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**Pre-Service Teacher Perspectives on Bullying by Middle School Girls**

Nicole L. Stoodley

A Thesis Submitted to the University Honors Program  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Honors Degree

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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### Abstract

The present study focuses on pre-service teacher perspectives of bullying in schools, specifically on the prevalence, characteristics, and interventions of bullying by middle school girls. Participants in the Teacher Education Program of Southern Illinois University Carbondale completed a questionnaire that asked them to estimate the prevalence of bullying by girls compared to that of boys and to identify the specific behaviors that characterize bullying by girls. They described their obligations to address bullying in school and provided identification and intervention strategies. The results show that female pre-service teachers overwhelmingly report that bullying by girls is more common or considered crueler. Male pre-service teachers are less comfortable in their ability to identify and take action against bullying involving girls, though they have accurate explanations as to bullying behavior characteristics. Conclusions drawn from the present study suggest that pre-service teachers feel an obligation to the students to stop and prevent bullying; however, they are less familiar with proactive strategies to address it and rely heavily on reactive identification techniques. Future research should address the effectiveness of mandating bullying awareness campaigns for pre-service teachers in terms of learning strategies and feeling competent, as well as research on the success of intervention programs in schools to address the relational aggression that girl bullies use.

## **Literature Review**

Bullying is defined as a repeated imbalance of power in an effort to cause intimidation or attack (Olweus, 1993). To a bully, who may have a grandiose self-image or severely lacks self-esteem, the victim is seen as the weak and defenseless one, an easy target. Garinger reports that such attack and intimidation is considered necessary to maintain exclusive friendships and relationships during a crucial development age when social acceptance and identity are among top-priorities (2006). Surveys and reports quantify the commonness of bullying to affect close to half of all school-aged children (Olweus, 1993). A survey by Kaiser Family Foundation of kids age eight to fifteen showed 68% of those ages twelve or older ranked teasing and bullying a bigger problem than racism, AIDS, and pressure to have sex (Dutton, 2003). These student-reported numbers and intensity of importance implore that schools take proactive action to impede bullying. Perhaps the reason the occurrence of bullying is so high is because in today's society aggression is regarded as normal, acceptable behavior (Garinger, 2006). Adults cannot permit and promote hostility through entertainment without seeing a correlation in the rise of adolescent violence. The vast coverage of recent school shootings supports that victims of bullying are then prone to perpetuate violent behavior. In a study from the last decade, 2/3 of thirty-seven school shooting cases examined involved shooters who felt persecuted, bullied, or threatened (Drake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2003). Aggression through bullying is creating a behavior loop, and it is no wonder why students regard the issue with such significance.

## **Methods**

Southern Illinois University Carbondale pre-service teachers from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction enrolled in middle school and secondary content literacy courses freely participated in an anonymous questionnaire asking about their perspectives of bullying

between middle school girls. They indicated an age category, sex, and content level from which comparisons and trends could be drawn. A copy of the questionnaire can be found at the end of this paper.

### **Prevalence of Bullying by Middle School Girls**

The study asked pre-service teacher participants to compare the prevalence of bullying by middle school girls to that of middle school boys and to provide a rationale. The results show great variation in responses as surveys are laid side by side to compare male and female pre-service teacher estimations. Of the nine male responses, two indicated they were not sure how prevalence compared and reasoned that they did not see bullying by girls as often as boys. Three males indicated that they believe bullying by girls occurs more often because it is social and emotional rather than through physical altercations. The remaining four male participants indicated that the prevalence of bullying by boys and girls is equal but suggest that the bullying occurs in different forms and is seen more publically when boys bully other boys. A conclusion can be drawn that regardless of who really bullies more, male teachers propose that girl bullying is more covert and seen less than when boys use physical aggression; therefore, bullying by girls may be more common than reported data reveals because of its social and emotional characteristics. Nineteen female pre-service teachers responded to the prevalence question. Two participants were unsure how to compare the number of occurrences, but they feel that bullying among girls is hidden more, which contributes to a skewed image of how bullying appears. Eleven female participants describe that bullying by girls occurs more often for reasons such as retaliation, holding grudges longer, image competition, harsh judgment, and the hidden nature of girl bullying tactics. The remaining six participants did not answer so much in terms of who bullies more, but rather they insinuate that girl bullies are meaner, vicious, intense, and cruel—

characteristics that they feel physical fighting does not share. Female participants overwhelmingly suggest that bullying by middle school girls occurs more often or is worse; the results suggest an experiential component in the responses to this prevalence question.

Research finds that physical aggression is more common in boys but relational aggression is equally common in boys and girls (Crapanzano, Frick, Childs, & Terranova, 2011), contrary to what the majority of female participants thought. Lansford explains, however, the group whose use of aggression is predominantly indirect and relational is girls (2012). Girls may use more indirect aggression tactics instead of physical violence because at a young age girls are discouraged from engaging in direct or physical conflict (Phillips, 2003). Compared to boys, girls may be more influenced into participating in bullying behavior by social norms that change over time (Crapanzano et al., 2011). One major social connection that changes over time is with friends; friendships involve trust and honesty, which leaves girls vulnerable to attack from those who become ex-friends and bullies when their closeness is subject to jealousy and competition (Dutton, 2003).

### **Relational Aggression**

Pre-service teachers in the present study were asked to describe how bullying by middle school girls appears. Several participants, regardless of gender, presented similar descriptions. Phrases such as “pack mentality,” “walking around in cliques,” “leaving out groups,” “pretending to be friends,” “targeting a weak link,” “not including others,” and “through chains of people” all suggest that the girl bully is capable of manipulation and deceiving other students to join in on her harassment and exclusionary tactics. The definition of bullying entails a perceived power struggle. At an age when finding positive self-image and identify are crucial for healthy development, adolescents seek this validation from their peers. This leaves girls

vulnerable to the social exclusion and put-down tactics that girl bullies use. From the survey, girl bullies were described as using aggression to ruin reputations, name-call, back stab, pass rumors, and make fun about appearance and weight. These techniques further support an adolescent girl bully's efforts to throw potentially negative attention and judgment away from herself and on to someone else, hoping to establish power and social status from her followers in the process.

Relational aggression, as used by both boys and girls, is defined as behavior used to hurt or harm another's social relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). By the middle school years, girls' verbal and social skills are more advanced than boys' (Pearson, 1997). Girls begin to use their words and social status to call names, start rumors, and ostracize other girls. The girl bully may develop a façade as one of the prettiest, smartest girls in class to further her rise to power by attracting other participants and diminishing how adults could see her as a culprit (Garinger, 2006). Physical aggression may only involve two participants. Girl bullies, however, maintain their status by creating a hierarchy of followers. The bully can solicit the help of a sidekick and use a banker to collect and hold data of fellow classmates while a floater belongs to no single group and may stand up to the queen bee; the bystander provides the bully with an audience, and the pleaser will do anything to win favor with the bully to avoid her antics (Garinger, 2006). Every girl could be forced to engage in the situation in some way to either protect herself and/or serve to support the bully's imbalance of power. This being said, identifying a bullying situation is not so easy as picking out one perpetrator as much as seeing how all the counterparts fuel the situation and deciding how to address each girl's role.

### **Obligations as an Educator**

Pre-service teacher survey participants were asked to identify and explain their obligations to stop bullying. In a profession that serves to support children's dreams and enhance understanding, one would assume the natural answer from these future teachers would be a strong obligation to maintain harmony and positive relationships. In actuality, of the twenty-seven participants who completed a response for this portion of the survey, not a single one dismissed the significance of bullying or described that they had no obligation to address bullying. There is a common argument among adults that bullying is a natural interaction, no more than petty competition or horseplay, but these pre-service teachers recognize the severity of effects that bullying can have on victims and the bullies. Responses declared that bullying must be addressed with immediate intervention and/or prevention measures. One participant was adamant about her role as a mandated reporter. Another stressed that any type of bullying would not be tolerated in her classroom. A few participants explained that no child deserves to be bullied. One identified the effect of bullying on the atmosphere of the classroom and how bullying jeopardizes the safety of the environment for children which statistically affects the amount of learning that occurs. Two females reported their roles as protectors of their students and the need to teach students how to defend themselves.

These pre-service teachers are correct for feeling a serious obligation to stop and prevent bullying because of the numerous negative effects associated with bullying. Bullying causes serious negative academic and mental health consequences to victims such as a decrease in school attendance and an increased risk for emotional problems (Crapanzano et al., 2011). Victims suffer from depression, poor grades, eating disorders, and suicidal thoughts (Dutton, 2003). They feel rejected by peers, experience social anxiety, and are significantly more



submissive as a result (Garinger, 2006). Problems associated with bullying also include lower self-esteem, loneliness, substance use, sleep problems, stomach aches, fatigue, stealing, vandalism, difficulty making friends, and lack of social acceptance (Drake et al., 2013). This long list of consequences negatively affects physical, social, intellectual, and emotional development of middle school students that are trying to transition into an older crowd. The seriousness of bullying consequences demands effective techniques in identification and intervention.

### **Identification and Intervention Strategies**

Participants of the study were prompted to provide strategies in how an educator can identify bullying behavior and techniques to prevent (proactive) or stop (reactive) bullying. Male responses reveal a different trend than female responses. Of the eight males who constructed a response, five included reactive identification strategies and the other three did not provide a means of identifying girl bullies. Of the eight male responses to intervention techniques, one participant offered a reactive strategy, three offered proactive strategies, and the remaining four offered no such intervention strategies. A few male participants were honest in that they did not know how to identify or solve girl bullying behavior. Of the seventeen female participants that responded, only two responses lacked identification strategies and two lacked intervention techniques, suggesting that the female participants feel more comfortable in approaching and developing rapport with their female students. Also, equal amounts of proactive and reactive intervention techniques were provided.

Examples of reactive identification strategies presented include reading students' journal entries and by watching and listening to the students to see who they associate with and how they interact with each other. Examples of proactive identification strategies presented include

approaching students and generating rapport, conducting small investigations, encouraging students to talk with the teacher, and getting to know the personal qualities of each student. Reactive intervention techniques are used to stop bullying behavior already in effect; examples of such techniques reported include talking with students in conferences to understand what is going on, including administrators and parents in discussions and awareness, taking all complaints seriously, documenting incidents, and teaching students how to defend themselves. Proactive treatment techniques are measures that prevent acts of bullying from entering the classroom in the first place; examples of proactive treatment reported include school-wide anti-bullying assemblies, educating students on the negative effects of bullying, providing bullying examples and videos, putting zero-tolerance policies in place, establishing firm school/classroom rules, role playing, and strategically forming student groups in class.

Steps should be taken to increase educator competence in the identification and intervention of middle school girl bullying. Schools could mandate staff to read current literature to depict realistic bullying behavior and consequences to everyone involved (Garinger, 2006). Special training for teachers may need to incorporate activities that support teachers' confidence in their ability to deal effectively with bullying (Drake et al., 2013). When it comes to punishment, current sanctions against bullying behaviors have been unsuccessful (Letendre & Smith, 2011). Unfortunately, for youth that crave power and domination, bullying is naturally reinforcing. It may be of little effect to focus on victim empathy or punitive measures for those girls who have little concern for victim suffering (Fanti & Kimonis, 2013). Discipline may not be the answer so much as counseling and emotional support for the victim that bolsters empowerment and self-esteem (Dutton, 2003). Bullying interventions should, instead, take a proactive, positive approach that teaches students strategies to regulate anger and overcome

aggression (Crapanzano et al., 2011). The Norwegian Bullying Prevention Program is among the best-known whole school prevention programs; the program's components include: creating parent awareness, administering student bullying questionnaires, holding anti-bullying conference days, providing effective supervision, creating a bully prevention committee, establishing classroom rules, having regular class meetings, and sponsoring serious talks with bullies, victims, and parents (Drake et al., 2013). This holistic approach includes proactive and reactive measures that address bullies' motives, victims' healing, and the role that community members play in supporting the positive development of middle school students.

### **Conclusion**

The survey presented to pre-service teachers requesting their responses about bullying by middle school girls revealed a few trends. Female pre-service participants estimate the prevalence of bullying by middle school girls to be much higher than the male participants estimated, citing rationale from personal experience; however, both male and female participants, regardless of age and content area, can list common characteristics of what relational bullying by girls looks like. All participants feel an occupational or personal obligation to stop bullying in their future classrooms. Responses regarding identification and intervention strategies also show a slight trend among male and female participants. Results conclude that males are more unaware of how to recognize female bullying behavior and are uneasy about providing strategies to handle it, whereas the females offered numerous strategies and equal amounts of the proactive and reactive types. This study encourages future research on the effects of bullying training programs for pre-service teachers. These pre-service teachers need to feel confident in their ability to recognize the indicators of bullying that are more common among girls than boys. As new teachers, they need to have access to research-based

strategies to ensure they can make proactive measures to thwart the consequences of bullying, especially for middle school students experiencing dramatic developmental changes.

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