

Cultivating Courage to Overcome Bullying Through Diversity Book Clubs

Sonja Ezell
Emporia State University

Abstract

As universities enroll increasingly diverse student populations, fill tenure track positions with minority status faculty, and hire staff members conscientiously, they need transformative narratives and culturally sensitive dialogs as adaptive changes. A small university i the Midwest provided a diversity book club to promote weekly conversation among students, faculty, and staff on issues related to race religion, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. This study examines diversity book club study offerings for courageous responses to bullying and recommends practices to cultivate courage to overcome bullying related to diverse populations on university campuses.

Book Clubs

A small university in the Midwest provided a diversity book club to promote weekly dialogue among students, faculty, and staff on issues related to race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. The multicultural books were provided free of charge to the students and covered diverse genres. Included inside each book was a bookmark listing the dates and times for the weekly meetings and the assigned pages. The book club sessions was attended by students of all academic classifications, ranging from freshmen to seniors. The students represented the various colleges on campus, including The Teachers College, and the Sociology Department. Some students expressed the desire to major in education, counseling, criminal justice, or history. The students commonly shared that they were at the book club because they personally related to the topic or the focus of the book was of strong interest to them. The

[TABLE of CONTENTS](#)

book club was established to open up dialogue and provide a safe space for students who were dealing with cultural bullying.

Battling Bullying

Bullying is a crucial, real-world issue that affects most students. Research indicates that bullying has a profound impact on a person's social and emotional well-being. Precisely defined, bullying is calculated, ongoing abuse that is intentional and repetitive social cruelty. In general, bullying is aimed at a less powerful target and the targets cannot easily defend themselves.

Many of us are aware of overt or physical bullying; but research shows that most bullying today does not involve any physical contact. Nonetheless, bullying is an abusive behavior with embellished idiosyncrasies that stakeholders may miss or misinterpret. Therefore, when ascertaining bullying, we need to judiciously know what to look for and acknowledge digital technology isn't the only factor that has changed the nature of bullying.

Contemporary bullying is centered around the use of methods, policies, and behaviors to convey contempt and dominance and is not always easy to recognize. Almost all children and adolescents belong to at least one stigmatized group, whether they are a Black or Latino boy in school; an immigrant or refugee; a gay or lesbian teen; or a girl in physics class. At some point, lack of acceptance or the bullhorns of bullying impacts most youth. Stealth bullying, or its counterpart, open rejection on the basis of race/ethnicity, immigration status, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity can have long-term academic, psychological, and social repercussions.

How individuals are impacted by overt or covert bullying, depends on the resources and support systems they have in place to cope with the off setting event. Through book clubs students can experience an uncommon sense of agency in their own lives. As readers and conversationalists, hearing

all voices, they can initiate positive changes to decrease bullying to ensure that all individuals feel safe and valued.

Courageous Conversations to Conquer Bullies

While book clubs may weave together strands of public discourse about the power of literature to stir courage and foster change; there must be a venue to address personal and social attacks from bullies.

Book clubs allow individuals to better comprehend multicultural texts, raise questions, transcend traditional beliefs, and listen to multiple viewpoints (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2014). Through social interaction, dialogue, and conversation with their peers, students gain valuable knowledge and understandings about multicultural literature. Studies have shown that students who read and discuss diverse texts are able to think about culture and diversity in complex ways (Athanasas & Larrabee, 2003). Book clubs utilizing multicultural literature provide experiences for students to learn about one another and lay the foundation for courageous conversations about self, others, and the response of diverse individuals to bullying.

Universities can create a culture that supports academic achievement and social and emotional development; by developing authentic learning experiences so that students feel safe to take risks and are challenged by new ideas and perspectives. A learning space, such as a book club, where students are presented with new ideas; empowered to advocate for themselves and others against bullying; and are supported in developing values, attitudes, behaviors and actions that are crucial for learning and life.

A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Bullying

To promote courageous conversations and cultivate diverse thinking to counter the opposition of bullying; a diversity book club at a small university in the Midwest read, discussed, and pondered over the following multicultural texts: *HisPanic: Why Americans Fear Hispanics in the U.S.* (by Geraldo Rivera); *Choking on Silence: A Memoir* (by Paul B. Tripp); *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in*

the Age of Colorblindness (by Michelle Alexander); and, A Density of Souls (by Christopher Rice).

These texts allowed the book club members to deeply explore courage, diversity, cultural competence and the harsh realities of bullying. Table 1 presents an overview of the selected multicultural texts and the associated social tools to tackle bullying

Hispanics:

The nonfictional text, *HisPanic: Why Americans Fear Hispanics in the U.S.* seeks to explain why so many Americans are concerned about illegal immigration. The author notes that the current hostility demonstrated by some anti-immigrant groups is no different from the vices that were directed against earlier generations of Irish or Italian immigrants.

To counter the oppressive layer of bullying that establishes a hostile environment and exacerbates differences; the cultural competencies of group advocacy and awareness campaigns are needed to evoke courage. A resolution inviting deeper conversations and sound governing policies are needed to promote a more inclusive environment to counter the bullying climate of ‘you don’t belong here’ As the author highlighted, when it comes to immigration, it should be recognized as a part of a process that makes this country unique.

LGBTQ:

The nonfictional text, *Choking on Silence: A Memoir*, is a powerful narrative about an individual who was forced to live an inauthentic life that often broke his heart and threatened to break his spirit. Tripp shares the personal journey he undertook to find his way to a place where he could love and accept the person he was while serving in the U.S. military.

To pierce the suffocating layer of bullying that forces secrets and creates a threatening climate of non-acceptance; the cultural competencies of registered student organizations and planned social mixers are needed to invite courage. The resolve to create social events for diverse groups of individuals to

gather and share their true authentic story is needed to erode the bullying platform of rejection. Paul Tripp reminds us of our responsibility to speak up and take a stand against any institutions that denies individuals their fundamental rights to live their life openly and honestly.

African Americans

The nonfictional text, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* is a gripping account of the rebirth of a caste-like correctional system in the United States, that has resulted in millions of African Americans being locked behind bars and then relegated to a parallel social universe where they are denied the right to vote; the right to be free of legal discrimination in employment, access to education and public benefits.

To erode the hinges of institutionalized bullying that results in discrimination and exclusionary laws and practices that bullies those who have paid their debt to society; the cultural competencies of organized rallies and high-profile speakers are needed to flame the embers of courage to address community concerns about the inequalities of the criminal justice system. The author, Michelle Alexander, challenges all of us to place mass incarceration at the forefront of a new movement for racial justice in America.

Mental Health

The fictional text, *A Density of Souls*, shares the story of four individuals who quickly discover the fragile boundaries between friendship and betrayal as they enter high school and form new alliances. Brandon and Greg gain popularity as football jocks and Meredith joins the bulimic in-crowd, while Stephen becomes the target of homophobia in a school that viciously mocks him. Horrifically, two violent deaths disrupt the core of what they once shared and the casual cruelties of high school develop into acts of violence that threaten an entire city.

To pierce the heavy layer of bullying that establishes alienation and isolation; the cultural competencies of building allies and attending support groups are needed to evoke courage. A resolution welcoming alliances with key mental health partners, life coaches, and group therapy sessions are needed to stoke strong social and emotional health in the face of vile bullying. Christopher Rice created a stirring novel that exposes the dark side of teenage bullying in modern-day America.

Conclusions and Implications

Multicultural literature bridges the reader's insight and understanding regarding the battles with bullies that various groups face. Book clubs can foster an avenue for discussing bullying through the lens of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomics, language, religion, and sexual orientation, and offer students a safe space to champion a sustainable future against the perils of bullying.

References

- Athanases, S. Z., & Larrabee, T. G. (2003). Toward a consistent stance in teaching for equity: Learning to advocate for lesbian-and gay-identified youth. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 19*, 237-261.
- Blum, H. T., Lipsett, L. R., & Yocom, D. J. (2014). Literature circles a tool for self-determination in one middle school inclusive classroom. *Remedial and Special Education, 23*(2), 99-108.

Books Cited

- Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York: New Press.
- Rice, C. (2014). *A Density of Souls*. Seattle: Thomas & Mercer.
- Rivera, G. (2008). *Hispanic: Why Americans fear Hispanics in the U.S.* New York: Celebra.
- Tripp, P. B. (2012). *Choking on Silence: A Memoir*. North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace.

Table 1. *Multicultural Texts and Social Tools to Tackle Bullying*

Multicultural Text	Social Tools to Tackle Bullying
<i>HisPanic: Why Americans Fear Hispanics in the U.S.</i> by Geraldo Rivera	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group Advocacy • Awareness campaigns
<i>Choking on Silence: A Memoir</i> by Paul Tripp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registered Student Organizations (RSO) • Planned Social Mixers
<i>The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness</i> by Michelle Alexander	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized Rallies • High Profile Speakers
<i>A Density of Souls</i> by Christopher Rice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build Allies • Support/Therapy Groups

Table 1. *Multicultural Texts and Social Tools to Tackle Bullying*

Multicultural Text	Social Tools to Tackle Bullying
<i>HisPanic: Why Americans Fear Hispanics in the U.S.</i> by Geraldo Rivera	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group Advocacy • Awareness campaigns
<i>Choking on Silence: A Memoir</i> by Paul Tripp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registered Student Organizations (RSO) • Planned Social Mixers
<i>The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness</i> by Michelle Alexander	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized Rallies • High Profile Speakers
<i>A Density of Souls</i> by Christopher Rice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build Allies • Support/Therapy Groups

Table 1. *Multicultural Texts and Social Tools to Tackle Bullying*

Multicultural Text	Social Tools to Tackle Bullying
<i>HisPanic: Why Americans Fear Hispanics in the U.S.</i> by Geraldo Rivera	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group Advocacy • Awareness campaigns
<i>Choking on Silence: A Memoir</i> by Paul Tripp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registered Student Organizations (RSO) • Planned Social Mixers
<i>The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness</i> by Michelle Alexander	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized Rallies • High Profile Speakers

A Density of Souls
by Christopher Rice

- Build Allies
- Support/Therapy Groups