, Life Education Australia, The Alannah & Madeline Foundation.

Susanne speaks at Conferences, Festivals, has toured extensively speaking across Australia including School of the Air in Kalgoorlie, The Literacy AATE/ALEA Conference Darwin, numerous country and city libraries, UBUD Writers & Readers' Festival, The NSW Writers Children's and YA Festival, The National Trust Norman Lindsay Festival, numerous in-services for educators, at schools to students, parents and teachers. She has spoken extensively in the media, including radio, TV and print. See ABC radio transcript regarding 'I Am Jack' and school bullying. [www.abc.net.au/perth/stories/s1443845.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/perth/stories/s1443845.htm)  
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\* These URL sites provide a valuable overview of school bullying which is helpful to teachers.

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