A Qualitative Investigation of Bullying

The Perspectives of Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Graders in a USA Parochial School

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ABSTRACT Quantitative analyses of survey or observational data underlie much of the current knowledge about bullying. Rarely have investigators qualitatively tapped the complex and sophisticated knowledge base of children. The present investigation was conducted in order to plumb the working knowledge of intermediate and middle school students about potential strategies for alleviating bullying. Fifth, sixth and seventh-graders (three males and three females) discussed the prevalence of bullying in their school, methods for dealing with bullying employed in the past and future coping strategies. Two of three female interviewees but none of the males reported experiencing bullying at the time of the interviews. While respondents struggled to articulate strategies for coping with bullying, most participants clearly expressed their desire to rationally work through problems with aggressors. When asked to rank order suggested strategies, participants selected violent or aggressive retaliation as the least effective and least desirable coping strategy. Additional themes emerging from the data include gender based experiential and interpretive differences, including the tendency for males to classify most potential conflicts as harmless horseplay. Interviewees portrayed chronic victims as passive and ineffectual when it came to dealing with aggression.

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Little doubt remains that bullying is a significant problem in American schools. Although most people can think back to a time in their childhood when they were either involved in or witnessed some form of bullying, the actual numbers remain daunting. McTaggart (1995) indicated that 1.3 million children a year become involved in some form of bullying, with most incidents taking place in school. Current research suggests that between 10 and 14 percent of American youth suffer bullying either frequently or seriously enough that it affects self-reported social adjustment (Hoover et al., 1992; Perry et al., 1988).

Bullying is clearly associated with problems among victims and perpetrators. First, a relationship between physical/psychological safety and academic achievement likely exists; it stands to reason that students learn more when they feel physically and psychologically safe (Roberts and Coursol, 1996). Second, young bullies grow into adulthood exhibiting a myriad of problems, among them at least a fourfold increase in contacts with the criminal justice and/or mental health systems, relational problems and difficulty holding down jobs (Olweus, 1993). Victims, while seemingly better adjusted at adulthood than bullies (Olweus, 1993), nonetheless may become increasingly prone to depression and anxiety as a function of the frequency and severity of the bullying they undergo (Rigby and Slee, 1999); this may be particularly true for females, based on an Australian investigation (Bond et al., 2001). In addition, students who bully others are much more likely to exhibit risk factors in other life domains (drug and alcohol use, problems learning in school) than are their peers who do not bully others (Berthold and Hoover, 2000; Simanton et al., 2000).

Society also pays a price for bullying and schools' failure to address it. Several lines of evidence lead to the conclusion that bullying and risk for more intense violence are related. A significant correlation is observed between mild forms of mischief at school and more serious crimes (National Center of Educational Statistics [NCES], 1998; Wilson and Petersilia, 1995**)**. Fellow students described several of the notorious school shooters of the past few years as ongoing victims of peer harassment. Finally, bullying among school-age children may start male-female relationships out on the wrong foot, setting the stage for toxic levels of domination and hostility (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Shakeshaft et al., 1995).

Several efforts have been put forward to understand student perceptions of bullying and peer harassment (Hazler et al., 1991; Hoover et al., 1992). However, writers have seldom looked at students' perceptions of bullying and strategies for addressing it. This is significant for several reasons. First, it is important to address young people's perceptions of their worlds. Actions are ultimately dependent not so much on what outsiders see as objective reality, but more on how

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youngsters understand and interpret their universe. No model of treatment will be effective unless it takes this into account. Second, perhaps a tendency exists on the part of adults to underestimate youngsters' knowledge. In looking deeply at their insights regarding ways to deal with bullies, perhaps practitioners can generate clues about both individual counselling and systems approaches to dealing with aggression. Over and above potential treatment benefits, we see discovery of children's views as intrinsically valuable. Via in-depth interviews, we attempted to understand the coping strategies young people chose in dealing with bullying and in determining the perceived efficacy of those choices. In other words, we posed the following formative question: How do young people explain, experience and manage bullying?

Methods

Setting

The investigation was conducted with the cooperation of a parochial (Roman Catholic) school in a Northern-tier state. The school consisted of classes in kindergarten through grade twelve and was selected for logistical reasons; specifically, students in target grades were all present in one building (hereafter called St. Stephens's Prep).

Our impression was that students at St. Stephen's evidenced somewhat lower rates of bullying than did their local, public school counterparts, though these differences in teasing and violence rates appeared quite small. During preparation for the study, school officials resignedly stated that bullying took place in the institution. We were not interested particularly in the rate of bullying within St. Stephen's, so we did not assess the overall frequency of misbehaviour or bullying. However, it is possible that outcome data could suffer from a lack of external validity due to the specialized setting in which they were collected.

Participants

Fifth, sixth and seventh graders (ages 10–13, $n = 6$), half of whom were female, volunteered to participate in interviews. One of the seventh grade participants was female, while the other two were boys. The three sixth grade respondents included two females, whereas Gamliel (the first author conducted all interviews) only interviewed one fifth grader (a girl). Participants were all middle class, European-American children and adolescents. Although not required to provide demographic information, in every sense but that of religion, interviewees reflected the region's population.

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Materials employed: interview and card sort

*Interview***.** Gamliel developed the interview protocol based on adaptations of an existing bullying prevalence survey (Appendix A) (Hoover and Oliver, 1996). The interview addressed perceptions of whether or not (or to what degree) the interviewee had suffered bullying at peers' hands. The interviewer also asked about feelings generated by bullying and recollections of strategies employed to end or militate against its effects. At the end of each session, Gamliel requested that students rank order a set of strategies via the card-sort task described below. Every effort was made to structure the interview as a natural conversation in order to maximize responsiveness. A central aim of the interview and rating sessions was to allow students' individual and collective voices to ring through, such that we could attain their perspectives on bullying-related phenomena – even to the point that no assumption was promulgated that bullying existed at St. Steven's Prep. In terms of qualitative methods, the design can best be described as an ethnography (Wolcott, 1994).

*Coping strategy card sort (CSCS)***.** The card sort task consisted of nine different coping alternatives listed on 3 × 5 cards. All nine strategies were laid out on the table in front of the subject and each alternative was read aloud. The interviewer instructed participants to choose the one strategy that they would implement if bullied. Once interviewees selected a strategy, Gamliel instructed them to continue choosing coping strategies in order from best to worst until the participant selected all coping choices.

Strategies were assigned a value ranging from 1–9, with '1' indicating the 'best' strategy (i.e. the one selected first) and '9' that student's notion of the least useful coping mechanism. Coping strategies that comprised the CSCS were developed based on a list proposed by Hoover and Oliver (1996), which in turn was derived from an analysis of the treatment of bullying in child and adolescent fiction.

Other aspects of procedure

Following receipt of consent/assent forms from students and parents, interviews were scheduled and conducted in a private room at St. Steven's Prep. We identified eight potential interviewees in this manner. Because of a recording failure, only six interviews were audio taped and subsequently analysed. Interviews ranged from 10–30 minutes, with an average duration of about 15 minutes.

Coding qualitative responses

Audio tapes were transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. Gamliel and Daughtry read and re-read the transcripts several times in order to colour code themes and patterns related to participants' coping

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strategies. For example, statements such as 'When I don't say anything, [the bullies] don't confront me' and 'I just ignored [the bully] and didn't talk to him and I just kind of tried to stay away from him' were categorized under the heading avoidance/ignoring. We drew upon memos and/or session notes about what was perceived in the interview while ensuring consistency with other statements and themes that were discussed by participants.

A second reading of the transcripts was undertaken independently by two of the authors. In the second case, comments by respondents were culled for themes other than coping strategies; Imbra and Hoover discussed the outcomes until agreement was reached regarding: (a) accuracy of the portraits and (b) central meanings voiced by participants, then recorded these themes and transmitted them electronically to the other authors. Final discussions were conducted until agreement was reached on the meaning contained in the interviews. Agreement on veracity of portraits was accomplished in the same manner.

Results

Portraits

We developed student portraits in order to set results within the context of individual personalities and behavioural styles. Generalizations are best understood as filtered through the individuals providing data. We altered all names in order to protect participants' identity.

Marcia. A communicative, open, engaging, seventh grader who could be described as short for her age, Marcia was the most verbal of all interviewees. In fact, Gamliel wrote 'hyper-verbal' in his field notes upon talking with her. While all of the children expressed the desire to be heard and understood, this appeared to be particularly important to Marcia; who, leaning forward intently, frequently corrected the interviewer's paraphrases of her answers or clarified them by way of extension. Marcia described several situations in which she comforted other youngsters who had experienced bullying.

Marcia reportedly suffered bullying at the hands of her peers at least four days per week. She voiced a preference for talking through bullying situations, but also expressed guilt and frustration that she sometimes lost her temper and yelled back at kids picking on her. She attributed this to what she called, 'an adrenaline rush' experienced during conflict situations.

*Greg***.** Greg presented as a fairly typical seventh grade boy and in fact described himself this way, using the term 'normal.' Though pressed

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by the interviewer, Greg struggled for words in answering questions about victims' experiences, except to note that victims tended to be either small or 'fat'. According to his field notes, Gamliel was left with the impression that Greg tended to follow others and might encourage or participate in mild bullying on that basis, but not instigate episodes.

Greg reported never having been bullied. He talked little about the consequences of bullying for victims, rather concentrating on appropriate responses to bullying. Greg stated that he would advise victims to ignore teasing and harassment they experienced, but added that he did not see this approach as particularly useful. Greg raised a topic that proved thematic among the boys: namely, that bullying was most often interpretable as horseplay or 'dicking around', in his own words. Yet he seemed to understand that a distinction between horseplay and bullying potentially existed because, when pressed, he guessed that long-term victims probably 'felt bad'. Greg was clear about one aspect of the distinction between bullying and horseplay: Seventh grade boys 'earn' victim-hood, so to speak, via not fighting back when harassed.

Peter. This seventh grader viewed himself, first and foremost, as a member of the most popular clique. Refreshingly honest (Gamliel's field notes), Peter acknowledged bullying on occasion and stated that he did so in order to 'fit in' with his set, a group of boys who overtly rejected less popular children and occasionally engaged in 'put downs'. Peter picked up Greg's theme of horseplay, suggesting that most of what the more vulnerable boys experienced as bullying could best be described as messing around:

[Do kids pick on each other?] Kind of . . . but not . . . I mean, me and my friends just kind of mess around. Like, the first time of the day he'd go up and hit me . . . in a way . . . kinda . . . [Later in the interview]. I'm thinking of a time when I had meant . . . just like joking. [Do you ever feel bad?] Only when they really get hurt. Most of the time they don't.

A clear pattern with Peter was the importance, the centrality of fitting in – he stated that this was true for himself and also felt that victims felt sad because 'they just want to fit in with the popular kids'. Peter noted that one victim he knew 'worked out' his feelings via an interest in drawing, a seeming reflection on the concept of catharsis.

*Jan***.** While not contemporaneously victimized, Jan experienced significant bullying during grade four, two years earlier, at another school. She was the only female who did not report being bullied during the 2000–2001 school year. The interviewer viewed Jan as linguistically gifted, primarily based on her style of expression, both in terms of vocabulary and the structural complexity of her utterances.

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Jan voiced a mix of emotions related to dealing with bullies. She insisted that a calm, rational, verbal approach to bullying episodes was warranted. On the other hand, she admitted past failures dealing with bullies in this manner Later in the interview, Jan bluntly stated that, 'boys bully'.

Bobby. A sixth grade male, Bobby presented as small for his age and physically awkward. Bobby appeared uncomfortable and defensive about student-on-student aggression. The strained quality of his vocalizations suggested to Gamliel a reluctance to reveal too much personal anxiety or pain.

Bobby reported that he suffered frequent physical and verbal attacks from his peers when he was in kindergarten through second grade. Something in Bobby's defensive body language and paralinguistic style caused Gamliel to add the following to his field notes: 'Identified self as bully; I believe he fits in as both bully and victim although the bully is more prevalent at time of interview'. Bobby did not confirm the latter observation, however.

Bobby stated that he had not undergone bullying during the year under investigation, but had participated in the mild bullying of peers. Despite his earlier victimization, he expressed little sympathy for victims, ardently arguing that they should 'stand up for themselves', and that bullying, 'teaches kids to fight back'. Wanting to confirm this position, Gamliel asked again about Bobby's feelings toward victims, thinking that he might express more empathy for their plight. Bobby, however, reiterated his position that victims should stand up for themselves. He expanded his response by suggesting that bullying 'toughens up' weak kids. Bobby also picked up two themes raised by others. First, Bobby noted that victims tend to be passive – the type of students who don't fight back. Second, in agreement with all the other boys, he characterized behaviours that girls identified as bullying as frequently being horseplay, 'Sometimes it's just like playing around, but sometimes it isn't.'

Bobby spoke about the topic of physicality also raised by Greg. Nearly all respondents saw victims as psychologically ineffectual, lacking the ability to assert themselves or to 'fight back' as they often put it. Bobby added that he was only bullied when he was small and neighbourhood boys stopped picking on him when he 'got big'. Gamliel reflected in his field notes that he thought that, at least symbolically, Bobby was projecting this sense of 'smallness' toward victims.

*Cindy***.** Mildly to moderately obese (Gamliel wrote 'chubby' on his field notes), this fifth grade girl exhibited nervousness by giggling and occasionally laughing aloud at seemingly inappropriate times – for example, upon relating sadness or discomfort. Cindy was also visibly shorter than other fifth graders. She proved verbose, sharing

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considerable information while vocalizing at a breathlessly fast pace.

Cindy shared that she bore severe loneliness at school, with few close friends. She reported experiencing bullying 'at least' three times per month and animatedly reported that she felt very bothered by it. The episodes of teasing Cindy related, seemed to be mostly verbal in nature and she did not speak about solutions – she seemed stumped by the question and voiced considerable uncertainty.

Themes

As data were examined, several themes emerged. The original thrust of the investigation involved the coping strategies recommended by children, so these are discussed following a brief explication of the numbers bullied. A second important set of observations has to do with the coping strategies employed and recommended by interviewees, as well as the observed and imagined effects of bullying on victims. Gender issues came to the fore in the discussions. We discuss these under two closely related topic headings, gender issues and horseplay. Other topics evident from the data included a desire for adult intervention and the observation that victims are often the ones to get into trouble with adults.

*The prevalence and nature of bullying***.** Two participants each rated themselves as not having been victimized but having observed others being harassed. One participant reported both suffering bullying and perpetrating peer victimization. Bobby noted that he occasionally bullied another student, though the questions was not put directly to participants. The final participant reportedly neither suffered peer harassment nor had he seen others being picked on.

Two of the three girls reported peer victimization during the 2000–2001 school year, while none of the boys did. As will be discussed, boys spoke of engaging in bully-like behaviour, but did not, strictly speaking, define it as bullying

*Coping strategies***.** Throughout the interviews, Gamliel asked respondents to discuss ways in which they coped with bullying and/or ways in which they perceived classmates coping with harassment. Two strategies, *avoidance or ignoring the bully* and *rational or calm confrontation* emerged as the most commonly employed strategic themes. Students also engaged in what we termed *verbal retaliation* and *cathartic expression*, though these strategies were reported less frequently.

1. Avoidance or ignoring. Most interviewees reporting their own victimization during the 2000–2001 school year chose to ignore or stay away from the bully, a strategy they rated as effective on a short-term basis. Six occurrences were noted of *avoidance/ignoring* (AI) being an

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effective strategy in specific situations, with two AI statements coded as 'reflecting ineffectiveness', and nine responses suggesting that AI neither helped nor exacerbated the bullying situation.

2. Rational and calm confrontation. We coded eight statements as reflecting rational or calm confrontation(s) [during directly-experienced bullying episodes]. Rational or calm confrontation (RCC) was defined as approaching the bully with a non-aggressive demeanour while discussing rational and logical reasons why the bully should stop his or her present behaviour and leave the victim alone. Four respondents voiced the eight statements coded as RCC, Marcia, Jan (who brought up the strategy of 'talking to' the bully five different times), Cindy and Bobby. Three of four students who suggested this strategy during interviews were female. Students expressed mixed feelings about: (a) whether bullies would respond rationally in turn and (b) whether non-assertive victims could work up the psychological wherewithal to confront bullies. Examples of neutral and positive results of *RCC* are provided below:

> *Neutral/RCC*: I'd probably just talk to them and ask them, 'You know, I didn't do anything to you, why did you do this to me?' (Jan).

> *Neutral/NCC*: I just said, 'Please knock it off – you're really hurting my feelings and I could say a lot of things I don't like about you.' . . . Then I said, 'Please knock it off or I'll go tell the teacher or tell my mom to talk to the principal,' or stuff like that (Cindy).

> *Positive/RCC*. I'd probably tell them to talk to that person 'cause that's what works best for me (Marcia).

Overall, student responses to bullying tended to fall into the verbal domain – as did most of the bullying they experienced. While female respondents tended to recommend reasoned discourse – with the bully, with friends to help with feelings, with teachers and parents – boys recommended entering into the spirit of horseplay and 'giving back' the teasing.

3. Verbal retaliation and cathartic activities. Only one female and two males indicated that they would respond to a bully with verbal retaliation or name-calling. Marcia commented that, 'I know this isn't right, but I . . . I say things back to them'. Peter's thoughts subtly echoed the social and literary convention of standing up for one's self: 'I'd probably say stuff right back, just . . . cause I'm not the type of guy who'd just let someone . . . make fun of you'. Other than Marcia's observation that 'I know this isn't right', a seemingly moral compunction, it was impossible to determine whether respondents viewed verbal retaliation as a useful strategy or not.

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Marcia's response to arguing back in the face of bullying and cliquish exclusion proved both subtle and complex. On the one hand, she recommended a rational approach, but admitted that she didn't always follow her own suggestions. Her statements reflected profoundly mixed feelings. She spoke of it feeling good to 'push back' at least metaphorically, but experienced guilt later about doing so:

> Usually I . . . I know this isn't right, but I say things back to them. But I don't physically hit or push them. That's never come into my mind either . . . and then, like, I go home and I feel really bad about what I've done.

We coded *catharsis* when students' statements reflected the 'working through' of emotions. This idea came from the students, themselves, as the strategy of 'talking through' with others was it included on the card sort (see section below). Catharsis is implemented as an indirect way of expressing oneself while retaining personal safety and distance from the bullying event. Marcia, in rapid-fire succession, recommended talking hurt through with sympathetic students, parents, teachers or counsellors. Jan talked her anger and hurt over with her pets. Peter related a strategy that might better be called, 'displacement', at least in terms of traditional psychotherapeutic terminology, in noticing that a frequently-victimized boy buried himself in drawing after being picked on. He remained mute regarding the strategy's effectiveness.

*Bullying's effects on victims***.** Most victims and peers recognized that bullying resulted in 'hurt' feelings. The term 'hurt' was frequently used among participants to describe their own feelings or those that would be expected of a victim. Statements like 'I was confused', 'She just bugged me so much that I was ready to explode', 'I didn't think that there was much that you could do' and 'I wouldn't want to do anything, I think I'd just want to sit around', indicate that many peers and victims suffer confusion, frustration and anger as a result of being bullied. These and other types of statements made by participants indicated that as the bullying became more severe, rage and apathy emerged. Perhaps when a person is bullied repeatedly, he or she will become frustrated and angry, however when their efforts to halt the behaviour remain unsuccessful, apathy sets in.

*Desire for intervention on the part of adults***.** All three girls expressed some reservation regarding the degree to which student-generated strategies in and of themselves could solve problems associated with student-on-student aggression. They seemed to long for straightforward intervention on the part of adults. In some sense, they felt powerless to intervene and wanted the help of adults to interpret social codes, seek solutions and facilitate a safe, tranquil school environment.

*Gender issues***.** Gender issues appeared in two forms. First, they emerged indirectly, via analysis of utterances about other topics. For

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example, more girls than boys described contemporaneous bullying. In addition to the indirect evidence, however, four interviewees raised gender-based issues unequivocally; this was particularly true of seventh grader Marcia and Jan, enrolled in the sixth grade.

Our initial impression was that female respondents, independently of grade level struggled verbally with the complexities of student-on-student relationships. They 'tried out' ideas and groped for words, occasionally expounding at length about their situation at school. Males, in contrast, answered in short bursts – often one or two-word utterances, typically reflecting either a very concrete approach to interpersonal issues or brief, clear statements that they didn't know about or didn't understand [the issue under discussion]. Female subjects spoke much more than did males, employing more than three times as many words to answer essentially the same questions (Female mean = 1,761 words, SD = 518; Male mean = 545, SD = 203). Even with a sample size of only six, this difference was unlikely to have occurred by chance (Independent Groups t, 4 df = 3.79, p = 0.019).

Given that the subjects somehow represented their sexes, girls wrestled aloud more than did the boys with the issues raised by Gamliel during the interviews. This was reflected, as noted above, by females' propensity to see social and verbal solutions to bullying.

All three girls raised gender issues specifically during interviews, as did one of the boys (Peter). Both Marcia and Jan suggested that bullying may be modal in the school and playground relationships between boys and girls. Marcia spoke of boys calling girls names, revealing secret contents of their lockers – especially if the girls refused to help with schoolwork. Jan equated the way a boy was picked as, not only brutal and unfair, but *characteristic* of how boys treat girls:

> Well, I know a few people in the class bully one boy. They kind of treat him like he's a girl. Well, you know, they'll go up to him and kick him for no apparent reason and I've talked to one of them and they said that the only reason why they do it is because this person doesn't fight back. So they treat him very poorly because he doesn't seem to do anything about it.

*Horseplay versus bullying***.** The theme of horseplay is closely related to the gender issues noted above. Often, boys reported participating in horseplay, but did not define this as bullying, If youngsters directed horseplay toward one person consistently, who did not like it, the boys concluded that this could represent bullying. We noted few remarks about strategies for boys who did not enjoy this type of rough-and-tumble, other than the opinion that males received more abuse when they did not fight back. A passive or shy behavioural style was clearly seen as risk factor by interviewees; both boys and girls expressed this perspective.

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*Physicality***.** Related to the horseplay theme above, two of the boys raised the issue of physical appearance and size as playing a role in bullying. Peter mentioned that a boy regularly picked on by the other children was overweight. Bobby, in a discussion of earlier episodes, attributed bullying to size. He was small when he was bullied and metaphorically, at least, now 'stood tall' and so was not picked on, nor would he stand for it.

*The victim might get into trouble***.** Despite the fact that bullying was attributed to a stance of passively 'taking it' on the part of victims, two interviewees noted that, should victims retaliate, they would get into trouble. To the extent that this is accurate, it reflects a clear psychological bind for victims.

Coping strategy card sort results

The rank order of mean responses by males, females and the total group are shown in Table 1. Some slight differences were noted, with females selecting 'Making friends with the bully' as their first choice, while among males this option was tied for third and fourth place. Males selected 'Avoid the bully' as their first choice.

Table 1 *Rank order of potential bullying solutions as a function of sex (Card-Sort Task)*

Potential bullying solution	*Gender (and total rank order)*		
	Females	*Males*	*Total*
Make friends with the bully	1	3.5	1
Avoid the bully	2.5	1	2
Act in ways other kids like (conform)	2.5	3.5	3
Use humour in the situation	4.5	2	4
Get an adult to help	4.5	5	5
Get a bigger/older student to escort	6	7	6.5
Act like you are not afraid	7.5	6	6.5
Fight back verbally	7.5	8	8
Fight back physically	9	9	9

Qualitatively, the mean rank order across genders seemed very similar. This was confirmed via calculation of Spearman's *r* between male and female ranks. Results demonstrated that rankings were very similar across genders, $\rho_{xy} = 0.84$, $p = 0.005$). Peaceful methods such as making friends, avoiding and conforming behavior to cultural standards were ranked highest, while confrontational methods such as fighting back verbally and physically received the lowest mean rankings. Males

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ranked 'Using humour' and 'acting like one is unafraid' slightly higher than did females.

Discussion

Respondents opted for calm, rational approaches to bullying, but, at best, they were neutral about the effectiveness of the strategies they recommended for dealing with it. Feelings of helplessness and the desire to involve adults can be inferred from these data. It is unlikely, however, that young people will involve adults unless they view parents, teachers, administrators and counsellors as potentially helpful; steps must be taken to ensure that students feel empowered to recruit adults and that doing so will not make the situation worse (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001).

In line with Shakeshaft et al.'s conclusions, the experience of bullying and its interpretation appeared to be filtered through the very different cultural lenses of males and females (c.f. Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). Specifically, the girls either received more bullying or viewed behaviours as bullying that boys portrayed as enjoyable horseplay. Two of the three female respondents came very close to defining bullying as 'a boy problem'. In line with past studies, the bullying that females perpetrated on one another was related to social exclusion (Hoover et al., 1992; Olweus, 1993). In the eyes of at least one student, passive boys who receive harassment from their male peers are 'treated like girls'. Certainly these findings deserve much more attention from researchers and practitioners.

Female respondents talked much more about the bullying, about three times as much as the boys in working through the subtleties of interpersonal relationships. They invoked verbal behaviour in recommendations for stopping the bullying (talk to the bully, talk to others) and in dealing with the hurt resulting from peer aggression. In the female culture of this school, discussion and compromise appeared to play a vital role, while among boys, physicality seemed more central. The current sample is too small to draw firm conclusions, but the behaviour of the males and females is reminiscent of findings from research on conflict mediation programs suggesting that while boys need the services of peer mediators because they engage in more conflicts, girls more readily and frequently seek the services of peer and adult mediators (Olsen and Hoover, 1997).

Researchers report that frequently bullied students can name effective strategies for dealing with bullying, but that emotional arousal interferes with their ability to manifest these strategies during the emotional heat of a bullying situation (see Perry et al., 2001, for a review). Much of the descriptions of bullying episodes in the present data match these

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findings. Interviewees reported that bully victims would probably like to 'do something' but that they don't know what to do. Marcia described a scenario where she 'fights back,' even though she believed that discussion is much better – and then felt guilt about the situation later.

Respondents portrayed victims as passive. In fact, as seen by the boys particularly, it could be argued that horseplay only crosses the line into victimization when two factors are present. First, the victim does not wish to engage in the horseplay and second, the victim does not respond or responds passively in the face of such rough-and-tumble behaviour. This deserves increasing attention from educators who might encourage an ethic that young people, who's behavioural style renders them defenseless in the face of bullying, deserve the right to be left alone. These individuals must be offered the social skills to assertively demand their rights to excuse themselves from the rituals of harassment and exclusion in which other children might choose to engage.

Limitations and delimitations

Several factors limit the generalizability of the present data to other student cohorts. The sample was drawn non-randomly from a parochial school in a Northern-tier state, potentially producing a volunteer effect. All interviewees were European-Americans and came from Roman Catholic families.

It is not impossible that social desirability motivated some of the answers and comments offered by students, though no overwhelming reason exists to suggest this. Nonetheless, faced with a relatively unknown adult, students might have emphasized reason and discussion more than they might among themselves. Even the 'getting even' motif that appeared among male respondents might reflect a socially desirable stance in the male culture of this semi-rural community.

Notes

The study is based on the first author's master's thesis in the Department of Counseling, the University of North Dakota, completed under the direction of the third author.

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Appendix A

Interview script

Begin the interview with the following definition of bullying: any kind of verbal injury (like name calling or making fun) or physical injury (like hitting or pushing) that occurs on more than one occasion.
Make sure the participant understands this definition!

1. Do kids at (name of school) ever pick on or bully each other? Could you tell me more about that? What have you seen or heard about?
2. Have you ever been bullied or picked on? [If 'no', go to question #6]
3. Tell me what happened the last time you got bullied or picked on. Who was there? Where did it happen? How were you bullied? What was done to you? How did you feel at the time? How often are you bullied in an average week?
4. Now we come to a very important part of the interview. I would like to know how you act when you feel you are being bullied or picked on. What did you do about it? Did your actions stop the bullying? How is that different or the same compared to what you usually do when you are being bullied? How did you feel afterwards?
5. Would you do that again if you were bullied again? If not, what would you do next time?

[Now continue to question #9]

6. Tell me what happened the last time you saw someone else get bullied. [If the student has not seen another student bullied, nor been bullied, politely end the interview.] Who was there? Where did it happen? How were they bullied? What was done to them? How do you think they felt when they were being bullied?
7. Now we come to a very important part of the interview. I would like to know how you see others act when they are being bullied or picked on. What did they do about it? Did their actions stop the bullying? How is that different or the same compared to what the student usually does when they are bullied? How do you think they felt afterwards?
8. Would you do what that person did if you were bullied? Why or why not? If not, what would you do?
9. Do you think there is some way a child who gets bullied would like to act, but can't? Why don't you do that?
10. If you had a friend who was being bullied, what would you tell them to do? Why?

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