Teachers’ Perceptions of Bullies and Bullying Behaviour

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Abstract

This paper contains interviews of Greater Toronto Area School Teachers, and its purpose was to examine their perceptions of bullies and bullying behaviour. The data collected was coded thematically in an effort to comprehend how an individual’s experience with bullying can shape their understanding and definition of bullying. The study concluded that some bullying behaviours are accepted, others overlooked, and some modeled in the classroom. By looking at how perception dictates actions this paper offers value to the greater discourse of bullying and bullying prevention.
Chapter 1: Introduction

A topic often discussed in the media today, and in education circles, is the topic of bullying. Despite shifts in educational pedagogy, technological advancements, and reminders from the media, bullying behaviour has not been successfully removed from schools (Dake, Price, Telljohann, and Funk, 2003). Old forms of bullying, such as sexism and racism, still remain active in the classroom and advancements in technology have allowed new forms of bullying, such as cyberbullying to appear (Juvonen and Gross 2008). As a result of the heightened awareness, we see a greater number of bullying victims either coming forward, or sadly, taking their own lives. Based on media coverage one could assume that bullying has become a more pervasive issue than drugs facing today’s youth (Dake, Price, Telljohann, and Funk, 2003). From this we see that there has been an increased discourse surrounding bullying and a greater vilification of bullies.

In Western cultures, bullies and bullying behaviour have been labelled as malevolent in intent, and are the focal point of anti-bullying campaigns. Many experts conclude that bullying behaviour has brought victims to the point of suicide, and has been the main cause in victim retaliation in mass school shootings such as Columbine (Beaty, and Alexeyev, 2008). Bullying research, despite its prevalence over time, is relatively new in the North American context, the majority of the work has been sparked by recent crises involving school shootings and victim suicides. Therefore, we see little discourse on bullying behaviour, prevention, and intervention programs in North America prior to the late 1990’s. In Scandinavia however, research about bullying and bullying prevention has been in process since the late 1970’s. As such, much of the
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North American research is grounded in the works of Dr. Dan Olweus, the pioneer of bullying research.

There are distinct differences in the societal constructs of North America and Scandinavia in terms of the concepts of manliness and popularity (Newman-Carlson and Horne, 2004). The social construct of manliness, in the North American context is a male who is aggressive, powerful, and lacks empathy. It is from this construct of manliness that popularity is achieved, therefore, males use bullying to achieve popularity through aggressive behaviour that lacks empathy in the pursuit of power (Sarfan, 2008). Therefore, programs within North America have not seen the same success as they have in Scandinavia, partly because of the “one size fits all” approach to bully prevention that fails to target the nuanced cases of bullying. There appears to be a failure to link prevention tactics to the various motivations / causative factors for bullying.

My paper will explore how teachers perceive bullies, bulling behaviour, and their motivations. I feel that there is a disconnect between the perception and reality of who bullies are and what motivates them. Because of this disconnect bully prevention and intervention methods are failing to achieve their goals my belief is that bullies are not inherently malicious, but instead they are students motivated to do terrible things to their peers as a result of societal pressures, and naturally accepted norms for behaviour.

Purpose of study

The purpose of the study is to describe the current perception of bullies, the motivations for bullying behaviour, and teachers understanding of the motivations and intent for bullying in their schools. To achieve the objective of a more comprehensive examination of bullying perception my paper will provide a definition of bullying by the Ontario Ministry of Education
and compare this definition to the perceptions of my study participants. The evolving definition of bullying will include the perceptions about bullying from interview participants, as well as sub-definitions to help categorise more nuanced types of bullying.

**Background of researcher**

This research topic is important to me because of my own experiences as a both a bully and someone who was bullied. I have often felt that bullies have been unjustly vilified because their motivations have not been explored at any depth. In my experience I was bullied because I was the smallest, and least athletic of my peers. I was the first to have glasses and the only one to be held back a grade. It is for those same reasons that I bullied others. I understood that I could either be the one accepting the punishment, or the one giving it out because bullying seemed to be an accepted behaviour among my peers. My ability to make fun of others came easily and it allowed me to gain in popularity among my peers. I noticed that anti-bullying programs in the schools I had attended focused more on physical violence, and not on the emotional damage that I was inflicting on my peers. I was never given a valid reason to stop bullying. I justified what I was doing as a security blanket that was protecting me from being bullied.

I saw, and still see schools as competitive environments, the very environments that breed the need for students to bully others to ensure a higher stature than those around them. One type of bullying in schools was particularly prevalent it was a form of “intelligence bullying”. This type of bullying happened when a smarter student would shut down a less intelligent student with a role of the eyes or a snicker. The less intelligent student would react by fighting back using physical violence. In these cases the victim was often labeled the bully, because they
reacted by using force. As a result of this awareness, I see the importance of identifying all types of bullying behaviours, and removing the motivations for bullying.

Overview

My paper will explore the perceptions of students who have been identified as bullies and explore their (perceived) motivations are. The paper will provide a literature review that will review the context for bullying, and bullying behaviour. The literature review will also examine research on perceptions of bullies and bullying behaviour. I will also provide the Province of Ontario’s definition of bullying. The literature review will include a description of barriers to bully prevention, and new approaches to bullying prevention. Finally, the review will look at new forms of bullying facing today’s schools.

The paper will explain my methodologies for the study with a brief introduction of my participants. I will then provide my findings regarding how teachers perceive bullies, bullying behaviour, and motivations for bullying. The findings section will be organized thematically with the emerging themes being definition of bullying, characteristics, motivations, acts/types of bullying, environment, and lived experience. I will conclude with a discussion of my findings offering recommendations for further discussion and study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Perceptions of Bullies and Bullying Behaviour

The act of bullying is perceived to be the second most detrimental impediment to a student’s life next to drug use in North America. (Dake, Price, Telljohann, and Funk, 2003). Teachers in the 2003 study felt strongly that when asked about bullying behaviour. However,
despite the fact teachers felt that being bullied is dangerous for students, bullying was also understood to be a natural occurrence (Beaty, and Alexeyev, 2008). Types of bullying varied by gender, for instance girls were perceived more likely to spread rumours, and boys were more likely to be physically violent. Yet, regardless of the type of bullying it was assumed to be part of the growing up process, as well as a tool to help victims “toughen up” (Beaty, and Alexeyev, 2008). Regardless of the belief that bullying is seen as inevitable, bullies were still seen as villains. Surprisingly much of the perceptions about bullying behaviour is that the victim is partially at fault. Although victim blaming is another important issue facing society, I will not be investigating this topic but recognise that it is still a popular and common perception in the study of bullying. There are many conflicting perceptions about bullying, for examples, the idea that bullies are behaving “naturally”, and yet these natural behaviours are understood to be evil: and victims are often responsible for being bullied. These conflicting perceptions of bullies and bullying behaviour illustrate why it is necessary to examine teacher’s perceptions further in a hope to add to the discourse of bullying.

**Defining Bullying**

This study is based in Ontario, the following excerpt is the Ontario provincial government’s definition of bullying as part of my literature review. I will also be comparing this definition to the definition my participants provide in their responses.

“bullying’ means aggressive and typically repeated behaviour by a pupil where,

(a) the behaviour is intended by the pupil to have the effect of, or the pupil ought to know that the behaviour would be likely to have the effect of,
(i) causing harm, fear or distress to another individual, including physical, psychological, social or academic harm, harm to the individual’s reputation or harm to the individual’s property, or

(ii) creating a negative environment at a school for another individual, and

(b) the behaviour occurs in a context where there is a real or perceived power imbalance between the pupil and the individual based on factors such as size, strength, age, intelligence, peer group power, economic status, social status, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, family circumstances, gender, gender identity, gender expression, race, disability or the receipt of special education;” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012. P. 4)

**Barriers and New Approaches to Bully Prevention**

Newman-Carlson and Horne’s (2004) research provides further focus of the work done by Dr. Dan Olweus. The crux of Olweus’ work was that bullying prevention is only achieved at a holistic level, only when community, school, society, and family adopt values against bullying will bullying begin to dissipate (Newman-Carlson and Horne, 2004). The pair noted that in Olweus’ work and their own that bullying could not be eliminated, but through prevention and awareness programing bullying could be significantly reduced. Newman-Carlson and Horne’s (2004) belief was that Olweus’ work was done in Scandinavia, a region whose culture is not as aggressive as that of the U.S. Newman-Carlson and Horne examined the role of the teacher in bullying prevention and how bully prevention could work in a US context. The troubling part of their research is that bullying is limited by the definition of “aggressive behaviour”, and their research has the potential to miss other critical aspects of bullying.

The implementation of Newman-Carlson and Horne’s research was psychoeducational training, called the “Bully Buster Program”, for teachers to improve their ability to prevent and
reduce bullying in the classroom. (As an aside, it is ironic that the pair used an aggressive word like “buster” for training aimed to reduce aggressive bullying in schools.) They chose the education of teachers as their focus of study because teachers reported that when they would intervene in bullying cases that the victims would only be bullied more because victims would be seen as “tattle tales”. Furthermore, teachers were seen to have the most influence on a child’s behaviour based on the reality that children spend the majority of their day in the classroom and under a teacher’s care (Newman-Carlson and Horne, 2004). What their results showed was that psychoeducation increased the likelihood that teachers would intervene in bullying instead of passing off bullying cases to counsellors and principals. Psychoeducation refers to the education of individuals with mental health conditions, it also educates family members to help provide said individuals with proper support (Newman-Carlson and Horne, 2004). In this study teachers became more confident in their ability to deal with bullying incidents using classroom management strategies. However, teachers still felt limited in their ability to effect change related to the external motivating factors for bullying, such as personal matters and conditions within the bully’s home life. The study noted that care for victims was overlooked because there was such a heavy focus on bullies and bully identification. Therefore, aspects of their program were beneficial to the reduction of bullying while other aspects failed to address external factors, and the needs of the victims themselves.

Seals and Young’s (2002) work examines the social factors that influence bullying, such as gender, grade level, ethnicity, self-esteem, and depression. Their work is important because many generalizations are made regarding bullying, such as the perception that males are more likely to be bullies. However, their research and the research of Newman-Carlson and Horne (2004), loosely defines bullying as aggression, therefore only physical or verbal aggression
towards a victim is categorized as bullying. Seals and Young did some exploration of exclusion as a bullying behaviour, however it was not a major focus of their research. This is problematic because it fails to recognize the full spectrum of bullying. However, their research still produces valuable information in the study of bullying. For instance, Seals and Young (2002) uncover that ethnicity has little to do with who becomes a bully. Their study showed no significant correlation between of bullying in any specific ethnicity. What the researched overlooked was how ethnicity could be a target for bullying.

Another important aspect of the research was that it illustrated that bullies and victims are not stand alone groups, in fact there was a subset group where bullies were victims and vice versa. When self-esteem and depression were examined in the study, the outcomes were that bullies had greater self-esteem but greater amounts or depression, whereas victims lacked self-esteem and also suffered from depression (Seals and Young, 2002). The reason for these outcomes was attributed to bullies being seen as more popular and victims less popular, nevertheless, Seals and Young made no attempt to identify if being a bully made one popular or if popular students felt the need to bully. A fascinating observation was that those students in the middle, did not bully and where not bullied, illustrated normal levels of self-esteem and little or no depression.

The results of the study when looking at gender, seemed to favour males as the greater perpetuators of bullying and victimization. However, the article states that female bullying is more covert, so these numbers could be skewed because some bullying inflicted by females may have gone unnoticed by students that were surveyed. What can be taken away from the work of Seals and Young (2002) is that bullying is problematic because there is social value associated with it, such as popularity within the group.
Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, and Isava’s (2008) contribution to the study of bullying is pertinent to this paper because of its discussion on the effectiveness of bullying prevention and intervention programs. As discussed by Juvonen and Gross (2008) bullying is evolving, and so prevention and intervention must evolve also. Although the study of bullying has been going on for some time overseas, its study has been in its infancy within the North American Context (Safran, 2008) (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, and Isava, 2008) therefore it has been difficult to assess the success of prevention and intervention programs prior to 2008.

What the research of Merrel et al (2008) has been able to capture is that there has been some success with anti-bullying campaigns, however the success has been limited in scope. For instance, bullying awareness and discourse has increased but actual cases of bullying have not seen a dramatic decrease in number. One could conclude that the type of prevention and intervention methods being offered to schools and communities today are not focused on the more critical issue, or are antiquated in their methods (Safran. 2008) This is not to say that the work of Dr. Dan Olweus, the pioneer of bullying prevention should be abandoned, it suggests that the methods for prevention must be extended to address bullying before it begins, and to do so we must examine the factors that lead a bully to become a bully, and the factors motivating bullying. Merrel et al (2008) and Safran (2008) suggest that bullying may not be the most detrimental part of the bullying process in the future, but instead the revenge or retaliation of victims. Victim retaliation has already been reported in several school communities such as Columbine, Sparks, Chardon, and many other U.S. and Canadian comminutes.

Safran (2008) provides a comprehensive understanding of bullying types and motivations. Her article highlights that in the US there is a belief that bullying is a natural social occurrence that students grew out of. As they pass through there development stages however,
that belief was questioned after the emergence of school shootings, and suicides amongst bullying victims (Safran, 2008). So much of the literature surrounding bullying focuses on aggression and overt bullying such as physical harm and name calling.

Research into covert bullying is valuable in the sense that it moves away from the misconceptions of bullying and illustrates the need for targeted approaching in preventing bullying (Safran, 2008). This is a departure from blanket anti-bullying programs that focus more directly on overt and visibly bullying. Although Safran agrees that bullying is more predominant in males she dispels the misconception that the male motivation comes from being less intelligent and having to resort to physical confrontation. Males use bullying to gain power and illustrate dominance because they can see that these traits are valued in North American culture, not because they do not have the intelligence to understand what they are doing is wrong (Safran, 2002).

What emerges from the research is how bullying is a process, students progress from overt to covert forms of bullying to mask their wrong-doings and achieve their goals. This research begins the discourse about the motivations of bullying, and that each subset model of bullying may come from differing motivations. In most cases, bullying is about fitting in, and social dominance, whereas some cases it is simply a lack the understanding of social cues. The models developed by Safran (2002) are collectively: a) the social skills deficit model, more commonly associated with male aggressive bullying; b) the social blindness model, where students lack skills to decipher social situation or lack empathy; c) the social intelligence model, students who are keen in social situations use their skills to manipulate victims, and have higher metacognitive skills; and, d) the theory of mind model, much like the social intelligence model
students use social manipulation to exclude others or groups of people using tactics that distance distance from being seen as the aggressor.

**New Forms of Bullying**

Juvonen and Gross’ (2008) investigate a new aspect of bullying known as *cyberbullying*. This type of bullying has added complexity to bully prevention and to the study of bullying. This research looks at dissolving the misconception that *cyberbullying* was separate from school bullying. Juvonen and Gross also examine whether or not online anonymity is a motivation for *cyberbullying* (P. 498). The study concludes that *cyberbullying* is not a vacuum, it is not self-contained and separate. Instead the new bullying phenomenon is an extension of what happens on the school grounds. Students who reported being bullied at school reported that they were also being bullied online. Interestingly, the victims reported was they always knew, or had some idea of the identity of the bully. The study concluded that anonymity was not the key motivation for *cyberbullying*. Furthermore, victims reported that they would be more likely to retaliate or seek revenge when bullied online, therfore, *cyberbullying* has the potential to perpetuate bullying (Juvonen and Gross, 2008 pg 501, P. 502).

Another part of the study described the psychological damage caused by *cyberbullying*, this was due to its many forms, methods of delivery, and audience size. The internet is not limited to the school yard, therefore content posted online has the capability to reach a larger audience. Social media provides many platforms for cyber bullies to bully and can bully from home using today’s technology.

Finally, the greatest issue facing *cyberbullying* is that parents are limited in preventing bullying because of their lack of technological knowledge and awareness of bullying online.
Cyber bullying is unlike any bullying parents have encountered at school before, and it is more difficult for them to intervene. Students reported that they often kept the information that they had been cyber bullied from their parents. The research of Juvonen and Gross (2008) is required for future study of bullying and prevention, because it illustrates that bully prevention and intervention must evolve to understand and address new forms of bullying such as cyberbullying.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research will be a small study of the perception of bullies, their behaviour, and motivation in schools in the Greater Toronto Area. The purpose of the study will be to identify the commonalities in types of perceptions and experiences. The study will examine the experiences participants have had with bullying in their lives and their classrooms. Additionally, the data collection will include the types of bullying that participants have dealt with in their schools.

Interview questions

1. What grade level and subjects do you teach?
2. How many years have you been teaching?
3. What is your definition for bullying?
4. I want to ask you some questions about different kinds of bullying. In my Literature Review, researchers are naming a few different kinds of bullying such as: intellectual bullying, cyber-bullying, physical bullying, and psychological bullying. Have you had any experience of any of these types of bullying?
5. What are the specific characteristics that you associate with bullying?
6. In your experience as a teacher, what type of circumstances usually lead to bullying?
7. Can you describe a specific incident where you were aware of bullying behavior?

8. When you think back to this incident, what do you think was the intent or motivation for the bullying behavior?

9. What would the student say if he/she were in the room and had to explain their behavior?

10. In your experience, have there been incidents where bullying behavior is acceptable/acceptable?

11. When you look back on your past, was there a time when you were a bully? If so, what were your motivation or intent for bullying?

12. Have you ever been a victim of bullying? What do you think the bully’s motivation or intent was at that time?

**Research Context**

The context of this research will be two Toronto area public schools, one elementary school and one high school. The reason for the different divisions is to identify differences and commonalities with bullying prevention throughout a diverse age range. The study will attempt to use participants from schools in varying socioeconomic neighbourhoods.

**Participants**

The study consists of two participants. The goal was to engage participants from varying gender and ethnic backgrounds. Participants were not be limited to teachers but open to school guidance counsellors as well. The reason for the mixed ethnicity, gender, and job title is too allow the study to find commonality in bullying prevention regardless of these factors in
hopes of identifying universal values and approaches. However, only teachers responded to my request for study but this does not affect that value of the research conducted.

The first participant in the study is named David. He is a non-Caucasian high school teacher with the Toronto District School Board. His school consists mostly of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. At the time of the study he had taught 10 years, in various subjects with a main focuses on courses in physical education and science. The second participant is called Mary, a Caucasian teacher from an elementary school in York Region. At the time of the study she had been teaching for 9 years. Her school has students from mixed socioeconomic backgrounds. She is a French teacher that has taught grades 1 through 3.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected during one-on-one sessions or phone interviews with participants. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed soon afterwards. Interviews will last 30 minutes. The transcribed data will be coded to determine patterns, commonalities, and differences from participant answers. The analysis will use coded data to form overarching themes using basic coding followed by in-depth coding to identify commonalities within the emerging themes. After data is coded, it will be examined for differences and similarities within the themes.

Participant Consent and Ethical Implications

Participants will sign consent forms which will include all the information regarding the study, such as how their answers will be used in the research process, and the purpose of the study. Because the purpose of the study is academic in nature there will be no effect, or consequence in their personal or professional lives. To ensure confidentiality and protection of
information their anonymity will be enforced by using pseudonyms for individuals and schools, mentioned within the context of bullying. Only those who wish to participate will be included in the research and so no ethical issues are foreseen arising from the results of the interviews and subsequent paper. Information is strictly confidential and of a sensitive nature.

**Limitations**

The first limitation of this research study is the size of the study and the number of participants. Because of the small scale of the study and limited sample size, the findings may not be valid or reliable when applied to a larger context. Another limitation of the study is that the study will not interview bullies and victims directly, their motivations are merely being speculated on by teachers and guidance counselors. Despite these limitations the study is still important because it will help describe prevention mechanisms currently being used, as well as beliefs and perceptions about why bullies choose to bully. It is my belief that these perceptions of bullying motivations are a determining factor in the creation of anti-bullying programs. Therefore, it is believed that the limitations are not detrimental to the success of the study.

**Chapter 4: Findings**

There are many different ways to look at and understand bullying. We each have a different perception of what a bully is and why people bully. In some cases, we find justifications for bullying behaviour and rank it in degrees of severity based on our own experiences with bullying and being bullied. This section of the paper will attempt to find some common threads in an effort to make sense of these perceptions. Due to the complexity of the make-up of bullying behaviour this section has been broken up thematically, each theme representing a single element in the overall understanding of bullying. The identified themes are as follows: Characteristics,
Motivations, Act/Types of Bullying, Environment, and Lived experience. These themes were not
assigned at random they emerged from the common elements found after coding each interview.
Common threads, despite the small sample size of the research project, begin to suggest how this
paper can contribute to the larger discourse of bullying and bullying behaviour.

**Participant Definition of Bullying**

“Anytime somebody else is making somebody else feel shitty. Or not good or
making them feel, putting them down. Yeah...Pretty much anytime you are
purposefully trying to make somebody else’s day a bad day.” - David

“Um, any student that is being harassed by another student, so a victim with
an aggressor, and um also bystanders that are standing there watching bullying
happen. An aggressor would continuously pick on one child whether that be
verbally or physically and yeah.” - Mary

When asked to define bullying each participant had similar responses. Each cited bullying as
having two components: a bully and a victim. Mary focused her definition on physical and verbal
harm caused to a victim. What was interesting was that she also included witnesses into the
conversation. Mary felt that bystanders were just as guilty of bullying as the “aggressor”.
Regardless of a bystander’s motives for not intervening, their passive response should be
classified as bullying. The idea of a passive response does come up in some literature, but was
not cited as bullying behaviour. Mary also mentions that bullying is a constant process not a
singular event that may cause a victim discomfort. This is an interesting perception because it
suggests that a singular bullying experience cannot have the same impact on a victim as constant
harassment.
David’s definition of bullying is more ambiguous and does not specify any specific type of bullying. His definition looks at bullying a “shitty day” and therefore the harm caused by bullying will only last for a short time. He also notes that a bully’s actions usually have purpose and are calculated. I would speculate that David may feel this was because of his gender and the gender-biased belief that bullying in some cases is used in an effort to strengthen one’s character (Dake, Price, Telljohann, and Funk, 2003). Support for this observation was a result of his answer to a question about whether or not he would condone any form of bullying, he replied:

“Um…I think amongst friends when…the bullying is meant to be light-hearted…Um…for example…the basketball team makes fun of each other all the time. They call each other fat or slow, or… make fun of their abilities to play basketball. They are all very elite level basketball players and very good basketball players…Um…they will make fun of each other…you know…as part of the team” – David

In this response, David classified the communication between basketball players as bullying. However, contrary to the literature, the basketball players were using bullying as a tactic for inclusion, whereas most texts would define bullying as an act to exclude an individual. What is clear from both of my participant’s definitions of bullying is that, teachers form their own understanding of bullying based on experience not based on the Ontario Ministry of Education’s definition. So, based on their responses we are left with a definition for bullying that suggests bullying behaviour is generalization of negative behaviour towards others with the intent to hurt others. My belief is that not all bullying is intended to hurt another; in some cases I feel that victimization of an individual is a by-product of a larger systemic issue. This is based on my own experience with bullying and the findings of this research paper.
Characteristics

When talking about the conditions for bullying Mary was specific with her examples. She said that a bully had low self-esteem, lacked consequences at home, had an unstructured home life, and that the student’s guardians were in denial about their child’s behaviour. The theme of a broken home or unstructured home life are a fundamental concept of Mary’s perception of bullying. All examples given shared a common element of a less than ideal home life or an absentee parent. The major defining characteristic of a bully for Mary was not based on the characteristics of a student, but of the parent’s ability to provide the student with structure and consequences. Her negative interactions with parents form her perception about which student could potentially be a bully. Mary used a very limited range of criteria for determining an environment that could support bullying behaviour. Moreover, her specific examples of bullies were all gender-specific—all male. She mentioned types of bullying that are more common among females but only after being probed by questions, and even at that point she had no concrete examples. Even more interesting was that all of her examples of bullies were Afro-Canadian. Therefore, one can assume her perception of who in a classroom is more likely to be a bully would be an Afro-Canadian male student from an unstructured home with poor parenting.

David, on the other hand, describes anyone as being capable of being a bully. He goes on to say they come in all shapes and sizes, from varying intellect, and could have either low or high self-esteem. David’s answer is a more general approach to perceiving bullies but in the rest of his answers he did provide more depth. Unlike Mary, David did not have one set idea of the bully. He explained that his experience with bullies has afforded him the ability to see differences in their characteristics. For instance, a bully may be a student who lacks social and communication skills and therefore may resort to physical communication to deal with frustrations. In other
cases David has seen students who mimic family members, because that is the behaviour modeled at home and it becomes all the student knows. David also characterizes some bullies as very purposeful, highly intellectual, and manipulative; they use bullying as a tool.

Despite the understanding and perception of the characteristics of bullying, when asked to discuss a specific bullying scenario, David also selected an Afro-Canadian student from a less than ideal home environment. The difference in his case was that the student was female. In both Mary and David’s recollections of bullies, they both cited the quality of defiance as the outstanding characteristic of a bully. In this case, the student’s defiance made both teachers feel bullied because the established power dynamic in the classroom was challenged. The literature often discussed that a characteristic of a bully is that they are often higher in the pecking order, however, gaining power and social standing can also be seen as a motivation for bullying.

**Motivations**

Motivations and justifications can often be interchangeable when discussing bullying. An example of this was when Mary said:

“No, no, bullying is not acceptable, unless, well, unless you're trying to get the class to do something. If you have one kid who isn't doing something, ‘I'm sorry class we can't continue until this one kid does it.’ Then it's peer pressure from the rest of the students, ‘Hey Billy just do it we want to continue, we want to do art’ I don't know if that’s considered bulling or a type of bullying, but I get them to surrender.”

We see that in this case Mary uses her position of authority in the classroom to exclude a student and have them “surrender” in order to keep the class moving. This is a form a bullying, her motivation is to stop inappropriate behaviour in the class, and because she sees it as good for the class the behaviour is justified. What is also interesting is that Mary places the onus of influence
through bullying on the students. Their peer pressure creates the desired outcome but she does not focus on the fact that she chose to center a child out. In this way power dynamics in the class can be understood as a motivation for bullying. Mary displays her power in the classroom by manipulating students using peer pressure.

David gives a different kind of example of power and authority in the classroom when describing student defiance. David’s scenario is of a new female student who has few friends:

“…on the very first day of class the teacher setting up the seating plan would not let this particular student sit with her friends. So separating all the groups of friends in the classroom as you do, typically as a classroom management strategy. To reduce the amount of distractions or talking that students will do in a class. From that day the student, this student in particular was very argumentative and defensive and defiant to this teacher when being requested to sit in a different seat”

Again we see that classroom management influences teachers’ perceptions of bullying motivations. The teacher moves students out of their comfort zone to maintain order and the student who feels singled out reacts inappropriately and bullies the teacher. Each party feels justified in their actions because they are doing what they feel is right. Another important motivation for the female student is that she is new in a school with very few friends or allies, so her motivations (as noted by David) are to gain some status in the school in an effort to feel included. Fitting in at school is a major motivation for students who bully (Beaty, and Alexeyev, 2008).

The idea of bullying to fit in is exemplified by Mary’s anecdote about a group of students that follow a “ring leader” and bully other students. The followers in the group mimic the
behaviour modeled by the leader in an effort to feel part of the group. It was also mentioned that these students are all Afro-Canadian and refer to themselves as the "Blacks."

The motivation of bullying to fit in looks differently based on gender. Both David and Mary discussed the fact females are more likely to spread rumours, which is also validated in the research in the literature review. The motivation in this case in not only gender normality, but also fitting in to a social group. In these cases it is easier for a student to be part of a group by spreading a rumour about the excluded student(s) (Dake, Price, Telljohann, and Funk, 2003). Looking back at the example of David’s of the boys’ basketball team (who make fun of one another) we can see the gender normal belief that "boys will be boys." The students participated in teasing and put-downs in an effort to fit in as a team. However, David does add that sometimes this behaviour can go too far and students are left hurt, and excluded.

A motivation that Mary sites in the majority of her examples of bullying is and individuals need for attention. Mary sees this as a negative behaviour but does not make the connection between high levels of need for attention at school and students who come from homes where they may not be getting the attention they require. As a researchers, I understood the student’s need for attention as a form of self-preservation. These students use bullying to get attention from the school environment because they are lacking at home. Mary mentions that one student is in a lower level intellectually and often distracts other students by hiding pencils or preventing them from completing tasks. Mary perceives this behaviour as being motivated by attention seeking. In this instance, the hidden motivation for the student is to create an environment where they are not the only ones not able to complete tasks. It is simply easier for the student to bring other students' grades down than to bring their grades up (Beaty, and
Alexeyev, 2008). We can see that perception of these motivations can negatively impact how a student is supported in the classroom.

The student’s need for status was further explored by both Mary and David. When probed, both participants responded that students often use intellectual bullying as a way to assert dominance in a classroom. Smarter students will snicker at students struggling to answer a question or students will make fun of a mark a student got on test. These motivations were not elaborated on and no concrete examples were provided, but both teachers said that they see this behaviour on a regular basis. The lack of examples of intellectual bullying illustrates that this behaviour may be overlooked in the classroom and therefore there is less regency to curtail this behaviour. However, as discussed earlier, intellectual bullying is a catalyst for physical bullying in that the lesser intellect often responds to intellectual bullying with physical force.

**Types of Bullying**

The types of bullying that were more commonly witnessed in the classroom by my participants were verbal and physical. Admittedly both Mary and David felt that these were the easiest to spot in the classroom. Mary witnessed students trip other students and then deny it had happened. In some cases Mary was okay with the physical confrontation because it was in retaliation to a student’s actions. For instance a student would be kicking a child lightly in the back during time on the carpet, and then the student being kicked would retaliate. The retaliation in itself is not bullying, yetcondoning the retaliation illustrates that physical violence is an acceptable form of problem solving. She has also witnessed a student strike another student in the face with a lunch bag while entering a bus. David had similar stories but they still follow a gender normative path—boys on the sports team hitting one another to illustrate masculinity and
team spirit. For both participants aspects of physical hostility are okay because they are perceived as normal behaviour.

Verbal bullying included name-calling, racial, and homophobic slurs. Both participants found themselves dealing with these instances reactively because for the most part there was no build up to the verbal assaults. Yet, if not dealt with immediately in most cases physical aggression would follow. Both cited some rumour spreading and manipulation but for the most part the actual witnessed behaviour was physical.

When asked if either had been bullies in school David responded “yes”. His story was much like mine; he was a smaller male and felt the need to bully as a method of self-preservation. He would verbally assault peers and make them feel stupid. Unlike me, David was more athletic and used his athleticism to physically bully others. Although Mary said that she had never been a bully, when probed she recalled that she had talked behind other girls’ backs but said she was only telling the truth and not spreading rumours about other girls.

I found Mary’s response interesting, because it was used to justify her actions. Mary believed that because what she was saying was factual it was not a form of bullying regardless if those facts were harmful or hurtful. Moreover, she illustrated how she uses bullying tactics in her classroom to force students to surrender, yet did not classify her actions as bullying.

Could denial be a form a bullying? For the most part the participants' experiences aligned with types of bullying covered in the Literature Review. However, there was little mention of cyberbullying. The fact that cyberbullying was not mentioned was interesting because it seems to be the most talked about form of bullying in the media. Mary’s reasoning for not mentioning it
was because she is teaching Grades Two and Three and her students do not interact on the internet as often as older students.

**Environment**

Bullying can happen both inside and outside of the classroom and school environment, however I wanted to discover any emerging environments that were more fostering of bullying behaviour. David’s experiences explicitly illustrate that sports teams can foster and condone bullying behaviour. From his answer I was able to determine that there is an understanding that in males it helps build team spirit and drive competition. While David has experienced times when this behaviour has gone too far, for the most part the behaviour is tolerated for the sake of the team, fitting in, and winning. It should be noted that David’s school has an excellent basketball program and winning traditions, unfortunately the scope of this study did not allow me to compare David’s experience with the experience of a coach of a less successful team. David’s experience nevertheless is consistent with the belief that “boys will be boys,” an understanding that males require this type of interaction to help develop their sense of masculinity and dominance.

Those not familiar with the male locker room environment may view it as hostile, which it is, but this type of hostile environment can also be mirrored in the classroom, as David implicitly indicated in his scenario of the student being defiant to the teacher. This interaction told through the lens of a teacher would make it seem like the “bully” is in fact the student. However we can see that from the student’s point of view they feel bullied. The classroom in this case is a hostile environment.
“…this student in particular was very argumentative and defensive and defiant to this teacher when being requested to sit in a different seat. Asking why? I don’t want to, why can’t I sit with my friends? Why are you being like that? It’s the first day, give us a chance, like that kind of stuff.” – David

The student is asking for the opportunity to sit with their friends. Note again, that this student is new to the school and this is near the first day of classes. In an effort to illustrate authority and manage the classroom the teacher is requesting the student move. Both sides can be seen as the aggressor because both are denying the requests of the other and creating a hostile environment. The victims are not limited to both parties but also the other students in the class whose time is being wasted.

The interviews suggest that teachers are unknowingly modeling bullying behaviour for students and creating hostile environments that foster bullying behaviour. An example of this type of modeling behaviour occurs when Mary creates a passive aggressive hostile classroom when she isolates one student and pits the class against them. Both interview participants cited home life as an environment that leads to bullying behaviour. The students mentioned by Mary and David in their examples all came from unstructured homes. David said that his students modeled the behaviour of siblings. Mary alluded to the fact that lack of structure and discipline at home are the primary environment based factors for a bully. This would mean, however, that students who come from structured environments would not be bullies, which is not the case. The environments we as teachers create are somewhat determined by our own lived experiences, if we believe that “boys will be boys” then the type of bullying that comes with it is inevitable.
Lived experiences

Lived experiences shape our perceptions of the world. In this case the lived experiences of my participants play a part in how they perceive bullying and bullying behaviour. Mary says that she has never been a bully. When probed if she participated in covert bullying, which is common of females, she said:

“Well I look at that as two different things. So you can talk about people right, but when you start spreading rumours. I never spread rumours or say anything untrue but it is in girls natural, I don't know the way we communicate is to gossip.” - Mary

So her lived experience is that it is natural for girls to gossip, however it is only bullying when untruthful things are being discussed. What I understood from this was that Mary believes bullying is wrong and therefore does not want to be associated with it. To disassociate herself she chooses justify her actions and classify them as non-bullying behaviour. Much of her justification could be attributed to the fact that she was bullied by other females and their statements were untrue. I then provided her an example and asked if she felt it was bullying. The example was: “If Student A were a closeted gay student and student B knew this to be true and told other people. Would that be bullying?”

“Well, it is the truth, but it’s not student B’s news to spread so yes that would be a form of bullying” - Mary

This is a clear contradiction of her justification of why she is not a bully.

David’s lived experience differed greatly from Mary but somewhat mirrored my own. He was open with the fact that he was a bully. He bullied because he was smaller than others and needed to prove himself.
“Oh man…of course…um……Sometimes it’s just being competitive and…um…sometimes it’s just being…it’s usually physical bullying…um……probably came from…um…a need to prove that I was strong enough, or big enough to compete…against people in physical situations or in sports.” - David

David grew up in what he felt was a rough neighbourhood. He had experienced a lot of bullying. He had been physically bullied, robbed, and teased. His understanding of bullying was that bullying is a test. He believed that people bullied him to get a reaction, to see what he would do. What I found very interesting was his belief that bullying is a stage people grow out of.

“…But now, I mean…you’re older and not a kid anymore, so, you know…resorting to all sorts of behaviors are obviously not acceptable. So…usually it’s just… Easier to walk away. And walk, walk…and I mean I guess, I’m lucky that I can feel that confident enough to do that” – David

Although David may suggest that bullying is a stage along the maturation process he does believe that moving past that stage requires confidence. My participants had varied life experiences but came to some of the same conclusions related to motivations and perceptions of bullying and bullying behaviour.

**Chapter 5: Discussion**

**Implications and Recommendations**

Although this study was conducted on a small scale we can still find value in the findings. An important discovery was that despite an existing definition by the Ministry of Education each participant had their own understanding and beliefs about of what constituted bullying. This is important because we cannot begin to prevent bullying in schools if each teacher understands bullying differently. David and Mary justified bullying in different ways.
David understood bullying as a stage of adolescence, and in some cases a necessary means to build a team. Mary’s belief that an unstable household is a training ground to create bullies. This would mean that she will have a predetermined attitude towards some students.

As teachers we must be on the same page, and remain fair and balanced if we hope to remove bullying from schools. We cannot accept some forms of bullying and punish others, this sends the wrong message to our students and builds the wrong culture in our schools (Safran, 2008). It is recommended in this case that teachers reflect on their own experiences with bullying and those experiences may shape their understanding of bullying behaviour. Through this lens of self-reflection teachers should be conscious of their bias towards certain people they may label as bullies, and certain types of bullying behaviour they may justify or vilify (Newman-Carlson and Horne, 2004). We must also address teachers “blindness” to when teachers bully, we cannot expect the students to change their behaviour if we do not model it first.

A common misconception about bullying behaviour, is the idea that students will grow out of it. This idea was echoed in my findings. The literature points to the fact that this misconception is untrue, if bullying behaviour is not addressed it continues into an individual’s adult life. The result of no addressing bullying behaviour is that it can have a significantly negative impact on the bully and those around them (Newman-Carlson and Horne, 2004) The negative impact this misconception has on schools is that if teachers believe students will just grow out of it then there is no urgency or need to prevent the behaviour. Moreover, if the behaviour is believed to be a natural occurrence rather than a learned behaviour then teachers would accept the notion that regardless of the type of prevention the behaviour cannot, and will not ever be removed. For the sake of any anti-bullying program we must as educator remove the vocabulary that certain types of bullying are natural. We must stop thinking that females are
predisposed to spreading rumours and that male athletes can only be successful if they can bully their teammates. These occurrences are only seen as natural because of the culture we create in our schools, classrooms, and lives.

Finally, educators understand the difficulties that arise when managing a classroom, we must be mindful that we are not using antiquated bullying practices to “control” our students. Instead of exclusionary practices to manage the classroom teachers can turn to community building. The classroom should not be seen as a competitive environment but instead a place where everyone works together and everyone succeeds. My participants illustrated that they felt helpless in addressing bullying because of the home life of students. However, if we create classroom community where bullying is not needed to succeed or fit in, then the hope is that students will be the better example at home. Too often our classrooms model the world we live in, whereas they should model the world we want to live in. Teachers play a part in the larger systemic issue that labels bullies as villains. Before we can address bullies and their behaviour we need to understand how we perceive bullying.

**Limitations**

The limitation of my study was its small scale, however, this limitation did not impede the study’s success. My goal was to understand how teachers perceive bullies, bullying behaviour, and motivations. Despite only having two participants the findings uncovered common threads that are impeding the removal of bullying from our schools. The study, although limited in scope has offered a space for further discussion on bullies and bullying behaviour.
Further Study

It is my hope that a study of this nature would be conducted on a larger scale with the purpose of uncovering more misconceptions of bullies and their behaviour. A larger scale study can also be used to help craft a more mindful approach for teachers addressing bullying behaviour in their classroom. Using my research as a springboard I hope that more is effort is placed on the impacts of vilifying bullies. The research I studied, and my findings did little to investigate how vilification helps or hinders anti-bullying programs. However, it is my belief that vilification only turns bullies into victims further perpetuating bullying culture. Furthermore, the effects of community building as an anti-bullying technique should be studied, how our society is formed comes from within our classrooms, and schools. If we hope to live in communities that are just and free of prejudice and hostility then we must model that as educators.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying ______________ for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr.__________________. My research supervisor is ___________________. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: _________________________________
Phone number, email: ______________________________

Instructor’s Name: _______________________________
Phone number: ___________________ Email: ___________________

Research Supervisor’s Name: ___________________
Phone #: ___________________ Email: ___________________

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ____________________(name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: _______________________________

Name (printed): ______________________________

Date: __________________________