THE EFFECTS OF BULLYING ON SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS WITH EMPHASIS ON
MH, SLD, PH, & SED SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Techniques of Research

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ABSTRACT Bullying affects everyone. It causes fear, intimidation, feelings of inferiority, stress, enjoyment and many other feelings associated with the human psyche. It is very powerful and continues to disrupt society and especially school settings. It is often viewed as picking on the weak or misfortunate and this is not necessarily the case. At some point in every individual’s life, they will be confronted by a bully. It happens daily across America in every school and workplace environment. It happens in nursing homes, it happens to the rich, the poor and it knows no boundaries. It is a vicious form of human expression. This study looked specifically at special education students and how bullying affects their lives in a school setting. A survey was designed and sent out to one urban, rural, and suburban school district in the state of Ohio to highlight and discuss problem areas associated with bullying for special needs students. Surveys were distributed in two sessions and training was provided for survey administrator prior to implementation. When compared to regular education students there is a much higher average of occurrences happening daily in this much smaller population of special education subgroups.

INTRODUCTION Bullying continues to be a major problem in both educational settings and in society in general. It affects all individuals and continues to be a major focus of research studies in terms of ideology and the reasons behind the desire to harm others either physically, mentally or emotionally. Bullying occurs across every economical, social, cultural group and affects all ages and genders. According to a 2001 study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human development about one in three children are affected by bullies albeit as a victim, as
the perpetrator, or both. This research study will address the natures of bullying and specifically look at the impact on school environment and how these acts affect the psyche of its victims. An alarming statistic from a 2003 study from the National Center of Educational Statistics states that “approximately 25% of elementary and high school students as well as 40% of middle school students report being bullied at least once per week.” In an elementary school of 500 students this would equal out to approximately 125 incidents of bullying occurring per a five day week. Broken down even further would indicate a pattern of at least 25 random acts of bullying occurring daily. These are staggering examples of how rampant these acts of intimidation are happening every day in every district throughout our educational settings. Middle school statistics even show greater occurrences and in a similar school of 500 students would equal out to 200 incidents per week or 40 incidents per day and with a typical school day of six hours would equal out to about 5 incidents per hour. Craig, Henderson, & Murphy (2000), state that different cultures have different terms for defining what is bullying and suggest that at the individual level there is lots of subjectivity in characterizing this behavior. In other words, bullying takes many shapes and forms and occurs at varying degrees of intensity. According to Merriam-Webster On-Line form 2004, their definition states that the term bully refers to “a blustering browbeating person: especially, one habitually cruel to others who are weaker”. According to Olweus, a well noted expert on the topic of bullying states that “bullying exists when students are exposed repeatedly or over time to a negative action on the part of one or more students (as cited in Berthold & Hoover, 2000, p.65) This definition takes into consideration that bullying can also be
considered a group activity when the negative energy or focus is detrimental to one individual. The preying on one by a group is indeed a cruel way to exercise power. According to a study by Smith (2000) defines a bully as a person who demonstrates repetitive aggressive behavior that purposefully hurts another and ultimately results in a systematic abuse of power.” A variety of definitions basically come to the conclusion that the term “bully” incorporates three distinct attributes (Coy, 2001; Hoover & Oliver, 1996; Simanton, Burthwick & Hoover, 2000) First, the harassment of the victim occurs over an extended period of time. Second, the intent behind the harassment is meant to cause harm either mentally or physically to the victim. Third, an imbalance of power is apparent. For this research we will include these three attributes when defining what bullying means so all have a clear understanding of what the attributes represent. Since schools show such unique dynamics, how does bullying affect others such as students with special needs. These are individual’s who are often presented with significant challenges as compared to “regular education students.” The purpose of this research is to specifically look at how the concepts of bullying impact this specific population of students across the educational continuum. It is fair to say that people with diminished intellectual capabilities or those classified as mentally handicapped (MH) are often taken advantage of and are easier to manipulate. Many of these special needs students have lower self-esteem, fewer friends, more health issues (may be seen as physically weaker targets for bullies), lack the ability to see trouble brewing and have trouble fitting in. Students who are classified as having severe emotional difficulties or SED present unique situations in that they have the highest incidents of being bullies across the
Specials Ed population. Multiple attributes that contribute to bullying behavior may include a genetic predisposition toward violence and environmental factors such as a dysfunctional family, negative role models, or fewer and poorer social relationships. (Schonert-Reichl, 1993) It should also be stated that children labeled emotionally disturbed or behavior disorders are also likely to be victims of bullying. Students considered anxious-withdrawn or described as having a personality disorder have low self-esteem, may be timid or shy and suffer from unhappiness (Heward, 2003). Since bullying occurs with all individuals we need to discuss what types of bullying may occur. For this research study, we will be looking at verbal intimidation, physical intimidation, and the combination of both and how they affect the special education population. According to an article from 2002 (“New Insights on Special Education Practice”) there is an abundant amount of research conducted on bullies and their victims of regular education students but little attention has been focused on children and youth with disabilities. This study will focus on this target population as a way of exploring in detail ways that bullying affects this special subgroup of education and help expand the limited information pertaining to this group. This researcher is hypothesizing that bullying occurs more frequently and with more intensity within the special education population as compared to regular education settings and it negatively affects special needs students.

**METHODS** A survey was designed to send out to three distinct and different school districts in the state of Ohio. All received the same survey although each district had unique degrees of
intensity in terms of special education students especially the subgroup of severe and emotionally disturbed. Since this designation is based on the determination of Psychologists based on the DSM IV and the recommendations of the MFE team the severity between urban, suburban, and rural districts of this subgroup was noted when designing this study. The populations were also significantly different with the rural districts having two elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school consisting of 50 special education students (20 diagnosed as MH (mentally handicapped), (15 diagnosed as SLD (specific learning disability), (3 diagnosed with PH physically handicapped) and (12 diagnosed as SED (severe emotionally disturbed). The suburban school district was larger in population than the rural district but still considerably smaller than the urban school district. The suburban district consisted of four elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school with a total special education population of 75 special education students. There were 20 diagnosed as MH, 40 diagnosed as SLD, 5 diagnosed as PH, and 10 diagnosed as SED. The urban school district had the highest population of special education students with a total population of 600 students. There were 100 diagnosed as MH, 300 diagnosed as SLD, 50 diagnosed as PH and the remaining 150 were diagnosed as SED with 75 located in a separate facility for students with severe emotional difficulties. The participants in the survey consisted of special education students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade. All eligible students had to have a diagnosis of mentally handicapped, specific learning disability, physically handicapped, or severe emotionally disturbed. Gender was determined on the survey questionnaire as well as ethnic determination and grade level. The rural district was labeled as
survey 1, the suburban district was labeled as survey 2, and the urban district was labeled as survey 3 for house keeping purposes. There were no other individually labeled areas to determine the actual participants names or any other identifying information. This was done to protect the individual’s rights and privacy. The surveys were sent out in two sessions with session two depending on the retrieval of responses from the initial mailing. Each district was sent individual surveys based on the number of eligible special education students and were given three weeks to mail back the responses. Prior to actually implementing the survey questions, each district had a training session with a minimum of three trained graduate students to ensure proper and uniform presentation of the actual survey. The surveys were sent to the office of special education in each district and they sent the individual questionnaires to the special education teachers based on the number of students they had direct responsibility for. The teachers then sent back their student’s responses to the office of special education who then forwarded the results to this researcher. The second mailing was done at the end of the three weeks with the same procedures in place (three week window to complete the survey) and it was determined prior to the study that the office of special education of each district would be responsible for trying to get each special education student to respond to the survey. If a student was unable to read the survey questions, then the questions could be read to them by their individual teacher, teacher’s aid, principal, or a member from the special education office. At the top of each survey was a brief overview of what bullying means so all participants had the same basic definition. There were 40 total questions regarding aspects of bullying and other relevant information such as
age, gender, and grade level. Questions 1-5 dealt with personal questions regarding demographics but no specific questions to determine identity. Questions 6 -15 dealt with questions and issues surrounding of being a victim of bullying. Questions 16 - 27 dealt with being a perpetrator and questions 28 - 35 dealt with related avenues such as witnessing or observing acts of intimidation either verbally or physically. Questions 36 - 40 dealt with feelings and emotions associated with bullying. Some example questions included the following topics: If other students made fun of them physically or verbally? Do they see examples of bullying occurring in their schools, during transport, during specials, or at free time? How often have they been made fun of during a typical week. Did they tell anyone about being bullied- a teacher, friend, parent, etc.? How did you feel when bullied? After answering the survey, the administrator wrote the student’s specified special education category on each form for collection purposes in determining various sub-groups of special education designations. The survey method was chosen because of the vast samples need across a large geographical area. The training provided from the graduate students helped ensure that each survey was given in the same manner in regards to consistency of the instrument. The samples although random gave insight into three distinct regions of society without regards to any other outside factors other than being labeled as one of the categories of special education that were previously stated. The usability was designed to be user friendly with supports based on special needs and not very time consuming. When designing the survey, it was determined that a person with a typical IQ should be able to complete the survey within thirty minutes. Although there were no time limits placed on the amount of
time to complete the survey, it was estimate to take no longer than sixty minutes for students with special needs. Each survey that the researchers received back were first separated into three categories based on rural, suburban, or urban designations. Each question was then diagnosed individually and the response were tallied up.

**RESULTS**  Based on survey user responses, it was confirmed that there are greater instances of special education acts of bullying occurring in today’s schools at least in the random sample from the state of Ohio that was designated as the testing site for this study. It was mentioned previously when looking at the 2001 study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development than approximately 3 in 10 regular education students are victims of bully intimidation and according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) that approximately 25% of elementary and 40% of middle school students report being bullied once a week. Our results have shown that in the special education population random acts of bullying albeit a perpetrator or victim occur more frequently and in greater intensity as compared to regular education students even though the population is much smaller. Statistically you have a smaller pool of participants with a greater number of occurrences. We will discuss some possible reasons for this later in this paper. When digesting the results from the three separate and distinct school districts, a pattern of continuity emerges. In looking at the results from the rural school district consisting of having two elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school consisting of 50 special education students (20 diagnosed as MH (mentally handicapped), (15
diagnosed as SLD (specific learning disability), (3 diagnosed with PH physically handicapped) and (12 diagnosed as SED (severe emotionally disturbed) the results showed that the greatest number of occurrences were reported in the severe emotionally disturbed category. Actual received responses back to the study included 17 from the MH subgroup, all 15 from the SLD subgroup, all 3 from the PH subgroup, and 11 from the SED subgroup. This equal out to a total response rate of 46 out of 50 or 92% response rate. In looking at the results from the suburban school district that consisted of four elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school with a total special education population of 75 special education students they were consistent with the rural district in that there were more occurrences associated with the SED subgroup. There were 20 diagnosed as MH, 40 diagnosed as SLD, 5 diagnosed as PH, and 10 diagnosed as SED. Actual response received back from the suburban school district included all 20 in MH, 36 in SLD, all 5 in PH, and 9 from the SED subgroup for a total return rate of 93.3% or 70 out of 75. In looking at the results from the urban district the highest population of special education students with a total population of 600 students. There were 100 diagnosed as MH, 300 diagnosed as SLD, 50 diagnosed as PH and the remaining 150 were diagnosed as SED with 75 located in a separate facility for students with the most severe emotional difficulties in their district. The results correlated to higher number of incidents with SED students as compared to the other two districts. Response rate was a lower average than other two districts but still had an 78% response rate with 450 out of 600 surveys returned. The breakdown included 70 MH responses, 265 SLD responses, 48 PH response and 83 SED response. The high level of response
rate can be contributed to effective design structures when constructing this study. When comparing all three districts each showed higher percentage rates of bullying occurrences as compared to the study on regular education students. The survey questions were broken down into four specific areas based on the questions. Area one or questions 1 - 5 helped break down results by gender, ethnicity, and special education designation (based on teacher label such as MH, SLD, PH, SED.) Area two or questions 6 - 15 broke responses down regarding instances or frequencies of being bullied and where these may have occurred such as free time, cafeteria, hallway, during transport, etc. Area three or questions 16 - 27 broke down responses regarding instances of one being the perpetrator or the actual bully and how this made them feel such as powerful, guilty, self esteem. Area 4 or questions 28 - 35 broke down response in terms of witnessing or observing random acts of intimidation, duration of acts, and the number witnesses daily. Area 5 or questions 36 - 40 broke down responses in terms of feelings and emotions associated with bullying. Out of a total of 582 response across all districts 256 were females and out of those 56 were MH, 148 SLD, 24 PH and 28 SED. Out of a total of 582 response 326 were males with 51 were MH, 168 SLD, 32PH and 75 SED. Because this is a random sample across various geographical areas, we will be looking at the results in terms across the whole spectrum of educational settings vs specifically only rural, suburban or urban districts. Area one showed that males are more likely to be bullied and be perpetrators vs females based on responses and that SED subgroup had more occurrences than all other groups across all grade levels. Area two showed the majority of occurrences happened during unstructured times such as during transport
to and from school, and during free time. Area three showed that when one was being a bully, it made them feel powerful and in control of their actions but it was not associated with positive self-esteem feelings. Area four showed that the majority of respondents witnesses bullying tactics daily and it caused fears of intimidation and worry. The responses showed higher frequency of occurrences across the board in all subgroups and when compared to our regular education study. So compared to our regular education example of 500 students in an elementary school with 25 random acts of bullying occurring daily, and 5 random acts occurring hourly in the middle school our statistics broke down 582 students across multiple grade levels from Kindergarten through twelfth grade. They showed an average across each grade level of 9 incidents of bullying occurring hourly with the average school day of six hours this equals out to 54 acts daily or 270 acts of bullying weekly. As compared to the middle school average of 45 this is an increase of 9 more occurrences an hour in a much smaller population. The effects on bullying include reduced self-esteem, fewer friendships, feelings of worthlessness and inferiority, depression, anger, and thoughts of suicide.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

Bullying is a problem that is not going away. It affects every family, household, and individual and often with negative results. According to a U.S. Secret Service Report in 2000, in two-thirds of all school shootings that took place in the last ten years, the attacker felt “bullied, attacked, threatened, or persecuted prior to the incident.” These are sobering words when we look at the issues associated with bullying.
Violence on television, violence in the movies, unstable societal issues, broken family dynamics, mental issues and a slew of other factors may lead to one conclusion. Bullying is not dependent on an instructional manual. There are multiple reasons and factors of why one may feel the need to become a bully or why one lets himself become a victim. The human psyche is not an exact science and the best prevention methods are the ones that need to be continued to be focused on in educational settings. To prevent, we need to educate. This study concluded that a small population of special education students, make up the vast majority of bullying occurrences. What needs to be look at in further research may be the factors why. Are there more diagnosis of mental illness, do feelings of weakness or inferiority come into play based on their disabilities? Do schools need to better educate these populations with more intensive interventions on the issues surrounding the concepts associated with bullying? Further research may need to look at breaking down the samples into even more defined populations such as kindergarten to second grade, third to fifth grade, and then middle school and high schools. One could look at more diverse geographical locations and even look at other areas of the world and see the impact of bullying on their students and cultures. In our definition of bullying we stated that “the harassment of the victim occurs over an extended period of time, the intent behind the harassment is meant to cause harm either mentally or physically to the victim, and an imbalance of power is apparent.” Based on this definition one needs to ponder the question of first why does one become a bully, what are they getting emotionally out of it and how does this affect their daily relationships with others? When considering the victim, one could ask similar questions why am
I the victim of a bully, how is this hurting me emotionally, and how is this affecting my relationships with others? Is bullying a generational trait that is passed on? Is it a learned behavior or a response mechanism to deal with emotional issues? Whatever the determining factors are for becoming a bully is not as important as the pain, stress and depression it may cause in both perpetrators and victims. The special education subgroups discussed in this study are already looked at negatively across most areas of society. Unfortunately, this is a fact of life and views need to be changed. It is a slow process to change the ideology that has been only recently becoming more acceptable in mainstream America. Early intervention may be one key area to address the factors regarding bullying. Peer pressure often causes people to act in ways that they may not normally do and the concept of group bullying was not discussed in this paper although it has been documented in various publications. Many programs are available for bullying prevention in schools and education in general tends to focus more time on social skills than in any previous time in history. With all the unique challenges that face special education students, there needs to be a concerned effort in targeting this at risk group for the areas associated with bullying. Recent studies suggest that to decrease bullying in schools, there needs to be a school climate that discourages bullying and the need to establish intervention programs that specifically address social skills and bullying. According to Lickona (2000), there were thirteen identified suggestions for preventing cruelty at school. Some of these included adoption of a school wide character education program, parental involvement, and social skills training. Some pitfalls of such a program may include lack of teacher training, refusal to participate from certain cliques, or
the inability to implement school wide. Parent involvement in some districts remain at an all time low and without their support it can be that much more difficult in addressing these behaviors.

According to Wessler (2000), there is no magic program or solution to address bullying. The effectiveness of any attempt to decrease bullying in the schools, particularly in regard to students with disabilities, may depend in part on the demographics of the school community, the administration, and parental support. A team approach with all involved working together, may be the best approach to fighting the concept of bullying in schools.
References


