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Authors:

Corresponding Author:
Faye Mishna, Professor and Dean, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street W, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V4, Canada
f.mishna@utoronto.ca
1- 416 – 946 - 5494

Kaitlin J. Schwan, PhD Candidate
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street W, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V4, Canada
kaitlin.schwan@mail.utoronto.ca

Rachel Lefebvre, MSW
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street W, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V4, Canada
rachael.lefebvre@mail.utoronto.ca

Payal Bhole, Research Associate
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street W, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V4, Canada
payal.bhole@alum.utoronto.ca

David Johnston, Senior Manager
Counselling and Accessibility Services, Seneca College, Toronto
1750 Finch Avenue East, Toronto, ON M2J 2X5
david.johnston@senecacollege.ca
1. Introduction

In recent years, addressing the ethical dimensions of conducting research with children and youth has been given greater attention across various disciplines (Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004). In response to a historical paucity of research in this area (Lindsay, 2000), a growing body of literature seeks to understand the particular ethical challenges of conducting research with children and youth; how best to respect their agency and capacity in research; provide benefits for child and youth research participants; and offer meaningful participation by children and young people in the development, implementation, and dissemination of research (Barker & Weller, 2003; Goodenough, Williamson, Kent, & Ashcroft, 2003; Grover, 2004; Skelton, 2008). One outcome of this growing interest has been greater use of qualitative methods generally, specifically Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Community Based Research (CBR) methodologies. This shift is based on the supposition that these methods have a greater capacity to foster and respect children and youth’s agency, and to meaningfully engage partners, and offer greater benefits to child and youth participants (Duckett, Kagan & Sixsmith, 2010; Kellett, 2009; Langout & Thomas, 2010; Powell & Smith, 2009). Implicit is the view that children and youth who participate in quantitative research will not have an equal opportunity to a) share their world views, b) benefit as much from the research process, or c) express, utilize, and communicate their autonomy, agency, and capacity to the same extent. In light of this, it is important to consider the current status of quantitative methods with respect to conducting ethical research with children and youth.

In this paper we discuss the capacity of quantitative measures to respect and foster the agency, capabilities, and autonomy of children and youth research participants, as well as facilitate opportunities for students to receive social services. This paper is based on the
unanticipated findings of the first year of a three-year longitudinal, mixed-methods study on cyber bullying among students in grades 4, 7, and 10 in a large urban school board. Specifically, we focus on the experiences of students identified as being “in distress” which was identified largely through the study’s quantitative measures. Data indicate that youth participants were regularly able to express agency and autonomy by navigating the quantitative phase of the research process in ways that met their needs. Further, through a protocol put in place through the ethics process, we utilized the quantitative methods to facilitate social work referrals of students as needed. These findings suggest that quantitative methods should be included among a range of research methodologies that can promote children and youth’s autonomy, agency, and unique voices; meaningfully engage children and youth; and offer benefits to youth participants. More broadly, these results suggest that discussion about conducting research with children and youth would benefit from a complex modeling of ethicality with respect to research methodologies, one which does not advance a static or linear correspondence between ethicality and research method.

2. Method

This study employs data collected during year one of a mixed-methods longitudinal study on cyber bullying among students in grades 4, 7, and 10, in a large Canadian city. The study uses a longitudinal, multi-informant mixed methods design with a grounded theory approach. The study received approval from the University’s Research Ethics Board and the External Research Review Committee of the participant School Board, one of the largest in Canada.

A primary risk identified with participation in the study was that some questions could cause distress for the student participants or lead to disclosure of information requiring reporting by the researchers to appropriate authorities. In anticipation, a protocol was established to assist
students identified as being “in distress” through the questionnaire or interview responses. While the procedure was put in place as an ethical and safety measure, the large number of students that were revealed to be in distress and the emergence of unanticipated findings during the implementation of the protocol created the opportunity to systematically analyze the outcomes and processes involved in identifying and assisting students “in distress”.

2.1. Participants

Participants comprised students in grades 4, 7, and 10, as well as their parents and teachers. In partnership with the participant School Board, a stratified random sampling design was used and strata were identified based on grade and level of external challenges affecting student success, as determined by the School Board’s Learning Opportunities Index for 2011 (LOI). LOI is a single index composed of the following variables: median income; percentage of families whose income is below the low income measure; percentage of families receiving social assistance; adults with low education; adults with university degrees; and lone-parent families. Sixty-two schools were invited to participate in the study, and 19 schools participated, resulting in a school participation rate of 31%. The primary reason principals gave for not participating was an overload of research and other activities taking place in the school. Of the 19 schools, approximately 3873 students were asked to participate and 691 agreed. Seven student participants subsequently withdrew, resulting in a total of 684 student participants and a response rate of 17.7%.

We attribute this relatively low response rate to the active consent required. Active consent entails obtaining consent by a student’s parent/guardian. In contrast, passive consent involves informing parents/guardians about the study, and asking for a written response only if they do not consent to the student taking part in the study. Obtaining active consent requires considerable
resources, because generally there is a need to send follow up letters and regularly speak with the school personnel to remind students about the forms. Considerable school personnel time is typically required. The response rates of passive consent are considerably higher than those of active consent, ranging between 80-100% (Fendrich & Johnson 2001; White, Hill, & Effendi, 2004). Active consent response rates in contrast, range from as low as 10% (MacGregor & McNamara, 1995; Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010) to 60% (Tigges, 2003). Of the 684 students, 160 participants were in grade 4 (23.4%), 248 in grade 7 (36.3%), and 276 in grade 10 (40.4%). Males comprised 40.5% of the sample and females 59.5%.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Quantitative Measures

The student, parent and teacher participants were asked about demographics and their usage of information and communication technologies. All student participants then completed three questionnaires: (1) Bullying and Cyberbullying: Perpetrators, Victims & Witnesses Survey (B&C: PVWS), which gathers information on experiences with bullying and cyber bullying in the past 30 days; (2) Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985a) (grades 4, 7) and the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Harter, 1988) (grade 10), standardized measures which assess self-esteem and self-concept in the social domain; and (3) Social Support Scale for Children (Harter, 1985b) (grades 4, 7) and Social Support Behaviors Scale (Vaux, Riedel & Stewart, 1987) (grade 10), a standardized measure which assesses perceived support by family, friends and peers. Finally, grade 7 and 10 student participants completed the Youth Self-Report (YSR) (Achenbach, 2001), a widely used standardized measure about behaviour, social, thought and attention problems, and delinquent and aggressive behaviors with excellent reported test-retest reliability.
2.2.2. Interviews

In addition to the quantitative measures, face-to-face individual interviews were conducted with selected boys and girls in each grade who identified as victims, perpetrators or witnesses of bullying/cyber bullying in the B&C: PVWS. Youth who indicated involvement with bullying in the questionnaire were selected based on age and gender, as well as degree and role in bullying/cyber bullying incidents. The parents and teachers of selected students were also interviewed. In Year One, 143 interviews were conducted: 62 with students, 51 with parents and 30 with teachers. Follow-up interviews with students and parents will be conducted in Year three.

2.3. Consent, Confidentiality, and Distress

Prior to consenting to participation, students and parents were advised that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and confidential where possible. All students and parents were advised that confidentiality would be maintained by replacing participants’ names with a unique numerical code on each questionnaire, recording, and transcript. It was explained that while students’ teachers and/or school administration may be aware of their participation, only the research team would have knowledge of participants’ answers. A master list of participants’ names, matched with their unique identifiers, is kept by the research team in the event that any participant wishes to withdraw and/or a student’s answers indicate that he/she is in distress.

An important component of the study’s consent process was ensuring that students and parents understood that in instances where students’ answers indicated they may be at risk to themselves or others, the research team would meet with the student, which could lead to a referral to school social work. Further, we advised students and parents that if a child disclosed that an adult had hurt them physically or emotionally, that someone had touched them in a way that made them feel uncomfortable, or it was identified that a child was not being taken care of,
child welfare authorities would be contacted and a referral would be made.

While students and parents were advised that a referral to school social work or child welfare authorities were possible outcomes of study participation, there is no evidence that this deterred participation or that participants intentionally misrepresented their answers on questionnaires or in interviews. Rather, the high level of students identified as being in distress would suggest that participants were generally truthful about their experiences and feelings, even when it was painful or difficult for them to do so. To the best of our knowledge, participants’ awareness of the lack of anonymity in the study did not impact the results.

2.4. Distress Identification and Management

Student participants were classified as “in distress” if they met one or more of the following five criteria: 1) indicated on the B&C: PVWS that they needed help and would like to speak to a researcher; 2) endorsed fire setting items on the YSR; 3) endorsed self-harm/suicide items on the YSR; 4) scored at or above the clinical cutoff score of 85% on the YSR; and/or 5) disclosed distress during an interview. All students identified as “in distress” were seen individually in a private and confidential school setting by a research assistant who was a Master of Social Work student, a PhD student, or a student with equivalent training and experience. These research assistants had prior experience working with children or youth in a mental health setting. Although the study investigates cyber bullying, distress for a number of the students did not necessarily relate to bullying experiences. Prior to meeting with students in distress or who asked to speak with a member of the team, each research assistant attended a two hour training session on identifying distress, asking follow-up questions, and making appropriate referrals according to the Ethics protocol in consultation with the Research Coordinator and Principal Investigator. Consistent with a grounded theory approach, the distress protocol evolved to fit emerging data.
The research assistant began each of these meetings by explaining that the research team asks to meet with students who indicated they would like to speak to a research assistant or whose questionnaire or interview responses suggest they are having difficulties. Students were reminded that anything discussed during the meeting was voluntary and confidential, and that they could choose to end the meeting at any time. Students were told that their responses would not be shared with their school, but that confidentiality would be broken if the student disclosed that they were at risk of harming themselves or others, or if the student disclosed that they themselves or another child under the age of 16 was being abused, in which case the appropriate authorities would be contacted to protect the child. The research assistant then invited the student to discuss how things were going for them in school, with peers, and at home. The research assistant asked about the nature of the distress, frequency, intensity, duration and about available supports, in order to obtain sufficient information to assess a) whether the child was a risk to themselves or others and b) whether a referral to school social work was warranted.

If the research assistant ascertained that the student was not in distress or seemed to have effective coping strategies and supports to manage his/her distress, the research assistant thanked the participant and concluded the interview. If, however, the participant was experiencing distress and not receiving help, but was considered in need of such assistance, the research assistant asked the student for permission to put them in contact with a school social worker by making a referral through the school Principal. In some instances students requested this social work assistance. If the student was reluctant or refused to consent to a school social work referral, the research assistant consulted with the Research Coordinator and the Principal Investigator. In cases where the student did not want a referral and the student’s distress did not meet the “limit to confidentiality” criteria, a referral was not made even if the research assistant
believed was recommended and would be helpful to the student. These students were provided with a list of resources should they want assistance in the future. In instances where the student’s distress indicated the need for a mandatory referral and the student did not want the referral, the research assistant met with the student a second time and reviewed the benefits of a social work referral with the hope of assuaging the student’s concerns and encouraging him/her to consent to a social work referral of his/her own volition. In most cases, students readily agreed to a social work referral. In rare instances it was determined that the risk posed to the student or to others required a mandatory referral to social work against the wishes of the child. These referrals were made with great caution and in consultation with the Research Coordinator and Principal Investigator.

Research assistants submitted a written report describing the meeting with the distressed student. The report was reviewed by the Research Coordinator and Principal Investigator to ensure that the student’s distress had been appropriately assessed and that the student had been referred to a school social worker as needed. When the Principal Investigator’s judgment differed from the research assistant’s assessment (i.e., Principal Investigator determined that a social work referral was needed but had not been made), the research assistant scheduled a second private meeting with the distressed student at their school to ask for consent to make a referral.

2.5. Analysis

In analyzing these unanticipated findings, a grounded theory approach was utilized. A broad conception of “data” was utilized and included not only information disclosed during the meetings with students in distress, but also the actions, interactions, and outcomes involved in implementing the distress protocol. Thus data analysis included attention to the process of implementing the distress protocol and the various outcomes to which it led.
Open coding was initially used to identify categories and themes in the data and constant comparison was utilized to group similar concepts. Coding was performed line-by-line and intersecting, overlapping, and mutually exclusive codes were identified. Axial coding was then employed to detect connections between initial codes, combine and refine codes, and identify causal conditions. Several themes were identified and analyzed through selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Measures to ensure trustworthiness were taken (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), including seeking alternative explanations for patterns in the data. We sought to establish credibility through team analysis of the data.

3. Findings

3.1. Distress among Students

Overall, 22% (n=148) of the sample of 684 students were identified as being in distress. Thirty-four percent of students in distress were identified because they scored at or above the 85th percentile on the YSR; 32% were identified because they endorsed items related to fire setting, self-harm, and/or suicide on their YSR; 20% requested to meet with a researcher on the B&C: PVWS, and 2% were identified during an interview. Eight percent of students in distress were so identified because they met more than one of these criteria (See Table 1). The level of distress among the sample was consistent with the level of distress found in The Ontario Child Health Study, one of the largest population-based studies on children’s mental health to date (Cadman, Boyle, Szatmari, & Offord, 1987; Offord, Boyle, & Rancine, 1989; Offord, Boyle, Szatmari, Rae-Grant, Links, Cadman, et al., 1987). There likely were additional students in distress who were not captured by the study since the distress protocol was put in place to identify significant distress, thus excluding more moderate or mild levels of distress.

Among the students in distress there were differences by gender, grade, disability, sexual
orientation, and school need. Female students were more likely than males to be in distress (25% vs. 16%). Grade 4 students were the least likely to be in distress (13%) compared to grade 7 (23%) and grade 10 students (25%). One quarter of student participants attending medium need schools and just less than one quarter (24%) of student participants attending high need schools were in distress, compared to 16% of student participants who attended low need schools. Thirty percent of participating students with a disability were in distress and just over two-thirds of participating students who identified as non-heterosexual were in distress (64%). There was no significant difference in the numbers of student participants in distress by their academic grades or their place of birth (See Table 2). These findings are consistent with research which indicates that sexual minority youth (Konishi, Saewyc, Homma, & Poon, 2013) and youth with disabilities (Baumeister, Storch, & Geffken, 2008; Monchy, Pijl, & Zandberg, 2004; Singer, 2005; Van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010) are disproportionately at risk for bullying victimization and that bias-based bullying among these populations is linked to adverse mental health outcomes (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Poteat, Espelage & Espelage, 2007; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). Further, recent research indicates that the effects of bias-based bullying may be more detrimental to health and wellbeing than general bullying, and thus is associated with higher levels of distress (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012).

Participating students who reported being victims of bullying were more likely to be in distress than those who did not report experiencing bullying: 33% of students who reported experiencing traditional bullying victimization and 48% of students who reported they were victims of cyber bullying were in distress. Student participants who reported bullying others were also more likely to be in distress. Forty-four percent of participating students who reported perpetrating traditional bullying and close to two thirds (61%) of students who reported
perpetrating cyber bullying were in distress (See Table 3).

Of the 148 students who were identified as in distress, 82 (55%) were considered to require a referral to social work services. Just under half of these referred students were in grade 10 (49%), while 37% were in grade 7 and 15% were in grade 4. Forty-nine percent of referred students attended high need schools, 30% attended medium need schools, and 21% attended low need schools. The majority of referred students (70%) were female.

3.2. Social Work Referrals through Quantitative Measures

While the distress protocol is typical for studies with children and youth (Alderson & Morrow, 2011), implementation revealed an unexpected level of number of students identified as in distress. Of these, a considerable number were considered to require a referral to social work services, a breadth of distress was identified among participants, and a large number of the students identified as in distress said they had not previously disclosed their distress or the degree of their suffering to an adult. In following the protocol, the study offered opportunities for the research team to collaborate with schools to refer students to social work services. The distress expressed by students included traditional and cyber bullying; mental health issues; domestic violence, sexual violence, and peer violence; difficulty with academic work and concentration; fire-setting; drug and alcohol misuse/abuse; suicidal thoughts; and self-harm.

Of the 148 students identified as in distress, 82 social work referrals were made by the research team. In a small number it was determined that immediate assistance was required. In some of these cases, as discussed in greater detail below, students reported not having any adults in their lives to whom they felt they could go for help. The presence and severity of distress ranged considerably among students: some students indicated that the source of distress was ongoing, others revealed that although the source of distress was in the past they remained upset,
while still others identified no longer being in distress over the particular issue/experience. The research assistant asked the students to assess their needs and what if any strategies or resources they thought could help. The research assistants observed that many students were clear about whether they wanted help, the form of assistance they desired, and what they thought would be helpful and what they thought would be ineffective. During the meeting with the students in distress the research assistants helped the students identify resources and coping strategies they already had on which they could rely in the future. When the student did not want a referral and the distress did not meet the “limit to confidentiality” criteria, a referral was not made although the research assistant told the student they recommended a referral.

Twenty percent (n = 30) of students wrote on the B&C: PVWS that they wanted to meet with a research team member. Some students used the meeting with a research assistant to ask advice about something specific or to seek help, or said they “just wanted to talk.” Several students requested a meeting with a research assistant to seek advice on cyber safety strategies or to have help preventing/stopping cyber bullying in their lives, which was not surprising as cyber bullying was the study focus. The research assistants provided practical cyber safety strategies to students during these meetings. Similarly, at times both students and school administrators sought assistance through the study in order to provide education on bullying and cyber bullying for school personnel and students. Subsequently, a number of presentations were offered or facilitated through the study in several participant schools.

A number of students said they had enrolled in the study with the hope of obtaining help for an issue unrelated to the subject of the study. There was a range of issues for which students sought help or advice, including: concerns about friends, siblings, and parents; sexual health; sexual orientation and disclosing sexuality to family; obtaining social work assistance; threats of
violence in their community; and experiences of racism. One student, for example, asked for social work assistance in order to develop anger management skills so that he “wouldn’t end up in jail.” A number of students however, were unaware of social work services and other forms of assistance available to them through the school. Others expressed not knowing how to access social work or other services, or felt unable to advocate for more social work assistance.

Some students disclosed school-wide phenomena, for example school-wide bullying that they considered worrisome. At times, students utilized the meeting with the research assistant to request that the research team work with the school to remediate a situation. A number of students mentioned strategies they thought would be helpful for their school and asked the research team for help in implementing these. In some instances, the research team subsequently communicated students’ observations and concerns to the principal and to collaborate in addressing the identified problem(s). In one case a student identified a high prevalence of self-harm among the student body and requested help for the school. The research team worked with the administration to arrange for social work to give a school-wide presentation, which the school found beneficial. In some instances principals reported not being aware of the problem(s) identified by students, and expressed gratitude that it was brought to their attention.

3.3. Not telling Adults

A significant theme that emerged during the meetings with students was the frequency with which students had not disclosed their distress to adults. Some students had not talked to anyone about any dimension of their distress, whereas others had only told peers. Some of the students had only disclosed a dimension of their distress to an adult, or had not told the adult about the severity or complexity. As this theme emerged, we used a grounded theory approach to revise the follow-up meeting guide, by developing questions directed at understanding how students
decided whether to disclose distress to adults in their lives. Using grounded theory analysis, our findings indicate that barriers to disclosing could be grouped into three categories: 1) protecting self, 2) protecting others, and 3) believing that the adult’s advice/help would not be effective. Often more than one of these categories combined to influence the child or youth not to disclose their suffering. It was a concern that a number of our meetings with participants revealed that students often felt that the costs of disclosing distress outweighed the potential benefits.

3.3.1. Protecting self

Several students explained that a main reason they had not disclosed distress was to protect themselves from their own, and often others’, emotional responses. Several students reported feeling concerned about how others would react if they told; specifically they mentioned feeling worried that they would be judged or blamed. Some students were concerned their feelings or experiences would be minimized, or that they would not be listened to. For example, one student said that if she told her caregiver, “she wouldn’t listen to me and she would just yell at me.” Other students indicated that their family ‘norms’ discouraged expressing feelings. When explaining their decision to remain silent about distressing experiences or feelings, “not wanting to make a big deal” was a phrase the students mentioned often, regardless of their age, grade, and gender. Many of the students talked about not wanting to “bother” others with their feelings/experiences. Several were clear that they did not want to talk about the distress, or were reluctant to do so because talking about this issue upset them. With respect to distress related to cyber bullying victimization a number of the students expressed their worry that in an attempt to protect them, their parents might remove their technological devices or Internet access.

It appears that for other students, protecting a particular self-image and sense of self was a crucial factor in non-disclosure. Some children and youth expressed that their desire not to cause
conflict or “trouble” in their family prevented them from disclosing distress. While for many students this concern was linked to anxieties about consequences or protecting family members’ feelings, it was evident that some children/youth did not want to be identified as the person in the family who caused difficulties. One student, for example, articulated not wanting to “be the one to bring trouble.” Similarly, some students’ concern that they might be a “burden” led to them not telling adults not only because of wanting to protect others, but also because the student appeared to be worried about what “being a burden” would mean about themselves and their sense of identity. A number of students worried what their parents or other important adults would think of them if they disclosed what was distressing them. One student, for example, worried that if her principal found out about her fire-setting she would consider her “unstable”.

Being able to handle their own distress was a source of pride for other students.

3.3.2. Protecting Others

Several students explained that they had not told adults about their distress because they wanted to protect others, either from their feelings or from the consequences. Some did not want to further “burden” their already encumbered parent(s), or did not want their parents to feel “bad” or blamed for their child’s distress. Other students did not want their parents to “worry” about them. Still others did not disclose their distress because they did not want to get friends or others “in trouble,” or they did not want to “cause trouble” within their family or school.

3.3.3. Advice/help won’t be Effective

A number of students believed that any assistance or advice they might receive was unlikely to help. Some explained that in the past their parents or teachers and other adults had not understood how they felt, which they anticipated to recur should they disclose. Others felt their teachers or parents would not know what to do. Some students described having talked to their
parents or other adults in the past about distress, but stated that they had done nothing to assist them or had offered advice or strategies that were not helpful. Still other students were concerned that they would not be believed if they disclosed the distress, often because of similar past experiences. Moreover, a number of students felt that adults were unlikely to help, understand, take action, or believe them often were reluctant to accept a referral to social work. Several students stated that they could not trust anyone with their “secret” or concerns.

3.4. Disclosure of Distress to the Research Team: Students Seeking Help through the Study

As many students reported not telling adults about their distress, the research assistant with whom the student met was often the first person or adult they told about their distress, including the few instances in which the distress was severe, chronic, or posed immediate danger. Many students explained that the separation of the study from the rest of their lives was a primary reason they told the research team. Several students explained that this distance made them feel they “wouldn’t get in trouble” and despite having been informed of the limits to confidentiality, some said they felt secure that the disclosure would be kept confidential. A few students asked the research assistant to help them tell adults in their lives about their distress, or sought advice on how to do speak to the adults themselves. Some students already in counselling found it insufficient or ineffective, or did not feel comfortable with the counsellor / social worker / psychiatrist. Finally, some students expressed wanting social work assistance but had been unable to do so because their parent(s)/caregivers would not grant permission.

3.5. Altruism as a Motivator to Participate in the Study

Several students explained that they enrolled in the study in order to help others, and asked to meet with a research assistant to discuss these concerns. Some requested a meeting with the research team because they wanted to contribute to understanding about bullying in order to
assist youth in the future, in some cases because they wanted to use their own experiences of bullying/cyber bullying to help others. Others used the study as an opportunity to further develop their own initiatives to help children and youth experiencing bullying, such as a “bullying club.”

3.6. Ambivalence about Telling: Not Wanting to “Make a Big Deal”

While many students told research assistants about their distress, quite a few were ambivalent about whether they needed help, whether they were in distress, and whether they would agree to a social work referral. These students oscillated between claiming to be “fine” / “okay”, expressing (at times severe) distress, and/or assuring the RA that it wasn’t “a big deal”. Not wanting to “make a big deal” stood out in this oscillation and in some cases appeared linked to feelings of shame. Some students offered details about distress only after repeated assurances that the RA would not judge them, be angry, or get them in trouble.

4. Discussion and Implications

An unanticipated and concerning result of this study was the level of distress expressed by the student participants. This finding is consistent with other research (Cheung, 2006; Freeman et al., 2011; Paglia-Boak, et al., 2010; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2013). Indeed over 80% of school staff (40% with over 10 years of experience in school-based mental health) from 117 school districts across Canada reported that there are unmet mental health needs among students (Mental Health Commission of Canada [MHCC], 2012).

One purpose of this paper is to explore the capacity of quantitative methods to foster and respect children and youth’s capacities, autonomy, and agency. Analysis focused on the processes and outcomes in implementing an ethics protocol for students identified as being “in distress” in a longitudinal, mixed-methods study on cyber bullying among students in grade 4, 7, and 10. As the data discussed in this paper were unanticipated, this article is best viewed as an
opening into the issue of youth’s disclosure of distress. These unanticipated findings highlight the need for systemic research on the conditions that influence whether youth choose to disclose distress to adults, and the outcomes of their disclosure or non-disclosure. In addition, these unanticipated findings underscore the importance of clinically trained research assistants and considerable team supervision when conducting research with children and youth.

4.1. Non-Disclosure of Distress and Accessibility of Social Work Services

Consistent with the literature documenting children and youth’s reticence to discuss distress with adults for a range of reasons (Cohen, 1999; Eicheler, 2010; Mishna & Alaggia, 2005; Priebe & Svedin, 2008), our unanticipated findings suggest that children and youth may not disclose distress because they want to protect themselves, protect others, and/or because they don’t believe the advice or assistance they may receive from adults will be helpful. The large number of students who had not disclosed distress to an adult seems to suggest a need for institutional changes in order to allow students to disclose distress easily and in ways they feel are safe and empowering. Further research is required to understand whether concerns about “making a big deal” are a consistent barrier to students’ disclosure of distress. In addition, future research might investigate how best to facilitate students’ access to school or other social services if concerns about being a “burden,” “making a big deal,” or “causing problems” are salient factors in their decisions not to disclose distress and seek help. The relationship between youth’s identity and disclosure of distress is also an important direction for systematic longitudinal research.

The frequency with which students oscillated about whether they would agree to help may suggest that access to social services is mediated by how youth view the issues and stakes involved in disclosing distress. It seems advisable for researchers and social service providers to identify and address these issues and stakes identified by youth. As shame appears linked with
“making a big deal,” it is important to create opportunities for students to more readily discuss their distress before it escalates to the point at which they feel there is no choice but to “make a big deal.”

For some study participants, a significant barrier to seeking help was out due to a concern about what others would think of them. Some students indicated that the assurance of confidentiality (within identified limits) and the researchers’ separation from their daily lives enabled them to feel comfortable to talk about the distress they had not previously disclosed. Research is needed to examine whether increasing the visibility and ease to access social work services would be beneficial, recognizing the students’ oscillation about asking for help. More broadly, the severity, breadth, and frequency of distress identified suggests that mental health must be included as an important part of the curriculum in elementary, middle, and high schools.

4.2. Clinically Trained Research Assistants and Partnering with Schools

An important component of ensuring the wellbeing and dignity of student participants in following the distress protocol, seemed to entail the use of research assistants with clinical as well as research skills. The complex dynamics in assessing and engaging students experiencing a range of distress suggest that partnerships among the research team, the school board, school administration, and social work services was critical in ensuring that social work referrals were made. Their clinical training and consultation with the research team helped the research assistants to facilitate social work referral particularly when students considered in need of a referral, refused or only gave permission for a referral under specific conditions. For example, some students only granted permission for a social work referral if they reviewed what the research assistant would disclose and/or if they could be present during the social work referral.
The willingness of participant schools to partner with the research team and collaborate to offer solutions to students in distress was essential to this sometimes multi-step process.

4.3. Quantitative Methods and Conducting Ethical Research with Children and Youth

In recent years, there has been a shift from viewing children and youth as passive objects of study to considering them active participants in constructing their own social worlds, capable of articulating their perspectives and competently participating in research (Dalrymple, 2005; Liegghio, Nelson, & Evans, 2010; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010; Wyness, 2006). With respect to this shift, there has been growing focus on research methodologies which seek to promote children and youth’s autonomy, agency, and unique voices. Indeed, the belief that research should ensure the inclusion and consultation of children and youth has become so significant it has been argued that “there has been a paradigmatic shift whereby social scientists no longer need to justify why CYP [children and young people] should be consulted but instead focus on how best to achieve this” (McCarry, 2012, p. 56). To this end, establishing children and youth as partners in research has become increasingly common (Alderson, 2001; Christensen & James, 2008; Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010; Goodenough et al., 2003). In light of these changes, qualitative, participatory, collaborative and community-based research methodologies have been advanced as having a greater capacity to involve, respect, and foster child and youth’s agency, and hence some scholars have argued that these methods are in fact more ethical (Liegghio et. al., 2010).

The unanticipated findings discussed in this paper suggest that methodologies based in positivist epistemologies do not necessarily “exclude children’s views and experiences” (Liegghio, 2010, p. 85), but can be used in ways that encourage the agency, autonomy, and voices of children, as well as offer benefits to child/youth research participants. Through our
ethics protocol to identify students “in distress,” we inadvertently discovered that a number of children and youth strategically enrolled in the study in order obtain various forms of assistance; solve problems in their lives and in their schools; share painful and shameful feelings and experiences; help friends, family members, and other children and youth; learn; and seek advice. We were impressed that a number of students employed significant skill and agency in order to utilize the study to meet their needs. These unanticipated findings suggest that the principles brought to the research process may be more relevant to the ethicality of research with children and youth than the chosen research method. Refocusing the qualitative-quantitative debate in this way allows us to deepen how we assess the ethicality of research practices beyond viewing ethicality as an outcome or inherent quality of methodology.

4.4. Limitations

Although the current study utilized a large and diverse sample of youth, limitations must be noted. Firstly, because these findings were unanticipated, less systematic data were collected on distressed students with whom the research team met, prior to the emergence of findings that were deemed worthy of systematic analysis. Thus some data were incomplete regarding students who were identified as being in distress in the initial stages of the study. Second, it is likely that the measures utilized to capture students’ distress did not capture milder levels distress and thus more students may have been in distress than were identified through the study. Third, our analysis does not include longitudinal data on distress among student participants. We do not know the outcomes for the students who disclosed their distress to the research assistants or who were referred to school social work. Fourth, because the sample only includes students in grades 4, 7, and 10, caution should be used in generalizing these findings to other grades. Finally, these findings are exploratory and perhaps what is most glaring is the need for further systematic
research on children and youth’s decision to disclose distress to adults. Despite these limitations, we determined that the significance of the unanticipated findings outweighed the subsequent limitations and we proceeded with analysis.

5. Conclusion

This paper has elucidated some of the potential opportunities and benefits offered to children and youth through quantitative methods. We argue that quantitative methodologies, like qualitative, participatory, and community-based methodologies, have the capacity to be utilized to respect and foster the agency and capabilities of child and youth participants, partner with participants to solve problems that are important to them, and facilitate referral to social work services for children and youth in distress. The sheer number of students who had not previously told adults about their distress and who did not appear to have adequate strategies and resources to cope with their distress indicates that social work services must be highly visible and readily and easily accessible to students. Moreover, research is needed to better understand how to provide access to social services in ways which feel safe, empowering, and easy for students.
References


findings (CAMH Research Document Series No. 34). Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.


Table 1

Breakdown of how students were identified^

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requested Meeting</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High YSR Score</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YSR Fire</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YSR Suicide</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Interview</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination of Requested Meeting and YSR</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination of YSR Suicide and YSR Fire</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>148</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.
Table 2

Characteristics of students in distress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified as in Distress</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of School Need</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades Obtained</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly A's</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly B's</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly C's and D's</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Place of Birth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Canada</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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* Chi-Square indicates statistical significance levels: **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, *p < 0.10.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>23%</th>
<th>355</th>
<th>77%</th>
<th>459</th>
<th>100%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-heterosexual</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>148</strong></td>
<td><strong>22%</strong></td>
<td><strong>537</strong></td>
<td><strong>78%</strong></td>
<td><strong>685</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^Percentages are row percentages. Total frequencies may not be additive due to missing information.

'Sexual orientation was not asked for grade 4 students.

*p<0.05

**p<0.01

***p<0.001
Table 3

Bullying and students in distress^  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified as in Distress</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Bullying Victim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Bully</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyber Bullying Victim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyber Bully</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^Percentages are row percentages. Total frequencies may not be additive due to missing information.

***p<0.001
Table 4

Characteristics of students in distress who were referred^  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of School Need</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>82</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.
Highlights:

• Unanticipated findings in research
• Large percentage of students in distress
• Quantitative methods to engage children
• Benefits to child research participants
• Empowering children and youth through research