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Being bullied in adolescence: A phenomenologic study

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BEING BULLIED IN ADOLESCENCE

A PHENOMENOLOGIC STUDY

by

Linda Lesperance

Bachelor of Science in Nursing
University of Nevada, Reno
1982

A thesis in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

Being Bullied In Adolescence
A Phenomenologic Study

by

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Bullying is a common phenomenon that involves repeated intentional infliction of harm (physical, verbal, or social) to someone less powerful. Although bullying has been accepted as a normal childhood experience, it can result in a number of negative outcomes, including psychosomatic complaints, depression, suicide, and even homicide. A review of the literature found many research studies related to bullying, but only one phenomenologic study. Understanding what the experience of being bullied is like for those who endure it is an essential element in understanding and addressing the phenomenon of bullying.

The purpose of this phenomenological investigation was to understand and describe the adolescent experience of being bullied. Three adolescent male participants were interviewed about their experience. Using Colaizzi’s method of interpretation, two main themes were isolated from the verbatim transcripts, (1) The Importance of Connection and (2) Ways of Dealing With It.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the many children I have had the pleasure of knowing over the years, who have helped me to understand the healing power of simple human kindness. I would also like to thank my parents for teaching me the Golden Rule, and my sister for teaching me the importance of forgiveness.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: AIM OF THE STUDY

Phenomenon of Interest: Being Bullied

Being bullied is a common phenomenon that can interfere with children reaching their maximum potential, directly cause intellectual and physical harm, and has been associated with related physical, emotional, and psychiatric symptoms. The experience of being bullied has the potential for lifelong emotional sequella.

Dan Olweus (2001), a noted authority on childhood aggression, summarized the definition of being bullied which is agreed upon by most authorities on the subject (Hazler, 1996; Randall, 1997; Smith et al., 1999; and Watts, 1998): “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (p. 6). Additional guidelines given with this definition state that it must be difficult for the student to defend himself or herself, that it is not bullying if it is done in a playful or friendly manner, and that it is not bullying if the parties involved are similar in strength or power.

Bullying is a common phenomenon, however, estimates of the numbers of children who have experienced bullying vary widely. For example a recent study

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of 15,686 students (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, & Ruan, 2001) in grades six through ten, found that 29.9% of students had been involved in bullying, as either the bully, the victim or both. Another study of 204 middle and high school students (Hazler, Hoover & Oliver, 1992) found that 75% reported having been bullied.

The phenomenon of bullying has been studied by researchers in the educational and psychological fields. Very few studies can be found in the nursing literature on the phenomenon, and the majority of these studies were done in England. Because bullying has far reaching implications for the delivery of health care, research from a nursing perspective is needed. Additionally, a review of the literature reveals only one phenomenologic study related to the experience.

A majority of the studies identified in the literature address both victim and aggressor components of the bully/victim relationship, because the existence of one is dependent upon the other. Furthermore, studies which segregate students into groups of those who are bullied and who are bullies do so in a contrived manner, making decisions as to what levels of behavior should be used to define the different populations. In one study (Espelage, Bosworth & Simon, 2000) the authors chose to view bullies and victims on a continuum, which effectively addressed this problem. While there is overlap between the groups of students who are victims, bullies, or both, there are substantial differences between the groups. These differences warrant separate investigations into the experiences of these individual groups (Crick et al., 2001 and Haynie et al., 2001).

Numerous studies from a variety of professional fields have yielded important information on the phenomenon of bullying. However, many questions still
remain, including questions about how best to predict what children will become bullies or be recipients of bullying and how to protect these children from the ill effects associated with this phenomenon. A very pertinent and relatively unexplored area of research is in understanding what the experience of being bullied means to those whom it affects.

Focus: Adolescents Who Have Experienced Being Bullied

Bullying has been found to be at its worst between the sixth and ninth grades (Duncan, 1999; Hazler, 1996; and Nansel et al., 2001). Adolescents were targeted for this study because they may be able to communicate the nuances of this experience better than younger children (Nippold, 2000). In addition, the higher prevalence of bullying behavior at this developmental stage increases the likelihood of finding participants for the study who have recent exposure to the experience.

Research Question and Study Purpose

The question of this phenomenological study is: What is the experience of being bullied like for adolescent victims? This study will attempt to understand and describe the meaning this experience has for those adolescents who have lived it, and attempt to discover common themes which may be related to the physical, emotional, social and academic impacts of this experience.

Relevance to Nursing

Although this study deals only with childhood bullying, bullying is a phenomenon that is pervasive to all cultures, genders and ages. The effects of being bullied can be found at almost any stage of life. Therefore, understanding
this phenomenon and its implications are important to all nurses. It is hoped that the results from this study will provide a greater understanding of what the experience of being bullied means to those who live it. This information could then be used to positively influence delivery of nursing care to those who are bullied and perhaps contribute to nursing education programs aimed at understanding, identifying, and reducing the prevalence of this phenomenon.
CHAPTER II

EVOLUTION OF THIS STUDY

Rationale

The implications of both being bullied and being a bully are staggering in terms of lost quality of life and lost human potential. In a study of more than 16,000 students, Nansel et al. (2001) found both depression and severe suicidal ideation were strongly linked with being a bully, a victim, or both. In addition, this study found that students in grades six through ten who were bullied had increased difficulty making friends, experienced greater loneliness, and exhibited diminished social and emotional adjustment when compared to other students. Duncan (1999) found that young adults who were bullied in childhood continued to experience higher levels of psychological distress than peers without this history. In follow up of his Scandinavian studies, Olweus (1993) found that former bullies have four times more court convictions than their non-bullying peers by the age of 24, and that adult survivors of bullying have higher levels of depression and lower self esteem than those who were not bullied.

The prevalence of bullying and its potentially serious consequences call for efforts to remedy this problem. An abundance of programs aimed at both children and adults have been generated, to teach assorted skills as alternates
to bullying and victimization behavior. The intention of these programs is to minimize harm caused by this phenomenon. Examples of programs instituted in efforts to both curb bullying behavior and to 'bully proof' children abound: Second Step (Beland, 1997), Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus, 2001), Pledge To Respect (English, 2001), Resolving Conflict Creatively (Banner, 1999), Employee Assistance Programme [sic] (Randall, 1997), and Enhancing Resilience (Center for Mental Health Services [CMHS], 1999). Many of these programs provide research results demonstrating statistical evidence of their effectiveness. However, both bullying and being bullied continue to be commonplace experiences in our society, as demonstrated by numerous research findings (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Duncan, 1999; and Nansel et al., 2001).

Although a moderate amount of research on the subject of being bullied has been published, there is a paucity of nursing research on the subject, and very few studies have been done in the United States related to bullying. Additionally, there is a substantial lack of qualitative research related to the phenomenon of bullying and being bullied. It is essential to understand what the actual lived experience of being bullied means to those who live it, in order to formulate appropriate nursing interventions, develop successful anti-bullying education, and guide the direction of future research. While this study will only focus on the lived experience of those adolescents who have been or are being bullied, there are other equally important aspects of the human experience related to the phenomenon of bullying that need to be better understood.
Historical Overview

Bullying is nothing new. Olweus (1993), perhaps the premier authority on bullying, notes that “bullying among schoolchildren is no doubt a very old phenomenon” (p. 1). Hoover and Oliver (1996) postulate that bullying may have had necessary roots: “there may have been a time when the honing of competitive and aggressive skills in rough play had survival value for the human species” (p. 4). This attitude is reflected in research findings by Oliver, Hoover & Hazler (1994) that revealed students between 7th and 12th grades who were participants in bullying believed that bullying serves to make the victim “tougher.”

Traditionally, bullying and being bullied have been accepted as an integral part of the normal interaction between children. It has been addressed historically with an attitude identified as ‘kids will be kids’ (Hess, 1999; and Hoover & Oliver, 1996). Children hear many comments that undermine their survival of and protection from the serious and destructive nature of bullying: ‘it’s a part of growing up’ . . . ‘take it up yourself’ . . . ‘toughen up’ . . . and ‘they tease you because they like you’. These comments serve to enforce the myth that being bullied is an inconsequential experience (Hazler, 1996). It has been speculated that this attitude results in children believing that being bullied is a “part of the natural order of things” (Hoover & Oliver, 1996, p. 4). However, the growing realization that bullying results in serious and lifelong consequences for all involved parties and awareness of the connection between recent acts of school violence and being bullied requires a revision in these attitudes. Officials at the National School Safety Center (Watts, 1998) comment that “bullying is
perhaps the most enduring and underrated problem in our schools today" (p. 160).

*Awareness of the Problem*

Authorities, whether it be parents, teachers, principals, or employers, are often unaware of the prevalence of bullying. In addition, they fail to intervene appropriately when they are aware of the problem and tend to underestimate the serious nature of the harm which can result from being bullied. An Australian study of 631 middle school students (Slee, 1992) revealed that 10% of the students felt that teachers 'hardly ever' or 'never' tried to stop bullying, and 15% of the students felt 'not at all or only safe sometimes' from being bullied at school. In discussing interviews with middle and high school students in 1990, Hazler et al. (1992) found that the majority of students felt adults failed to "recognize the severity of the problem" (p.20). Olweus (1993), in a 1983 study of 568,000 primary and junior high Scandinavian students, found that between 40 and 60% of these students reported that teachers intervened 'once in a while' or 'almost never' in bullying situations. Furthermore, that 'someone at home' talked to the junior high students about their experiences related to bullying only 35% of the time. A small study of 207 middle and high school students (Hazler, Hoover & Oliver, 1996) in the Midwest United States revealed that 69% of the students felt that school professionals handled bullying situations 'poorly'.

It is interesting to note that more recent studies indicating awareness of the prevalence and seriousness of school bullying were not found in the literature. It would seem that with the increasing notoriety of the problem of bullying, parents
and teachers would be more aware of the problem. However, an unpublished study (Lesperance, Schaffmaster & Wilson, 1999) conducted in rural Nevada elementary schools in 1999 revealed that while 49% of the students felt that bullying was a problem at school, less than 1% of either the teachers or the parents felt that bullying was a problem.

**Worldwide Experience**

Bullying is a globally pervasive problem that is expressed in varying ways depending on cultural influences. Bullying first came under scrutiny in Sweden in the 1960's and in other Scandinavian countries soon thereafter (Olweus, 1993). In these studies, bullying was called 'mobbning'[sic] based on the English word 'mob' indicating that a number of perpetrators were involved (Olweus, 1993). Another variation, 'Ijime', occurs in Japan and is defined as a "type of aggressive behavior by which someone who holds a dominant position in a group-interaction process, by intentional or collective acts, causes mental and/or physical suffering to another inside a group" (Smith et al., 1999, p. 311). Though influenced by culture, with subtle variations in definition, the phenomenon of bullying has been identified and researched in essentially every part of the world (Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Smith, et al., 1999; and Watts, 1998).

**Prevalence of Bullying**

Bullying is not only pervasive throughout cultures; it is also extremely common. A study conducted in the rural Midwest (Hoover & Oliver, 1996) revealed that 90% of a 4-8th grade student sample had been bullied during their school career. In a retrospective study of 210 college freshmen from varied
majors (Duncan, 1999), 44% reported having been bullied verbally on a weekly basis in childhood. A recent comprehensive survey (Nansel et al., 2001), using the World Health Organization’s Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey, of youth in grades six through ten, reported that 29.9% of the students surveyed were involved in moderate or frequent bullying, as either the bully, the victim or both. A study of 558 middle school students (Bosworth et al., 1999) revealed that 81% of the students admitted to bullying another student at least once in the previous 30 days.

Characteristics Of Bullies, Victims, and Bystanders

The Bully

Interpersonal conflict is an inevitable circumstance in the human experience, including childhood. It is to be expected that children typically will have difficulty dealing with interpersonal conflict, due to their relative lack of experience. Typical conflicts may have verbal, physical or social aspects and are occasional incidents, with varying ‘victors’ (Hazler, 1996). When these conflicts occur repeatedly over time, initiated and won by the same person, who for some reason (social status, peer influence, or physical strength) has more power, then that person is rightfully called a bully. It is this disparity in power which is the key determinant in defining bully status rather than victor status.

A Canadian study of 200 middle school students (Charach, Pepler & Ziegler, 1995) revealed that most students, including the bullies, cited a desire to feel powerful as the primary reason for bullying. Bullies tend to come from families who use physical forms of discipline (Espelage et al., 2000) and thus may be
modeling behavior they have experienced at home. A study of 558 middle school students (Bosworth et al., 1999) in the United States found that previous episodes of misconduct and frequently being angry were associated with children who admitted bullying behavior. Additionally, this group of students also reported increased access to guns compared to other students.

While bullies cause a good deal of harm, they tend to have their own set of problems. Schwartz (2000) found that bullies have impaired social skills, poor academic adjustment and are disliked by their peers. Tritt & Duncan (1997) found that young adults who were bullies in their childhood experienced more loneliness than other young adults who were not childhood bullies. A survey of Finnish adolescents revealed that students who were bullies experienced increased rates of depression and suicidal ideation (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Marttunen, Rimpela & Rantanen, 1999).

Types of Bullies

Bullying behavior is often categorized in varying ways by different authors. However, the most consistent categories found in the literature appear to be the divisions based on those who are purely bullies (pro-active bullies), and those who are both bullies and victims (reactive bullies or provocative victims) (Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993; and Schwartz, 2000).

Pro-active bullies. Pro-active bullies initiate and perpetuate the bullying behavior. They have levels of anxiety equal to or less than their non bullied peers (Salmon, 1998), and they have not been found to have low self esteem (Olweus, 1993). Additionally, these children have fewer relationship enhancing behaviors
and goals than the reactive bullies (Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1999). Other studies have found that peers viewed these pro-active bullies as having a higher social status than victims (Oliver et al., 1994) and that bullies report a greater ease in making friends than their peers (Nansel et al., 2001). In the same study, Nansel et al. found that bullies were more likely to smoke tobacco and drink alcohol than their peers.

Reactive bullies. Reactive bullies, also called provocative victims, have anxious, aggressive or irritating behaviors that provoke bullying from other students (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999; Olweus, 1993; and Schwartz, 1998). These students have poorer social and emotional adjustment than other students (Nansel et al., 2001). Kaltiala-Heino et al. (1999) found that students who were both bullies and victims had a higher risk of being depressed and experienced more suicidal ideation than children who were only victims or only bullies. A study of more than 4,000 middle school students in Maryland (Haynie et al., 2001) revealed that of all students, those who were both bully and victim had the highest scores on a wide range of psychosocial variables including misconduct, decreased self control, decreased social competence and school adjustment, and increased depressive symptoms.

Victims of Bullying

Victims tend to have certain personality characteristics in common, including being cautious, sensitive, quiet, more anxious, and more insecure than other students (Olweus, 1993; Salmon, 1998). Victims are reported to be unpopular students who are not perceived as fitting in, either by themselves or their peers.
Furthermore, victims tend to retain their victim status over time (Olweus, 1993). Oliver, et al. (1994) found that middle school students tend to believe that victims brought the bullying on by their own behavior. Unfortunately, this belief was indicated by agreement on a Likert scale, so behaviors perceived as causing the bullying were not identified. Schwartz (1998) found that victims tended to see both bully and non-bully peer behavior as provocative, or as motivated by hostility. Forero, McLellan, Rissel and Bauman (1999) found that bullied students age 11 to 16 years lacked social skills and were more likely to be alone because other students did not want to spend time with them.

**Bystanders**

The bystander group has received the least attention in the research literature. Bystanders are the ones on the sidelines, who watch the bullying scenario and do not intervene. Hazler (1996) postulates that these children take the safest route, and do nothing to intervene on behalf of the victim. Furthermore, he suggests that this failure to act results in loss of self respect, and may cause the bystander to be concerned that this inaction could be perceived as a failure by the bystander's peers. In addition, the onlookers can contribute to the bully's reputation and social standing by spreading the word and verifying the power of the bully (Randall, 1997). Information regarding this group is mainly from opinion articles, and very little research can be found that mentions this group. Research into this area has the potential to contribute.
meaningfully to the understanding of the phenomenon and is therefore warranted.

School Violence

A thorough discussion of bullying must include its connection with school violence. It is this connection which is responsible for bringing media attention and research to the issue of bullying. Early research in the 1970’s took place primarily in Scandinavia, fueled by societal concern. This concern was validated in 1982, when three Norwegian boys, aged 10 and 14 years committed suicide, with evidence that severe bullying was to blame (Olweus, 1993). In the early 1990’s, bullying was implicated in similar episodes in the United States. In 1993, in Iowa, Curtis Taylor fatally shot himself at home after suffering from repeated bullying at school. Several months later in Georgia, 15 year-old Brian Head walked to the front of his class and shot himself in the head, after repeated bullying by peers (Marano, 1995).

As painful as these stories are, recent media draws our attention to the results of being bullied which have redirected self inflicted violence back toward the bullies. An intense retrospective study (Anderson, Kaufman, Simon & Barrios, 2001) of school associated violent deaths revealed trends which indicated that student perpetrators of homicide were twice as likely as homicide victims to have been bullied by their peers. In 1999, twelve lives were lost at Columbine High School, in an incident that was perpetrated by two students who have been described as being victims of bullying by their peers (Emerson, 2001). In March 2001, a 15-year old victim of extreme bullying allegedly shot 15 fellow
students, killing two of them (Roth, 2001). While these are just a few examples of
the episodes of school violence which have peppered recent history, episodes of
school violence are in all reality, rare and isolated. However, the outcome is
horrific and demands societal effort at prevention.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment falls under the definition of bullying (Randall, 1997) and is
perhaps the most prevalent and publicly acknowledged form of adult bullying. In
1998, more than 15,000 sexual harassment charges were filed with either the
Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or state agencies (Long & Leonard,
1999).

Unfortunately, sexual harassment is not limited to the adult realm and
contributes significantly to the problem of adolescent bullying. Both boys and
girls experienced increasing amounts of sexual harassment yearly from fifth to
eighth grade in a study (Craig, Pepler, Connolly, & Henderson, 2001) which also
showed that boys experienced increasing amounts of same sex sexual
harassment. Another study (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000) found
that bullies were more likely to report both physical and social aggression toward
and less positive view of their boyfriends or girlfriends than adolescents who
were not identified as bullies.

Gender Influences

Research studies demonstrate varying findings related to gender influences
on bullying behavior. Overall, the majority of research tends to demonstrate that
boys are more often bullies than are girls (Bosworth et al., 1999; Charach et al.,
1995; Forero et al., 1999; Nansel et al., 2001; and Olweus, 1993). However, research reveals conflicting reports as to whether gender influences being bullied. Charach et al. (1995) found that girls and boys were bullied equally. There appears to be a difference in the way that girls and boys experience being bullied. Males more often are physically bullied, by such means as being hit, slapped or pushed. Females are more often bullied with use of rumors, social exclusion or with sexually oriented comments (Crick, Bigbee & Howes, 1996; and Nansel et al., 2001).

Justification for Studying This Phenomenon in Adolescents

The early school years correspond with Erickson’s developmental stage (Lefrancois, 1996) in which the conflict between industry versus inferiority is resolved. During this stage, children have an increasing need to interact and be accepted by their peers. Bullying at this age can hinder children’s normal social development (Dixon & Stein, 1992). Because children with poor social skills (i.e. displays of submissive or withdrawn behavior, depressive behavior, and aggressive acting out) have an increased likelihood of being bullied (Schwartz, 1999), these children may find themselves in an escalating and circuitous situation in which they continue to be bullied.

While bullying takes place at all grades and ages, it has been found to be at its worst between sixth and ninth grades (Duncan, 1999; Hazler, 1996; and Nansel et al., 2001). A study of more than 6,000 middle and high school students (Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1996) revealed that bullying behavior drops off dramatically once students enter high school. Schwartz (2000) postulates that
individual aggressive and perhaps victimization behaviors stabilize at this age. The combination of age, developmental stage, and the influence of bullying on social skills development supports adolescent vulnerability to bullying.

Factors Related to Why This Inquiry is Thought to be Important

Assumptions

It is the assumption of this researcher that bullying behavior is preventable and that bullying and being bullied is not a necessary right of passage. It is the assumption of this researcher that interviews with victims of bullying will reveal common themes, and that understanding these themes is crucial in providing meaningful nursing interventions.

Biases

Potential for bias comes from several areas. First, this researcher has both personal and professional experiences with bullying and is intimately familiar with the particular's as well as the pain that can result from this experience. Consequently, this researcher cares deeply for and is empathetic with the child victims of bullying she has dealt with in her practice as a school nurse. It may become difficult to separate the essence of what the children’s interviews reveal from what this researcher’s experience has been. Secondly, this researcher has formed internal defenses in order to cope with bullying and has personal ideas and perceptions about the experience of being bullied that have the potential to sway the findings. These biases will be minimized through the use of bracketing, including decentering and anecdotal journaling (Munhall, 1994).
Perceptions

It is the perception of this researcher, based on her experience in implementing an anti-bullying campaign in her school district, that programs created to deal with bully proofing children are flawed because they are not based on the children’s reports of the experience. While the majority of these programs do teach sound interpersonal skills and should be helpful to any child, they are not geared specifically to the needs of the children who either bully or experience bullying.

Research Method

Phenomenology, a descriptive, “rigorous, critical, systematic method of investigation” (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999, p. 43) will be used for this research project. Phenomenology examines the qualities of experience and attempts to answer the question: What is it like to have this experience? Phenomenology’s goal is to promote understanding of the human experience (Field and Morse, 1985). Colaizzi’s (1978) approach to phenomenologic interpretation will be used to analyze the data collected during interviews.

Because the goal of this project is to attempt to understand and describe a human experience, namely the experience of being bullied, phenomenology is a suitable research method for this project. Additionally, phenomenologic research is well suited for nursing inquiry:

Phenomenologic inquiry brings to language perceptions of human experience with all types of phenomena. Because professional nursing practice is enmeshed in people's life experiences, phenomenology as a
research method is well suited to the investigation of phenomena important to nursing (Struebert & Carpenter, 1999, p. 43).

Relevance to Nursing

Bullying is a problem that often occurs in or around schools, merely because children are present in large numbers and must interact with each other. One study (Kandakai, Price, Telljohann, & Wilson, 1999) reports that 12% of all reported violent crimes happened in or on school property. Most research of childhood bullying issues has been associated with schools. Bullying then becomes a problem of the school and must be intervened upon by school personnel, including school nurses.

In keeping with the nursing function of offering holistic care and health promotion, appropriate interventions aimed at caring for students who have in one way or another been harmed by bullying become an important and essential responsibility of the school nurse (Darstadt & Woods, 1999). The National Association of School Nurses (NASN) endorses the school nurse’s role in supporting and teaching conflict resolution, peer mediation and peace education (1997).

School bullying results in many health related issues. Evidence indicates that both bullying and being bullied are linked to depression and suicidal ideation (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999). Bullying is also associated with severe somatic or psychosomatic symptoms including headaches and stomachaches, and behavioral and psychiatric problems including bedwetting and difficulty sleeping (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Forero et al., 1999; Williams &
It is necessary to understand how the experience of being bullied influences children, in order for the nurse to effectively intervene and care for these children. An understanding of what this experience means to those who live it can provide logical rationale for provision of more appropriate nursing interventions tailored to help children deal with the experience. Understanding of the phenomenon of bullying potentially can be used in developing interventions aimed at preventing bullying.

**Historical and Experiential Background**

I have been a school nurse for ten years, during which time I have had many, often daily, experiences caring for both bullies and their victims in my practice. I first became involved with the study of bullying behaviors based on a suggestion from the nursing administrative liaison for the school district where I am employed. This suggestion prompted a group of school nurses to do a project fulfilling the requirements of a graduate nursing course, which looked at the prevalence of bullying in the school district. A number of findings came from this project. Most notably, children responded that bullying was much more prevalent than either the teaching staff or the parents perceived.

The proposal for this study came about because of a continuing concern for children who are involved in bullying. The full spectrum of bullying includes children who bully, children who are bullied, children who are both bullied and bullies, and the bystanders. In my work with children, I have daily encounters with children who have physical, emotional, and intellectual complaints, the root
of which often lies somewhere in this spectrum.

My involvement with the subject of bullying is multi-focal. As a child, I was the victim of social exclusion perpetrated by a girl who was at the time, my best friend. This experience was quite painful and resulted in depression and continued difficulty with peer interaction.

In addition to this history, and somewhere in between taking classes toward my master's degree, being a school nurse and following up on the previously mentioned graduate class project which involved bullying, I became aware of a certain uneasiness with 'the evidence' related to bullying that I was basing both my school work and my nursing interventions on. I believe that there are important components, yet to be brought to words, which are influential in bully-victim interactions. As time passes, the volume of research literature related to the subject of bullying in my collection grows steadily. Most of the research is based on artificial play group study, self reports on questionnaires and the like. In these well thought out 'hard science' studies, there is limited direct input from the people who are actually caught up in the phenomenon and where there is input, it is limited in scope by the instruments used.

The findings from the aforementioned graduate project led to the implementation of an anti-bullying curriculum titled Second Step. A violence prevention curriculum (Beland, 1997). This program was chosen because it had favorable research supporting its use (Grossman, Neckerman, Koepsell, & Liuet, 1997). Staff members in the school district were well acquainted with the program, and some were trained to train others to teach it which helped to make
the program both easy and affordable to implement. Additionally, the staff members trained in its use were very positive about the potential benefit of the program.

Follow up questionnaires sent out after the first year's program was completed indicated that the program was very effective in decreasing numbers of bullying episodes reported by the children in our district. However, bullying continues leading to the conclusion that there simply is not enough known about the phenomenon. It is crucial for research to continue in an effort to stop the vicious cycle of bullying, and this research must be based on direct information from those experiencing the phenomenon.
CHAPTER III

GENERAL METHOD OF INQUIRY

Introduction to Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophy, a way of thinking about how best to understand and know the world with the goal of investigating and describing phenomena. Moran (1999) suggests that phenomenology is a practice rather than a system that “is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising [sic], which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears” (p. 4). In order for this to be accomplished, the investigator must set aside all preconceptions of the experience, regardless of the source, “religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or, indeed, from science itself” (p. 4).

Munhall (1994), describes the philosophical outlook of phenomenology in a colorful and perhaps more meaningful way, stressing the importance of reflection in the phenomenological approach:

It is the taken-for-grantedness, the sailing-through-life without reflection, the dazed going-through-the-motions learned from whatever context that give way too often to the meaninglessness and alienation so characteristic of our
situated context in the postmodern age. Phenomenology, as a way of being, takes us from this dazed perspective to a gazed perspective where we give, reflect, and attempt to understand the ‘whatness’ of ordinary life (p.4).

Phenomenology, however, is not only a philosophy, it is an appropriate method for qualitative research. As defined by Burns and Grove (2001), phenomenology is an “inductive, descriptive qualitative methodology developed from phenomenological philosophy for the purpose of describing experiences as they are lived by the study participants” (p. 806).

Unlike quantitative research methods, the goal of phenomenologic research, consistent with the philosophy from which it stems, is not to quantify, qualify, minimize or segregate human responses into various parts (Burns & Grove, 2001). Rather, phenomenologic research has the goal of understanding the “total, indissoluble unity or interrelationship of the individual and his or her world” (Valle & King, 1978, p.7).

Both qualitative and quantitative research add needed information to the professional fields. They are not exclusive. Rather, when both types of research are used, the researcher comes away with a more comprehensive knowledge about the phenomenon in question. Valle and King (1978) refer to phenomenology as a complementary approach to the natural (or hard) sciences. They suggest that phenomenon is both behavioral and experiential and assert that the experience must be identified prior to accurately labeling, much less studying the behavior under scrutiny. Phenomenology then, serves to identify the experience, and is an appropriate beginning in the search for understanding of a
phenomenon. In the case of bullying, it would seem as though the cart has come before the proverbial horse, in that there is an abundance of hard science research findings, yet only one (and that very recent) identified phenomenologic research study.

Qualitative research has been used by social and behavioral sciences as a valid scientific methodology, but it was not until the 1970's that nurse researchers began looking to qualitative methods (Burns & Groves, 2001). The human experience, involving emotions, sensations and perceptions, is often difficult to quantify, which gives rise to the thought that qualitative research may be a more appropriate method for some investigations. Munhall (1994) notes that nursing research focuses on the nature of humans and their interaction with the environment and is influenced by the discipline's ideology. She concludes that the research questions proposed by the discipline, based on its world view, support the use of qualitative, and specifically phenomenologic, methodology for nursing research. Qualitative methodology subscribes to the idea that truth is highly complex, not static, and defined by individual perceptions (Burns & Grove, 2001).

In general, there are five transformations in phenomenologic methodology. Initially, the experience of people is gathered through verbal discourse and transformed into language. In the second transformation, the researcher states an understanding of the experience. The third transformation involves isolating conceptual categories delineating the essences of the experience. In the fourth transformation, the researcher creates a written document that embodies the
researcher's summation of the experience. Because information can be misconstrued through any of these transformations, it is vital that this document be critiqued by the person who originally experienced the phenomena and verified for its accuracy. In the fifth transformation, an exhaustive description is written which should reveal the depth of the experience (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999).

It is important to note that while truth is seen as individual, the phenomenologic approach attempts to identify themes that are present in the collective experience. Moran (2001) warns “explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomenon have been understood from within” (p. 4). The explanations derived from the phenomenologic pursuit involve identification of themes which provide the structural units of the meaning of the phenomenon.

De Santis and Ugarriza (2000) propose that in recent qualitative nursing research, the idea of theme has been loosely used and this has contributed to lack of rigor in these studies. The authors proposed a definition of theme based on an extensive review of literature: “A theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole” (p. 362). Additionally, five aspects of a theme were identified: “Themes have form (patterns, configurations); themes function to unite or unify; themes are the underlying factor, web, essence or meaning of an experience; themes are woven throughout; and themes exist apart from their individual
properties" (pp. 366-367). In the interest of scientific rigor, these criteria will be used in attempting to define themes which might be identified in this study.

Aim and Rationale

The aim of this study is to understand and describe the meaning of the lived experience of being bullied. Bullying is a very common event that in one way or another affects the overwhelming majority of school age children (Hoover & Oliver, 1996; Ladd & Ladd, 2001; and Watts, 1998). Bullying has been around since perhaps the dawn of humankind, and traditionally has been viewed as a childhood rite of passage (Hazler, 1996; and Hoover & Oliver, 1996). However, in recent years bullying has gained notoriety because it is being implicated in many adverse outcomes (Harachi et al., 1999; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999; Labi, 2001; Morita, Soeda, Soeda, & Taki, 1999; and Olweus, 1993).

While one would imagine that considering the prevalence of the phenomenon, most people have a fairly good idea of what it feels like to be bullied. However, these perceptions are limited to personal experience, and although valid, are limited in scope. Understanding of the meaning of the experience of being bullied prior to caring for children who have been bullied or before designing a curriculum aimed at bully proofing children is crucial. A thorough review of the literature reveals one phenomenologic study describing the meaning the child’s experience of being bullied.

The purpose of this study is to understand and describe the meaning 6th, 7th, and 8th grade adolescents ascribe to the experience of being bullied. Understanding this experience will assist nurses in providing sensitive and
appropriate nursing care. Phenomenologic research methods were used to seek understanding and identification of the essence of this experience, posited in the form of common identified themes.

**Outcome of the Method**

Use of phenomenologic methodology provided identification of the experience and an accurate description of what it is like to be a child who is bullied. Themes, or essences were identified and an exhaustive description of the experience was derived from the process in an attempt to provide understanding of this experience.

**Colaizzi's Method of Data Analysis**

Paul Colaizzi (1978), an existential phenomenologic psychologist, set forth a particular method of data interpretation. The rigor of the Colaizzi methodology promotes credibility of the research findings. Colaizzi reasoned that use of strictly experimental research in the field of human science was paradoxical. He suggested that operational definitions excluded the human experience from the very research which struggles to study it. On the other hand, the need for an objective methodology was recognized, culminating in the specific steps he outlined (Valle & King, 1978).

**Colaizzi's Methodologic Steps**

Colaizzi (1978) outlines seven essential steps in the process of analysis:

1. All subjects' oral or written descriptions are read in order to obtain a feel for the whole. These written descriptions are also called protocols.

2. Significant statements and phrases pertaining directly to the phenomenon
are extracted. In this step repetitious statements can be deleted and highly specific comments can be generalized.

3. Meanings are formulated from these significant statements and phrases. This step involves "creative insight for the leap from what his subjects say to what they mean" (p. 59). There is a risk of losing the essence of the meaning for the individual in this leap, which the researcher must be cautious of.

4. Meanings are clustered into themes. Prior to this step, the process in number three has been repeated for all protocols. As in step three, translating the meanings into clustered themes also risks losing sight of the subject's meaning.

5. Results are integrated into a written exhaustive description of the phenomenon.

6. The exhaustive description is formulated into an unequivocal statement identifying the fundamental structure of the phenomenon.

7. The researcher returns to participants with the findings for validation. This step is critical in providing reliability to the research. If there is any additional data or clarification, it is incorporated into the findings.

Methodological Rigor

To have meaning and be of value, research must be based on sound scientific principles. Rigor is the term used to denote adherence to the process of scientific research and encompasses four areas. These four areas are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity and are described as they apply to qualitative research by Guba & Lincoln (1981).
**Internal validity.** Internal validity is described as the truth or credibility of the research findings and helps to establish confidence in the findings as being a truthful representation (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). One method for assuring internal validity is returning to the study participants to verify that the findings indeed reflect their experience.

**External validity.** External validity, also called fittingness or applicability, has to do with the ability of the research findings to be generalized to other populations. However, the aim of phenomenologic research is not to obtain findings that can be generalized; it is to provide insight into a particular group. Guba and Lincoln, (1981) discuss the use of “thick description” (p. 119) as a way of helping the reader assess the generalizability of the study. Thick description involves thoroughly and literally documenting the situation being studied.

**Reliability.** Reliability is also called consistency or auditability. For qualitative research, this indicates that the research findings are logical and replicable (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). One method of demonstrating reliability is for the researcher to document the process, leaving a ‘trail’ that another researcher, trained in the method, can follow.

**Objectivity.** Objectivity, also referred to as neutrality or confirmability, is a difficult yet critical part of the phenomenologic process (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Two processes can be used to help promote objectivity of the phenomenologic research. Researchers identify and set aside their own perceptions of the experience in a process known as bracketing. The other process involves taking
the findings back to the participants for confirmation that the description captures their experience of the phenomenon.

**Concepts and Terms**

Concepts and terms particular to phenomenology may require some explanation for those who are unfamiliar with this type of research.

**Bracketing.** Bracketing is a process in which the researcher acknowledges and sets aside personal beliefs, withholds judgements about what has been experienced, and remains open to the findings as they are revealed (Struebert & Carpenter, 1999). The related techniques of decentering, and anecdotal journaling will be discussed further in chapter IV.

**Consciousness.** Husserl argued that the world would not exist without consciousness, and that if one could completely make the world disappear, pure consciousness would remain. Consciousness is defined as absolute existence in this world separate from the things of nature (Moran, 2000). Munhall (1994) quotes Merlau-Ponty's definition of consciousness as a "sensory awareness of and response to the environment" (p. 14). The mind and the body are seen as one unit of experiencing. Objectivity, which searches for reliability and validity, must consider the mind-body relationship and understand that all knowing comes through this consciousness (Munhall, 1994). In order for perceptions to be considered reliable and valid, one must consider that perceptions are inextricably tied to a subjective experience because they are perceived through consciousness.

**Embodiment.** This concept refers to the fact that it is the body which gives
access for the senses to experience the world. Each person experiences the world within a personal framework based on personal factors (Munhall, 1994).

**Essences.** The structure of an experience, which can be found regardless of particular circumstances, is the essence of the experience. Valle and King (1978) liken essences to crystal morphology. A mineral crystal may take many shapes, sizes and color variations. A closer look will reveal the constant and unchanging form of the crystalline structure which is the foundation of any such specimen. Essences then, are the underlying constant and unchanging basis of an experience.

**Meaning.** There is a transaction between the individual and the situation, a give and take which results in the person not only constituting the situation, but is in turn, also being constituted by the situation (Munhall, 1994).

**Perception And Experience.** Perception is what happens in the body with the information that is obtained through the senses. It is the perception of experience that is paramount in phenomenology. Perceptions are necessarily accepted as truthful. It is imperative that researchers place no value judgements upon perceptions (Munhall, 1994).
CHAPTER IV

METHOD OF INQUIRY- APPLIED

Sample

The population targeted in this study was students attending either a junior high or middle school in rural Elko County, and who had experienced being bullied within the last year. The participants selected were willing and able to discuss the experience and the feelings surrounding it. Both the students and their parents agreed to be interviewed and tape recorded. Due to time constraints and the demands of transcribing and analyzing the data from the interviews, a sample of three students was used. The students approached for this study were identified through the school counselor or school nurse based on previous reported episodes of being bullied. Effort was made to identify a purposeful sample of students unknown to the researcher. However, one student was selected to participate who was known to the researcher. He was chosen based on his desire to talk and compatibility to the project requirements. It is proposed that preexisting rapport and trust may allow more meaningful interviews with adolescent participants (Field & Morse, 1985).

Specific criteria for inclusion in this study were age, experience, and willingness to talk. Students were required to be in either the 6th, 7th, or 8th grade,
and between 12 and 15 years old. Additionally, they were required to have been victimized by bullying on more than one occasion, and not identified as exhibiting coexisting bullying behaviors. They also needed to be willing and able to talk openly with the researcher. One bilingual student was chosen, who was quite fluent in English.

Setting

This study took place in a rural town in Nevada, with a population of about 25,000. There is one Junior High School with students in 7th and 8th grades and a Middle School with 6th, 7th, and 8th grades in an adjacent suburb. The town is somewhat isolated with the next comparable size town more than two hours away by car. The economy of the town is supported by nearby gold mines. The local economy has become somewhat depressed because of the declining price of gold over the last few years.

The interviews took place either at a nearby school or in the participant’s home, depending on where the participant felt most comfortable. Utmost attention to the participant’s privacy was afforded at all times. Family members were instructed in the essential need for privacy with the interviews which took place in the home. A quiet atmosphere was required to ensure quality recording of the interviews. The locations were selected in order to provide a private, neutral, and confidential environment, which promoted the participant’s comfort and willingness to relate information about the experience of being bullied.

Gaining Access in the School District

The school district was approached and was receptive to this research
project. Preliminary approval for the project was given by the Superintendent of the school district. Additionally, the Administrative Liaison to Nursing expressed support of this project. Prior to actually beginning the study, the principal of each school was approached and their approval to commence with locating participants was obtained. An explanation of this research project was provided to the nurses and counselors of the two schools. They were asked to identify appropriate students and explain the project to them. The counselors and nurses were given printed material to distribute to these students which included a method of contacting the researcher.

*Human Subjects Consideration*

*Informed Consent*

A written informed consent was obtained from each participant who participated in the study as well as from each participant’s parent (See Appendix I). The written consent included a full disclosure of the reasons for the research and the procedures used to gain information. Permission was received for tape recording the interviews. One copy of the informed consent was retained by the researcher and another given to the participant and the parent. Each participant and their parent had opportunity to ask questions and have them answered satisfactorily. Each participant was advised that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw or not answer questions without penalty. Participants were advised that they could request to have the tape recorder turned off at any time without penalty. These consents were clearly written in language appropriate for 7th and
8th grade comprehension level. The consent was read aloud and explained prior to obtaining the participant's signature (Field and Morse, 1985).

**Potential Risks.** A description of the potential risks was provided to each participant. These risks included increased identification of emotions involved with being bullied, possibly precipitating the need for emotional counseling. Participants and their parents were offered a list of counselors.

**Potential benefits.** Potential benefits of participation were discussed with each participant and their parent. Potential benefits included a sense of empowerment from contributing meaningfully to the understanding of this phenomenon and a feeling validation by another person's understanding of what this experience has meant to them.

**Secrets.** Secrets were discouraged. Participants and their parents were informed that information indicating potential harm to the participant or someone else would need to be referred to the appropriate agency. Otherwise, information obtained during the study was kept confidential and the research participants were guaranteed of confidentiality in reporting study findings.

**Gaining Access with the Participants**

Gaining access with the participants had potential to pose more difficulty. Adolescents can be wary of adults, and concerned about being judged negatively (Riley, 2001). Participants were approached by the researcher in an honest open manner with the goal of enlisting their trust and honesty.

Developing rapport between the researcher and the participant is essential and influences the amount, depth and quality of the information shared. It is
especially important when working with adolescents that contact must be positive and that the researcher has no authority over the adolescent (Glesne, 1998). Both of these factors were attended to by the researcher in her demeanor and in communicating to the adolescent that she was not representing the school district nor acting in an authoritarian role.

**General Steps**

*Presuppositions*

According to Colaizzi's phenomenologic interpretation (1978), the researcher begins by examining his/her approach in an effort to discover "presuppositions about the investigated topic" which helps the researcher to identify "certain beliefs, hypothesis, attitudes, and hunches" (p. 58). To accomplish this, the investigator elaborated her beliefs, hypotheses, attitudes and hunches in writing, as completely as possible.

Ongoing anecdotal journaling was done to help the researcher identify pertinent observations as they occurred. Anecdotal journaling is described by Munhall (2001) as a way of identifying experiences which relate to the topic as they occur during the research. While these experiences could be used to contribute meaning to some types of phenomenologic research, this study used anecdotal journaling as a method of ongoing bracketing.

Decentering was performed by outlining these presuppositions into a formal statement which acted as a framework for the researcher to contemplate. The researcher then set aside the presuppositions in an additional attempt to keep them from influencing study findings.
Interviews

Preliminary untaped interviews with the participants and their parents were conducted to enlist support for and understanding of the project. Questions about this project were elicited and answered and informed consents were obtained during this time. Each participant was offered a variety of creative methods (hence forth to be referred to as 'art-expression pieces') to depict the experience of being bullied. Adolescents are attracted to expressing themselves symbolically more than expressing themselves verbally (Riley, 2001), and it was hoped that this approach could be used to help participants communicate more effectively.

During the tape recorded interviews and while the participants were working on the art-expression pieces, the researcher interviewed the participants in a relaxed manner. The first interview was initiated with a grand tour question asking the participants to describe themselves and their lives. This was done in order to form a supportive and open relationship with the participants. The second interviews were initiated with the grand tour question: Tell me about being bullied, what has it been like for you? Because adolescents can be hesitant to talk to adults, a variety of restatement type questions, silence, and open ended questions were used to elicit information. At the end of each interview, if the participant had worked on an art expression piece, the researcher positioned herself next to the participant and reflected on the art expression piece with the student. This positioning often enlists an explanation and revelation of deeper meaning, especially once the participant realizes that
the interviewer remains neutral and nonjudgmental about the work (Dewdney,
Dewdney & Metcalf, 2001).

After each interview, the tape was reviewed by the researcher, and questions
or insights for discussion at the next interview were determined. Each interview
was limited to approximately one hour in length. Three additional interviews were
conducted and saturation was reached with each participant. These sessions
were private and between each participant and the researcher.

Transcription

The taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and listened to several times
in order to verify that the transcriptions were an accurate account of the interview
(Omery, Kasper & Page, 1995).

Analysis

Each interview was read several times in order for the researcher to begin
preliminary data analysis. Subsequent interviews were held to clarify any points
of question not answered in the previous interviews. These subsequent
interviews were also taped and transcribed as above.

Following Colaizzi’s method, significant statements were extracted from the
interviews. Duplicate statements were discarded and specific statements
generalized. A complete list of significant statements were formulated and
analyzed, and the meanings of these statements were “discovered and
illuminated” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59).

Clusters of themes were isolated from these formulated meanings. The
validity of the themes was verified by examining original interview data and
assessing for data not accounted for in the themes, and conversely, for anything in the themes not apparent in the interview data. Another researcher, with expertise in phenomenological research reviewed two of the interviews and the audit trail and indicated confirmation to the validity of the findings.

*Exhaustive Description.* These clusters of themes were integrated into an exhaustive description of the findings. In paragraph form, the meanings of the isolated themes were discussed at length. These meanings were then summarized in “as unequivocal a statement of identification of its fundamental structure as possible” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 61).

*Validation.* The preliminary findings from Colaizzi’s method in steps three and four were taken back to each participant for validation and clarification. Any new data received from this step was incorporated into the final descriptions and interpretations.
CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

The participants in this study were three 7th and 8th grade adolescent males who had experienced bullying. Each of these participants had experienced bullying from peers over a span of years. Although each of the participants had some physical interaction with the bullies, the majority of the bullying was verbal in nature. Each participant related that being bullied affected many aspects of their lives.

Andy, 14, is the only son of a combined marriage. He was born with a heart defect which has been repaired, though it continues to limit his activities. He was bullied at school for several years after moving to a small rural town.

Bob is a 13-year old Mexican American, fluent in both Spanish and English. He lives with his mother and has one sister whom he is close with. He has severe asthma and is obese. He has been bullied since third grade when he moved from a very small rural town to a larger town. During his interviews, he speaks of ISS, which means In-School-Suspension, a program to keep students supervised who have been suspended from school.

Daniel, 12, is the third of three sons, and lives with both parents. He had several anatomical abnormalities which resulted in a chronic urinary tract
infection. This was the major source of the bullying that Daniel received. He has also been bullied since the third grade. He recently made some poor decisions that he refers to during the interview, which caused him to serve time in the local Juvenile Detention Center (JDC).

Two major themes were identified from interviews with the participants: (1) The Importance of Connection and (2) Ways of Dealing With It. Sub-themes were identified under each of these major themes (see Appendix II). Each participant related information pertinent to the majority of each sub-theme.

The Importance of Connection

The importance of connection was woven through the interviews of all three participants. Four sub-themes were identified, Family Connection, Peer Connection, Self Connection, and School and Learning Connection.

Family Connection

You Don’t Want to Lose Your Family

The three participants all identified their mothers as sources of support. Andy said “I let my mom know . . . I cry and stuff.” Bob spoke of his sister as well: “And learning from . . . My mom and my sister, I think I have just grown stronger from learning from them.” He found connection with his father in coping with bullies: “I just usually shut up and ignore them . . . I think I get that from my dad.” Daniel identified several family members as supportive: “I talk to my mom or my dad about it . . . and my grandma, she always helps me when I am having a rough time. . . . she says it will just blow over and it always does.” Andy felt that being
connected with family was important: “You just don’t want to lose your family, cuz that’s the only thing you’ve got . . . you don’t want to grow apart.”

Connection to family, especially to their mothers was used against the participants by the bullies. Daniel stated “He was talking about my mom. . . . He was calling her a whore and everything else.” He offered this explanation: “They talk about your family, but they don’t talk about you in front of your face . . . because they don’t want to get in a fight with you.” Andy voices a similar experience: “He called my sister a whore . . . saying my mom was a baby cuz she was going to school. . . . So I grabbed him and I threw him on the table and I told him to leave my mom alone.”

We Beat Each Other Up Sometimes

Being bullied resulted in some amount of difficulty with connections within the families of all of the participants. Bob related “I wasn’t getting along too well with my mom . . . everything was just making me so mad and everything.” Andy summed it up: “You would just be rude, like your sisters could do something . . . and you can get really mad at them. You get in fights with your sisters a lot. You say things you don’t mean.”

All three participants had circumstances within their families which contributed to difficulties maintaining a sense of connection. Andy and Bob both had difficulties with their fathers. Bob related that his father “hardly comes to see me. . . . I don’t know that much about him.” Andy felt that having a better connection with his father would have diminished the pain he felt from being bullied: “My dad wouldn’t call and if he did, it wasn’t very long and . . . . He would
blame his problems on me. It doesn't help if your dad doesn't talk to you.” Andy relates that health problems contributed to difficulty connecting with his father: “My pulmonary valve still leaks . . . I get really tired, I can't do hiking, it hurts. . . . I had a really hard time, my dad was mad at me cuz I wasn't like him.” Daniel spoke of difficulties with one of his brothers “and I got to see the two fish fight . . . They will fight till the death. . . . Hey, that is kinda like me and [my brother] . . . we don't kill each other, but we beat each other up sometimes.”

Daniel's connection with his brother was made more difficult when his brother revealed Daniel's medical problems to his peers, which resulted in more bullying for Daniel: “My brother . . . told everyone. . . . I think he should have kept his mouth shut . . . some kids teased me because of it." Daniel also made life choices which contributed to difficulty with connections: “I was in big trouble, my dad was not too happy. . . . My grandma was mad . . . Grandpa. . . . wanted to see me before he died . . . he has cancer . . . he called me an idiot . . . he said I wasn’t very smart.” Andy summed up the importance of family connections: “You just don’t want to lose your family . . . that's the only thing you've got . . . you don’t want to grow apart.”

*Peer Connection*

*They Wanted to be My Friend*

Bob related that forming a connection with his peers minimized the teasing: “Once everything happened and they found out like, about my parent's divorce and everything and how hard life was for me, they sort of backed off, cuz they knew that was a hard thing for me, so they kind of stopped.” Andy felt that
connection with his peers helped him improve scholastically: "When we moved here . . . I started getting better grades right off the bat. It was just because a lot of people were nice to me and they wanted to be my friend." Finding connection in shared reasons for being bullied helped Daniel: "He went through the same thing that I went through . . . he had a urinary tract infection and he kinda had the same thing going on . . . so I started hanging out with him." Daniel stated that during a period when he experienced intense bullying "my friends they didn’t ever tease me."

All three mentioned connection with animals as a source of support. Andy commented "The best comfort for me is to have a dog or something . . . to be with, and talk, and tell things, just tell stuff to . . . I don’t have to worry about him going telling somebody what I said." However, this connection also left an opening for bullying for Andy: "I had to give him away because the neighbors were being rude and saying he was barking at cats and they didn’t like it . . . their son was the one who was bullying me . . . I kinda took that as bullying." Daniel also looked to his dog for protection: "Then I ran behind Rascal, because Rascal is my dog, and he’ll protect me."

While connection was typically seen as being beneficial, Bob expressed that connection did have its pitfalls:

They just think that . . . that’s their destiny to stay in that group. And like if they switch to another group, then their previous group might just think, oh, so they want to go there, we’ll just leave them alone then . . . There’s like the group of bullies and the kids, the kids that get bullied. And, I don’t know.
When asked if getting out of the groups of students who are bullies or were bullied was difficult, he responded: “Yah, that’s like big time.”

Protection: Someone to Stand Up For You

All three participants identified friends who stood up for them to bullies. Bob spoke of “a good friend, he’d stick up for me and like say . . . you try having asthma and try running.” Andy remembered “about four years ago . . . I made a friend . . . he wouldn’t make fun of me, he would stick up for me.” Daniel said of his friend “He stands up for me whenever someone is teasing me. I wouldn’t want to mess with him, he is a big kid. . . . A true friend is . . . someone that’ll stand up for you.” Daniel also finds protection with his grandmother: “She tells my brother . . . to knock it off whenever he is beating up on me.”

Bob found connection with a new peer group offered not only direct protection, but also protection borne from increased interpersonal coping abilities. He relates that his bullying diminished from “continuously” to “three times a month, maybe less.” He feels this is possibly because . . . “I am doing more things, ignoring people and fighting back and hanging out with all these new people.”

Nobody Understood Me

Difficult connections with peers were seen as an opening for bullying to occur by all three participants. After moving to a new town, bullying started for Bob: “I was the new kid, nobody understood me. And it sorta went downhill from there.” Recently, bullying had come from another source for Bob, who had taken Catechism his entire life with the exception of last year:
I hung out with the people who were the same religion. But then last year, you know I didn't know who went to Catechism. I didn't hang out with those people, I hung out with the people that I hung out last year and that was sort of where the trouble was too.

For Andy, the difficulty also started when he moved to a new town. He remembers life before the move: “Before we moved . . . I had a pretty good life. . . I just felt comfortable being there.”

Daniel did not attempt to seek help from teachers with his being bullied because he felt that would have resulted in more: “I wouldn’t rat him out. Because that would be like another thing for them to tease me. They’d call you a rat and everything else.”

The change from elementary school to junior high contributed to difficulties with connection. Bob related “here comes junior high, a bunch of new people . . . the judging happens and more people to tease . . . mostly because . . . kids have never been together . . . and they don’t really know each other that well.”

Difficulty with connections to peers was also caused by an informal segregation into various groups. Daniel stated “I kinda hang out with the geeky kids, that’s what we are called. So, I am a geek I guess.” Bob also spoke of the groups: “the Mexican kids hang out with the Mexican kids . . . the school’s broken up into so many things, there’s people that we call preps and jocks and geeks and stoners, and all other kinds of people.”

This segregation bothers Bob:

I don’t see why . . . everyone else can’t just mix in . . . that’s why I wanted to
join the Art Club . . . it’s not split into all these different groups. We’re not the preps and we are not the stoners, we are the others.

The influence of other students on friends was seen as a source of difficulty in maintaining connection with peers for the three participants. Daniel tells of a past friendship lost to bullying:

I don’t think he is my friend anymore . . . his friend . . . threw my hat in the tree, and [he] . . . don’t like me . . . [he] is like you can’t be friends with him cuz I am not friends with him so . . . he started teasing me.

Bob commented “there’s those rumors that people say that cut some of your friends in half, cuz they actually believe in them and then they don’t want to be friends with you anymore.” Andy felt excluded by peers when trying to fit in:

“When I joined basketball, they threatened to push me off the . . . box. When I would play basketball, they wouldn’t pass me the ball.”

Bob felt that no matter how well people know someone, there was still a lack of connection:

When your friends say I know you, you know, that just irritates me when people say that, cuz they really don’t know you. Like that one girl, who tried to commit suicide, they thought she was just fine and you know, she ignored all the teasing, but then she wanted to commit suicide. People really didn’t know she wanted to do that . . . They think they know what’s going on in your mind but they actually don’t.

Bob also felt that difficulty with connection to peers was partly his doing:

“Being disconnected from my peers, I think it’s because, and this is me, I think it
is because I don't like them. I mean some of them understand me and some of them, they don't."

_I Had a Disease_

All three participants had health problems which impacted their connections with peers and resulted in being bullied. Bob related three main issues for which he is ridiculed: "There's because of my voice, my asthma, and because I am overweight." He elaborated on his size: "They think you know since we're big kids that we're like really really tough . . . No one hangs out with you that much cuz they think that you might beat them up or something." His asthma was another source of difficulty. He was allowed to run one lap when the rest of the class ran two: "those girls are always like jealous, so they just talk about me." He goes on to say "with the teacher letting me go off easy, people thought that I was just cheating . . . and lazy." He also relates that after a severe asthma attack "all the cool people . . . would always make fun of me . . . I would hear about it every day . . . they would do re-enactments of it to get pleasure and you know, think it's funny."

Daniel felt that "kids never stopped teasing me. . . . Kids started teasing me because I didn't know that I had peed my pants, and then they just teased me, and they teased me." He spoke of what life would be like if he did not have this problem: "I would have a lot more friends . . . Probably be popular and not as a geek. . . . I'd be more happy . . . I wouldn't have ever got made fun of except for my temper, kids wouldn't have known about it."

Andy also relates that his health problems caused difficulty with peers: "I had
a big wart on my hand, right there. And they would start saying that I had a
disease and be really rude.”

False Connections and Betrayal

Bob felt that often his friends were not true friends, that the call of being cool
caused friends to turn their back on him: “Some of my friends, they want to be
like the cool people right, so sometimes they switch all of a sudden and they be
rude to be like the cool guys, and sometimes they just come back.”

Sometimes, these interactions felt more like betrayal than simply peers
looking to be cool. Bob stated “people are backstabbing sometimes, like I said
they pretend to be your friends.” Daniel spoke of a sense of false connection with
past friends:

I don’t think I was even ever liked by those kids. I guess they were probably
just trying to make fun of me. . . . I think that they were just pretending. . . .
they’re like what’s up Daniel, and then the next day they are like, Daniel you
are a fag.

For Bob, betrayal was something that started at home: “His girlfriend’s
daughter . . . would always tell me that my dad brought her mom flowers, and I
said no, not my dad . . . ever since I was little, everything’s sorta been a lie.”

You’ll be a Part of This Group If . . .

Bob spoke at great length about the superficial connections that are important
to the “cool kids.” He related observing a classmate ‘earn’ her way into the cool
group by sharing her gum. He thought she was “stupid cuz she was just thinking,
oh, I am cool now . . . If you think that by giving gum to some girl who is really popular, and thinking that she thinks that you’re cool, then think that way."

Bob also spoke about the tasks required to belong to the “cool kids.” These tasks were quite often bullying other students:

They just want to be cool so they decide to tease you . . . They have to do certain tasks to be part of the cool group. . . . Tripping someone, or like spitting in someone’s hair, or teasing them . . . start a rumor about somebody.

And I just, I didn’t want to be those kinds of people who got laughter out of someone falling down and like all their books and papers falling over the floor.

*I’m Doing This to Get to You*

Both Bob and Daniel spoke of the difference between joking and bullying. Bob related that feeling connected helped him to interpret joking as friendly:

“Everyone knew me there that was in my grade and like lower and they would always joke about things and I would always know when they were joking.”

Daniel related “I know that when he’s teasing me he’s just joking . . . other kids, they are really doing it just to be mean. . . . When your friends will tease you, you know they’re joking because . . . they wouldn’t hurt you like that.” Bob explained:

“Teasing would just be saying really crude stuff and you know, not saying you know I am not joking I am just doing this to get at you.”

*Self Connection*

Bob spoke of connection with himself which provided a sense of protection:

“She would always ask me to prove to her who my friends were. . . . I’d say why
do I need to prove myself to you. I don’t need to prove anything to you.”

However, connection to self was not always strong enough to be protective against the bullies.

I Won’t Stand Up for Myself

Two of the participants related incidents that underscored a sense of difficulty connecting with self. Bob lost sight of himself in the teasing: “There were just times that like when they’d just keep on going, I’d actually start to believe them.”

In addition, he spoke of a dichotomy between the person he is on the outside and who he is on the inside:

My inside image and my outside image are half and half, cuz my outside image, it’s like half pain, and sadness, and it also has, you know the cool calm that ignores everything and it’s the same on the inside, you know. I don’t really care what they think sometimes and then sometimes I do.

For Andy, a lack of connection to self contributed to his being bullied: “I’ll stand up for my mom, my dad and my sisters, but I won’t stand up for myself.”

Andy summed it up: “It really makes you feel very bad about yourself when the kids are making fun of you.” It also seemed that this lack of connection contributed to a lack of personal power: “This kid said shoot me in the, below the belt and I said no, he pumped it up, put the BB in and I didn’t want to, but I pulled the trigger.”

School and Learning Connection: That Must Mean You’re Stupid

All three participants related that bullying influenced learning and teacher relations. Bob was the most eloquent on this subject: “It was mostly at school, so
my grades kinda went down the drain." He summed it up profoundly:

Sometimes teachers make some of the most stupid assumptions and think well, oh they're doing bad, and . . . they're bad you know they don't want to learn so they shouldn't even be here. When they don't even know what their life outside of school is like. . . . And teachers just think bad grades, bad kid. Don't, don't teach them.

Having difficulty with learning opened the door for more teasing. Bob relates that this is another reason he gets teased and talks about the cycle it leads to.

They just think . . . since you got this low grade that you are stupid. . . . And then they get a low grade on something and then someone teases them about that, oh well look, you got a low grade too, so that must mean you're stupid, and you know and when that happens, people get teased and then they get in fights and it gets pretty weird.

Fear of difficulty with peer connections was seen as influential in classroom participation by Bob: "I don't want to ask . . . and feel stupid . . . if you get it wrong and it was like a real easy question, and then like some of the kids laugh."

Andy felt that being bullied made it difficult to focus in school: "Besides your grades slipping, you can have a steady A, and you start getting bullied and your A drops. You don't turn in anything, you don't pay attention in class."

Dealing With It

All three participants spoke of finding ways to deal with the difficulties present in their lives. Three sub-themes were identified under this theme, (1) Coping with bullies, (2) Escaping, and (3) Fighting back.
Coping With Bullies

Keep it Inside

Daniel copes with his size by finding advantage: "Short is being cool. When you are short, you have a lot of advantages." He also realizes that he needs to cope by reacting in a less harsh manner:

I am starting to make it so like I don’t just lash out at people . . . my dad says that maybe I should start that because of my temper and one of these days if I lose it bad enough I could really hurt someone. I think he is telling the truth, because I have a pretty bad temper.

He also tries to ignore the bullies: "but sometimes it’s just too hard to ignore them. I don’t know why, it just is."

Andy copes by holding his feelings inside: "like a pop bottle . . . when I am sad I might cry a little but then I keep it inside. . . . I get quite angry at this kid at school but I don’t let him know."

You’ll do Practically Anything to Get Friends

Andy spoke at length about the things he does to find connection with peers. He spoke of looking for peers to connect with who helped him to feel better about himself: "it seems wherever I go I always pick out the kids who have trouble." He says of making friends who need his help "I feel good, I feel like one, I am smart." He also tried finding connection in other ways:

I tried doing sports . . . just to try to make some friends, but they were really rude to me. I would buy stuff to give to the kids . . . I would like give some gum . . . it didn’t really help. You’ll do practically anything to get friends. You’ll
start being rude to your friends. . . . Thinking that popular kids would start
being nice to you . . . when I tried that I just lose my friends.

Looking for connection with his parents was also important: "I’m happy when I
get higher grades, it makes me feel like my parents care about me."

Daniel was teased about an incident he participated in which resulted in his
spending some time in JDC. However, after he returned to school, it became a
source of connection: "Everyone else thought it was cool, and I said it wasn’t
[going to JDC] . . . then they are like Ya, it is." Daniel verbalized that this was a
potentially dangerous way of connecting with his peers. He also discussed efforts
he did make to connect with his peers:

I don’t get my work turned in on time . . . I was at the beginning. And then I
wanted to fit in cuz kids started to tease me . . . I was acting so smart and
stuff. . . . I am starting to make myself not a geek. . . . Start acting cool in
class and not all smart . . . I make smart aleck comments.

Bob looked for connection on a deeper plane. He did not relate looking for
friends at any price. Rather, he listed requirements for qualities in a friend which
included: "Trustful, you know it doesn’t do, it doesn’t go to the other cool guys
just to be cool. . . . Really good friend: always there for ya. Doesn’t do drugs,
stuff like that just to fit in with the cool kids." He also related "I don’t judge on
looks . . . it’s mostly personality and getting to know the person. . . . Like every
day I meet a new person and they show me to this new part of life."

Bob looked to a connection with teachers as a source of positive intervention
with bullying: "Sometimes I think the teacher can handle it . . . My new teacher . .
Some People Crave Attention

All three participants looked for ways to understand the many issues related to bullying. They also felt that this experience was influential in the type of person they chose to be and become.

Andy thought that the experience of being bullied would help him be "nicer and more understanding" as an adult. He also stated that for his own children, he would: “Talk to em. Do stuff with em. Ahh, just do stuff with them basically.” Andy said of bullies “they’re rude, they do it because they have some problems.”

Daniel explained of bullies in a way that clearly reflected how he feels about his short stature: “They try to act bigger than they really are. And they’re actually quite a little bit of wussies . . . they also come from like bad environments kinda. Most do. Bullies are usually big, not no wussy boys like that tall.” He also thought kids teased: “just to be mean, spiteful. . . . Maybe it is to show off to their friends.” Daniel spoke of raising children: “if I have any kids, I will tell them not to take it. And actually, I will tell them just to take it, cuz it will only go on not very long cuz they’ll get tired of it, because you won’t react to it if they get teased a whole bunch. . . . I will tell them stories about my childhood.”

Bob related understanding that advice from his family might not work: “my mom and my sister say I should have a big mouth like them. . . . I wish I did, but sometimes, that’s what gets you in fights and stuff.” He also commented on his understanding of why people bully others: “There’s just some people who crave
attention. . . . Need attention so bad that they have to go tease someone.” He also related understanding about how he reacts to bullying: “Bullying is sort of like a constant thing . . . when it just keeps happening it’s sorta just like gets you down and down farther and you just don’t want to listen to it any more so you just ignore it.” Bob’s understanding of bullies contributed to the way he treats others: “It made me figure out to not tease kids . . . or anyone that are in their family or anyone that they really like . . . because I know exactly how it feels.”

Bob also spoke of understanding that bullying causes more bullying: “When you get teased . . . you have to take out your pain on someone else and tease them. And then you know, it’s like a pattern. Then that person that you teased is going to go tease someone else.” He explained one of his art expression projects: “the world is, just a simple ball of red, which means anger, everyone cannot get along in this world . . . And when you know, when the ball can’t take all that anger it just, you know rips and it just falls apart . . . it’s just a red ball of fire like the sun.”

_Escaping: A World Where Nobody Could Bother Me_

All of the participants spoke of both longing to escape from being bullied and ways they attempted to escape from bullying. Attempting to escape by ignoring the bullies was a common finding. Bob said “I try not to pay attention to it because I just think they are dumb . . . I don’t really listen to them a lot of the time.” Andy said: “I wouldn’t do anything with anybody. I would just go someplace and just sit . . . If they did [bother me] . . . I just tried to ignore.”

Daniel and Andy also wanted to escape by just getting away and being alone.
Andy said "When the bell would ring . . . I would run home . . . I’d go to the
bathroom and I wouldn’t, I didn’t want to go back to class. . . . One time I actually
told my mom . . . I wanted to be home-schooled." Daniel commented: "I kinda
wanted to go home and like cry . . . be alone. And sometimes I just went to sleep
without dinner . . . I didn’t want to be around anyone. . . . I thought that maybe I’d
hit them and then get in trouble." While Bob did not directly comment on
escaping by being alone, he did relate that being out of school was helpful:
“When school ended . . . that was yesterday and it felt good, all the pain from
teasing went away.”

Bob found music a good way to escape: “The only way I could get away from
it and not think about it was mostly because of music. . . . Sometimes I have that
song stuck in my head all day . . . always helps me.” Daniel used to find music
helpful: “Listen to my music, but that don’t work anymore . . . cuz in country,
there is a lot of sad songs.” Daniel escapes by not talking or thinking about
incidents of being bullied: “Cuz they sort of hurt.”

The participants also spoke of trying to escape through various activities.
Andy found an escape in reading: “I got really into the Harry Potter books, cuz it
was like a world nobody could go and bother me.” Daniel turned to sports: “so I
have something to keep me active so I don’t think about it. . . . It helps a lot.”

Getting out of school by pretending to be ill was spoken of by both Andy and
Daniel. Andy said “I purposely made myself sick . . . I would stick my finger down
my throat . . . or I would just tell my mom I wasn’t feeling too good, or I would just
go to the school nurse.” Daniel found connection with his mother and
grandmother in escaping school: “I learned from the best... my mom always did that when she was a kid... Then my grandma’d come and get me and we’d went to Arby’s... And then she’d say you are not really sick are you?”

Andy escaped by not doing his school work: “I didn’t really like to do anything, cuz if I got it right, the kids would say that I was stupid... yet if I got it wrong they would say that I was stupid too... afraid kids’ll make fun of you because you do your homework.”

Daniel also spoke of the difficulties escaping can lead to. Remembering a time when the school nurse called him in from the playground in an effort to keep him from being bullied, he states “That kind of helped things too, except for when I got to class, people were like well, you have to have the nurse come and help you now?... the price you pay out there was shorter than the one you paid in the classroom.”

**Fighting Back**

Each of the participants spoke of the necessity of standing up for themselves, or fighting back. Daniel stated “Like when there’s no one else around to help you and then like they’ll never stop until you give them a reaction and if you beat them up one time, they’re going to leave you alone.” However, fighting back was not without cost, and was not always effective.

Daniel describes fighting back verbally: “And then there’s this girl in my first hour class, she calls me freckle face, and I call her the jolly green giant.” However, for Daniel, most of his fighting back is physical, borne of rage, and almost uncontrollable: “he just tripped me and split my lip, so I got up and I hit
him really hard, and if... my brother wouldn't have pulled me off, [he] probably
would have been in the hospital, because I wouldn't have stopped."

Daniel is aware that fighting back will cost him: "Don't defend yourself, you
will get in so much trouble. . . . I think that the kid that started it should only get
suspended, cuz the other kid was defending himself, but that's not how it goes."
He also related that after he started fighting back "It got worse because kids
knew I would react, and now it's like really hard for me to stop." However, he also
says of being bullied: "It's made me stand up for myself a whole bunch more. . . .
And, it's made me think more highly of myself."

For Bob, fighting back was verbal and not physical. He felt that being a "big
kid," offered him some protection from fighting: "They . . . know, not to get in a
fight with me cuz I was big, and they thought they'd probably lose." He describes
fighting back "someone says something and then I fight back and say something
else, which kinda makes them think, okay, well, if I tease them, well then they'll
hit me harder with something else. So then I'll just stop teasing."
However, this approach is not always effective: "But then there's still that people
who just keep doing it and then you know, I keep firing [harsh retorts] and still
doesn't work."

Bob described an incident:

I always tell him to stop it . . . and it still didn't work . . . they threw this marker
on my desk and the lid popped off and it went under his desk. So I went to go
get it, and . . . when I was getting up, the marker went like right here above
his eyebrow, and he though I did that on purpose . . . then the kid comes
back with the magic marker and sticks it in my eye. Although this incident started with an accident, Bob felt that it was seen as fighting back by the other kids: “After that, the teasing kinda went down, cuz people knew, you know, he fights back, then maybe we shouldn’t do that.” This incident cost Bob two days in ISS, but it also had a positive result other than minimizing the bullying: “When I did it, I felt happy, cuz I finally did something.” While fighting back stopped some of the bullying, it was not 100% effective: “All these new ones that didn’t pick on me last year, but now they are picking on me.” He also thinks there is a positive side to being bullied: “I think I have grown stronger from it.”

When Daniel and Andy speak of fighting back, it is easy to think that they might be the bullies. It is important to note that neither student was identified by school personnel as a bully. Additionally, they both felt that their actions were precipitated by the bullies’ behavior. Daniel stated “When in third and fourth, I kinda just took it, and then I got sick and tired of it, so then I started to fight a lot more.” Daniel was careful to note that he was not the one to start the fight when relating these incidents: “I kicked his butt when he was the one who started it.” Andy spoke of several incidents in which he was bullied that ended with physically fighting: “he come up to me and he just started shoving me and talking about my mom, so I laid into him.”

Fighting back was encouraged by the parents of all three students. Bob’s mother encouraged him to “do everything you can so I said stuff about his sister, his mom, his dad, everything.” Andy’s mother’s encouragement was more
physical: “My mom said if he throws the first punch you just lay into him, I did and then I stopped.” Daniel related that his father encourages him to fight back: “My dad always says, if they start it then you finish it.”

Daniel overcomes much of his bullying by being tough: “kids pick on me cuz I am small, they think that they can just push me over and I wont fight back. . . . I acted a lot tougher so like kids wouldn’t push me over.” He presented this toughness even in playing: “I had to start playing with the sixth graders cuz I was too rough with the other kids . . . when I was in fourth . . . and I still knocked them down.” He understands this behavior influences the opinions of his peers:

I know some kids are afraid of me, I don’t know why, I am just a little kid, a small little kid. . . . I don’t want them to be afraid of me because I am not going to hurt them unless they do something to me first.

Daniel is from a tough family, and he affirms that he learned to be tough from them. He describes various family members

My cool brother, he beat the crap out of [my other brother]. . . . My mom beat the crap out of some lady because she was trying to steal five bucks . . . my dad, when he was a kid, he used to fight with golf clubs. . . . They are not afraid to voice their opinion, and they’re not afraid to fight back. . . . We just fight when we have to.
CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

Summary

Bullying is a destructive behavior which peaks in early adolescence that causes and contributes to a myriad of negative outcomes. There is a deficit of knowledge about what the experience of being bullied means to those who endure it. For this reason, this study's purpose was to attempt to understand the meaning which the experience of being bullied has for those adolescents who are affected by it. A phenomenologic approach was used to gather information from three adolescent participants over the course of four informal interviews. Colaizzi's method of phenomenologic interpretation was used to arrive at themes that represent what this experience meant to these participants. Two major themes were derived from the data, (1) The Importance of Connection and (2) Ways of Dealing With It.

Discussion

There is a tremendous lack of qualitative research on the subject of bullying. Only one research study related to this subject was located in the literature with a phenomenologic component (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001). Although this study focused on adolescent girls' experience of being bullied or
victimized, there were many findings that resembled the themes isolated from the interviews with the adolescent male participants in the current study. Although Casey-Cannon et al (2001) did not isolate themes as such, they reported their findings in the following categories: Overt and Relational Victimization, Emotional Reactions and Behavioral Responses, Impacts on Self-Image and Peer Relationships, and Current Responses to Victimization. There are similarities between these categories and the sub-themes isolated in the current study. Although the female participants’ responses were reflective of responses from the current study’s participants, the male participants related more emphasis on the importance that connection to self and others has for them, and reported a greater variety of methods they used to cope with being bullied than the female participants.

Another qualitative study, done from an ethnographic perspective discusses themes which also relate to the current study. Cram (2001) researched the impact childhood bullying had on adult development of religious self understanding. The participants in this study had varying experiences with bullying; some had been bullied, other were bullies and others were bystanders. In addition to isolating nine themes from the interview, Cram observed that even after years, these participants continued to find connection with an intensely painful memory of the experience. The majority of these participants also related that they had never shared this pain with another person. Cram also noted the close association between fighting back and becoming a bully: "In an unexpected paradox, it would appear that the victim of the bully has become a potential bully,
both in terms of the feelings of hatred toward the bully, and the violent, unpredictable behavior outward and inward" (p. 339).

Of the nine themes identified by Cram (2001), two are particularly relevant to the current study, (1) the feeling of abandonment by significant others correlates with the importance of connection and (2) the desire to seek revenge which correlates to the sub-theme of fighting back. The finding that, at least for these participants, the pain related to bullying experiences influences a person well into adulthood is significant. Duncan (1999) found that 46% of college students who reported being bullied continued to think about that experience into young adulthood.

In a longitudinal study of more than 400 students, Kochenderfer-Ladd and Wardrop (2001) found that being bullied was not a chronic problem for the majority of children. They speculated that this may be the reason adults tend to react with a "general lack of concern and decision not to intervene" (p. 146). Furthermore, they speculate that this may be an appropriate reaction. In light of the life long, unshared pain that the participants in Cram's (2001) study relate, being bullied may indeed create a reaction that perpetuates the pain into adulthood.

Connection and Connectedness

The importance of connection for the participants in the current study is striking. The interviews continually reveal the power that both positive and difficult connections had for these participants. Hazler and Denham (2002) conducted a literature review which supported their hypothesis that isolation has
a role in what they term “peer on peer abuse.” They postulate that isolation helps to maintain an environment which not only allows bullying to occur but also facilitates it. Lack of connection, similar to isolation, removes victims from sources of support and protection. A literature review conducted to support the findings of the current study revealed that other researchers have used the term ‘connectedness’ and have studied the influence of connectedness on adolescent behavior.

**Family Connections**

Family connections were both a source of strength and a source of painful connection for the participants in this study. The importance of family influence wove its way through the interviews of all three participants. In a sample of more than 12,000 students drawn from the 90,000 student responses in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Resnick et al. (1997) found that parent and family connectedness was a key variable in overall adolescent emotional distress, as well as in lower levels of perpetration of interpersonal violence. Duncan (1999) in her retrospective study of college freshmen found that bully victims were more likely than peers without a history of being bullied to have experienced significantly higher levels of both emotional and physical maltreatment by their parents. These studies reinforce the importance of positive family connections spoken of by the participants in the current study.

**Peer connections**

The tremendous need for friendship was spoken of by all three participants, as was the pain which results from difficulty with friendships. Bullied students
have been shown to have poor social and interpersonal skills (Forero, 1999; Hoover et al., 1996; Johnson et al., 2002; Olweus, 1993; Salmon, 1998). These findings would certainly support the potential for difficulty with peer connections and bullied adolescents. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Wardrop (2001) found that bullied students consistently felt sad and alone. Loneliness was found to present sooner than social dissatisfaction in students who were bullied over time, and many of the students continued to feel lonely long after the bullying stopped. These findings support the importance of forming and maintaining peer connections as protection against both bullying and the mal-effects which result from it.

All three participants discuss physical differences which provoke bullying. A number of studies have found physical and behavioral differences to be provocative of bullying behavior. Hazler et al. (1991) found that adolescents identified characteristics such as physical weakness, facial appearance, overweight, lack of social skills, and emotionality as factors that promote bullying. Voss & Mulligan (2000) found that short adolescent males were twice as likely to be bullied. Vessey (2002) found that students she describes as outliers, those who were too smart, disabled and fat were more likely to be bullied. What becomes apparent, both through the literature and the interviews, is that adolescents are extremely aware of these differences, and that bullies are as unaccepting of these differences as bullied students are vulnerable because of them.

In a Dutch study of 1500 adolescents, van Beest and Baerveldt (1999) found
no support for their hypothesis that adolescents would compensate for lack of parental support with peer support. This supports the importance of connection to both parents and peers for adolescents who have been bullied.

Connection with Self

Being bullied minimized or undermined the most basic connection of all, the connection with self, for these participants. It resulted in both a diminished sense of self and sense of personal power. Grills and Ollendick (2002) found that with increasing victimization, sixth grade students experienced increasingly feeling worse about themselves. They proposed that victimized students begin to incorporate the “negative views attributed to them through peer attacks” (p. 65). This is certainly supported by Bob’s statement that he would “actually start to believe” what the bullies were saying. In a study of more than 2600 adolescents (Meeus & Dekovic, 1995), all aspects of identity formation were found to be primarily influenced by peer relations. If this is so, conflict with peers would have potential to cause difficulty with identity formation. This might shed some light on Andy’s sense of powerlessness in peer relationships, demonstrated by his inability to stand up for himself, and to control his behavior when the other adolescent goaded Andy into shooting him with the BB gun.

School Connections

Because the majority of bullying took place at school, many school related connections were affected. Connections to both learning and teachers were compromised with these participants, sometimes resulting in disciplinary action, but frequently resulting in pain. Resnick et al. (1997), found that connectedness
to school was negatively associated with adolescent health risk behaviors, including emotional distress, suicide attempts or ideation, and engaging in violence. Another study (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002), also using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, found that school connectedness was impacted by four attributes, classroom management climate, school size, severity of discipline and participation in extra-curricular activities. The importance of classroom management is clearly reflected in Bob's comments regarding the benefit of finding connection with the teacher in solving interpersonal conflict. It should be noted that the severity of discipline that Daniel experienced for fighting back, which resulted in suspension, reinforced a sense of disconnection at a time when connection was especially important for him.

*Dealing With It*

Very little research has been directed at how victims deal with being bullied. The literature does not reflect the perseverance and creativity that these participants used to help them deal with being bullied.

*Coping*

The pain that each of these students felt as a result of being bullied was extreme. That they were able to cope with it and continue not only to attend school, but to search for connection is a testament to their inner strength. Coping, or rather difficulty with coping that results in psychosomatic illness and depression, has been found to result from bullying. It would be expected that keeping feelings locked inside as Andy describes would lead to somatization. The participants in this study did not relate that being bullied had caused them to
suffer symptoms that could be related to psychosomatic illness. A plausible reason for this is that they simply did not realize the connection between these symptoms and being bullied. However, numerous studies have found a link between being bullied and psychosomatic complaints (Sweeney & Sweeney, 2000; Williams & Chambers, 1996; Wolke et al., 2001).

Both Daniel and Andy clearly related depressive symptoms and contemplation of suicide as a result of being bullied. While it could be argued that suicide would be more appropriately discussed under the theme Escaping, it is also an extension of depression and will therefore be included here. As discussed earlier in this study, a relationship between depression, suicide and being bullied has been documented (Bond et al., 2001; Hazler, 1996; Kaltiala-Heino, 1999; Rigby & Slee, 1991; Vessey, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that these participants spoke of these things. What is surprising, thankfully so, is that none of the participants had acted on their desire to end their own life. The extreme pain related by both Andy and Daniel and their successful avoidance, at least at this time, of suicide speak to an incredible ability to cope.

**Escaping**

The basic human response of taking flight when threatened is reflected in the interviews with these participants. The threat of harm, socially or emotionally, was almost more than these participants could cope with. They discuss both ignoring and wanting to be alone as ways of escaping being bullied. Participants in research by Casey-Cannon (2001) related that they had also tried to ignore the bullies. While this may be a common response, a reference to it was not
found elsewhere in the literature. However, loneliness in relation to being
victimized is. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Wardrop (2001) found increased levels of
loneliness in victims and propose that it is either because of withdrawal by peers
or social withdrawal by the victims. Both of these hypotheses are supported by
the stories the participants in the current study have shared.

Escaping by pretending illness was discussed by both Andy and Daniel. This
is not to be confused with the increased psychosomatic complaints addressed
previously. These participants clearly pretended to be ill, using whatever means
they thought would work. This finding can also be supported in the literature
(Hazler 2000). The 1993 Youth Risk Behavioral Survey (DuRant et al., 1997)
reported that 4% of students surveyed reported missing school due to feeling
unsafe either at school or on the way to school. Conversely, school absenteeism
has been shown to diminish after implementation of anti-bullying programs
(Smith & Madsen, 1996).

**Fighting Back**

The participants in the current study spoke of both verbally and physically
fighting back. Fighting back was felt to be not only justified but necessary and
was encouraged by parents. However, there is a fine line between fighting back
and succumbing to rage, and not crossing this line was difficult for both Andy and
Daniel. Participants in the study by Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) related similar
actions. They reported responding both with verbal retorts and actions such as
kicking. It is interesting to note that one of the female participants in this study
also understood that fighting back was seldom effective, as did Daniel. A theme
identified by Cram (2001), from interviews with his participants, was the desire to seek revenge. Some of his participants describe incidents of revenge that were quite violent. The fine line between being bullied and being a bully was also discussed by Cram.

Unfortunately, fighting back can become quite deadly as discussed in the earlier section on school violence. DuRant et al. (1997) found that greater than 10% of adolescent students reported carrying a weapon on school property in the previous month. Given the rage that Andy and especially Daniel express, it is easy to imagine that a violent and potentially deadly outcome would be likely if either had access to and possession of a weapon. The potential for a violent outcome of this nature is supported in research done by Anderson et al. (2001) in which adolescent students who committed homicide were twice as likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of bullying.

Conclusion

Findings and Implications

The lack of comparable studies makes it difficult to evaluate the extent to which these findings can be generalized. However, from current research literature, two findings are significant; the need these participants had for connection, and the difficulty of dealing with being bullied.

The Importance of Connection

The need for connection, or connectedness, is tremendous. Virtually every interview with these participants revolved around the essential need for human connection and the pain which results from difficulty within those connections.
This need for connection is not limited to family and peers, but extends to self and teachers and learning. The benefit of connection is clearly supported in the literature.

Children who experience conflict and harassment at school often find difficult connections which are not limited to those with whom they are experiencing the conflict. Connections become difficult with other peers who do not want to become involved and possibly victims themselves. Connections with school and teachers can become difficult as the result of dealing with the bully. As Bob related, it is often difficult for adult bystanders to correctly judge who the troublemaker is in these situations. Discipline may not only alter the relationship students have with teachers, but if suspension results, disconnection with school and peers may occur. Connections often become difficult with parents who are at a loss for how best to help their child deal with the situation. As Andy, Daniel and Bob related, difficulty with parents and siblings occur simply from feeling sad and angry because of being bullied. To make things worse, flight instinct takes hold, causing withdrawal from sources of support. All these things culminate, causing pain and suffering which can last a lifetime, contributing to negative life outcomes.

The implications of this need for connection are multiple. Adolescents need to feel connected and it is essential that avenues for connection be promoted in all arenas. School nurses who work with bullied students should include opportunities for promoting connection with peers in the care plans for these students. Family relationships need to be supported, strengthened and
maintained. Therefore, referral for family counseling should be part of the initial care of these individuals and their families. Helping children learn to identify and communicate their emotions would help to minimize interpersonal difficulty at home which can result from being bullied at school. The school nurse can both model and teach effective communication skills to the students he or she works with.

Cultivating connection with peers is essential. This can be promoted through many avenues, both curricular and extracurricular. As Bob related, finding peers who accepted him improved his life tremendously, and was somewhat protective against bullying. However, prompting adolescents who have been bullied into new social situations may be difficult. Connecting these students with others who have also been bullied may be helpful, as both Bob and Daniel related. The school nurse should act as an advocate for these students, encouraging them to form alternate and supportive connections through both socialization at school and extracurricular programs. Forming a support group for students who have been bullied is highly recommended. It is also important that the school nurse educate administrative staff as to the importance of keeping these students at school when there is a need for disciplinary action.

Unfortunately, finding connection with peers based on negative actions or consequences of these actions, as when Daniel was placed in JDC, is a real concern for these adolescents. Although Daniel discusses knowing that this is a poor reason to find connection with peers, the potential to look for connection again down this avenue remains. The school nurse can proactively address this
issue with students who have experienced improved connections with other students based on negative behavior.

While it is painful to observe these students being bullied on the playground, it is important that they not be removed from the situation, unless they are in physical danger. Instructing duty personnel to be aware of bullying behavior and arming them with appropriate interventions, including conflict resolution, redirection and anger management techniques is another appropriate nursing function.

Children need to be helped to form a positive self identity, especially when they have physical and behavioral differences which make them visible and vulnerable to bullies. Positive connections with others can enhance this sense of self, and while it may seem simplistic, even connection with a pet can be beneficial. School nurses should be aware that children who are either physical or behavioral outliers are prone to being bullied and help them to find connection with a supportive peer group.

*The difficulty of Dealing With Bullying*

It is clear from the reports of these participants that bullying causes immense pain. Pain is something that needs to be dealt with. It is contrary to the human condition to passively endure pain. Dealing with being bullied is a difficult thing which often results in depression, and sometimes tragically in suicide.

It is essential that students who are identified as being bullied be assessed for both depression and suicidal ideation, and treated accordingly. Students must be given both encouragement and opportunity to talk about their feelings related
to the experience of being bullied. These participants were anxious to share what this experience has been like for them, and both participants and their family felt that it had helped to be heard. School nurses need to provide an opportunity for bullied students to safely voice their feelings.

Escaping bullying, by either staying home ill, or socially withdrawal is documented in the literature and supported by this study. Frequent visitors to the nurse’s office may be asking indirectly for help with bullying. School nurses need to be aware that excessive visits to the nurse’s office and absenteeism may indicate the student is being bullied, and approach the student with this concern. Because social withdrawal can result in a lifelong feeling of loneliness, these students need to be helped to form positive interactions with peers in whatever way possible.

The concern for the potential of fighting back to result in a lethal outcome cannot be overstated. The research literature and news reports are full of stories which underscore this concern. While none of these participants spoke of wanting to take the life of the students who bullied them, both Andy and Daniel did speak of a rage that caused harm in retaliation for being bullied. Fortunately, these instances stopped short of ending in tragedy. However, it is easy to conjecture that this might not always be the case; if Daniel’s brother had not pulled him off the student who had been bullying him, perhaps it would indeed not be the case.

The obvious implications are that anger management and conflict resolution skills are imperative for these adolescents. However, the solution must go
deeper than that. Research has demonstrated that violence is a learned behavior (DuRant, 2000). The implications of this, in a world at war, in a country which has violent crimes occur almost continually, and in a society in which violence is the common denominator for many pastimes including television programs and video games are staggering. The school nurse can educate parents as to the destructive nature of violent television, movies and video games and encourage them to find healthier recreation.

**Strengths of the Study**

Perhaps the most important strength of this study is found in the participants themselves. Their courage in speaking of these painful events, not only in bringing them to the surface and looking at them, but in sharing them, is immense. Each participant spoke in great detail about a wide variety of aspects of their lives. This is quite commendable in light of the fact that adolescents often are hesitant to speak with adults. Additionally, because of the researcher's involvement in the school district and the small size of the community, many of the incidents related by these participants are readily verifiable.

Another strength of the study is that it proved to be a positive experience for these participants and their families. Two of the participants' parents and one sibling thanked the researcher for listening to the participant, stating that it had been beneficial. All three participants related feeling good about their participation in the study.

**Limitations of the Study**

This researcher is inexperienced in both this type of research and in
interviewing adolescents. These factors certainly influenced the quality of interviews and perhaps the findings. The researcher discouraged the participants from discussing their experience of being bullied until the second interview, in order to help form a trusting relationship with them. This may have been unnecessary, as they were all three ready to speak about this experience from the first interview. Discouraging them may have limited the amount of information they shared. In addition, the initial grand tour question of the second interview was not clearly asked of all participants, which may have also limited the information shared. Finally, one of the participants was known to the researcher. While he was anxious to participate, he did verbalize at the last interview that his mother would have made him participate even if he had not wanted to. These factors may have influenced the information he shared. Finally, the requirement that information about potential danger to either the participant or another must be reported, may have limited the information they shared.

Suggestions for Further Research

Because bullying sharply declines in high school, a study including former victims is warranted in the higher grades, to assess if distance from bullying episodes changes perception of the phenomenon. This small study should certainly be replicated, both with this population, with female participants, and with bystanders. Although locating adolescent bullies who are willing to share their experience might be difficult, a study with this population is also certainly warranted. A study researching responses to bullying and coping mechanisms for dealing with bullying is also warranted.
Being bullied has caused difficulty with every source of human connection these adolescent boys have. It resulted in immense pain due to conflict with and alienation from family, peers, and teachers, in addition to harming their sense of self and eroding a sense of personal power. These adolescents exhibit tremendous inner resources in devising a variety of creative methods of coping with both bullies and the pain they cause. Many of these methods increase the difficulty of finding positive and meaningful connections with others at a time when these connections are most needed. These courageous young men continue to search for connections with themselves as well as others.

Advice: Be Your Own Person

It is fitting that the last words are given to the participants themselves. They offered advice for teachers, school nurses and other students who are being bullied.

Bob had advice for teachers and school nurses:
Watch their students closely. . . . If like one kid one week was all happy but then like the next week, they were all depressed and they weren't doing good on their grades or something, ask them why. Just don't be like all snoopy and stuff, just say you know, why is there a sudden drop in everything? And hopefully they'll open and say why, and say it's because of bullying and hopefully that works, but if that ever happens, then they should ask instead of just let it pass by.

Daniel had more to say: "I think that if there are other nurses, they should
stop the kid ... if they see something, that kids are bullying someone, then they should take that kid down to the principal. There’s the solution.”

Bob, as was often the case, was the most eloquent on this subject. He offered advice for other victims of bullying:

Just be your own person, don’t let someone decide what kind of person you should be ... Ignore, ignore bullies ... mind yourself before you listen to them, you gotta look deep down to know who you are and not listen to what they say.
APPENDIX I

CONSENT FORMS
General Information:
I am Linda Lesperance from the UNLV Department of Nursing. I am the researcher on this project. Your child has been invited and agreed to participate in this research study. The study is to find out what it is like for middle school children to experience being bullied. I in no way represent the school district for the purposes of this research.

Procedure:
If your child participates in the study he/she will be asked to do the following:
1. Your child will meet with the researcher a total of four times to work on an art project of their choice, in a location of their choice. The length of these meetings will be about one hour.
2. During this project time, your child will be casually interviewed about what it has been like for him/her to be bullied.
3. Your child will be asked to review the summary of the findings to tell the researcher in what ways he/she agrees or disagrees with the summary.

Benefits of Participation:
By participating, your child will be able to talk about what it is like to be bullied, and this may help him/her gain some understanding about the experience. Talking about this kind of experience is often helpful and it may be of help to your child to talk about this experience. Additionally, the information from this study may help school nurses provide better nursing care of other children who have been bullied.

Risk of Participation:
Your child may become upset remembering what it felt like to be bullied. Your child may feel uncomfortable talking about being bullied. He/she is encouraged to talk about this with you or me. If you feel that your child needs assistance, you are encouraged to seek help from a mental health provider for your child. If you wish, a list of such providers will be provided by the researcher.
INFORMED CONSENT (continued)

Contact Information:
If you or your child have any questions about the study or if you or your child experience harmful effects as a result of participation in this study, you may contact me at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Nursing Department at 702-895-3360. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, you may contact the UNLV Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 702-895-2794.

Voluntary Participation:
Your child’s participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. Your child may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the University, the School District, or this researcher. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or at any time during the research study.

Confidentiality:
All information gathered in this study is confidential. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link your child to this study. No one other than you, your child and this researcher will know about your child’s participation in this study, unless your child chooses to reveal his/her participation. All records will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the University for at least 3 years after completion of this study, and then destroyed. There will be no identifying information on them, and no one else will have access to them. Information regarding potential threat of harm to your child or others will be reported to the appropriate authorities.

Parental Consent:
I have read the above information and agree to allow my child to participate in this study. A copy of this form has been given to me.

______________________________  ______________________________
Signature of Parent              Date

______________________________  ______________________________
Parent Name (Please Print)       Child Name (Please Print)
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Department of Nursing

CHILD ASSENT FORM

General Information:
My name is Linda Lesperance, and I am a student in the nursing department at UNLV. In no way am I representing the school district for the purposes of this study. You were chosen to participate in this project because you have been bullied by another student.

Procedure:
You will be asked to do the following:
1. Meet with the researcher between 2 and 4 times to work on an art project of your choice which describes what being bullied is like for you. The length of these meetings will be about one hour.
2. While you are working on the project, you will be asked some questions about what it has been like for you to be bullied.
3. I will ask you to read the summary I write about this experience and to let me know what you agree with and what you think is wrong.

Benefits of Participation:
Talking about what it is like to be bullied, may be helpful. Also, the information you give may help school nurses take better care of other children who have also been bullied.

Risk of Participation:
You may become upset remembering what it felt like to be bullied. You are free to talk about this with me. If you feel that you are so sad that you need help, your parents will be given information about someone who can help you.

Voluntary Participation:
Your do not have to participate in this study. You can refuse to participate at any time. There will be no consequences if you wish to stop participating. It is important that you discuss participating in this study with your parents before you sign this form.
INFORMED CONSENT (continued)

Parent Consent:
Your parents will be asked to sign a consent form allowing you to
directly participate in this study.

Questions:
I want you to ask me any questions you might have about the project either
before or during our interviews.

Confidentiality: No one will know what you have told me, unless it involves
danger to you or someone else, then I must tell the proper authorities.

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this
study. A copy of this form has been given to me.

_____________________________   ________________________
Signature of Child               Date

_____________________________   ________________________
Parent Name (Please Print)       Child Name (Please Print)
APPENDIX II

IDENTIFIED THEMES
IDENTIFIED THEMES

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTION

Family Connection
  You Don't Want to Lose Your Family
  We Beat Each Other Up Sometimes

Peer Connection
  They Wanted to be My Friend
  Protection: Someone to Stand Up For You
  Nobody Understood Me
  I Had a Disease
  False Connections and Betrayal
  You'll be a Part of This Group If...
  I'm Doing This to Get to You

Self Connection
  I Won't Stand Up for Myself

School and Learning Connection: That Must Mean You're Stupid

DEALING WITH IT

Coping With Bullies
  Keep it Inside
  You’ll do Practically Anything to Get Friends
  Some People Crave Attention

Escaping: A World Where Nobody Could Bother Me

Fighting Back
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