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A Bully and a Victim: The Bullying Experiences of Youth with Emotional and Behavioural Disorders

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Abstract

Young people with emotional and behavioural disorders (EBD) comprise a unique group of students involved in school bullying. The present case study examined the bullying experiences of a group of students, aged 10–14 years, identified as having EBD. A total of ten students participated in self-report questionnaires and interview-style journaling. The main research questions were related to type of involvement in bullying and the bullying experiences in this population. Questionnaires and journaling gathered information about involvement in bullying, as well as about psychological risk factors including normative beliefs about anti-social acts, impulsivity, problem solving, and coping strategies. The overall results indicated that all ten students had participated in bullying as either a bully, a victim, or both. They described their experiences involving both external and internal aggression. These personal accounts offer insight into implications for intervention and educational practices.

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Abstract

Young people with emotional and behavioural disorders (EBD) comprise a unique group of students involved in school bullying. The present case study examined the bullying experiences of a group of students, aged 10–14 years, identified as having EBD. A total of ten students participated in self-report questionnaires and interview-style journaling. The main research questions were related to type of involvement in bullying and the bullying experiences in this population. Questionnaires and journaling gathered information about involvement in bullying, as well as about psychological risk factors including normative beliefs about anti-social acts, impulsivity, problem solving, and coping strategies. The overall results indicated that all ten students had participated in bullying as either a bully, a victim, or both. They described their experiences involving both external and internal aggression. These personal accounts offer insight into implications for intervention and educational practices.

Despite attention of researchers and the development and implementation of intervention programs, children continue to be victims and bullies in school settings. From the seminal work of Olweus (1993) to more recent scholars, bullying in schools has been identified as a pervasive and serious socio-educational problem facing students each day (Juvonen & Graham 2014; Marini, Dane, & Kennedy, 2010; Rose, Simpson & Preast, 2016; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Bullying is “aggressive, goal-directed behaviour that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance” (Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014, p. 327). Further to this definition, the three main components of bullying are: (a) goal-directed behaviour, (b) that causes harm to another individual, and (c) in the context of a power imbalance, where the victim is not able to rectify the

situation on his/her own (Volk et al., 2014). When considering the “why” of the behaviour or the motivation to bully, the function of the bullying can fall into either reactive or proactive behaviour (Marini, Dane, Bosacki, & YLC-CURA, 2006). Reactive bullies (one who bullies others as a reaction to a threat) or reactive victims (one who reacts aggressively as a bully as a result of being victimized) are both characterized by an impulsive reaction to a perceived provocation or victimization. This type of emotional reactivity can be characterized by a tendency to make hostile attributions and by a general proneness to frustration and hostility. In sharp contrast, proactive bullies have a positive evaluation of aggressive acts and are able to target their aggression toward the obtainment of instrumental goals or less tangibles such as status and popularity. Given this high degree of goal directedness and intentionality, their aggression usually lacks hostility (Hubbard, McAuliffe, Morrow, & Romano, 2010; Marini & Dane, 2008).

Most children, at some point in their childhood, will have an experience with bullying whether as a bully, a victim, or a bystander. As researchers have been examining this phenomenon of aggressive children, bullies and bully-victims, for the past three decades, a sharp focus has recently fallen on the role children with identified exceptionalities (e.g., physical disabilities, cognitive disabilities, speech and language impairments, autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, etc.) play in bullying situations. Students with exceptionalities are more likely both to experience victimization and to engage in bullying, when compared to students without exceptionalities (Blake, Lund, Zhou, Kwok, & Benz, 2012; Marini & Dane, 2008; Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2011). Children who have exceptionalities are 1.5 to 2 times more likely to be involved in bullying than peers without exceptionalities (Rose & Espelage, 2012; Zinner, Conelea, Glew, Woods, & Budman, 2012)

Scholars have studied the characteristics of this unique group of children, who both bully and are victimized, and have found a distinct set of characteristics. These associated characteristics and outcomes can be categorized according to personal factors, behavioural factors, social and communication factors, and mental health factors. Personal factors include difficulty regulating emotions, low self-esteem, irritability, low frustration tolerance, and emotionality that predispose them to react aggressively when faced with confrontation (Marini et al., 2006; Perry, Willard, & Perry, 1990; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Toblin, Schwartz, Hopmeyer Gorman, & Abou-ezzeddine, 2005).

Behavioural factors involve internal and external elements. Often, individuals are characterized as being impulsive, reacting in an emotionally charged manner, making hostile attributions, and being easily frustrated and hostile, all contributing to their emotional or explosive aggressive reactions to perceived provocation (Hubbard et al., 2010; Little, Brauner, Jones, Nock, & Hawkley, 2003; Raine et al., 2006; Spence, Young, & Toon, 2009).

Social and communication factors include problems with peer relations and difficulties with social information processing, especially for blame, anger, and retaliation (Camodeca, Goosens, Schuengel, & Meerum, 2003; Marini et al., 2006). Specifically, children with exceptionalities can have social deficits regarding information processing, which can cause involvement in bullying to be increased as a result of misinterpreting social cues and attributing hostility to peer behaviour (Crick & Dodge,

1996; Dodge et al., 2003). Researchers have attributed this escalated rate of involvement in bullying for students with exceptionalities to be related to a misinterpretation of social communication that results in reactive aggression and a lack of age-appropriate social skills (Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2011; Yang & Salmivalli, 2013). Specifically, the social skills necessary to effectively solve problems with peers may be lacking for students with exceptionalities, resulting in an increase in reactive aggression and reactive emotions such as fighting and anger, respectively (Rose et al., 2016). These social factors contribute to the overall experience students with exceptionalities may have in navigating through bullying situations they may encounter.

Mental health factors associated with children who are bully-victims include psychological maladjustment such as depression in response to the aforementioned personal, behavioural, and social and communication factors and internalization of problematic issues (Marini et al., 2006; Spence et al., 2009; Yang & Salmivalli, 2013).

Regarding the high incidence of involvement in bullying for children with exceptionalities (1.5 to 2 times greater) and the findings regarding characteristics of bully-victims, it is necessary to consider the involvement of students with emotional and behavioural disorders (EBD) as a high risk of involvement in bullying due to both diagnosis and predisposed characteristics (Rose & Espelage, 2012; Zinner et al., 2012).

Bullying and Students with EBD

Children with EBD have been found to have higher incidence in self-reports for many categories of bullying behaviour including bully, victim, and bully-victim (Rose, Simpson, & Moss, 2015). The notion that perhaps students with exceptionalities as a whole may even be predisposed to participation due to individual characteristics such as temperament and personality traits has also been explored (Farmer, Wike, Alexander, Rodkin, & Mehtaji, 2015; Marini & Dane, 2008; Rose & Espelage, 2012; Zinner et al., 2012).

Understanding the psychological impact of the bully-victim roles on certain students is crucial in understanding and developing intervention programs (Marini & Dane, 2008; Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015). Recent research indicates that students with EBD make up a large portion of students with exceptionalities involved in bullying situations (Maag & Katsiyannis, 2012; Rose & Espelage, 2012; Rose et al., 2015). Rose and Espelage (2012) and Rose et al. (2016) found that students with EBD reported significantly higher levels of bullying and fighting than other subgroups of students with exceptionalities. They found that victimization predicted bullying and fighting; lower levels of depression and higher levels of hostility predicted bullying and fighting; higher levels of depression, hostility, and lower levels of self-esteem predicted higher levels of overall victimization; and finally, higher levels of depression, hostility, and lower levels of self-esteem also predicted involvement as bully-victims and reactive-victims (Rose et al., 2016). Furthermore, Cuevas, Finkelhor, Turner, and Ormrod (2007) studied victimization theory and delinquency and bullying in youth and found that the bully-victim group was unique from the other two groups identified: delinquent-victims and non-delinquent sex/maltreatment groups. The bully-victims scored higher in level of victimization, delinquency, adversity, and anger (Cuevas et al., 2007). Their findings also

suggest that victimization precedes delinquency, which occurs later and expands more rapidly in early to late adolescence (Cuevas et al., 2007).

Although many scholars have researched this topic and made recommendations for intervention, children with EBD continue to be involved in bullying as victims and bullies (Farmer et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2016; Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2011). To date much of the research has focused on measures to establish percentages of individuals who can be classified into categories of bullying. For the current study we used descriptive information from several questionnaires with a small group of student participants and examined more closely their personal experiences with bullying through journaling. The overall results provided insight into the “hows” and “whys” of the involvement of students with EBD in bullying situations.

One of us (first author) in classroom experience working with students with EBD, witnessed on a daily basis an ever-changing hierarchy of mistreatment of each other, in what seemed to be an attempt to gain social status, even if just for one day. Through examining the literature on students with EBD and their involvement with bullying, it was discovered that an increased involvement in bullying for students with EBD and other exceptionalities existed (Blake et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2016). Students with EBD participated more often than non-identified peers in acts of bullying and were also frequently victimized (Rose et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2016). However, these studies were mostly quantitative in nature and we wondered what the students themselves thought about their experiences. Therefore, in an attempt to better understand the dynamic that existed in the first author’s classroom among the students with EBD, our research examined the experiences of these students as bullies and victims, with a focus on the following research questions:

- Do students with emotional and behavioural exceptionalities experience both bullying and victimization and if so, what are their bully-victim experiences?
- Do they understand their role as bully-victims and how do they make sense of their experience as students with exceptionalities and as bully-victims, for example, do they legitimize anti-social behaviour such as bullying?
- What suggestions do the students make regarding what should be done about bullying?

We considered their stories and experiences as they were captured through questionnaires and journal entries, and deconstructed these to better understand the impact and consequences of the dual involvement in bullying (as bully and victim) experienced by these students. These personal accounts provided insight into the complicated bullying experiences of these youth with EBD and shed light on prior research on bullying and students with exceptionalities, in which findings were mainly quantitative (Blake et al., 2012; Marini & Dane, 2008; Rose & Espelage, 2012; Rose et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2016; Swearer, Wang, Maag, Siebecker, & Fredchs, 2012; Zinner et al., 2012).

Methodology

Based on action research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) questionnaires and case interview-style journals were utilized to gather the personal experiences of the students in

the class to create a collective case study. One of us (first author) was the educator in the classroom and was a first-hand witness to experiences of power dynamics in the classroom. This research was aimed at not only providing a voice for the bully-victim experiences, but also as a method to provide information and opportunity to discuss issues associated with bullying in a safe classroom environment. According to Yin (2009), case study research such as this attempts to uncover details about the particular case (students with behaviour exceptionalities) in order to explain “the how and why” of a phenomenon (bully-victim experiences).

Based on the current literature on students with EBD regarding their high participation in bullying, as well as the research related to associated factors including temperament, personality characteristics, and social-emotional challenges, four questionnaires were selected in order to gather background information regarding student experiences: the School-Life Questionnaire (Marini, 1998); the Legitimizing Antisocial Behaviour subscale (Jessor, van den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, and Turbin, 1995); the Choices Inventory (Lopez & Little, 1996, Behavioural Inventory of Strategic Control); and Self-control Constructs (Wills, Walker, Mendoza, & Ainette, 2006). Descriptive data gained from these questionnaires were used to develop journal prompts to gather in-depth accounts of student experiences.

The School-Life Questionnaire (Marini, 1998) focused on student bullying experiences as bully, victim, and bystander. Three sections of the School-Life Questionnaire were used to gather data regarding each of the three roles involved in bullying; the bully, the victim, and the bystander (Marini et al., 2006). Questions involved identifying how many times in the past six months, based on a 7-point Likert scale, they had witnessed, participated in, and/or were the recipient of various acts; for example, pushing; name calling; etc.

The Legitimizing Antisocial Behaviour subscale presents a variety of statements that target at-risk or anti-social behaviour outlined by Jessor et al.’s (1995) Attitudinal Intolerance of Deviance Scale. The students were asked to rate, on a 5-point Likert scale, how “wrong” they felt acts were on 11 statements that included moral issues relevant to students in this sample age group (10–15 years); for example, taking something you know belongs to someone else. Jessor et al. (1995) discussed that student beliefs about the rightness or wrongness of anti-social behaviour may help to predict the likelihood of engaging in delinquent acts such as bullying. The Choices Inventory taken from Lopez and Little’s (1996) Behavioural Inventory of Strategic Control asked the students to say how true the statements were of themselves based on a 3-point Likert scale. This measure assessed coping strategies including avoidance, social co-operation, emotional support, aggressive individualism, social exploitation, and hostility; for example, “I often lie to get what I want,” or “I will take something that doesn’t belong to me” (Lopez & Little, 1996).

Finally, the Self-Control Constructs measure taken from Wills et al. (2006) evaluated how children react in certain situations as well as their level of self-control. Two scales were used in this study, Problem Solving and Impulsiveness. The students were required to rank their responses or reactions on 5-point Likert scales. The choices ranged from *never* to *often*.

Following the completion of the questionnaires, descriptive information gathered from the questionnaires was used to develop journal questions. Questions were generated, using a deductive approach, from the main themes that emerged from the common responses to the questionnaires, including experiences as a bully and a victim, engagement in anti-social behaviour, and difficulty making good choices and acting impulsively. Questions developed around these themes were designed to be open ended and provided further insight into student experiences regarding making choices and decisions, personal experiences with bullying and friendship, and their suggestions for intervention and/or prevention. Questions were administered on an individual basis through the use of a journal. The journal responses were analyzed question by question for similar key words that were used to help represent the experiences of the students.

These methods gathered the personal experiences of ten of the eleven students (nine males and one female), aged 10 to 14 years, currently enrolled in the self-contained class at the time of the study, where each student had an identification of behaviour exceptionality by the school board's Identification, Placement, and Review Committee according to Regulation 181 of the Education Act (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1980). Specific diagnostic information was not accessed regarding type or severity of each student's EBD. The self-contained class is designed as a therapeutic educational setting within a school to support the development of social skills and self-control as well as academics. All students participated in "included" classes with other students in the school daily based on their own level of readiness. This ranged from one class per day to up to six classes per day with support from a Child and Youth Worker or Special Education Teacher. One student did not consent to the research but still participated in the social skills program and discussions about bullying during class time. One of us (first author) as educator in the classroom was also the lead researcher in this study. This research aimed to not only provide a voice for the bully-victim experiences, but also allowed an opportunity to provide information and discuss issues associated with bullying in a safe classroom environment. For students who generally have difficulty trusting adults, the environment with the classroom teacher, with whom the students had a prior rapport, provided an opportunity to discuss and learn strategies for dealing with bullying situations. The goal of the study was to consider only the students' perceptions and reported experiences with bullying and victimization.

Results

Results from the study are presented based on the responses to the four questionnaires and the journal responses. Questionnaire results were used as descriptive data, as well as providing the substance for generating themes to be developed into the journal questions. What follows includes the highlights from the student responses through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

Questionnaires

Results from the School Life Questionnaire indicated that all students reported witnessing both indirect and direct forms of bullying with most choosing 3 (*sometimes*) or higher for most items in this section. Eight out of ten students indicated that they

witnessed “threatening and intimidating” *often* or *very often*. For the second section, students were asked how often they had been the recipient of each of the items, all students identified being the recipient of at least four of the 13 bullying behaviours. Most students selected 5 (*often*) or 7 (*very often*) on at least one item, and three students chose 5 (*often*) or 7 (*very often*) on at least 10 of the 13 bullying behaviours, including direct physical (pushing, hitting, etc.) and indirect (excluding, intimidating, etc.). These results indicate the theme participation in bullying as a bully and victim.

Figure 1. Frequency of Bully, Victim and Bully-Victim Behaviours

B-V = Bully-victim totals, which were calculated when a student selected that statement on both the victim and the bully section of the questionnaire. For example, for question 1. *pushing and shoving*, 4/10 students identified that they had performed and that they were the recipient of this act.

Results from the Legitimizing Antisocial Behaviour scale indicate that several questions were selected by many students as being *not at all wrong* or *a little bit wrong*. Aggressive behaviours, such as “To break something that belongs to another person just to get even” and “To get in fist fights with other people,” were both selected as *not very wrong* by five of the ten students. Seven out of ten of the students felt that it was *not very wrong* to “Give your teacher a fake excuse for being absent,” or “To cheat on a test.” Results indicate that participants justified the theme of “unacceptable behaviour” as being acceptable for various reasons to meet their needs.

Results from the Choices Inventory, indicated that students frequently selected *true* as a response for negative reactions to situations. For example, in response to the statements “When I’m hurt by someone, I often fight back” and “When I’m threatened by someone, I often threaten back,” all the students said it was *completely true* or *somewhat true* of themselves. These responses relate to the theme of poor choices and impulsive behaviour.

Results from the Self-Control Constructs indicated that all of the students identified characteristics of impulsiveness when responding to various situations. All students reported *a little* or *never* when it came to thinking about choices before they do something, for example, “I often think about the consequences of my actions before I do something.” These responses also relate to the theme of poor choices and impulsive behaviour.

Journals

Students’ experiences were used to further explain their responses from the questionnaires that garnered the themes, as they related to (a) making choices and decisions and (b) their experiences with bullying as a bully and victim, as well as (c) their suggestions for intervention and/or prevention. The following results are presented sequentially as they relate to each theme. A question prompt is followed by several student response examples. All responses were checked by the teacher or Child and Youth Worker; and problematic or alarming responses were discussed further in a safe, comfortable, environment during individual or class discussions regarding how one could appropriately respond to any angry or aggressive feelings they might have.

Figure 2. Journal Prompts and Probing Questions

Part 1. Choices and Decisions

1. Do you think the following sentence is true or false? Provide a reason for your choice. “I often lie to get what I want.”
2. Do you think that if someone looks or acts differently they are asking to be made fun of? Why do you think this?
3. Do you sometimes do things that you know are wrong because your friends are doing it? Can you explain or give an example?
4. Do you trust your friends? Why? Do you think your friends trust you? Why?
5. Do you find it hard or easy to stay out of fights? Can you explain or give an example?

Part 2. Bullying Experiences

1. Can you tell me what bullying looks like? Can you give an example of bullying?
2. Have you ever been bullied? Can you describe a time when you were bullied?
3. Have you ever teased, made fun of or physically hurt another student? Can you describe a time when you did this?
4. How do you feel when someone picks on you?
5. How did you feel when you picked on someone else?
6. Why would someone bully another person?
7. Why do you think someone bullied you?
8. Why did you bully someone else?

Part 3. Student Suggestions

1. Who do you think can help kids who are bullies or who are being bullied?
2. What do you think kids can do to help with bullying?
3. What do you think adults can do to help with bullying? For example teachers at school or parents.

Choices and decisions. The first section of the journal questions involved questions related to making choices and decisions about issues faced by young people. Most questions involved a moral dilemma, including elements of peer pressure and friendships.

The students were first asked to comment on the statement “I often lie to get what I want.” Most students claimed that they lie in order to not get in trouble and to get what they want: “If you don’t lie then you might not get it,” or, “I like to lie about when I do something bad.”

Only one student said that if someone looks or acts differently that they are asking to be made fun of. The remaining participants demonstrated empathy for individual differences: “Just because someone looks funny, doesn’t mean you have to make fun of them.” Another said, “No, because it’s not always their fault, some people are born different.” Just over half the participants felt self-conscious about people laughing around them: “Sometimes I think they are laughing at me”; “I take it personally.”

Many students said that they sometimes made mistakes because they would do things that they knew were wrong, just because their friends did: “If my friend is doing bad things, I gotta do it to.” Less than half identified trying to “fit in” as motivation for doing things they felt were bad or wrong: “When you’re with a certain group of people they can pressure you into doing things and it can be hard to say no.”

When questioned about trust, most felt they could not trust people because they (people) often lie; and several indicated having had a friend lie to them: “My friends will lie to me and say they are going someplace and they will be going someplace else.” One student admitted to lying in order to make or keep friends: “Sometimes you have to lie to be friends with them.” On the other hand, most students felt they are not trusted by others because they have lied in the past: “If you lie once, some people will never trust you.” The students identified some common traits of how friends show each other respect, including trust, sharing, helping, being nice, caring, and being good to you (them). The most common reasons for the importance of having a friend were: (a) a play companion, and (b) for help or protection.

Just over half felt it was no use to stay out of fights because they needed to stand up for themselves: “People will just try more to bug you” (reactive bullies). Whereas most felt they had no control over their own choices and no matter how hard they tried, they just could not stay out of trouble: “I am always in trouble, I make wrong choices.”

Many students shared that they felt others are always trying to start fights with them because of inferiority reasons including being smaller, less popular, or less strong. They described themselves here as victims: “They hate me”; “I am an easy target”; “[They] make fun of me.”

Bullying experiences. The second section for the journal questions asked students specific questions about bullying and their experiences with bullying. When asked to describe what bullying looks like, more than half of the students identified both direct and indirect forms of bullying. Examples of direct bullying include hitting, fighting, pushing, injuring, kicking, biting, taking someone’s lunch or money, hurting, or victimizing. For indirect bullying, students included items such as laughing, using put downs, picking on someone, swearing, name calling, belittling, disrespecting, acting

rude, making faces, and making someone feel sad. When describing bullying scenarios, several students identified emotions felt by the person being bullied; for example, one student said, "Bullies belittle you and make you feel like you are nothing." Another said, "Making sure they [victims] have no fun and that no one likes them and making them feel sad." Several students also used wording when describing the acts of a bully that put themselves into that role: "Bullying is when you ... pick on someone; hurt someone." A few made reference to the size and strength of a bully (see Volk et al., 2014): "A bully is big and some can be small, it can be a boy or a girl or anyone"; "Bullying is when you pick on someone much weaker than yourself, much smaller, much younger."

When students were asked to describe a time when they themselves were bullied, only two indicated they had never been bullied. Of the remaining eight, two identified having experienced only direct forms of bullying, and the remaining six mentioned both direct and indirect forms of bullying in their stories. Most stories involved small groups of youth in unsupervised settings; for example, the skateboard park, or out on the street while playing alone or with other children. One student described his story: "I was walking by the skate park and these kids said to go away. They started cursing at me so I started cursing at them and this one guy came and pushed me on the ground."

When asked if they had ever teased, made fun of, or physically hurt another student, all students said *yes* they had and most identified both direct and indirect acts. One student said, "I teased someone by telling them that they are useless and you can't play because you suck at this; you are too small to play and I pushed him and that is how it ended that day for him." In telling their stories of bullying others, the theme of revenge surfaced in several stories; for example, "Sometimes people make fun of me so I get back at them." When asked how they felt when someone picked on them, many said they felt angry or mad. They described their reactions similarly, as most reacted with revenge: "I feel like I want to kill them"; "I would do the same thing back"; "I got some people to beat them up."

When the students were asked to reflect back on how they felt when they bullied another person, they all related their bullying to revenge or "getting back at" someone for doing something to them. Students were divided almost in half on who felt good and who felt bad about bullying. Those who indicated feeling good about bullying made comments such as, "I felt a bit better because at least they weren't picking on me"; "I felt like I was getting revenge, I was hurt and angry and wanted them to feel it too." Some students also identified the surge of adrenaline and/or euphoria that can accompany an act such as bullying: "I felt like I was ruling the playground"; "I didn't know how to deal with my anger so I took it out on someone else." One child appeared to begin to understand the complexity of the bully-victim situation in his comment, "It makes me feel confused (bullying someone) because I don't know if they are going to do anything back." One was remorseful and stated that "I felt bad because it wasn't right."

When answering journal questions about why someone, including themselves, would bully another person, four themes emerged; pleasure or fun, control, size or social status, and revenge. These self-reported qualifiers were categorized as proactively aggressive and reactively aggressive behaviours. Although proactively aggressive behaviours were mentioned more frequently overall, both proactive and reactive behaviours were

mentioned by students. Proactively aggressive behaviours were mentioned more for the question “Why do people bully others?” and reactively aggressive behaviours were mentioned more when answering the question “Why do you bully other children?” Some of the reasons given for why someone is a bully included, “To feel in control”; “They have no friends”; “To feel cool”; “They feel sad inside”; “They are mad or angry.” The reasons given for why some people are bullied included, “They are small”; “They have no friends”; “They are weaker”; “They are nerds,” “... stupid,” “... mental.” One student said, “People who don’t do anything, don’t get bullied.”

When asked why they felt they had been bullied, three out of eight students felt it was because of some inferiority they had (i.e., size, likeability, special needs) and others felt it was because of lies; for example, “People say things about me that’s not true like I said something about their mom.” The remaining five felt that they were bullied due to the bully’s anger.

On the other hand, when asked about the reasons why they bully other children, four out of ten students said that it was fun or funny, and the remainder said they were angry and wanted to “get back at” the bullies, or, that they did not know why they bullied other children. One said, “I just like bullying other people”; another included, “I think it’s fun and people are weaker than me, sometimes I like it.”

Figure 3. Attributed Motivating Factors for Bullying: Why Do People Bully Others?

Proactive acts = The students felt that other children were bullies mainly for proactively aggressive or intentional reasons. Reactive acts = The students indicated that they bully others mainly for reactively aggressive reasons including to get back at the bully or as a direct reaction to being picked on.

Student Suggestions

All of the students who participated indicated that more help from teachers would be a solution to prevent bullying. The students expressed wanting to get help and feeling that teachers could help them but that from their experiences, teachers did not often help them. One student indicated, “Sometimes you tell a teacher and they don’t do anything about it [bullying].” Students identified that teachers should help at school by intervening in the bullying. Teachers need to “help the bullies learn how to be nicer and deal with their anger.” The students also mentioned that the bullying that occurs outside of school is harder to get help because “if I tell my dad, he won’t let me go there [to the skateboard park] anymore.” Students did not identify that peers could help in bullying situations.

Discussion

The overall results indicated that all of the ten students in this sample have participated in bullying as either a bully, victim, or both. All ten participants had bullied others, and eight of the ten identified they had been victims. This prevalence of bully-victim involvement in students identified with EBD from special education classrooms designed for students with behavioural challenges aligns with recent quantitative research indicating a 40–70% prevalence among students with EBD (Rose et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2016). The journal answers provided rich data regarding the peer relationships, the bully-victim experiences and other social decisions of the participants. Students identified challenges in negotiating peer relationships and their involvement in confrontations in which they were instigators as well as recipients of mistreatment. Students self identified as having interactions in which they were victimized by their peers and also indicated reacting in an aggressive manner in order to “get back” at their bullies. This is consistent with Rose and Espelage’s (2012) suggestion that students with EBD are more likely described as reactive victims, also known as reactive bullies (Marini & Dane, 2008), that is, individuals who respond to being victimized in an aggressive way as a reaction to their experience. On the other hand, students with other exceptionalities represent bully-victims; that is, they engage in both bullying and victimization—not in the same reactive and aggressive way, but more as a response to inappropriate social behaviour (Blake et al., 2012). This distinction described by Marini and Dane (2008) and Rose and Espelage (2012) is important in general because it speaks to the nature of the exceptionality, in that some exceptionalities are grounded in characteristics that are more reactionary (e.g., impulsivity, anger, aggression). It is also relevant to the current study in that the personal accounts of being victimized and of bullying others supports the notion of reactive victims or reactive bullies as a subgroup of bully-victim, namely represented by students with EBD. The journals indicated that most of the students identified having difficulty making friends and trusting people, and felt that they were targets of peer victimization.

All of these students described engaging in bullying behaviour that included both indirect and direct (physical and verbal) forms. These students identified feelings of revenge and relief for bullying others and some also identified feeling bad. According to Marini and Dane (2008) it is quite likely that these children are first victims who then bully others, usually out of frustration or poor self-control. This reactivity seems to occur

because of a response to their own victimization and also an inability to self-regulate both their emotions and behaviour. Reactive bullies or reactive victims (Rose & Espelage, 2012) tend to have their own set of identifying characteristics including impulsivity, emotional reactivity, a tendency to make hostile attributions, and have low frustration and tolerance (Marini & Dane, 2008; Yang & Salmivalli, 2013). Furthermore, through the journaling and questionnaires, the students in this study demonstrated engagement in inappropriate interactions with others, had positively endorsed beliefs about anti-social behaviours, and had difficulty making good moral choices and decisions.

Consistent with what has been suggested in the literature, and in examining the characteristics expressed by the participants in this study, it should be noted that these youth possess characteristics that closely resemble those of emotionally dysregulated reactive bullies. Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien (2001) suggested that the common risk factor that predisposes bully-victims is the difficulty with regulating emotions. Since they are prone to emotional reactivity, they are likely to overreact with explosive outbursts to provocation such as teasing. Their predisposition to frustration and anger may make them more susceptible to being aggressive, and their emotional volatility may alienate peers and make them targets of bullying (Schwartz et al., 2001; Spence et al., 2009). The participants of this study appeared uninhibited in their interactions with each other, demonstrated difficulty making decisions, displayed impulsive tendencies, and had low frustration and tolerance—the same characteristics of emotionally dysregulated, reactive bullies. It is thus not surprising that these students shared the experiences they did.

The literature clearly indicates that students involved in peer victimization as bully-victims, especially those identified with an exceptionality, will experience the most serious individual and social risks compared to their peers who do not have an exceptionality or are not involved in bullying (Farmer et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2016). The participants in the current study—identified as having difficulty with social relationships, being rejected by peers, and often blamed for unacceptable acts—are comparable to participants in other studies (Farmer et al., 2012; Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2001). Students described characteristic behaviours related to social communication in which they responded impulsively and aggressively when they interpreted an interaction as threatening. Based on their experiences with social relationships and peers and their identifications of having EBD, it is not surprising that the students in the current study demonstrated difficulties with reactive aggression and emotional regulation.

Implications and Conclusions

The results of this study have a number of implications that are theoretical and practical. Firstly, this work contributes to the bullying research on students with EBD and provides a qualitative lens to further the understanding of student experiences. Each individual has a unique experience, and the opportunity to explore the experiences of these youth impacts the way we look at the current quantitative bullying research on students with EBD and provides a verification that is intimate and real.

Secondly, there are implications for educational policy (e.g., Safe Schools Strategy; Ontario Ministry of Education & Training, 2007). The findings support the need for

Boards of Education to do more targeted policy development that is specific to bullying and children with various exceptionalities in order to support the emotional and physical well-being of students with exceptionalities. A way for policy makers to do this would be to include students with exceptionalities, namely EBD, in tiered approaches to prevention and intervention that outline appropriate and meaningful student support in their bullying and safe-school policies. This would help to ensure that students with exceptionalities receive unique support based on their involvement in bullying.

Thirdly, there are implications for educational and clinical theory (e.g., intervention and prevention programs for bullying). It is clear from the current study, as well as from the theories presented thus far, that bullying interventions need to be specialized in order to meet the needs of students from various groups and with various experiences. Students who are identified as being at a higher risk of dual involvement and/or reactive bullying, such as those with EBD, should have access to more specialized approaches as part of their programming and/or in school supports. Intervention programs that offer students with EBD opportunities to engage in topics related to bullying, self-control and anti-social beliefs can provide them with avenues for self-reflection followed by strategies for intervention.

Based on the findings from this study, it can be concluded that this research fills a small piece of something much larger; however, it is a piece that is very important in the understanding of bullying as a whole, especially for students with EBD. Although there are several potential limitations including researcher bias, this study provides qualitative evidence to support existing research and emphasizes the unique and complex experiences of these youth. This information helps support the planning and implementing of specialized programs for students involved in bullying. Although the findings are specific to this group of students, scholars and educators can have a further developed understanding of the complexity of the social and emotional experiences of these students when interacting in confrontational situations with peers. These findings also suggest the benefit of hearing the voices of those involved in the bullying experiences for those with EBD and other exceptionalities. It is clear from this study that as a group, these students with EBD, through expressions of their personal experiences, can be identified as reactive victims or reactive bullies. These understandings assist educators and other front-line professionals to better program for prevention and intervention specific to best meet the needs of students with EBD.

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