

## **Bullying Jack - using Literature to teach about bullying**

Jenny Foster

### **I AM JACK**

by Susanne Gervay  
Angus and Robertson, 2000.

I wrote **I AM JACK** because my son was being bullied and I wanted to offer my hand to him and to other kids - Susanne Gervay, 2000

(Endorsed by Life Education, Australia as a book children should read because kids are unique.)

Using literature in teaching is a way of connecting across the curriculum and creating powerful learning experiences. A successful cross-curriculum experience using Susanne Gervay's novel, **I AM JACK** was conducted with a year 5/6 reading group at Winmalee Public School. 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 had some interesting spin offs.

To the students' delight, Susanne visited the school and spent a very happy session discussing with them the reality of the book and her writing.

### **Background**

Like many schools, Winmalee Public School has responded to the research and evidence that has drawn attention to the high incidence level of bullying in schools, and has launched a whole school and community approach to bullying to ensure that Winmalee Public School is a happy and safe environment for our students. Surveys designed by Dr Ken Rigby, an acknowledged expert on bullying in schools, were completed by students, parents and staff. The results challenged commonly held beliefs that bullying wasn't really an issue at our school, and became the focus for the School Welfare Team in developing an Anti-Bullying Policy for the school.

Bullying is an issue. Rigby (1997) maintains that about one child in six is bullied in Australian schools on a weekly basis and that primary school children of both sexes are generally bullied more often than children in secondary schools. Libby Petersen, School Counsellor at Jameson High School, studied anti-bullying and peer support on a Churchill Fellowship. Her presentation to staff showed evidence that every school can make a difference. Teachers need to encourage children to report bullying and help provide children with strategies to counter incidents of bullying.

Susanne Gervay's book **I AM JACK** provided an ideal means to do just this with a group of Year 5/6 students.

## Why use I AM JACK?

Susanne Gervay writes from personal experience. Her son, the character Jack in the novel, was a victim of bullying. Jack is a real kid. His story and eventual support from family and friends reinforce with children that they don't have to face bullying alone. They should tell. Set in a primary school, it is a story that students can relate to.

Relating to a story, or being emotionally engaged facilitates learning. Readers become fellow travellers in a story journey. Linning, Phillips and Turton (1997) in a literature based approach to bullying rationalise that a 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. By taking students on a journey with Jack, attitudes, feelings and strategies about bullying can be explored and discussed in a non threatening way.

## Organisation

The students in years five and six move to reading groups daily after recess. The novel **I AM JACK** by Susanne Gervay was read by one of the groups in a joint teaching program involving the class teacher and the teacher librarian.

The class teacher:

- programmed for novel study - identified literacy and PDHPE values and outcomes to be achieved:
  - English K-6 V1, V2, V6, TS3.2, RS3.5, RS3.6, RS3.7
  - PDHPE K-6 V1, V3, V4, PSS3.5, GDS3.9, IRS3.11 and INS3.3
- Safe Living Strand of Child Protection Education
- Reading for enjoyment
- collected background information on author/book and adapted teaching ideas (Teaching Notes - Judy Thistleton-Martin) to support program
- successfully applied for ALOUD WEST grant for Susanne Gervay's visit and organised visit
- organised reading group lessons to achieve outcomes
- liaised with teacher librarian to team teach and bring reading group to the library on Fridays
- coordinated display of work
- evaluated unit

The teacher librarian:

- team taught with class teacher
- supported class program with an author study using websites
- provided copies of Susanne Gervay's novels for individual borrowing
- was participant in class discussions to follow progress of reading in the classroom
- provided an alternate working space and support for group work activities
- organised and prepared for other classes to meet Susanne Gervay on her school visit

## **Teaching and Learning Predictions and expectations.**

The individual copies of **I AM JACK** were booked out to the reading group members. Before work was commenced the children were asked to write down what they thought the story would be about and what they expected they might learn. After an examination of the cover, blurb and the contents, students made the following predictions:

‘It looks and sounds like it will be about bullying and having a hard life at school. It might tell how to stop being bullied.’ Ashlea, Year 6

‘Teasing is not fun.’ Andrew, Year 6

‘It’s about Jack. He gets teased and he gets into trouble. I might learn ways to avoid being teased.’ Kara, Year 5

‘I think it might be about school getting dangerous.’ Emily, Year 5

‘It is about a kid getting bullied at school. I don’t think that I’ll learn anything new.’ Jamie, Year 5

‘It’s about Jack. I might learn how to handle bullying. You’re not the boss if you bully.’ Andrew, Year 5

Student expectations ranged from the book being unlikely to offer anything new, to a source of strategies to avoid bullying. Some students seemed to be looking for strategies to combat being bullied. In light of these responses and the in school survey results, the PDHPE teaching outcomes and values were re-examined and activities to address what constitutes bullying, how it affects people and possible class/school strategies to combat bullying were formulated.

### **Starting the unit**

Feelings and how feelings influence our lives were discussed. The class were asked to reflect on times when they had experienced different feelings. (Thistleton-Martin 2000) If the students preferred to keep these feelings private, they were able to seal their work, to be opened and reflected on at the end of the unit. Others were prepared to share their feelings with the class. This provided the referral point for later discussions in the study.

Teaching notes for **I AM JACK**.

### **Chapter 1**

Start character profile pages. Character studies are updated continually and the novel is read, to understand characters, their reaction and changes in behaviour.

## **Chapter 2**

Jack's illness is discussed. Its reality and symptoms are debated.

Activities;

- Why is Jack sick? Is he faking it? Justify your answer with evidence from the text.
- Create your own illness and describe the symptoms.
- Add new characters.

## **Chapter 3**

Jack's problem and possible solutions are discussed.

Activities;

- Why is Jack afraid? What should he do?
- Think of some creative excuses for not going to school.
- Add new characters.

## **Chapter 4**

Jack has worked out how to avoid George Hamel. Avoidance versus solution is discussed.

Activities;

- What clever tactics does Jack use to avoid George Hamel?
- Suggest other tactics Jack might use.

## **Chapters 5 & 6**

The ability to influence the behaviour of others is discussed. (Note: The class decided to try and influence the school. The wearing of bandanas as a cool look was agreed upon and a session making bandanas was conducted. The students were to monitor if others copied their lead.)

Activities (group);

- Write down why you think other children have started to ignore Jack and call him names.
- List the things that Jack is good at.
- See if one group can get others in the school to follow. Monitor effect.

## **Chapter 7**

Questions are used to reflect on how the bullying situation has escalated and to encourage the children to offer opinions on solutions.

Activities (group)

- The following questions are to be answered, recorded and presented as a group activity;
  1. What has been happening to Jack at school?
  2. Does he deserve to be treated this way? Give reasons.
  3. What advice would you give Jack and why?
  4. What should Mr Angelou do?
  5. What should Jack's mum do?
  6. Do you think Anna did the right thing? Why?
- The reaction and copy behaviour is discussed. (bandanas)

## **Chapters 8 & 9**

Groups are given sides in the dilemma whether Jack should change schools or not. The groups prepare cases to support their point of view. The cases for and against changing schools are presented to the class and then a class vote taken to select the best case.

Activities;

- Individually, write down how you think Jack feels? Should Jack change schools? List 2 reasons for and two reasons against.
- Work with your group to argue for or against Jack changing schools, and present your side in the class debate.

## **Chapters 10 & 11**

Looking at a situation through the eyes of one of the characters is explored.

Activities;

- Choose one of the characters in the book and write a journal entry for that character's point of view about what is happening to Jack.
- What do you think bullies do to feel good about themselves?
- What did Mr Angelou think made the other children stop liking Jack?

## **Chapter 12 & 13**

Bullying is discussed in class after the students are asked to consider bullying by answering some questions based on the novel.

Activities;

- Answer these questions in your book and be ready to discuss the answers in class;
  1. Why is George Hamel a bully?
  2. Do the reasons make his bullying OK?
  3. Why or why not?
  4. In what way does bullying by girls sometimes differ to bullying by boys?

## **Chapter 14**

Why is taking photos important to Jack?

Student Response to the book

Activities;

- Consider the ending. What did you think about the ending? In a sequel, what would you like to know more about?
- Bullying
  - Would you feel stronger now if you had to deal with a bully?
  - What do you think you might do?
  - Look back at the feelings that you recorded at the start of the unit.

Do you think that you could now deal with some situations that you were unhappy about before?

- Discuss the effect of influencing others - good and bad. (In this case, how effective was the group bandana wearing in influencing school behaviour. What could our group do about bullying in the school?)
- Display of students' work.
- Producing anti bullying posters.
- Discussion with author.

What do you want to ask Susanne Gervay?

- Producing a drama presentation for assembly - a dramatic presentation based on the book was written in three parts;
- Let us tell you about our friend Jack. He was a victim of bullying. Jack doesn't go to our school, but this could have happened in any school. Several students relate Jack's story in a matter of fact way and then pose the questions; Does our story have a happy ending? What had happened to Jack?
- Several other students take over and tell how Anna, Mum and Mr Angelou step in, ending with the questions; How can we stop that happening in our school? What can each of us do?
- Several students display and read their bully-busting posters and read them to the assembly, ending with we are going to put these around our school as a reminder that bullying is not wanted here.

### **Evaluation and Reflections**

**I AM JACK** was an ideal novel with which to work with students towards cross curriculum outcomes. The discussion that was generated and the enthusiasm that permeated Susanne's visit indicated that the reading had been enjoyed and that the reality of the novel gave the topic of bullying a real take off point to consider the wider subject area.

- Literacy outcomes were evaluated from written work and class presentations.
- Portfolio Assessment tasks were completed to show students' ability to identify and interpret ideas, structure, themes, issues and characterisation in literary texts.
- Library and computer sessions were successful and used effectively to achieve curriculum outcomes.
- PDHPE outcomes were placed within the values of developing a sense of own worth and dignity, of enjoying a sense of belonging and accepting responsibility for personal and community health.
- It was apparent from the written work and comments that the novel had impacted on students. This was sometimes in a very personal way – giving them the power to take charge.

Opportunities were given for all students to share their feelings, individually or in groups. The students were able to share their work with other class members and with the whole school through their display, their assembly presentation and their bully-busting posters. A heightened awareness of bullying behaviour and support for victims was evident.

Assertive ways of dealing with harassment were evident in class activities and class discussions. The students were asked to revisit their initial predictions and feelings. Were their predictions correct? What had they learnt from the novel study?

Comments included the following;

‘Yes my predictions were correct. The book was about bullying and it told you to get help.’ Ashlea, Year 6.

‘I’ve been bullied. Susanne said to tell someone so I did.’ Andrew, Year 5

‘It was a good story. I learnt about bullying and to tell somebody if you are being bullied. You have to stick up for your friends.’ Kara, Year 5

Strategies to explain and deal with life changes were evident with the identification of what constitutes bullying and the ways of dealing with it.

The secret to stopping bullies is; (Joshua, Year 5)

- to have a solid group of friends
- stick up for your self
- when it starts tell somebody
- change the subject.’

Some Year 6 girls brought in a teen magazine article that was relevant to school bullying and used it as part of their argument about changing schools. Their heightened awareness enabled them to recognise issues outside of their own school.

Supporting friends was a high priority issue, and discussed with Susanne in the light of Jack’s friends deserting him.

The FULL article, teaching notes, interview with Susanne is available from:-

‘I Am Jack - Using Literature to Teach about Bullying’ by Jenny Foster, The NSW Department of Education & Training journal Vol 21 No. 3 August 2002

[www.det.nsw.edu.au/schoollibraries](http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/schoollibraries)

Private Bag 3, Ryde, NSW 2112 Australia

Fax: 02 9886 7413