Humans inherently conflict. Yet many conflicts transpire unproductively and help define the infamous b-word: bullying. Researchers have discovered that levels of the b-word have steadily increased over time, for which they blame the increase in technological advancements and the c-word: cyberbullying. Teenage social lives have always included exclusion, teasing, and gossiping, but now perpetrators can use technology as an additional outlet. Characterized by emotionally harmful interactions online, cyberbullying plagues my generation and derives from a decrease in empathy; self-reported empathy in college students has declined significantly over the past three decades (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing). Thus, adolescents today need more empathy in order to eliminate cyberbullying. Researchers and educators agree that a key component to learning this exists – art. Observation and practice of art increases human empathy exponentially (Bertling 21; Hurley et al. 422423; Jarvis and Gourthro 1517; Seaman 27). Therefore, I believe schools should develop art education to stimulate empathy and effectively solve cyberbullying.

Psychologists have discovered a distinct correlation between acts of bullying and levels of empathy. According to researchers at the University of Antwerp, low scores on the Basic Empathy Scale “[predict] bullying perpetration.” Individuals with low empathic levels have a higher likelihood of bullying or bystanding online; conversely, adolescents with higher levels of empathy will likely support the victim (Cleemput, Vandebosch, Pabian 385). Hence, a primary factor in cyberbullying’s ubiquity today remains the absence of empathy in society.

Art such as literature and drama can fill this void, as it can significantly increases levels of empathic concern. Studying fictional plotlines allows students to develop “emotional connections with ideas and characters”; thus, it allows them to view situations from others’ perspectives (Seaman 27). Further, if educators instruct with text that discusses oppression and cyberbullying, students will have the opportunity to assess bullying as an objective outsider. Consequently, their empathic abilities will evolve alongside their understanding of literature. Drama programs can also foster such empathy; as a member of a Boal Acting Troupe, I know this well. Boal Theatre derives from Augusto Boal, who formed the Theatre of the Oppressed in the 1970s to protest Brazil’s militaristic government. Boal created theatrical images to expose oppression, and students today mirror his actions by creating art that expresses modern issues like cyberbullying. For example, I created a portrayal of events at Steubenville High School, where a group of high school boys shared detailed accounts of a girl’s rape on social media. The piece I created allowed some of my co-artists to cope with similar experiences – the art helped them acknowledge past issues with cyberbullying. Further, it pulled on audience members’ heartstrings to expose the extremely negative impact of cyberbullying; thus, observers’ levels of empathic concerns increased. If schools promote such activities, victims of cyberbullying could cope and perpetrators of cyberbullying could empathize with victims. These skills that artistic experiences cultivate increase overall emotional intelligence, which in turn increases empathy – a key ingredient to eliminating cyberbullying.

Therefore, I firmly believe that the development of art education will prompt an abundance of empathy and, consequently, a famine of cyberbullying. Educators and artists should focus on these aspects in lessons, and schools should increase art opportunities for teenagers. However, the aforementioned developments cannot materialize without proper governmental funding; hence, legislators must increase funding for school art programs in order to stimulate widespread student empathy. This c-word remains cancerous to the growth of adolescents, yet a lack of art education remains equally cancerous to the growth of empathy.
Works Cited


