

EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF  
BULLYING AS PORTRAYED IN THE DOCUMENTARY *BULLY*

by

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## ABSTRACT

Bullying has been an ongoing problem that tends to be ignored or tolerated due to institutions, and people in general, not knowing how to effectively address the issue. Campaigns, counseling, and even tighter school policies have yet to show any effectiveness. To gain a better understanding of bullying a qualitative content study was conducted using the documentary *Bully*. *Bully* provides an insight into real-life experiences in action. This study looks at the effect of bullying as portrayed in the documentary. The research indicates that schools should implement school-wide approaches/programs that encourage and promote effective interventions to reduce and prevent bullying.

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Table 1

### Appendix A: Emergent Themes

Code	Category Description
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4	Impacts of Bullying
5	Victims' Emotions
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a pervasive social problem that is believed to have affected about one-third of students in their lifetime (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013). Moreover, bullying affects individuals regardless of gender, age, and nationality although the highest frequency of bullying occurs during middle school, while one out of four experienced teasing and harassment during the previous year (Cornell, Gregory, Huang & Fan, 2013).

In Europe, about 24 million students each year are subjected to bullying ("Europe," 2013). Out of this population, an average of 1,712 children and young people commit suicide in a given year because they could no longer deal with the torment wrought by bullying ("Europe," 2013). In the United States, 28% of students in grades 6 to 12, and 20% in grades 9 to 12 experienced bullying (Stopbullying.gov, 2014). About 30% of young people admit that they have bullied (Stopbullying.gov, 2014). Roughly 71% of young people say they have witnessed bullying in their schools, 62% have seen bullying two or more times in the past month, while 41% say they see bullying once a week or more (Stopbullying.gov, 2014). To note, bullying is a phenomenon that occurs in most societies around the world (Child Helpline International, 2012). On a global level, 48% of boys and 57% of girls state that they have been bullying victims (Child Helpline International, 2012).

Meanwhile, the adolescent peer group is one of the most enduring and dominant

characteristics of secondary school (Brady, 2004). Students, themselves, construct their peer groups that are in turn, reinforced by administrators and teaching staff. Such peer groups cultivate unique social orders within their respective institutions. In relation to this, actual or perceived membership of any specific group can potentially become an identity label, some of which can be difficult to shed (Brady, 2004). Indeed, these identity labels are determinants of how a student and groups of students are designated to status hierarchies within the school. These status or social hierarchies are defining attributes of a school's overall culture. Moreover, this relative positioning is a crucial determinant of how students are treated by their peers, administrators, and teachers (Brady, 2004). In the event that a student belongs to, or is perceived to, belong to a low status group, said student will likely be rejected by other members of the school community (Brady, 2004). One of the problems in this regard is that designation to a low status as well as accompanying rejection can adversely affect students' engagement with their schools and the process of formal education.

Usually, students belonging to the low status look up to their peers at the top of the social hierarchy and even seek to emulate the characteristics of these more popular students (Brady, 2004). It is not uncommon for low status students to fail to move up the social hierarchy regardless of how, and how much, he or she refashions himself or herself in their image. This is because of the prevalent perception that those belonging to the low level of the social hierarchy are somehow "defective" (Brady, 2004, p. 356). Notably, status hierarchies in schools may be based on socio-economic status, ethnicity, participation in co-curricular activities, membership on school teams, and clothing styles, among many other factors.



It cannot be emphasized enough that since high school education commenced, teens have already been forming cliques and ranking them. This disparity in status is grounded on dominance, or social power, or popularity (Brady, 2004). When a student is designated to a position within that hierarchy by their peers, it is difficult to shake free from that position. In addition to these, cliques are all-pervasive, such that they can be found in the cafeteria, organizations of co-curricular activities, and may even extend to social arrangements outside of school. An example of a student belonging to the low level of social hierarchy in schools is the nerd.

“Nerds” are often the targets of bullies and it appears that this is due to the influence of school culture that encourages the cultivation of crowds or cliques carrying prestigious identities, such as the preppies and the populars (Bishop, Bishop, Gelbwasser, Green, & Zuckerman, 2003; Bishop, Bishop, Bishop, Gelbwasser, Green & Peterson, 2004); Brady, 2004). Indeed, in school environments, it is commonplace for students to be designated to specific groupings by their peers based on the reputations and characteristics they have that fit with the stereotype of that group (Rentzsch, Schutz, & Schroder-Abe, 2011). The label “nerd” refers to one of the least liked groups in school. A nerd is a person who possesses one, or a combination of, the following characteristics: intelligent, ambitious, has good grades, diligent in studying, shy, has few friends, not fashionable, non-athletic, thin, not physically attractive, or has a pronounced physical characteristic such as a prominent nose (Rentzsch et al., 2011). Because they are situated at the bottom hierarchy of the school culture, nerds are commonly treated as social outcasts in school and labeled with social stigma that is equivalent to “having a communicable disease” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 237).

Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault (2014) explain that people who had been bullied when they were young tend to carry the negative effects of bullying until late adulthood. According to Takizawa et al. (2014), those who were bullied as young people continue to carry the scars of this treatment even as they reach the age of 50. For example, bullied individuals continue to manifest poorer health in comparison with their non-bullied peers. Among older people who had been bullied when they were young, incidences of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation are higher than in those who had not experienced bullying (Takizawa et al., 2014). Bullied individuals had patterns of low educational attainment as well as weaker cognitive function in comparison to non-bullied people (Takizawa et al., 2014). Older people who have had experiences with bullying are less able to sustain healthy relationships, romantic or otherwise (Takizawa et al., 2014). In the past, society was more tolerant of bullying among young people based on the belief that this phenomenon is merely a rite of passage (Poon, 2014).

Nevertheless, the urgency of addressing bullying cannot be overstated due to its adverse impacts on both bullies and the bullied, which can scar both for life. Consequently, this study explores the impacts of bullying on both the bully and the bullied. Previous studies have shown that bullying causes adverse effects to entire student bodies (Cornell et al., 2013). Specifically, extant literature indicates that bullying is a chronic stressor which causes traumatic impacts on adolescent development, damages an individual's "self-concept and trust in others, and leads to avoidant behavior and social withdrawal" (Cornell et al., 2013, p. 139). Longitudinal studies show victims of bullying experience emotional problems, eventually becoming afraid for their safety, and faring poorly in terms of academic achievements. They are also more likely to dislike and avoid

school (Cornell et al., 2013; Mian, 2013; Weissbourd & Jones, 2012). Depression and even suicide have also been found to be positively associated with bullying (Zirkel, 2013). At the other end of the spectrum, the bullies themselves also suffer from similar adverse impacts from their bullying behavior, but they appear to be more likely to deal with these negative outcomes by lashing out (Weissbourd & Jones, 2012). A phenomenon that has often been found to be true in the case of bullying is that it is self-perpetuating, as “children are bullied one day and turn around to bully the next” (Weissbourd & Jones, 2012, p. 28). This phenomenon has been attributed to how bullying results in mental health problems in victims, such that bully-victims are considered the most impaired group compared to bullies and victims.

Just as importantly, the phenomenon in which bullying victims become bullies themselves provide insight into how bullying evolves. Apparently, many bullies start off as bullying victims indicating that some sort of reciprocal relationship exists between bullies and their victims, and this eventually lead to the development of the bully-victim. In other words, the path to bully-victim begins with victimization rather than with bullying. In light of the adverse effects of bullying, there has been concerted effort from different stakeholders to identify the most effective interventions in order to halt this cycle of bullying and victimization.

Numerous interventions have been proposed in order to address the problem of bullying in schools. These have included the tightening of school policies, providing counseling for both the bullied and the bully, punitive measures such as expulsion for the bully, and various anti-bullying campaigns (Roberge, 2012; Strohmeier & Noam, 2012). In light of the steady increase in reported incidences of bullying in schools, it is not

unreasonable to believe such interventions have not been effective (Strohmeier & Noam, 2012). There is a need, therefore, to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of bullying in schools and the different factors that encourage it in order to craft truly effective interventions.

Certain researchers assert that school culture is a significant determinant of bullying (Bishop et al., 2003; Bishop et al., 2004; Brady, 2004; Mian, 2013). This suggests that there are certain factors in the school environment that allow this type of attitude to flourish despite the fact that it is not tolerated by society in general. Using content analysis, this study seeks to understand the experience of bullying in schools and the appropriate measures that must be undertaken to eliminate it. The content analysis will be conducted on a documentary directed by Lee Hirsch entitled, *Bully*. The ultimate goal of this study is to make recommendations regarding positive changes in school environments and culture that would discourage bullying.

### **Rationale**

The study of bullying can take multiple forms. Although a multitude of researchers have attempted to address the problem of bullying from a macrocosmic perspective, few have looked at the phenomenon of bullying on a case-by-case basis. In order to understand this phenomenon, it is important to not only look at it from a broad, societal perspective, but also to take a close look at specific examples of bullying in action. The documentary *Bully* provides a careful, close look at a number of case studies of bullying, and provides an opportunity to examine the impact of the school environment on perpetrating this kind of behavior.

Meanwhile, there are volumes of studies in extant literature pertaining to bullying

in schools. Some of these discuss the possible causes of bullying while others pertain to the negative impacts of bullying on students and bystanders (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Cornell et al., 2013; Mian, 2013; Roberge, 2012; Strohmeier & Noam, 2012; Weissbourd & Jones, 2012). Other studies emphasize the importance of school culture in cultivating a climate where bullying is tolerated or ignored rather than effectively addressed (Barnes, Cross, Lester, Hearn, Epstein, & Monks, 2012; Cornell et al., 2013; Petrosino, Guckenburg, DeVoe, & Hanson, 2010). In many schools, students do not even report incidences of bullying except when the bullying results in serious injury; physical threats; property damage; actual physical contact; greater frequency; and, multiple forms of bullying in more than one location (Petrosino et al., 2010).

There are thousands of articles published in peer-reviewed journals on the topic of bullying. Interesting though these articles might be, the message about bullying that they want to convey is fragmented. None of the articles reviewed capture the experience of bullying holistically; therefore, they really cannot provide a clear, cohesive picture of the roles that school culture truly plays in bullying. For these reasons, this study uses the documentary *Bully* in order to understand how bullying occurs in schools and how school culture can possibly encourage or address it. Through the use of qualitative content analysis of this documentary it becomes possible to gain a better grasp about the total phenomenon of bullying, and how different variables intersect to impact a victim. Unlike journal articles, documentaries may bring greater reality to bullying because of the experiences told from the perspectives of victims. Coming from people who actually experienced bullying, there is greater clarity and evidence as compared to simply hearing third-party narratives.

*Bully* is an excellent documentary material to use for this study, as it chronicles the lives of five students living in different states as they deal with bullying almost on a daily basis at their schools. Additionally, it shows the different contexts in which bullying can occur, from both urban and rural areas. The documentary highlights numerous themes which are common to the academic literature on bullying, including (a) the passiveness of spectators to ongoing bullying; (b) the tendency to blame the bullied for his or her experiences; (c) the reactive versus proactive stance of school administrators and teachers against bullying; (d) the usual targets of bullying (nerds and immigrants); (e) the lack of supervision in schools; (f) cyberbullying; (g) the perception of bullying as a rite of passage; and, the emergence of an anti-bullying movement (Hirsch, 2011). Most importantly, *Bully* explores the reasons that certain bullied students use suicide as a means of escape from their tormentors. According to the documentary, this is particularly true for students whose bullying experiences are intense, and those students who are not receiving support to counter the negative effects of bullying.

Through this documentary, it becomes evident that bullying persists primarily because of others who enable this behavior through indifference or not wanting to get involved in the business of others. Although generally people need to maintain their distance in matters that do not concern them, the documentary makes the point that bullying should be exempted because it is a problem that requires individual and group actions. Many students do not want to get involved because they fear that the bullies could turn on them, and they could become the victim of bullying. Alternatively, other children do not care enough for the victims to do anything about the situation. Even worse than these passive spectators are the people who have the ability to stop bullying

but choose to blame the victims instead. This is highly empowering to the bullies while putting the victims in a corner, trapped with nowhere to turn. For some students who find that bullying against them has come to a point that is no longer tolerable, the only recourse they could think of is taking their own lives. Anti-bullying movements often spring up in response to this horrific outcome, particularly among individuals who have victims or those whose loved ones have been subjected to bullying. Many of the aforementioned insights were derived from published sources and thus do not really provide adequate insight into the actual bullying of students. Therefore, this study fills this gap by exploring the documentary *Bully* to gain deeper understanding about the actual experiences of bullied students.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 of this study discusses the phenomenon of bullying, including, its definition, characteristics and impacts, among others. This chapter also presents the underlying rationale for studying bullying through the documentary, *Bully*. The second chapter of this study presents a review of extant literature on bullying, including comprehensive definitions, its characteristics, and published interventions that may be useful in terms of eliminating this phenomenon. The theoretical foundation of this study is also discussed in the literature review. Chapter 3 discusses the method used in this study. Meanwhile, Chapter 4 presents the results of the qualitative content analysis while Chapter 5 discusses the study results and provides recommendations as well as a conclusion to this investigation.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a literature review about concepts and perspectives relevant to bullying in schools. Bullying is considered a pervasive social problem affecting schools and students, as well as often being associated with tragic outcomes such as suicide (Jimerson et al., 2010; Pepler & Craig, 2008; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004). This is considered pervasive because bullying has become part of school culture; meaning, one can expect that in any school environment, there will always be students who are getting bullied in one way or another. This problem can be mild, such as in teasing an individual for being somewhat different than the others, or the problem can be more severe wherein the victim is experiencing marginalization or even physical assault from others.

Different stakeholder groups have been pressuring schools to address the problem of bullying, with many of them responding by means of a broad range of anti-bullying programs (Garandeau, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2014; Jones & Augustine, 2015; Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2015). However, in spite of the different approaches and rates of adoptions of various anti-bullying programs, there does not seem to be any noteworthy decline in the incidence of bullying in schools, and cyberbullying has been on the rise (Borgwald & Theixos, 2013; Carter & Wilson, 2015; Davison & Stein, 2014; Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2010; Korenis & Billick, 2014). This lack of improvement suggests schools are not effective in their efforts to curb bullying. There could be a problem in



implementation, especially in schools where funding issues could interfere with the administration's enthusiasm for solving this issue. This chapter is a review of relevant literature pertaining to bullying in schools.

### **Definition of Bullying**

There is no universally accepted definition of the term bullying; however, a widely-cited and influential definition of bullying is that of Olweus (1993): "a student is being bullied or victimized when he [sic] is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (p. 125). Subsequently, other researchers have expanded upon and modified this definition in order to highlight specific facets of the bullying phenomenon including power imbalance. Other definitions emphasize the various forms that bullying can take (Goldsmid & Howie, 2014). There are three characteristics of bullying as discussed below: repetition, intent to harm, and power inequity.

**Repetition.** The majority of definitions emphasize bullying as repetitive behavior (Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). Doing so distinguishes bullying from single acts of aggression, and to call attention to how bullying not only leads to immediate harm and distress but also threat of future victimization. However, there is no scholarly agreement regarding how many times behavior has to be repeated in order to meet this criterion. Consequently, researchers started promoting the notion that victimization and bullying should be conceived as falling along a continuum (Goldsmid & Howie, 2014). Because of this, research on bullying in schools tends to measure bullying according to combined variables of frequency and different behaviors within a given span of time (Gregor, 2004).

**Intent to harm.** Intent to harm is theoretically significant in defining bullying because it sets bullying apart from accidental, and thus unintended, harm (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Although most definitions of bullying contain terms such as deliberate and intentional, in practice, the concept of intention is problematic (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). This is because it assumes adequate honesty and self-awareness on the part of the bully. However, it is crucial that bullying be distinguished from inadvertent harm, which is why it is necessary to keep this criterion.

**Power inequity.** As mentioned in the introduction chapter of this study, power imbalance is an essential criterion in defining bullying. This is based on the rationale that a person's use of illegitimate power over another differentiates bullying from violence or general aggression (Connell & Farrington, 1996). Here, it has to be noted that power inequity can be physical, psychological, economic, or hierarchical (Connell & Farrington, 1996); however, there are researchers who object to the inclusion of this criterion in the definition of bullying considering that the bullied do not refer to it or acknowledge it.

A subset of power inequity is provocation. Bullying has been classified as a subset of aggressive behavior known as proactive aggression, which refers to the use of unprovoked aversive means for the end goal of influencing or coercing another individual (Griffin & Gross, 2004). Importantly, there have been researchers who object to the inclusion of provocation whether it is applied to the bully or an outsider (Parada, 2006). Indeed, there have been contentions that including provocation as criterion creates a culture in which the victim is blamed such that the bullying becomes justified if provoked (Parada, 2006). This criterion is based on notions that certain victims also exhibited aggressive behavior, or had been involved in bullying others, such that they may have

provoked their own bullying. Nevertheless, due to lack of evidence about the reciprocity of bullying, the validity of provocation as criterion is still being debated.

### **Prevalence of Bullying**

In spite of a remarkable increase in public awareness and anti-bullying legislation in the United States, bullying remains prevalent and is one of the most urgent issues faced by American youth (Luxenberg, Limber, & Olweus, 2013). Bullying is experienced by people regardless of their ethnicity, gender, grade, and socioeconomic status, regardless of whether they reside in urban, suburban, or rural areas (Luxenberg et al., 2013). Notably, bullying could be such a painful experience that its effects are felt long after the individual has reached adulthood. Currently, the best option that schools have is to use evidence-based prevention programs (Juhnke, Juhnke, Curtis, Thompson, Coll, Yu, & Mullett, 2013; Ross & Nelson, 2014), yet the problem of bullying persists. The following subsections discuss the prevalence of bullying in schools in the country.

**Percentage being bullied.** In 2013, about 15% of students in the United States reported being bullied while 6% reported bullying others (Luxenberg et al., 2013). Notably, the percentage of students reporting being bullied steadily decreases with increasing grade level. For instance, whereas 23% of third graders report having been bullied twice a month, by the time they reach seventh grade, this would have decreased to 15%. By 12<sup>th</sup> grade, this would have further decreased to 8% (Luxenberg et al., 2013). At the other end of the spectrum, the percentage of students who report bullying others “is more stable over grade levels, remaining between 5 and 6 percent between third and twelfth grade” (Luxenberg et al., 2013, p. 5). These numbers suggest that there is a strong relationship between age or grade level and bullying victimization.

Moreover, there seems to be a strong, positive association between age and bullying victimization for both girls and boys (Luxenberg et al., 2013). For example, there are more girls in the third, fourth, fifth, and eighth grades who tend to bully others compared to boys (Luxenberg et al., 2013). Moreover, almost one-third of high school boys who are bullied report that they also bully others (Luxenberg et al., 2013). This is twice the number for elementary and middle school boys. Meanwhile, 13% of girls are both bullied and bully, with this figure more or less stable across all grade levels. While boys tend to bully other boys, girls tend to be bullied by both boys and girls (Luxenberg et al., 2013). Among bullied girls, 48% are bullied by both boys and girls, 32% by girls only, and 20% by boys only (Luxenberg et al., 2013). Among bullied boys, 40% are bullied by both boys and girls while 50% are bullied by boys only, and 10% by girls only (Luxenberg et al., 2013).

**Types of bullying.** There are four general types of bullying: physical, verbal, social exclusion, and cyberbullying (Lehman, 2015). Physical bullying is manifested through hitting, kicking, pinching, spitting, pushing, tripping, taking or breaking the victim's things, and making rude gestures, among others. Verbal bullying refers to either spoken or written forms of bullying, including name calling, inappropriate sexual comments, abusive language, and threatening to cause harm. Social bullying involves harming relationships or another person's reputation (Pabian & Vandebosch, 2016); therefore, it includes intentionally excluding someone from activities; persuading other people not to be friends with the victim; spreading false rumors; and, shaming or embarrassing the victim in public. Cyberbullying is perpetrated through the use of information or electronic technology, including mobile devices, computers, and social

media through text messages, chat, and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter (Carter & Wilson, 2015).

Verbal bullying is the most common form of bullying for both boys and girls (Luxenberg et al., 2013). About 16% of both girls and boys get verbally bullied at least two times a month (Luxenberg et al., 2013). The next most common form of bullying is spreading of rumors, with the occurrence slightly different between the sexes. Specifically, about 15% of the girls are victimized by rumor mongering compared to 11% of the boys (Luxenberg et al., 2013). In terms of physical bullying, 8% of boys are physically bullied compared to 5% of girls (Luxenberg et al., 2013).

Whereas there have been reports that cyberbullying has exponentially increased in recent years, the truth is that its percentage is not as high as verbal bullying. In fact, cyberbullying is the least commonly reported form of bullying for boys at 4%, and one of the lowest for girls at 6% (Luxenberg et al., 2013). It appears that media reports about the prevalence of cyberbullying have inflated the actual numbers; however, the problem of cyberbullying is just as pressing as traditional bullying especially because the outcomes could be just as harmful (Tanrikulu, 2014). Alternatively, cyberbullying tends to overlap with other types of bullying such as verbal or social exclusion bullying, which are possible reasons why it appears to be less commonly reported (Carter & Wilson, 2015). Most students are bullied in multiple ways; only a small number of bullied students (15.8%) are bullied in a single way (Luxenberg et al., 2013). Of those who had been bullied in a single manner only, the type of bullying had been verbal in nature (56% ), while 13.2% are socially excluded and 8.5% are bullied through the spreading of rumors (Luxenberg et al., 2013). The rest of the bullying types do not occur in isolation,

including cyberbullying. Only 1.7% of students who are bullied in a single way are cyberbullied (Luxenberg et al., 2013).

### **Impacts of Bullying**

Bullying impacts victims in many ways, especially because bullying is repetitive. For instance, academic problems have been shown to plague victims of bullying, manifested through truancy and school dropout (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Cornell et al., 2013; Mian, 2013; Weissbourd & Jones, 2012). Additionally, there could be ensuing adjustment problems that include symptoms of depression, feelings of rejection, social withdrawal, loneliness, negative self-concept, helplessness, and a sense that he or she deserves to be bullied (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Cornell et al., 2013). Moreover, physical and psychological health problems have been associated with bullying (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013). Physical impacts of bullying include outright injuries, as well as changes in sleep and eating patterns (Hemphill, Tollit, & Herrenkohl, 2014; Nordahl, Beran, & Dittrick, 2013). Psychological impacts include depression and anxiety, loss of interest in activities victims used to enjoy, decreased academic achievement, cutting class or dropping out, and even suicide (Hemphill et al., 2014; Nordahl et al., 2013). In addition to these poor outcomes, adults who had been bullied have tendencies to rear children who are also aggressive, suggesting that bullying could be a part of a cycle of violence.

Just as bullied students suffered various long-term effects, different negative outcomes have been observed among bullies. These include, but are not limited to: loss of confidence, academic difficulties, issues pertaining to emotional regulation, externalizing problems, and inadequate coping skills (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Weissbourd &

Jones, 2012). In addition to this, “social supports of bullies can be impacted, as they often have a difficult time maintaining interpersonal relationships, experience peer rejection” and tend to associate with “antisocial peer groups” (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013, p. 527). It is important to note that aggression is consistent over time for certain people, indicating that children who bully may continue with their hostile behaviors into adulthood. Just as importantly, aggressive adults have a tendency to perpetrate domestic violence, workplace harassment, and even illegal activities (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013).

**Bystanders.** Bullying is often, but not always, a group phenomenon in which a variety of players contribute a number of roles, pressures, and influences, either intentionally or unintentionally (O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). In the context of bullying, some researchers have emphasized the important roles that bystanders have in diffusing a bullying incident (Rock & Baird, 2012; Evans & Smokowski, 2015; Palmer, Rutland & Cameron, 2015). Bystanders have the potential to play pivotal roles in bullying incidents. There are some who contribute to the bullying, and there are those who prefer to keep out of it. There are also bystanders who play the role of interveners who comfort and come to the defense of the bullied (Evans & Smokowski, 2015; Palmer et al., 2015; Rock & Baird, 2012).

There have been researchers who investigated how certain children are able to successfully evade bullying situations by adopting a more prosocial approach in their engagement with other people. According to Eisenberg, Wentzel, and Harris (1998), young people who effectively control their emotions tend to be more sympathetic and prosocial. Using the social-information processing model, Nelson and Crick (1999) sought to understand the underlying mechanisms of prosocial behavior. Based on their

study results, Nelson and Crick (1999) explain that social-cognitive patterns support a prosocial nature. Therefore, children who have this characteristic are most likely to give others the benefit of the doubt, establish goals that facilitate the attainment and maintenance of positive relationships, and respond to provocation according to high moral standards. Nelson and Crick (1999) also note that prosocial children do not become stressed when provoked by their peers, thereby suggesting that emotion regulation is a determinant of prosocial behavior.

### **Bullying Interventions**

Because bullying generates profound adverse effects on both the bullies and the bullied, educators and researchers are in agreement that it is crucial that an effective intervention be identified (Eslea & Smith, 1998; Glina, 2015). Glina (2015) notes that there are two commonalities in bullying interventions. First, the majority of interventions acknowledge the importance of school-wide recognition about the severity of bullying. Second, most interventions embrace the whole-school or school-wide perspective through which “firm and explicit antibullying policy defines bullying, as well as its component parts and participants, and unilaterally delivers possible strategies for resolving it” (Glina, 2015, p. 2). Nevertheless, there are several interventions that stand out as being more effective compared to the rest, including the Olweus Anti-Bullying Program (OABP), the DFE Sheffield Project, Think First, and Bully Proofing Your School (BPYS) ( Ahmad, Whitney, & Smith, 1991; Olweus, 1993; Smith, Ananiadou & Cowie, 2003). The most-discussed in literature are the OABP and the BYPS.

**OABP.** The OABP was developed in order to: (a) reduce present bullying problems involving students in schools; (b) prevent the emergence of new bullying



problems; and, (c) enhance peer relations within the academic institution (Olweus, 1993; Olweus & Limber, 1999). In order to achieve these objectives, schools oftentimes have to restructure their environment for the purpose of reducing opportunities and rewards for bullying as well as cultivate a sense of community for the school body, including educators (Olweus, 1993, Olweus, 2007). The OABP is a problem-solving approach grounded upon founding principles. These are for adults in the school to (a) demonstrate warmth and sincere interest in the students; (b) clearly define unacceptable behavior; (c) use consistent, non-physical and non-hostile sanctions when rules are violated; and, (d) serve as positive role models while maintaining authority at the same time (Olweus, 1993; Olweus, 2007).

The OABP seeks to strengthen peer relations and foster a school environment that is safe and conducive to learning, through the heightening of school-wide awareness of bullying. This model entails regular discussions pertaining to anti-bullying rules as well as alternative activities that engage students. The long-term agenda of OABP is to change student attitudes and perceptions regarding bullying. The OABP was developed through a pilot study in Norway. After two years of implementation, a 50% reduction in bullying ensued (Olweus, 1993; Olweus, 2007).

**BPYS.** The BPYS is also a whole-school intervention that seeks to develop and reinforce bystanders' identities, or the caring majority, in order to positively impact the school climate (Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, Short-Camilli, & Seifert, 2004; Menard & Grotper, 2014). Bystanders, through their actions and influence, determine the operating environment, encouraging and supporting victims such that the power of the bullies is diffused. The BPYS program encompasses teacher training as well as lesson

plans on intervention. It is an entire curriculum, comprised of five lessons, that not only establishes terminology for consistency but also teaches skills and strategies so that victimization is avoided. However, a criticism against the intervention is that it imposes significant responsibility on bystanders and seemingly assumes that they are not affected by the bullying that they are witnessing. It is important to note that in spite of the evidenced effectiveness of a given intervention within specific contexts, there is no guarantee that said interventions are successful for every type of bullying circumstance (Olweus, 1993).

### **Why Bullying Persists**

Based on many study results, it may be discerned that bullying, particularly in middle schools, continue to persist in spite of interventions that such schools adopt (Essex, 2011; Lickona, 2016). This means to say that many schools' attempts to address bullying have been accomplishing little. The following are possible reasons that explain the persistence of bullying in schools.

**Comprehensive Programs.** Comprehensive programs to significantly curb bullying are lacking in most schools. Comprehensive programs against bullying can include daily reminders concerning behaviors that are considered unacceptable; staff intervention in reported cases of violence; identification of bullies and studying of their backgrounds to understand why they engage in disruptive behaviors; seminars given to students so that they will know how to react against bullies and what they should do in case they become victims of bullies; and meetings with school officials and faculty, community members, and teachers to discuss the merits of their programs including successes and failures (Nauert, 2016). These efforts should also be ongoing so that it

becomes clear to everyone that bullying is not going to be set aside and allowed to disrupt and harm the school system. Unfortunately, the cost of implementing comprehensive programs limits the number of schools that can participate. Usually, what schools have is bandage solutions that only address particular instances of bullying but do not go deeper into the problem (Nauert, 2016). Schools require a program that integrates anti-bullying initiatives in all aspects of the environment so that students know that their attitudes toward each other is monitored and those who violate the rules could be severely punished. But this kind of program can also face legal hurdles, thus, it requires the input of legal professionals and the participation of parents, the school board, and the community as a whole (Nauert, 2016). Anti-bullying programs cannot merely focus on problem students because everyone has the chance to become a victim, bystander, or bully themselves. When all of the students are empowered to stop bullying, they could do something to interfere whenever an individual is being picked on by others.

**Commitment.** Commitment is the second factor that is lacking in order for anti-bullying campaigns to succeed (Nauert, 2016). As mentioned, the community is also required to participate in anti-bullying efforts because talks about bullying, for instance, should also take place in community organizations. This can only happen when there is commitment from community leaders to participate fully and consistently. Without this commitment, participation could be minimal, random, or sporadic. What children will learn from the school is not reinforced at the community level.

Parents, too, have to be committed to anti-bullying programs (Abdirahman, Fleming, & Jacobsen, 2013; Nordahl, Poole, Stanton, Walden, & Beran, 2008; Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2008). This includes accepting the possibility that their

children are, indeed, committing acts of bullying. It can be difficult to make children adhere to rules if their parents are either non-cooperative and non-participative, or disbelieving of the fact that their children are involved in this type of behavior (Georgiou, 2008). According to the Parent Involvement model of bullying, encouraging parents to join meetings and trainings, providing information to parents and developing parent-teacher conferences reduce bullying at schools (Kolbert, Schultz, & Crothers, 2014). School administrators need to adopt programs featuring parental involvement so that parents and extended family members become knowledgeable about child development (Kolbert et al., 2014). These parental involvement approaches: (a) require parents to establish home environments that support student learning; (b) teach parents about the short- and long-term impacts of bullying; (c) impart knowledge about indicators that their son or daughter could be bullying or is being victimized; and, (d) provide insight about strategies to use when talking with their child about potential victimization or perpetration (Kolbert et al., 2014).

Most importantly, students as a whole should be committed to ending bullying in the schools. It is a reality in schools that there are those groups that are considered popular. If these groups are enlisted by school authorities to embrace anti-bullying campaigns, there is a possibility of reducing bullying by at least 30% (Camera, 2016). This is because popular students hold influence with the rest of the student population. However, the school should also ensure that these individuals are not the ones perpetuating bullying no matter how subtle or mild in form.

### ***Bully Documentary***

*Bully* chronicles the experiences of three teen-aged students who live in different

parts of the United States as they endeavor to deal with bullying in school. In Oklahoma, the audience meets Kelby Johnson, a former star athlete yet down-to-earth young person who becomes a pariah overnight after coming out as a lesbian. Kelby has a strong support network in the form of her best friends and girlfriend, but she constantly struggles with feelings of inferiority and the fear that she will forever be an outcast. Consequently, she attempted to commit suicide three times.

In Mississippi, the documentary brings the audience to Ja'Meya Jackson, a young girl confined in juvenile detention after she pulled out a loaded gun on a bus full of students. As Ja'Meya told her mother, she did not intend to hurt anyone – all she wanted was to scare her tormentors who bullied her every single day for months while nobody took action in order to protect her. Although Ja'Meya did not fire the gun, her life totally changed as a result of her detention.

In Iowa, the audience meets Alex Libby, a socially awkward teen in middle school who was born with a slight case of Asperger's Syndrome (The Bully Project, 2011). Alex is bullied because of his physical appearance and is called "fish-face" (The Bully Project, 2011). Alex appears to be a ticking bomb as he bottles up his rage towards his bullies, coldly saying that "sometimes I want to become the bully" (The Bully Project, 2011). The bullying against Alex on his school bus escalates to such proportions that Hirsch intervenes and shows footage of Alex being physically attacked to his parents and school administrators.

The stories of two other young people are depicted through narratives by their parents, as they had committed suicide when they could no longer take the bullying (The Bully Project, 2011). *Bully's* opening scene is a narrative by David Long, father of the

late Tyler who hung himself at 17 years old when he could no longer tolerate the bullying because of his weak appearance. The audience also hears from his mother, Tina, who continues to grieve for the loss of her son. The Longs are resolved to campaign against bullying and look for solutions. Lastly, Kirk and Laura Smalley are the parents of the late Ty who shot himself in the head with a shotgun at the tender age of 11 years old (Hirsch, 2011). Earlier that day, Ty had finally stood up for himself against his bully after months of torment but got suspended for fighting in school. The Smalleys established an organization named “Stand for the Silent” to encourage people to speak out for bullied young people.

*Bully* does not contain interviews with psychologists or other experts. It is a simple documentary that shows real people in real-life bullying situations. The parents of Alex, Ja'Meya and Kelby are interviewed, with the three aforementioned children also being shown at home where they seem to be safe from bullying. It is at school where they are shown to be bullied. It appears as if the message of *Bully* is targeting schools and their accountability for non-management or non-response to bullying. Notably, a number of theories have been presented in literature in order to explain the phenomenon of bullying as well as to underpin rationales for specific intervention designs.

### **Theoretical Background**

Numerous researchers and scholars use the social-ecological theory in order to explain the phenomenon of bullying (Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Kolbert et al., 2014; Rose, Espelage, Monda-Amaya, Shogren, & Aragon, 2015; Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Based on the message being conveyed by *Bully*, this study also uses social-ecological theory because of its emphasis on risk and protective factors as well as its general

approach to social problems such as bullying.

The social-ecological framework holds that children belong to a complex network of interrelated systems (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Certain behaviors, such as bullying, are the results of the interactions of different variables within an individual's environments, in ways that reciprocally impact each other (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). From this perspective, teachers, peers, and parents can potentially influence the behavior of a child. The important thing to note about this model is that no single person or environmental context is attributed as causative of bullying. Instead, people and contexts can potentially combine so that they contribute to the development of problematic behavior.

Moreover, social-ecological systems theory is a useful framework for the examination of risk and protective factors for bullying in school (Hong & Garbarino, 2012). Previous studies have shown that it is crucial that an understanding be gained regarding the actions and attitudes of family, peers, teachers, and community, as well as cultural characteristics that encourage or discourage bullying behavior in school (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Scholars and researchers have emphasized the significance of assessing the risk and protective factors associated with bullying beyond the individual level considering that evidence exists pointing to environmental factors as having a large impact on bullying in school (Hong & Garbarino, 2012).

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) social ecological systems (ES) theory, bullying is an ecological phenomenon that continues to persist due to the complex intersection of inter- and intra-individual factors. Specifically, Bronfenbrenner (1977) explains that there are four system levels impacting individual behaviors: the micro-

system (direct setting); meso-system (associations between two or more micro-systems); exo-system (does not directly involve individuals but influences the micro-system and by extension the individuals); and, macro-system (broader culture and society that affects all of the system levels such that it is manifested in the individual's consciousness). Based on the social ecological systems theory, there are risk and protective factors associated with bullying at each of the four levels.

According to Bronfenbrenner (2005), the micro-system is a child's immediate environment in which they are in direct contact, and which encompasses the roles and interpersonal relations in settings such as the home, school, or immediate community. As mentioned earlier, the meso-system encompasses the interrelations between two or more microsystems. Examples of these are the interrelations between home and school. On the other hand, the exo-system encompasses environments that do not directly include a developing child, but could still impact that child, such as a parent's work-life (Gould, 2011). The macro-system encompasses the underlying beliefs and ideologies of a culture, subculture, or society (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The macro-system, to a large extent, determines how a child is socialized and this, in turn, influences the child's behaviors and attitudes towards bullying (Gould, 2011). As noted, young people are affected by both protective and risk factors at each of the four levels.

### **Protective and Risk Factors**

Although Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) social ecological framework implies that factors found in the meso-system level can impact young people's involvement in bullying, there is a paucity of research exploring such influences. Nevertheless, the following are the protective and risk factors related to bullying experienced by students in



schools.

**Individual level.** Characteristics at the individual level, such as sexual orientation, have been historically recognized as salient risk and protective factors. Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, and Austin (2010) explain that sex is a consistent major determinant of bullying in school. Indeed, gay males, lesbians, and bisexual females tend to be at higher risk of victimization compared to heterosexual males and females because of sexual orientation and gender expression (Berlan et al., 2010). Adolescent high school students are the most likely perpetrators of homophobic bullying compared to girls. Along the same lines, teen-aged boys commonly engage in sexual prejudice and biased language and are less likely to befriend a sexual minority student (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). At the other end of the spectrum, teen-aged girls tend to be among the first to demonstrate compassion for bullying victims in general (Blosnich, 2007). These prejudices result from the youths having misconceptions about minorities, including those belonging to the LGBT community. This happens because they lack proper education, exposure, or even guidance not only from school but even in their families. It is possible that their values are impacted by what they observe or hear in their home environments.

Nerds and geeks are individual characteristics that pose higher risks for bullying-related victimization (Bishop et al., 2004). Usually, students who are good in sports, outgoing, funny, or attractive are the popular ones in middle school (Bishop et al., 2004). At the other end of the spectrum, “being a nerd is like having a communicable disease” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 237). Students do not like hanging out with nerds because doing so sends a signal that they are also nerds. Hence, nerds find it difficult to make friends

and often lose old friends, thereby constraining their abilities to develop social skills that can help them get out of their predicament.

More often than not, nerds are classified as such for looking physically different from their peers as well as for looking unattractive but having good grades (Bishop et al., 2004). For many bullies, the bullying of nerds is particularly appealing due to the non-response of the bullied nerd (Bishop et al., 2004). To maximize the humiliation, submissive male outcasts such as nerds are usually harassed in presence of other students. It is not uncommon for friends of nerds to sometimes join in the harassment in a joking manner, in efforts to escape their own outcast identity (Bishop et al., 2004).

**Microsystem level.** Bronfenbrenner (1977) states that the micro-system is an individual's immediate environment, such as a home or school, in which direct manipulation and face-to-face communication occurs. A young person's micro-system embodies a social network of interpersonal relationships involving engagements with people with whom he or she has a relationship, are influential in his or her life, and who, in turn, are influenced by the youth (Muuss, 2006). The principal micro-systems are family, peers, and school. Several researchers have already shown immediate risks and protective factors for bullying occur within peers and school micro-systems. This means that bullying is most likely to happen within the school or within a person's circle of acquaintances. Protective elements would include the individual's family, friends, and the school environment where there are policies meant to discourage and punish bullies.

**Mesosystem Level.** Meso-systems represent relationships between microsystems indirectly influencing students such as parental involvement in education (Ayers, Wagaman, Geiger, Bermudez-Parsai & Hedberg, 2012). Not only do bullies and the

bullied have individual characteristics predisposing them to bullying and victimization, respectively, but peers, families, teachers, and schools also contribute to bullying behaviors and environments. At the mesosystem level, having peers who reject dissimilarities among classmates increases the probability of a student bullying (Ayers et al., 2012). Moreover, inadequate parental involvement in a student's life has been linked to aggressive behavior manifested through bullying (Olweus, 1997). Teachers and school administrators may unknowingly encourage bullying behavior by being insensitive or indifferent to reports of bullying (Ayers et al., 2012).

**Peers.** For young people, membership in a peer group is highly important (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). Numerous studies show that bullying is often perpetrated by peers, ranging from verbal harassment to physical violence (Eisenberg, Gower, McMorris, & Bucchianeri, 2015; Mann, Kristjansson, Sigfusdottir, & Smith, 2015; Sokol, Bussey, & Rapee, 2015; Turner, Finkelhor, Shattuck, Hamby, & Mitchell, 2015). This does not mean that bullying is perpetrated overtly all the time. There are times when bullying is mild or through innuendo. This can be delivered by the more influential members of the group to the least popular members of the group. Moreover, studies on the impacts of peer group negativity indicate that even if anti-social youth represent only a minority of a peer group, they can still change the climate of behavior in a negative way (Dishion, McCord & Poulin, 1999). A social climate defined by an aggressive peer group increases the incidence of bullying (Poteat & Espelage, 2005).

**School.** Bullying has been associated with school climate and culture (Bishop et al., 2004; Brady, 2004). According to researchers, students belonging to the lower level of the school's social order are prone to bullying and peer victimization (Bishop et al.,

2004; Brady, 2004). As mentioned earlier, nerds and geeks are particularly vulnerable to bullying especially in schools wherein the culture is defined by a strong social hierarchy (Bishop et al., 2004; Rentzsch, Schröder-Abé, & Schütz, 2013). These individuals are also vulnerable to bullying especially when the schools lack strong policies against bullies. School authorities that are seen as lackluster or indifferent toward bullying incidents would indirectly perpetrate this problem because bullies know that they can get away with this type of behavior. Victims would also be afraid to report to authorities for fear of making the bullying worsen and knowing that school authorities lack teeth in curbing bullying.

**Exosystem level.** Mass media and community environment are two exosystems that are salient to bullying in school. Notably, specific community characteristics such as poverty may or may not directly impact the individual, but can affect the microsystem, such as school environment. Schools and peers are situated within the context of a broader community. Therefore, peer relations and school climate may result from the beliefs, norms, and attitudes within a given community (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009).

According to some studies, communities with high poverty rates tend to have higher incidences of bullying because bullying is an accepted norm of behavior (Kosciw et al., 2009). Moreover, poor, rural communities where there is low educational attainment among adults have higher incidences of bullying (Moore & Ovadia, 2006; Ohlander, Batalova, & Treas, 2005). This is because the adults themselves do not take concrete steps to prevent bullying, and they may even be the ones to perpetrate violence at home. In turn, children from abusive homes can carry the same attitude outside of their homes. Aside from these, exposure to violence through mass media can also influence

bullying behavior (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006).

**Macrosystem level.** Society itself, in which all of the other systems are embedded, can influence bullying behavior. Specifically, laws and policies pertaining to bullying, if effective, can lead to the cultivation of schools where children can safely learn and thrive (Hong & Garbarino, 2012).

### **Research Questions**

In light of the preceding discussions on bullying as well as the overview about the documentary *Bully*, this study seeks to answer these research questions:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of bullying as portrayed in *Bully*?

RQ2: How are those who are bullied impacted as represented in *Bully*?

RQ3: What role does the school culture play in promoting bullying as represented in *Bully*?

In seeking to answer these research questions the intent is to establish findings, which will in turn conclude with recommendations to effectively address bullying.

### **Summary**

The chapter presents a review of extant literature on bullying in schools, including comprehensive definitions, its characteristics, and published interventions. Three research questions are developed by observations of mentioned research and viewing of *Bully*. The theoretical foundation, including protective and risk factors of this study is also discussed.

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

This study used thematic content analysis to analyze the subject of the documentary *Bully*. Content analysis as a research method may be defined as a “procedure of applying scientific method to documentary evidences lying in a particular document” (Mangal & Mangal, 2013, p. 220). This method seeks to demonstrate the underlying meanings of “written or visual sources . . . by systematically allocating their content to pre-determined, detailed categories” so that outcomes may either be quantified or qualified (Payne & Payne, 2004, p. 124). One of the advantages of content analysis is that it is an unobtrusive method of inquiry that avoids imposing upon people for interviews. In the sensitive context of bullying, this represents a special advantage because it avoids adding to the stigma of already vulnerable and at-risk youth.

With qualitative content analysis, the primary goal of the researcher is to gain a deep understanding about subjective contents, including the interests, attitudes, habits, temperaments and values of those included (Mangal & Mangal, 2013). This study used qualitative content analysis in order to obtain in-depth insights into the phenomenon being investigated through a case study of *Bully*.

#### **Methods of Analysis**

The documentary *Bully* was viewed at least three times before data collection was undertaken. The current study used the deductive content analysis approach. With this

approach, the typical purpose of the researcher is to retest existing data according to a new context (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). This entails the testing of categories, models, or research questions. For this particular study on bullying, the testing of research questions was undertaken. The most crucial procedures in the deductive content analysis are the development of a categorization matrix and the coding to data based on these categories (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Moreover, in deductive content analysis, the investigator has the choice of using a structured or unconstrained matrix of analysis, depending on the aim of the study. With a deductive content analysis, a categorization matrix has to be constructed in order to organize concepts or themes extracted from the data. The structured matrix of analysis is a type of categorization matrix. Through the structured matrix of analysis, the researcher can be selective about the aspects of data that will be analyzed, picking out only data that fit the categorization frame or those that do not. The current study made use of a structured matrix of analysis.

It is also important to mention that deductive content analysis is generally based on earlier work such as theories, models, mind maps and literature reviews (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). For this study, the content analysis was based on a viewing of the documentary and then applying concepts already identified in the literature review section of the paper, to see if such concepts occur in a different context. Once a categorization matrix was developed from this current literature, all data were then reviewed for content and then coded for “correspondence with or exemplification of the identified categories” (Elo & Kyngas, 2008, p. 111). Because the matrix is structured, only aspects that fit within the matrix of analysis were selected from the data. In doing this, it became possible to test the research questions for this study. In terms of coding

and categorizations, this study used a list of possible themes, as seen in Appendix A.

### **Data Analysis**

In addition to deductive content analysis, two types of data analysis methods were used for content analysis: textual and thematic. In order to perform thematic analysis, the documentary was viewed in order to analyze themes revolving around the phenomenon being investigated (Mangal & Mangal, 2013). By undertaking thematic analysis, the researcher seeks to identify themes that may emerge as a result of words spoken or images shown on the documentary. Through thematic analysis, a researcher gains the chance to identify other meanings, contexts, and interpretations of the documentary contents (Mangal & Mangal, 2013).

In order to undertake a thorough thematic analysis, *Bully* was viewed several times at different days. As Berelson (1952) explains, it is of utmost importance that the “classification into a single set of categories of similar samples of communication content taken at different times” in order to provide “a concise description of content trends, in terms of relative frequencies of occurrence” (p. 29). Hence, for this particular study, the creation of the codes and categories was accomplished only after *Bully* was viewed three times over a span of several weeks, at varying times of the day.

### **Reliability**

In order to ensure that data are trustworthy, the data analysis process and the description of study results must be effectively described so that readers gain a thorough understanding of how the analysis was undertaken. There must be a transparent disclosure of the content analysis strengths and limitations (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Meanwhile, to enhance the reliability of the content analysis, it is critical that the



researcher is able to establish a link between the results and the data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). This is why the researcher needs to seek to describe the analysis process in as much detail as possible when it is time to report the results. An effective way of achieving this is through the use of appendices and tables in order to demonstrate the relationships between the data and results.

Another method used in establishing reliability was to have another coder to sample the coding book. As Macnamara (2005) puts it: “A rigorous ‘scientific’ approach to media content analysis to gain maximum reliability requires that two or more coders are used – at least for a sample of content (called the reliability sub-sample)” (p. 10). The second coder was informed of the testing and its use. The coder was then trained on a couple of scenes not used in the research as practice. After this was accomplished, that second coder was then able to view two applicable scenes, chosen by the researcher, using the same coding book as the researcher. The coding book was then sent and tested for reliability. Once it was determined that the coding book was reliable, the researcher was then able to code the rest of the scenes in the documentary related to the research.

### **Summary**

This study used thematic content analysis in order to investigate the documentary *Bully*. This method is appropriate because it allows the researcher to analyze the underlying meanings conveyed in the documentary. An advantage of using this method is that it does not require study participants and yet at the same time, obtain just an equally in-depth insight about the phenomenon being investigated.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Through the years, empirical investigation of bullying has taken different forms. However, a look at extant literature reveals that studies on bullying come from diverse perspectives such that, currently, a fragmented, picture of the phenomenon has emerged. Hence, it is crucial that empirical studies be conducted in order to learn more about bullying in action, and its real-life contexts. In light of these, this study investigated bullying through the documentary *Bully* which chronicles the lives of five bullied young people who experience bullying in schools, and which also covers some of the bullying experiences of two deceased young people. Specifically, this study used the documentary *Bully* to gain knowledge about how bullying actually occurs in schools and the role that school culture plays in the phenomenon. This study used qualitative content analysis of a documentary on bullying to better understand the phenomenon. Documentaries bring greater reality to bullying due to the “slice of life” coverage that is provided on the victims, the bullies, the school and the victims’ families. This study seeks to address these research questions:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of bullying as portrayed in *Bully*?

RQ2: How are those who are bullied impacted as represented in *Bully*?

RQ3: What role does the school culture play in promoting bullying as represented in *Bully*?

The following subsections discuss the themes extracted from the coding as part of the content analysis of *Bully*. These themes are characteristics of bullying; impacts of bullying; and, school culture.

### **Characteristics of Bullying**

As discussed earlier in this study, bullying is characterized by three defining attributes, namely, repetition, power imbalance, and intent to hurt (Cuadrado-Gordillo, 2012). These characteristics were represented in *Bully* through the construction of gender, power balance in relationships, and perceived or real violent intentions. Bullying may be manifested through direct or indirect aggressive behavior that is distinguished by the perpetrator's intention to inflict harm repeatedly in a manner that highlights imbalance of power between him/her and the bullied (Strohmeier & Noam, 2012). As was seen in the documentary, those who are bullied generally occupy an inferior status in school cliques and thus have little influence over the behavior of the bully (Cuadrado-Gordillo, 2012). It is important to note that bullying is intentional and recurrent, with the bully bent on harming the victim, physically, socially, emotionally, or psychologically over an extended period of time.

According to researchers, bullying characteristics include hitting, punching, kicking, teasing, pushing, pulling, pestering, bragging, taunting, harassing, playing mind games, frightening, heckling, insulting, annoying, gossiping, bothering, hurting, threatening, tormenting, ridiculing, tripping, pinching, acting violent and intimidating (Freeman, 2014; Petrosino et al., 2010). Some of these characteristics of bullying were evident in *Bully*. This section discusses the characteristics of bullying as discerned from *Bully*.

**Gender.** All of the profiled victims attend middle school and belong to the middle class. Based on the documentary, bullying occurs across genders. As seen in the film, both male and female were bullied. Two are female, Ja'Meya and Kelby. Kelby also identifies as lesbian. The third student, Alex, is male. The two deceased subjects of the documentary were both male, Ty and Tyler. It also appears as if students with same-sex orientations are targeted for bullying, as in the experience of Kelby. To note, Kelby experienced bullying right after she came out as a lesbian. As Kelby said in *Bully*:

They made it very clear that I wasn't welcomed at the school. When I opened my locker, there was a note that said, "Faggots aren't welcomed here." And the teacher was calling roll and said, "Boys," and then he said, "Girls" and then paused and said, "Kelby." And another teacher told me how they burned fags, and kept talking about it with me in the classroom, and everyone was laughing. And they knew it was hurting me, and they kept going.

In this instance, bullying was perpetrated by both students and faculty. Unfortunately, where tolerance, regardless of ones beliefs and/or career field, should have been displayed, it was only reinforced to be okay to do, by the teacher.

Several studies have investigated the specific targets of bullying, and it has been found that youths perceived as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender are particularly vulnerable (Patrick, Bell, Jon, Lazarakis, & Edwards, 2013). This phenomenon has come to be known as homophobic bullying (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004). For Kelby, being bullied on account of sexual orientation presents increased risks related to her well-being. Indeed, being part of a sexual minority group in a heterosexually-dominated environment carries its own risks of poor health, unhealthy behavior, and impaired

quality of life particularly due to stigmatization and social mistreatment (Patrick et al., 2013). Kelby's experience with sexual orientation is reflected in studies indicating that it is during middle and high school years when many young people establish their sexual identities. It is also during this period that they are most vulnerable to bullying (Patrick et al., 2013).

Meanwhile, psychologists recognize homophobic bullying as a serious problem for young lesbians and gay men (Clark et al., 2004). According to researchers, up to 50% of lesbians and gay men have experienced some form of bullying in school (Clark et al., 2004). Notably, many school problems of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, including, poor academic performance, truancy, and dropping out of school, are direct or indirect results of bullying. Kelby's problems with bullying should not be minimized.

Nevertheless, Kelby seems to be resigned to her fate in school and an important positive attribute that he has is resiliency brought about by the supportive relationships that she cherishes with her family and friends. Ja'Meya, too, had her mother and Alex, while without friends in school, has a happy family life. This brings the discussion to another characteristic of bullying in *Bully* wherein the victims draw strength from relationships.

**Relationships.** Meaningful relationships with family and friends constitute a powerful mechanism through which the bullied deal with their bullying experiences in school. Without these relationships, it seems that it would not have been possible for the three main characters in the documentary to have persisted with their schooling. In *Bully*, there are two aspects of relationships that impact bullying victims, relationships with parents and relationships with friends. Both have positive effects on the bullying victims being studied.

As mentioned earlier, Kelby had friends who helped her cope with bullying and eventually accept bullying as inevitable after she had come out. According to Kelby:

Tyler, Summer, Caitlin, Brooke, if I didn't have them, I wouldn't be here. For sure, like 100%, they are everything that makes me get up and walk in the doors to school every morning. I couldn't do it without them. I've got my, what, four-foot-ten girlfriend to protect me? . . . You know I just keep thinking that maybe I'm the one that is in this town, that can make a change. I don't want them to win, and I don't want to back down, and maybe all it takes is for one person to stand up. You're not just standing up for you. You're standing up for all the kids who go through this, every single day.

As may be discerned in the experience of Kelby, her meaningful friendships served as support network. Although disheartened by her bullying experiences, she nevertheless became courageous not only about defending herself against his tormentors but also in fighting back. Her aforementioned statements raise the questions regarding what it is about friendships that make the difference to bullied youth.

According to Cuadros and Berger (2016), adolescent interpersonal relationships, particularly friendships, are among the most significant factors diminishing the negative consequences of victimization. This makes friendships protective factors for bullying victims. However, it must be emphasized that this protective factor does not simply consist of having friends per se. What is more important is that these friendships are of good quality, meaning that they are stable and that the friends serve as positive influences on one another. Studies abound showing that youth with close, positive friendships are less likely to be victimized by peers and perceive friendship self-efficacy as a tool that

empowers them to deal with the negative effects of social victimization (Cuadros & Berger, 2016). Here, friendship self-efficacy refers to the young person's confidence in his or her own abilities to engage and communicate with a friend, to resolve conflicts, and to manage emotions.

In light of these, as shown in the experience of Kelby, friendship appears to be an important developmental dimension related with peer victimization. Because of her high friendship quality relationships, she was better able to deal with bullying than Je'Maya and Alex. When young people perceive a relationship is stable, self-esteem is enhanced and they become better at perspective-taking and decision making. The reference to Alex at this point is important because he did not have friends in school. This is why Alex did not have the protective factor of friendship in school. This is attested by what his mother told him:

Jackie: Friends are supposed to make you feel good. That's the point of having them. It's someone else on the planet you can connect with. Your only connection to these kids is that they like to pound on you.

Alex: If you... If you say these people aren't my friends, then what friends do I have? (Hirsch, 2011)

Alex, however, enjoyed positive and happy relationships with his family members. His strong relationship with his parents has helped him survive the intensity of bullying experiences he had. This is not only because his parents served as his social supports but because he, himself, desired this type of social support from his parents even if he did not express it.

Social supports are buffers that can help children with the challenges of being

bullied (Honig & Zdunowski-Sjoblom, 2014). Social support is associated with many positive outcomes for students while inadequate social support has been associated with negative outcomes (Honig & Zdunowski-Sjoblom, 2014). Social support may be defined as “the existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about, value, and love us” (Antonio & Moleiro, 2015, p. 731). Therefore, it may be said that parental support has allowed Alex to survive the bullying in school in the same way that Kelby’s friendships did. Notably, researchers state that victimization and a lack of social support play important roles in the prediction of psychosocial difficulties (Antonio & Moleiro, 2015). In other words, when parents serve as social support for their children, they help their children deal with problems.

Evidence exists that children, themselves, directly or indirectly desire their parents’ social support (Puhl, Peterson & Luedicke, 2013). In the context of bullying, strategies for parental social support include encouraging their children, bully-focused strategies such as reporting the matter to the bully’s parents, and involvement in school/institutional actions (Puhl et al., 2013). The parents of all major characters in *Bully* not only encouraged them but also became involved in school action; however, in *Bully*, parents were not initially aware that their children were being bullied in school, which is why even though parents are important sources of support for bullied children, they oftentimes have not been able to timely help. Bob Johnson said:

I never knew, the saying you don’t know what a person’s been through until you walk a mile in their shoes, I never understood the depth of that meaning until I had a gay child. It has made me completely reevaluate who and what I am as a human being to see the ugliness that has come out.



A possible explanation for parents' lack of awareness about the bullying is because their children tend to hide their bullying experiences from them and from school personnel (Honig & Zdunowski-Sjoblom, 2014; Stavrinides, Nikiforou & Georgiou, 2015).

Here, it is important to note that parental knowledge is derived from two primary sources: parental monitoring and child disclosure (Stavrinides et al., 2015). Parental monitoring is the “set of correlated parenting behaviors involving attention to and tracking of the child’s whereabouts, activities, and adaptations” (Stavrinides et al., 2015, p. 81). It is expressed in two main ways. First, parents ask their children as well as their children’s friends for information in a process called parental solicitation; and second, parents impose rules and restrictions on their children’s activities and associations, and in doing so, they control the amount of freedom children have to do things without telling them, in a process known as parental control (Stavrinides et al., 2015).

On the other hand, child disclosure pertains to the free and willing information that children provide to their parents regarding their whereabouts during their free time, their academic performance, “whether they keep secrets from them, who they socialize with, and what they do when they go out at night” (Stavrinides et al., 2015, p. 81). Most of the bullied children in *Bully* did not openly disclose their experiences to their parents. There are different explanations for this. Interestingly, there is a catch-22 in this phenomenon. The children did not tell parents but the parents cannot help if their children do not tell them what is going on in their lives.

One of the reasons why students conceal their bullied experiences is that they do not believe that their parents can help (Seddon, 2005). This was not demonstrated or shared by the three living individuals in the documentary. The perception that parents do

not act on their children's problems make the latter conclude that adults simply do not care. As will be discussed later, there is a prevalent attitude among adults that bullying is merely a stage in growing up. It is a rite of passage that young people simply have to work out among themselves. Therefore, among bullied children, there develops a code of silence regarding the abusive treatment that they receive from peers.

Another possible reason that would apply to the three main characters is that they are afraid of retaliation, or afraid of gaining the reputation as a snitch (Seddon, 2005). These could even further exacerbate the bullying from their peers. Indeed, as shown through the experiences of Alex and Kelby, students are less likely to report bullying to their school authorities than parents or friends. It is possible that their unwillingness to report bullying to school authorities is caused by negative messages regarding snitching and tattling, fears about retaliation, as well as lack of confidence in adults' responses to bullying. Moreover, it is possible that the bullying victims in the documentary were ashamed of their experiences. For example, in the case of Alex, there appears to be a certain degree of shame about being bullied because it would mark him as an outcast in school. It is also possible that bullying experiences had disempowered the students such that they became fatalistic about their experiences. For example, Alex does not report his being bullied. Instead, he attempts to laugh as his bullies hurt him, and he subsequently said that he would laugh it off in sight of his bullies because he wanted to make it appear to others that the events were mere jokes of which he was a part. In spite of the fact that Alex tried to make light of his bullied experiences, it certainly cannot be denied that his being victimized greatly pained his parents.

Parents feel greatly pained by the bullying of their children. Whenever they spoke

in the documentary, they were either crying or on the verge of tears. At varying times, they showed anger, despair, and frustration when they learned that their children were being victimized by their peers. They often seemed at a loss about what they should do, beyond speaking with school administrators. The blend of anger and sadness was evident in the statement made by Kirk Smalley, Ty's Father:

You know, we're nobodies. I guarantee you, if some politician's kid did this, because he was getting picked on at a public school, there'd be a law tomorrow, there'd be changes made tomorrow. We're nobody, but we love each other and we loved our son.

Kirk and Ty were both at a loss about what to do about bullying. Unfortunately, it came to a point where Ty felt it was necessary to take his own life. Had the school reacted effectively, the outcome could have been different.

It is important to note that some parents voiced powerful statements regarding expectations they had about the schools which their students attended. Tina Long aid: last year, when two children beat Tyler up, [a] school resource officer refused to file the charges. I had to fight. Here what we get is, there's nothing wrong, we didn't do anything, everything's fine. But bottom line here is, when you send your child to that school, doesn't matter what parents that child has, they should be safe and protected. Period.

The feeling of pain among parents is understandable. It is natural for parents to feel pain whenever their children are harmed. Indeed, all of the parents interviewed in the documentary showed their raw pain when talking about their children's bullying experiences. Understandably, this negative emotion escalates, especially since a rise in

violent bullying attacks could spell life or death for their children.

**Violence.** In *Bully*, the most dominant characteristic of bullying is increasing violence – an experience that is shared by all of the characters, including Ty and Tyler when they were alive. Because of the increasing violence involved in bullying, it may be said that, if left unattended, peer victimization could be so extreme that it could cost the lives of victims. Alex made one of the most powerful statements in the documentary:

They punch me in the jaw, strangle me, they knock things out of my hand, take things from me, sit on me. They push me so far that, that I want to become the bully.

Kelby experienced a highly violent form of violence when her schoolmates attempted to run her down through a vehicle, an incident in which her head bore a hole into the vehicle's windshield:

We were walking back from lunch and these guys, there was probably like six older guys, driving in their mom's minivan. They were mostly jocks. I was gonna find out what their problem was, so I kinda walked in the road, and instead of slowing down or stopping to talk to me, they sped up and I flew onto the windshield. I couldn't have gotten hit by something cool, like a Jeep or something. I had to get hit by a minivan. (Kelby)

While Kelby made light of an almost dire situation, the reality is that she could have been killed, whether it be intentional or unintentional.

Ty experienced a different type of violence in the form of psychological violence, as shared by his parents.

There was no doubt in our minds. When . . . you're in the shower and your clothes

are taken, and you have no way of getting out of the gym other than walking out naked. When you're standing in the bathroom and you're urinating, and kids come up and push you from behind up against the stall and against the wall and you urinate on your pants. When you're sitting in the classroom, somebody comes by and grabs your books and throws them on the floor and tells you, "Pick them up, bitch." Those are things that happened to Tyler. Did he ever come home with blood running down his face? No. It was the mental abuse and the not-so-physical abuse that Tyler endured. (David Long)

Violence in bullying can take several forms, not just the misnomer that it is always physical. The effects of any form, as witnessed, can be detrimental.

In the documentary, the director, Hirsch, flashed a couple of insights that he had with regards to the bullying that Alex had been experiencing in his school bus. Hirsch stated that due to the increasing violence to which Alex was being subjected, the director felt that he had to intervene although doing so was contrary to his goals as a documentary filmmaker. Nevertheless, he showed the footage of Alex being bullied by several boys one day in the school bus, where a schoolmate began stabbing him with a pen. Hirsch showed the footage to Alex's school principal, and eventually to Alex's parents, fearful for the young boy's safety. The dialogue involving Alex proceeded as follows below:

Bully 1: Get your ass off my book bag.

Alex: OK. Here.

Bully 1: Move! Move! I'll beat your ass.

Alex: What? Why are you punching me?

Bully 1: I'll use my cell phone, bitch. Little bitch. Come on!

Alex: No, no, no.

Bully 1: Bitch!

Alex: Why you stabbing me with it?

Bully 1: Gonna knock your fish lips off! Bitch!

Bully 2: Give it to him hard.

Bully 1: Bitch! (Hirsch, 2011)

Hirsch demonstrated a proactive approach as a bystander by letting someone else know of the bullying taking place. His reactiveness could have likely prevented further instances of bullying to this extent.

Ty was 11 years old when he killed himself. His friend, Trey, recalled of him:

Ty was just the coolest kid I knew. . . . When people would bully him, I'd get so angry, and I could have hurt those kids so badly that done something to him. Like they'll push him down, and say, "Shut up spaz," or throw him into a locker, or shove him into one. And I'd just go to take off after them and he'd be like, "Trey, it isn't worth it, be better than them, it's all right," and he'd walk off with a smile. And I don't know how he could do it. He was way stronger than I was. If it was up to me, if I was the king of the United States, I'd make it to where there was no popularity, everyone was equal, because that's how it should be.

Treys remarks indicate an example that while others may appear or state to be "ok" with bullying actions, more than likely they are suffering in silence. Unfortunately, lack of responsiveness to bullying was the demise of Ty Smalley.

In contrast to aggression, usually defined as any behavior intended to harm another person who does not want to be harmed, violent bullying is aggression with the

goal of extreme physical harm, such as injury or death (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). For instance, a student spreading rumors about a classmate is considered as carrying out an aggression but not an act of violence. In contrast, a bully who kicks, hits, stabs, or shoots a peer is acting violently. Undeniably, Alex had been at the receiving end of violence from his bully tormentors. All violent acts are aggressive, but not all aggressive acts are violent and in the case of Alex, the latter is true because his bullies intended to cause him extreme physical harm. The message being sent out in *Bully* in terms of violence as well as the resulting deaths of Ty and Tyler due to bullying is unmistakable: the time to act against bullying in schools is *now*. There is no time to waste as the very life of America's youths could be at stake (Jan & Husain, 2015; Mayer & Leone, 2007; Wilson-Simmons, Dash, Tehranifar, O'Donnell & Stueve, 2006).

To note, bullying is considered as a low-level form of violence as opposed to the high-level form, an example of which is possession and use of weapons and severe physical attacks (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011; Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008). Although bullying is not as overt as weapons offenses and fatal shootings, bullying is a more frequent occurrence and may even "have more profound and lasting effects on students' mental health and school performance" (Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008, p. 212). Indeed, bullying is a primary antecedent leading to more devastating and attention-grabbing events. Despite the fact that high-level violence acts occur very infrequently, the low-level violence act of bullying generates less attention yet more negative impacts; such as, higher rates of truancy and dropping out of school, worsening academic performance, or difficult psychosocial and psychosexual relationships. When school violence occurs in the form of bullying, inevitably, one of the first questions asked is, "Why didn't someone

do something to stop it?” (Wilson-Simmons et al., 2006, p. 43).

**Bystanders.** The question of why nobody at least intervened during bullying is emphasized especially when it becomes evident that there were others present before or during the event. In *Bully*, bystanders included the school bus driver and peers. However, these bystanders were not able to intervene because, they, themselves did not know how best to deal with the situation so that the bullying stops.

Because *Bully* does not contain expert opinions and analyses, the only intervention voiced out in the documentary pertains to the role of bystanders as expressed by the parents of Ty and Tyler, the two boys who had committed suicide due to bullying. Kirk Smalley and his wife eventually formed an advocacy group against bullying called Stand for the Silent. At the first rally held to launch the group, Kirk said:

Go out there and find that one child, that new kid, who just moved to town, standing over there by himself, be his friend, smile, be willing to help him out when he's pushed down, be willing to stand up for him. If we all do it together, we will change the world. It starts right here, right now.

Tyler's father also believes that bystanders can make the difference for bullied students. According to David:

I believe had more kids stepped forward when Tyler was being bullied, and took a stand alongside of Tyler, Tyler would still be here today. Everything starts with one and builds up. And if we can continue to increase the numbers, whether it be one by one, two by two, eventually we have an army, to where we can defeat anything. (David)

In spite of the need for bystander intervention during bullying problems, the sad reality is



that only a handful of these bystanders will intervene to help the victim (Cowie, 2014; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002).

According to Salmivalli (2014, p. 117), bystanders are “trapped in a social dilemma” such that they are undecided about what they should do. In the case of student bystanders, they understand that bullying is wrong and at least some wish that they could do something to stop it. However, at the same time, they are also highly conscious about their own needs for security and acceptance among their peers, especially those belonging to the higher portion of the school’s social hierarchy. Many of the bullies belong to this higher level of social hierarchy.

Bullies’ high social status in school is also one of the reasons why student bystanders do not intervene. Instead of intervening on behalf of the victimized peer, many bystanders reinforce the bully’s behaviors by verbal or nonverbal cues that are deemed as socially rewarding because they indicate that bullying is acceptable, or even funny and entertaining (Salmivalli, 2014). All of the major characters in *Bully* experienced this. For example, while Alex was being bullied, other students in the bus were laughing and cheering on the bully. Making others laugh is already rewarding for the bully such that he or she tends to be encouraged to prolong or continue repeating this behavior.

On the other hand, there are also peers who remain silent while witnessing the bullying (Salmivalli, 2014). The issue with remaining silent is that the bully may interpret this as a signal of approval of the bullying. Although there were none in *Bully*, there are bystanders who actually step in to stop the bullying. Studies show that there are three types of bystanders to bullying: reinforcer (of the bully), assistant (of the bully), outsider,

and defender (of the victim) (Salmivalli, 2014). In the documentary, there were reinforcers and assistants but no defenders.

Meanwhile, due to the problem in which school administrators do not impose adequate bullying interventions, many staff members do not have sufficient training (“Understanding”, 2014). Even though 93% of school employees assert that their district has been implementing a bullying prevention policy, only half had actually received training in relation to said policy (“Understanding”, 2014). To further exacerbate matters, school staff have heavy workloads, and they play many roles in their jobs. Due to these demands, even if school employees are aware of the significance of bullying prevention, “principals, district-level administrators, and school board members” should “support these efforts and make them a priority” (Stop Bullying, 2014).

Espelage, Polanin and Low (2014) explain that heightening public awareness about bullying in schools and its dangers has led to the increase in number of legislation in the United States for the purpose of combating bullying. In spite of the fact that there is no singular federal anti-bullying law, a number of laws have provisions addressing bullying, including No Child Left Behind, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, as well as the Civil Rights Act (Lund, Blake, Ewing & Banks, 2012). Aside from national legislation, 49 states have active anti-bullying laws, four of which were passed in 2010 (Lund et al., 2012). There are different ways bullying is defined and addressed in these laws, but they all seek to improve the welfare of students by decreasing bullying in schools by means of policy implementation and training. Apart from these, an issue at hand is that federal guidelines do not provide specific guidance regarding definitions or intervention strategies for bullying (Lund et al., 2012). Due to

findings of numerous studies, it is crucial that school faculty and staff receive training in the implementation of bullying interventions that are supported by empirical research, while school administrators need to know which interventions are most appropriate for their academic institutions.

### **Impacts of Bullying**

As mentioned earlier, *Bully* does not contain any interviews with, or statements from, experts such as psychologists. Therefore, there are no analyses of events that are shown in the documentary, or as discussed by the characters in the film. *Bully* does not have a narrator to provide contexts to viewers. A profound impact of bullying as portrayed in *Bully* is in negative emotion, in the form of pain and feelings of isolation as experienced by the victims. Because of these, all of the bullying victims – and to a certain extent, Kelby – have had adjustment problems that include symptoms of depression, feelings of rejection, social withdrawal, loneliness, negative self-concept, helplessness, and a sense that he or she deserves to be bullied. These students have been scarred for life. The characters convey this according to different manners. For instance, Alex said:

People think that I'm different, I'm not normal. Most kids don't want to be around me. I feel like I...I belong somewhere else.

Alex's mother, upon seeing the bus footage in which he was being stabbed asked him:

Mother: Does it make you feel good when they punch you? Or kick you? Or stab you? Do these things make you feel good?

Alex: Well, no. Well, I don't know. I'm starting to think I don't feel anything anymore. (Hirsch, 2011)

These negative emotions in the form of pain and isolation were also felt by Ja'Meya. As

she described the triggers for her behavior of bringing a gun and pulling it out on her schoolmates in the bus:

It feels like everybody just turned against me. It was like nine of them, nine or ten of them, calling me stupid and dumb, and they started throwing things at me, and one of the guys said something to me, and he threatened me, telling me what he was going to do to me, and he'll fight girls, and everybody was laughing. And I was telling him to be quiet, and he kept talking and that's when I got up.

(Ja'Meya)

Kelby experienced the same feelings of pain and isolation, from the day the new school year started after she had come out:

Yeah, you know, I went in thinking it was gonna be a new year, and people were used to me. And I went into class, and the class was already full and I sat down, and everyone around me moved seats. Like every single person. I was the only one sitting in a little circle. That was enough. Maybe there's another place I can go try to make a difference.

The negative impacts felt by this victims may be considered low-form violence, however, can have lasting effects.

Another impact of bullying that cannot be denied as one of the most compelling messages of *Bully* is that it could lead to suicide. As Tina, Tyler's mother recounts:

This was Troy's room, and this was Tyler's room. And when David opened the door, that was Tyler's bed. And he saw the note lying on the bed. But, of course, you can't see into the closet from here because it's just a door. So when David walked in is when he saw the inside of the closet, and there was Tyler. And then,

of course, David yelled for me, and Troy got up. So Troy... saw everything...all we see when we come in here still...is the picture of Tyler hanging there.

David, Tyler's father related:

When he was in PE, he was always the last one to be chosen. Nobody would be on his team because they said he was a geek and he's a fag, and they didn't want to play with him. And it took a toll on him early in middle school to where he... he cried. And then he got to a point to where he didn't cry anymore. And that's when it became difficult to truly understand what he was going through...Some kids had told him to go hang himself, that he was worthless. And I think he got to the point to where enough was enough. (David Long)

A voiceover on the documentary tells about Ty's suicide (he shot himself):

A Perkins boy, just 11 years old, believed to have been desperate enough to take his own life... despite what the superintendent says, friends say Ty Field was the victim of bullying.

Unfortunately, two incidents witnessed in *Bully* give proof to the most extreme, negative impacts of bullying – death by suicide.

Studies show that at least half of bullied students experience serious difficulties in concentrating and paying attention in class because of bullying and the fear associated with it (Jan & Husain, 2015). Bullying victims and bully/victims experience the highest level of adjustment problems, whereas bullies had the lowest (Smokowski, Evans & Cotter, 2014). Because of bullying, victims feel powerless, excluded, and unsafe (Smokowski et al., 2014). Bullying victims have low self-esteem, low social competence, poor social and emotional adjustment and low school attendance (Smokowski et al.,

2014). Being victimized also leads to increased internalizing problems, nervousness, loneliness and social withdrawal (Smokowski et al., 2014). They also tend to perceive lower levels of teacher support as well as peer support compared to their nonvictimized classmates. Victims tend to perceive that their teachers and peers are not willing to stop the bullying, thereby eroding their sense of support. Just as importantly, victims of bullying experience higher rates of depression and anxiety compared to bullies, bully-victims, and noninvolved youth (Smokowski et al., 2014). Victims also eventually show aggressive behaviors themselves (Smokowski et al., 2014).

### **School Culture**

Schools represented in bully lacked a means for preventing bullying on busses and in public spaces thereby giving the impression that they do not care. An unnamed boy, speaking up for Tyler said:

Um, I was a very good friend of Tyler Long's, and whenever you would walk around that school, you notice that everybody gets bullied. And then the teachers just kind of shrug it off. As in, oh, he done something wrong to that kid, that's why he got what he got. And it's okay, it's just fine. That's a load of daggom crap. It's a big lie.

Jackie Libby, Tina Long, and another unnamed parent expressed the same sentiment about school administrators' and public officials' attitudes about bullying in academic institutions. The unnamed parent said:

You go to the school, um, kids will be kids. Let these girls work it out. Let your child work it out. Well, it's not just in school. They go on the Internet, cell phones. They can damage somebody's life.

Bob Johnson, Kelby's father said:

The school doesn't care. We've had so many meetings with the principal and the superintendent. And they all give you the same plastic smile and say, "Yes, I understand. I'll do everything I can." And nothing's ever done. (Bob Johnson)

The lack of bullying knowledge with school administrators is a repeated action in the documentary.

Alex's mother, Jackie, upon seeing the footage of her son being stabbed in the school bus, immediately went to see the school principal, Kim Lockwood. The following is their conversation, attesting to the school administrators' attitudes toward bullying:

Jackie: My voice is shaking. I'm very upset. I'm gonna be honest. I'm upset enough I don't want him to ride the bus anymore.

Kim: What bus is he on?

Jackie: Fifty-four.

Kim: OK.

Jackie: It's absolutely not acceptable. I mean, they're stabbing him with pencils, and choking him, and...

Kim: Buses are notoriously bad places for lots of kids. I... You know, I wish I could say I could make it stop on that, but I'm not gonna lie to you. I can't. Um, but what we can do is we can get him on another bus.

Jackie: So if I put him on another bus I have, what, little to no guarantee that he'll be safe on that bus, either? When I was on the bus, when I was a kid, if you got out of your seat, they pulled over, the whole world stopped until everybody sat down and shut up. How come they don't do anything now? They just drive. Like,

there should be more responsibility than that.

Kim: Now, I've ridden 54. I've been on that route. I've been on a couple of them.

They are just as good as gold. I feel real bad that this happened. You'll just have to trust me that we'll take care of that other child. (Hirsch, 2011)

However, there was one assistant principal in Alex's school, Paula Crandall, who had been teaching students about appropriately communicating about bullying by reporting any such experience:

Paula: What's one thing that you need to start doing that you haven't done?

Boy: Tell someone.

Paula: Yes. Do you trust us that we'll do something when you tell us that someone's bothering you?

Nevertheless, it cannot be emphasized enough that the statement "kids will be kids" had been used at least three times in the documentary to describe school authorities' attitudes to bullying. As mentioned earlier, a defining characteristic of bullying as discerned in *Bully* is increasing violence.

It is of utmost importance that low-level violence be addressed through effective interventions; otherwise, they might escalate to high-level forms of violence (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011). This is exemplified by the experience of Ja'Meya in *Bully*, when she ended up bringing a gun to school and drawing it out at the school bus in order to make her peers stop bullying her. When tolerated, bullying is associated with long-term implications due to evidence that low-level violence leads to devastating effects. For example, bullies are five times more likely than the rest of their peers to enter the juvenile justice system and to be convicted of crimes (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011). Moreover,



roughly 60% of bullies in Grades 6 through 9 had at least one criminal conviction by age 24 (Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008). When long-term bullies become parents, they tend to have highly aggressive children (Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008).

Supposedly, school safety measures established to prevent violence increases the awareness among students regarding surveillance as well as proactivity on the part of the school in terms of preventing undesirable behaviors (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011). Hence, it is not unreasonable to believe that such school safety measures would reduce bullying. However, according to a study conducted by Blosnich and Bossarte (2011), the most effective among such school safety measures are those that involve teachers. Previous research shows that among bully-victims, there are fewer signs of depression when they reported having social support from teachers. The participation of teachers in bullying prevention interventions enhances the rapport and cohesion between students and adults such that prosocial behaviors are facilitated.

## **Summary**

This chapter reviewed, analyzed, coded, and extracted themes from the documentary *Bully*. Coding was performed to make sense of statements made by characters in the documentary. This was achieved by looking at recurrent words and phrases, topics as well as irregularities, similarities, and paradoxes. After coding was done, content analysis was performed through which five themes were extracted from the data. These themes were characteristics of bullying based on gender, relationships, violence, and bystanders; impacts of bullying; and school culture. This study makes the claim that based on the analysis of themes discerned in the documentary, school administrators have inadequate knowledge about bullying interventions.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore the phenomenon of bullying as experienced by actual victims in their real school settings, through the documentary *Bully*. This documentary follows the stories of three young people in middle school and features stories about two other young people who had committed suicide because of bullying. This investigation is based on the rationale that the use of content analysis of *Bully* a better understanding about the phenomenon. This chapter is organized according to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of bullying as portrayed in *Bully*?

RQ2: How are those who are bullied impacted as represented in *Bully*?

RQ3: What role does the school culture play in promoting bullying as represented in *Bully*?

#### **Characteristics of Bullying**

The first research question pertains to the characteristics of bullying as depicted in *Bully*. Notably, bullying characteristics constitute an emergent theme in this study, under which several sub-themes were also discerned.

**Relationships and gender.** *Bully* highlights the importance of friendships. One of the most consistent findings in social science literature pertains to the remarkably powerful effect of peer influence. In light of the theoretical model used for this study, this

is very important. Groups establish norms and standards of behavior and among students, may pressure members to conform to these norms. It is commonly believed that students, particularly teens, exert pressure on one another even when it comes to antisocial behavior. However, as Pozzoli and Gini (2013) explain, “peer influence is neither always powerful nor always malign” (p. 163). Notably, peer pressure can also be positive. Peers can support and exhort each other to achieve good grades, participate in productive school activities, as well as volunteer in community action projects.

At the meso-system level, friendships can potentially protect against bullying involvement, whether in terms of perpetration or victimization, because they serve as opportunities for adolescents to “negotiate closeness, achieve acceptance and validation, and contribute to their general well-being” (Kendrick, Jutengren & Stattin, 2012, p. 1069). Aside from providing opportunities for positive experiences, friendships can also contribute to a person’s resiliency in spite of negative experiences in adolescence. This is highly descriptive of Kelby’s case, as well as Trey’s sentiments as he was talking about his deceased friend, Ty.

Indeed, friends and family members can buffer against negative experiences and their subsequent outcomes (Fridh, Lindström & Rosvall, 2015; Kendrick et al., 2012; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013). In itself, having strong relationships is already an indicator that a young person possesses social skills, can think of others, and resolve conflicts in order to maintain the said relationships. Numerous studies show that friendships in particular can potentially reduce victimization in school.

**Violence and Bystanders.** Again, at the meso-system level, the role of bystanders in bullying is important. In *Bully*, it was evident that bystanders could have played

significant roles in protecting peers from victimization. In other words, in *Bully*, there were many students who could have intervened on behalf of Alex, Ja'Meya, and Kelby so that they would not be bullied, but none actually did. Children and young people report disliking bullying because they find it immoral (Cowie, 2014); however, not all young people have the “empathic emotion for someone in need” such as those being bullied, and it is this empathic emotion that is crucial for bystander intervention (Cowie, 2014, p. 26). Empathy-based socialization practices encourage prosocial behavior, thereby leading to more satisfying relationships as well as higher tolerance of stigmatized outsider groups. When it comes to bullying, unfortunately, only a minority of bystanders will intervene to help the victim (Cowie, 2014), because bystanders are typically trapped in a social dilemma. They understand that bullying is wrong and many wish that they could do something to stop it, but they are also highly conscious of their own needs for security and acceptance within their peer groups.

There are some bystanders who do intervene but who eventually feel worried about their position in the school's social hierarchy, as well as shame for having violated an unspoken creed about turning against those who are higher up in the hierarchy. In the case of *Bully*, it is possible that no bystander intervened because they were also fearful about the consequences of their intervention. Meanwhile, there are other pragmatic young people who also believe that if they intervene in bullying, they are, in a way, protecting themselves from becoming the next victims. It is this characteristic that school authorities need to cultivate so that peers can help in bullying situations as they play prosocial bystander roles.

## **Impacts of Bullying**

The second research question pertains to the impacts of bullying as discerned in *Bully*. As established in Chapter 4, the experience of bullying is a painful one that leads to negative emotions and feelings of isolation or exclusion. This feeling of pain is shared by all the characters in the documentary *Bully*. In the cases of Ty and Tyler, bullying had been presumptively so painful and emotionally distressful that it drove them to suicide. Clearly, Alex, Ja'Meya, and Kelby, endeavored to make sense of the pain that they had been feeling as a result of the bullying, as demonstrated in statements that the three made and cited in Chapter 4.

Social exclusion can potentially cause such pain that people feel, and respond to, it physically (Nordgren, Banas, & MacDonald, 2011). Examples of responses to social exclusion are temporary numbness as in the case of Alex, or heightened aggressiveness, as in the case of Ja'Meya (Nordgren et al., 2011). However, it is important to note at this point that people have a tendency to systematically underestimate the severity of social pain, and this biased estimate is only corrected when they actively experienced social pain for themselves. Applied to bullying, people can only understand the depth of the emotional impacts of bullying if they had experienced it themselves. Nordgren et al. (2011) stated that underestimation of social pain affects school policies towards bullying. It appears that many school policies on bullying do not consider the extent of emotional suffering that bullying victims experience; hence, many bullying victims endeavor to make sense of their experiences of bullying by themselves.

Traditionally, socialization theories have focused on how children and teenagers internalize the values, norms and behavior patterns of their society in a unidirectional

manner (Thornberg, 2015). Recent research on socialization indicates that “children are not just passive recipients, but active agents in their socialization process” (Thornberg, 2015, p. 16). Thus, they not only internalize the world, but endeavor to make sense of their culture and to participate in it (Thornberg, 2015). The implication for bullying in this regard is that children need help and guidance as they make sense of their bullying experiences. Another implication here is that children interpret bullying in different ways, according to their understanding of the world. It is important that understanding is gained about how children make sense of the different social situations and phenomena impacting their lives, in order to better understand their attitudes, responses, and interactions as a result of these situations and phenomena.

Among young people, a common interpretation as to why bullying takes place is that the victim is different, odd, or deviant in specific ways (Thornberg, 2015). Because of this difference, young people believe that society is intolerant of such people, thereby justifying bullying and harassment. These “different” young people eventually feel that they do not fit in, start mistrusting others, and subsequently self-isolate in order to protect themselves. Some of them experience self-blaming and resignation to their situations. Another common bullying explanation among young people is that bullying occurs because those who enjoy bullying have psychosocial problems, such as low self-esteem or self-confidence, insecurities, and problems at home (Thornberg, 2011). Several minor characters in *Bully* had mentioned these psychosocial issues, such as Ty’s friend. Other bullying explanations articulated by students are “the mean or bad personality of the bullies,” having fun and avoiding boredom, peer pressure, and thoughtlessly acting without any premeditation at all such that bullying is something that just occurs

(Thornberg, 2011, p. 17).

### **School Culture**

The third research question pertains to the role that school culture plays in promoting bullying as represented in *Bully*. The theoretical framework for this study is Bronfenbrenner's social ecological theory. From what has been gathered in *Bully*, at the individual level, the characteristics of the bullying victim should *never* be a justification for bullying. Just because a student looks different such as in the case of Alex, or has a different sexual orientation as one's own just like Kelby's case, they should never be bullied. However, at the individual level, protective factors may be developed. Indeed, one of the most powerful messages to have emerged out of *Bully* is that children have to learn to stand up for themselves in order to protect themselves from bullying.

On the other hand, at the mesosystem level, *Bully* shows that, indeed, peers bully others because they reject dissimilarities among their schoolmates. This is especially true about Alex and Kelby. In Ja'Meya's case, the focus of the documentary on her character pertains to how bullying can escalate to the point that the victim simply cannot tolerate the victimization anymore. A tragic aspect of peer bullying is that it could be so devastating that some young people are driven to suicide. According to Olweus (1997), insufficient parental involvement in a student's life can be a contributing factor to bullies' behavior. In the documentary, parental involvement is an important protective factor in discouragement of bullying. This is substantiated by Alex's mother who endeavors to persuade Alex to report bullying and to dissuade him that bullying is some sort of fooling around as her son justifies it.

In an interview with Hirsch, the director revealed that it was highly difficult to

gain the full cooperation of at least one school, the administrators of which would be entirely aware of the thrust of the documentary (Bieze, 2011). This was Alex's school. Lockwood, the assistant principal, had been severely criticized because of her inaction when it comes to bullying, and for adopting the attitude of "kids will be kids." Lockwood was courageous enough to attend the screening of *Bully*, after which she arose to face the audience, and apologized for her mistakes and lack of action (Bieze, 2011). In the experience of this school, *Bully* drives the message that interventions addressing school culture alone are not enough: without the involvement of the entire school staff as well as of parents, bullying is too complex a phenomenon to be managed alone. Here, the exosystem level is also highly important. *Bully* as an instrument of media as well as the community environment can potentially and positively (a) impact efforts to reduce bullying in school; and (b) transform beliefs, norms and attitudes about bullying within a given community (Kosciw et al., 2009).

**Lack of Knowledge.** This study makes the claim that school administrators themselves have little knowledge about the appropriate bullying interventions to adopt and how these should be implemented. As seen in the documentary *Bully*, bullying victims were largely left to their devices in spite of school administrators' knowledge that they were being bullied.

Indeed, while literature on bullying in schools provides modest support for the effectiveness of some bullying intervention programs, one of the most important questions is whether such programs and strategies are actually used in schools (Lund et al., 2012). According to United States federal agency Stop Bullying (2014), school administrators are faced with many challenges when it comes to addressing bullying in



schools. The most important challenge is that school staff and students often have different views about the extent of bullying and how it should be addressed. Because of this, many school staff are not directly involved in bullying prevention efforts (Stop Bullying, 2014). In a national survey of more than 5,000 school staff, roughly 60% reported that their school had formal bullying prevention efforts, but out of this 60%, less than 40% stated that they are directly involved in these activities (Stop Bullying, 2014).

Many administrators argue that the severity of sanctions within the zero-tolerance approach for bullying behaviors serve as deterrent for students from engaging in those behaviors, for fear of the subsequent consequences of their actions (Roberge, 2012). However, historically, punitive approaches to dealing with student behaviors have not been found to be as effective as the reinforcement of positive behaviors (Roberge, 2012). This is supported by many researchers, including, Olweus, who was a pioneer in bullying research. He said that a disproportionate focus on the modification of behaviors are counterproductive when reducing bullying in schools (Roberge, 2012). Moreover, bullying is usually perpetrated in the absence of adult supervision and is also unreported because bullying victims are afraid of subsequent reprisal. Hence, it is just but logical to consider zero tolerance policies in addressing all bullying behavior as ineffective in light of the fact that only a low percentage of bullying behaviors are reported. There are even less bullying incidents actually witnessed by adults/supervisors in the school setting.

Students and staff are nearly equally concerned about bullying in their schools; however, just as seen in *Bully*, staff members considerably underestimate the numbers of students who are frequently involved in bullying, as well as the extent of suffering among bullying victims. As a result, students have this perception that their schools are not doing

enough so that bullying is prevented (Stop Bullying, 2014). At the other end of the spectrum, the majority of educators believe that they are providing adequate bullying prevention efforts.

Again, as seen in *Bully*, numerous students do not report bullying that they experience or witness in their schools (Stop Bullying, 2014). In *Bully*, reports of bullying are done when it is too late. As shown through the experiences of Alex and Kelby, students are less likely to report bullying to their school authorities than parents or friends. It is possible that their unwillingness to report bullying to school authorities is caused by negative messages regarding snitching and tattling, fears about retaliation, as well as lack of confidence in adults' responses to bullying (Stop Bullying, 2014).

**School administrators.** Parents and other community members, as shown in *Bully* lamented the lack of response to bullying among school administrators. Parental frustration was also evident because school administrators alternated between promising that they will do something about the bullying or that they will take care of the children (Hirsch, 2011). A friend of Tyler's even pointed out that it had to take Tyler's suicide before school authorities took notice of bullying. In contrast, Alex's school principal, Kim, seemed to be of the opinion that bullying is a rite of passage that young people normally experience. School administrators in *Bully* contributed to the worsening of the bullying situation in their schools through inaction.

According to some scholars, the ambivalence of some school administrators stems from the fact that they, themselves, do not have sufficient knowledge regarding the appropriate interventions to take when bullying occurs in their schools (Lewis & Asher, 2012; Roberge, 2012). The documentary analysis demonstrates that school administrators

need to take the initiative to learn about the appropriate measures for bullying prevention. Many studies have been undertaken regarding interventions that school systems, communities, legal systems, and parents should adopt in order to address bullying (sources). Evident in *Bully* is that school administrators can start with Tier 1 or school-wide bullying interventions, which are universal programs that focus on the creation of positive school climates (Lund, Blake, Ewing & Banks, 2012). In such school climates, there is zero-tolerance of bullying while respectful behaviors are rewarded. Tier 1 programs also seek to increase student, faculty, and staff knowledge and awareness of bullying. Every individual in school helps in building a positive school environment that discourages bullying and promotes respect. In these programs, staff, faculty, and students are trained to report and address bullying behavior promptly. It must be noted that school bus drivers are crucial members of school staff who require training and education on bullying. This is supported by literature as well as the documentary considering that Alex and Ja'Meya both had been violently bullied in buses (DeLara, 2008; The Weinstein Company & Hirsch, 2011). Meanwhile, based on Bronfenbrenner's (1977; 1979) ES theory, school administrators in *Bully* had been failing to provide protective factors to students. They can reverse the situation by implementing effective bullying interventions.

### **Communication-Based Interventions and Skills**

Of all the characters in the documentary, it is Alex who has the most significant communication issues. In spite of the increasing and persistent violence that he has been experiencing at the hands of his peers, he is reluctant to report it to his parents or to school authorities. Recall that Paula Crandall had been teaching a bullied boy to tell another person about the bullying. Alex's reluctance in talking about his bullying

experience is interpreted by Jackie as unwillingness to be perceived as incapability in controlling his life. Jackie tells her husband: “Probably the only thing worse than being bullied all day is to have to come home and tell you” (Hirsch, 2011).

It is possible that Alex’s communication problems may be linked to perceptions about his father’s lack of receptiveness to what he has to say about bullying. This is important because if this is the case, then parents need to learn about how they can be more receptive to their children’s narratives about school activities. On the other hand, bullying victims, like Alex, need to develop communication skills so that, first, they can articulate their bullying experiences to school authorities and their parents, and second, so that they can verbalize standing up for themselves.

A school administrator, Paula Crandall, teaches students to report any bullying incidence. Alex’s mother, Jackie, encourages Alex to report his bullying experiences. On the other hand, it is not only the bully victims who need communication strategies and skills as interventions for bullying. As Jackie tells her husband, there is a need to listen to Alex when he needs to talk about his bullying experiences. Children should be taught that when they report their bullying experiences, doing so does not reflect an incompetence in managing their lives.

Researchers explain that many bullied young people refuse to report on their negative experiences in school including bullying for fear that they might be perceived as not being competent enough to manage their own lives (Austin, Reynolds & Barnes, 2012). However, a highly important insight in terms of communication comes from Devon, a friend of Tyler’s who had also been bullied:

I know what Tyler was going through. I know how he was thinking about suicide.

They went around, they were calling me a pussy, shoving me into lockers, saying, “F you,” and now, after I’ve actually stood up for myself, they just walk by me like oh, there’s another kid. It’s just another kid here at our school. It really came down to the point that I had to go myself and literally stand up for myself for them to leave me alone.

Indeed, many studies call for students to learn communication skills such as standing for oneself whenever there is a threat of being bullied (Papa & Lefton, 2015). By standing up for oneself, a key criterion of bullying, that of power imbalance, is immediately eliminated (McGuckin & Lewis, 2008; Pöyhönen, Juvonen & Salmivalli, 2010).

The single intervention that was clearly communicated in the documentary was prosocial behaviors from bystanders, as expressed by the parents of the deceased bullying victims. Many scholars and researchers have noted that prosocial behavior of bystanders as interveners could be the most effective approach for dealing with bullying in schools (Evans & Smokowski, 2015; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Indeed, it must be emphasized that bystanders witness the majority of bullying episodes (Rock & Baird, 2012); however, only a small percentage of these bystanders actually help the victim for the purpose of interrupting the bullying dynamic (Evans & Smokowski, 2015). According to some studies, only 10% -19% of a crowd can potentially become interveners on the behalf of the victim (Evans & Smokowski, 2015). Nevertheless, researchers also explain that in schools, the role of the intervener during bullying incidents may be fostered through teacher support. Studies have long shown that when students feel the support of their teachers, they become more committed to the attainment of tasks and projects (Evans & Smokowski, 2015; Rock & Baird, 2012).

In spite of the challenges related to school administrators' lack of knowledge about bullying interventions, there are significant opportunities for school administrators to make a difference. Indeed, increasing numbers of educators are becoming concerned about bullying. An overwhelming majority of educators believe that when they witness bullying, it is their duty to intervene (Stop Bullying, 2014). They are also aware of the impacts that bullying can generate on the academic, social, emotional, and physical well-being of their students.

Stop Bullying (2014) emphasizes that "education support professionals are untapped resources for bullying prevention efforts in many schools." Many of them have witnessed bullying and are highly willing and dedicated to the eradication of bullying in schools; however, there is a tendency for them to be less involved than teachers in training and prevention activities. Through the passage of anti-bullying laws in almost every state, school districts are mandated to develop policies so that bullying is addressed (Stop Bullying, 2014). School administrators can harness their unique expertise, a collaborative approach, as well as leadership so that these policies may be developed and refined and perhaps more importantly, implement evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies that meet not only the needs of the bullying victims but also their teachers, staff, students, and families. Through this, they can ascertain that common misconceptions as well as the wrong directions taken in bullying prevention are avoided. These wrong directions encompass zero tolerance policies that can isolate and individual students. Instead, policies should promote an environment in which alienation and distrust thrive ("Understanding", 2014).

## Conclusion

Due to the non-intervention of many bystanders while bullying was being done in *Bully*, one gets the message that an important intervention that schools need to develop and inculcate among students is bystander intervention as a form of prosocial behavior. Apart from these, schools may adopt programs that have been proven to be effective, provided that they use the entire-school approach. The findings of this study lead to applied recommendations for helping schools address bullying.

Bullying is considered as a low-level form of violence. It must be addressed before it could escalate to high-level violence, as seen in *Bully* through Ja'Meya's experience. Even though it is a low-level form of violence, bullying occurs more frequently and thus could have more profound and lasting impacts on students' mental health and school performance. One must keep in mind that tragic school incidents such as the shootings in Columbine High School, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, and Sandy Hook Elementary School, were all rooted in bullying. Schools may have safety measures but not all of these would be effective. As substantiated by previous research, school safety measures seeking to prevent violence may increase awareness among students about surveillance, but these are not necessarily effective when it comes to bullying. One recalls how the bus driver in *Bully* seems so be ineffective in trying to stop Alex's bullying.

According to Blossnich and Bossarte (2011), overall, school safety measures are not associated with reports of low-level violent peer victimization. Safety measures (such as security cameras) are not positively associated with prevention of certain types of peer victimization (such as rumor-spreading), there are measures (such as security cameras) that would seemingly prevent peer victimization (such as physical bullying) but actually

do not. Albeit the primary purpose of these safety measures is to prevent violent behavior, the underlying rationale of surveillance presents questions regarding effectiveness. This is an interesting perspective in the context of intervention. For instance, if students were aware that they are being physically watched in the hallways by security guards, teachers, or a surveillance camera, would they be less likely to perpetrate overt peer victimization behaviors related to bullying? Previous studies have shown that having teachers or other staff supervise hallways leads to reduced physical victimization and vandalism; however, the same is not true in the case of security guards and security cameras (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011).

Are students, then, less aware and are thus less affected by security cameras? This is highly relevant to the experience of Alex in *Bully*. He experiences increasingly violent forms of bullying in the school bus, wherein the driver is the relevant school staff. On the other hand, another compelling aspect of Alex's experiences of increasingly violent bullying in the school bus is that Hirsch was able to capture most of it through his camera, implying that Alex's bullies were not inhibited by the prospect of being filmed while perpetrating the act. Why, then do bullies persist in spite of the presence of school authorities and in spite of camera gaze?

On the other hand, previous studies show that students feel better about their negative experiences in school if they feel that they have the support of their teachers. It is likely that the deeper level of engagement between students and teachers as compared to other school staff contributes to this phenomenon. Hence, school staff, including bus drivers, need to be trained about how they can effectively engage with students so that they can influence behavior including bullying. In relation to these, school teachers need



to be exhorted to be more active in anti-bullying campaigns because of the influence that they have on their students. Additionally, there is a need to emphasize that the attitude “kids will be kids” is harmful to students especially in the context of bullying. School staff need to acknowledge that bullying is a grave social issue that prevails in school environments; thus, there is nothing acceptable about it.

Peer counseling would seem to be a potentially effective intervention for bullying.

Through peer counseling programs, students can learn how to stand up for themselves, as well as learn that intervening in bullying is a prosocial behavior that will have positive consequences. When schools ask their students to intervene as bystanders, there should be resources in place that such students, when intervening, will not suffer from adverse outcomes such as retaliation. Bystander intervention needs to be promoted in schools. Indeed, these bystander programs may be taught to emphasize how through their actions and influence, bullying may addressed from schools.

Parents need to be constantly encouraged to be involved in their children’s schooling. They also need to undergo training about how they can adopt effective communication strategies such that their children feel welcome whenever discussing bullying incidents. For the part of the bullies, parents need to be vigilant about their children’s behavior especially in the context of bullying. Along these lines, adults need to demonstrate about the following measures: warmth and sincere interest in the students; clear articulation of unacceptable/acceptable implement sanctions for violators; and, serve as role models.

Schools need to adopt school-wide or entire-school approaches to bullying. An example of this is the OABP. This program needs to be implemented in order to reduce

bullying problems in schools, prevent emergence of new bullying problems, and, improve peer relationships within the school. In turn, school may have to restructure their environment so that risks for bullying are managed, opportunities for reducing bullying are rewarded. Schools may also adopt the school-wide BPYS, which promotes the development of skills and identities that positively impacts bullying.

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation of this study is that it is based on a documentary that does not present insights from experts and professionals such as psychologists and educators. The value of the documentary in providing an in-depth presentation of bullying as directly experienced by victims cannot be emphasized enough. Nevertheless, the lack of professional and expert insight into the phenomenon means that this study is grounded in analysis that is filtered through the researcher's personal lens. Hence, there could be important phenomena that may have inadvertently been left out of the analysis and accompanying discussions.

### **Areas for Future Research**

Further research is needed to measure the effectiveness of current interventions that schools are using to address bullying, keeping in mind the different subgroups impacted. These include youth coming from minority groups. There seems to be contexts in which students or families who report bullying are not taken seriously, or even shunned, by their peers or other community members. Based on the results of this study, future areas for research include the specific interventions that may be tailored according to student factors, including, gender, the type of involvement in bullying experienced, and form of bullying. There is also a need to study the roles of bystanders in such

interventions.

### **Closing**

It is unfortunate that bullying continues to persist partly because school attempts to curb it have not been successful. In the process, thousands of young people and their families continue to experience the pain, humiliation and adverse effects bullying. As a society, now is the time to stand for the victims and this entails increased efforts in finding the appropriate interventions as well as raise awareness of the harmful attitudes toward bullying in general.

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## Appendix A: Emergent Themes

Code	Category Description
1	Demographics (Education, Race, Age, Gender, Socio-Economic Status)
2	Violence
3	Bullying Characteristics (what, where, when, how)
4	Impacts of Bullying
5	Victims' Emotions
6	Loved Ones' Response
7	Parents' Expectations
8	Bystanders
9	The Bullies
10	School Administrators' Roles
11	School Culture
12	Existing Interventions
13	Friends