

It's Hard to Learn When

Teachers who refuse to tolerate verbal harassment can create havens of safety and respect.

Stephen L. Wessler

Hank's freshman year in high school was a success. He was a straight-A student, participated in many extracurricular activities, and had lots of friends.

Hank's sophomore year was different: After he was outed as being gay, he became the target of verbal and physical harassment in the hallways, on the bus, and in the lunchroom. The verbal harassment even crept into some of his classes. His isolation and fear increased throughout the fall semester, and his grades fell dramatically.

Early in the spring, in a chemistry class, a student who had been one of the ringleaders in harassing Hank turned to him while the teacher was writing something on the board, called him an anti-gay slur, and poured a vial of acid onto his head. Hank screamed. The chemistry teacher turned and yelled, "Hey, you two, that's what comes from fooling around!" Hank went to the school nurse and eventually received treatment at a hospital. The chemistry teacher never inquired into what had precipitated the incident—and Hank never told, fearing retaliation. Hank's grades plummeted further. Shortly before the end of the school year, he dropped out of high school.

Respectful Classrooms Depend on Respectful Schools

A respectful classroom means different things to different people. We can all agree, however, that students in a respectful classroom all feel physically and emotionally safe and valued for who they are. A young person who

does not feel safe and valued will find it difficult or even impossible to focus on academics or relationships with classmates.

A respectful classroom requires a teacher who notices the interactions between students, who follows up to learn why something unusual or harmful has occurred, and who does not tolerate harassment or social exclu-

sion. But a respectful classroom also depends on a respectful school. Even in the safest classroom, students will not feel safe and ready to learn if they have to run a gauntlet of abuse to get from class to class. Hank's grades began to fall months before his fellow student poured acid on his head. Hank's academic performance suffered as a result of the verbal and physical harassment that he endured in the hallways, on the bus, and in the cafeteria.

Recently, I had separate conversations with several students who attended different high schools. These students had two experiences in common. First, they all suffered from harassment because other students perceived them as different. Second, when I asked how they tried to remain safe in school, they each mentioned the same strategy: In every class, each had drawn a floor plan of the school to identify the fastest way to get out of the building and then reenter at the closest

point to their next class, thus avoiding walking through the hallways. The hallways were a scary, sometimes terrifying place, where these students were constantly on edge, waiting for the next insult or the next shove into a locker. To state the obvious, a student who spends his or her time in math class drawing floor plans of the school is not focusing on the lesson.

To develop a respectful classroom, we must value students' emotions and their lives outside the classroom.

A respectful and safe classroom that enables every student to focus on academics can exist only in a school with safe and respectful hallways, locker rooms, cafeterias, and buses. No teacher can single-handedly ensure students' safety throughout the whole school. But one teacher can bring his or her classroom very close to that ideal.

Ask the Next Question

Tom, a 7th grader, had been harassed in school for as long as he could remember. Somehow, Tom did not fit in. The other students viewed him as a "nerd" and somewhat clumsy. Tom often felt anxious and usually lacked the confidence to complain about the harassment that he received.

But one day in English class, Tom finally gathered the courage to raise his hand. When the teacher called on him, he told her that the student next to him was calling him names. The teacher responded, "Both of you, cut it out

You're Scared



© Rob Leywne/Corbis

now." Tom's classmate continued the whispered slurs, and Tom again raised his hand and complained. The teacher gave Tom a frustrated stare and said in a louder voice, "I told both of you boys to cut it out now, and I mean *now!*" Many years later, as a college senior, Tom wrote to me about this incident:

It seemed that my teachers just did not speak the same language. They couldn't see what was going on directly in front of them. "Boys will be boys" was the motto. I found it very frustrating that a teacher could

respect me as a serious student and then think that I was lying when I complained of harassment. They just had no idea of how it made a kid feel.

We cannot expect teachers to see everything that happens in a classroom. Teachers must write on the chalkboard, talk to individual students, and walk around the room. But we can expect teachers to ask questions. When a student complains of being harassed, the teacher needs to follow up and determine what happened—preferably right then, but at least sometime during

or immediately after class.

The consequences of failing to follow up are serious. The offending student may feel that he or she has received a green light to continue the harassment. Perhaps even more important, the student who complained may lose faith in his or her teacher's ability to ensure fairness and to provide a classroom environment in which the student can learn. Students remember these painful incidents for a long time: Tom recalled his experience with great clarity nine years later.

Realize That "Good Kids" Can Harass

Recently, in meetings with middle school and high school students, I asked the students to write down one message that they would like to give their principals about harassment. More than half of the students wrote some variation of the following statement: "Please let our principal know that 'good kids' can be mean and can harass."

Students have a keen awareness of what they feel is unfair or discriminatory. They are disturbed and upset by their perception that teachers give favored treatment to so-called "good kids." Students tell me that once a boy or girl gets a reputation as a "trouble-maker," teachers will judge that person far more critically than they would others whom they consider "good students." These students also tell me that some "good kids" do engage in harassment but are rarely caught and even more rarely disciplined. Students simply want everyone to be treated by the same standard.

In a recent conversation with a high school senior, I asked how this type of discrimination played out. This senior told me that he was a good student, participated in extracurricular activities, and had the respect of teachers and administrators. He told me that he could tell his teacher that he had to go to the front office, leave class, and carry a syringe through the hallways without a pass. In the unlikely event that a teacher stopped him in the hall, the teacher

would probably not demand a hall pass and would just ask him what kind of science experiment he was performing with the syringe. In contrast, any student with a bad reputation walking in the halls between classes would be stopped immediately and asked to produce a pass. If he were carrying a syringe, he would quickly find himself in the assistant principal's office.

When students see such disparate treatment, they become both disillusioned and angry. Respectful schools and classrooms are possible only if students respect their teachers, and students lose respect for teachers who appear to engage in stereotyping and discriminatory treatment.

Make Sure That Every Student Belongs

When I visit schools, I am always impressed with the time and effort that teachers spend placing posters, photographs, quotations, and maps on the walls of their classrooms to make the rooms stimulating, colorful, and lively. Unfortunately, the displays that teachers put on their walls often fail to make all students believe that they belong in the classroom.

When the pictures on our classroom walls omit many of our students—disabled students, students of color, students from nontraditional families, students from different religious traditions, overweight students, gay and lesbian students, and many more—we should not be surprised that some students begin to question whether they are less worthy than their classmates or that other students seethe with resentment. It's hard to feel respected and valued when you never see yourself mirrored in a positive way.

When I discuss these issues with teachers, they sometimes tell me, "We don't have any diversity in this class." I respond that they probably have far more diversity than they think. Every class has students of different sizes and weights. Although the teacher may not know it, almost every class has students from nontraditional families; students

who have gay or lesbian relatives; and students whose extended family members are from different races, religions, or ethnic groups. The assumption of homogeneity is usually an illusion.

It takes extra work to find pictures and photographs that mirror all of our students. But the result—a classroom environment in which all students feel valued for who they are and therefore feel ready to learn—is worth the effort.

Even in the safest classroom, students will not feel safe and ready to learn if they have to run a gauntlet of abuse to get from class to class.

Show Students That They Matter as Individuals

A few months ago, I was working with a group of boys in a juvenile correctional institution. We talked about the institution's school, and the boys complained about both the school and its teachers. But when I asked whether they could think of a teacher whom they respected, they immediately began naming several teachers.

These teachers had one thing in common, said the boys. They were willing to put their lesson plans on hold for several minutes and "talk to us about what's happening" inside the institution and in the outside world. They talked to their students and asked them for their thoughts about the major events affecting their lives.

At all levels of the education system, students want to be treated as individuals—to have their personal experiences with traumatic events valued and to have their own opinions validated. A colleague recently told me what occurred on Sept. 12, 2001, at the liberal arts college where he taught. That morning, a history professor came into the class and began his lecture to

125 students, picking up at the exact point where he had left off the day before. He never referred to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Without any discussion, one by one over the next 15 minutes, two-thirds of the students in the class quietly gathered up their books and walked out of the lecture, dismayed at their professor's inability to acknowledge their intense emotions resulting from the traumatic events of the day before.

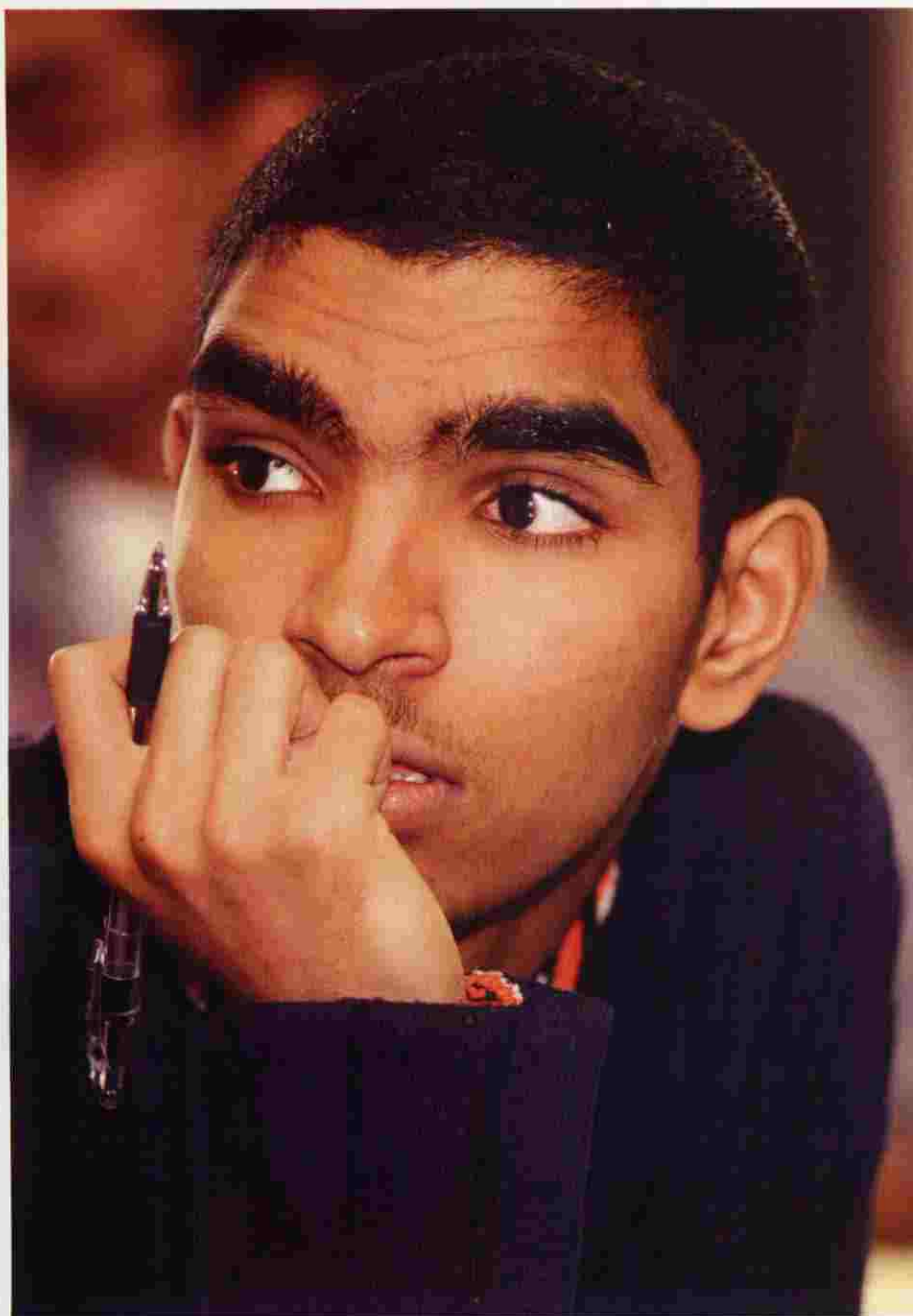
To develop a respectful classroom, we must respect students by valuing their emotions and their lives outside the classroom. When students believe that teachers respect and care about their feelings, they are more likely to respect themselves and their classmates.

Respond to Degrading Comments and Slurs

Most students hear classmates use degrading language and slurs every day. These comments usually happen outside of classrooms and away from the ears of teachers—usually, but not always. Whenever teachers do hear such language, they should respond immediately and firmly to send a clear message that disrespect and incivility are not acceptable.

By interrupting degrading comments, teachers reduce the chance that insults will escalate to threats and violence. These teachers reassure the targeted students that someone cares about their feelings. And they model for all students the confidence to stand up against harassment.

When responding to degrading language in the classroom, the teacher should discuss the issue in front of the entire class. If he or she waits and talks with the offending student one-on-one after class, other students who heard the slur but did not hear this private conversation may assume that the teacher does not care or even condones such language. The teacher can respond in a way that does not humiliate the offending student but that sends the unequivocal message that the teacher will not tolerate slurs and put-downs.



No One Would Say Those Words Around Her

A few years ago, I was talking to two students about the pervasiveness of degrading slurs in their middle school. The boys told me that they frequently heard slurs about people of color, Jewish students, and other students who were perceived as different, and that they heard anti-gay slurs and degrading words about girls "all the time."

A few days later, I talked to a teacher in the same middle school. I asked her how often she heard the language that the two students had described. She looked at me with a questioning expression and told me that she never heard any students use those words. When I later mentioned the teacher's statement to the two boys, they responded, "No one would say those words around her!" They added that her class was "really interesting" and that she spent time talking to students about what was going on in the school and in the world. They told me emphatically that no harassment ever occurred in this teacher's classroom.

No teacher can create a completely respectful classroom in a school suffering from pervasive bias, harassment, and disrespect. But one dedicated teacher can create safety for most, if not all, students in his or her classroom and serve as a powerful role model for both students and other faculty. And in the many schools where most students can say about their teachers, "No one would say those words around her," the goal of creating classrooms, hallways, and cafeterias in which every student feels respected and safe is achievable. ■

Some students, particularly young children, use degrading words whose meanings they don't understand. The teacher can respond by explaining in age-appropriate ways what the words mean and why they are disrespectful. The teacher can also use the incident to start a broader discussion about stereotyping and disrespect.

We can respond to disrespectful language in various ways, and each of us will develop our own approaches. But it

is imperative that we always respond, in the classroom or elsewhere in school. When I ask students what they want adults to do when slurs and put-downs occur, the students generally tell me the same thing, whether they are in the 3rd, 7th, or 11th grade: "Say something." Silence sends an unintended but powerfully destructive message. By speaking up, we take an important step toward creating respectful classrooms and schools.

Stephen L. Wessler is Director of the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence at the University of Southern Maine, where he is also a research associate professor; 96 Falmouth St., Portland, ME 04104; (207) 780-4756; wessler@maine.edu. He is the author of *The Respectful School: How Educators and Students Can Conquer Hate and Harassment* (2003, ASCD).

Copyright of Educational Leadership is the property of Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.