Shakespeare gives the latest strategy in anti-bullying in schools

By Colleen O'Connor
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Caroline Barry, left, and Joan Dieter perform a scene from Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" at Arrowhead Elementary. (Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post)

Shakespeare is the latest strategy in combating bullying in America's schools, but the idea was not an immediate hit.

"When we first told people, they said, 'What? That's weird. How do those two things go together?' " said Jane Grady, assistant director for the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado.

But after a month of performances of "Twelfth Night" in 25 schools across Colorado, which were followed by workshops in which kids talked about the character Malvolio and other bullies in the play, the results surprised the experts.

The plan was to do eight shows a week throughout October, which is National Bullying Prevention Month. Bookings were filled before the first rehearsal, so a fifth week was added.

"It's pretty amazing," Grady said. "Hopefully it will take off, because this is really a better way to get the message out."

In Colorado, anti-bullying education in schools has helped decrease the problem, according to a 2009 Colorado Trust survey, which was part of a $9 million Bullying Prevention Initiative. More than 3,000 students — in fifth, eighth and 11th grades — in 40 Colorado counties participated in the program. Results were tracked twice
a year. Students who said they participated in or witnessed physical bullying dropped from 69 percent to 58 percent over three years. For verbal bullying, the decline was from 76 percent to 67 percent.

**Every 7 minutes**

Much more prevention work, however, is needed in Colorado and other states.

Bullying is the most common form of violence in the U.S., with one-third of students bullied each month, according to the National Education Association. An incident happens every 7 minutes in every kind of school: rural, suburban and urban.

The idea that 17th-century Shakespeare plays can be relevant to the contemporary bullying problem came from the Colorado Shakespeare Festival.

Associate producing director Timothy Orr and education associate Amanda Giguere had been brainstorming about the fall school tour of "Twelfth Night," a romantic comedy in which a servant named Maria decides to get back at Malvolio, a dour, mean-spirited steward, by forging a love letter from him to his employer, Lady Olivia.

"The idea hit me that in 'Twelfth Night,' everyone mistreats each other," Orr said. "It's like a practical joke gone too far, and I thought, 'Let's talk about bullying.'"

They approached the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, just a few blocks down the street in Boulder.

It was just random outreach — they had no idea that their Boulder neighbor is a national leader on anti-bullying research or that its director, Delbert Elliott, served as science editor for the U.S. surgeon general's report on youth violence.

**Study guides, workshops**

"They loved the idea," Orr said. "When we pitched the play, we talked about the phony letter forged for Malvolio. They said, 'That's just like cyberbullying on Facebook!'"

Elliott applied for a grant to fund the project, and his team worked closely with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival to develop study guides and workshops that feature the latest research on effective anti-bullying practices from the CU center.

"It's a very unique and creative way to present the information to students," said Jeanne McDonald, assistant director at the CU Office for University Outreach, which also collaborated on the project. "After the play, they're able to do workshops with the actors, do movement and act things out, and talk out different scenarios."

On Thursday morning at Archuleta Elementary School in Green Valley Ranch, students packed the auditorium to see three actors perform scenes from the play.

The kids fidgeted during longer monologues but shouted, cheered and laughed during high-action scenes of humor and drama.

Toward the end, Malvolio — whose bullying behavior gets him mocked and tormented by his peers — turned toward the audience and said: "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you."
Similar patterns

During workshops that followed, actors led discussions with students to help them analyze how this moment capped a cycle of violence within the play, and how Malvolio's story might reflect the same patterns of bullying they see in their own lives.

When an actor asked how many students had "seen bullying like you've seen on stage today," almost everyone raised a hand.

In a workshop filled with mostly third-graders, actor Joan Dieter asked the kids to list bullying behaviors they saw in the play.

"Pushing and fighting," said one boy.

"A pretend love letter!" said another.

Dieter picked up on this, asking whether they knew about cyberbullying.

Facebook, Twitter and texting, answered the kids.

"Did Shakespeare have an iPhone?" asked Dieter, a concept the students found hysterically funny.

"Maria writes a letter," Dieter said, "and that is like cyberbullying."

Also, the students discussed concepts such as imbalance of power, read short bits of the script and moved around the room in role-playing exercises. Performers coached them to act out the different feelings they saw in characters in the play, from low self-worth to high self-worth.

Bullies tend to have low self-worth but masquerade as having high self-worth, Dieter told them, and one student had a vivid realization after role-playing this.

"It's like when you bully people," the student said, "it feels like you are bullying yourself on that inside."

"That's right," Dieter said. "Because you're pushing people away."

Grady of the CU center said the results are thrilling.

"Research by itself is very dry," she said. "It's not just the kids that tune it out; it's probably all of us. Seeing the play, it's raucous in some ways, funny and sad. It draws people in a whole lot better than a presentation."

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