

2002

# Room of Confession: An Investigation into the Challenges and Possible Applications of Primary Narrative for Use in Middle School Peer Harassment Intervention

Dorothy D. Foote

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ROOM OF CONFESSION: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE CHALLENGES AND  
POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS OF PRIMARY NARRATIVE FOR USE IN  
MIDDLE SCHOOL PEER HARASSMENT INTERVENTION

By

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A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

(in Human Development)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

August, 2002

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Sandra L. Caron

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
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Peer harassment is an omnipresent reality in our schools today. The literature reviewed for this paper examines harassment and victimization on several levels (e.g., individual behaviors of target and perpetrator, various forms of victimization, group processes, family dynamics, and structural characteristics of larger units such as the classroom and the school). The literature identifies a number of prevention and intervention strategies designed to address this issue in a school setting, with much of the emphasis on the classroom teacher or guidance department. One strategy not found in the current literature is storytelling in the form of primary narrative.

This thesis investigates the use of “harassment tales” told by high school students to middle school students to create a context of confession, enabling the younger students to consider their own roles in harassment and victimization. The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges and possible applications of personal testimonials by high school students as a means of intervention in middle schools. This study involves

students in an ongoing program, the Diversity Coalition at Camden Hills Regional High School in Rockport, Maine.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my gratitude to the many individuals who aided me in the completion of my graduate work. First, my sincere appreciation to the student members of the Diversity Coalition at Camden Hills Regional High School. Without their willingness to do the difficult work of reflecting on their own harassment stories, The Harassment Tales Project would not have become a reality. I am indebted to Dr. Sandra Caron, my Advisor, for trusting me to do the work required for a nontraditional thesis, for her ability to keep me focused considering my ardent but sometimes capricious passion in pursuit of this project, and for her encouragement in further study around the issues of diversity and tolerance. I also thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Cynthia Erdley and Dr. Mary Madden for their valuable feedback and advice, not only on my thesis work, but also as I put this work into practice. I thank my partner Charlie and my children, Andrea, Morgan, and William and all those who lent an ear to my thoughts and deliberations throughout the development of the project.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

[I]t is a fundamental democratic and human right for a child to feel safe in school and to be spared the oppression and repeated, intentional humiliation implied in peer victimization or bullying. No student should be afraid of going to school for fear of being harassed or degraded, and no parent should need to worry about such things happening to his or her child. (Olweus, 2001, p. 11-12)

These words, written by Dan Olweus, Ph.D., reflect a basic and widely shared expectation as we raise children in the 21st century. However, as Olweus (2001) found in Scandinavian schools a generation ago and as researchers are now finding worldwide, the phenomenon of peer harassment and bullying is a serious issue that threatens the health and proper functioning of our school systems. We can no longer assume that the underlying structures of society or public education are equipped to deal with this often insidious issue.

Based on research into the disabling effects of harassment and victimization on psychological well-being as well as studies that identify numerous models of victimization, schools worldwide have developed various strategies to curb the potential for harm to the target, perpetrator, and society (Brown, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Eyre, 2000; Field, Diego, & Sanders, 2001; Goodman, Stormshak, & Dishion, 2001; Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000; Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; McFarland, 2001; Metzler, Biglan, Rusby, & Sprague, 2001; Owens,

Slee, & Shute, 2000; Pollack, 2000; Schultz, Barr, & Selman, 2001; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000; Sprague et al., 2001; Tezer & Demir, 2001).

In the United States, public schools face a daunting array of challenges arising from the profound social, cultural, and economic changes of the past half-century (Lapan et al., 2001). Understanding the causes and consequences of peer harassment, and developing effective intervention strategies are made more difficult by these changes. Until we move from simply describing the behaviors that constitute harassment to a place where we are naming, and mapping strategy around, the complex mix of social, cultural, and economic factors that drive these behaviors, we will continue to see harassment and its degrading effects.

Any comprehensive school program aimed at ending harassment must begin by looking frankly at the underlying issues, which typically involve differences, real or perceived, among students. It must then work toward integrating and maximizing the positive potentials of diversity, rather than perpetuating fear, conflict, or the derogation of the “other.”

This thesis examines the current literature on peer harassment and victimization in schools, then moves toward an investigation of an intervention tool I have developed over the past 2 years. In my review of the literature, I was unable to identify the use of “storytelling” in the form of primary narrative as a means of influencing the behavior of a perpetrator and supporting the target of harassment. This gap in the literature suggests that, as a society, we fail to recognize the enormous potential value in the telling of our stories to one another. Although we often associate storytelling with preliterate societies,

this tool has seen broad use in numerous fields of therapy and human development (Costantino, Malgady, & Rogler, 1986; Garcia, 1992; McAdams, 1993; Rogers, 1980).

The tool I developed, which will be explored in the Methodology and Discussion sections of this paper, is called The Harassment Tales Project (THTP). It involved a group of Camden Hills Regional High School students called the Diversity Coalition (DC) working with groups of students in grades 5 through 8. By telling their own stories of harassment in middle school, the older students tried to influence the attitudes and behavior of their younger peers. This thesis will explore the potential, challenges, and possible drawbacks of this proposed intervention tool and will describe a method of employing it within the framework of a comprehensive, antiharassment program.

## Chapter 2

### A REVIEW OF THE HARASSMENT LITERATURE

#### Definition of Terms

Peer harassment. The most recent work of scholars studying peer harassment, victimization, and bullying is contained in the aptly titled *Peer Harassment in School: The Plight of the Vulnerable and Victimized* (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). For the purpose of establishing a common language in this manual, considering its numerous authors, the editors define peer harassment as “victimization that entails face-to-face confrontation (e.g., physical aggression, verbal abuse, nonverbal gesturing) or social manipulation through a third party (e.g., social ostracism, spreading rumors)” (p. xiii). The editors also note that what distinguishes this behavior from other types of negative interaction—for instance, conflict—is the imbalance of power between target and perpetrator. This imbalance results in the target’s inability to defend him/herself (Olweus, as cited in Juvonen & Graham, 2001).

Bullying. Dan Olweus is considered a pioneer in the study of peer victimization, having identified and defined the phenomenon in Norway and Sweden over 30 years ago (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). In launching a nationwide campaign against bullying in Norway in 1983, Olweus developed a student questionnaire that defines bullying as: “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (Olweus, as cited in Juvonen & Graham, 2001, p. 6). An expanded definition in the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire follows.

Expanded definitions (extract from Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire, in Juvonen & Graham, 2001, p. 15):

*We say a student is being bullied when another student, or several other students*

- Say mean and hurtful things or make fun of him or her or call him or her mean and hurtful names.
- Completely ignore or exclude him or her from their group of friends or leave him or her out of things on purpose.
- Hit, kick, push, shove around, or lock him or her inside a room.
- Tell lies or spread false rumors about him or her or send mean notes and try to make other students dislike him or her.
- And do other hurtful things like that.

When we talk about bullying, these things happen repeatedly, and it is *difficult for the student being bullied to defend himself or herself*. We also call it bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a mean and hurtful way.

But we *don't call it bullying* when the teasing is done in a friendly and playful way. Also, it is *not bullying* when two students of about the same strength or power argue or fight.

### Background

Harassment in schools is pervasive. It occurs across cultures and among students of all social backgrounds. It takes forms ranging from humiliation to taunting, threats,

rumor-spreading, and social ostracism. As a result, school is often described by students as “not a conducive place to learn” (Hersch, 1998, p. 57).

The consequences of harassment—including feelings of rejection, isolation, and physical fear—have been shown to be related to student failure, school avoidance, diminished educational performance, diminished self-confidence, and ultimately student violence (American Association of University Women, 1993).

Although sexual harassment has been the focus of study since the late 1970s (Eyre, 2000), the broader phenomenon of peer harassment and victimization has received serious attention only in the last decade. Sparked by extreme peer-directed hostilities like school shootings, researchers around the globe are only now examining the full range of negative peer interaction. The emergence of a new literature on harassment is crucial as we attempt to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies for schools.

Studies of peer harassment began in Scandinavia in the early 1960s and focused on a group behavior called “mobbing.” In the first report on this phenomenon, researchers observed that “the mob, suddenly and unpredictably, seized by the mood of the moment, turns on a single individual, who for some reason or other has attracted the group’s irritation and hostility” (Olweus, as cited in Juvonen & Graham, 2001, p. 4). Dan Olweus has continued to study aggressive behavior since that time and has refuted the initial assumption that this particular group behavior is the norm in schools. He argues that, while mobbing is a random possibility in schools, it is usually directed by aggressive individuals “grouping-up” with schoolmates who are not directly involved in bullying but who participate in a passive, acquiescent “bystander” role (Salmivalli, 2001; see also Figure 1).

## A Critical Analysis

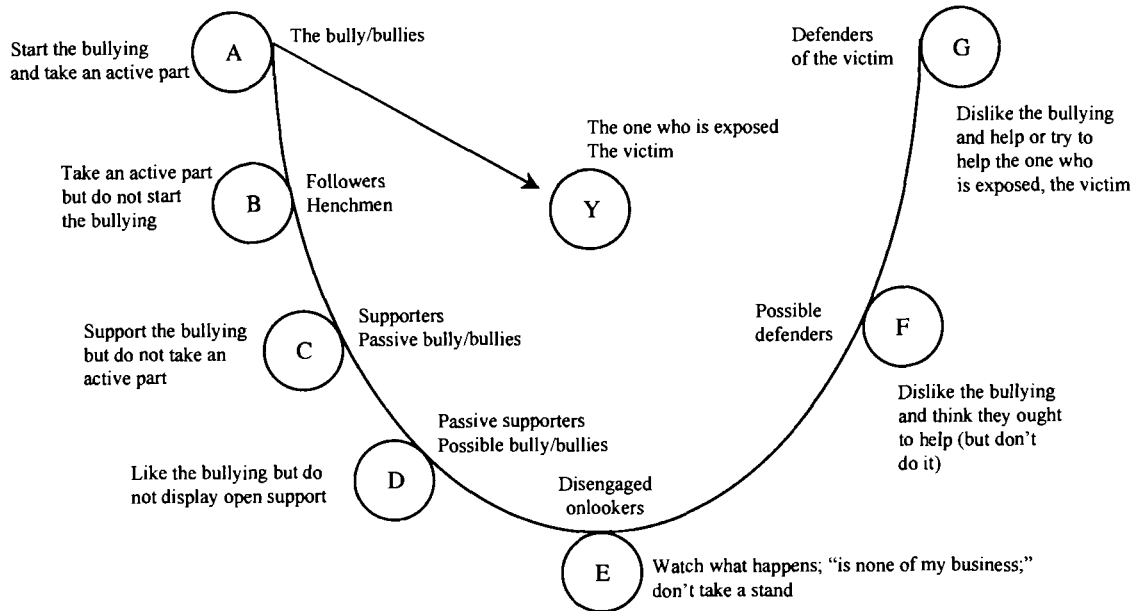


Figure 1. The Bullying Circle: Students' Modes of Reaction/Roles in an Acute Bullying Situation.

It is crucial to note that, with mobbing as with other forms of harassment, an imbalance of power between the perpetrator(s) and the victim is central to the confrontation. The target is outmatched and is unable to defend him/herself.

Olweus has criticized the approach taken by North American researchers to peer victimization. At a 1989 symposium held by the Society for Research in Child Development, he argued that much research has focused exclusively on the narrow, related field of "peer rejection" of an aggressive child as a future predictor of antisocial behavior. The measures used to profile a rejected child, he maintained,



do not focus directly on the behavioral or personality characteristics of the child. They rather reflect the social environment's—the peers'—evaluation of the child in the form of a general liking or disliking. Because different children may be disliked or liked by their peers for very different reasons, it is reasonable to expect considerable heterogeneity among children who are rejected by their peers. (Olweus, 2001, p. 7)

It is, therefore, difficult to design a single form of intervention. Rather than focusing exclusively on an aggressive child with poor social skills, Olweus suggested that we look at the full range of behavioral and personality characteristics involved in peer harassment (Juvonen & Graham, 2001).

As knowledge of Olweus's pioneering work has gained ground among American researchers, recent study has widened its focus from peer rejection to the real behavioral complexity of harassment dynamics. This, in turn, has led researchers to look deeper at social power constructs—including class, race, ethnicity, and gender—that may give rise to power imbalance and oppression.

The work of Olweus and other researchers has led to innovative legislation in Scandinavian countries and has given rise to similar initiatives across Europe and Asia. In the U.S., however, despite the attention given to safety in public schools, we continue to see an escalation of harassment and victimization (Shakeshaft & Barber, 1995).

### Measures of Harassment

There are numerous theories, encompassing various social and developmental elements, driving harassment research today. The common denominator, however, is a

general agreement that peer harassment represents a form of abuse that undermines children's healthy development. Studies vary according to frequency of harassment over periods of time, duration or stability of the occurrences, various forms of victimization, and mediating factors and their ultimate effect on the victim (Juvonen & Graham, 2001).

Frequency of occurrence has proven difficult to measure, owing to the subjectivity of "self-reporting" or "peer-reporting." Research in this area supports the notion that frequent bully/victim interactions in school are linked to loneliness, trouble coping with anger, and an increased likelihood of impulsive behavior (Rosenman, 1999); and also related to feelings of unhappiness, difficulty adapting to school, mistrust of the peer group at large, and negative school attitudes (Ladd & Ladd, 2001). Because of insufficient data, these researchers are uncertain whether "chronic harassment" (across grade levels or years) impacts an individual *differently* than does "acute" or "sporadic" harassment. Also, since both verbal and physical victimization frequently occur underground, it is difficult to set a threshold of frequency or duration that triggers maladjustment, or to define a "norm" of harassment (Ladd & Ladd, 2001; also cited in Shakeshaft & Barber, 1995).

Nonetheless, recent longitudinal studies by Perry, Hodges, and Egan (2001) have linked chronic harassment by peers to serious adjustment problems, including depression, anxiety, emotional misregulation, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, loneliness, suicidal tendencies, dislike and avoidance of school, poor academic performance, rejection by mainstream peers, and lack of friends (also discussed in Field et al., 2001; Rigby, 2001).

More illuminating—and more alarming—is Ladd and Ladd's (2001) finding that harassment "need not be frequent" and that "even temporary harassment could be

sufficient to trigger adjustment difficulties if it occurs to children who are highly vulnerable or lack the resources needed to compensate for its effects” (p. 30). Juvonen et al. (2000) further note that peer victimization is predictive of depression, loneliness, and social withdrawal anywhere from several months to several years later.

### Forms of Harassment

Overview. Although victimizing behavior has been identified as early as the preschool years (Crick et al., 2001; Ladd & Ladd, 2001) and there are age-related patterns of harassment from elementary school onward (Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001), this thesis focuses upon the behavior of adolescents in middle school and the forms of harassment displayed there.

Harassment among adolescents can be grouped in a few general categories. It should be borne in mind that the boundaries between categories are indistinct and that each comprises numerous subtypes of victimization. We will consider: (a) direct, verbal and physical aggression; (b) sexual harassment; and (c) indirect and “relational” aggression.

The literature indicates that as students grow older and more sophisticated, patterns of harassment become increasingly subtle, in order to go unnoticed by adults. As youth go through the middle school grades, peer harassment and victimization can become insidious and difficult to name, especially for girls (Smith et al., 2001).

Direct, verbal and physical aggression. Some of the more overt forms of aggression—hitting, shoving, and physical threatening—are generally carried out by boys (Juvonen & Graham, 2001; see also Owens et al., 2000; Perry et al., 2001; Soutter &

McKenzie, 2000). Bullying by boys can prove dominance and adult status, which may be attractive to girls (Pellegrini, 2001a). These forms of overt aggression tend to decrease with age, as the adolescent begins to identify with more prosocial behavior (Greener & Crick, 1999).

Both boys and girls have been found to experience, with age, more same-sex than opposite-sex victimization (Craig, Pepler, Connolly, & Henderson, 2001). Also, failing to adhere to strict social or gender stereotypes such as the “Boy Code” and being a “good girl,” can often fuel same-sex victimization, which can escalate to dangerous levels with further consequences (Brown, 1998; Pollack, 2000).

Another form of direct aggression is called “retaliatory aggression,” and is acted out in response to an aggressive act (or perceived aggressive act) by a peer. Crick (1999) found that so-called “physically aggressive” children are more likely than their non-aggressive peers to attribute hostile intent in ambiguous provocation situations and to formulate aggressive responses.

Sexual harassment. As overt bullying by boys decreases with age, it may turn to teasing, and its focus may shift to interaction with girls. Pellegrini (2001b) found in studying cross-sex interactions that boys recognized girls’ dislike of rough play in middle school and turned to teasing to gain access to females. Also, because of emerging sexuality and more inter-sex groupings, sexual harassment (including toward gay and lesbian youth; McFarland, 2001) was found to increase with age.

Four out of five public school students from 8th to 12th grade reported experiencing sexual harassment, defined as “unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior that interferes with your life” (“Hostile Hallways,” 1993 AAUW Educational Foundation

Survey, as cited in AAUW, 1999, p. 85). Sexual harassment has been shown to degrade the atmosphere for learning for all students (AAUW, 1999).

Gender differences in middle-schoolers' perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment may be an area of weakness in the literature today. Rotundo, Nguyen, and Sacket (2001) found that adult women perceive a broader range of social-sexual behaviors as harassing than do men. I found a similar pattern among the Camden Hills adolescent group: The young men did not perceive certain actions toward female peers as harassing, but the young women did find them so. The young men said they just "didn't know" and were "just teasing" (interviews with DC students, Spring 2001). More qualitative study in areas such as "playful, cross-sex teasing" could be useful to assess the negative consequences (if any) of such behaviors.

Early-maturing adolescents, especially females, are at increased risk of sexual harassment. Coupled with self-consciousness and age-related "egocentricity," this form of harassment can be particularly disempowering. Craig et al. (2001, p. 247) found that ". . . victimization focusing on sexual issues is not only a developmentally relevant form of victimization, but it is a form of victimization that is associated with characteristics that are central to the individual."

Indirect aggression and relational aggression. The behaviors grouped under these subheadings are similar, but recent research in the U.S. has focused mainly on relational aggression.

Indirect aggression is described by Owens et al. (2000), using methodology from the 1988 Finnish research team of Lagerspetz et al., as a form of victimization occurring mainly among girls that entails either spreading false stories or exclusion from the group.

It is considered “social manipulation,” in that the perpetrator uses the social structure of a group to manipulate others, without resorting to overt personal attack. The most vulnerable targets are girls new to a group or school, especially if they have few friends or lack assertiveness.

The main difference between indirect and relational aggression is that the former is a covert behavior in which the target is not directly confronted. Relational aggression can move further into overt manipulation to get one’s own way. (“You can’t be my friend if you don’t give me a bite of your ice cream cone.”) Relational aggression encompasses all hostile acts in which relationships are the vehicle of harm, regardless of the direct or indirect nature of the behaviors. “Reactive” or “retaliatory” relational aggression may include acts such as spreading nasty rumors about a peer to get even with him/her, or social exclusion from the group. “Proactive” relational aggression may take the form of friendship bargaining (“You can’t be my friend unless you . . .”) or threatening to divulge personal secrets to gain control over a peer (Crick et al., 1999). Crick et al. also found that as boys grow older, they may employ relational aggression, especially toward females, along with physical aggression.

Aggressive behavior traditionally has been studied among males, with female behavior regarded as non-aggressive. But relational aggression has been found by numerous researchers in the interaction between girls. Interestingly, when both direct and indirect forms of aggression are assessed, the gender gap is greatly reduced (Brown, 1998; Crick, 1999; Crick et al., 2001; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Olweus, as cited in Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Owens et al., 2000).

Gilligan (1982) identified women's social morality in terms of a responsibility to the maintenance of relationships and an ethic of care in connection to one another. She states that

If aggression is tied to the fracture of human connection, then the activities of care, as their fantasies suggest, are the activities that make the social world safe, by avoiding isolation and preventing aggression rather than by seeking rules to limit its extent. In this light, aggression appears no longer as an unruly impulse that must be contained but rather a signal of fracture of connection, the sign of failure of relationship. (p. 43)

In an effort to be a "good girl" who takes care of relationships, one must disconnect from the truth of one's angry feelings (Brown, 1998; Gilligan, 1982).

In her 1998 study of adolescent girls, Brown (1998) identified class differences in girls' aggressive behaviors. Among lower-class girls, feelings of anger and aggression must go "underground," while among middle-class girls—in keeping with conventional notions of femininity—such feelings are rendered "unrecognizable" or shared only in trusting relationships "in carefully camouflaged ways" (pp. 96, 100), and finally shuffled away so not to disrupt relationships. Owens et al. (2000) also found in his research an "almost obsessive concern of the girls to be seen as 'friendly and nice'" (p. 363).

Although the theories of Gilligan (1982) and Brown (1998) involve complex social constructs (plus a depth of anger towards society itself, which is outside the focus of this thesis), their insight into the dynamic of young female relationships is crucial to understanding the "why?" of aggression in girls. Girls' inability to honestly act out their anger and aggression, for fear of losing relationships, leaves them with few choices.

Crick et al. (2001) further hypothesize that the structure of girls' friendships (tightly knit, emotionally close) provides a unique context for relational aggression. Direct aggression would be too overt and cause disruption in such a relationship.

Because indirect victimization is often subtle, it may be difficult to detect and to identify as harassment, as compared with physical victimization. Therefore, the target may have trouble getting help from adults and from peers in their social network (Richardson & Green, as cited in Crick et al., 2001).

During the middle school years, relational aggression becomes more sophisticated, as youth grow in social skills and awareness. Negative behaviors in this group include spreading rumors, withdrawing friendship, weaving stories to "trash" someone's reputation, stealing dating partners, and ignoring the victim while playing up to an important friend in the victim's same-sex peer group (Crick et al., 2001).

The covert nature of relational aggression renders it challenging to measure, as it is often difficult to observe directly. Researchers studying this phenomenon alone and in combination with other factors (e.g., other forms of aggression, familial patterns, social environments) present strong arguments in favor of expanding research in this insidious form of victimization.

#### Other Issues in Peer Harassment and Victimization

As discussed, victimization can take on different forms based on age and developmental level. Perspective-taking (described as "the child's understanding of the relation or coordination between the self's and other's points of view") also comes into play (Selman, 1980, p. 16). Selman reminds us that ". . . [our] knowledge of the level of



social understanding which underlies behavior can be critical to understanding and dealing with that behavior” (p. 16). Youth of middle school age (approximately 10 to 14 years) should have the ability to take a true third-person perspective—to step into someone else’s shoes. However, certain cognitive factors can hamper both perpetrator and target in avoiding patterns of victimization. Challenges in developmental issues will be considered further in the “Discussion” section (Davies, 1999; Perry et al., 2001).

The age of technology has allowed a more contemporary, sophisticated, nameless and faceless form of harassment to surface. The unregulated use of e-mail and instant messaging has pushed harassment behavior to a new level, which proves to be a serious challenge in today’s schools (J. Laurence, personal communication, 2002).

Along with harassment via computer, other forms of victimization not fully discussed in this paper include harassment by teachers, specific harassment within ethnic groups, and “hate speech” (Cowan & Mettrick, 2002; Salzman & D’Andrea, 2001; Schultz et al., 2001; Shakeshaft & Barber, 1995; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000).

Finally, a form of aggression briefly mentioned in the literature—teasing/harassment for the purpose of entertainment—requires more attention and research. In Owens’ study of teenage girls in Australia, teasing for entertainment or excitement was the most frequently cited reason for peer harassment. These girls simply wanted to create some excitement, and they used harassment “just for something to do” (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2001, p. 224). Nonetheless, Olweus (2001) explicitly does not consider this form of harassment harmful, and seems to agree that “conflict with natural and healthy tensions are normal in relationships” (pp. 32-33) (Selman, Watts, & Schultz, 1997).

It should be noted that throughout the literature, there is difficulty measuring the incidence of harassment. This is because of questions about the reliability of peer nomination, self-nomination, and teacher reports. For example, *age* may influence how accurately children measure victimization: Peer nominations are more accurate for older children than for younger children. It has been suggested that more studies involving qualitative data would benefit this area of research (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Goodman et al., 2001; Owens et al., 2000).

### Characteristics of Target and Perpetrator

Recent research suggests that the target of harassment often plays a stable, ongoing role as “victim,” filling this position for years. Personal, peer-relational, and family-relational factors appear to be the essential elements in how and why an individual is harassed, and these elements can often operate in an interconnected manner (Craig et al., 2001; Olweus, 2001; Perry et al., 2001).

Although many researchers maintain that not enough is yet known about what qualities lead to a child being harassed (Shakeshaft & Barber, 1995), numerous physical, behavioral, and social-cognitive factors have been examined. These include obesity, wearing glasses, speech problems, clumsiness, physical disability, self-concept, social skills, reaction to teasing, physical weakness, antisocial conduct, poor conflict management skills, the “provocative victim,” developing sexuality, gender identity perceptions and stereotypes, and insecure attachment issues. Additionally, Owens found that girls tend to feel that they are to blame for what was done to them (Craig et al., 2001;

Davies, 1999; Owens et al., 2000; Olweus, as cited in Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Perry et al., 2001).

With relational aggression, however, Owens et al. (2000) found that the target was left with confusion about the incident(s): “Why are they doing this to me?” Victims of such aggression tend to “cover up” their feelings, internalize, and perhaps not let the perpetrators know they are causing pain. Further, Crick and Grotpeter (1996) found that relational aggression is uniquely related to problems such as depression, loneliness, social anxiety, and social avoidance.

Although harassment effects can be attenuated through different competencies and adaptive combinations in each individual, “without respectful relationships students’ learning is compromised. Their future is affected by bullying” (Soutter & McKenzie, 2000, p. 104).

Specific contributions to the behavior of the “aggressive bully” are social-cognitive deficits, inadequate self-control, early developmental and environmental issues such as insecure attachment, dysfunctional parenting, and exposure to aggressive models. And although research by Olweus in the 1970s found perpetrators to have a positive attitude toward aggression, a strong need to dominate others, and a tendency toward impulsiveness, recent research suggests that not all bullies lack social and cognitive skills, and some may actually have high levels of social intelligence (Salmivalli, 2001).

Throughout the literature, mitigating factors and subversive factors appear in a complex mix, making it difficult to assess the adaptability and subsequent emotional health of harassment victims. The mix of factors includes gender issues, socioeconomic status, age, developmental level, resilience, cognitive abilities, ethnicity, adaptive coping

resources, perspective-taking skills, subjective feelings of victimization, attributional style (i.e., characterological self-blame or behavioral self-blame), social skills, family relationships and attachment style, assertiveness, passive withdrawal, different levels of physical maturity, the timing of harassment, and teacher attitudes (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Crick et al., 2001; Davies, 1999; Graham & Juvonen, 2001; Ladd & Ladd, 2001; Perry et al., 2001; Schultz et al., 2001; Selman, 1980; Smith et al., 2001).

### Group and Systemic Factors

Discussions of harassment typically focus on the dyad, perpetrator and target, suggesting that the phenomenon exists primarily between two individuals. Much current research, however, focuses on group behavior and the roles various group members play in victimization (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Olweus, 2001; Salmivalli, 2001).

Some researchers recently have pushed for the study of victimization within a group context rather than that between two individuals, as the group itself contains complex social processes that allow victimization to happen (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Craig et al., 2001; Salmivalli, 2001).

To better understand the perpetrator in relation to his/her peer group, Olweus developed a pedagogical tool called the “The Bullying Circle” (Figure 1). This chart identifies the numerous roles taken by observers of victimization, beyond the principal players of perpetrator and target. Perry et al. (2001) identify six such roles: aggressor, victim, aggressor’s assistant, aggressor’s reinforcer, bystander, and victim’s defender.

Metzler refers to systemic issues as contributors to a climate of tension in schools, citing punitive school and classroom environments, unclear rules and expectations, and

inconsistent application of consequences (Metzler et al., 2001). Other researchers have noted ineffective instruction that results in academic failure, lack of opportunity to learn and practice prosocial interpersonal and self-management skills, failure to enforce rules, and failure to individualize instruction to adapt to individual differences. These systemic failings have been shown to contribute to increased levels of student antisocial behavior. In fact, research has shown that punishment-based interventions for students with serious antisocial and violent behavior usually result in an increase in the problem behavior (Colvin, Kameenui, & Sugai, as cited in Sprague et al., 2001; Mayer, as cited in Sprague et al.; Sprague et al.; Walker, as cited in Sprague et al.).

### Prevention Strategies

School systems worldwide have worked to develop anti-bullying campaigns in an attempt to change aggressive behavior and provide support for the target (Soutter & McKenzie, 2000).

As schools grapple with the disintegration that peer harassment and victimization can cause, programs such as civil rights teams, assertiveness training programs, conflict resolution strategies, ethics committees, peer review boards, character education policies, and comprehensive guidance and counseling programs have gained prominence as possible solutions within schools (Lapan et al., 2001; Lickona, T., 1993a, 1993b; Owens et al., 2001; Schultz et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2001; Tezer & Demir, 2001; Tigner, 1993).

Schultz, however, points to the difficulty of implementing such “character education” programs:

[N]ot only is there lack of research about *whether* character development programmes work, there is even less research about *how* they work.

Changing how young people relate to others would seem to require structural changes in their meaning-making systems and character, yet few of the existing studies of character education programmes are grounded in theories of human development that could link issues of programme effectiveness to developmental processes. (Schultz et al., 2001, p. 4)

Olweus (2001) has developed a “Core Program Against Bullying and Antisocial Behavior” that has been shown to reduce bully/victim problems to about 50% to 70% of their initial levels. His approach includes a restructuring of the social environment, via changes in the “opportunity structures” and “reward structures” for bullying behavior. The program has both an individual and a systems orientation, with emphasis on incorporating the school, classroom, and community, if possible, in a comprehensive campaign.

The readiness and willingness of teachers and other school staff to intervene in preventing harassment is a significant issue. The AAUW (1999) follow-up study found that there is resistance by teachers to “undo bad habits,” specifically in relation to gender issues. Some prevention programs stress “consciousness-raising” and in-depth training for all staff members (Owens et al., 2000; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000).

Most intervention strategies outlined in the literature require leadership by the school administration and are carried out chiefly by the teaching staff and the guidance or counseling department. Metzler has suggested, therefore, that schools adopt an underlying human-rights philosophy, to serve as the skeleton for policymaking around

issues of harassment. In the absence of such a philosophy, individual bias and “hard-wiring” in some adults may thwart efforts toward systemic change (Metzler et al., 2001; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000).

In some of the literature, students report a lack of support from school staff, with statements such as: “The teacher really doesn’t care. He doesn’t say anything [to the perpetrator of sexual harassment]” (Shakeshaft & Barber, 1995, p. 36). It has also been reported that “teachers and administrators rarely intervene” (Shakeshaft & Barber, p. 37; see also McFarland, 2001). Pollack (2000) also reminds us that there is a general public of adults who often dismiss teasing, bullying, and peer pressure as an inevitable behavior among adolescent males: “Boys will be boys” (p. 107).

Similar flip and over-generalizing statements can be found about girls’ aggressive behavior, as noted in the title of a recent *New York Times* article, “Girls Just Want to Be Mean.” Society can often refer to harassment as a normal phenomenon and something to acclimate to in school (Talbot, 2002).

Among the preventative approaches suggested in the literature are assertiveness training for youth; listening strategies for parents (i.e., listen to whatever your child shares with you about harassment, and avoid put-downs and shaming); fostering a sense of belonging; assisting with friendships; drama programs; poster designing; playground game programs; peer and staff policing programs; and regular communication between parents and school (Selman et al., 1997; Smith et al., 2001; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000).

The literature also includes common themes of a positive focus with peer mediation built into the program; not focusing on the bully as a specific personality trait but more as a context of behavior and its relation to certain circumstances; a systemic

change in attitudes that empowers victims with the awareness of rights and the measures to enact them; having friends/schools creating supportive friendships (as aggressive children will often target someone who lacks friends, as they do not have the worry of retaliation from the target's friends); and "naming" the harassment or antisocial behavior in order to change it (Freire, 1980; Perry et al., 2001; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000).

Peer mediation and peer counseling programs are currently a popular means of engaging students in their own effort to change a climate of harassment. The uses of drama, role-playing, negotiation, peer sentencing, and forms of peer mentoring are based on the assumption that students are more comfortable in talking about their concerns with other students than with adults (Owens et al., 2001; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000.)

Although the literature remains tentative in this regard, Owens has found some peer-based programs to be successful in dealing with conflict among students. However, he cautions that such programs represent a "shot in the dark" approach and that administrators are not yet clear which components of these programs are truly effective (Owens et al., 2001).



## Chapter 3

### A REVIEW OF THE STORYTELLING LITERATURE

#### Overview

Throughout the review of literature on harassment, I was unable to find the use of storytelling, in the form of primary narrative, being used as an intervention tool. This chapter addresses that omission, and works to bridge the gap in the literature, by discussing the value of storytelling and its connection to harassment strategies.

Livo and Rietz (1986) define story as

a way of thinking, a primary organizer of information and ideas, the soul of a culture, and the mythic and metaphoric consciousness of a people. It is a prehistoric and historic thread of human awareness, a way in which we can *know, remember, and understand*. (p. 2)

Since before the first Europeans arrived in North America, the oral tradition of Native peoples was the primary means to entertain, to preserve cultural history, and to instruct. Most stories were considered “lesson stories.” The elders felt that a well-told tale would be remembered longer than a reprimand of “You should . . .!” to a youth. Further, the Native Americans believed that storytelling was a teaching circle with many voices in a continuing discussion throughout generations (Bruchac, as cited in Birch & Heckler, 1996).

In reference to the context of immediacy and authenticity that storytelling creates, Livo and Rietz (1986) state that people enter a form of “cultural communion” with the storyteller, which “. . . reaffirms their belonging as a community and reconfirms their understanding of ‘rightness’ and ‘truth’” (p. 14). Since language is a primary element of culture, these researchers further consider the story as a fundamental stasis, “an ancient,

perhaps natural order of mind—primordial, having grown along with the development of human memory and of language itself” (p. 5).

### Use of Storytelling in Therapy

In an oversimplification of Sigmund Freud’s formulation of theories of psychoanalysis, it can be observed that Freud attempted to clarify and elucidate the puzzles that have confronted us since the beginning of man. He did this by asking, “*How* did the person under examination come to make the kind of choices he or she makes?” and then by listening to the primary narrative of his subjects (Covitz, as cited Garcia, 1992). Further, in what is considered the “bible” of storytelling, Livo and Rietz (1986) comment that the story is a “universal mirror” that shows us the truth about ourselves.

Although science often relies on the “indicative” mood to reduce uncertainties and complexity, White and Epston (1990), writing about “storied therapy,” support the values found in the “subjunctive” mood. Narrative linguistics in the subjunctive mood creates a world of implicit rather than explicit meanings, broadening the field of possibilities through the “triggering of presupposition,” to install “multiple perspective,” and to engage “readers” or listeners in unique performances of meaning. These linguistic practices bring an appreciation of complexity and the subjectivity of experience, where “both ‘observer’ and ‘subject’ are placed in the ‘scientific’ story being performed . . .” (pp. 81-82).

The development of language and the ability to “think in words” marks a fundamental shift in a child’s capacity to process and organize experience. Davies refers to storytelling throughout youth as a form of therapy that “makes sense of experience.”

Referring to a story in the text, told by a youth “lost in the woods,” Davies (1999) cites a clear change in behavior after the young man tells the story to his father: “[He] visibly calmed down after he told his personal story . . . [and was] able to reduce his fear by communicating what happened to him” (p. 178).

The “person-centered therapeutic approach” of Carl Rogers (1980) refers to “rehearing,” on an experiential/cognitive basis, when interviewing a client. Rogers explains that although his therapeutic approach seemed to be one that he stumbled upon, “it had grown out of a number of very down-to-earth steps. First, I had learned that . . . simply to listen understandingly to a client[’s story] and to attempt to convey that understanding were *potent forces for individual therapeutic change*” (p. 50). Throughout his work, Rogers references the process of simply telling our human stories as a key ingredient in behavior change (see also Crossley, 2000, re: the “narrative psychological approach”).

Judith Herman (1992) refers to this transformative process in her work with trauma patients. She says that the telling of the primary story is “truth-telling” and considers this a fundamental premise of the psychotherapeutic work. Testimony is ritual healing and central to the recovery process.

While the purpose of therapy is to change beliefs and behavior in an individual in the attempt to heal, Rogers’ (1980) work illuminates a number of other components found in the storytelling literature, such as empathic knowing and understanding of another’s experience in order to learn, and its “lifelikeness.”

These components parallel the work of other researchers, who use storytelling/listening to create contexts for change in acculturative migration anxiety and criminal behavior. The next section will briefly outline this research.

### The Narrative Process as a Culturally Sensitive Modality: Cuento Therapy

Dr. Lloyd Rogler, Albert Schweitzer University Professor at Fordham University, in collaboration with colleague Guiseppe Costantino, conducted mental health research in the 1980s within migrant Puerto Rican communities in New York. Their research found significant mental health risk in these populations, based on acculturative changes (such as cultural isolation induced by language difficulties). This and other studies by these researchers found depression in adults, along with sleep and articulation disorders, intellectual impairment, asocial behavior in school, anxiety and fear, anger and belligerence, hyperactivity, agitation, and antisocial attitudes in children (Costantino, Malgady, & Rogler, 1994). Their research highlighted the early manifestations of symptomatology being pervasive and consequential later in life.

Based on the success of former studies having used “Cuento Therapy” (also referred to as “Storytelling Therapy,” a modality developed by Dr. Rogler from the 1970s throughout the 1980s), these researchers found that by using culturally sensitive folktales as a cultural intervention for Puerto Rican youth, they were able to reduce anxiety symptomatology, and increase self-esteem, social judgment, and ethnic identity (Costantino et al., 1994).

In research on adolescents, Dr. Rogler and his colleagues combined with a panel of Puerto Rican psychologists, educators, sociologists, and a literature specialist, to

develop a modeling technique using folktales that include the biographies of “heroes.” The panel conceived this idea with the rationale that heroes would serve as a bridge to the identity of an adolescent (Costantino, Malgady, & Rogler, 1988).

Small-group therapy sessions were conducted around these cultural hero tales. Through analysis of the story and their own connection to the hero, the adolescents worked through cultural difficulties and gained mutual trust and self-confidence (Costantino et al., 1988). By developing a culturally sensitive modality—folktales—infused with Puerto Rican culture and lived-experience in New York City, the researchers were able to bridge bilingual and bicultural conflicts, instilling a sense of ethnic identity and self-esteem in these teenagers (Costantino et al., 1988).

Dr. Rogler’s theories on the use of storytelling are used worldwide today in many different therapeutic situations (beyond the issues of migration). Forms of storytelling therapy have proven successful in drug and alcohol intervention, among trauma and abuse victims, and in cancer therapy, cross-cultural psychology, and general psychotherapy (Costantino et al., 1994; Herman, 1992; Howard, 1991; Land, n.d.)

In work on the value of a narrative approach to therapy conducted at Notre Dame in 1991, Howard focused on language use and a struggle toward finding meaning in one’s experiences. He quotes Mair (1988):

Stories are habituations. We live in and through stories. They conjure worlds. We do not know the world other than as story world. Stories inform life. They hold us together and keep us apart. We inhabit the great stories of our culture. We live through stories. We are *lived* by the stories of our race and place. It is this enveloping and constituting function of

stories that is especially important to sense more fully. We are, each of us,  
locations where the stories of our place and time become partially tellable.

(p. 192)

The authenticity of telling the story of our place in time has been found to be a significant methodology not only in the development of identity but in the therapeutic setting of making meaning of our lives (Howard, 1991).

### The Role of Confession in Storytelling Therapy: Sentencing Circles

Sentencing circles are a form of justice administered in some Canadian provinces. The process involves telling the “story of the crime” and is used for Native perpetrators of both violent and nonviolent offenses. The purpose is to determine a proper punishment, which ultimately will act as a teaching tool. A sentencing circle consists of peers of the convicted criminal, including family, along with the victim’s family, elders, counselors and lawyers, who together have the power to levy a traditional native punishment.

The circle begins with the perpetrator sitting among his peers and confessing the crime through primary narrative. A difficult discussion of the crime story ensues among the participants, with the convicted individual working through remorse, shame, and a commitment to change behavior. The members of the sentencing circle then decide on a punishment which, they feel, fits the crime. The product of a circle is not simply the native punishment (which can range from a public apology and community service, to banishment from the community to a remote island for a number of years), but also the power of confession of the transgression, and chastisement in a relationally meaningful

context. The Native peoples believe the circle to be a learning atmosphere, one conducive to changing behavior (Fennell, 1995; Nemeth & Cardwell, 1994; Sillars, 1996; Wittmeier, 1999).

In considering the literature on sentencing circles, the crux of the therapeutic treatment is this thread of “confession,” woven through the process of storytelling. Recent research postulates that “a sincere confession (i.e., a confession with remorse) connotes that an immoral deed has been done, but by a person who has recovered morality and will not behave this way in the future” (Gold, 2000, p. 293).

Interestingly, Gold also found that when an individual confesses, thereby accepting full responsibility and blame, the adverse actions directed toward that person are reduced. There is a subtle honoring of an individual who is willing to address his or her transgression and to learn from the misdeed. However, genuine remorse must be perceived. The context of the confession is also important, in that the confession is a more effective act toward one who has actually been affected by the misdeed (Gold, 2000).

The power of confession is widely recognized in our public institutions, as well as in the social sciences, as a therapeutic tool (L. Rogler, personal communication, 2002). A well-known historical example of healing and growth through “confession” was written by Saint Augustine (A.D. 353-430). His *Confessions* is a retrospective self-analysis written to regroup and recover from a “shattered and disordered” state of mind. By composing his story, he was able to return to his life with direction and purpose (McAdams, 1993).

## Chapter 4

### STORYTELLING AS AN INTERVENTION TOOL: THE HARASSMENT TALES PROJECT

#### Overview

The literature on harassment, summarized in Chapter 2 of this thesis, clearly points out the psychological harm that harassment can cause in a victim, ranging from maladjustment and depression to violence and suicide. Chapter 3 discusses the value of storytelling, from its use in Native traditions, through research and literature by nationally recognized storytelling experts, and as seen in the therapeutic environment. The literature on “confession” links the storytelling of a misdeed to the possibility of change in behavior. Chapters 4 and 5 will join these two major bodies of literature, by describing a harassment intervention tool that uses the modality of primary narrative.

#### Background

In the therapeutic literature, I did not find narrative therapy or storytelling used as a therapeutic tool in harassment behavior. These omissions prompted me to investigate the potential of an intervention tool developed in 2000 in association with the Diversity Coalition (DC) group of students at Camden Hills Regional High School in Rockport, Maine. This tool, presented here as a *component* of a comprehensive harassment plan, is called The Harassment Tales Project (THTP).

The project uses real-life stories of the students’ own harassment behavior in middle school—either as a perpetrator, bystander, or target—and shares these stories with



middle school students. The theory underlying this program is that the content of these stories (which are often charged with pain, remorse, sadness, anger, and shame), coupled with the power of primary narrative and “confession,” may induce changes in the attitudes and behavior of the younger students.

In the program, the DC students went into middle school classrooms and acted as an ensemble of storytellers. In an improvisational manner, they created a context of confession, telling their own stories of harassment and concluding with a “moral” or life-lesson. By coming to terms with their own harassment experiences and by speaking out, the DC students could (it was hoped) become “heroes” to the younger students, empowering them to change an environment of silence and dangerous behavior.

The program was designed so that the process of “objectifying” and “personifying” their stories would allow the DC students to separate themselves from the emotional saturation of their experiences (as suggested by White & Epston, 1990). This externalizing process would enable the student to see his or her own story through a new, more dispassionate lens. The story could then be used as a powerful teaching tool, enhanced by the authenticity of “author as narrator.” This process, in turn, would create a safe space and context for confession by *both* the middle and high school students, thereby opening the possibility for positive change.

The key component in this design was the “power of confession,” whereby it is postulated that if, in fact, one confesses *with remorse*, there is a likelihood that the transgression will not be committed again (Gold, 2000).

## Genesis of the Project

The Diversity Coalition is a program established in 1998 at Camden Hills Regional High School in Rockport, Maine. Active membership has ranged between 15-25 high school men and women (from any nearby high school) willing to work on “tough issues” such as HIV/AIDS, sexuality and sexual orientation, homophobia, abuse, homelessness among teens, global slavery and sweat shops, issues of conflict, oppression and discrimination, religion, racism, classism, recycling, and many other social and environmental issues. The group meets at least once a week after school for 3 hours. Beyond sorting out the members’ varied opinions and beliefs around difficult and controversial topics, meetings often include films, literature, or guest speakers. The group is active in school and community in efforts to teach others and effect change. I served as adult facilitator of the coalition from its inception through the period considered in this thesis.

The issue of harassment arose among DC students during the 2000-2001 school year. A number of students shared their experiences of harassment in middle school. This dialogue was charged with emotion; the students were now at a level of maturity that allowed them to grasp the seriousness of harassment in a world beyond middle school. As they related their experiences of being on one end or the other of harassment (perpetrator, bystander, or target), I came to realize the power of this raw form of “primary narrative.” It seemed to offer the potential to impart lessons in a manner quite different from the traditional textbook, prepared lecture, or even role-playing and theater, which can seem contrived. The authenticity of these students telling their own stories was undeniable. This was the catalyst for The Harassment Tales Project.

It seemed reasonable to suppose that stories about harassment told by high school students would be both accessible and valuable to younger adolescents. Youth generally feel more comfortable speaking with other youth about their concerns, as noted in the literature review. Accordingly, I contacted the staff of Camden-Rockport Middle School (CRMS), who agreed to give this project a trial. Class periods were scheduled during which the DC students would work with groups of middle school youth, using their shared stories as the basis for addressing the problem of harassment.

There followed a period of training and preparation, during which I worked with the DC students at their weekly meetings to prepare them for the project. Over the 2-year period examined here, the Diversity Coalition developed and refined THTP as a supplemental component of a broader antiharassment program at CRMS. The DC students also presented the program at other schools in Maine. This thesis, however, will consider only the experience of Camden-Rockport Middle School.

## Chapter 5

### PROJECT METHODOLOGY

#### General Parameters

The Harassment Tales Project was presented during the school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 to students in grades 5 through 8 at Camden-Rockport Middle School, located in Camden, Maine. Presentations were made by groups of high school students in grades 9 through 12. All the presenters were members of the Diversity Coalition (DC) at Camden Hills Regional High School in Rockport, Maine.

Both male and female DC students were involved at each presentation. In most sessions, a majority of the presenters were female, reflecting the membership of the coalition. The presenters spanned the full range of high school ages (roughly 15-18 years).

The DC students made their presentations during language arts classes for 80-minute periods. If there were more than 20 middle school students in a class, the class and the presenters would divide into smaller subgroups.

The project was constrained by a limit on the number of absences permitted (and desirable) for the DC students from their regular high school classes. Owing to this limitation, the DC students were only able to visit each classroom in grades 5 through 8 once per year during the 2 years of the project.

## Training and Preparation

Prior to entering the classroom, all participating DC students were trained to use storytelling as a means of imparting information and life lessons around the issue of harassment. This training fell into four main areas:

- Helping the students understand the dynamics of harassment behavior, including group dynamics, and why and how young people engage in this activity. The literature surveyed in Chapter 2 provided the material used for this purpose.
- Giving the students insight into the cognitive skills and developmental levels of 10-to-14-year-olds, so that the older students would be better able to approach the issue of harassment in a way accessible to middle schoolers.
- Helping the students externalize, objectify, or step outside their stories. The DC students were trained to examine narratives (their own and others') for underlying patterns of behavior and belief, and to regard these stories as potential teaching tools. The students were then encouraged to construct a framework for their story: deciding exactly what they hoped to teach the younger students (i.e., the harmful use of homophobic language, the many forms of harassment, the danger of internalized emotional pain, etc.), complete with recommendations for change.
- Setting guidelines and boundaries for the in-class presentations. For example, if a younger student should raise parent or family issues, or if specific teachers or students were named, the DC students were trained to move the

conversation away from these specifics, and to help the student relate his/her experience in more general terms. (In practice, an adult facilitator was also present should intervention or guidance be needed.) A further crucial guideline was the commitment to absolute confidentiality of all that was said in a THTP session. Nothing was to be taken outside the classroom. The DC students were instructed to remind the youth that the mission of the project was to help them from harassment to healing—*not* to perpetuate harm through gossip or through using other’s stories as “power-over” strategies.

### Project Implementation

On the scheduled school date, the DC students (as few as 5 and sometimes as many as 12 per class) traveled to the middle school, gathered in a classroom with between 10 and 20 middle schoolers, and sat together in a casual cluster, either on desks, on the floor, in chairs, or a mixture.

Adults present in the room included the classroom teacher and a facilitator for the DC group. These were often joined by a guidance counselor and occasionally an educational technician (teacher’s aide). As far as practicable, an effort was made to minimize the adult presence, so as to help the younger students feel comfortable when discussing sensitive or personal matters.

As adult facilitator, I began each session with a brief introduction to the middle school students and their teacher, outlining the essentials of the program and the purpose of our visit. The chief focus of this introduction was on providing a framework or a “setting” for the discussion that would follow. The introduction stressed the significance

and pervasiveness of harassment as an issue facing middle school students and their peers, and informed both students and teachers of some of the larger, societal factors that bear upon harassment behavior. One intended purpose of the facilitator's remarks was to assure (or reassure) the classroom teacher of the importance of providing this time and space for the students to share their stories. A DC student then provided an explanation of the process for the 80-minute class, along with introductions of the other high schoolers.

After these introductions, a DC student began the storytelling, presenting his or her own story. The story would describe this particular student's experience of harassment in middle school—either of having been part of a group harassing another student, or of having been personally harassed (see Appendices A and B for story examples). Not all DC students told a story at every session; usually five or six stories were told. Some of the high school students preferred not to share their experiences; some proved more talented at analysis and explanation.

A discussion followed each story, with the DC group using the context of their peer's story to teach the components of harassment. The DC students worked together in a collaborative style, often supplying anecdotal connections and elaborations from their own points of view and fielding comments and questions from the middle school audience.

After 30 to 45 minutes, a rapport between the older and younger students was generally established. From this point onward, spontaneous dialogue would ensue. Whenever a middle school youth shared a personal story, the DC students supported the youth by either sharing a similar story and its accompanying strategy or simply asking questions to lead the youth toward his or her own understanding and solution. The DC

students were instructed (and demonstrated an intuitive ability) to display great compassion during these sessions, in consideration of the emotional content of the issues that surfaced.

The role of the adult facilitator was generally limited to providing occasional guidance or redirection, in cases where a discussion had strayed into irrelevant or unproductive ground. By design, and in practice, the students made the project happen.



## Chapter 6

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

#### General

The intimacy and inherent sensitivity of “primary narrative” made this intervention project challenging to conduct. However, the results from 2 years of direct, in-school experience show significant promise for the use of storytelling by peers as an intervention tool, especially when employed as part of a comprehensive anti-harassment program. Benefits were observed both among the middle school students for whom the presentations were designed, and also—unexpectedly—among the high school students who conducted the presentations.

In considering THTP as a therapeutic modality, sufficient observations were obtained during the 2 years of this study to support the idea of storytelling in a culturally sensitive context (primary narrative by adolescents to adolescents) to consider the program a valid component in the effort to impact middle school harassment behavior. Such an application is consistent with, and supported by, the relevant literature (Costantino et al., 1994; Crossley, 2000; Malgady et al., 1990; White & Epston, 1990).

The power and intrigue of culturally sensitive modalities, “the abiding interest of youngsters to participate actively in symbolic activities that enmesh culture” (Costantino et al., 1994, p. 19) is well-attested. While most research has focused on conflictual issues in ethnic culture, with storytelling used as a symbolic activity to form context, it is supportive of the use of storytelling in the adolescent culture of peer harassment.

Farber and Rogler (1981), at the Hispanic Research Center at Fordham University, developed “Unitas” with the intent to create a social-psychological intervention for Hispanic children, using the foundation of “interrelatedness” to heal. Understanding the importance of appropriate context (youth to youth), these researchers created a climate where “the healthy children learn to have an influence on others [children]” (p. 3). Further work with Unitas by Procidano and Glenwick (1985) reiterates the importance of social support specifically by teens to youth.

Creating appropriate context is essential to allow dialogue to flow in regard to such serious and harmful behaviors as harassment. The DC students worked to create a context of empathy with middle school youth during THTP sessions. When responding to stories told by younger students, the DC students responded by praising the strengths of the story, thus creating a “safe therapeutic environment” (Davies, 1999).

It is essential in this context that the “youth feels understood” (Rogers, 1980). The give-and-take in THTP is consistent with Rogers’ (1980) work in Person-Centered Therapy, where the power of telling and listening were potent forces for therapeutic change. He refers to the “genuineness” of telling our stories in his therapeutic work, which parallels the “authenticity” observed in THTP. The literature on sentencing circles reinforces the power of confession to influence attitudes and behavior.

### The Classroom Experience

The authenticity of the primary narrative presented by Diversity Coalition students, combined with powerful body language (showing discomfort in telling the story, sadness, embarrassment, and remorse, or signs of lingering pain and despair),

created an immediate connection to the emotions and daily experience of the middle school students. THTP sessions sometimes exhibited a theatrical aspect, with lively give-and-take between audience and narrator.

More significantly, THTP constituted therapy in its most natural form. The students involved—both older and younger—shared difficult truths in a forgiving and healing atmosphere. Middle school students often raised their hands during a session, eager to join in by telling their personal stories or sharing their own ways of dealing with harassment. Thus, the younger students became part of storytelling/therapeutic dynamic.

Many of these sessions demonstrated a principle noted by Birch and Heckler (1996), whereby a story can actually serve to lead its narrator, as the intense emotion of a personal story, which may never have been told, provides the power that drives the telling. As well, telling a story of a personally lived experience introduced an air of excitement, suspense, and intrigue into the room, and seemed to capture the attention of the audience much more easily than would a more formal, elaborately planned presentation.

The DC students commanded respect, attention, and silence in the room while telling their stories. They assisted the younger narrators by rewarding their moral courage (in being able to externalize their stories in a group setting or in having intervened in a harassment situation). And significantly, being only a few years older, they were able to provide middle-school-friendly explanations of the constructions in power imbalances.

The DC students demonstrated considerable skill at externalizing or stepping out of their stories, in order to use them to teach (Selman et al., 1997). By exposing and naming harassment behaviors as a large part of adolescent daily life, they provided a safe

context for story sharing or confession by the younger students. Through their use of primary narrative, the DC students modeled behavior that required the youth to rise above the systemic nature of harassment in middle school, and to disengage from patterns that are entrenched and, on many levels, supported within a system that believes that harassment is just part of middle school (Shakeshaft & Barber, 1995).

### Growth in the Storytellers

The positive impact of THTP on the DC students, and their willingness to assume the risks associated with breaking the silence around harassment behavior, proved to be impressive.

A common thread running through the therapeutic narrative literature, storytelling literature, literature on sentencing circles, and that of confession, is the theme of empowerment and growth in individuals willing to share their inner stories (Birch & Heckler, 1996; Herman, 1992; *Maclean's*, 1996, 2001; Roe, Alfred, & Smith, 1998; White & Epston, 1990). Two years of experience with THTP bear these findings out.

Because of the depth of training and discussion the DC students participated in, with adult facilitation, during weekly meetings, these students acquired considerable self-responsibility, critical thinking skills, moral decision making, and perspective taking skills.

After working with THTP over a period of months, the DC students became strong interventionists (having rehearsed interventionist language and strategies repeatedly with the younger adolescents), and were able to work in their high school to change a climate of harassment amongst peers and with teachers. Also, by working with

THTP, the DC students deepened their understanding of the patterns of oppression, seen in forms of harassment like relational aggression or sexual harassment. Interestingly, the DC students also learned the essentials of public speaking and performance through THTP. They demonstrated their new skills willingly and with confidence throughout the school year, speaking at public events such as peace vigils, World AIDS Day, artistic monologues, poetry readings, announcements over the school P.A. system, and other school and community events.

### Challenges and Applications

Differences in the developmental levels of middle school students may impact the effectiveness of any peer harassment intervention program. Selman's (1980) work on "perspective taking" outlines some of the challenges the DC students must consider when working with THTP.

Selman's Perspective Taking Levels 1-4 outline advances in child development related to a child's ability to take another person's perspective. A younger adolescent (approximately the ages in grades 5 and 6) may not have the conceptual ability to take a true third-person perspective. If a youth does not have well-developed perspective-taking skills, it is likely that he/she may not be able to identify with his/her victims' feelings (Schultz et al., 2001; Selman, 1980).

Also, it is possible that the events of harassment can serve to empower an individual with less-developed perspective-taking skills, inspiring him or her to engage in further bullying behavior. It is important to note here that the perspective-taking construct is considered "broad and vague" (Crick & Dodge, 1999). According to these researchers,

and as elaborated by Schantz (as cited in Crick & Dodge, 1999), “the specific social cognitive processes that are involved in taking another’s perspective have never been specified.” A further caveat is that perspective taking is “difficult to assess and teach” (p. 130).

Owens et al.’s (2001) findings suggest that early adolescents largely believe that victims are picked on because they deserve it—they engage in annoying or provoking behavior that is within their control. Juvonen and Graham (2001) support this hypothesis in their survey findings on why some kids get picked on a lot. They note that over 50% of the responses from younger adolescents tended to blame the victim for his or her plight in harassment.

The DC students also encountered this perspective when working with fifth and sixth graders. Some of the younger adolescents seemed not to understand their responsibility as perpetrators in a harassment situation. These middle school students had a tendency to blame the victim of their harassment: “He looks funny, that’s why I harassed him. It’s his fault.”

The inability of the youth to abstractly step outside the interaction and to consider the perspectives of self and others renders the relationship system limited in perspective (Selman, 1980). This can pose a problem if, in fact, the DC students’ stories are not presented with sufficient detail and sensitivity to teach this perspective. There is research that states that empathy and prosocial behavior *can* be taught under the right conditions; however, this requires ongoing management by the teacher and modeling in both school and home by adults (Kahn & Lawhorne, in press).

It is suggested in this literature, and research by Davies (1999), that the older school-age child (approximately ages 9-12) has the ability to analyze cause-and-effect sequences and use reversible thought. But the DC students have experienced sessions in fifth and sixth grades where the discourse required far more explanation and empathetic training, along with specific directives on “how to be a friend,” “how to step into someone else’s shoes,” or “why we don’t judge others.”

Nonetheless, there may be some benefit in dealing with harassment behavior in the more closely knit, developmentally younger classroom atmosphere of fifth and sixth grade. It has been found that students at this level are more likely to “tell the teacher” and engage other adults in their problem solving (Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001).

With increasing age, middle and late adolescent students receive less personal attention from teachers, more explicit social comparison with peers, and greater expectation for independent problem solving (Paris & Cunningham, as cited in Newman et al., 2001). The work with THTP supports this research, in that greater success was attained with seventh and eighth graders than with the younger adolescents. The older students—those aged roughly 12-14—are more likely to understand their responsibility in harassment behavior and to be amenable to problem solving in collaboration with the DC students.

Although the DC students did not face overt challenges regarding social differences, a further challenge to THTP is the difference in developmental levels and world views among youth raised in different socioeconomic environments. Selman (1980) refers to some of these differences as socioeconomic levels, ethnicity, and culture. Further research is required to assess these specifics with THTP.

## Gender Issues

Crick and others have found relational aggression in male and female adolescents. However, researchers suggest that girls tend to engage in this form of aggression more often than boys, who tend to engage in more overt verbal or physical aggression (Crick et al., 2001). Mixed-gender groupings of both DC students and middle school students in a classroom setting may be a potential challenge to THTP, considering the different forms of harassment behavior. As well, the format of THTP may not be conducive to males and females openly sharing stories of their own harassment behavior in some instances.

Interestingly, the DC students did not experience much problem with this, especially in the younger grades. (Even fifth and sixth grade boys were very willing to share.) It is likely that as students get older, smaller gender-specific groupings of both DC students and middle school youth could encourage more strategizing for both boys and girls. When considering girls' sensitivity toward relationships, THTP could be a good fit with the nature of girl-to-girl dialogue. Girls in grades 6, 7, and 8 were often eager to join in, either with tales of their own or of others that they have witnessed.

In mixed-gender groupings of seventh and eighth graders, DC students found it helpful to explain the root causes of the different forms of aggression, so that both boys and girls could gain insight into gender, social, economic, and systemic constructs that support this behavior. Overall, both male and female middle school students found that sharing their stories in a mixed grouping helped them to understand better the social dynamics of gender-specific behaviors. The classic example in this regard is the question of what actually constitutes sexual harassment. (Does a boy "accidentally" rubbing up against a girl count?)



The only identifiable problem experienced by THTP with regard to gender groupings arose when a guidance counselor placed a class of seventh grade students from the school's gifted-and-talented program with a lower-level language arts class for a presentation. This teaching situation proved challenging for the DC students, as few of the students in the lower-level class dared to speak out about sexual harassment in the presence of their "smarter" peers.

### Peers Teaching Peers

A general challenge to older adolescents teaching younger adolescents about wide-ranging social issues is the preoccupation of middle school students with their own current reality. Schultz et al. (2001) found that although eighth graders care about such issues, they tend to frame them in general and abstract terms and do not have elaborated or personal frames of reference for understanding societal problems. Furthermore, they did not understand their roles in relation to societal issues on the same level as their understanding of social problems in their own peer groups. Issues such as civil rights, hunger, poverty, and politics, were less well understood than issues like ostracism, fighting, and teasing.

Although the broader social issues may not be well understood by middle school youth, the DC students considered this introduction, through THTP, an important basis for youth to begin to understand their behavior as it relates to their roles in the broader society. The DC students tried to weave a basic understanding of issues like oppression, discrimination, healthy relationships, and references to global conflict into the presentation in order to ask the younger adolescents to step out of their current reality to

see a broader picture of their harassment behavior. The true importance of this middle school preoccupation is that it actually provides a perfect climate for the use of THTP. Therefore, the data provide strong support for use of the peer-oriented Harassment Tales Project to work with harassment behavior in middle school.

The diversity that the DC students brought to the project—in terms of gender, personal appearance, body language, personality, and style of storytelling—provided a greater chance of connecting with the range of students in middle school. Character education programs, counselor programs, peer mediation programs, and civil rights programs can be more conceptual in approach, as they are generally under the direct command of adults. Such programs may lack the immediate connection of a peer-to-peer approach. Owens cites a study of one “teacher-led” program in which the girls were skeptical of the usefulness of interventions directed by teachers/counselors (Owens et al., 2001). Sprague et al. (2001) quote teachers saying of an intervention program, “It’s a lot of work.” Nonetheless, a combination of these and other programs, along with a peer-to-peer program such as THTP, within a comprehensive, multiple-systems approach to peer harassment, would merit further investigation.

The concept of the “hero” as someone to emulate is raised throughout the adolescent and storytelling literature (Birch & Heckler, 1996; Ekins & Freeman, 1998; Livo & Rietz, 1986; Malgady, Costantino, & Rogler, 1990). Through the process of confessing their own raw stories in a session of THTP, and through their willingness to take on a leadership role to effect change, the DC students became heroes to middle school youth.

Farber and Rogler (1981), working with the therapeutic community at Unitas, found a shift in the social organization from a predominantly hierarchical order to one whose roles were more democratic and egalitarian. Their research showed that by developing communication between patients and their peers, the individuals were emboldened to take on more responsibility for their own and one another's care. In her article on the "Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth," Gisela Konopka (1973) states that, ". . . youth should be helped to develop a feeling of *accountability* for the impact they have on other human beings-accountability not in a hierarchic sense, but *in the context of a relationship among equals*" (p. 10).

### Future Directions

Based on the results obtained by 2 years of study and evolution of this project, a number of future steps and directions are indicated:

1. Ongoing, longitudinal follow-up among students who have attended THTP sessions in middle school, aimed at measuring changes (if any) in these student's social attitudes and behaviors, particularly with regard to harassment. This follow-up should consist of both "objective" measuring tools such as a standardized questionnaire, and also "qualitative" tools including individual interviews, and feedback in future years' THTP sessions. The use of pretests and posttests and long-term follow-up (e.g., a year later) would allow closer monitoring of behavior change in middle school students.

Information sought from students would include not just whether an individual has/has not changed a pattern of overt harassment, but also whether the individual has changed roles or modes of behavior in group situations—for instance, by going from “passive onlooker” to “victim’s defender.”

2. Feedback from faculty, administrators and guidance counselors. Of primary interest here is the question of whether these adults have noticed any changes in broad behavioral patterns among middle school students and whether such changes (if any) might be attributable to the students’ involvement with THTP. Also, feedback should be sought as to which components of the project appear to have been most effective.
3. Improved methods of maintaining contact between DC students and the middle school youth who have attended THTP sessions. These methods would include e-mail, feedback forms, and more follow-up sessions where possible. The goal here is to keep middle school students “in the loop,” making them active participants in an ongoing project, not just passive spectators at a one-shot presentation. Additional THTP sessions at the 6-week follow-up point would be a future goal as well.
4. Broadening the scope of the project to include a wider and more representative range of schools, communities, high school-age presenters, middle school-age participants, and adult project

facilitators. This should help determine which aspects of THTP “translate” well across socioeconomic and other boundaries and should make it possible to examine the project methodology in a more clinical way.

5. Standardizing or “packaging” the project by creating a project manual, teacher’s guide, feedback forms, and other material, so as to make it possible for any school system to launch its own version of The Harassment Tales Project or to modify the standard form of the project to suit local needs and other special considerations.

### Conclusion

Relational issues are of overwhelming importance to the developing middle school student. Issues of universal values and social justice are interwoven with this developmental time of self-in-relation, and according to Kohlberg and Konopka, this is the critical stage to stimulate maximal psychological and moral maturity (Konopka, 1973). Therefore, an antiharassment program that allows youth to work together to solve their problems meets these students at an optimal crossroads in their development.

Based on the literature reviewed in this thesis, and the presentation of strengths and weaknesses of the Harassment Tales Project after two years of study, the results obtained support the proposition that direct, primary narrative in a culturally sensitive context (adolescent-to-adolescent), presented in a safe and confidential “room of confession,” merits further investigation as a possible tool for schools in developing a comprehensive, multiple-systems approach to peer harassment.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A:

### Sample Relational Aggression Story Told by “Amelia,” a Junior in High School

“When I was in grade school I lived down south. In Georgia. And kids used to tease me ‘cause I wasn’t rich. And everybody was rich in that town. So they teased me. And whispered about me and left me out. I asked my mom to buy me rich kid clothes but she wouldn’t, I don’t know, she just wouldn’t. We were poor. I hated those girls, ‘cause they hated me . . . just ‘cause I was poor and wore different clothes. I was miserable . . . and always hurt . . . just because of class.

So, we had to move when I was in sixth grade. I decided right then and there that I was going to be popular and I was going to be the queen. I could just start over where nobody knew me, and act like those rich girls in Georgia. But I still hated rich girls ‘cause I was afraid they’d hurt me again. So when I came to Camden, I WAS the queen, and got people to do things for me like carry my books and buy me lunch and stuff. I got my mom to buy me cool clothes and hair stuff, and walked around with power. This was sixth and seventh grade. We used to sit at the “cool table” at lunch, and nobody could touch us. I would tell girls who were weaker, what to do and say and wear. I’m feeling really, really, cruddy about this right now. [With her head down, Amelia’s body language showed sadness and remorse, and the middle school boys and girls were listening intently. Amelia paused and took a deep breath before continuing.]

“Then one day . . . we were outside at our spot at recess, and we were in a group . . . and I said, “Anyone who doesn’t want Caroline in the group, raise their hand.” I raised my hand. And so did everyone else. [Long moment of silence.] We voted Caroline out of



the group. She was just sitting there and got up and walked away. Voted out. [Silence; sincere sadness and shame in Amelia's body language.]

“I still hurt for what I did to her and how I made her feel. I went to bed nights crying about what I had done, knowing it was wrong, knowing how *I* felt when it happened to me. Asking myself why I did it, when it felt so bad to do. I know I hurt others, too, just to get back at how I was treated in Georgia. And I wanted to feel powerful . . . And that's how I did it. By taking someone else's power away. Stripping her down emotionally in front of her friends. Who just stood there . . . with me . . . raising their hands.”

At this point in the story, Amelia asked the middle school students about this pattern called “relational aggression”—whether they see it in school, and what it looks like. The DC students pulled together around Amelia's story at this point and discussed the issues of power, discrimination, relational aggression, depression and injury that this form of harassment can cause; the underlying issues of girls' relationships and inability to express anger; and ways to deal with this problem. The strategies ranged from moving away from peer groups who do not align with your values, to teacher/parent/peer support, addressing the problem openly with the perpetrator, and finding new friends.

Seventh and eighth grade students were more able to recognize the components of relational aggression than fifth or sixth graders. Girls were more likely to share their stories when presented with a story such as Amelia's. A balanced give-and-take of open dialogue ensued following a story like Amelia's, with the DC students teaching from their more mature perspective. The DC students felt “high” and empowered after a

session like this, and were well prepared to go on to the next class (as sometimes the DC students presented THTP to more than one class a day).

## Appendix B:

### Sample Bullying Story Told by “Stephen,” a Junior in High School

“When I was in third grade, I was little. And lots of boys used to pick on me, ‘cause I was small. Push me around and stuff. This was in Rockland, where I lived until fourth grade. When I came here to Camden I tried to stay away from people and not make friends because I thought they’d do the same. I was really defensive and kind of always looking for a fight. So I was known as a fighter until sixth grade, when I started thinking about what I was doing. I don’t know how I did it but I just stopped fighting, but still stayed away from people.”

“I have a few good friends now, and I try to teach them not to do what I did. That it’s not fair.”

“I remember when I was changing [my behavior] in sixth and seventh grade, I started to think about the world, and what if everyone fought? How could we survive? Why do we do this to each other? If only EVERYONE could be kind to each other . . . Could you imagine that? . . . That’s what I’m working toward, and I help my friends think about it too. I ask them to walk away from possible fights. And they listen to me. I now have friends that admire me for who I am and what I believe, instead of discriminating against me because I was small. That’s why I wanted to come to speak to you [middle school students] today. It’s hard to do this, to talk like this, but I know I have to now. I know we can change things in schools and change things in world conflict by changing our behavior. One by one. Thank you.”

Stephen was nervous speaking, but knew it empowered others to see him stand up and speak out about what he believes. The middle school students were in awe of Stephen's speech and were silent for a moment, thinking about his story. The DC students used the story as the context to describe elements of retaliatory aggression, and the issue of boys' development (being small, and threatening his masculinity with teasing and physical aggressiveness).

The DC students heard stories from the middle school students that had similar themes, and they worked through strategy with the younger students, explaining such things as the role of an individual in group behavior, the narrow parameters of the "boy code," and teasing as entertainment. The middle school boys were brave in that many of them had never spent 80 minutes discussing adolescent aggression prior to this session of THTP. Although there was inherent tension in the subject matter, there was a level of comfort within the framework of storytelling.

## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Dorothy Foote was born on October 28, 1959 in Lewiston, Maine, to Dr. Daniel Desjardin and Lorraine Caho Desjardin. She graduated from Edward Little High School in Auburn, Maine, and continued her education at the University of Maine, receiving her Bachelor of Science with honors in 1982. In 1985, she received a degree in Commercial Finance at Williams College in Massachusetts. For both undergraduate and graduate studies at the University of Maine, Dorothy was awarded membership into the National Honor Society for Kappa Omicron Nu. Dorothy worked as an officer in commercial banking through 1989 and was an adjunct professor of banking with Thomas College and on numerous banking boards during this time.

Throughout the 1990s to the current time, Dorothy worked in advocacy for the arts in community, having served in many capacities in arts organizations, ultimately having been hired by the BBC to speak at the Gilmore Festival, the largest classical piano festival in the world. She has also been a tireless advocate over the past 10 years for those living with HIV/AIDS in Maine. She is currently a trustee with Bay Chamber Concerts, The Maine Community Foundation, Coastal AIDS Network, and is a Partner and Comptroller at Coastal Communications, Inc. She and her husband Charles have three children and live in Rockport, Maine.

Dorothy was a founder of the student organization Diversity Coalition at Camden Hills Regional High School in 1997, where she was able to develop programs such as The Harassment Tales Project. She plans to continue the study of diversity and tolerance in educational settings within a doctoral program. Dorothy is a candidate for the Master

of Science degree in Human Development from The University of Maine in August,  
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