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# Sticks, Stones, and Stigma: Student Bystander Behavior in Response to Hearing the Word "Retard"

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## Abstract

The present study explored the prevalence of the r-word in schools and students' bystander behavior in response to hearing the word. In total, 2,297 students from 12 high schools across the country participated in this study. Results revealed the r-word was used frequently among high school students, most often toward individuals without intellectual disability (ID). Students were more likely to take an active bystander role when hearing the r-word used toward students with ID than when hearing it used toward students without ID. Students' gender and prosocialness also played a role in determining their bystander behavior in response to the r-word. This study has implications for reducing the use of the r-word and the stigma associated with ID.

**Key Words:** *adolescence; bystander behavior; prosocial; intellectual disability; stigma*

The word *retard* (i.e., the r-word) has drawn much attention from educators, policy makers, and other disability rights advocates in recent years, as they work to reduce the stigma surrounding individuals with intellectual disability (ID; Degeneffe & Terciano, 2011; Gelb, 2002). What was once a clinical term for individuals with ID—*mental retardation*—has become a highly pejorative term commonly used by youth as an insult to demean and denigrate others (Siperstein, Pociask, & Collins, 2010). As recently as 2010, 92% of students in grades 3 through 12 had heard the r-word used as a slang invective, and 86% had heard it used by their peers, revealing the widespread use of the r-word in schools (Siperstein et al., 2010).

The frequent use of the r-word among youth both reflects the stigmatized status of individuals with ID in our society and acts to perpetuate this stigma. When the r-word is used toward an individual or object, it is meant to express disapproval, and to transfer the negativity associated with individuals with ID onto this individual or object. In addition to this negative outcome for the person being called the r-word, the use of the word results in a negative outcome for individuals with ID at large. The language that we use and hear used shapes our perspectives and attitudes, both directly and indirectly (Degeneffe & Terciano, 2011; Walsh, 2002). Thus, when the r-word is used as an insult or in reference to something undesirable, people learn to conceptualize ID itself as undesirable. This reinforces the devaluation of individuals with ID, further marginalizing a group that is already largely excluded from society (Ditchman et al., 2013).

The concern from disability rights advocates regarding the use of the r-word in the youth lexicon and its perpetuation of stigma toward individuals with ID has recently culminated in a change in clinical terminology from *mental retardation* to *intellectual disability*. Changing terminology in the field of ID has had a long history, as demonstrated by the continual changes to the name of the leading national association representing this population. Founded as the *Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions for Idiotic and Feeble-Minded Persons*, the organization has since been known as the *American Association on Mental Deficiency*, the *American Association on Mental Retardation*, and is currently named the *American Association for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*.

This continual shift in terminology demonstrates the need for professionals in the field of ID to stay one step ahead of the youth lexicon. Just as the word *retard* has developed negative connotations within the youth lexicon, past clinical terms such as *idiot* and *moron* have also gone through this process and are now commonly used to describe people who are devalued or different. Youth will continue to take and

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incorporate these clinical terms into colloquial use at the expense of others so long as low intelligence is devalued in our society and people with ID continue to be misunderstood.

In an attempt to intervene in this process, educators, community leaders, and self-advocates have been making concerted efforts to stop the use of the r-word and educate society, particularly youth, about the stigma associated with the term. These efforts led to the passing of Rosa's Law in 2010, which eliminated the use of the term "mental retardation" in federal policy language (Degeneffe & Terciano, 2011). Special Olympics International has spearheaded the movement to educate youth about the r-word through their Spread the Word to End the Word Campaign, which asks students in thousands of schools across the country each year to pledge not to use the r-word. The purpose of this campaign is three-fold: to promote respect and acceptance of individuals with ID, to educate youth about the negative impacts of using the r-word, and to encourage youth to take action when they hear others use the r-word (Special Olympics: Why Pledge, 2015).

Campaigns such as this draw strong support from the bullying literature, which over the past decade has increasingly focused on the potential of student bystanders to take action and intervene in school bullying (Aboud & Miller, 2007; Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). The same roles that exist for bystanders of bullying, also exist for students who witness the use of the r-word by peers at school. Student bystanders can join in or encourage the use of the r-word, stand up to the person using the word or defend the person it's directed toward, or remain passive by doing nothing. Studies on bystander roles have revealed that the majority of student bystanders are passive (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Oh & Hazler, 2009; Salmivalli, 1999). Because of this, school-based intervention programs often focus on empowering youth who would typically remain passive to take action to improve their school communities.

Both personal and contextual variables are known to factor into whether a student takes on an active or passive bystander role. For instance, it has been found that females are more likely than males to be active bystanders (O'Connell et al., 1999; Oh & Hazler, 2009; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukialnen, 1996; Siperstein et al., 2010), and younger students are more inclined to take action than their older peers (Aboud & Miller, 2007; Menesini et al., 1997; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Siperstein et al., 2010). These patterns have been found both in bullying and in the use of the r-word. In addition to age and gender, recent studies investigating the motivational underpinnings of bystander behavior have looked at variables such as student self-efficacy, values, and expected outcomes with regard to intervening (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2012), social competence and perceived popularity (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008; Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2013), and empathy (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010).

In fact, empathy has often been associated with active bystander behavior (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Hoffman, 2001). However, these findings have not always been consistent (Gini et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2013), suggesting that empathy alone does not distinguish active from passive bystanders. Empathy is one component of the larger concept of prosocialness—the tendency to voluntarily and intentionally behave in a way that benefits another (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). Empathy in particular is associated with behaving prosocially when there is no expectation of being rewarded or benefitting personally from the behavior (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987), such as one might expect when an individual chooses to stand up against the use of the r-word toward a peer. The other two components of prosocialness are concern for others and the desire to adhere to social norms (Jensen, Vaish, Schmidt, Ford, & Moore, 2014), which add a level of complexity to the concept, allowing for prosocial behavior that is tied to other motives, such as social reward. While prosocialness has not been a prominent focus within the bystander literature, it plays a logical role in a student's decision to take action against the use of the r-word given what is currently known about bystander behavior and the use of the r-word among youth.

In addition to a bystander's gender, age, empathy, and broader prosocialness, several studies highlight contextual variables that also factor into bystander behavior. In school environments where the norms and expectations set by students, parents, and teachers are ones that encourage students to intervene in school bullying, students are significantly more likely to stand up for victimized peers (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013; Pozzoli, Gini,

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& Vieno, 2012; Rigby & Johnson, 2006). Given the important role school environment has been found to play in students' decisions to intervene in school bullying, there are a few different contextual factors that might be expected to play a role in students' decisions to intervene in the use of the r-word. The first variable to consider is the school environment specific to students with ID. The bystander literature suggests that students may be more likely to take action against the use of the r-word if they view their school as being socially inclusive because this suggests a social norm of acceptance within the school, and adhering to social norms is an important component of prosocial behavior. The second, and possibly most important, contextual variable to consider is the target of the r-word (i.e., who the word is directed toward). This variable is of particular interest as students may be more likely to take action against the use of the r-word toward a peer with ID than toward a peer without ID.

The present study sought to follow up on the prevalence of the r-word in schools and, most importantly, understand student bystander behavior in response to the use of the r-word. Specifically, the study examined students' likelihood of taking action in response to the use of the r-word toward students with and without ID. By identifying the personal and contextual characteristics that contribute to active bystander behavior, this study builds upon the existing literature and will inform programs that aim to eliminate the use of the r-word and decrease the stigma surrounding individuals with ID.

# Methods

## Participants

A total of 3,330 students from 12 high schools in three states in three different geographical regions of the country participated in a survey in the fall of 2014. This survey was part of an ongoing investigation into inclusive programming in schools across the country. Because this survey was administered in the fall, and asked students to think about the previous year of school when responding to the survey questions, 9th graders were not included in the analyses. This ensured that all students were reflecting on their experiences in high school. Of the remaining 2,297 students, 33% were in 10th grade, 37% were in 11th grade, and 30% were in 12th grade. All students were between the ages of 14 and 19, and approximately 48% were female. See Table 1 for more demographic information about the students who participated in this study.

## Procedures

The 12 high schools that took part in this survey were part of a multi-year study of the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program, a school-based program that promotes social inclusion through sports and leadership activities. Students were surveyed before schools began implementing the program. Thus at the time of the survey, none of the participating schools had any special or extensive programming in place to address the social inclusion of students with ID in the school, and none of the participating schools had previously been engaged in any school-wide campaigns about the use of the r-word.

A representative sample of the student body at each school was obtained through a random selection of whole classrooms. The number of classrooms selected to participate in the survey varied across schools based on the size of the student body and the average class size. The survey was administered by teachers during regular class time in the selected classes using a paper and pencil Scantron® survey format.

Table 1
*Student Demographics*

| Variable | *N*/*n* | % | *M* (*SD*) | Range |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Overall | 2297 | | | |
| Gender | | | | |
| Male | 1182 | 52% | | |
| Female | 1108 | 48% | | |
| Age | | | 16.2 (.92) | 14–19 |
| Grade | | | | |
| 10th | 760 | 33% | | |
| 11th | 846 | 37% | | |
| 12th | 691 | 30% | | |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | | |
| White | 1726 | 84% | | |
| Hispanic | 508 | 23% | | |
| Black | 233 | 11% | | |
| Other | 235 | 12% | | |

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## Measures

**Student prosocialness scale.** A prosocialness scale was used to measure students' empathic and helping responses. This nine-item scale was based on the 16-item *Prosocialness Scale for Adults* developed by Caprara and colleagues (Caprara, Steca, Zelli, & Capanna, 2005). The original scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .91, however, Caprara et al. noted that six of the items contributed less to the scale than the rest of the items. These six items, and one additional item, were removed to create the nine-item scale used for this study. Participants were asked to respond to each item on a five-point scale from *never true* to *always true*. Sample items include "I try to help others" and "I try to console those who are sad." The scale was sum-scored, with possible scores ranging from 9 to 45 and with higher scores indicating greater prosocialness. The nine-item scale used in this study had strong internal consistency, similar to the original scale (Cronbach's alpha = .88).

**School social inclusion scale.** A school social inclusion scale was used to assess students' perceptions of how socially accepting their school community is of students with ID. This 12-item scale was based on the *Inventory of School Climate – Student Scale* (ISC-S; Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003). The original scale included 50 items and was made up of 10 subscales. The 12-item scale used in this study was drawn from the Negative and Positive Peer Interaction subscales of the *ISC-S*. Participants were asked to respond to each item on a four-point scale from *never* to *often*. Items on the *School Social Inclusion Scale* ask about the previous school year. Sample items include "Students in your school made fun of students with intellectual disabilities" and "Students in your school got to know students with intellectual disabilities well." The scale was sum-scored, with possible scores ranging from 12 to 48 and with higher scores indicating a more positive perception of school social inclusion. This scale had strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .86).

**R-word questionnaire.** A set of five questions was administered pertaining to the r-word. This questionnaire was developed for a previous study (Siperstein et al., 2010) and revised for use in the present study. The questionnaire included one "yes/no" question to measure the prevalence of the r-word in high schools (i.e., "last year at school, did you hear someone use the word 'retard?'"). Four multiple choice questions were used to measure the frequency with which the r-word is used toward students with and without ID (e.g., "last year at school, when you heard the word 'retard,' how often was it directed toward a student with an intellectual disability?") and students' bystander behavior in response to the use of the r-word (e.g., told others to stop using the word, did nothing) depending on whether the word was directed toward a student with or without ID (i.e., target).

# Results

## Prevalence of the R-Word in Schools

As a first step, the present study sought to confirm the prevalence of the r-word in high schools today, and determine the frequency with which students hear the word. As expected, the r-word continues to be commonly used in schools, with the vast majority of students (82%) reporting that they heard the r-word at school. Most often, the r-word was directed at students without ID, as nearly all students (94%) who heard the r-word during the school year heard it directed toward students without ID at least once or twice, and up to more than 10 times. In sharp contrast, less than half (41%) of students who heard the r-word used at school heard it directed toward students with ID. See Table 2 for a breakdown of how frequently students heard the r-word used toward their peers with and without ID.

Looking at only those students who heard the r-word directed toward a student with ID, most heard it only once or twice during the school year (73%). In contrast, of the students who heard the r-word directed toward students without ID, most heard this happen 10 or more times during the school year (53%). Not only are students less likely to hear the r-word directed toward a student with ID, but the students who do, hear it far less often than when it is directed toward a student without ID.

## Student Responses to the Use of the R-Word

As the next step, the present study focused on how students respond when they hear the r-word at school and what factors influence those responses. When the r-word was directed toward a student without ID, only one third (33%) of students

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Table 2
*Frequency at Which Students Heard the R-Word at School*

| Frequency | Directed toward a student with ID ($n = 1685$) | Directed toward a student without ID ($n = 1659$) |
|---|---|---|
| Never | 59% | 6% |
| Once or twice | 30% | 20% |
| 3 to 10 times | 8% | 24% |
| More than 10 times | 3% | 50% |

reported taking action by telling others to stop using the word, comforting the person, or telling a teacher. However, when the r-word was directed toward a student with ID, two-thirds (65%) of students reported taking action. Telling others to stop using the word was the most common action, regardless of who the r-word was directed toward. See Table 3 for a breakdown of students' responses to the use of the r-word.

## Model Predicting Student Bystander Behavior

It is clear that the target of the r-word (i.e., a student with or without ID) plays a critical role in determining whether student bystanders remain passive or take action. In order to better understand what motivates students to take action, the present study next examined a number of potential contributing factors, including student demographics (i.e., gender, grade, and race), prosocialness, school social inclusion, and the target of the word.

Multilevel logistic regression models were used to predict active versus passive responses to hearing the r-word. Logistic regression was selected because the outcome variable was binary (i.e., took action or remained passive). "Taking action" was defined as telling others to stop using the word, telling a teacher about the situation, or comforting the target of the word. "Remaining passive" was defined as doing nothing. Because students were asked about their response to the r-word when they heard it used toward a student with ID and when they heard it used toward a student without ID, instances of hearing the r-word were nested within students. Multilevel modeling was required in order to account for this nesting and students' decision to take action or remain passive in each scenario. Table 4 displays the results of the main effects model predicting student bystander behavior in response to the r-word.

Of the student demographic variables included in the model, gender was found to be the only significant factor determining whether students stood up against the use of the r-word. Female students were significantly more likely than male students to take action (OR = 2.10, $p < .001$). In fact, they were more than twice as likely to intervene. Students' grade and race were not found to play a significant role.

Along with gender, students' prosocialness played a significant role in determining student bystander behavior (OR = 1.14, $p < .001$). Students who were more prosocial were significantly more likely to take action against the use of the r-word. In fact, with every one-unit increase on the 36-point *Student Prosocialness Scale* there was a 14% increase in the likelihood of taking action when hearing the r-word, meaning that students who were more prosocial were much more likely to

Table 3
*Student Responses to the Use of the R-Word*

| Student responses | Directed toward a student with ID ($n = 641$) | Directed toward a student without ID ($n = 1441$) |
|---|---|---|
| Did nothing | 35% | 67% |
| Told others to stop using the word | 58% | 29% |
| Comforted the person | 5% | 3% |
| Told a teacher about the use of the word | 2% | 1% |

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Table 4
*Main Effects Model*

| Variable | Coefficient β | *SE* | Odds Ratio |
|---|---|---|---|
| Female | .742*** | .200 | 2.10 |
| 11th Grade | −.005 | .217 | 1.00 |
| 12th Grade | −.382 | .234 | 0.68 |
| White | −.342 | .484 | 0.71 |
| Hispanic | .185 | .279 | 1.20 |
| Black | −.146 | .483 | 0.86 |
| Other Race | −.038 | .428 | 0.96 |
| Prosocialness | .129*** | .018 | 1.14 |
| School Social Inclusion | .027 | .014 | 1.03 |
| Target (Intellectual Disability) | 2.263*** | .234 | 9.61 |
| Log likelihood | −999.44 | | |
| $\chi^2$ | 111.08 | | |
| Level 1 *n* | 1716 | | |
| Level 2 *n* | 1229 | | |

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

take action when hearing the r-word than students who were less prosocial.

School social inclusion did not play a significant role in determining student bystander behavior (OR = 1.03, $p > .05$), meaning that students' perceptions of the social inclusion of students with ID in their school did not contribute to their responses to hearing the r-word.

Finally, as expected, the target of the r-word played a key role in determining whether or not students took action when they heard the r-word used at school. Students were nearly 10 times more likely to take action when the r-word was directed toward a student with ID than when directed toward a student without ID (OR = 9.61, $p < .001$). Though finding a difference in response based on target was expected, what was unexpected was the overwhelming magnitude of this difference.

In addition to the main effects model just discussed, a model that examined the interaction between students' prosocialness and the target of the r-word was also estimated. Given that prosocial behavior involves both empathy and concern for others, it was expected that students' prosocialness would make them especially likely to take action against the use of the r-word when the target was a student with ID. Table 5 displays the results of this interaction effects model.

In this model, gender remained a significant factor (OR = 2.10, $p < .001$), with female students more than twice as likely as male students to take action against the use of the r-word. The main effect of prosocialness also remained significant (OR = 1.12, $p < .001$). Because this model includes an interaction between prosocialness and target, this main effect indicates that prosocialness was significantly related to taking action even when the target was a student without ID.

The main effect of the target of the r-word also remained positive and significant in this model (OR = 9.77, $p < .001$). Because an interaction with prosocialness is included, this main effect indicates that at average levels of prosocialness (i.e., when the mean-centered prosocialness variable equals 0) students were still nearly 10 times more likely to take action against the use of the r-word when the target was a student with ID.

Lastly, the interaction between prosocialness and target was positive and significant (OR = 1.07, $p < .05$), indicating that prosocialness is an even stronger motivator of bystander action against the use of the r-word when the target is a student with ID. In other words, prosocialness is related to taking action *regardless* of the target, but it is even more strongly related with taking action when the target is a student *with* ID. These findings suggest that students' decisions about whether or not to take action to stop the use of the r-word are determined by a combination of individual characteristics (e.g., gender and prosocialness) and the context in which

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Table 5
*Final Model Including Interaction Between Prosocialness and Target*

| Variable | Coefficient β | *SE* | Odds Ratio |
|---|---|---|---|
| Female | .736*** | .199 | 2.10 |
| 11th Grade | −.005 | .217 | 1.00 |
| 12th Grade | −.363 | .234 | 0.70 |
| Hispanic | .212 | .279 | 1.24 |
| White | −.328 | .484 | 0.72 |
| Black | −.159 | .484 | 0.85 |
| Other | −.035 | .427 | 0.97 |
| Prosocialness | .111*** | .019 | 1.12 |
| School Social Inclusion | .027 | .014 | 1.03 |
| Target (Intellectual Disability) | 2.279*** | .237 | 9.77 |
| Prosocialness*Target (ID) | .065** | .026 | 1.07 |
| Log likelihood | −996.26 | | |
| $\chi^2$ | 110.71 | | |
| Level 1 *n* | 1716 | | |
| Level 2 *n* | 1229 | | |

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

the r-word is used (i.e., when the target is a student with or without ID).

## Discussion

With 4 out of 5 students reporting hearing the r-word used at school, the r-word is just as prevalent in schools today as it was six years ago. This is unsurprising, given that the schools surveyed for this study had not had any sort of intervention to address the use of the r-word or the inclusion of students with disabilities. Also consistent with what was found six years ago, the r-word is still rarely directed toward students who have ID, but rather continues to be used regularly as an invective or general insult toward students without ID (Siperstein et al., 2010). The use of the r-word toward individuals without ID is meant to denigrate these individuals by creating an association between their behavior and that of an individual with ID. This acts to concretize the demeaning nature of the term and perpetuate the cycle of devaluing individuals with ID.

The pervasiveness of the use of the r-word is matched by the finding that most students choose not to take action in situations in which the r-word is directed toward students without ID. In fact, students are nearly 10 times more likely to intervene when the r-word is directed toward a student with ID than toward a student without ID. Coupling the difference found in the *use* of the r-word toward students with and without ID with the difference found in student *response* to the use of the r-word toward students with and without ID, it is clear that students understand that using the r-word toward students with ID is wrong, and warrants intervention. However, the fact that so few students intervene when the target of the word is a student without ID suggests that most students are not aware that using the r-word has a negative impact even when someone with ID is not directly involved. Among youth, there is a lack of understanding of the process by which the r-word contributes to the devaluation and marginalization of individuals with ID.

Regardless of who the word is directed toward, students who do take action against the use of the r-word do so primarily by telling their peers to stop using the word. Very few students take action by telling an adult, which highlights the fact that high school students do not typically turn to adults to deal with adolescent social issues (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Oliver & Candappa, 2007). This is consistent with the bullying literature and reflects the emphasis recent school-based bullying intervention programs place on student bystanders as having the potential to end school bullying, rather than on teacher or other adults in the school

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(Aboud & Miller, 2007; Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Polanin et al., 2012; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010).

Among student bystanders, there are certain characteristics that differentiate those students who are likely to take action from those who are likely to remain passive. As expected, females are more likely than males to take action against the use of the r-word, a finding that has been observed fairly consistently across the bystander literature (O'Connell et al., 1999; Oh & Hazler, 2009; Salmivalli et al. 1996). Females also tend to be more empathic than males (Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNalley, & Shea, 1991). However, the fact that gender remained significant in the model predicting student bystander behavior, even after prosocialness was included, suggests that there is something else about females, or about males, besides this difference in empathy and broader prosocialness that contributes to their likelihood to take action against the use of the r-word.

As suggested above, a second student characteristic that differentiates active and passive bystanders in the use of the r-word is prosocialness. Prosocialness (i.e., the tendency to voluntarily and intentionally behave in a way that benefits another) is made up of three primary components: empathy, concern for others, and the desire to adhere to social norms (Jensen et al., 2014). The findings on prosocialness and gender provide support for empathy playing a key role in student bystander behavior in the use of the r-word by peers. They also suggest that the larger concept of prosocialness may be a better predictor of bystander behavior than empathy alone, as this concept includes adherence to social norms, which may be important to some students' decision to intervene. This idea is consistent with recent bystander literature, which has shown that peer social norms surrounding bullying play an important role, in addition to, or even above and beyond, the role that empathy plays (Kim et al., 2013; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010).

The significant interaction between prosocialness and the target of the r-word suggests that prosocial students recognize students with ID as vulnerable, or in need of their support. They may feel greater concern and empathy toward these students, and thus feel more of a responsibility to intervene when the word is used toward them. The disability status of the target likely makes the harmfulness of the word salient to student bystanders. When students with ID are not present and the r-word is used, even prosocial students may not recognize the situation as warranting intervention. While it may follow peer norms to intervene to defend a student with ID who is being victimized by the use of the r-word, it does not appear to be the social norm among students to intervene when the word is used toward individuals without ID.

The findings of this study provide valuable insight into students' experiences with and responses to the r-word, however there are some limitations to note. One limitation that permeates the literature in this and other areas is the issue of social desirability bias. The field has been unable to find a way to ask individuals about their own negative behaviors, such as their use of the r-word, which would elicit a non-biased response. After finding that very few students report using the r-word, but almost all report hearing the word used, Siperstein et al. (2010) posed the question, "Is it possible to eliminate a word that everyone hears, but no one says?" Knowing that asking students directly about their personal use of the r-word does not produce accurate results, the current study simply did not ask this question. This study did, however, rely on participants' self-reported bystander behavior in response to the use of the word, which could also be affected by social desirability bias. Future studies should consider utilizing other methods that do not rely on self-report, for example, when possible, direct observation of participants' responses to the use of the r-word.

While the current study did ask if schools had participated in any kind of program to address the use of the r-word, it did not ask if the schools had been involved in school-wide programming to address bullying or disruptive behavior more generally among students. Because programs such as these may have a secondary outcome of reducing the use of invectives, such as the r-word, among students, future studies should collect information on any school-wide programming happening in participating schools. A natural follow-up to this study would be to identify schools that have adopted programs or campaigns to stop the use of the r-word and promote social inclusion more broadly, and see how students in these schools respond to the use of the word. This would shed light on the efficacy of existing programs, such as the Unified Champion Schools program, in addressing the use of the r-word.

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## Implications

The long history of shifting terminology surrounding individuals with ID has shown that stigma does not simply go away when we adjust the language that we use to talk about individuals with ID. Eliminating a word from the lexicon of our youth is not enough. Stigma will continue to exist, it will only be expressed using different vocabulary. We need to tackle the stigma itself, not just the language currently being used to express it. This does not mean that language is not important. Language plays a powerful role in reinforcing and perpetuating stigma, but our language is dynamic and flexible and will adjust to allow people to express themselves effectively. So long as people have negative thoughts and feelings, there will always be harmful words to express them.

What needs to be addressed is a value system as a society that does not allow us to see the worth of individuals with ID. In a society that values intelligence and devalues the lack thereof, how do we combat the stigma associated with having a disability that impacts intelligence? In recent years our society has become increasingly more accepting of individuals of different genders, races, and sexual orientations. Can disability rights advocates learn from how other marginalized groups have made progress in reducing stigma and the use of stigmatizing language? The word *fag*—a derogatory term for gay people—which was once used just as widely and in a similar way among youth as the r-word, seems to be fading from our vocabulary in recent years. And no other word has surfaced to replace it. The stigma associated with that identity has been largely reduced. This is perhaps because gay individuals, women, people of color, have all been able to speak up for themselves, to convey their stories, demonstrate their abilities, and establish a sense of commonality with their privileged counterparts. We have learned to see these individuals as not being so different from ourselves. Even individuals with physical disabilities have been able to show that just because they may look different on the outside or might require a wheelchair to get around, does not mean they are any less capable of contributing to society than their able-bodied peers.

Reflecting on other marginalized groups in this way helps us to identify where the additional challenges lie in making society more accepting of individuals with ID. The value that we place on intelligence is something that works in favor of other marginalized groups because they can demonstrate their commonality and ability to contribute in this way, but works against individuals with ID because this is what sets them apart. The task at hand seems quite daunting. How can we change the values of the next generation so they do not devalue individuals with ID?

Our school system provides an important opportunity to make a difference. As one of the major socializing institution for society's youth, schools have a responsibility to educate their students beyond the academic curriculum, to instill in them the values of our society, and produce individuals who are able to contribute. In order to create a just and accepting society free of stigma, schools must actively teach the importance of diversity, and must teach their students to value all members of our society.

The findings of this study have important implications not only for schools' priorities, but also for school-based intervention programs aiming to reduce the use of the r-word and increase respect, acceptance, and inclusion of individuals with ID. In addition to empowering students to be active bystanders in stopping the use of the r-word, such programs need to focus on education to reduce stigma. This education should address the apparent misconception among students that the r-word does not cause harm when it is directed toward students without ID. Students need to develop an understanding of how negative language such as this impacts people's perceptions of ID, whether a student with ID is present or not.

These programs should also promote empathy and broader prosocialness by educating students about their peers with ID, what their lives are like, and what they have in common with these individuals. The most effective way to learn about individuals with ID is to get to know them. Thus, it is important that programs create opportunities for social interactions between students with and without ID. Past studies examining effective methods for increasing prosocial behavior and bystander behavior in adolescents have emphasized the importance of a school-wide approach that involves peer modeling of social skills (Aboud & Miller, 2007; Kidron & Fleishman, 2006; Polanin et al., 2012). This is why it is important that schools not only include students with ID in academics, but also make sure they are included in all aspects of the school, including school clubs

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and athletics, where they have an opportunity to get to know other students. This will allow students with ID to demonstrate their abilities outside of academics, and will also model positive social interactions between students with and without ID to other students (see Parker, Corona, & Cahn, 2013).

In order to reduce stigma, we need to be able to show our youth that individuals with ID are capable, and that they have things in common with them—that individuals with ID feel happy, sad, and angry just like they do, can play sports and be in clubs just like they can, have talents and skills that they have, can contribute just like they can. Our society relies on individuals with all types of skills and abilities to function. Thus, our schools have a responsibility to provide opportunities for each and every student to realize their potential, and in doing so, help their students to see the value of every person.

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