

Addressing Bullying in the Classroom: Undercover Anti-Bullying Teams

Mike Williams

“I know I’m weird”, she said slowly, tossing her multi-colored hair around her shoulders as she sat down heavily in the chair in my office, “but I can’t help it!”. Tears welled up in her dark eyes, and she shuddered involuntarily. The smell of sweat and fear filled the air in my small room. Her eyes, heavy with cheap mascara looked as if they had withdrawn into her pale, blotchy face. She shifted her long body from side to side. “I feel like a dumb goose”, she sobbed, “I don’t belong in this school or even this world. I know they all hate me”.

I sat back gently to give her space and listened with interest to what she was saying. I had seen her on the school campus many times, usually alone, looking stressed and unhappy, walking quickly from place to place, carrying her heavy school bag and not looking at anyone. Other kids seemed to avoid her and whispered about her as she walked past.

“It’s not fair, I’ve done nothing but be myself, but nobody can accept that. I am starting to think that it’s true what they say. Why do they want me to change? I don’t ask them to change who they are!” she blurted out.

“I don’t belong here”, she reminded me. “I want to stay home and never go to this stupid school”.

She paused for a moment, then she said, “But I hate home as well, I don’t belong there either, my parents are losers and never get out of bed. I don’t know what to do. I really hate my life”.

The sound of her pain seemed to hang like a sword in the air. I was stunned by this stream of painful emotions that surged like a tornado in my room.

“No”, she said emphatically, “It’s not fair because I have done nothing”.

“Would you mind if I asked you some questions about what’s been happening?” I asked. “I’ve seen something like this before”, I added, “and I have some ideas about what we can do”. She shifted slightly in the chair, her long legs looking for a place to hide and her sobs began to slow down.

She shrugged her shoulders and said, “ I guess....Go ahead then”.

I paused again for a brief moment, then I asked gently, "Where does this kind of thing happen most?"

"It's **everywhere** but mostly in my classes. It's the story of my life. They gang up on me and shut me out deliberately and they talk about me behind my back. I can't take much more of it", she said. "They bully me and make me feel stupid. One kid even made up a song about me. Everyone laughed, even my so-called friends," she said with disdain.

She lifted her head slightly and looked out at me from under her tousled hair. I handed her a tissue and she dotted the black lines of mascara that had made streaky tracks on her face.

I had been carefully listening for a way to talk about what she had been experiencing and I had a number of choices including "bullying", "ganging up", "shutting me out deliberately", "talking about me behind my back", "making me feel stupid", but I chose "bullying" because it seemed to sum up all the other things she had been going through and it was after all, a description that she had chosen.

"Is it bullying that you've been the target of?" I asked. When I used this word, she looked up at me and her face winced at the sound of the word. I felt that I had struck a chord with her.

"Yes, it's bullying plain and simple," she said sadly.

"I would like to tell you my ideas about how we can get rid of it, would you like to hear them?" I ventured. "It may take a few minutes and if there is something you don't understand, please ask me. Is that alright?"

She didn't answer and looked bored, but I persevered.

"I have seen problems like this one and even some worse ones solved with 'Undercover Anti-bullying Teams'," I continued. "They are a group of students from your class that we select together and they come up with a plan to eliminate the bullying. Once they find out how much the bullying is affecting people, they usually are happy to do whatever they can to bring some happiness back into the class. It's my guess that they are looking for a chance to do something right. I think they know about the bullying but don't know what to do about it. They hate it as much as you do."

“Yeah, sometimes some kids have stuck up for me and the bullying has stopped, but it doesn’t last. I wish they could keep it up because that’s when I think they accept me.”

I paused for a moment, thinking about what she had just said. I could see that there had been moments when there was no bullying, that there had been exceptions to the story that she was telling me.

“On your team,” I continued, “must be the 2 kids who are the biggest bullies together with 4 others who are kids that the teachers and other students look up to”.

She looked startled when I mentioned the bullies being on the team.

“That’ll never work”, she said, “Why should they want to help me when all they do is bully me?”

“Well for one thing, they are outnumbered”, I smiled, “and the other more important reason is that, in my experience, sometimes even the bullies get sick of bullying, but they don’t know what else to do. They almost think that’s who they are. For some reason they like to think that they know how everyone should be and when they come across someone who they think is different, they try to get them to be like them! That’s the part I am still trying to figure out, why they think they should do that”.

“I’ve found through doing this Team idea for over 50 times now, that once they are introduced to a better way and the other kids on the team get behind the plan, they always seem to change the way that they speak and act, and in some teams, they have become the leaders of the team! In many cases, the bullies have become friends of the ones they had been bullying but we don’t expect them to”.

“It could work...”, she said cautiously. “50 times? How many failures have you had?” she cheekily asked, and I thought I detected the hint of a smile.

“I know it sounds ridiculous, but there have been no failures. Every team has been successful in eliminating bullying and what’s more”, I said with pride, “it hasn’t returned!”

“There are two other important parts to this way of dealing to ‘bullying’ in this way.” I continued. “Firstly, the teachers of your classes are told what has been happening to you in their class and that an ‘undercover anti-bullying team’ has been set up to eliminate it. They are usually quite surprised, and some teachers



have even told me that I'm mistaken. They say that there is no bullying in their class! Just goes to show how clever kids are. The kids who bully certainly don't want the teachers to know about it".

"The teachers are told the names of the team members including those doing the bullying, but without mentioning the names of the students who are doing it. They are invited to make suggestions about who they think should be on the team. Sometimes we add their names as well, but most often you will know the ones best suited to help you. It's not just your friends, but ones who you think could really make a difference. So now the teachers know about what was previously kept hidden from them. They become like extra team members!"

"Secondly, when you are sure that the bullying has gone for good, the team members receive a certificate of recognition from the Principal and a canteen voucher from the school. We have a special ceremony in my office where we hand out the certificates to the team. We talk about how the team went and what they have done and what they can keep doing to make this school safe from bullying. Sometimes the Principal hands out the certificates, sometimes the dean, and sometimes teachers and even parents will come to show their appreciation. Sometimes, the ex-victim likes to give out the certificates!"

"Like I said, I've done this over 50 times now and it has worked every time".

"I guess...", she said tentatively. "It's better than nothing being done which is how it's always been".

"Once the team is set up", I continued, "They make a plan that details how they are going to make the changes. I don't tell them what to do, it's better if it comes from them".

"Then I wait a couple of days for the team to begin their plan and the next step is to call you out of class and we talk about what has changed and what remains to be changed. I write all this down on my form. Then I call the whole team together and I share with them what you have told me. We talk about the same things that I talk about with you, such as: How is the plan going? Should they add to the plan? Is it enough? Have they been able to stick to the plan? What have they noticed about your reactions to their efforts? Have other kids said anything? Have they been able to keep it undercover? Etc. You don't have to meet the team or do anything special, but it does help if you recognize the efforts the team is making. I also ask your teachers to tell me what changes they have noticed, and I share

these observations with the team and with you each time we meet. We keep going with this process until you decide that the bullying is over. In most cases it takes at least a couple of weeks for the changes to become permanent, but I am sure you agree that's not much compared to how long this has been going on for".

She was starting to show some real interest by now. She brushed back her hair and stood up and looked at her eyes in my mirror. She used the tissue I had given her earlier to dab the corners of her eyes. She is quite tall, I thought, as she stood beside me.

"Well, to get this started I need to carefully write down the story of the bullying. This will be what I read to the team. Then we select the team members and then I email your teachers to let them know what we are doing. The next day, I call the team members from classes where they will not be obvious and give them their instructions."

"One more thing", she interrupted me, "why is this '**undercover**'?"

"I was hoping you would ask that," I said. "As I explained earlier, I have found that when people feel that they have been caught out bullying, they are more than likely to blame the person they think has exposed them. Then they try to get revenge on that person, and it usually makes things worse. If they are invited to solve the problem of bullying without being exposed as the bullies, they respond positively. It's a way of protecting you from retaliation. They become part of the solution, whereas before they were part of the problem. It gives them a fresh chance to do what is the right thing to do. Punishment never works in cases like this".

"Also, the other students who have been observing the bullying and have done nothing to stop it usually feel ashamed of their inaction. By being anonymous, they also get a chance to make the changes they have wanted to do without it being a big deal".

"But the main thing though, is that this kind of bullying survives **because it is undercover** or under the radar. Teachers rarely see it. We must use the same kinds of tricks against it and who better to do it than students themselves? It is a job that no teachers or other adults can do; it's going to need some special strategies to expose it and to get rid of it".



I paused for a while to let all this information be absorbed by her. She seemed to understand what I was saying.

“What I have noticed happening with these teams, is that sometimes the friends of the team members notice the changes and ask if they can be on the team. It’s often hard for the team members to keep it a secret because they enjoy the new job and things in the classroom change pretty quickly. I believe that the kids who bully are not bullies by nature. Often, they don’t even realize they are bullying. They think they are having a joke. Hardly ever do they think that bullying is their only job in life”.

“Are you ready now to tell me your most recent experience of bullying?”, I enquired as I took out the forms I use to record her story.

“Well”, she began, “It’s been going on for most of my life. It wasn’t as bad at primary school but it’s gotten much worse as I’ve gotten older.”

This is what she told me. I carefully recorded her own words, checking every now and then to make sure I had written down exactly what she said.

“Well, in social studies, we had to get into groups around tables and I was late to class because of my rowing training. The only place left was right by the door where no one was and everyone who was around were saying things like ‘goosey girl’, ‘loner’ and ‘O.T.L.’ (Only The Lonely) and stuff and laughing so the teacher couldn’t hear. I was sitting by myself, and it made me feel horrible, like I was dead meat”.

“Another time last week was when I walked into the library, a group of the boys were lined up against the wall on both sides and they were yelling stuff at me and saying stuff to me. They were calling me names and saying that I made up an account on Facebook just to have friends and stuff and why did I bother coming to this school because nobody wants me here. A while ago in P.E (Physical Education), we had to get into groups and nobody wanted to be in my group. The leaders put me in a group, and they were all going, ‘why do we have to have her in our group and stuff?’ This kind of thing happens to me a lot when we have to get into groups”.

I wrote it down as she spoke, checking with her to make sure I heard her clearly. Then I asked her how this incident/s affected her and made her think and feel.

“I feel like I can’t cope and I want to be able to relax like everyone else. It’s OK for them but they don’t realize what they are causing me because I don’t get any support at home. I don’t feel at home even at home. It makes me want to run away. Sometimes I want to leave but I can’t. Sometimes I want to leave and never come back. I hate coming to school early for rowing because kids are saying horrible things and stuff but if I am late, everyone draws attention to it. They look at me and act in a shaming way. It makes me hate school. I used to love school and now when I wake up, I just want to lie there and not move. I hate it so much. Sometimes I wish I was not even alive”.

I let that powerful expression of her emotions hang in the air. I had heard similar stories many times but each of these moments are so moving, so important.

Following the questions on my form, I gently asked her, “Ideally, how would you like things to be?”

She paused for a while and looked at me. My guess was that it was hard for her to relive those painful moments, but this question seemed to shift her thoughts.

“Well, I want to feel comfortable here to relax and forget about everything else, to be comfortable at school. I want to be able to say what I feel, not being scared of everything I say and do. I don’t want to be bullied anymore. I want to have friends, good friends that I can trust and not laugh at me or put me down. I feel like I must defend myself to show that they are not hurting me”, she added.

“Thanks for letting me write it all down”, I said. “Can I read it all back to you to make sure that I have got it down correctly? Remember that this is the story I will read out to the Undercover Anti-bullying Team once they are assembled”. She nodded her head.

I read the story to her just as she had told it to me. She listened carefully to my reading of her story and looked sad.

“Are you ok with me reading this out to the Team like that?” I asked.

“I hope this works”, she said, “and that they don’t use it as a reason to bully me more”, She said with a worried look on her face.

“You know, in all the Teams I have run, that has never happened. Most times the team is shocked to hear the story and is ashamed that it has got to this stage. In some cases, students have cried when I have read their story out. One time, the bully confessed! It was him that eventually became the leader of the team”.

She seemed reassured by this and I said to her, “Now we must select the Team before I let the teachers know about it. Let’s look at your class list and we can go through each student one-by-one and you can tell me what you know about them and we can select the Team”.

I printed off the list and we discussed each student. I explained that apart from the 2 students who were responsible for the most bullying, the other 4 people would be students that the rest of the class and teachers looked up to. Students with status in the eyes of their peers. I recorded these names on my form.

Once the composition of the team was decided, I thanked her for her bravery in coming forward with this and I sent her back to her class.

Then I sent this email to her teachers:

Hi Teachers,

Candice has told me a story about some bullying of the continual teasing, name calling, mocking family, excluding from group work type, what others might think as “low level” but to her its big and causing her to switch off school. Together we think that an Undercover Team might work well to eliminate the bullying.

She has selected:

Michelle, Josephus, Mario, Alayah, Yanet and Carlos as students she wants to support her. Remember that in this group are the two “worst” bullies. Considering what you know about these students and others in the class, can you suggest any others that may be more suitable?

If you think this is a good team to go about doing anti-bullying work, don’t reply. If you have any suggestions, please let me know asap as I need to call the team together tomorrow.

There is nothing extra you need to do but it would help if you notice the activities of the team and feed your observations back to me by email. I will pass them on during the monitoring process. You may decide to take some actions yourself with the class but please do not let the existence of the team be known to the class.

On the side of a bullying free school, Mike.

Sending such an email to the teachers is a risky business and I have only recently begun to do that. It is my belief that this undercover bullying needs to be exposed, and the widest audience possible recruited, to eliminate it. By informing teachers about activities that have been happening in the lives of their students, they become part of the Team and become more aware of the relational climate in their classes. Knowing what I know about each teacher, I predicted a variety of responses.

1. Dear Mike

Thank you for the email regarding the bullying of Candice. I was quite surprised to read this because I thought she was doing very well. Are you sure you have the right person? I struggled to detect the 2 worst bullies though. Except for Mario who makes the occasional smart comment to everyone, not just Candice, they all seem to be nice kids. I won't allow any negativity in my class though and it is important for me that kids feel safe enough to learn.

It must be pretty low level as you say because I haven't seen much of it. Still, I will take your word for it and keep my eyes open for the positive actions of the team members. She has selected a good Team because the ones she has chosen are students that I think have leadership potential. Who are the bullies again?

I will keep you posted, George.

2. Mike

I thought as much! She is strange and the kids find it hard to accept her. She should get her hair cut and not put so much make up on. She mucks around quite a bit and draws attention to herself. She doesn't do much work in my class and is absent a lot. She doesn't make it easy for herself though as she sometimes says some pretty harsh stuff back to them. I wonder if she deliberately excludes herself from whole class activities.

She does need to harden up and not be so sensitive.

I will keep my eyes open for any kids who might be acting differently towards her, but I can't see them making much of a difference.

Most of these kids on her "Team" are pretty hard workers when they want to be so I wouldn't make any changes.

Andrea

3. Dear Mike

This is clever! I have seen this kind of thing in my last school but it was more obvious. The counsellor took the kids who were bullying aside and had a talk with them. There was a small change but it didn't really last because my guess is that they did it for the counsellor, not because it was the right thing to do.

As you know, I do my best to have the best environment for learning. Happiness is important to me and I want my kids to have fun learning. But if any one kid is unhappy in any way, I want to know about it.

I will call a class circle tomorrow and we will all talk about how we can make our relationships the best that they could be. I will not draw attention to Candice but talk about good relationships in general.

In agreement with you about having a bully free school, Jenny.

I was predicting a more unsupportive response from one teacher who I knew wouldn't email me, but would talk to me face to face.

I was sitting in the staffroom with my friends during morning break when he came over to me. The room was filled with colleagues drinking coffee and enjoying the respite from teaching. There were lots of warm conversations around tables and some people had gone outside to enjoy the early summer sun.

"Can I talk to you?" he asked.

I knew what this would be about and I steeled myself for what I knew was going to be a difficult conversation. "Could we go somewhere else and discuss this outside?", I asked.

We found a quieter corner of the courtyard and he started telling me his ideas.

"I am not happy about this "Undercover Team" in my class", he said. "It's bollocks. I won't tolerate bullying. I have high standards. If I knew who they were, I would make them stand up in front of the class and apologize to everyone for



what they are doing. Then I would give them a detention or lines and I would ring their parents and tell them what they are doing.

“Going soft on these bullies is a waste of time”, he continued. “They need to be held accountable for what they are doing and be punished. That’s how it was in my day and I haven’t changed my opinion”.

I struggled to find a way to address his concerns.

“Kids in my class don’t dare bully each other. If I catch them, they know what to expect. If it was my kid who was bullied, I would want those kids excluded from school”.

I took a deep breath and tried to be calm.

“I know that this is not how you might do things, ” I said, “but I have found over many years that when kids are punished, especially for bullying, they will somehow try to get their revenge back on the person that has told on them. If they don’t, then they will get their friends to. It always makes things worse. Besides, they spend time thinking about revenge and then they don’t learn. In my experience, students who are bullied don’t want the bullies to be exposed or punished. They just want it to stop.

“We both want the same thing, for kids to learn and to treat each other well. I am not asking you to change anything in any way, but just see if you can notice when the students on the team are doing positive things to support Candice.

“There may not be bullying while the students are in your lessons,” I explained, “but if all teachers can be on the lookout for any kind of unpleasantness, then our school is going to be a much happier and purposeful place, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Well, I’d be surprised if it was going on in my class, but I will keep an eye out for Candice as I do anyway.”

“Thanks for telling me about your concerns”, I added and went back with a pounding heart to my friends.

Two days later I called up the team members. They shuffled into my office looking anxious and worried. I suspected that although they were classmates, they were not friends. They looked at each other suspiciously and began to ask why they were called out of class.



“Welcome,” I smiled and said as they looked uncomfortably for a chair to sit on. “You must be wondering why you have been called out of class and I will tell you why in just a moment and you may be surprised. But you may not be as well”.

“Yesterday, one of your classmates told me a sad story of bullying in your class. I made sure she didn’t mention any names because as I explained to her before she started, the best way to eliminate bullying is for everyone to work together. Sometimes people get caught up in bullying and want to change because they know it’s wrong and they would not like it if it was done to them. Sometimes, people don’t even know that they are bullying and just think they are having fun. Other times, people see and hear the bullying and don’t know what to do about it. Many times, it seems as if even friends are in on it”.

“Who is it?”, one student said. “Why us?” another said.

The room went silent, and some students began shifting nervously in their seats. I let the silence sit for a while and then I continued, “She has personally selected you as the students best able to eliminate the bullying. Not only that, but your teachers have endorsed her selection and are going to do what they can (without exposing the team) to make their classrooms safe from bullying. If you agree to be on the team and when you have eliminated the bullying for good, you will receive a Principal's Award in recognition of your anti-bullying activities and a canteen voucher from the school at a little ceremony to celebrate your success. He could even present it to you if you like”, I added cheekily.

“The important thing about this is that it is undercover. Nobody would know of your existence but myself, your teachers, the Principal, and of course the student who has been bullied. You can tell your parents if you like as I am sure they will be proud of your selection in this really important matter.”

They laughed uncomfortably and looked at each other sideways.

“I am going to read out the story and then I will tell you who it is and ask you if you would like to be involved. Are you ready to hear her story?” I asked.

“Yes”, they all nodded in agreement.

“I think I know who you are talking about “, one of the boys ventured.

“I will read the story exactly as she told me. I have added nothing and taken nothing out. You may know of the incidents she describes, and you may have seen it differently, but this is her story, this is how it is for her”, I added. “I am

telling you in this way because I want the focus to be on the bullying, not so much on who was involved. You will notice that she doesn't name anyone. That is not important to me. No one is being blamed or singled out".

"This is her story", and I read out her story, including how it made her feel and think.

There was silence and some students said quietly, "that must be horrible".

"I think I know who it is", one boy said. "I didn't know she felt like that. That's sad".

When I mentioned her name, I noticed looks of surprise on the faces of some students. Some were clearly embarrassed, but all the students listened without interruption to her tale.

"Would you all like to be on her undercover team?", I asked.

They all said they would be, including the ones she has identified privately as the 2 worst bullies.

"What do you want us to do?" Josephus asked.

"We make up a plan. I call it our '5 point plan'. On it, we list simple ideas that will turn things around for her. Who would like to start?"

I went over to the whiteboard with my marker in my hand.

"If the same things were happening to you, what would you like people to do?" I asked.

"Offer her help when she needs it and offer for her to come into our group. I will do that", Alayah said.

"That's great!" I exclaimed.

"I could remind her that she doesn't need to go 'all stupid' in a gentle way. I will do that because I think she will listen to me" Michelle said.

"Stick up for her when people tease her", said one boy and the others all nodded in agreement. "Would you all like to sign up for that?" I asked. I wrote 'whole team' next to that suggestion.

"Listen to her, give her some time", said Mario.

“Just talk to her, find out what she likes, go up to her and talk to her, try harder to make friends”, said Yanet.

I wrote the names next to the items on the list and later I copied these suggestions onto my form.

“That’s a good plan” I said. The students were getting quite excited now and I had strong hopes that this would work.

“What should we call ourselves?” Carlos asked the others. “How about the UC specials?”

The others laughed and I said, “You can sort that out later. Some teams have had special signs and handshakes when they did some anti-bullying actions.” They laughed some more.

“We have a job to do. When would you like to get started?”

“How about now?” they all said at once.

As they filed out of my office, I reflected on what had happened in my room. The scent and heat of their bodies lingered, their laughter and their particular sense of humor caused me to smile. I looked up at my white board and looked at the simple yet effective plan they had developed. I wondered about the second item, and how Michelle had said that she could remind her “not to go all stupid”.

Michelle was the one that Candice had identified as one of the bullies, but that was not obvious to me when they all started making suggestions about how they would help her.

Two days passed and I called Candice from her class.

She appeared at the door, and she had a big smile on her face. I asked myself, could this be the same girl that had told me such a sad tale?

“Please sit down, Candice,” I said warmly. “It seems like there has been a change in your class”, I smiled in return.

“Well,” she began, “in Math, this kid was saying stuff, like mean stuff, and this other girl came and sat down next to me and told this kid not to be sad. She’s not even on the Team! She stuck up for me. It was actually kind of cool and it felt like his comments couldn’t affect me. Then he gave in”.



I didn't really understand what she meant about the boy "giving in" but I got the feeling.

"In English, Yanet waved at me", she continued, "and I waved back, and I felt really happy and stuff. There were glances, kind glances from all of them. Michelle started talking to me and it was cool".

"Have your teachers done anything?" I asked.

"I was really shocked. My Math teacher got us all in a circle and told the whole class that he was disappointed to hear that there was bullying in his class. He said how sorry he was that there was meanness towards each other and that he understands that when there is bullying, students can't learn. He said that we weren't going to blame anyone but that we should all look out for each other and be kind to each other because no one really knows what a kid is going through. The class was shocked. I looked at some of the kids on the Team and they looked surprised as well. He reminded the class about how they should all treat each other. I was terrified that he was going to say that it was me who told. But he never mentioned any names. Nobody looked at me, which I was surprised about. He asked the whole class to say what kind of classroom relationships we preferred and all the kids said that they wanted to get along with each other. Then we all had to say how we could make that happen. It reminded me of Primary School but it had a big effect. Then we went back to working and the whole class had one of the best lessons of the year! Then as I was leaving the room, he asked me quietly if I was OK. Nobody noticed. I liked that. That was cool. It made me want to try harder with my work".

I wrote all this down in my notes and then I said that she could go back to class and just keep noticing the good things about her day and when kids are kind to her.

A couple of days passed, and I was surprised to see her at my door when I arrived at school. She said that she wanted to tell me 'things'. I was a bit worried because I wasn't sure what she had to report, but I motioned her into my office and she sat down.

"Well", she stated, "in gym, Josephus came down and sat next to me. Jacob was pushing Josephus into me and calling me 'a thing'. Josephus told Jacob that he was not uncomfortable sitting next to me. He didn't have a problem with me. That was cool, he was sticking up for me. I think that Jacob expected him to laugh

and push me over but he didn't. Alayah now and then says 'hi Candice'. Yanet talks to me now even though she was the meanest. She told me once that I should not look at boys above my station. I didn't know what she meant by that and I am too scared to ask. Carlos asks me if I am alright and he talks to me. I don't know what to say back but at least they pay me some attention. He showed concern for me. Mario has asked me if I need help with my classwork and he has sat next to me. That was weird! I wasn't expecting that".

I asked her how all this extra attention was affecting her.

"I'm not being as crazy. I'm trying to talk to people more. I am being more careful about what I say. But I still feel lonely and scared and I worry that all this might just be an act. I hope it lasts though".

I made a mental note to see her after this team was finished so we could address all these issues that the Undercover Anti-Bullying Team had brought up.

I thanked her for telling me of these new developments and she went to her first class of the day. Later on that day, I called up the team for their first meeting to discuss how they were going.

They all filed into my office and were smiling and laughing as they jostled for places to sit. "How is the team going?" I asked. "How are all your anti-bullying plans working out?" I enquired.

"Good", Carlos said. "She's not calling us names as much".

"I was watching her in Math ", said Michelle, "and a boy called Martin was sitting next to her and he was talking to her. She seems quieter, more happy than sad."

Alayah asked her what was wrong when she looked sad but she wouldn't tell her what hurt her.

"She's really loud in class, and when she is hyper she acts silly".

"We don't like that. She should just be normal".

"She gets defensive when we tell her to be quiet but she's better now. She's done really well in Rowing".

"What do you still need to keep doing to get rid of bullying?" I said, pulling them back to the task.

“Just keep doing what we said on the first day”, Mario said. “Be friendly, look out for her, you know, all the things we said on our plan”.

“What **was** the plan?” Michelle asked. I read out the plan that they all had contributed to:

- *Offer her help when she needs it and offer for her to come into our group*
- *I could remind her that she doesn't need to go 'all stupid' in a gentle way*
- *Stick up for her when people tease her*
- *Listen to her, give her some time*
- *Just talk to her, find out what she likes, go up to her and talk to her, try harder to make friends.*

“Not really”, they nodded in unison. They all agreed that it was a good plan and they just needed to keep doing what they were doing.

One of the girls was not all that positive though and asked, “Why does she target boys that she has no chance with? That's just annoying”. It was this comment that started me thinking about social pressure and the power of looks and comments from other girls that are intended to “pull someone into line”. I noticed that she was not seeking an answer from me but voicing an opinion. I let it go.

I said that I would check with their teachers to see if they have noticed anything more positive about the way that the class was working and that I would see Candice soon to see how she was doing as well.

I emailed her teachers and thanked them for their willingness to support Candice.

The teacher that organised the restorative circle explained that they had a really good conversation about how they could make a positive difference in the ways that they functioned as a class. She said that the students were all very receptive and some noticed that some looked at Candice when she was setting the scene for the talk. She explained that she was careful to not name any names but to discuss ways of speaking that were supportive and not negative of each other. The whole class had worked much better after that and she planned to hold a similar circle each Friday until the end of term because it was so effective.

None of the others replied to my email but one or two of them commented during the lunch break how the class seemed happier and that Candice was much quieter and more manageable.



The next time I saw Candice, she had a lot more to say.

“The bullying is going, dissolving, they’re including me more”, she said as she reflected on my question. “They’re including me a lot more. Mario really helped me, he jogged alongside me in PE and that was cool. He said, ‘Good job and keep on going’. That made me want to go faster. Yanet kept high-fiving me when I ran past her. It’s getting better. The bullying has died down but I still don’t have many friends”, she said sadly.

“Getting and keeping friends is something we can look at when the bullying is over”, I reassured her. “The kids on the team are seeing you in a new light and you them,” I offered. “Maybe someone from the team or all of them can be your friend. I didn’t ask them to be your friend because that would have been a bit forced, but I did invite them to be friendly”.

“Yeah, they have been friendly”, she answered, “but I would like at least one best friend at school”.

“Do you think that the bullying has gone for good?” I enquired.

“Not really... nearly, not totally”, she replied.

“Well, keep on noticing the team treating you well and let them know that you have noticed”, I offered. “I will call the team together this afternoon and we will see what they think. If it’s OK with you, I will let them know what you have seen.”

The notice went out to their various classes in the last period of the day and the Team filed into my office and sat down.

“Can I read to you what Candice has noticed?” I asked.

They all nodded their heads and I read out what she had told me about the ways that the team were working.

“Yeah, it’s true that she doesn’t have many friends. We are trying to include her more and I am glad she is seeing our efforts”.

“She still needs to settle down more, not try so hard to get attention”, Mario said. “She is better, she seems happier, and we are definitely sticking up for her”.

“The whole class has changed,” Yanet said. “There is a better atmosphere in the class and everybody is getting along better”.

“Is there anything that we could improve on?” I enquired.



“Not really”, Josephus added. “We just have to keep doing the plan. That covers it all”.

“How are your energy levels for this kind of work”? I asked.

“Sometimes we just forget about it”, Michelle said. “We just get on with our own work. It’s only when we think about it that we do stuff”, she added.

“I sit next to her”, said Carlos, “and I keep an eye on her. She’s better”.

“I will be seeing her tomorrow and I will ask her if the bullying has gone, ” I explained. “Then if she says she is sure that she feels safer and happier and that the Team's work will last, we will have a little ceremony and hand out the canteen vouchers and certificates from the Principal.”

“Can she come?” Mario asked. “We want to see her and tell her that we have her back now.”

“I will ask her about that and let you know”, I replied.

Candice had a big smile on her face when she appeared at my office door. “Hi Candice”, I said warmly, “How’s things?”

“You mean the bullying?” she said, “It's way better. I feel more comfortable around my class than I used to. Not so tense. I do think about what I do, but I’m not so worried that everything I say is not going to turn into something that can be used against me like ammunition. The bullying is going down on the scale and they don’t treat me like I’m a disease-ridden person. They act normal. I can be myself more, do my own thing. I fit in more now that they are not against me. I’m trying harder in everything I do because I am thinking about the task ahead of me, not about what people are saying and thinking”.

“Do you think that it’s time for the team to be finished now?”, I asked.

“I just hope they keep it up and don’t go back to their old ways, ” she said wistfully. “How do I know that’s not going to happen? Then it would have all been a waste of everybody’s time”, she added.

“A lot more people know about the bullying and a lot more have stood up against it. I think that they were looking for a chance to do what is right rather than feel intimidated by those who seem to be more powerful and influential than themselves. Now your teachers know what has been happening and those who have been bullying you know that the teachers know!”



“Do you think that I could come to the final meeting of the team and hand them their certificates?” She asked.

“That would be a great idea”, I replied. “They all have an evaluation task to do as well, but I am sure that they would like to hear what you have to say about how the team has worked”.

“I often ask a Dean or the Principal to hand out the certificates, but it would be good if you were to do that. I will still ask someone from the management team in the school to come because it is a good chance for them to see what students are doing to eliminate bullying. Often those who bully kids are known to them, and if that is the case, it gives them an opportunity to tell them how they have changed their behaviour”.

I arranged for the Principal to sign the certificates and asked him to come to the final ceremony.

“I would love to,” he said. “Will I get a chance to talk to the Team to tell them how important their work has been?”

“You can say anything you like, you’re the Principal”, I joked. “You will see first hand how a group of students have made a real difference in the classroom”.

I assembled each personalised Principal’s certificate and the canteen vouchers according to the names of the Team members in my office in preparation for the final ceremony. I had bought some orange juice, paper cups and a packet of biscuits at the supermarket and I set them out on a little table in the centre of the room.

The Principal came in as the team members were arriving and I managed to squeeze everyone in. The atmosphere was electric, and they were all excited as they all found a seat and sat down. I watched Candice carefully and she mingled with the students. There seemed to be no problems at all and they were all talking and joking when I motioned that I would like to start the meeting.

Everyone was quiet and I felt the Principal’s eyes on me as I scanned the room.

I took a breath, and I felt my heart pounding at what I had just witnessed. Although I had done this so many times before, each ceremony has a different flavour and my thoughts traveled back to the first meeting I had with Candice, and I recalled the desperation I had seen in her eyes.



Ignoring this surge of emotions, I addressed the team.

“First of all, I would like to thank you for what you have done for Candice and for the impact that you have had in the classroom. Your teachers have told me of your work and how you have helped make learning better for all the students”.

I inquired: “Before I ask you what you and Candice have learned about yourselves and about bullying, I would like to find out how it was for you being on the Team”.

I heard a number of responses.

“It was cool doing this as a team. It made it more funner. We had secret signals that we pulled when one of us did something like seeing if she’s ok”.

“We stopped other kids from being mean. Then they just gave up”.

“It was easy for us. Natural”.

“I like helping others. My parents have taught me to do this. When I told them I was on a special team stopping bullying they said how proud they were. They said it was a Jesus thing to do”.

I asked what it was like for Candice having this team stop her bullying.

“It was so cool. I thought there was something wrong with me but now I’ve changed my mind. I like helping my friends. I’ve got to know them better and they are cool. The teasing has definitely stopped. I like coming to school because there is something for me to do. I don’t think they meant to be mean”.

“Thank you, Candice. I’m so pleased and even more pleased to hear you saying this to your team” I said.

I looked over at the Principal and said, “Mr. Watson, do you have any questions you would like to ask or any observations that you would like to share?”

Mr. Watson looked very thoughtfully at the students, scanning the room. I noticed that some of them were squirming a little on their seats and he said, “Thank you for making this school a better place. You have done something that teachers and parents worry about a lot. I’m keen to hear what you have learned from being on this Team”.

There was a stunned silence. I could tell that no one wanted to speak first.



The students seemed relieved when I said to him, “I’m sure that they have all learned a great deal but they are probably still gathering their thoughts”. The students nodded in agreement.

“What have you learned about yourself and about bullying?” I asked them. I heard more responses.

“I didn’t realise how bad bullying was”, said one of the ex-bullies.

“I was just going along with my cousin”, the other ex-bully said. “Then it was hard to stop even though I wanted to”.

“I felt ashamed that we had let it go on for so long. I’ve been bullied too, and I never got over it. Her story was so sad. Deep down, I didn’t want anything bad to happen to her”.

“Same!” another said. It wasn’t fair what she was going through but we had no idea”.

“It was fun.”

“I’m going to be looking out for bullying from now on and I’m going to speak up”.

“My parents said I should do more of this. They asked me all the time about it. I did it for them. They encouraged me”.

“I don’t care what people think of me. If I feel that something is wrong, I will stand up against it now. The Team taught me that”.

My final question was something that I wanted to hear the answer to. It was the same question that Candice had asked me when we were first setting up the team.

“How can we keep this good work going or should it die after you have been given your certificates and used up your canteen vouchers?”

The question hung in the air for a few seconds before one of the students replied to it.

“Well, I’ve changed now, and I won’t let this thing go. I feel like I can help others who are being bullied now. I know what to do. If everyone knew about undercover anti-bullying, then the school would be a better place. I wish I had known about this last year. Now that we can tell people, I’m going to tell my friends about the fun we had”.



I watched her face as the team members shared their experiences and responded to my questions. She seemed to be listening intently to all that had been said.

“Candice, is there anything that you would like to say to us all before I invite you to hand out the certificates and canteen vouchers?” I asked.

“Well, thank you all for making me feel better”, she said shyly. “I didn’t think this would work but it has. I feel like I belong at this school now and I’ve also learned a lot too”.

“I still feel like I’m weird and I still need to feel accepted, but I have made friends with people now and I think I’m beginning to be accepted for who I am. I’ve tried to change who I am since the Team started and I don’t think that I am as annoying as I was. It’s better at rowing now that I’m not trying so hard to make friends. But thanks to all of you for being kinder to me and including me in things”.

“That’s about it.”

I handed her the certificates and the canteen vouchers and she stood up and gave out the certificates that I had prepared along with the voucher as she shook each team member’s hand. The sincerity and solemnity of this action surprised me. The students seemed happy that they had done something quite special and unprecedented, something like no other group.

“All that is needed now is for us to have a drink of juice and a biscuit and please complete the evaluation form before you leave”, I said ceremoniously and jocularly.

The mood was much lighter and festive as they poured out the juice into their paper cups and reached out to pick up a chocolate biscuit or two from the plate in the centre of the room. They completed their evaluation forms and filed out the door. I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude as they departed and as Candice walked out the door, I said, “Let’s catch up in a couple of days, OK?” She smiled, flicked her hair and nodded her head then quickly re-joined her teammates, laughing about something that only teenagers know about.

The Principal lingered for a while longer and he looked at me with a smile on his face and said, “That was a good thing to do, Mike. Thanks for including me in the ceremony. Now I’ve seen living proof that students can really step up when there is a job as important as anti-bullying to be done.



I tidied up the room and I put the completed evaluation forms into my folder along with the original story and closed it up then I went to lunch myself, still reeling from what had happened.

Concluding Thoughts

Over the period of 2004 to 2020, I have had cause to implement this practice at Edgewater College 56 times. All the instances were not as extreme as those in the story above; however, without the intervention of the Undercover Anti-Bullying Team, many of the stories could have caused the victim of the bullying to have attempted suicide. It is clear to me that lives have been saved by such a timely intervention, and had the Team not been formed, the consequences would have been much more serious.

All of my previous Teams have had very similar results.

At the completion of the Team, I ask the students to complete an evaluation of the process and it was these evaluations that have been studied in two independent studies that show the sustainability of this work and the immediate impact on the students involved and the wider school community. These results were verified by the former victims, former bullies, other members of the underground teams, classroom teachers, and friends of all the participants in the programme.

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