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**Qualitative Research Method and Analysis Final Paper:
Bullying in Middle Schools**

EDU 7900 Qualitative Research Method and Analysis

Korynne Taylor-Dunlop, Ed.D, Professor

Submitted By

Chelsea Brown

Cohort 9

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It is the goal of school administrators to create a safe, healthy, engaged, supported, and challenged learning environment for all students. Too often middle school age students are faced with direct and indirect bullying situations. Students are repeatedly exposed to verbal and physical incidents that interfere with their academic success. For the purpose of this paper, a focus group was formed of ten seventh graders who meet daily for homeroom. Questions were developed to explore their understanding of bullying in school and what steps could be taken to reduce or eliminate bullying behaviors from school. The following questions were asked over a period of two weeks:

1. What does bullying look like?
2. What does bullying sound like?
3. What are the underlying/root causes of bullying?
4. What can students do to prevent bullying?
5. What can adults/grown-ups do to prevent bullying?

The focus group took place twice a week for three weeks. While all of the students participated, some participated more than others. The tone of the room was positive and students were eager to share their opinions. Some students offered to share some personal experiences to illustrate their point. After speaking with the students and discussing these questions, it was clear that all of the students felt that bullying did exist in school and that it was an important topic to discuss. In addition, they had some very strong feelings about why it occurs and how we can work together to help reduce the number of occurrences. According to the students, bullying is when kids say or do mean things to another person. It can include pushing kids in the hallways, the cafeteria, the courtyard and outside after school. One student stated, "Some kids

think it is funny, but it's not, especially when they are making fun of someone's weight or when they call the students with special needs "Retarded".

When discussing the third question, "What are the underlying/root causes of bullying", students all agreed that bullying is connected to jealousy. Often students will bullying someone else because they are jealous of the material things they have, the number of friends they have, or how popular they might be. Several students shared that bullies often have a low self-esteem and need to pick on other kids to make them feel better about themselves. In addition, bullies are victims of bullying too. The students reported that when an older sibling bullies someone, at school or at home, they come to school angry and push other kids around. One female student stated it best, "At home older siblings pick on them, and then they come to school and bully other kids to make themselves feel better." They also felt that students, who exhibit this mean behavior, do so because they are jealous. One interesting concept that was discussed was the number of friends bullies have. Some of the students in the group felt that bullies could be the popular kids, while the other students thought bullies do not have many friends. When asked to discuss this further they shared, girls who bully have a group of friends, or followers, while the male bullies tend to be able to act alone.

The final two questions about what the students and adults can do to help reduce bullying in schools sparked varying responses. One of the biggest problems they said is that most of the kids see it happen and don't do anything however, some of the students shared that if students reported the incidents to a trusted adult in the building it would help stop bullying. If bullies were reported, they would receive strong punishments and they would not want to bully anymore. Other students disagreed and felt that kids should try to ignore the bully and the problem will go away. They shared some personal experiences where they did tell someone, the

bully found out, and the situation worsened. While they had some possible solutions to this ongoing problem, the students were undecided as to the best way to resolve it.

Conducting the focus group sparked the need to explore some individual concerns about the bullying behaviors in the building and the need to connect with each member of the focus group on a personal level. To collect additional information from the students individually and gain a better understanding of the problems the students in this building are facing, interviews were conducted with each student. The following questions were posed to each student:

1. Who are the adults that you trust or respect – someone you think you could talk to at school?
2. What it is about that adult that makes you trust him/her?
3. How would you respond if you saw someone being bullied (verbally or physically)?
4. Where in the building do bullying incidents take place?
5. Why don't students report these incidents?
6. What suggestions do you have for our school to reduce/eliminate bullying?
7. What can the grown-ups/adults do to help the victims?
8. What can the grown-ups/adults do to help the bully?
9. What can the grown-ups/adults do to help the bystander/onlooker?

After conducting all of the interviews, the student responses were analyzed and categorized. This process revealed some patterns, themes, and discrepancies. Several students had similar responses for many of the questions during their interviews; however one student took a different stand on the issue altogether. This student, newly enrolled this year as a seventh grader, has had a difficult transition from his previous school. He has on occasion sought out negative attention from the group by making absurd comments to his peers. This student and his responses are an

outlier. While interviewing the student, his affect was flat and he showed no interest in the topic, almost finding the entire process, the focus group and interviews, comical.

The overall theme that surfaced from this activity was that of students treading water. The students felt as though the bullying situations and related disrespect are not increasing, but they are just staying afloat. Several of the students feel that although they report their peers for being disrespectful and mean, they do not see the building as bully-free. Because of the focus group and interviewing process, students felt that all of the students in the building could benefit from sharing their thoughts and feelings and provide additional suggestions for improving the climate of the building for everyone. Several students agreed that it needs to be a building wide effort to reduce or eliminate bullying. One student stated, "I think that our school does a lot of activities to reduce bullying but we can also have more teachers in the hallways to keep an eye on everything."

Students who feel connected to adults/grown-ups in middle school, feel safe. When students are able to trust adults, they are more prone to report bullying situations. In order to understand the relationships that exist in the building, the individual responses were compared and several patterns emerged from the interviews. Many of the students did feel connected to an adult in the building and have on occasion confided in him/her. The conflicts that they discussed were addressed, sometimes by administration, and the student felt safe and able to walk through the hallways and learn at their best potential.

When asked where the incidents took place, almost all students agreed that bullying occurs when adults are not around. For example, one student summed it up by stating, "Mostly in the hallways because of the pushing. You can say mean things and no teachers will hear you because it is so loud." To support this feeling almost all of the students responded with

conviction that adults can help all of the students involved (bullies, victims and bystanders) by being a presence in the hallways more during passing and be more visible during lunch, in the cafeterias, and in the courtyard.

Another pattern emerged when students were asked what it is about the teachers you talk to in school. Several students felt that the teachers were nice, trustworthy, treated kids more like adults, were fair, and had a sense of humor. These qualities encouraged the students to tell the adults about their experiences. The adults tried to help the students or suggested the student speak with their respective counselor. Some adults told administration what was shared with them, in confidence, and the situations could be handled.

Two discrepancies emerged from the student interviews. The first was the way the students would respond if they witnessed or experienced a bullying incident. Based on personal experiences, students who experienced incidents firsthand said that they would ignore the person and walk away. One student stated, "I would ignore them because I wouldn't want to get bullied either." Other students shared that they would tell a trusted adult about what happened. Some students shared that they would face the bully and tell them to stop and go away. The responses took various sides when asked what they would do if they witnessed a bullying incident. Several students felt it was important to tell an adult about the situation, while others wanted to address the bully themselves and help the victims stand up for themselves. Two students said they were sure how they would respond because they were afraid that the bully would target them.

The other discrepancy that existed was when students were asked what adults could do to help the bully. Some of the students felt there should be strict punishments and consequences for the bullies. One student shared, "the principal needs to give a sufficient punishment. Kids who get punished won't want to hurt people again." The other students who were interviewed took a

softer approach. They felt that in order to help the bullies, adults needed to talk with the bullies and find out what was bothering them. If the bullies got counseling, they would not keep hurting kids. The same students shared that while the school provides assemblies about bullying and cyber bullying, they can always bring more assemblies and presentations to the school. In addition, they felt that the school needed more posters and signs to help remind the students that this behavior is not okay.

In conclusion, students who participated in the focus groups and individual interviews felt that bullying exists in the building and something needs to be done. From the information gathered, it is necessary to provide all students with the skills to address this phenomenon. Students need to be empowered to stand up and speak their mind. They need to protect themselves physically and emotionally. Having a trusted adult in the building is a key component to eliminating bullying behaviors in school. In addition, adults need to be visible in all areas of the building, especially during non-instructional times. When students feel supported, they feel safe and when they feel safe, they maximize their learning capabilities.

Interview of Female 7th Grade Student

1. Is there an adult that you trust or respect?

Yes

2. Is this someone you think you could talk to at school?

Yes, I can always talk to her.

3. What it is about that adult that makes you trust him/her?

I have known her now for two years and she is a counselor. I see how responsible, kind, helpful, and comfortable she is with kids, especially in the club I am in with her. She is comfortable helping us with our problems and she has a great sense of humor.

4. How would you respond if you saw someone being bullied (verbally or physically)?

I would walk over and try to stop the person. I would not want the other kid to feel alone. Then I think I would tell an adult.

5. Where in the building do bullying incidents take place?

Mostly they happen in the hallways because of all of the pushing. Kids can also say mean things in the hallways and no teachers will hear you because it is so loud.

6. Why don't students report these incidents?

I think kids do not report them because they think if they do; they will be bullied and be made fun of for tattling.

7. What suggestions do you have for our school to reduce/eliminate bullying?

I think that our school does a lot of activities to reduce bullying. We have had assemblies and I remember when you read us that book. But we can also have more teachers in the hallways to keep an eye on everything.

8. What can the grown-ups/adults do to help the victims?

After the bullies get help, let them go to counseling together (with the victim or with a group of other bullies) and talk until everything is okay.

9. What can the grown-ups/adults do to help the bully?

Send them to a counselor to find out the source of their bullying and what is bothering them. They might need an adult to talk to so they can feel better.

10. What can the grown-ups/adults do to help the bystander/onlooker?

Convince them (the bystander) to stand up for the victims, but make sure that nothing gets dangerous. I would not want anyone to get hurt.