

# Sticks and Stones

**Language can hurt. Educators, parents, and community members must help students become the solution to the problems of bias, prejudice, and harassment in schools.**

**D**uring a recent student assembly at a suburban high school, I asked the students to raise their hands if they believed that dangerous weapons were brought to school on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, not one hand was raised. I looked around the auditorium, paused, and told the students that I believed that each one of them was wrong. One particular kind of weapon is brought into their school, and into every high school and middle school in the United States, every day: degrading words, slurs, and put-downs. Recent cases in Maine schools illustrate some of the critical and destructive characteristics of degrading language and slurs.

The first case began sometime in early January when four boys began targeting another boy—"John"—with antigay harassment. The harassment began with whispered slurs and comments as John walked by in the hallway. Then the four boys became more brazen. They began making graphic antigay slurs directly to John. By the end of January, the boys had taken their harassment to another level, tripping John when he walked by or pushing him into a locker while yelling slurs.

Sometime in early February, the four boys significantly increased the seriousness of their conduct. On two occasions, several boys jumped John during the school day. While one of the boys put him in a head lock, the other boys—continuing to call him names—kneaded him in the stomach and groin.

Three additional incidents occurred between late February and early April. John was jumped in the boys' bathroom by several of the boys who, while yelling antigay slurs, pushed his head into a urinal. In another incident, one of the boys came up behind John at school and put a noose around his neck. This was not a string or a piece of yarn, but a rope tied as a noose. The boy pulled the rope so tightly around John's neck that it took

John about 35 seconds to pry his fingers underneath to pull the noose over his head. Sometimes, when we look at the second hand of a wall clock and count to 35, the time goes by pretty quickly. For John, however, those seconds were probably the longest moments of his life. Up to this point, no adult in the school was aware of any of the harassment and violence directed at John.

The final event occurred when one of the boys told John that he knew where his father kept a handgun and that he was going to bring it to school the next day and shoot John, another boy who was John's supposed boyfriend, and then himself. A student overheard and told a teacher, who told the principal, who called the police. The police immediately reported the incident to me as director of the civil rights unit in the Maine Attorney General's office.

Two points from this sad series of incidents bear

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emphasis. First, the age of the boys. Each boy, including John, was 12 years old—7th graders in a K-8 school. Every year since 1992, the number of hate crimes and bias incidents involving teenagers and younger children reported by police to the Maine Attorney General has increased. Second, the escalation of degrading language and slurs to more focused harassment and threats and then to violence was the pattern in virtually every case of serious hate violence in middle schools, high schools, and colleges in the seven years I directed the antihate crime enforcement effort for Maine.

Another case started with a phone call from a high school principal. He called to tell me that a student had used a permanent marker to write "Kill the Jews" and to draw a swastika near some lockers. The principal asked for advice, and I suggested several concrete steps that he should take. My last words to him were that he should expect that some Jewish students would be terrified. When I hung up the phone, it rang immediately. I picked it up thinking that it was the principal calling back with another question. Instead, it was the mother of an 11th grade Jewish girl calling to tell me about the incident. When I told her that I already knew about it,



she said that her daughter had taken off the Star of David necklace that she had worn since 2nd grade. The girl believed she might be harmed if other students knew she was Jewish. Even when incidents of bias, prejudice, harassment, and violence do not escalate, they can terrorize some students.

denominator exists: the destructive power of degrading and violent language. Each incident illustrates a distinct effect of hateful words and symbols. The incident of the boy taunted by four classmates shows the escalation from language to violence. The incident of the anti-Semitic graffiti

## Pervasive Use

How pervasive is the use of degrading language? Derogatory language has been commonplace in schools for a long time. Most of us heard degrading language and slurs when we were students. But the use of language that degrades specific groups—particularly groups that appear different in some way—appears to have increased. Specifically, we are talking about words that degrade others because of their gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, economic status, and physical and mental disability. A second set of words appears to have increased in usage and intensity: words that threaten violence. It is striking how quickly—often in a matter of seconds—a mild argument in a hallway can escalate to involve violent and threatening language.

Not every student uses degrading and violent words; many do not. But all young people today hear hateful words, slurs, and words of violence every day as the background noise of their lives. They hear them at the movies, on television, from radio shock jocks, and on their CDs. Sadly, some young people hear them from their families. But most important, they hear them from one another—on the bus, in the hallway, on the playground, and in the locker rooms. They hear them 24/7. The use of degrading and violent language is pervasive and endemic.

Unfortunately, the routine use of slurs and other degrading language has desensitized too many students. They cease to understand or hear the real meanings of the words they use, and often the only students who truly realize their impact and meaning are the boys and girls who are the targets of the slurs, jokes, and put-downs. The impact of debasing language on these students is powerful and destructive.

## The Toll

The toll students suffer from their exposure to degrading language is profound

words, they said, "Don't use that word in this school." The four of them pivoted and went on down the hall.

This is not rocket science. This is adults modeling for our students the courage and skills to intervene and, in turn, those students modeling that courage and those qualities for other students.

### Our Students' Strength and Courage

Here's one last anecdote that illustrates the low points and the high points of dealing with these issues. A boy—"Scott"—was a sophomore who was "out" in his high school as a gay student. Walking home from school, he realized that five classmates were following him. The classmates started yelling antigay slurs. Scott started walking faster but realized that he was not going to be able to reach his home before his classmates caught up with him. He walked into a nearby three-story apartment house with the idea of knocking on doors and getting into someone's apartment to be safe. Unfortunately, no one was home and he was trapped in the stairwell. The five boys climbed the stairs and surrounded Scott. They yelled slurs that turned to threats and then started hitting him. Scott fell to the ground and the boys kicked him. One of his classmates picked up Scott by his shirt collar, held him out over the three-story balcony, and, yelling an antigay slur, told Scott that the next time he would be dropped.

This incident was referred to the police and the Attorney General's office. The case went to court successfully and received a fair amount of



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publicity. The next fall, Scott was standing at the bus stop ready to go to school when four middle school boys started taunting him. Two of those boys picked up a garbage can filled with disgusting, wet, and smelly junk and dumped it over his head. This incident was resolved informally. The local newspaper, however, wrote an article (without disclosing Scott's name) connecting this incident with the one the past spring. Shortly after the article appeared, I received a letter from a group of students who were members of a civil rights group at a nearby high school. They sent the letter to me and

asked whether I would send it to Scott because they did not know his name. The letter reads:

Dear Friend,

We, our school's Civil Rights Team, would like to convey to you our thoughts about the awful harassment that you have so bravely endured recently and in past months. First of all, we want to tell you how very sorry we are that you have been so terribly harassed and threatened. Let it be known to you and the small minority of people who hate those who are different, or who are perceived to be different, that they are not supported by the rest of society, and especially not by us as a team. The deplorable acts of cowardice perpetrated by these haters are just that, deplorable acts, and are condemned by us and the rest of humanity. We understand how deeply painful discrimination and harassment are, and ask you not to despair. Remember that the people who are responsible for the hateful acts committed against you are ignorant bigots whose opinions

and beliefs you should not take to heart.

Please remember that you are not alone and that we fully support you and denounce the haters of the world.

The letter was signed by the 16 members of the Civil Rights Team and their two faculty advisors.

I have had a strange and evolving relationship with this letter. When I first received it, I thought it was a nice letter. I sent it to Scott and put my copy away. But over the next weeks and months, I kept returning to the letter, and it gradually began to take on a great

## Interrupting the Language

No magic solution exists. We will not develop one project that will eliminate hate and prejudice or end violence, but we can begin to change the culture in which the use of degrading language and violence appears acceptable to our students. To do this we must, in consistent, firm, but low-key ways, confront the use of these words. Adults must intervene when degrading language is spoken.

Teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors have extraordinarily difficult and important jobs. The hardest situation occurs when you walk

through a busy hallway and hear a student make a degrading remark. What do you do? I'll tell you what your students tell me they want you to do. They say, "*Please, please say something.*" Children understand at a very early age that some other children will be mean to them. But, at the same time, they trust that teachers and other adults will protect them.

Two additional points make the need to intervene even more compelling. First, when a teacher does not respond to degrading language, students believe that the silence means that the teacher condones those words. This is not true, it is not fair, but it is what students believe. The students who are most devastated by degrading language are those who believe a teacher heard but did not intervene. Second, you cannot tell which students feel personally targeted by derogatory words and slurs.

If you are walking through a hallway and you hear two white boys using a racial slur but decide not to intervene

dent, you may be wrong. You do not know whether the white girl walking behind you has a favorite first cousin who is African American or an older brother or sister who has married a person of color. Our society is changing rapidly and the number of people who are deeply and personally influenced by degrading language and slurs has increased.

What kind of intervention am I talking about? First, I am *not* talking about calling in the SWAT Team. I am *not* talking about sending students to the principal's office. I am *not* talking about the 35-minute lecture on the

damage created by homophobic, racist, sexist, or anti-Semitic comments. I am talking about consistent, firm, and low-key interruptions of degrading language and slurs: "We don't talk like that here"; "That word offends me"; "Language, please!"

This kind of intervention breaks the pattern of escalation from language to more focused harassment to threats and, finally, to violence. It significantly reduces the chance that students will be the victims of serious violence. As a former prosecutor, I know that if we can interrupt the language before it escalates, we dramatically reduce the need for police and prosecutorial intervention.

Intervention also has an extraordinary impact on the students who feel targeted. They will remember you. I talk to former students in their 20s, 30s, and 40s who remember the teacher who interrupted degrading language and slurs. Last year, I spoke with a 57-year-old Arab American man who moved to the United States when he was 12. He

an algebra class when he was 16 years old. Some students started taunting him with ethnic slurs because he was from the Middle East. His teacher immediately intervened and stopped the taunts. This man described the incident as if it had occurred earlier that morning instead of 41 years ago. You may not know which students are affected by your interventions and you may not even remember when you intervened, but I have met men and women whose teachers became their lifelong heroes simply because those teachers intervened to stop hurtful and degrading language.

Most important, when you interrupt degrading language and slurs, you become a role model for your students. You cannot turn around a culture of slurs and put-downs by yourself. You need your students' help. I have seen schools turn around on the issue of language and civility. I have seen students begin to speak up in low-key ways. Students feel empowered, and they empower other students.

Last winter I had a conversation with a 9th grade boy who does speak up when other students use degrading language and slurs. "Mr. Wessler," he said, "I'm getting really down about this. I keep on telling kids not to use bad words, but I keep on hearing them." I had nothing extraordinarily helpful to tell this young boy and our conversation soon ended. The next week he saw me again, ran up, and said, "I need to tell you what happened at school last night." He recounted that he was walking down the hall with three girls after a school basketball game. They heard a boy use a racist slur toward another boy. The 9th grader told me that he started to turn around to say something, and as he was turning, he felt motion beside him. When he had turned around, he looked left and then right and realized that the three girls had turned at the same time and that the four of them had their fingers

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Fear can also lead to declining grades. I have seen too many young people whose abilities to concentrate and study declined dramatically in the wake of harassment. You cannot learn if you are focusing on whether you will be safe walking down the halls of your school. Finally, fear can lead to such physical and emotional problems as weight loss, sleep disorders, anxiety, and depression.

**Rage.** Some students who endure slur after slur, day after day, week after week, reach the breaking point and snap, hitting back at the attacker. There is no more difficult situation for school administrators to handle. The victim

has now committed a serious act of violence. The student who has engaged in the harassment has participated in a far less serious act of misconduct as defined by school disciplinary policies and the criminal justice system. When harassment has proceeded to this point, it often is too late to do anything but try to pick up the pieces.

**Loss of spirit.** These are, for me, the saddest stories. Many of our parents told us that "sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you." Students from traditionally targeted groups understand that sticks and stones may break your bones, but the words of hate may break your soul. Too many children lose hope. Too many gay and lesbian students drop out of school, too many students of color lose faith in a system that they expect to educate them, and too many girls lose faith and confidence in themselves. Tragically, some of these children become so hurt and lost that they engage in self-destructive behavior. Some do not survive.

years of investigating and prosecuting hate crimes in colleges, high schools, and middle schools that the violence was never the *beginning* of anything. Rather, the violence was the *end* of something, and that something was an escalating pattern of harassment that started with degrading language and slurs. It should not be a surprise that if it appears acceptable to constantly denigrate and slur, some students will conclude that it is also acceptable to take words to the next level. Some students will then conclude that it is acceptable to go to the next level, and the next.

Words do not exist in a vacuum. When left unchallenged, words create a culture and an environment that appear to condone bias, prejudice, and violence.

**Fear.** This is the hardest point for many of us to understand. Many of us do not identify with a word or symbol that can elicit a strong fear. But many of our students do experience this kind of

fear. The 11th grade Jewish girl I described earlier is not an exception. Antigay comments, racist slurs, and sexually degrading language all carry an implicit threat of violence. If you are a 16-year-old African American girl and someone scrawls "the KKK is back" on your notebook, what do you believe will happen next? If you are a gay high school student and a group comes up to you and yells "get out of our way, you [antigay slur]," what do you think will happen if you do not get out of the way? The answer to both questions is violence.

The fear of violence generated by degrading symbols and words based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation can be terrifying and paralyzing. This fear can lead to other consequences. For some young people, the fear that slurs, degrading language, and harassment will get worse if they tell anyone about them leads them to deny that the incidents ever occurred. Unfortunately, this denial intensifies the fear.

- importance for me. I now keep a copy in my wallet.

We hear people say that more police officers and more metal detectors are the solutions to school violence. We do need *appropriate* law enforcement activity. But if teenagers hear that the solution to the problem of bias and violence is a metal detector at every door and a police officer in every hall, they also hear the subtle message that the problem of teen violence is teenagers. I disagree. I do not believe that our students are the problem or the cause of incivility and violence. Instead, I believe that our students—like the students who sent the letter—are the solution.

Many of our students possess the seeds of the courage, the self-presence, and the empathy to speak up for civility. Young people are, in fact, our

greatest resource for addressing incivility, prejudice, and violence in the United States.

When Scott went through those two awful incidents—one in which he thought he would lose his life and the other in which he lost his dignity—the adult world did a great job of addressing the issue from a systemwide perspective. The courts, the schools, the police officers, and the prosecutors worked to ensure Scott's safety. However, it took a group of students from a different high school, students who did not know and will never know Scott, to reach out to make sure that he did not despair. Those young men and women ensured that Scott would not lose hope. I believe that when Scott is 20, 30, 40, 50, and older, what he will remember from those ugly and terrifying high school inci-

dents were the 16 students who reached out to tell him that he was not alone and that they joined him in denouncing the haters of the world.

Our task, as educators, as parents, and as neighbors, is to help our young people grow their seeds of courage and empathy to maturity—to the point where they will rely on their own courage, resiliency, and good will to say "No" to bias, disrespect, and violence. ■

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