

# A Safe Education for All

## Recognizing and Stemming Harassment in Music Classes and Ensembles

**Abstract:** This article addresses the pervasiveness of harassment in schools in the United States and presents ways to recognize and stem bullying in music classrooms. Music educators are in a unique position to recognize atypical behaviors in their students. Music educators who teach middle and high school ensembles often retain the same students in their classrooms over the course of many years. Because of the unique nature of the ensemble experience, coupled with the opportunity for extended instruction, music teachers can closely monitor the well-being of their students. However, music teachers should understand how difficult it may be for students who have been harassed to come forward with information about harassment. Sometimes harassment is overt and easy to recognize (e.g., name-calling, inappropriate gestures, graffiti). However, harassment can also occur in contexts that are not readily recognized but are just as hurtful. When students observe teachers taking a stand against bullying and harassment, they recognize the intention for a safe classroom. When students feel safe, they are more likely to ask questions and engage in class in dynamic and meaningful ways—both musically and nonmusically. Only when students feel safe can they learn. Music teachers need to gain a further understanding of various forms of harassment and further consider their role in creating a welcoming and secure environment.

**Keywords:** bully, development, environment, harassment, safe, social justice, teacher education

Harassment is a pervasive problem in K–12 educational settings in the United States.<sup>1</sup> According to a survey conducted by the American Association of University Women, of 2,064 students in grades 8 through about 11, 83 percent of girls have been sexually harassed by their peers, 78 percent of boys have been sexually harassed by their peers, and 38 percent of the students were harassed by teachers or school employees.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, 55 percent of the students stated that not only had they been sexually harassed during the school day, but the harassment took place within a classroom.<sup>3</sup>

According to the 2007 National School Climate Survey of 6,209 middle and high school students,

- Young people of color reported higher incidences of verbal harassment, physical harassment, and physical assault because of their race or ethnicity than did white students. Specifically, 21.9 percent of young people of color reported having been verbally harassed in school at least some of the time in the past year because of their race or ethnicity, compared to 8.2 percent of white students.

*Is your classroom a place where all students feel safe from harassment? If not, it is something you can change.*

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DOI: 10.1177/0027432111405342  
<http://mej.sagepub.com>

- Among students of color, 5.3 percent reported having been physically harassed in school at least some of the time in the past year because of their race or ethnicity, compared to 2.4 percent of white students; 2.6 percent of young people of color reported having been physically assaulted in school at least some of the time in the past year because of their race or ethnicity, compared to less than 1 percent of white youngsters.<sup>4</sup>
- Students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) share similar vulnerabilities to those who identify as a racial or ethnic minority. The same large-scale study found that nearly nine out of ten LGBT students (86.2 percent) experienced harassment at school in the past year. Three-fifths (60.8 percent) felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and about a third (32.7 percent) skipped a day of school in the past month because of feeling unsafe.

## Harassment in the Music Education Classroom

Although there have been no large-scale studies examining the frequency of harassment in music education classrooms, anecdotal evidence suggests that harassment exists in music education settings. In the past two years, I have been contacted numerous times for advice concerning harassment in music classrooms. In the next section of this article, I present three short examples of harassment brought to my attention within the past year. All three of the following scenarios were shared by colleagues concerned for their students' well-being. After presenting the stories of Samantha, David, and Eric, I end with ways music educators can confront and stem harassment in their classrooms.

### The Students' Experience

#### Samantha

Samantha is every middle school director's ideal student. She plays flute with ability well beyond her years, takes time to mark her music as instructed, and is

quick to answer questions. She arrives early to class not only to set up her chair and stand but to help the other flute students set up as well. Her parents help lead and organize the band fund-raisers and are always asking if they can help the program. Lately, though, something seems peculiar about Samantha; she seems detached and distracted. Samantha used to be the first to engage in conversation with her classmates, especially the boys sitting in the brass and percussion section. However, lately she seems to shy away from their attempts at conversation. I have also noticed that the boys seem to be joking with Samantha more than usual. They also seem to be gathering and whispering more than normal, which is peculiar behavior for these boys. I try to be in the room with the students 100 percent of the time, but on the few occasions I have visited my office for a minute, then returned, I have noticed the other girls whispering to, or seemingly counseling, Samantha. I think the boys might be saying something inappropriate and upsetting her, which is odd because typically, she is the type of student to be assertive and stand up for herself. But in this case, whatever it is that is bothering her, and perhaps the other girls, must be pretty upsetting.

#### David

The high school string orchestra I direct is not really any different than others around me in the Midwest. The small farm towns that make up this section of the country are all pretty similar, and the kids are pretty similar as well. However, I am starting to see some small changes to the homogenous population. This year, I have a student who moved here from India at a young age, David. David is a freshman and is a joy for me and the other students to be around. He seems to take the jokes that are made about his being Indian in stride—most of the time. I do think the kids have a tough time knowing when they cross the line. I worry that if my students are sometimes inappropriate in front of me and the rest of the class—how much ribbing might he get on the school bus? Sometimes I will make a joke or two about Indian people, but most of my stuff

is taken right out of *The Simpsons*. I also think the kids get a kick out of knowing I watch *The Simpsons* and am paying attention to pop culture.

#### Eric

Eric is by far the best-behaved kid in class. He arrives way before anyone else and is often the last to leave the classroom. It is almost as if he is avoiding being alone with other students. However, when the other students do arrive, he is very friendly toward nearly everyone. Eric is a senior, and I suspect he is gay. He does not dress flamboyantly, but some of the other girls told me he discusses his intent to date other guys in band. I think the other boys in the band might be uncomfortable with Eric. When students signed up for roommates for the spring trip, no one signed up to room with Eric. I also think the boys and some of the girls might be giving him a hard time—as a matter of fact, I am pretty sure of it. Eric is a good kid and I want to help him—I have known him for years—but I worry about what he, his parents, or other students would think if I spoke directly to Eric's sexuality.

### Recognizing Harassment

Music educators are in a unique position to recognize atypical behaviors of their students. Music educators who teach middle and high school ensembles often have the opportunity to retain the same students in their classrooms over the course of many years. Because of the unique nature of the ensemble experience, coupled with the opportunity for extended instruction, music teachers can closely monitor the well-being of their students. However, music teachers should understand how difficult it may be for students who have been harassed to come forward with information about harassment. Sometimes harassment is overt and easy to recognize, such as name-calling, inappropriate gestures, or graffiti. However, harassment can also occur in contexts that are not readily recognized but are just as hurtful. Here are a few examples of harassment you can be on the look out for in your classroom:

Cyberbullying, which may include inappropriate online chat, Twitters, or “sexting”

Inappropriate advances/suggestions/propositions

Jokes that are inappropriate, even though “everyone laughs”

Stereotyping in a way that marginalizes students

Bullying or name-calling

Rumors and false accusations

Purposeful avoidance and exclusion

Furthermore, students who are experiencing harassment may exhibit the following behaviors that may act as markers for you when examining student behavior:

Shows signs of bullying<sup>5</sup>

Is increasingly withdrawn or wanting to be alone

Experiences significant drop in grades

Has unexplained injuries, bruises, or cuts

Arrives to class with torn, damaged, or missing clothing and belongings

Is uncomfortable with peers

Has no or few friends

Has a difficult time defending himself or herself

May pretend that nothing is wrong because of feelings of humiliation

May claim to be ill, and ask to be excused from class

In the vignettes of Samantha, David, and Eric, there are signs that harassment may be present. However, when assessing harassment, teachers must be thoughtful and attentive to the dynamic social situation. Evaluating any social situation is never a tidy or easy experience. In Samantha’s case, her change of behavior is a strong marker that something inappropriate may be occurring. Her social withdrawal and increased dramatic tension with other girls in the class all point to possible negative experiences. For David, his experience being the target of jokes may have started out as simple, good-natured joking that allowed him to be the center of attention. Yet from this scenario, it seems like both the students



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and teacher have crossed a boundary of appropriateness. For David, the jokes may have become hurtful and insulting. David is probably struggling to find a way to stop the jokes and share with his peers and teachers that he no longer finds them amusing. In Eric’s case, being gay, either openly or closeted, presents difficulties in school. His odd behaviors of arriving early, leaving late, and sometimes avoiding students are possible markers

of tension in his educational experience. Furthermore, situations like rooming with other boys on field trips may pose difficulties as he navigates issues of homophobia from his peers. The teacher in this situation has chosen to not speak to or counsel David. For many teachers, addressing issues of harassment can be uncomfortable and difficult. Yet when the teacher does not speak out, the silence can unintentionally allow inappropriate



actions to continue. In all three situations, the teacher can have meaningful influence over the harassment being encountered by the students.

## Addressing and Reducing Harassment in Your Classroom

Become aware of your school, county, and state harassment and antibullying policy that lists categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and gender expression/identity. Policies regarding harassment vary substantially. It is important to carefully read and understand these policies, as some have specific instructions for the teacher in both recognizing and reporting harassment. Your specific school district may outline specific procedures for addressing harassment in the classroom; however, specific actions or ways to speak out in the classroom are often tacit. Recognizing this lack of direct advice, Kevin Kumashiro suggests the following actions when confronting inappropriate behaviors in your classroom. When something inappropriate is said, intervene and stop the behavior. This can be accomplished by plainly stating one of the following: “Cut it out!” “Keep your hands to yourself!” “That’s way out of line!” “Stop it right now!” “Out of the room!” “Whoa, that is not okay!” “Leave him (her) alone.” “Hey, that was uncalled for!” “That is unacceptable!”<sup>6</sup> If you stop a student from behaving poorly, but do not explain why the behavior is unacceptable, the student may think that this type of behavior is not allowed in music but is okay in math class. Educate your students on what behaviors are inappropriate; this should be in a tone that is both thoughtful and authentic. For example, you might say, “I know you did not mean that joke or phrase to be insulting, but it is because of what is strongly implied.” Although this extra step may take a moment out of your rehearsal and make you feel a little awkward, in the long run, it will save you time and energy in addition to saving a student from future embarrassment or torment. Last, establish clear ground rules for behavior at the beginning of the year that addresses issues of bullying and

harassment. Openly and directly state that your classroom is one where students will not be targeted, singled out, teased, bullied, or harassed in any way.

## A Safe Place for All

The goal of this article was to address the pervasiveness of harassment in schools and to present ways to recognize and stem bullying in music classrooms. Legally and ethically, we must work to stop harassment against children and teens on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, language of origin, or physical or mental abilities. When students observe teachers making a stand against bullying and harassment, they recognize your intention for a safe classroom. When students feel safe, they are more likely to ask questions and engage in your class in dynamic and meaningful ways—both musically and nonmusically. Only when students feel safe can they learn. I encourage music teachers to gain a further understanding of various forms of harassment and further consider their role in creating a welcoming and secure environment.

## NOTES

1. Jaana Juvonen and Sandra Graha, *Peer Harassment in School: The Plight of the Vulnerable and Victimized* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).
2. The American Association of University Women defines sexual harassment in school as any unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior that interferes with the student’s ability to perform in an educational setting.
3. Based on prevalence statistics from the American Association of University Women (2002); see <http://www.aauw.org/>.
4. Based on prevalence statistics from the National School Climate Survey (2007); see <http://www.glsen.org/>.
5. Adapted from Melissa A. Trautman, “20 Ways to Identify and Reduce Bullying in Your Classroom,” *Intervention in School and Clinic* 38, no. 4 (2003): 243–46.
6. Kevin Kumashiro, *Against Common Sense: Teaching and Learning toward Social Justice* (New York: Routledge Press, 2004).

## Resources on Harassment in Schools

- Bully Police USA, <http://www.bullypolice.org/>  
Maintains a website providing comprehensive information on bullying and the state laws, or lack of state laws, in the United States.
- Equal Rights Advocates, [www.equalrights.org](http://www.equalrights.org)  
Equal Rights Advocates is an organization that works to enforce girls’ equal access to education. Its work focuses on how sexual harassment in schools operates as a barrier to equal education.
- Legal Momentum: The Women’s Legal Defense and Education Fund, <http://www.legalmomentum.org/>  
Legal Momentum works to expand and enforce laws and policies enacted to protect women and ensure that they are able to obtain and succeed in education and in the work force.
- U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, [www.usccr.gov](http://www.usccr.gov)  
Helpful information about the law and policies for filing a complaint about sexual harassment and discrimination in schools and universities. They handle complaints against schools that do not take proper action regarding sexual harassment.
- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), <http://youth.eeoc.gov/>  
Helpful information about the law and procedures for filing a complaint about sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace. There is a special website set up for youth who may be experiencing sexual harassment or discrimination at work.
- GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)  
GLSEN is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students.
- Hoover, John, and Glenn Olson. *Teasing and Harassment: The Frames and Scripts Approach for Teachers and Parents* (Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service, 2001).  
In the book, the authors provide easy-to-follow instructions for teachers and parents when confronting issues of harassment. Specifically, issues of harassment concerning ethnic minorities are highlighted.
- Juvonen, Jaana, and Sandra Graha. *Peer Harassment in School: The Plight of the Vulnerable and Victimized* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).  
This book brings together leading investigators to present the latest research on harassed and bullied adolescents.