

“Everything . . . Affects Everything”: Promoting Critical Perspectives toward Bullying with *Thirteen Reasons Why*

Activities based on a YA novel help students to become transformative agents for people who are bullied.

You don't know what goes on in anyone's life but your own. And when you mess with one part of a person's life, you're not messing with just that part. Unfortunately, you can't be that precise and selective. When you mess with one part of a person's life, you're messing with their entire life.

Everything . . . affects everything.

(Asher 201–02)

Everything . . . affects everything,” from Jay Asher's young adult novel, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, captures a central message of this text

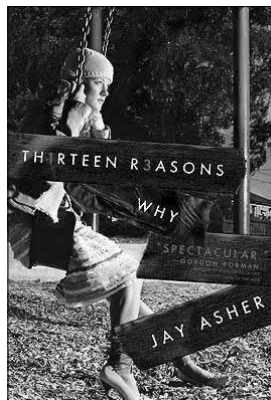
in which a young woman named Hannah Baker leaves behind a series of tapes addressed to particular individuals who played a part in producing the snowball effect that led to her suicide. “Everything . . . affects everything” also functioned as a theme for Brandie's tenth-grade literature course in which students read *Thirteen Reasons Why*, discussed its implications, and completed inquiry-based instructional activities to dig more deeply into the causes and consequences of bullying and suicide. In what follows, we highlight some of the tools that Brandie used to support students' critical perspectives toward the topic of bullying, and focus specifically on one student's especially powerful development as a “transformative agent,” a term that Richard Beach, Deborah Appleman, Susan Hynds, and Jeffrey Wilhelm use to describe a central goal for teaching literature to adolescents: the ability to read texts critically and try on multi-

ple perspectives on issues of social justice to effect change in the world (86).

Instructional Context

The students who are featured in this article attended a mid-sized county high school in Appalachia. Just over half of all students in this school qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. At the classroom level, 27 students (six young women and 21 young men) represented a diverse range of life and academic experiences. There were students for whom the sensitive topics investigated in *Thirteen Reasons*

Why—bullying, rape, sexual assault, the invasion of privacy, and drunk driving—seemed far removed from their everyday lives; for other students, some of these topics were far too familiar. The novel was relevant to both groups of students, however, because Asher focused his writing on how adolescents and adults responded (or failed to respond) to these crimes and the myriad ways in which these responses produced seemingly insurmountable obstacles for some of the characters in the text.



Brandie taught the course collaboratively with a special education teacher. During classroom read-alouds, both teachers interjected comprehension, interpretive, and evaluative questions to promote whole-class discussions, which took place almost every day for approximately 15 days.

Brandie had previously planned the course curriculum with James, a university supervisor, with whom Brandie had shared mentoring duties for a student teacher. James and Brandie coauthored this article based on their experience planning and evaluating the unit.

To understand how students engaged with the topics of bullying and suicide, we wanted to know what they understood about the topics in

the first place and particularly how they understood people who bullied and people who were bullied. Ultimately, we wanted students to be able to understand both of these perspectives deeply so that students could have the opportunity to develop the tools they would need to act when they encountered bullying in their everyday lives. To that end, we felt that Asher’s compelling

double narrative, his rich use of literary devices, and the multimedia supplements to this text would make it an especially riveting literary experience for adolescents.

Attitudes toward Bullying at the Beginning of the Unit

Students responded to the following three prompts:

Bullying is . . .

People who bully others . . .

People who are bullied by others . . .

Students’ responses to these prompts were revealing both for what they included as well as for what was excluded from their remarks. For the first item, “Bullying is . . .,” students responded to this prompt as an invitation to characterize the nature of bullying and to make judgments about the people who are involved in the act. Representative

responses included “picking on somebody,” “a bad thing that can get you into a lot of trouble,” and “what others do to get what they want.” Many students responded to the prompt about “People who bully others . . .” by identifying reasons why persons might engage in such behavior: “[they] think that they are more superior than others,” “[they] are probably bullied themselves or are going through a hard time,” and “[they] are people that think it’s cool to hurt people emotionally and physically.” These responses were interesting, among other reasons, for the diversity of causes that students attributed to the behavior of people who bullied others. Students’ responses to the prompt “People who are bullied by others . . .” could be characterized by the lack of agency that students ascribed to people who are bullied. Responses noted how people who are bullied by others “mostly won’t do anything about it so it still happens,” and “may be scared, let it happen, don’t tell anyone what’s going on.” These perspectives on bullying provided the backdrop against which we situated instruction.

Instructional Tools

Based on our belief in the value of teaching students to be transformative agents for a more socially just world, we thought that it was important to encourage students to make explicit connections between the text and the social worlds in which they lived. We used the following three tools to facilitate students’ development toward that end: a reflection and analysis listing activity, a multimodal and collaborative causal chain activity, and a text-to-world wall. We describe these tools below.

Reflective, Social, and Academic Listing Activity

After students had read the entire novel, we invited them to think about the meaning of the text from personal, social, and academic perspectives. Figure 1 depicts the list-making exercise and the choices that were available to students. For example, students were asked to make a list of 13 alternate decisions Hannah could have made in each of her “stories,” 13 lessons students learned for handling a difficult social issue in their lives, and 13 symbols students noticed in the book. Students presented their lists to the class and discussed snowballing effects related to bullying, which were related to Hannah Baker’s suicide.

We used the following three tools to facilitate students’ development toward that end: a reflection and analysis listing activity, a multimodal and collaborative causal chain activity, and a text-to-world wall.

FIGURE 1. The Reflective, Social, and Academic Listing Assignment

Reflection and Analysis		
Jay Asher's novel <i>Thirteen Reasons Why</i> gives readers much to think about personally, socially, and academically. After reading the novel, choose three items from the grid below—one reflective, one social, and one academic. ¹ Create lists, ² like Hannah did, to show your ideas.		
(Reflective) Make a list of 13 reasons you think somebody should read this book.	(Reflective) Make a list of 13 alternate decisions Hannah could have made in each of her "stories."	(Reflective) Make a list of 13 reasons Hannah had to live. OR Make a list of 13 things YOU have to live for.
(Social) Make a list of 13 important social issues addressed in this book.	(Social) Make a list of 13 tips you can offer somebody struggling with one of the difficult social issues in the book.	(Social) Make a list of the 13 lessons you learned for handling difficult social issues in your life.
(Academic) Make a list of 13 new or challenging vocabulary words you encountered in the book. Provide the definition. Then, provide a quotation from the novel showing the word in context or an illustration to help us visualize the word's meaning.	(Academic) Make a list of 13 literary devices you noticed in the book. Provide the name of the device with a user-friendly definition. Then, provide a quotation showing that device in action in the book.	(Academic) Make a list of 13 symbols you noticed in the book. Consider what each individual "reason" (or "story") represents.

¹Above, please circle the options you chose before turning in your finished projects.

²Think of how a useful list is organized. Perhaps it's chronological. Maybe it's alphabetical. It might be organized in yet another way. Remember how helpful lists appear. They are easy to read and neat. Sometimes they are numbered or bulleted. The choice is yours, but the challenge is to do your best work.

Causal Chains

To help students comprehend the chain of events that led to Hannah's tragic decision and to help students to visualize how "everything . . . affects everything," the class completed a causal chain of events using strips of construction paper, which were linked by causes and their corresponding effects. Students individually dealt with one of Hannah's "reasons" in the text and then combined that "effect" to someone else's "cause." The result in Figure 2 illustrates (a) an important theme in the text, (b) the heavy burden that Hannah carried, and (c) the weight of such actions in both the literal center of the classroom and the figurative center of students' lives.

Text-to-World Wall

We encouraged students to consider the relevance of Asher's novel through the use of a text-to-world wall, for which James, Brandie, and Brandie's students posted text connections from the book to the world. Examples included local newspaper clip-

FIGURE 2. A Chain of Causes and Effects That Led to Hannah Baker's Suicide in *Thirteen Reasons Why*

pings of a man who went bankrupt after his business failed as a result of the gossip that emerged on a well-known website where people can post anonymously; screenshots of Web-based news coverage of an adolescent who committed suicide as a result of the cyberbullying he endured because of his sexual orientation; and research synopses of nationwide assessments of the effects of bullying

prevention programs in public schools. Our text-to-world wall offered an opportunity for students to see dramatically how “everything . . . affects everything.” Brandie periodically called attention to new information posted on the text-to-world wall and discussed with students both the consequences of the snowball effect and relationships between the texts and Hannah’s story.

Attitudes toward Bullying at the End of the Unit

We redistributed attitude surveys at the end of the unit with the same prompts to learn whether or not and, if so, how students’ attitudes shifted toward bullying, people who bully others, and people who are bullied by others. Generally, students’ attitudes toward bullying remained unchanged. Students still defined bullying as

“picking on somebody” and “a bad thing.” We wonder if embedding additional explicit opportunities for students to consider the ways in which bullying can occur in subtle ways across various contexts might have encouraged a more complex understanding of the issue. Students completed the prompt, “People who bully others . . .” with responses that mirrored the pre-surveys: “[they] should be

punished” and “[they] are mean.” These responses did not exhibit the critical reflection that we had hoped to find. We consider some of the reasons why this might be the case in our conclusion section.

Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, students’ responses to the prompt “People who are bullied by others . . .” exhibited important differences on the post-surveys. Many students continued to characterize people who are bullied by others as passive individuals who lack the agency needed to stop bullying. However, half of the students positioned people who are bullied by others as change agents, as in the following responses:

[People who are bullied by others . . .] stand up for yourself!! No, don’t fight them, tell them to stop or ask, why? If that doesn’t

work, tell an adult—it’s not being a “snitch,” it’s standing up for yourself.

[People who are bullied by others . . .] need to tell someone.

[People who are bullied by others . . .] just want it to stop.

These responses ascribe a sense of agency to people who are bullied. As opposed to some students’ passive positioning of people who are bullied on the pre-survey as “poor people” who “let it happen to themselves,” some students identified the power within people to act themselves, or on the behalf of others. The person who responded that people who are bullied by others “just want it to stop” also focused on the act of bullying rather than the people involved. This is an interesting insight given Hannah Baker’s focus on the specific events that led to her decision to kill herself. Hannah emphasized how an innocent first kiss became something much more promiscuous when the person Hannah kissed embellished, exaggerated, and made up facts about the encounter. The fictional account of this event was fresh on the minds of Hannah’s peers when they voted her the “Best Ass in the Freshman Class.” That event, then, linked to a series of events that were interconnected in complicated ways. A central purpose of the distribution of Hannah’s posthumous tapes is to reveal how these events shaped and were shaped by previous and subsequent negative events in her life. The personal, passionate, and sympathetic responses to this prompt provide hope that students’ examination of this piece of literature allowed them to reflect on their own roles in protecting the feelings of others and preventing bullying in their own lives.

“She Didn’t Bring It on Herself”: Nikki’s Literature Circle

In an effort to promote multiple perspectives and allow students to engage with these perspectives in small-group discussions, we drew on the work of Harvey Daniels and Jim Burke to organize literature circles, which met periodically to make sense of the literary text and to pose questions about its implications for students’ lives. In the excerpt below, we illustrate how one student, Nikki, acted on the opportunity to stand up for Hannah Baker

The personal, passionate, and sympathetic responses to this prompt provide hope that students’ examination of this piece of literature allowed them to reflect on their own roles in protecting the feelings of others and preventing bullying in their own lives.

and Hannah's particular reaction to an important scene in the text, which snowballed into a series of misconceptions that ultimately proved to be too much for her to cope with.

1. **Nikki:** So do you guys get—understand—her problem? Like, what she's saying?

Gavin: No, I have no clue.

Tom: Then you weren't listening.

Gavin: Yeah, I was listening, but I have no clue.

5. **Nikki:** ANYWAY! She's saying that no one sees her for her, because if they did, they'd see what she feels.

Gavin: [They] may see her for what others think about, or say about her.

Nikki: Exactly.

Tom: Yeah, with all the rumors that were going around.

Nikki: What she says is they don't see that; to herself, she's all alone. She's got no one to talk to, no one cares about her.

10. **Gavin:** Yeah, yeah. If some hot girl was around here being a whore, I'd talk to her. Wouldn't you, Derek?

Nikki: That is mean.

Gavin: Wouldn't you talk to her? If she was here at this school?

Derek: She'd have all kinds of people talking to her, wouldn't she? This whole school's full of . . .

Nikki: That's what you don't understand, Gavin. The point is that she doesn't want to be looked at for her reputation. She wants to be looked at for her. The smart, intelligent, young lady that she is. She doesn't want to be seen for—

15. **Gavin:** —Well, then she needs to prove it. She needs to prove it.

Derek: She didn't bring it on herself.

In the exchange above, Nikki attempts to convince her literature circle group members—Tom, Derek, and Gavin—that Hannah's message in *Thirteen Reasons Why* is relevant to students' lives. Nikki, the "discussion director" in this instance, opens up the conversation after Tom points to

the significance of Hannah's poem, "Soul Alone." In this poem, the narrator first describes a potential "soul mate's" inability to see the narrator for who the narrator is. The focus then turns toward the narrator's mother, who also sees the narrator only superficially—for the clothes worn by the narrator—rather than the "soul" of the person she brought into the world. The poem ends with the following lines: "Put me / underneath God's sky and / know me / don't just see me with your eyes / Take away / this mask of flesh and bone and / see me / for my soul / alone" (Asher 191).

After reading the poem aloud, Nikki asks the rest of the group if they understand Hannah's meaning in the poem. Nikki explicates the text for Gavin (line 9), who is, at first, reluctant to provide his input on the subject, saying that he has "no clue" what Hannah's meaning could be (line 2). In line 10, however, Gavin transforms the question to apply to the context of the students' high school and asks Derek if he would "talk to" someone who had a reputation for being "a whore." Nikki immediately remarks that Gavin's question is "mean" (line 11), but Derek entertains the question and intimates that the entire high school might be "full of" such persons. Nikki does not allow this conversation to continue in the direction toward which it was ultimately leading. Instead, Nikki rebukes Gavin's comment and his inability to understand Hannah's meaning and, perhaps, the central message of Asher's text: "Everything . . . affects everything." Gavin's comments would have ultimately led to a list of persons he would like to "talk to"—a list not unlike the infamous list in the novel (the "Best Ass in the Freshman Class" list)—that permitted Hannah's peers to view her as a sexual object, a view that ostensibly led to widespread misinformation about Hannah's character and history. When Gavin makes one last attempt to carry on this line of thinking in line 15 ("She needs to prove it"), Derek—who initially was in favor of contributing to Gavin's hypothetical query—stands up for Hannah and, in so doing, stands up for Nikki and the people whose reputations could have been ruined by being brought up in such a conversation about "some hot girl . . . around here being a whore" (line 10).


We find both Nikki's actions and Derek's (final) response to be promising. These transformative agents took the opportunity to stand up

for “people who are bullied” by disengaging a line of conversation that could have had destructive consequences.

Transformative Agency

The courage to act—to stand up for oneself and for others—might seem like a daunting task for many adolescents. It is, however, an integral component that will be part of any successful anti-bullying agenda. Our work in this tenth-grade classroom suggests that incorporating young adult literature that addresses the topic of bullying can help students to examine this issue critically and unpack the causes and effects of such behavior both inside and outside of schools. Though we noticed that students’ perspectives relating to people who bullied others remained, generally, unchanged after engaging with this text, we believe that this might be due to the fact that *Thirteen Reasons Why* focused primarily on the consequences of the snowball effect on the person who was bullied. Other texts that focus on the motiva-

tion of people who bully might help students to problematize this behavior, as well.

As a result of our study, we close with the same sense of hope in change with which Asher concludes his novel. After listening to all 13 tapes, Clay Jensen, the character through whom the reader comes to know and understand Hannah Baker, rises above his inhibition and passivity to engage in a conversation with a peer who seemed withdrawn and whose behavior mirrored Hannah’s in some uncanny ways. We encourage teachers of English language arts to use literature such as Jay Asher’s text to understand both the consequences of the snowball effect—how “everything . . . affects everything”—and how everyone has the responsibility to create a safe classroom environment in which positive peer interactions foster both community and powerful learning opportunities. 

Works Cited

- Asher, Jay. *Thirteen Reasons Why*. New York: Razorbill, 2007. Print.
- Beach, Richard, Deborah Appleman, Susan Hynds, and Jeffrey Wilhelm. *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*. 2nd ed. Mahwah: Erlbaum, 2010. Print.
- Burke, Jim. *The English Teacher’s Companion: A Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum, and the Profession*. 3rd ed. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2008. Print.
- Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. 2nd ed. Portland: Stenhouse, 2002. Print.

Our work in this tenth-grade classroom suggests that incorporating young adult literature that addresses the topic of bullying can help students to examine this issue critically and unpack the causes and effects of such behavior both inside and outside of schools.

James S. Chisholm is assistant professor of English education in the Department of Middle and Secondary Education at the University of Louisville. Contact him at jschisholm3@gmail.com. **Brandie Trent** teaches English in rural Kentucky and serves as a teacher-leader for the Morehead Writing Project at Morehead State University. You may email her at mrs.brandie.trent@gmail.com.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In “Making Connections,” teachers learn to model for students how to make three different important types of literary connections: text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world. Students then use this knowledge to find their own personal connections to a text. <http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/making-connections-30659.html>