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# “Is Sarah a Bully or a Friend?”: Examining Students’ Text-based Written Expressions of Bullying

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Special thanks to Dr. Laura Crothers, who donated her time to act as our expert reviewer. This research was supported by funding through the International Literacy Association Esther Zolt Academic Research Grant.

## “Is Sarah a Bully or a Friend?”:

### Examining Students’ Text-based Written Expressions of Bullying

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#### Abstract

Bullying has been recognized as a complex phenomenon with potential for serious negative outcomes. Activities that address complex social situations of bullying, such as reading and writing to a pen pal about fictional literature, provide space for students to think and share about personal issues that they encounter and how characters deal with similar issues in productive ways. For this research, we used a critical literacy lens to explore bullying within the context of language, power and context. This research shares qualitative analysis of letters students wrote to adult pen pals after reading a fictional book with a plot addressing bullying. Letters from 32 students were analyzed and four themes emerged: 1) text-based interpretations about bullying; 2) personal experiences and perspectives about bullying; 3) bullying in relation to friendship and social positioning; and 4) lessons learned for addressing bullying via action and advocacy.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Approximately 30% of students report some involvement in bullying (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011) which may impact academic performance (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005) and have long-term negative effects (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Volk, Dane, & Marini (2014) note the significant and complex nature of bullying as a phenomenon and the growing body of research in this area. Research about bullying in schools often utilizes Olweus (1993)’s definition of bullying, which identifies a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. Gottheil and Dubow (2001) share a tripartite belief model of bullying behaviors, where individuals are most likely to engage in an activity if they deem it as “appropriate, doable, and rewarding” (p. 31). Whereas, Volk et al. propose an updated definition of bullying drawing from socio-ecological perspectives, suggesting that bullying is *aggressive, goal-directed behavior that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance*. This view of bullying emphasizes three elements: goal directedness, power imbalance, and harm (Farrell, Della

Cioppa, Volk, & Book, 2014; Volk et al., 2014). As part of the revised definition, the scholars argue that bullying is *a unique form of aggression* that merits additional theoretical and applied research that can inform anti-bullying interventions and policies.

#### Bullying in Middle Grades

The body of scholarship about bullying in middle schools has grown extensively in the last 40 years (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Schwartz, Steifel, & Rothbart, 2016; Simon, Nail, Swindle, Bihm, & Joshim, 2017). Most notable, research reveals that bullying peaks during middle school prior to declining near the end of high school, but may be evident as early as preschool (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Moreover, studies suggest that students who experience unaddressed bullying and peer victimization in middle school are associated with negative long-term outcomes in social relationships and perceptions of self-worth during adolescence and adulthood. Previous research also reveals that teachers and parents tend to underestimate the prevalence and nature of bullying in schools (Stockdale, Hangadumbo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002). Given the intense prevalence of bullying in middle schools, we agree with scholars who argue that comprehensive school-wide

prevention and intervention efforts are crucial for addressing the issue (Carney, Hazler, Hibel, & Granger, 2010; Carrera, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2011; Ma, 2010; Milsom & Gallo, 2006; Pellegrini, 2002; Thunfors & Cornell, 2008).

Existing research demonstrates that school bullying can take on many forms so examining the diverse and complex nature of bullying and what it means to be a bully, a victim, and/or a bystander are important areas of study. Again, we turn to Hymel and Swearer (2015), who acknowledge this aspect about bullying:

Bullying takes many forms, from direct physical harm (physical bullying); to verbal taunts and threats (verbal bullying); to exclusion, humiliation, and rumor-spreading (relational or social bullying); to electronic harassment using texts, e-mails, or online mediums (cyberbullying). Although physical and cyberbullying are often of greatest concern, social and verbal bullying are the more common forms experienced by students. (p.295)

Hymel and Swearer (2015) also note the challenging nature of accurate assessment and measurement of school bullying. Many different research methods have been used to study bullying in middle schools, with a predominance of quantitative approaches using survey research methods. This has led some researchers, such as Vaillancourt and colleagues (2008, 2010), to question if researchers and youth are talking about the same thing when it comes to bullying. Considering the many forms that bullying may take in middle grades, combined with the challenges posed by measurement and assessment with youth and teachers in schools, there is a need for more qualitative research that centers student voice around this topic (Biag, 2014; Branson & Cornell, 2009; Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Varjas, Henrich, & Meyers, 2009).

In addition, recognizing that support from friends and peers, teachers, and parents is crucial for interrupting the prevalence of school bullying (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015), there is a need for adults to pay closer attention to bullying from the perspective of middle level students (Midgett, Moody, Reilly, & Lyter, 2017; Milsom & Gallo, 2006; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004; Perkins, Craig, & Perkins, 2011; Thornberg, 2015; Unnever & Cornell, 2003). In line with the theme of technology for learning in

the middle grades, our research investigates how the intentional use of technology within a supplementary literacy program promotes the development of student voice around the theme of bullying and cultivates communication between adult online pen pals and middle grade students (Grades 4-8).

## Methods

The research took place in a large urban school located in the mid-western part of the United States. Two 5th grade classrooms participated in a supplemental online pen pal reading curriculum (i.e., In2Books) that builds authentic learning from the Common Core State Standards. Just over 50% of the participants were male. Eighty-five percent of students were African American. Spring reading MAP scores from spring of 4th grade averaged 206.65 ( $SD = 11.16$ ) and in spring of 5th grade averaged 212.2 ( $SD = 10.36$ ), which are consistent with score norms (Northwest Education Association [NWA], n.d).

As part of the program, students were paired with an adult pen pal. Adult pen pals were volunteers from around the world, but mostly located in the US. Volunteers signed up through the online program's website and after being screened passing background checks, were paired with students in participating classrooms through the program. Adult pen pals had access to digital resources, such as examples of letters, suggestions on how to write developmentally appropriate letters, and reminders to discuss the book and ask students questions, but were not required to use the resources. The pen pals read the same curriculum-aligned books and shared digital letters about the books across a series of book cycles that focused on different genres. All activities between the adults and students were asynchronous. All student and adult letters had to be approved by the teacher prior to distribution. This standard precaution was taken to ensure that no identifying information (e.g., address, last name) was shared in the letters.

The pen pal program was designed to allow for five to six cycles, but due to time, students only completed four letter cycles during the year of data collection. There was one introduction letter cycle followed by one letter cycle per book. The program supported reading and writing about literature, but students were not explicitly prompted to include specific information in the letters. For detailed information about the

program, including scope and sequence, see Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo (2011).

The second cycle of letters was about realistic fiction literature portraying bullying. As teacher educators in literacy education and special education, we were drawn to the rich personal and text-based details shared and questions raised as they specifically related to bullying. This provoked us to explore the bullying cycle in greater detail and examine how the students who participated in this activity penned their thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions about the social behaviors of bullying. Thus, the following question framed our analysis: What do students communicate to an adult pen pal when they read a book with a central theme of bullying?

To explore this line of inquiry, we used a critical literacy lens that views school bullying within the context of language, power and content (Perry, 2012; Silvers & Shorey, 2012; Vázquez, 2016). This lens recognizes that language is not neutral and texts perpetuate ideologies (e.g., Whiteness, masculinity). Our aim was to gain a deeper understanding of how issues of power, normativity, and representation around bullying are accounted for – or not – and why this matters in relation to exposing and interrupting dominant narratives, power dynamics, and normative ways of thinking about bullying. The findings provide insights into students' text-based interpretations about bullying and thus compliment multidisciplinary scholarship about bullying as a complex phenomenon in middle grades (Carrera et al., 2011; Simon et al., 2017; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010).

### Qualitative Data Analysis Process

The content analysis was consistent with Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson's (2005) definition as a "close inspection of text(s) to understand themes or perspectives" (p. 197). Our subset of data consisted of 32 participant letters to pen pals. The collaborative content analysis process included multiple phases of coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2009). In the first cycle of analysis, we did an initial coding of 32 letters where participants referenced four different realistic fiction texts. As part of this first cycle of analysis, both researchers reviewed the shared texts in an effort to become familiar with the different storylines. Table 1 describes book synopses.

We then read the students' letters and coded data sources independently. Each researcher generated between 270-360 initial codes during the first cycle of analysis. As part of establishing inter-rater reliability and initial investigator triangulation, we held a series of data sessions in which we discussed the coding of data and recorded observations we had made both independently and collectively. Data sessions included examining preliminary codes in relation to significant factors identified in existing pen pal literature. These data sessions informed our second cycle of analysis where we collapsed codes into thirteen categories and three *preliminary* themes.

During this second phase, collaborative data sessions focused on codebook development and researcher reflexivity (to be elaborated in the next section). Our third phase of content analysis included comparing our categories and themes generated from a content analysis of children's letters with other data sources, namely, the end-of-the-year surveys. True to the iterative nature of qualitative data analysis, we moved to four interrelated thematic findings as part of the data analysis and interpretation process. During this third phase of data analysis, a graduate assistant also served as an external auditor to examine and confirm that our four thematic findings and interpretations were logical and grounded in data sources.

Finally, we included a peer debriefing component regarding the topic of bullying. That is, we asked a colleague in the field of educational psychology who studies bullying behavior in youth to read and provide critical feedback on our research, with special attention to the validity of our results and conclusions. Her feedback complimented our findings and was incorporated in the development of our manuscript. For a more detailed description of how we approached credibility and quality indicators, see Appendix A. For a full example of a student letter, see Appendix B.

### Results

Based on our independent content analysis of data sources and subsequent collaborative data analysis conversations, 13 themes were collapsed into four descriptive and interrelated themes. In their pen pal letters, participants communicated: (a) text-based interpretations about bullying, (b) bullying in relation to friendship and social positioning, (c) personal experiences and

Table 1.

*Book Synopses*

<b>Title &amp; Author</b>	<b>Main Characters</b>	<b>Plot Synthesis and Themes*</b>
<i>Donuthead</i> by Stu Stauffacher	Frank Sarah	Sarah is the new kid in town who beats up the school bully and develops a reputation for being a tough girl. Sarah is also a struggling reader who is reluctant to get help. As Franklin and Sarah spend more time together, he begins to better understand Sarah and learn more about friendship, hope, and perseverance.
<i>Jake Drake: Bully Buster</i> by Andrew Clements	Jake Link	Jake has had trouble with bullies all his life, but thinks he's safe—until Link Baxter moves to town. Link isn't like other bullies; he really knows how to push Jake's buttons. Jake realizes he is going to have to do something in order to stop Link's bullying and survive the year.
<i>Agnes Park...Girl in Progress</i> by Kathleen O'Dell	Agnes Peggy Joe	Agnes Parker wants to make a fresh start in sixth grade. She has many challenges to face, but her toughest problem is how to deal with the school bully, Peggy Neidermeyer. Agnes learns to stand up for herself and to remain true to herself and friends.
<i>The Misfits</i> by James Howe	Bobby Addie Skeezie Joe	Four students who don't "fit in" at their small-town middle school decide to stand up for what they believe in. These misfits form the "No-Name Party" for the student council elections, to stand up for all the students who have ever been called a name.

perspectives about bullying, and (d) lessons learned for addressing bullying via action and advocacy. The following describes each theme and provides supporting excerpts from our primary data source (i.e., students' pen pal letters). The excerpts are shown in the students' voice and how they were typed in the letter.

### **Theme One: Communicating Text-based Interpretations About Bullying**

Across all texts, students communicated interpretations about bullying by making connections to story elements, asking questions

directly related to the "bully" character, and making comments using specific examples of text-based evidence. Participants wrote about the characters who were portrayed as bullies or behaviors portrayed as bullying. Repeated teasing, name calling, pushing, or threatening others due to social differences were among the behaviors or actions mentioned in relation to a "bully" character. The participants in our study described characters who engaged in different forms of bullying, including physical, verbal and social or relational types of bullying behaviors. For example, a participant who read *Donuthead* (Stauffacher, 2005) commented on how the

character Franklin was perpetually teased by peers:

I have notice that a lot of kids call Franklin donuthead to tease him not because it is his last name because they want to tease him. Did you know that? (Arnetha – *Donuthead*)

Participants who read *Jake Drake* (Clements, 2001) noted how the character named Link was “constantly messing” with Jake. Below are excerpts from Richard and Tyler, who commented on Link, the “bully” character, or Drake, the character being bullied.

I say that is not good for people to be bullying people. Jake Drake bully buster on the page #18 Drake is not telling some body that he is being bully. (Richard – *Jake Drake*)

I do like the book. I especially like the character Drake. I like Drake because when Link was messing with him he tried to tell the teacher, but since she did not help, he fixed it by himself. (Tyler – *Jake Drake*)

Whereas participants who read *The Misfits* (Howe, 2001) wrote about peer bullying in relation to verbal and social or relational behaviors, including name calling, social positioning (e.g., popularity, fitting in), exclusion, and disrespectful comments about differences:

So I think the book is great. I think bobby will be a great leader in the future. I think this because he made the speech about no name calling because name calling can hurt peoples feelings. (Latasha – *The Misfits*)

My conclusion is that the Misfits they say some mean stuff. My solution is that if you have nothing nice to say don't say it all. (Devin – *The Misfits*)

Personal I think the gang of five has it hard because they have the cool kids *rejecting* the invites to the No-Name party and they only have four people in the group. (Addie, Joe, Bobby, DuShawn) so that really doesn't help them at all. I think the gang of five has it hard because they always come along trouble with other students that are supposed to be popular. But at the same time they are trying to get members in the

no-name party at the same time that is really hard on them. (Kevin – *The Misfits*)

Across all texts, participants interpreted physical, verbal, and social/relational bullying as a main problem to be resolved in the story plot. For instance, participants explored the label of a ‘misfit’ in relation to being different and issues of bullying and social positioning both in and outside of school. In their letters below, Sonya and Latasha described key events in the plot related to racism, and then also made connections to real-life texts and social situations. Interestingly, Sonya ended the letter by championing misfits:

The book "Misfits" is going to be mostly about the things you should do and not do, and that you should always stand up for your legal rights. ... Also I think on chapter 2 on #11-21 it says that Addie has said a long speech about not wanting do the pledge because she said it didn't make any sense and it wasn't true. So I think in chapter 3 she didn't have to say it any more so that's an example of a good cause and effect. I think I would agree with her when she said that a black man couldn't walk on a sidewalk without getting shot. I think it was very very curl to black people. Of course not everyone did bad things to people I guess. Do you wish that it wasn't things to hurt people in general? That speech and the one in the book reminds me of Neslon Mandela and his great work to stop apartied in South Africa... Fially I think it is good to be a Misfits because it's okay to be different. And sometimes it will come out as a good cause. (Sonya – *The Misfits*)

I liked how they sticked up for each other when it came to black and white. I also like how they have conversations after school to talk about there day and what happend at school to help them solve their problem. The reason I liked that they stood up for each other when it came to black and white because just because you're a different color dosen't mean anything. The reason I like that they talk about whats going on is because there friends can help them with what they are going through. And that talked about the issues they are having in school... (Latasha – *The Misfits*)

In addition to interpreting social labels (i.e., misfit) and the social positioning of bullying,

participants asked questions about characters that are portrayed as being bullied. For instance, Jake Drake's character is portrayed as being a victim because he is repeatedly exposed to negative actions by another student. Several participants asked their pen pals what they thought about Jake Drake's situation and how they might handle it. Most common was assessment of how well the character responded to aggressive, goal-directed behavior.

To a lesser extent, but nonetheless significant, some participants communicated text-based inferences about power and gender differentials between characters as *tough* perpetrators of bullying and *weak* or *fearful* victims of bullying. Alicia, who read *Donuthead*, asked, "Why does Franklin worry so much? Do you think his worrying helps him to be safer?...Why does Sarah act so tough?" While Jessica asked, "Why do you think that Donuthead went to talk to Gloria the school cansil [counselor] about riding a bus? I think his gut needs to tough it up and do what he needs to do."

Finally, students made explicit and implicit personal connections to the book. For example, Darius wrote, "Bullies are so mean. I do not like bullies either!" This brings us to our second theme, describing how participants communicated personal experiences about bullying in their own lives or personal perspectives about bullying as a problem in their school.

## Theme Two: Communicating Personal Experiences and Perspectives

Students' evaluation of the books extended to how they related to the characters. At times, students identified characteristics to which they related and explained personal connections to the pen pal. The following excerpt illustrated an instance when the participant communicated personal connections that they made to specific characters in the text.

I like Addie because she reminds me of my self she never gives up and stands up for what she believe's in, she's gets in trouble sometimes (I do to sometime) but its not like she does it a lot... (Tamara – *The Misfits*)

Other times, participants communicated connections to the central theme of bullying and shared their perspectives about bullying as a problem in their classroom, school, or

community context. After reading *Jake Drake*, Terrance wrote, "I like the book because bullying is a big problem in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade." Others provided more detail to their pen pals about personal experiences with bullying. Below are excerpts from two letters.

I can relate to this book. In 2<sup>nd</sup> grade I got bullied a little bit, people use to laugh at me when I would trip or get hurt. I started to tell the teacher when someone was messing with me. Teachers usually help me when I have a problem.....I'm just so angry some times I can't handle the pain like I did last year first I felt bad because nobody likes me and people keep asking me am I for (from) Africa just because I'm dark black and I'm not really if you see me in a light I'm pretty brown and light a little. Tim – *Donuthead*)

Overall the book made me feel alive, because it had real to life examples in it. In my opinion, I think that the book is a little bit interesting because there's a bully in the book and that makes me feel scared because there are bullies in my school. I can relate to the book because of that. I want to stop the bullying in my school! (Donna – *Agnes Parker*)

Although Tamara, Tim, and Donna read different books, they all made 'real-life' connections to the text and shared personal perspectives and experiences in their correspondence. This finding suggests that participants viewed online letter exchanges as a safe place to share personal perspectives about bullying. In the passage below, Devin told his pen pal about how classroom meetings provide time and space to talk about good or problematic issues. He then shared a personal resolution:

So every morning since last Friday we have been doing Morning Meetings. The Morning meeting help us get what every good things or problems out of our system. So we would sit in a circle and say the things we need to say. So my resolution ... is to try to get violence away from schools and cities. (Devin – *The Misfits*)

Most notable, Tyler communicated connections he made between the book and real life, sharing his perspectives about the gravity of the issue:

I'm really ready to talk about the "Misfits"! My brother has read this book too and is really thrilled that I have this book. ...The



book "The Misfits" is really weird to me because the people are really mean to Joe... Joe shouldn't let the people at his school treat him like that because they can get in serious trouble because most people kill there self when they are getting bullied at school or at home.

If I was Joe I would have told on all the boys that were bullying him. I feel this way because bullying isn't fair and it takes some kids to the edge. I know this because in 4th grade I watch a video and I girl killed her self because some other girls were bullying her. Some people say oh the need therapy but sometimes they can't say everything in front of a therapist. When some Parents finds out that there [sic] child is getting bullied they are just on the edge of there seat trying to help that child so I think those boys should stop.

So last thing I want to say is bullying is so evil so I wouldn't be surprised if Joe fought one of the boys that bully him at school. I wouldn't be surprised because they are disrespecting Joe. Disrespect get people no where. If I was in Joe shoes I would just let it role off my back. I would do that because in the end you still are who you are.

I can't wait to see what you think about bullying, too. Also I do see a very large amount of bullying. I see more just back and fourth bullying. Like someone will say something about you and you will just go back and fourth. What is your take on bullying? Have you ever been in Joe's shoes? (Tyler – *The Misfits*)

Many participants were curious to know if their adult pen pal had ever experienced bullying. Tyler (above) expressed that he was interested in his pen pal's opinions on bullying. Other students asked questions such as, "Have you ever been bullied?" Overall, this theme supports previous research demonstrating how online letter writing accounts for a mutual exchange of ideas where students and adults can make personal connections while also discussing books.

### **Theme Three: Communicating Bullying in Relation to Friendship and Power**

The third theme shares how students interpreted bullying and friendship as power-laden, yet fluid constructs that are not mutually exclusive. Participants recognized bullying as a nuanced

and changing phenomena, particularly in relation to friendship and power. For example, some participants pondered whether a character in the book is a bully, a friend, or both. This theme was particularly salient for participants discussing *Donuthead*. In this story, Franklin was being teased for his last name and was the target of physical attacks from a school bully. Sarah was portrayed as the "tough girl" who beat up the school bully in an effort to protect Franklin.

I can conclude that Sarah likes Donuthead because she stand [stood] up for him and *punched* the bully that keeps on bullying him and her. What can you conclude? (Walter – *Donuthead*)

Due to her "toughness" and ability to display physical aggression towards others, Sarah was perceived to be a bully, too. However, early in the story, Sarah defended Franklin from another bully. Later in the story, Sarah and Franklin become friends. These actions and changing, layered roles (victim/bully/defender/bystander) of the characters prompted Albert to ask his pen pal: "My other question is is Sarah a bully or is she a friend? Why does Sarah act so tough?" In a similar fashion, Tyrone commented on the friendship between Sarah and Franklin:

I think Donuthead is a great bully book, because someone wanted to be his friend like he found a friend named Sarah and Sarah was dirty but he still wanted to be her friend that's nice. Just because you look different from other that don't mean they will not be nice to you...And I like that he made friends even when people was bullying him and he did not make fun of how Sarah look because if I get bully I do the same thing back by doing it back but that's why I love this book. (Tyrone – *Donuthead*)

Similar comments related to bullying-friendship dynamics were made by students who read other books, too. In the story *Jake Drake: Bully Buster*, Jake was paired to work on a class project with a classmate (Link) who had been bullying him. In the end Jake had the insight to see that Link has his own insecurities, and saw Link in a moment where he was, "Just a scared kid." (Clements, 2001, p. 64). Participants commented about the fluidity between expressions of bullying behaviors and friendship in *Jake Drake: Bully Buster*, as seen in Richard's letter, "Why was the bully trying to

become his friend at the end (of the story)?” and Tyler’s letter, “I especially liked that they became friends by the end of the book.”

Another critical perspective about the complex and changing nature of bullying came from Carlos who perceived the adult characters as bullies in the story *Donuthead*:

This book surprised me because I thought some of the adults acted like bullies to Sarah and Franklin. I think Franklin’s mom was bullying him because in the story I think it said she listen to the president more than she listen to her own son because Franklin was named after the president and I agree with you because I see the story allot of adults bullying kids mostly Sarah and Franklin like most of the teachers in school and on the bus. (Carlos – *Donuthead*)

Carlos’ comments indicated that he recognized a power struggle that spanned ages. While adults are naturally in a more senior position of power, Carlos recognized a potential for unhealthy power dynamics between children and adults.

Other students recognized characteristics of friendship against the contrast of bullying behaviors, as seen in letters by students who read *Agnes Parker...Girl in Progress* (O’Dell, 2003). Four of the 32 participants read this book. In this story, Agnes Parker faced many challenges as she started 6th grade, including dealing with the school bully, Peggy Neidermeyer, and navigating her relationship with her best friend, Prejean. Agnes learned to stand up for herself and to remain true to herself and friends.

I liked the book because it was interesting and a good read. The most important character of friendship in the book is to be by ones side at all times. The best way to be a friend is to be nice and helpful at all times. Friendship approach in the book was realistic to me. (Donna – *Agnes Parker*)

What are the most important characteristics of friendship in this book? How did the book show the best ways of being a friend? Which character would you like to be friends with? How did being a friend with Joe help Agnes? (Julia – *Agnes Parker*)

Students also provided insight about the function of bullying behaviors, as seen in

Donna’s previous statement about individuals trying to get attention by bullying. To this extent, participants in this study share nuanced thinking about bullying within a continuum of relationship dynamics shaped by power and age differentials.

#### **Theme Four: Communicating Lessons Learned for Addressing Bullies and Bullying**

Just as friendships between characters were not stagnant and characters actively worked to resolve the issues of bullying in schools, the participants also communicated the lessons they learned from the books. The students also raised the need to address bullying behaviors via action and advocacy. Thus, the fourth major theme accounts for “lessons learned” by the students. First, students explicitly expressed that they learned something about bullying from the literature. The following written expressions demonstrate this point: “I like the way Drake handled bullies and I felt like I could learn a lot.” (Timothy – *Jake Drake*), and “My opinion is that this is a good book about how to stand up to the bully or if you need to tell the teacher,” (Richard – *Jake Drake*). Orlando shared his sentiment about the book explaining why he liked it:

I really like the book, *Jake Drake: Bully Buster*. I like the book because when Jake was getting bullied he stood up for himself, even if it got him in trouble. I think that Jake learned that it is important to always stand up for yourself and also be kind to your family. (Orlando – *Jake Drake*)

Still, other participants took the lessons learned a step further and shared about actions that they could take to prevent or stop bullying. Amari wrote, “It is important to stand up for yourself and do what is right.” Tamara, who read *The Misfits*, shared, “I think the most important part of this book is to stop bullying and stand up for others.” Another participant, Carlos, expressed different ways to take action in relation to the book *Jake Drake*:

The book had a lot of insight about bullying. Jake tried to prevent them from bullying by ignoring them. Link was for sure a super bully. He was the high tech bully because he was a really bad kid. I liked how interesting it was and how it taught me what to do if someone bullies you. By reading this book I

learned that sometimes it is a good idea to ignore bullies. Or, if they don't stop bullying you then all you need to do is tell a teacher or another adult. I would recommend this book to someone else. I think it will teach you how to handle bullies. It can maybe help you learn how to avoid bullying. (Carlos – *Jake Drake*)

Karen and Deanna also shared more personal accounts about what they learned from reading *Donuthead*:

By reading this book I learned that it is important to express yourself. It is also important to overcome the things that you are afraid of. I think this is really easy to relate to because I experienced that too. I think it is hard to try new things for the first time. (Karen – *Donuthead*)

I took a lot away from the book. I learned things about bullies and a way that one can hurt others and the best way to approach feelings and others as well. I think that other people bully is because they are trying to get attention and also they might not have everything that the one who they are bullying has. (Deanna – *Donuthead*)

Other participants, Amari and Angie, reflected on the bystander role and how a main character's actions led 'doing the right thing' in relation to school bullying:

I was happy too to see Agnes Parker stand up for herself when she wrote the letter to her about the girl in her classroom. She learned the most about herself by having the confidence to reach out to others to write a letter to her teacher explaining the situation. (Amari – *Agnes Parker*)

Agnes seems like a great girl. She stuck up for people who were being bullied. One time, she told them to stop and I think she went to tell the teachers. She is a good friend to Prejean and Joy. If they were getting bullied, she would stick up for them. When other people bully Agnes, she sticks up for herself and tells them to stop bullying without getting scared. (Angie – *Agnes Parker*)

Students situated bullying within the context of the book, the student's personal lives, and more general impact of bullying. They did not,

however, make connections to recent news events involving bullying or cyber bullying. This may be due to access and experiences of the students. In response to an expressed call to action against bullying, students ventured about what they would do when they encountered bullying. The participants expressed interest in correcting imbalances of power by standing up for people who are bullied.

## Discussion

This study aimed to provide insight on how middle level students in a large urban school district think and write about bullying within a supplementary reading program with adult online pen pals. We found students communicated both explicit and implicit text connections to their pen pal. Students used text-based evidence to make sense of bullying and often drew parallels to their own lives. The participants in this study asked critical questions about how characters are portrayed by the author and perceived by the reader. Participants also shared their thoughts on complexity of bullying behaviors as it related to the identity and interaction of the characters. Consistent with the notion that bullying takes on many forms (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Milsom & Gallo, 2006), participants described examples of physical, verbal and social/relational types of bullying behaviors in the books and their lives. Finally, they made statements about their insight and responsibility to take action against bullying, citing both how the characters in the story took action and how the students personally need to take action.

We are confident that each theme communicates a developed topic shared in the letters; however, we also recognize that the themes are not entirely independent of each other. For example, in Tim's letter, he relates to being bullied in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade (Theme 2) and connects this to the storyline and characters in the book (Theme 1). He discusses that he liked the book because he sees bullying happen and that there is a need in his school to stop bullying (Theme 4). Taken together, the four themes we describe provide insights about what students "bring to the table" as critical readers and interpretive thinkers engaging in text-based written exchanges with an adult online pen pal. Tim's letter in particular struck a chord with us as he shares raw insight on bullying. He demonstrated an 'opening up' about lived experiences regarding being bullied. He shares emotional personal connections to the

text, most notably, racialized experiences that surface feelings of anger and rejection. For Tim, making text-based personal connections was an important part of communicating and sharing with his adult online pen pal.

Several participants questioned what defined a bully, but not bullying behaviors. This wording suggests that they go into the readings with a view that a person either is or is not a bully. The actions of the characters in the book do not necessarily fit into that simplistic view of bullying. Students raised unresolved issues and nuances about bullying as multifaceted and complex phenomena. The question students raised of whether a character was a bully or a friend reflected critical thinking about character portrayal as part of the meaning-making process. It also points to contested constructions of what it means to be a bully in relation to power differentials. As pointed out by participants in the book *Donuthead*, Sarah was portrayed as tough, whereas Franklin was portrayed as weak. However, Sarah's character can be simultaneously perceived as a "bully" and as a "friend" over the course of the story. Thus, the question of "Is Sarah a bully or is she a friend?" denotes the development of critical thinking about bullies/bullying as contextual, changing, and relational in nature.

From a critical literacy perspective, our qualitative findings are significant because they suggest that the participants in this study are exploring bullies and bullying in relation to power and difference. They looked to their pen pal to discuss and learn more about the layers of bullying, as some shared thoughts on the function of the behaviors and others noted that "bullying" is not dichotomous or binary. Participants' complex view of the character of Sarah, perhaps, reflect the findings of Farmer et al. (2010), who analyzed peer-affiliation patterns of 2<sup>nd</sup> graders. Farmer et al. reported that individuals who engage in bullying behavior participate in separate social circles than students who engage and are the recipient of bullying behavior. While the National Bullying Prevention Center (n.d.) shares that friends do not bully friends, the information shared in the letters questioned more about a change in a character or different power relationships in different relationships. They extended their understanding beyond the explicit events in the texts and shared evidence of higher-order thinking about the subject. Thus, our research demonstrates how school children relate to the

issue and think critically about it as evidenced in the written letters to their adult online pen pals.

Despite collective awareness of bullying and the need to stop bullying, it appeared that bullying was apparent among classmates. This is especially concerning considering that bullying may continue to increase and peak in middle school (Hymel & Swearer, 2015) and the students in this study were just embarking on their journey in the middle grades. The study did not utilize a systematic bibliotherapy approach; nonetheless, students used the written discussions with the pen pal to express how they identified with characters in the book (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1998). Students expressed personal connections to the characters who were bullied, which compliments the work of Esch (2008) who shared that reading literature that portrays bullying behaviors can provide a gratifying perspective for the reader (in our case, those who expressed having experienced the bullying behaviors) and ultimately promote confidence, empathy, and perhaps insight into these types of behaviors.

#### **Implications for Research and Practice Limitations and Need for Future Research**

Limitations within the research need to be addressed. Consistent with qualitative approaches to research, our aim is not to establish causality about students' perspectives or text-based written expressions. Instead, our aim is to provide awareness of our participants' contributions within the specific context described in this paper. Future research that extends beyond survey research may provide insight to the experiences and practices in education and how educators may use literature to situate critical conversations with students about bullies and bullying, particularly in school contexts, and address impact on bullying (or anti-bullying) behaviors.

The inquiry into the theme of bullying within the written letters began after the completion of the data collection phase of the study. Consequently, no follow-up student interviews or assessments occurred. We recognize this as a limitation of our inquiry. Follow-up interviews with participants may shed more insight on students' perspectives and experiences with bullying. Further research is needed that analyzes how students comprehend and evaluate issues such

as bullying in literature and how students use this to make sense of their own situations. Additionally, it would be noteworthy to evaluate an activity such as the one explored here in conjunction with an assessment of bullying in schools (Crothers & Levinson, 2004).

### Implications for Practice

The letter analysis presented here compliments research by LeVine (2002), who demonstrates that authentic learning experiences allow students to share and express personal thoughts and Hughes, Evering, Malloy, and Gambrell (2015) who impart that authentic online learning experiences afford opportunities for students and adults to connection and exchange ideas without fear of judgement. This research extends to these insights to middle schoolers' expression of thoughts and ideas regarding bullying. Collectively, these have practical applications for practice. Our findings support the premise that online letter writing, for the authentic purpose of reading and discussing bullying literature with an adult pen pal, provide rich opportunities for middle school students to make connections to text, the world, and explore interpretations of complex social phenomena (i.e., bullying). Using technology provided asynchronous opportunity and space for 5<sup>th</sup> grade students to express experiences and perceptions about bullying. To this extent, our existing analysis contributes to a growing body of multidisciplinary scholarship that seeks to broaden our understanding of bullying, particularly from the perspective of middle level students in schools, as it informs our practices and anti-bullying initiatives (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013, 2014; Thornberg, Birberg, Thornberg, Alamaa, & Daud, 2014; Thornberg, Pazzoli, Gini, & Jungert, 2015).

In the written exchanges to their adult online pen pals, the 5<sup>th</sup> graders in our study demonstrated consciousness about parameters of socially-acceptable interactions. They communicated that words and actions impact others. This point brings us to Henkin (2005), who challenges school teachers to “build strong readers and writers who think about and are able to deal with bullying issues” (p. ix). We agree that “getting students to think about bullying and social justice through their reading and writing “is a way of integrating and deepening students’ literacy experiences; a way of helping them deal with bullies and/or imagining a better world (p. vii). As noted below

by Milsom and Gallo, 2006, by reading, writing, and thinking about bullying issues, we can offer students the opportunity to think through how characters deal with bullying in productive ways.

Students must develop an awareness of bullying, or more specifically, an awareness of which behaviors the school classifies as bullying, if they are to effectively help enforce school and classroom rules. Instructional methods and activities can be used to help increase students’ understanding of bullying in addition to providing opportunities for them to expand their social circles and practice new behaviors. (p. 17)

Such literacy experiences also offer students with the opportunity to imagine how they might act in similar situations (Henkin, 2005; Laminack & Wadsworth, 2012; Malloy et al., 2017; Young & Ward, 2011). Students gave examples of how and why they should not stand idly by when bullying occurs. This culture of awareness to advocate for self and others may be used as a catalyst in classrooms to end maladaptive bullying behaviors, as seen in the Bullying Literature project, where Wang et al. (2015) used literature to promote social-cognitive and prosocial behaviors in third and fourth graders. Teachers can weave opportunities to read, discuss, and write about bullying into existing curricula and programs, in ways that address social justice issues *and* core learning standards (Cunningham & Enríquez, 2013; Enríquez & Shulman-Kumin, 2014).

Another element worth noting in implications for practice is that the teachers read all of the letters while screening for identifying information. Consequently, although the student was authentically writing to a pen pal, the teacher had access to the content written in the letters about bullying. Stockdale et al. (2002) shared concerns that teachers underestimate the prevalence and nature of bullying. In addition, Orweus (1991, 1993) report that teachers are often present when bullying occurs, but infrequently intervene to talk with the victim or diffuse the problem. In light of Stockdale and colleagues’ and Orweus’ revelations, reading the letters may provide teachers with insight on bullying experienced by students, pervasiveness of bullying at the school, and the need for teacher action. Crothers, Kolbert, and Barker (2006) reported that students prefer anti-bullying intervention strategies where classroom

teachers deter bullying behaviors or intervene directly to provide assistance to the victims of bullying. Privy to information in the letters may position teachers to better understand local bullying and take actions against it.

### Conclusions

The prevalence of bullying and impact of such behaviors necessitates schools to provide opportunities for students to learn and communicate about bullying. It is important to allow students to voice and share thoughts about relevant topics in safe and authentic ways (Hughes et al., 2015). Qualitative analysis of student letters yielded four themes: (a) text-based interpretations about bullying; (b) personal experiences and perspectives; (c) bullying in relation to friendship and power; and (d) lessons learned to address bullying. Reading and writing *with* a purpose is just as important as reading and writing *for* a purpose. Thus, reading and talking about literature portraying bullying may provide personal insight and compliment schools' larger anti-bullying campaigns while addressing comprehensive literacy standards. Utilizing technology to engage students with online pen pals may be used as vehicles for facilitating critical thinking about relevant and timely social justice issues, such as bullying. It may also provide a platform to facilitate conversations with educators, students, and parents. The findings from this study provide data from which educators may continue the conversation about the role of education in learning about and preventing bullying.

In closing, reading and sharing about bullying is important and has the potential to be a catalyst for the educational community to address bullying and how to stop bullying. Thus, when considering supplemental academic programs in literacy, it may be of value to consider the value in sharing the literacy experience with a pen pal, allowing for how students' perceptions and experiences may contribute to outcomes.

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## **Appendix A: Credibility and Quality Indicators**

Potential subjectivity of empirical qualitative research require transparency to determine trustworthiness and credibility. Several qualitative researchers have shared markers from which to gauge trustworthiness and quality of qualitative analysis, with the effort to improve readers' confidence in merit of analysis and conclusions (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Shenton, 2004).

### **Credibility**

We took several precautions to establish credibility and trustworthiness of data analysis. For the purpose of clarity, we will describe our precautions and actions using the terminology shared by Brantlinger and colleagues (2005). First, we recognized that historically qualitative researchers acknowledge that data evaluators cannot fully suspend beliefs and ideologies when interpreting the data; therefore, it is important that researchers exercise reflexivity to evaluate how personal beliefs, values, and assumptions may impact interpretation of data and communication of findings. To this point, we spent time during our research meetings disclosing to each other how our personal beliefs might impact how we interpreted the data. In doing so we learned that we share a commitment to social justice and improved literacy outcomes for students who are often marginalized in our educational system. We also acknowledged that interpretive processes are shaped by our distinct disciplinary backgrounds, theoretical frameworks, and life experiences. Recognizing and valuing these differences allowed us to interact in ways that were mindful of researcher bias in data analysis.

Multiple researchers evaluated the data separately, creating and identifying codes (line by line) prior to debriefing and sharing codes. We discussed the language we used for the codes and why we thought that best captured the message of the text. We then discussed our codes and came to a consensus about the language. We separately evaluated how they collapsed into categories and themes and then met to discuss our categories and themes over several iterations. Upon completion of data analysis, a graduate student served as an external auditor and evaluate the original data, creating codes and themes, drawing conclusions which aligned with our conclusions.

We included a peer debriefing component regarding the topic of bullying. We asked a well-established colleague in the field of educational psychology who studies bullying behavior in children to read and provide critical feedback on our research, with special attention to the validity of our results and conclusions. Her feedback complimented our findings and was incorporated in the final manuscript.

### **Quality Indicators**

We applied quality indicators to both document analysis and data analysis. The research was approved by the University's IRB and the researchers collected parental permission and child assent to participate in the study. Only data for which the authors had signed permission forms were included in the analysis.

## Appendix B: Sample Student Letter

Dear PenPal,

Hey PENPAL I seen your letter. In it was great and yes I have a best friend she is so fun. August is my birthday. I like that we both have birthdays in warm months. When I grow up I want to cook a variety of things. Such as: chicken, ribs, biscuits and fries. When it comes to desserts for my bakery I would like to made cake, ice cream and apple pie. What is your favorite food and dessert? In school we have been studying about the Olmec. Do you know anything about the Olmec? It was great to learn about the Olmec.

Agnes seems like a great girl. She stuck up for people who were being bullied. One time, she told them to stop and I think she went to go tell the teachers. She is a good friend to Prejean and Joy. If they were getting bullied, she would stick up to them.

When other people bully Agnes, she sticks up for herself and tells them to stop bullying her without getting scared.

If anyone bullied me, I would tell them to stop talking about me. I would also want to go tell the teacher. If someone was bullying me, I would feel sad and hurt. I like Agnes because she is a nice girl and I admire her.

What kind of food do you like to eat? Do you have a job? If so, where do you work?

Write back soon!

(Student Name Removed)