

# Portrayals of Bullying in Young Adult Literature: Considerations for Schools

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## **Abstract**

In this article, the authors examine how bullying is portrayed in three recent young adult novels, focusing specifically on whether the information about bullying is accurate, biased, or represents old myths in comparison to current research. The authors conduct a systematic analysis of the following four themes: (1) What is bullying? (2) Who are the bullies? (3) Who are the victims? (4) Who are the bystanders and what role do they play? They conclude by arguing for the inclusion of young adult fiction that deals with sensitive issues as a way to promote awareness, empathy, and social change to empower youth in school settings.

*Keywords:* young adult literature, bullying, language arts class

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## Résumé

Dans cet article, les auteures étudient comment l'intimidation est dépeinte dans trois romans récents pour jeunes adultes en voyant si l'information sur l'intimidation est exacte ou biaisée ou encore si elle représente d'anciens mythes par rapport aux recherches actuelles. Les auteures mènent une analyse systématique axée sur les quatre thèmes suivants : (1) Qu'est-ce que l'intimidation? (2) Qui sont les intimidateurs? (3) Qui sont les victimes (4) Qui sont les spectateurs et quel rôle jouent-ils? Elles concluent en prônant l'inclusion de la fiction pour jeunes adultes traitant de sujets sensibles dans la panoplie des moyens susceptibles de promouvoir la conscientisation, l'empathie et les changements sociaux et, de ce fait, d'amener les jeunes à se responsabiliser dans leur milieu scolaire.

*Mots-clés* : littérature pour jeunes adultes, intimidation, cours de littérature

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## Introduction

For the last several decades, bullying has been noted as a serious problem in schools, and it has been noted that students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members need to work together to address ways to help victims, bullies, and bystanders develop coping strategies and prevent bullying. Recent surveys (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008) have indicated that up to 40% of students experience bullying while at school. Students in the middle school grades, Grades 6 and 7, experience high rates of bullying (James, 2010) and this may include not only physical aggression or name-calling (most common in the elementary grades) but also social bullying (i.e., purposeful exclusion, gossip, or rumours). Victims of bullying may experience short- and long-term effects such as sleep difficulties, anxiety, depression, or a loss of self-esteem or self-efficacy (Salmivalli, 2010). Their academic performance and satisfaction may also be impacted; in order to avoid the victimization students may purposely miss classes, or students may struggle in class because their memory is impaired due to stress levels (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). Therefore, bullying can impact all areas of a victim's life—personality, academics, social life, and physical and mental health.

Considering these possible impacts on students, many school boards have developed anti-bullying policies and school-wide initiatives to address the phenomenon. These initiatives come in different formats such as peer-to-peer mentor programs, buddy systems, character education in the curriculum, or arts-based programs (James, 2010; Stadler, Feifel, Rohmann, Vermeiren, & Poustka, 2010). Bullying initiatives may take a targeted approach (focused on only the victims and bullies) or a whole school approach (focused on all students in the school). Most experts (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2008) agree that a whole school approach is more beneficial for students since the messages and skills learned are universal and consistent.

Although well intentioned, many school-wide anti-bullying initiatives have proven to be only moderately successful in confronting the problem of bullying in schools (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). In a review of the literature, the authors evaluated 26 studies that discussed school-based interventions and categorized the interventions into five types: curriculum, whole-school interventions, social skills groups, mentoring, and social worker support. The results indicated that (a) four of the 10 curriculum studies showed decreased bullying, (b) seven of the 10 studies evaluating the whole-school approach

revealed decreased bullying but with few positive effects for younger children, (c) three of the four social skills training studies showed no clear bullying reduction, and (d) the one mentoring study found decreased bullying for mentored children, and the one study of social worker support found decreased bullying but no effect on the victim. In a similar review of school-based anti-bullying initiatives that involved students across all grades, Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel (2010) found that most school-based initiatives “had little impact on reducing bullying behavior” (p. 43). A problem may be that there is little evidence of long-term positive impacts from the initiatives, especially those for middle schools or high schools (Merrell, Guelder, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Safron & Safron, 2008).

There is research, however, to support the use of young adult literature (YAL) with middle and high school students in an effort to help them understand and deal with issues around bullying both in and outside of school (Henkin, 2012; Morris, Taylor, & Wilson, 2000; Pace & Podesta, 1999; Trent & Chisholm, 2012). YAL or YA fiction is typically written for readers between the ages of 12 and 18, features teen protagonists, and often deals with difficult issues facing adolescents. As Quinn, Barone, Kearns, Stackhouse, and Zimmerman (2003) argue, using a novel study approach is a “very natural way to open discussions and to increase awareness of the topic of bullying” (p. 583). Language arts teachers, in particular, can play a role in the process of dismantling bullying in their students’ lives through the use of well-chosen, age-appropriate novels.

However, little research to date has explored how bullying is portrayed in YAL, specifically whether the information about bullying is accurate in comparison to current research or students’ experiences, and how these portrayals in YAL can be used as part of anti-bullying initiatives in school classrooms. If YAL about bullying is to be used as a prevention or intervention tool within schools, then how bullying is portrayed in the novels needs to be critically examined by teachers prior to introducing them to students to avoid reinscribing stereotypical notions associated with bullying. Teachers using these books in class would need to confirm that they accurately represent the realities of youth, and if they do not, how the inaccurate information might be used as starting points for discussions. To this end, this article examines three contemporary YA books based on bullying. In our analysis of the novels, we were most interested in how the bullies, victims, and bystanders were depicted. In particular, we explored the following questions: (1) Is the information in this novel about bullying based on current research or does it portray

inaccurate information, stereotypes, or myths of bullying? (2) What messages are sent to students about bullying through the book? and (3) How can the topics be used as discussion points in the classroom?

## Methodology

In order to conduct an in-depth analysis, a small sample size of three books was used. The selection criteria included young adult novels that are (1) focused on age-appropriate characters for middle school students, (2) written in the last seven years, and (3) used in Ontario schools for language arts or other courses. The three young adult novels selected for the purposes of this article were *Bystander* by James Preller (2009), *The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen* by Susin Nielsen (2012), and *The Bully Book* by Eric Kahn Gale (2013). In our classroom-based research with students, we have also used *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio (2013), *Freak* by Marcella Pixley (2013), *Schooled* by Gordon Korman (2000), and *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli (2000). For teachers working with students in secondary school, we recommend *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2007), *Eleanor & Park* (Rowell, 2013), *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead* (Peters, 2009), *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), and *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* (Quick, 2013).

In order to analyze the books, a checklist of current research on bullying was created that included current information about the phenomenon of bullying. This checklist was based on the following four themes: (1) What is bullying? (2) Who are the bullies? (3) Who are the victims? and (4) Who are the bystanders and what role do they play? The novels were examined to see how each of the above themes were represented, in particular whether the information was based on current research or myths, as well as how the novel could be used to engage students in critical conversations about bullying.

## Analysis of Themes

In order to conduct an analysis of these bullying themes in the novels, the authors completed a review of current bullying research. Over 60 research studies on bullying behaviour from 2007 to 2014 were reviewed. This information was recorded in a spreadsheet according to the above-mentioned four themes in order to guide the analysis of the

books. Each book was read with these themes in mind and a content analysis was conducted in order to analyze how the phenomenon of bullying was portrayed and whether that information harmonized with current research. A particular focus in this study was understanding how the portrayal of bullying in the books can be used as discussion points with students in an educational setting. Therefore, this analysis section is intertwined with a discussion of how the information presented in the books could be used to promote bullying prevention through critical thinking and awareness among students.

### **What Is Bullying?**

Most experts (Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong, & Kras, 2013; James, 2010; Stadler, Feifel, Rohrmann, Vermeiren, & Poustka, 2010) have agreed that bullying is a repetitive pattern of aggression. However, there is concern that the word “repetitive” is being ignored and the term “bullying” is being misused by the public, thus leading to desensitization of the phenomenon (James, 2010). To be considered bullying, the perpetrator’s intention would have to be to gain power over the victim and the act would have to occur more than once (Olweus, 1993). In a bullying situation there is a clear intent to cause pain or harm to a victim. There is a power imbalance between a victim and bully; this could be due to a number of different reasons, including size, strength, popularity, social skills, economic status, birth order, culture, job position, status, intelligence, or knowledge (James, 2010).

Bullying can take many forms such as name-calling, social exclusion, physical aggression, spreading rumours, damaging or stealing property, or intimidation (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Students may experience bullying face to face or in a virtual world (i.e., social media sites, texting). Verbal and physical bullying are primary forms of bullying in the elementary grades whereas social and emotional forms begin to emerge more in the middle school grades (Safron & Safron, 2008). Social bullying is more common among females and may involve ostracizing, excluding others, spreading gossip, or publicly demeaning another person (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010). Males use more physical and emotional methods of bullying that include fighting, intimating, teasing, or name-calling (Feder, 2007; Wang et al., 2009).

The bullying that occurs in the three novels examined corresponds to the recognized definitions of bullying and the different types of bullying that are depicted. In *Bystander*, the main character, Eric, and his mother move to a new town and Eric is the

new student in the seventh grade. The seemingly popular student, Griffin, befriends him but Eric quickly realizes that Griffin might not be the best choice of friends. Eric watches Griffin bully David Hallenback, a socially awkward student in the same class. Griffin uses verbal and physical methods of bullying such as name-calling, teasing, and physically hitting David. This negative behaviour occurs repeatedly at various locations on school property—in class, in the hallways, in the washroom, and on the school yard. Griffin seems to enjoy intimidating David and making him feel frightened. This book presents an accurate depiction of bullying according to the research: (1) there is a clear power imbalance between Griffin and David (Griffin is more popular and physically stronger), (2) Griffin's verbal and physical attacks on David are repetitive, (3) Griffin uses verbal and physical bullying, which are two common forms of bullying among males, and, (4) the bully, Griffin, intentionally wants to hurt the victim, David.

In *The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen*, by Susin Nielsen, 13-year-old Henry tells the story of his brother, Jesse, and the bullying he endured at the hands of Scott Marlin and his buddies until he snaps and irrevocably changes their family forever. He recounts the events leading up to "It" through journal entries at the urging of his therapist. Jesse's repetitive bullying includes "accidental" tripping in the hallways at school (that sent him to the hospital for stitches) and finding "dog poop" in his locker. This book presents an accurate picture of bullying: (1) the bullies use physical forms of bullying, common among males, (2) the bullying behaviour is repetitive over time, leaving the victim feeling powerless, (3) there is a power imbalance between the victim, Jesse, and the bullies who are more popular and physically stronger, and (4) the bullies intentionally want to cause pain and harm to the victim, Jesse.

In *The Bully Book*, Eric Haskins has never had a problem with bullying until he enters sixth grade and the class bully, Jason "Crazy pants," and his supporters decide to make Eric the "Grunt." Eric doesn't understand what is happening to him until he finds out about "The Bully Book," a secret guide that outlines how someone can "make trouble without getting in trouble, rule the school and be the man" and how to select the "Grunt"—the kid who will be at the bottom of the social ladder forever. Eric is subjected to systematic bullying "by the book" through name-calling, physical intimidation, and social exclusion. According to "The Bully Book," the bullies have to call the Grunt names, and make fun of how the Grunt looks or behaves or talks in public so that everybody will catch on, and join in on the bullying. This book also presents bullying according to

the research for the following reasons: (1) the bullying that Eric endures is repetitive, (2) there is a clear power imbalance between Eric and the bullies; they are more popular and Eric has few friends, (3) the bullies' intent is to hurt Eric by causing embarrassment, shame, and physical pain, and (4) physical and social bullying is used since the bullies include both boys and girls.

In all three books the depiction of bullying coincides with current research related to the definition of bullying and the different types of bullying. However, the books do present variances from traditional views of bullying: (1) bullying is a social phenomenon, (2) bullying can occur within groups, (3) teens may experience cyber-bullying, and (4) sexual bullying is another form teens may experience. It is these variances in the novels from traditional views of bullying (face to face, name-calling, or fighting) that can create critical discussions among students in the classroom. These variances provide a springboard for teachers and their students, as they promote comparison and contrast between and among novels. Teachers can also encourage students to make personal connections to their reading by asking them to explore the different behaviours they engage in or witness and how these might fit under the recognized definition of bullying. Sometimes students might not recognize their own behaviours, such as spreading gossip, or intimidation over the Internet, as bullying. Many youth perceive "bullying" as a childish word and phenomenon—name-calling, teasing, and pushing that happens in elementary school. Therefore, it would be important for teachers and students to discuss how various behaviours, previously considered childhood forms of bullying, are in fact forms of abuse or harassment. Viewing bullying from this lens can ignite critical discussions around the seriousness of these behaviors, which can cause damage to victims and even bystanders, or those who witness acts, such as those presented in the YA books. Students can discuss the repercussions of these behaviours not only within the school but also in their broader community, thus reflecting on legal and social implications.

***Bullying is a social phenomenon.*** The bully or bullies in each book intended to cause harm to the victims for various reasons, such as to preserve their status (staying at top of the social ladder in school) or to gain or maintain a sense of power or control in their environment. The need or desire for power or control may stem from a lack of self-esteem, safety, autonomy, or control in life; from competitiveness, jealousy, abuse and neglect; or a person's personality characteristics. The characters who were doing the



bullying in these four books demonstrated a need for power and control but for different reasons.

The quest for power or control in a competitive or hierarchal social setting where youth are trying to figure out their identity and social status can be considered a natural consequence and thus a social phenomenon (Reijntjes et al., 2010). It is this social problem that students can examine: How does bullying manifest within a social circle? How is bullying a reflection of social issues? How do bystanders perpetuate or stop this social phenomenon? Students can reflect on how bullying behaviours are encouraged and maintained because of social responses, especially within peer groups. For example, the characters in the books can be examined to understand their role in the social phenomenon of bullying: How did they contribute or how were they affected by the bullying?

***Bullying by groups.*** Another point for discussion is the presentation of bullying by groups, not individuals. In *The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen* and *The Bully Book* there is more than one bully. Group bullying occurs when several people engage in bullying another person or group of people; this group bullying may be physical, emotional, or psychological (Salmivalli, 2010). The term “mobbing” has also been used to describe bullying by a group of people, often to describe bullying in the workplace, emotional bullying, or by adults (Duffy & Sperry, 2012). Group bullying may occur when the group members are all together or separated. For example, a youth may be the victim of cyber-bullying by four other students, each of whom intimidate and harass the victim online at different times. Bullying-related attitudes and behaviours can be characteristics that clique members share with each other. For example, some cliques consist of children who tend to take on pro-bullying roles such as bullies, assistants, or reinforcers (Witvliet, Olthof, Hoeksma, Smits, Koot, & Goossens, 2009). It has been argued that “bullying together” may provide a sense of unity and cohesion in groups that lack high-quality friendships and genuine cohesiveness, which would otherwise hold the group together (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006). Therefore, some researchers suggest that since bullying is a “group process,” interventions against bullying should be targeted at the peer-group level rather than at individual bullies and victims (Salmivalli, 2010).

Students can reflect on questions such as: What impacts did the group bullying have on the characters? What was each member of the group’s role? What did the group members do to stop or perpetuate the bullying? Students can examine how individual

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bullying can transition to a group phenomenon, why this happens, and what their personal role would be in such a phenomenon. Understanding our role and impact in our social context can contribute to a sense of responsibility (Ragozzino & Utne, 2009).

**Cyberbullying.** Up to 30–40% of students have experienced or engaged in cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Similar to traditional bullying, cyberbullying involves an imbalance of power, aggression, and repetitive, negative actions but these occur online through instant messaging, emails, chat-room posts, or texting (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008). The anonymity of the online world may make it easier for bullies to target their victims without adults looking on, and this can even trigger students who might not bully in person to engage in cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). The accessibility of the Internet can create more opportunities and spaces for bullies to harass their victims, causing more damage, because the bullies can expose their victims to much wider audiences by forwarding images and emails via mobile devices and posting on social networking sites (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). The goal of cyber bullies is often to socially embarrass or isolate the victim by having information witnessed publically (Dehue, Bolman, & Vollinkl, 2009).

Although cyberbullying is not a focus of any of the three books explored, it is present in all of them as a peripheral topic. Some of the researched characteristics of cyberbullying are portrayed in *Bystander*. Eric's friend Mary reports that one of the female characters in the book is being cyber bullied. One of her bullies posts a photo of the girl in shorts and midriff-baring shirt, with the head of a pig Photoshopped onto it. Mary says to Eric, "Girls are the worst. We can be so freaking mean" (p. 103). In *The Reluctant Journal*, Henry's brother, Jesse is tormented by his bullies, who create a "Jesse Larsen's a faggot" page on Facebook before they move on to more physical kinds of abuse. Cyberbullying also plays a part in *The Bully Book* when Eric is humiliated on Facebook because someone changes his status to "in a relationship" with another character, Melody Miller. Even though Eric does like Melody, the incident embarrasses both of them and causes a breakdown in their friendship, further isolating Eric from his peers. In each of these books the victim was embarrassed and felt socially isolated from the technological attacks, as is often the purpose of cyberbullying (Dehue et al., 2009). The cyber-bullies were able to reach them at home, after school hours, and have many witnesses to the bullying. Cyberbullying can be discussed with students who are more readily exposed to this

form of bullying through their increased use of technology and online social platforms. Critical discussions can focus on an awareness of what cyberbullying is, why students engage in cyberbullying, why it can be more damaging than traditional forms of face-to-face bullying, what forms of cyberbullying students see, and what are possible interventions considering so many young children inhabit technological worlds. Since most youth today are more technologically aware than their adult counterparts, they may have more viable solutions.

**Sexual bullying.** Verbal bullying, the most common kind of bullying among boys and girls, can often involve negative language that targets a person's sexual activity or sexual orientation. According to the American Psychological Association (1998), as many as 93% of teenagers hear derogatory words about sexual orientation at least occasionally, with more than half of teens surveyed hearing such verbal abuse every day at school and in the community. Although none of the characters in the novels identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ), several are bullied with negative name-calling associated with sexual orientation. In *The Reluctant Journal*, Henry and his best friend Farley are taunted about being "a couple." In *The Bully Book*, Eric's three bullies call him "gaywad" (p. 13) and encircle him at his bus stop, chanting, "He's the Grunt! He's gay! We're gonna make him pay!" (p. 174). LGBTQ students are considered a high-risk group for bullying and are two to three times as likely to commit suicide as their heterosexual peers (Blumenfeld & Cooper, 2010).

Although all three novels reflect the tendency for this age group to use verbal bullying related to sexual orientation, only *The Bully Book* takes up the issue of homophobic language through Eric's words to his former best friend, Donovan. Eric says, "Calling someone gay, like it's a bad thing, is like calling someone a dentist—it doesn't make any freaking sense" (p. 140)! In response to being challenged in this way, Donovan slams his head into Eric's nose and knocks him to the ground. Despite the outcome, Eric's words open up possibilities for readers to discuss the issue of homophobic language—to explore where and when they hear this language and how language can be emotionally harmful. Students can discuss the reasons and impacts of verbal abuse, especially related to sexual orientation. This discussion could lead to brainstorming of possible interventions for such behaviour, especially within schools, with a specific focus on creating a safe and inclusive community for all learners.

## Who Are the Bullies?

Hearing the words “school bullies” years ago may have conjured up the image of bigger students using their fists and words to threaten smaller, frightened students. More recently, researchers have suggested contradicting characteristics of bullies, making it hard to create a profile. Bullies are not typically larger than their victims; emotional, psychological, and cyberbullying does not rely on size (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007). Although creating a profile is difficult, a number of risk factors for bullying behaviour have been identified: (1) lack of communication skills, (2) poor problem-solving skills, (3) lack of conflict resolution skills, (4) poor self-regulation, and (5) intolerance of differences or perceived weaknesses in self or others (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2008; Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011). Some researchers suggest that bullies may have increased emotional intelligence, which actually enables them to be aware of others’ emotions, thus using this awareness to their advantage (Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011). Research by Salmivalli (2010) found that bullies have an “inflated ego ideal,” perceiving themselves as more dominant over other people. This coincides with other research that suggests bullies may have high self-esteem rather than low self-esteem (James, 2010). Additionally, bullies can be popular and exhibit potential leadership skills (Reijntjes et al., 2010).

The bullies in the three books examined are different in terms of their experiences and backgrounds. In *Bystander*, Griffin Connelly is charismatic, manipulative, and described as a “pretty” boy with long eyelashes. Jason, the bully in *The Bully Book*, is not remarkable in any physical way but he is popular, athletic, and skilled at kickboxing. These characters fit recent research that bullies are popular and demonstrate high intelligence in order to manipulate others (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Only the two bullies in *The Reluctant Journal*, Scott (Jesse’s bully) and Troy (Henry and Farley’s bully), fit the stereotypical idea of the large and aggressive bully who has physical power over their victims. Both characters are large in stature. Troy is described as a “big guy in jeans that hung well below his bum” (p. 7), and Henry describes Troy and his friends as “Neanderthals,” depicting the bullies in a stereotypical way.

These variances in bully characteristics can be a point of discussion with students to highlight how bullies come in all shapes and sizes. More importantly, this lack of a specific profile can lead to a discussion of how context (the environment) can contribute to bullying behaviours. Awareness of how social pressures such as competition or social

acceptance can lead to negative behaviours is important in promoting socio-emotional learning and positive behaviour changes for students (Ragozzino & Utne, 2009). Students can discuss what contextual factors are present in their schools and classrooms and possible solutions to mediate these factors.

### **Reasons for Bullying**

There are varied reasons for why children bully, thus adding to the difficulty of creating a single profile. Some children may bully for control, power, or for their own safety (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009; Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011). Olweus (1993) identifies three main and interrelated reasons that students bully: (1) they have strong needs for power and negative dominance, (2) they find satisfaction in causing injury and suffering to other students, and (3) they are often rewarded in some way for their behaviour with material or psychological rewards.

Additional research suggests that students that are popular may bully others to maintain their status on the social hierarchy; for many adolescents a goal is to find their place in the social hierarchy and avoid being at the bottom (Reijntjes et al., 2010). Some researchers compare this to Darwin's theory of the "survival of the fittest," describing it as a natural phenomenon (Berger, 2007). Some children may bully others as a reaction to experiencing bullying themselves and are often labelled bully-victims (Arseneault et al., 2010). Children may learn bullying behaviours from family members, or bullying may be the result of contextual factors such as homes or communities that are highly competitive, crowded, or authoritative and punishing (Vanderbilt & Augustyn, 2010).

The bullies in the three books demonstrated some of these reasons for bullying. In *The Reluctant Journal*, Troy seems to have little acceptance and empathy for those that are different. The need to stay at the top of the social hierarchy is the premise in both *The Bully Book* and *Bystander*. The bully guide or "The Bully Book" is written to teach other students how to secure a spot at the top of the social ladder; if you follow its rules and appoint a Grunt, you will be at the top. In *Bystander*, Griffin states his rationale for bullying quite clearly: "Hallenback is like the sick gazelle in the herd, limping along. The one that gets eaten. It's not fair, but that's life. I don't make the rules" (p. 93). The bully in *Bystander* has charisma that draws others in; however, underneath his smooth exterior, Griffin is a very angry young man who suffers physical abuse from his ex-policeman

father. He bullies others as a reaction to his own bullying and unhappiness; this is consistent with the “bully-victim” type described by Salmivalli and Peets (2009).

Students can explore the reasons behind bullying, leading to an understanding of how it is “not the victim’s fault” and that bullying behaviour may be a reaction to events, not a personality characteristic. Changes in perceptions such as this can promote greater empathy among students. Students can also explore how some people may try to achieve power in negative ways, such as through aggressive or manipulative behaviour, and ways they can achieve power in positive ways in their classrooms, schools, and communities. A key in bullying prevention is changing youths’ views of what is “cool” behaviour so the message is spread and adhered to within their own social circles.

### **Who Are the Victims?**

Creating a profile of a bullying victim has been described as dangerous and difficult by some experts (Berger, 2007; Brendgen, Boivin, Vitaro, Girard, Dionne, & Perusse, 2008). The idea that people demonstrating certain characteristics are prone to being bullied suggests that their characteristics attract bullying, and if they could change those characteristics they would not be bullied. There have been contradicting characteristics of victims identified in the research that make it difficult to create a profile. While some researchers have concluded that victims have low self-esteem, poor assertiveness skills, and internalize problems (Cole, Maxwell, Dukewich, & Yosick, 2010), others (Berger, 2007) suggest that victims are passive, impulsive, and have poor social skills or problem-solving abilities. According to Wang et al. (2009) bullying victims are often unpopular, not well-liked, and have few friends. However, recent testimonials from students in news reports and school surveys reveal that anyone could become a victim, even popular children (Belsey, 2009).

Although it has been impossible to create an accurate and consistent profile of a bullied victim, experts agree that there are some common characteristics they share. Researchers (Green et al., 2013; National Crime Prevention Centre, 2008; Olweus, 1993) claim that students with the following risk factors tend to be bullied more than their peers: (1) sensitive, (2) shy, (3) insecure, (4) unassertive, (5) low self-esteem, (6) mental health problems, (7) few friends, and (8) different (i.e., physical appearance, lifestyle, school performance, hobbies, interests). Furthermore, Salmivalli and Peets (2009) suggest

that there are two kinds of bullied victims: the “passive victim” and the “bully-victim.” Passive victims are identified as submissive, defenseless, and having few friends; they show pain, blame themselves, and internalize their problems (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Bully-victims are children that have experienced peer victimization themselves, then turn to bullying others as a coping mechanism (Arseneault et al., 2010). The victims express anger over being victimized in a reactive and impulsive manner and often get into trouble for their behaviour (Carrera, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2011).

The bully victims in each of the books portray some of these risk factors. In *The Reluctant Journal*, Henry calls Farley “the nerdiest-looking kid I have ever seen” (p. 5) and goes on to describe his “thick Coke-bottle glasses” and the plastic pocket protectors he keeps in his dress shirts. Henry tries to avoid Farley at first, not wanting to associate with someone who raises his “freak flag” so high; however, the two boys soon become very good friends and Henry realizes that Farley possesses the best qualities of a friend, including empathy, loyalty, and kindness. Eric, in *Bystander*, calls David Hallenback the “perfect pawn, seemingly willing to do anything for approval—no matter how humiliating, or cruel, or pathetic” (p. 84). He realizes early in the novel that David was “desperate for acceptance” and that Griffin manipulates this need. Everyone seemed to be in agreement that David was so annoying that he “asked for it” (p. 122). Jesse Larsen, Henry’s older brother in *The Reluctant Journal*, is a classic example of a bully-victim. He responds to the incessant bullying by internalizing his anger, and his behaviour changes over the course of a six-month period. He begins swearing at his parents and neglects his personal hygiene, until everything comes to a climax and Jesse confronts his bully, Scott, with a loaded gun. In *The Bully Book*, the protagonist, Eric, realizes that he is chosen as the “Grunt” because he doesn’t know who he really is and this makes him more malleable to his bullies. Being chosen as the Grunt serves to undermine Eric’s confidence and has implications for his self-esteem and self-image. Rather than wallowing in self-misery, however, Eric decides to put an end to the tyranny of the bullying guide known as “The Bully Book” and makes it his mission to find a way to get out from underneath his bullies.

These portrayals solidify the stereotypical image of a bullying victim for the readers and may do more damage by consistently pointing out a “type” (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). The way victims are presented, especially the idea that they deserve or ask for it, can be a critical point of discussion among students. Students can explore reasons

why people would be intolerant of what they perceive as weaknesses in others and what this says about personal character. This can be integrated into school-based initiatives of character education (Ansbach, 2012).

### **Who Are the Bystanders and What Role Do They Play?**

Bystanders can play either a positive or negative role in a bullying situation. By passively watching, the bully has an audience, which perpetuates the situation (James, 2010). Many schools are focusing on the important role bystanders can play in reducing bullying: telling someone, refusing to engage in the social group behaviour, or helping the victim if it is safe enough to intervene (James, 2010). If other students do not support the bullying behaviour there will be less of a social reward for the bully (Stadler et al., 2010). Carney Hazler, Oh, Hibel, and Granger (2010) also suggest that those who witness bullying can experience traumatic effects similar to being a direct victim of bullying because the child witness may feel helpless, afraid, or shocked.

The role of bystanders and the impacts of bullying on them was explored in each of the books. In *The Bully Book*, the main character has a friend who tries to support him through the bullying ordeal. However, the reader is not privy to this friend's feelings about the bullying or the impacts on him as a bystander. Although this is not discussed in the book it would be important for students to explore the impacts on the victim's friend. Students can discuss what friends can do to support each other in bullying situations. In *The Reluctant Journal*, Henry is diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder by his therapist. He witnesses a horrible attack on his brother that he relives over and over both awake and in his sleep. He experiences "furies," which make him difficult to deal with when he is feeling particularly anxious. The bullying that is happening to Henry's brother affects the entire family; both of his parents are experiencing depression and anxiety as well. This domino effect of bullying can be discussed with students so they understand the consequences of bullying's reach far beyond just the victim. Reviewing such widespread consequences can promote empathy, altruism, and a sense of responsibility among students, thus acting as deterrent to bullying behaviours (Craig et al., 2007).

*Bystander* deals very directly with Eric's role as a witness to David Hallenback's victimization. As the new student at school, Eric does not want to become a target. When



Griffin first approaches Eric and behaves in a subtly threatening manner, Eric knows he must be careful:

Eric sensed that he'd have to be careful; this encounter could go either way. It could turn out okay, or go very bad. Threat hung in the air, though no one had said or done anything wrong. It was just a feeling Eric got. A knot in his stomach. (p. 9)

When Eric questions Griffin's physical assault on David and says it "wasn't necessary," Griffin "dismissed him with a wave of his hand. 'Shut up, Eric, or maybe next time it will be you'" (p. 82). Torn between fear of being the next target and feeling complicit in the bullying, Eric tries to convince himself that he is not the problem. When he eventually talks to the other kids about the bullying, they turn against and isolate David.

This book provides some wonderful teachable moments because it is with the bystanders that we can make the biggest difference. Students can explore Eric's role as a bystander, especially his reasons for being fearful of intervening and the courage it took to stand up for what he felt was right. Many bystanders do not intervene for fear of retaliation (Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011). Students can discuss these feelings and safe ways to help; it is important for students to develop the skills and confidence to effectively stand up to bullying (Dehue et al., 2009). It would be valuable for students to come up with prevention and intervention ideas as a group so there is social acceptance of those ideas within their own peer groups; this will lead to a greater chance the youth will follow those suggestions.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite some stereotypical views of bullying, these three novels offer an excellent "way in" to discuss students' personal issues related to bullying, to dispel myths about bullying, and to educate young adolescents about this important topic. Uncovering the true nature of bullying in the lives of youth can assist in developing effective interventions. For instance, it may be helpful to downplay the term "bullying," because if bullies do not see their behaviour as bullying, they would not take interventions as applicable to them (Salmivalli, 2010). Students can also recognize that bullying is not a victim's fault, or that bullying behaviours may be the result of external factors and not personality. By

dispelling myths of who the bullies are, victims and bystanders can help youth and adults understand that anyone could play those roles, dependent on factors in their lives. This may help youth recognize bullying-type behaviours in themselves and others with greater objectivity. It would be beneficial to discuss with students the importance of being kind, accepting differences, standing up for those who cannot protect themselves, and healthy ways to achieve a sense of power or control in their life.

Pepler and Craig (2000) recommend a systemic approach to bullying in schools that includes the involvement of the whole school community (parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, and the students, through peer-to-peer mediation). Their report offers a comprehensive overview of the short and long-term responsibilities of all stakeholders in bullying prevention. We offer a curricular approach, as part of a systemic solution, that focuses on using literature as a vehicle for deep engagement with the issues surrounding bullying. There are many good books at all levels, fiction and non-fiction, that can be used as springboards for important discussions in the classroom. Some schools implement a “Drop Everything and Read” or DEAR program that could focus on bullying books across the grades, providing a coordinated effort to address bullying.

In the classroom, teachers might choose to select one of these novels as a read-aloud and establish literature circles based on a selection of other thematically related books to explore bullying in the lives of youth and to discuss ways they as caring friends and classmates can support one another. This approach facilitates exploration of the themes and issues from various perspectives and encourages an examination of how bullies, the bullied and bystanders are portrayed in the novels. Alternatively, teachers might incorporate the novels into a balanced literacy or “Daily 5” structure (Boushey & Moser, 2014), which focuses on independent, small-group and whole-group reading and writing. An additional approach would be to have older youth help run bullying literature circles with younger students. The peer-to-peer model is an effective way for students to learn, especially in terms of pro-social behaviours (Ragozzino & Utne, 2009; Reijntjes et al., 2010).

Critical review of the books’ themes can go beyond student discussions in class. In a recent research project with Grade 6 students, we had used a critical digital literacies pedagogy (Hughes & Morrison, 2014) that positioned students as agents of change in their school community. They designed buttons, posters, T-shirts, infographics, and video public service announcements to increase awareness of bullying issues in their school.

Between the covers of these three YA books exist stories that can create awareness, stir emotions, and provoke change. Wolk (2009) suggests, “Teaching for social responsibility with good books does far more than encourage civic participation; it redefines the purpose of school and empowers all of us—students, teachers, administrators, parents—to be better people and live more fulfilling lives” (p. 672). Through critical discussions of how bullying is presented in the books in comparison to the student’s real world experiences, students can take an active part in finding solutions to prevent bullying. This can empower students to be “agents of change” and promote an equitable and empathic school community. Using YA books that focus on bullying has the potential to create awareness about the issues and transforms the lives of students, not only the 64% of students who report being bullied, but the 72% who report witnessing bullying events at school (Stop a Bully, 2014).

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