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## **Perception of Bullying in a Rural Independent School District: A Survey of PAL Students**

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**Abstract.** The objective of this study was to explore students' perceptions of bullying in intermediate (fifth and sixth grades) and middle school (seventh and eighth grades) students in a rural school in southern Texas. Analysis of student-led and student-developed surveys provided a description of 271 student responses. The results are consistent with previous research but raise some questions about how students perceive bullying and how they perceive themselves or others as victims, bullies, or witnesses.

**Keywords:** bullying, rural schools, PAL

The word "bullying" has been used since the 1500s to encompass the action between two people, the aggressor or bully, and the victim or target of the bully's actions (Donegan, 2012). The first research conducted on bullying originated about 40 years ago, igniting the confusion over the conceptualization of bullying (Olweus, 1994). This confusion sparked different perceptions and concepts of the act of bullying which Olweus (1994) defines as "repeated exposure to negative actions in which the person being victimized has limited ability to defend themselves" (p.1171). Samilivalli (2010) includes the terms of a subtype of aggressive behavior and "relatively powerless person(s)." Terry (1998) introduced the notion that the power imbalances do not always have to be present in defining bullying. Aalsma and Brown (2008) identify the major differences between bullying and other acts of aggression as being the absence or presence of power imbalances. Regardless of the disagreement among the definitions, bullying has been problematic for more than 40 years (Olweus, 1994) and has caused concerns for students, school faculty and administration, parents, and society as a whole. Students (Isernhagen & Harris, 2004) and school personnel (Thomlison et al., 2008) have identified bullying as a problem and associated it with social status and importance.

The prevalence of this issue in the U.S. culture is widespread and often neglected in schools, yet serious implications remain (Swearer et al., 2010). Studies of the causes of bullying range from the relationship between popularity and bullying (Carvita & Cillessen, 2012) to bullying based on disabilities such as stuttering (Langevin et al., 2012) to the relationship between bullying and attachment styles (Williams & Kennedy, 2012).

### **Forms of Bullying**

Bullying takes on different forms for those who are the victims, the bully, and the bystanders. These include verbal, cyber, physical, and social forms of bullying. Wang et al. (2009) reported that 20.8% of the students were bullied physically, 53.6% verbally, 51.4% socially, and 13.6% cyber or electronically within two months of the study. Physical, verbal, and cyber bullying were more prevalent in boys while relational and cyber bullying were more common in girls (Wang et al., 2009). Wang et al. (2009) also found that when parental support was high, less bullying occurred across these four forms and when one had more friends less bullying took place on all levels except cyber.

### **Effects of Bullying**

Bullying impacts academic achievement influences relationship building, and can produce violence outbursts (Donegan, 2012). Equally important, it can be associated with psychological complications such as depression, suicidal ideations, isolation, rejection, and even low self-esteem (Bolton, Trueman, & Murray, 2008). Being a victim of bullying is not a random event; it is stable across ages, linked with mental health problems and symptoms (including self-harm, violent behavior, and psychotic symptoms and suicide) and has lasting effects (Arseneault et al., 2010). Boys and girls experience suicide attempts and completion after being involved in bullying behaviors after the age eight (Klomek et al., 2009).

### **Prevention**

Because of the serious harmful effects associated with bullying, bullying prevention models have been assessed, and the prevention of bullying has taken a front seat in K-12 schools (Rigby, 2012). Most bullying research studies rely on student self-reports of having been bullied or having bullied other people. Consideration has not been given as to how the children define bullying and the impact their understanding of bullying has on self-reporting. If a student does not understand that he or she is committing an act that is considered bullying, then self-reporting is likely to produce invalid results and is also considered the “Achilles’ heel” in prevention efforts (Cornell et al., 2006). Whether it be the students, parents, or teachers, the confusion in determining if an incident is bullying or teasing (without intent to hurt), the concern is twofold in that one person may deem an act as bullying and another may simply see it as joking among friends (Mishna, 2006). Although some research has stayed away from using the word “bullying” and instead presented the subjects with keywords and phrases that indicate bullying has occurred, the power has still rested with the researcher and the researcher’s definitions of bullying and development of the indicators that a student has bullied or been bullied.

### **The Current Study**

The objective of this study was to explore the impact and perceptions of bullying of students in intermediate (fifth and sixth grades) and middle school (seventh and eighth grades) in a rural middle school. With limited studies on rural bullying, this article seeks to add to the body of empirical research on the topic (Farmer et al., 2011). The current study sought to review bullying from the students perspective. In this way, the study attempts to not only explore the students’ experiences but begins to understand the nuances associated with the students’ construction of the concept of bullying. This study differs from previous studies in that the power throughout the research was shared between the subjects (students) and the researchers. The measurement instrument was created by the students using the students’ definition of bullying and associated concepts.

### **Peer Assistance Leadership**

The survey instrument in this study was created by students in the Peer Assistance & Leadership (PAL) program at a middle school in rural southern Texas. Peer Assistance and Leadership, or PAL, was established in 1980 by Workers Assistance Programs, Inc. (WAP)

(PAL Peer Assistance & Leadership, 1980). This model is nationally recognized and proven as an evidence-based prevention program assisting students in decision-making, resilience, and critical thinking. School districts desiring to implement PAL within their schools are required to contact PAL registers and attend an adult training. The PAL training is designed to teach school administrative personnel the PAL curriculum. Once the administrative personnel has attended the training, students are then trained on the various topics (bullying being one) of the PAL program.

The goal of PAL is to enable students to display their full potential to become leaders within the school and community. These students are selected through an application and interview process as well as teacher recommendations. Additionally, students are encouraged to get involved in their community by volunteering. A selected PAL student will possess qualities such as trustworthiness, self-confidence, dependability, responsibility, leadership and concern for others PAL (Peer Assistance and Leadership, 1980).

The PAL students at the middle school researched and created the measurement instrument with the purpose of examining the perceptions of bullying within the schools that implemented PAL. The students used their knowledge gained on the topic of bullying during the initial implementation of PAL to create a survey to be completed by their peers.

### **Research Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students in grades four through eight, who are associated with the PAL program. More specifically, the central research objectives are:

1. To determine how students define bullying; and,
2. To determine if age plays a role in students' perception of bullying.

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

In previous studies, students who have experienced, witnessed, or admitted to bullying have answered surveys developed from the literature. In this study, PAL students created and administered the survey based on their experiences and those of their peers. During the 2011 – 2012 school year, PALs mentors sent out an anonymous bullying surveys to all seventh and eighth graders. The response rate was 271 valid responses (N=271). The survey consisted of 21 questions.

Additionally, a similar instrument was given to intermediate students (fourth, fifth, and sixth graders) and produced a sample size of (N=32). Because the sample size was so small, the data from that survey was analyzed, but only reported in two areas: how frequently the students witnessed bullying and whether or not the student had been the victim of bullying. Seventy percent of the students who completed the survey at the intermediate school were fourth graders

(n=32), three percent were fifth graders, 22% were sixth graders; 22% were males and 78% were female.

In addition to the surveys, several middle school students were offered the opportunity to respond to a qualitative questionnaire. Five students chose to complete the questionnaire (N=5). The students were allowed to take the questionnaire home and complete it in private and return it. Questionnaires contained no identifying information so that researchers were unable to identify students with their questionnaires.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

As previously stated, the survey was created by PAL students. The survey included questions about prevalence and type of bullying experienced, perpetrated, or witnessed by the students. The validity of the survey was not tested. In attempting to change the power dynamic of the research, it was important to assume that the voice of the students in creating the survey was, in fact, valid.

A small sample was identified for qualitative interviews to achieve triangulation of data. The qualitative instrument included in-depth questions about how each student viewed bullying experiences and how each student felt about those experiences from three perspectives; witness, perpetrator, and victim. Students who completed the qualitative questionnaire were given the opportunity to describe their experiences in their own words and to give his or her own, individual perspective on bullying incidents.

### **Power Dynamic**

According to Dillon (2014), both the researcher and the subjects are influenced by the power dynamic during a research study. Van der Riel and Boettiger (2009) stated that the power dynamic in research is inevitable, particularly in rural communities. Nygreen (2006) suggests that researchers deliberately seek to change the power dynamic by using methodologies that question the power structure, particularly in educational settings.

In this study, the research instrument was developed by the students in the PAL program, thus shifting the power in the study to the subjects. Further, the qualitative questionnaire allowed the subjects to share his/her story from her/his point of view without question or preconceived notions.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Grounded theory was used as the theoretical perspective. The literature does not currently contain a strong theoretical perspective around theory. Because this study sought to leave the power dynamic with the subjects, grounded theory was utilized to allow the subjects' responses, both quantitative and qualitative, to dictate theory rather than testing a particular theory around bullying.

## Results

The researchers examined the anonymous bullying surveys previously conducted by students and found the following results.

### Prevalence of Bullying

The sample population of elementary and intermediate students was asked 21 questions. The aim of this study was to explore student perception of bullying across five grade levels categorized by elementary (fourth to sixth graders) and intermediate (seventh and eighth graders).

**Do you perceive bullying is a problem at your school?** The results from the intermediate campus (n=32) indicated 81% of the students surveyed perceived bullying as a problem (Table 1). When compared to the intermediate population, 19% of the students reported not being bullied during this period (Table 1). When compared to the intermediate sample, only 25% of elementary students reported that bullying was a problem, while 73% of the elementary students indicated that they did not perceive bullying as a problem (Table 1).

**Have you ever been bullied?** When asked, “Have you ever been bullied?” 69% of the elementary students answered yes (Table 1). Only 36% of intermediate students acknowledge being a victim of bullying. Thirty-one percent of the elementary students reported no as compared to 63%, intermediate students (Table 1).

**Have you witnessed others Resource?** When asked, “Have you witnessed someone being bullied? “, 84% of the elementary students responded yes, when compared to intermediate students of whom 36% had witnessed bullying (Table 1). The data is also consistent with the previous question, indicating that 16% of the elementary students and 60% of the intermediate students had not witnessed bullying (Table 1). A phenomenon to be addressed later (Table 1).

Table 1  
*Perception of Bullying*

Grade Level	Yes	No
<i>Do you perceive bullying is a problem at your school?</i>		
Elementary (4-6)	81%	19%
Intermediate (7-8)	25%	73%
<i>Have you ever been bullied?</i>		
Elementary	69%	31%
Intermediate	36%	63%
<i>Have you witnessed others being bullied?</i>		
Elementary	84%	16%

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Intermediate	36%	60%
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### Qualitative Data

As previously stated, five students were given qualitative questionnaires. Students took the questionnaires home and returned them. All five students attended the middle school. The students were asked to discuss times in which each had witnessed bullying, been the victim of bullying, and perpetuated bullying. Additionally, students were asked to describe the bullying problem at their school.

Two students described incidents in which he or she perpetuated bullying but stated that he or she did not believe that what had occurred was a form of bullying. One of the students states "I have trouble controlling my anger, but I do not bully others," and then described a time when he or she became angry and shoved another kid. Similarly, the other subject who described an incident where he or she perpetuated bullying, described it as "kidding around" and stated that the victim "had said some things" that warranted the bullying actions. Again, he or she stated that it only happened "a couple of times" and, therefore, was not bullying.

Only one of the students identified as a victim of bullying. However, all five described a time when they were bullied either physically or verbally. The subjects described incidents in which they were bullied but stated that it only occurred "once or twice" and, therefore, was not bullying. School personnel training of students of the PAL curriculum suggested that bullying was a "repeated act" and therefore, students believe that incidents that occur once or twice were not, in fact, acts of bullying. One of the students stated that the perpetrator was "kidding around and it got out of hand." This subject reported an injury from the incident but did not identify as a victim.

Conversely to the previous two questions, the students interviewed all described incidents in which each had witnessed bullying. All five students identified the incidents witnessed, both physical and verbal, as being instances of bullying. Additionally, all five students stated that bullying was a problem at the middle school and stated that it remained a problem for various reasons including: teachers did not stop the behavior, bullying happens at school functions where supervision is minimal, bullying happens when others are not around, or bullying is not perceived as harmful.

The qualitative data is congruent with the results of the quantitative data and offers an in-depth understanding of the students' perceptions. As was the case in the quantitative analysis, the qualitative data suggests that middle school students do not perceive themselves as having been bullied or as having bullied others but are able to identify instances of bullying among other students and indicate that bullying occurs in the school. Further, the qualitative analysis suggests that the students minimize instances in which they are victims, i.e. "it only happened once or twice" or "he was kidding around, and it got out of hand." Conversely, the students described incidents that each had witnessed and described those incidents as definite evidence of bullying, even when the student had minimized a similar incident if he or she was the victim. One student

stated that "although the bully said he was just kidding, it was clear that he meant to harm the victim." This confusion further supports the notion that middle school students more readily to recognize others as the victims of a bullying incident, but have trouble seeing themselves as victims. The in-depth information suggests that the students tend to place caveats when victimized or in situations where the student victimizes others. For example, the subjects stated that "it just got out of hand" or "I was not bullied because it only happened a couple of times" or "it is okay because we're friends now."

Lastly, all subjects who completed the qualitative interviews saw bullying as a problem at their school. The answer received most often was that the teachers really did not adequately address bullying in the school and sometimes did not stop it when it was happening. Several subjects said the teacher "just sat at her desk" or "I'm not sure if a teacher heard". The data also suggests that the incidents of bullying would occur at school functions when supervision was limited or when "nobody was around to stop it." School functions included sporting events, dances, and other social events where teacher supervision would be limited, or at times when the school relied on parental supervision.

## **Discussion**

### **To Determine How Students, Define Bullying**

A large percentage (63%) of the middle school students said they have never been bullied during this period. This does not correlate with the number of students who say they have seen someone being bullied. This imbalance in the data led the researchers to believe that the middle school students seem to recognize or perceive bullying more when it is done towards someone else, but they tend not to recognize when it happens to them personally. The way in which students defined bullying was based on the perception of observing incidents aimed at other students. Students seemed to be more concerned with others, which could be indicative of the fundamental principles of PAL.

### **To Determine if Age Plays a Role in Students' Perceptions of Bullying**

To address this issue the researchers conducted a correlation to assess the relationships of students perceptions of bullying based on the roles of perpetrator, victim, and witness. The percentages of bullying incidents varied greatly between the intermediate and middle school campuses. This presents a second phenomenon. There appears to be a disparity between the intermediate and middle school students' perceptions of bullying. This presents the researchers with the following question: why does the percentage of bullying incidents at the intermediate campus significantly outweigh the percentage of bullying incidents at the middle school campus? Further research is needed to fully address this question.

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