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On Bullying and Bullying Prevention: A Poetic Inquiry Into Undergraduate Students' Experiences

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ON BULLYING AND BULLYING PREVENTION:
A POETIC INQUIRY INTO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2018

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Title: On Bullying and Bullying Prevention: A Poetic Inquiry Into Undergraduate Students' Experiences

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Building on the work of many experts on research in bullying and research methods used by Hanauer in his 2012 and 2015 articles, this study explored the experiences of undergraduate university students with bullying through poetic ethnography. This study used the question, "What are undergraduate students' experiences of bullying or being bullied?" to guide interviews with participants about their experiences as bullies, victims, or bystanders. Participants' words in those interviews were then organized as poems and reviewed with them. Findings indicate that, though each experience with bullying is unique, all participants shared certain aspects of their experiences with bullying and had similar recommendations regarding bullying prevention for fellow students, teachers, schools, and communities. Finally, this study considers how participants' experiences and the poems created from them can be used to prevent future bullying.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
1	INTRODUCTION	1
	Purpose and Rationale.....	1
	Research Question and Significance.....	3
	Why Poetic Ethnography?	4
	Organization of This Study.....	6
2	LITERATURE REVIEW	9
	The Nature of Bullying.....	10
	Consequences of Bullying	12
	Possible Bullying Prevention Strategies.....	13
	Existing Anti-Bullying Programs	14
	A Case for Poetic Ethnography as a Tool for Reflection.....	15
	Conclusions.....	17
3	METHODOLOGY	18
	Participants.....	18
	Research Design.....	20
	Data Collection and Procedures.....	20
	Data Analysis	21
	Second Interviews.....	22
4	RESULTS	24
	Jlynn.....	24
	Katie.....	33
	Leah.....	45
	Rebekah.....	56
	Bernadette	70
	Conclusion	77
5	DISCUSSION.....	79
	Definition of Bullying.....	80
	Bullying in Specific Populations	81
	Effects of Bullying.....	82
	Suggestions for Possible Use of This Data.....	83
	Recommendations for Future Research.....	85
	Final Thoughts	87

Chapter	Page
REFERENCES	88
APPENDICES	95
Appendix A – Interview Script.....	95

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Participants and Their Contexts	19

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Recently, a video of a young man talking about his experience with bullying went viral across the Internet. In the video, Keaton Jones talked to his mother and her camera from the passenger seat of their car about how bullying was unnecessary, how other students at his school had poured milk on him and made fun of how he looked, and how others being bullied should have hope and try not to let the bullying bother them because “it will probably get better one day” (PHP, 2017). It is estimated that about 19% of United States students are bullied at some point during their time in school (Dake, Price, and Telljohann, 2003) – that is about 11 million students per year facing problems similar to Keaton’s (Davis & Bauman, 2013). Researchers have put a great deal of time and effort into trying to discover ways to decrease bullying, but understand we still have a long way to go, making research on this issue just as important for today’s young people and their communities as it was when studies on bullying began.

Purpose and Rationale

Keaton’s experience with bullying is unique, but countless victims of bullying before him have also felt the way he does and many students around his age likely share his feelings today as they undergo similar experiences in their own schools and communities. Bullying remains a serious problem in schools in the United States. It has been estimated that about 19% of United States students are bullied and that percentage may actually be higher, since many incidents are not recognized or reported (Dake, Price, and Telljohann, 2003). This issue is not strictly American and has been recognized in countries throughout the world (Tilindienė & Gailiūnienė, 2013; Gofin and Avitzour, 2012; Kulakci, Ayyildiz, & Venen, 2013; Tayli, 2013; Huang, Hong,

& Espelage, 2013, Yang et al., 2013; Cosma & Baban, 2013; Delfabbro et al., 2006), making bullying a universal problem and one worth studying and preventing.

“Bullying” is aggressive behavior, repeated over time, which is intentionally harmful and occurs with no provocation (Long & Alexander, 2010; Harris & Pétrie, 2002; Olweus, 1991). In Keaton’s case, we hear that his classmates made fun of the way he looks, told him he had no friends and poured milk on him, but Keaton mentions that this sort of thing happens to other students, too (PHP, 2017). The purpose of this study is to give voice to experiences like Keaton’s, just as candidly, but through poems, rather than through a video. In this study, five participants who have experience with bullying as a bully or victim share their stories in individual interviews. Their memories reflect the definition of bullying described above and expand that definition to fit participants’ unique situations. Participants’ memories also capture many of the same emotions Keaton felt, but in all cases, are several years removed from the actual experience, showing just how much participants remember, even a long time after the bullying occurred in their own lives.

In this study, five participants share their stories about their experiences with bullying. After an interview with each person, their memories are organized into a series of poems. In their interviews, each participant details her own reactions to and thoughts about bullying and how she remembers her experiences many years later, as well as how she is healing from those experiences. Participants range from feeling like they have moved beyond their memories of bullying to believing they are still struggling to come to terms with what happened.

Participants’ stories help us understand how research definitions of bullying apply to real life and each participant makes suggestions to help readers, students, adults, and communities

understand bullying and work to prevent it, with the sincere hope that stories like theirs and Keaton's are less likely to become the reality of students in the future.

Research Question and Significance

This study presents experiences with bullying through the eyes of participants who were previously victims, bullies, or both. Participants are interviewed and their words are organized into poems, providing a basis for discussion or thought among readers. While many studies present statistics and use surveys to gather data, this study focuses on participants' personal experiences and shares their stories as poetic ethnography, another way to look at the impact bullying can have on individuals. This study begins to answer the question: what are undergraduate students' experiences of bullying or being bullied?

As I quickly learned from speaking with participants in this study, bullying can have a long-lasting impact on those who have experience with it as bullies, victims of bullying, or even witnesses of bullying. For both bullies and victims of bullying, experiences with bullying have been shown to have a number of consequences, from low self-esteem to post-traumatic stress, and from lower school performance to social alienation (Houbre et al., 2006; Schneider et al., 2012; Delfabbro et al., 2006). These consequences of bullying make understanding and working to prevent bullying as important an issue today as it has been for many years. Participants in this study would certainly agree and, in all of their interviews, conveyed the importance of preventing their experiences from happening to others. In her interview, Bernadette expressed her concern that bullying was still happening to other students and throughout her interview, mentioned the importance of continuing to work to prevent bullying in schools and communities.

"I know a lot of people in my school
That were bullied
And no one spoke up

...

It just...it just blows my mind
Even that this still continues to happen to other people
It's just crazy"

Why Poetic Ethnography?

Poetic ethnography provides a method that emphasizes individual life experiences and makes them accessible for readers (Hanauer, 2015; Hanauer, 2012; Brady, 2004), making it an ideal method for beginning to understand our participants' stories. Many studies about bullying and its effects are based on statistics. Many programs used to combat bullying are also based on sharing statistics with students. However, many of those studies and programs also note that the statistics are not always an accurate representation of how many cases of bullying exist in a given community or the effects bullying can have on those involved. The poems included in this study record participants' experiences as they were told and with all their thoughts and emotions that cannot be conveyed through numbers. Each participant in this study expressed her hope that her story could somehow help others in similar situations, by helping a bully understand what he or she is doing, helping a victim gain the courage to reach out for help, or reminding an adult of the importance of talking with his or her children or students about bullying or just engaging in regular conversation about how they are doing at school or in their communities.

Below is one poem from Leah's interview. In it, she makes suggestions for students who are victims of bullying.

"As for students
If an adult approaches you
Let them know what's going on
You might be too scared to tell an adult
But if somebody asks
Don't deny it
If somebody tries to reach out to you and help
Grab their hand
Hold on
And accept that help

I would try and tell somebody in the same situation to ask for help
 But that's really difficult
 You might not even realize what's happening
 Especially with emotional bullying
If the bullying is not happening right now and it's been a long time since then
 And you're trying to deal with it
 And it's in the past
I would tell people in that kind of situation
 I mean, it's a lifelong struggle
 But you can move past this
 It negatively affects your self-esteem
 But you'll become a stronger person because of it
 And all that hurt and all that pain will go away
 And it helps you become the person you are
You might not realize that now
 And I'm not saying be grateful for what happened
 But it defines you
But don't let it be the only thing that defines you
 It's one part of your story
 But it doesn't have to be the your whole story”

Leah's suggestion that students try to reach out for help or, at least, try to accept help that is offered to them is echoed in recommendations from other participants as well. Bernadette repeats throughout her interview the importance of having a strong support system and all participants mention being at various points in their own healing processes – some feel they were able to move past their experiences, while others are still struggling to come to terms with what happened and understand how that has defined them without being their “whole story.” Leah also talks in her poem about some of the consequences of bullying, including low self-esteem, and how overcoming its effects can be a lifelong struggle. These consequences of bullying are common among both victims of bullying and bullies themselves and are discussed in Houbre, Tarquinio, Thuillier, and Hergott's 2006 study, as well as in Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter's 2012 study. Leah even mentioned aspects common in definitions of bullying, including victims' inability to defend themselves (Peguero, 2012; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Olweus, 1993). In Leah's example, victims are too scared to reach out for help or might not even realize

what is happening. This is one example of a participant’s poem – during their interviews, Leah, as well as Jlynn, Katie, Rebekah, and Bernadette, recount many more experiences and give recommendations for others who have experience with bullying. Their poems are presented in *Chapter 4: Results*.

Just like Keaton, many of the participants in this study choose to end their stories on a hopeful note. They offer suggestions for teachers, students, and communities to help decrease bullying in and around schools. Even while reliving their own experiences with bullying, they seem to share Keaton’s belief that “it will probably get better one day” (PHP, 2017).

Organization of This Study

This study is organized into five chapters.

In the first chapter, *Introduction*, the study, topic, and research question considered are presented. An example of a poem from this study is also included and discussed. This study presents five participants’ experiences with bullying through poems organized from their own words. The topic, bullying, is a relevant social issue that has been researched and discussed many times, though we still have a lot to learn as we continue to work to decrease bullying in schools and communities. The research question for this study focuses on individual experiences with bullying and asks, “What are undergraduate students’ experiences of bullying or being bullied?” This study also provides readers a number of new perspectives from students several years removed from their experiences, showing just how much and how clearly they remember specific events and how they have been healing or struggling to heal over time. A poem from one participant’s story is included and discussed, describing what happens in her story and the hope she expresses for the future, while encouraging others who face bullying in their own lives to grow from the experience without letting that experience, alone, define them.

In the second chapter, *Literature Review*, background on the issue of bullying is provided, from definitions to prevalence to impact. Poetic ethnography, which is the method by which the results are presented in this study, is also discussed. The chapter starts with a few definitions of bullying and one researcher's description of why bullying exists. Many researchers provide evidence on the consequences of bullying and programs that have been implemented to try to combat bullying in schools and communities. Finally, the use of poetic ethnography to inform further research is suggested along with reasons why this approach to presenting individual experiences with bullying might be used to prevent bullying in the future.

In the third chapter, *Methodology*, the steps used to obtain and organize interview data into poems are described. The method of presentation for this research is poetic ethnography. The method was chosen, in part, because it has, to the best of this researcher's knowledge, not yet been used to study individual experiences with bullying. Poems are organized from participants' own words and then presented, so that readers can hear participants' stories according to them – their own memories, emotions, and processes of healing. The chapter gives a brief background on each of the five participants and the university they attend (or attended at the time of the interviews), as well as how the interviews were conducted, and how the poems were organized and reviewed.

In the fourth chapter, *Results*, the interview data is described and presented. Poems included in the chapter are organized by participant. Prior to their inclusion in this study, the participant and researcher reviewed all the poems created from the participant's interview data and chose the ones that were most representative of each person's experiences. Those final poems are presented and analyzed.

The final chapter, *Discussion*, relates this study's results to the research question. Recommendations are made for the use of this data, as well as for future research. This research study begins to answer the question: what are undergraduate students' experiences of bullying or being bullied? In this chapter, the interview data is further analyzed and related to the research question. Recommendations are also made for the use of this data, as well as for future research. Each participant expresses her interest in having her stories and poems used to help others, either to prevent bullying or to help other people who have experience with bullying. Research on bullying does not, of course, end with this study and participants' poems give researchers further questions to answer with future studies.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bullying has been defined as aggressive behavior, repeated over time, which is intentionally harmful and occurs with no provocation (Long & Alexander, 2010; Harris & Pétrie, 2002; Olweus, 1991). In general, this aggression is against someone who cannot easily defend him- or herself (Peguero, 2012; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Olweus, 1993). A study in Lithuania found that the most common forms of bullying were nicknaming, spreading rumors, and intimidating victims (Tilindienė & Gailiūnienė, 2013), but the actions associated with bullying are certainly not limited to this list, nor is the problem found only in Lithuania. According to Dake, Price, and Telljohann (2003), bullying is a serious problem in schools in the United States, as well – in fact, it has been estimated that about 19% of United States students are bullied and that percentage may be higher, since many incidents are not recognized or reported. In an even more recent series of surveys, DeVoe, Murphy, and the National Center for Education Statistics (2011) found that 28% of U.S. students reported having been bullied at school and 6% reported having experienced cyber bullying either at school or away from school. While that rate of “traditional” in-person bullying has remained steady, cyber bullying has increased in recent years (Rigby & Smith, 2011, p. 441). Bullying is likely equally as problematic or, possibly, even more serious in countries outside the United States. Gofin and Avitzour (2012) completed a study in several schools in Israel and found that 44.9% of students reported being victims of traditional bullying and almost 14.4% of students said the same of cyber bullying – much higher rates than those reported by DeVoe et al. (2011). Studies have been conducted on bullying in a variety of other countries, as well, including Turkey (Kulakci, Ayyildiz, & Venen, 2013; Tayli, 2013),

China (Huang, Hong, & Espelage, 2013), Korea (Yang et al., 2013), Romania (Cosma & Baban, 2013), and Australia (Delfabbro et al., 2006), among many others.

While these statistical studies show that bullying is a problem, a number of studies have also been completed on the effects of bullying in schools. These studies have shown that there is a relationship between student bullying behavior and school-related issues, such as academic achievement, school bonding, and absenteeism (Dake, Price, & Telljohann, 2003). However, most research inquiries have been in the form of surveys, often narrowing participants' responses to one or a few choices. So far, few researchers have taken the opportunity to interview participants one on one to gather information about their individual experiences with bullying, so more research in this area is needed.

In this study, I continue research on bullying and bullying prevention. In particular, I seek to answer the following research question: What are undergraduate students' experiences of bullying or being bullied?

The Nature of Bullying

Why is bullying an important current issue in schools? And why should the prevention of bullying be a priority among school faculty, staff, and administration? Recently, some arguments have been made that suggest that preventing bullying altogether is impossible. Though she emphasizes that reducing the number of bullying incidences is certainly a worthwhile and very possible goal, Nishina (2004) also provided a potential explanation for why bullying exists:

[S]ocial dominance theory posits that individuals strive to form social hierarchies because it is evolutionarily advantageous to do so. Cross-cultural studies support this notion, as peer harassment appears to be a universal phenomenon. Similar social aggression and

dominance hierarchies are found in primate groups as well. Taken together, these findings would suggest that it is difficult, if not impossible, to completely eliminate peer harassment. (p. 50)

While Nishina's findings on the nature of bullying may be accurate, she also stated that her research in no way suggested that the number of incidences of bullying in schools could not be lowered and affirmed that schools should continue to work to reduce bullying occurrences, which, left unchecked, could have serious consequences for not only students, but also entire school communities. Other researchers have added to Nishina's findings, studying factors that may be related to or increase the likelihood of bullying. Unfortunately, many of the factors that predict whether a student might become a bully or victim are beyond anyone's control and include race (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007), ethnicity (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2009; Nieto, 1994), nationality, religion (Nieto, 1994), age (Huang et al., 2013), sex (Huang et al., 2013; Bradshaw et al., 2009), sexual orientation (Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012), and health problems or disabilities (Huang et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2013; Bradshaw et al., 2009), among others beyond the bully's or victim's control. According to one study completed in Turkey, even school size can affect whether a student develops experience with bullying, since participating students from small schools were more likely to have experience with bullying than students from large or mid-size schools (Tayli, 2013). Several other studies in China indicated that, depending on where bullying took place, other culture-specific factors could be added to this list of possible causes, including qualities such as a student's academic achievement (Huang et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2013) and one study, specific to African American youth, suggested that harsh parenting practices, negative peer influence, an unsafe school climate, and students' exposure to violence could contribute to bullying (Patton, Hong, Williams, & Allen-Meares,

2013). Researchers in Romania supported those findings when they learned that exposure to adverse childhood experiences increased students' chances of being bullied and added that a low socioeconomic status was also a risk factor for being bullied (Cosma & Baban, 2013).

According to a study by Espelage, Bosworth, and Simon (2001), at least for 6th graders in the United States, bullying seemed to increase with a culture of violence, few positive adult influences, and negative peer influences, coupled with higher levels of impulsivity, anger, and depression for any given student (Espelage et al., 2001). Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan (2009) looked more specifically at aspects of school culture that contributed to bullying, which were found to include the student-teacher ratio, concentration of student poverty, suspension rate, and student mobility. Finally, school alienation among elementary school students in Turkey was found to contribute to bullying (Kulakci et al., 2013). These are just a few of the possible causes of bullying – because bullying takes place on an individual level, identifying a single cause is challenging, since each instance of bullying likely occurs for multiple reasons and each person who takes part in those events is an individual with a unique perspective on the situation.

Consequences of Bullying

Looking at recent research, there are quite a few possible causes of bullying and there are just as many consequences of it. According to research studies conducted by Houbre, Tarquinio, Thuillier, and Hergott (2006), both bullies and their victims had the lowest self-concepts among their peers. Houbre et al. also found that both bullies and victims have more psychosomatic problems than their peers. In addition, victims of bullying showed increased symptoms of post-traumatic stress and, according to the same study, there existed a dependency relationship between post-traumatic stress and substance use. One study looked specifically at victims of

bullying who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and found that 17% of the participants who reported having been bullied at school showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Other victims of bullying reported lower school performance and school attachment, high levels of distress (Schneider et al., 2012), social alienation, poorer psychological functioning, and poorer self-esteem and self-image (Delfabbro et al., 2006). Overall, these researchers found that both bullies and victims suffer health consequences from bullying and being bullied. Also, as mentioned earlier, entire school communities suffer the consequences of bullying, which often include issues with academic achievement, school bonding, and absenteeism (Dake et al., 2003).

Possible Bullying Prevention Strategies

Fortunately, many of the problems that have been shown to contribute to bullying can be reduced or eliminated. For example, though middle school students and staff showed particular concern about bullying, among those who participated in a study by Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan (2007), both the students and staff from elementary to high school greatly underestimated the number of students involved in bullying (p. 361), so alerting school communities about the extent of the problem would likely be an important first step in stopping or preventing bullying. Though harsh parenting practices and exposure to violence cannot necessarily be eliminated, improving peer and teacher support and encouraging a positive school climate can help reduce bullying, especially for African American youth, according to Patton et al. (2013). Nieto (1994) suggested implementing programs and activities in school curriculums that promote students' cultural sensitivity, so that they can better understand (and be less likely to bully) their diverse classmates. Espelage et al. (2001) found that greater confidence among students on using non-violent strategies in their interactions with others was associated with less bullying, so teaching students about these strategies could prove helpful for schools attempting to

reduce bullying. Franks, Rawana, and Brownlee (2013) added to these findings, suggesting that fostering students' school functioning and pro-social attitudes might decrease incidences of bullying. Schneider et al. (2012) recommended prevention efforts that address bullying's relation to school performance and mental health as a way to combat bullying and some of its negative effects. Homgren, Lamb, Miller, and Werderitch (2011) advocated the use of drama, video programs, children's literature, and peer mediation programs to prevent and combat bullying and Haeseler (2010) supported their suggestions when she found that diversity-driven, literacy-infused classrooms helped prevent bullying among elementary school students. Researchers outside the United States have also contributed culture-specific recommendations for bullying prevention. Kasetchai (2013) conducted a study in Israel and suggested that organizing group study activities and special projects, giving advice, giving instructive reprimands, providing good models, teaching religion, and providing discipline training could all help prevent bullying in the schools that study participants attended. These are just a few of the recommendations that have been provided by researchers, so there is certainly no shortage of advice on how schools could alter their policies and curriculums to better prevent bullying.

Existing Anti-Bullying Programs

Many of the suggestions provided by researchers have been converted into school-wide anti-bullying programs and interventions. Nikels, Mims, and Mims (2007) led small group discussions and activities related to hate, stereotypes, and prejudices with 11th grade public school students. Strohmeier, Hoffman, Schiller, Stefanek, and Spiel (2012) evaluated the ViSC Social Competence Program, which was created as a response to the idea that bullying is common where it is not taken seriously. The program, then, was designed to encourage shared responsibility among teachers for problems associated with bullying and ensured that teachers

had a shared understanding of the problem and how to handle incidences of bullying. After completing the study in Israel mentioned above, Kasetchai (2013) conducted a second study implementing suggestions based on the first study's findings. The second study indicated that organizing group study activities in the Islamic private schools in which the study was completed did indeed help prevent and reduce bullying among students, partially because the group activities provided positive role models for students and incorporated Islamic principles and ethics. Wurf (2012) completed a study in Hong Kong international schools using several anti-bullying programs and methods and found that whole-school anti-bullying interventions were more effective than classroom-specific interventions or shifts in the curriculum. As can be seen from the diversity of programs mentioned here, a great many programs have been created and implemented to reduce bullying in schools either directly or indirectly – other examples include the Olweus program, Zero Tolerance, and many others. The research findings supporting the implementation of some sort of anti-bullying program in any given school are more-or-less clear. With this much emphasis placed on preventing bullying in schools, researchers are working quickly to look into as many potential causes as possible to help improve existing anti-bullying programs and inform the creation of new ones. Relating to methodology, most of the recent studies in this field have been based on surveys, looking at “big picture” statistics rather than individual experiences. Here, then, is where further research might be useful for continuing to inform anti-bullying efforts.

A Case for Poetic Ethnography as a Tool for Reflection

Poetic ethnography is a relatively new research method that has shown a great deal of promise for situations such as this, where researchers wish to capture not only participants' words, but also the emotions, connections, and meanings behind their words. A textbook

definition for the term, “ethnography,” is a “researched study that synthesizes information about the life of a people or group” (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2012, p. 4). A research definition for the term, “ethnography,” is very difficult to find. Wolcott (2003; 1988) likely came closest to defining ethnographic studies when he described them as being holistic, comparative, from first-hand experience, and preoccupied with cultural interpretation. This kind of study is also adaptive, basically descriptive, corroborative, individualistic, and non-evaluative.

The purpose of the proposed study is to record and analyze narratives about bullying as told by participants who were previously victims, bullies, or both, and an ethnographic research method would likely provide the best way to record these narratives. Using “poetic” ethnography would further emphasize the individual viewpoints and life experiences (of both the storyteller and the reader) found in all or most ethnographic work and make those narratives accessible to others (Hanauer, 2015; Hanauer, 2012; Brady, 2004). According to Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor (2010), successful narratives allow readers to see the details and complexities of culture, while reaching beyond historical experience to a “sense of aesthetics that enhances literal ‘facts’ rather than diminishes them” (Maynard & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010, p. 12).

Related specifically to bullying, Goldstein (2012) looked at the implications that poetic therapy might have for preventing or combating bullying in schools. She suggested that poetic therapy (or bibliotherapy) might offer a way to encourage empathy among students, whether they are victims waiting for a reason to come forward or aggressors who should reconsider their behavior. Poetic ethnography allows researchers to capture the emotions and connections behind participants’ words more than a simple interview and narrative recording might and could potentially be used as part of poetic therapy or to otherwise encourage empathy in readers. Because peer support has already been listed numerous times as a factor that mitigates bullying

in schools, records of narratives told by former bullies and victims could, therefore, prove to be invaluable sources of empathy-building information for teachers, students, and school communities.

Conclusions

This study begins to fill a gap in research on bullying through poetic ethnography, presenting five very different perspectives on bullying and what, exactly, that means to these individuals. In recent years, many studies have been conducted on bullying, its causes, its effects, and its potential “cures.” Several of these studies have been repeated in a variety of contexts around the world, strengthening the findings from the original study and showing that bullying is not a problem specific to the United States. However, because most of these studies were based on surveys, few researchers made themselves available to discuss with participants their individual experiences with bullying. Instead, most researchers have needed to rely on more general surveys with questions that could have been misconstrued or that frequently may not have encouraged participants to expand upon their answers. In this study, participants share their own stories in their own words, providing a personal perspective that cannot be achieved with a survey. Despite the large amount of recent research in this area, there is still a great deal more that has yet to be investigated about bullying.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to present experiences with bullying through the eyes of participants who were previously victims, bullies, or both. For this study, ethnographic research methods provide the best way to present these experiences. Using poetic ethnography further emphasizes the individual viewpoints and life experiences found in participants' stories and makes their perspectives more accessible to others (Hanauer, 2015; Hanauer, 2012; Brady, 2004), allowing readers to see participants' experiences through their eyes – not only reading their words, but also experiencing the ideas, emotions, and perspectives central to their stories. This research begins to answer the question: what are undergraduate students' experiences of bullying or being bullied?

Participants

Participants in this study are undergraduate students attending Western Pennsylvania University. In total, five students agreed to participate and tell their stories. At the time they contacted me to participate, two were in their first year, one in her second year, one in her third year, and one in her fourth year. All five shared stories related to being bullied and two out of five shared stories potentially related to things they had done to others or themselves.

Table 1

Participants and Their Contexts

Participant Alias	Gender	Year in College	Other Information
Jlynn	Female	1 st (Freshman)	Attended public schools
Katie	Female	4 th (Senior)	Attended private and public schools
Leah	Female	1 st (Freshman)	Attended private schools
Rebekah	Female	3 rd (Junior)	Attended public, private, and cyber schools
Bernadette	Female	2 nd (Sophomore)	Attended public schools

WPU’s main campus is located in a relatively small town in Western Pennsylvania, in the United States. The community surrounding WPU consists of the town and several townships in the surrounding area, which altogether have a population of about 33,000 (Western Pennsylvania School District). The university itself has about 15,000 students (Western Pennsylvania University, 2013). Five undergraduate students participated in this study. Though many experiences with bullying occur during childhood and teenage years, people remember them well into adulthood and sometimes throughout their entire lives. Asking undergraduate students to share their stories puts them just far enough away from their experiences to identify what really mattered to them at the time and shows just how much they remember years after an experience. Two out of the five participants were willing to candidly discuss experiences as possible bullies. I stress this point because, while finding participants willing to tell stories about having been victims of bullying is not generally particularly challenging in much of American culture, finding people willing to talk about their experiences as bullies is often considerably more difficult. To

find participants, flyers with a description of the study and my contact information were posted throughout the university's campus.

Research Design

This research was based on interviews with participants who volunteered to share their experiences with bullying as victims, bullies, or bystanders. Volunteers met with me to discuss their experiences – I used an interview script to prompt participants to share their experiences and, with each participant's permission, the interviews were recorded so that I could transcribe them and turn the experiences discussed during the interview into poems. Later, participants met with me a second time to review the poems I had designed from participants' words and check them for accuracy. Once the participant and I agreed on versions of the poems that best represented the participant's experiences, each of those final poems was included in the report.

Data Collection and Procedures

For this process, I used an interview script, which contained an introduction, a suggested script to prompt participants to share their stories, and a short 'thank you' at the conclusion of the interview. A copy of the interview script can be found in the *Appendix A*. Participants also needed paper and writing utensils to take notes on their experiences. I had a copy of the interview script and a recording device to collect data for this study – the participants' responses. The interviewees and I met in an appropriate location to conduct the interview – one that was private and that had a hard, flat surface that participants (and I, as needed for clarification) could use for writing. For this study, the participants and I met in WPU's library, in reserved and unoccupied classrooms or study rooms.

The process for conducting this study was simple enough: interview, transcribe, arrange, and review. However, each step was more complex. First, I needed to find participants willing

to talk about their experiences, emphasizing in interactions with them that any information collected would remain confidential and that findings would be reported only anonymously. The majority of the initial interactions between potential participants and me took place via email or through personal contacts.

After finding participants who volunteered to share their experiences and setting up interviews in a private location at a time convenient for the interviewees, I conducted interviews on participants' experiences with bullying, as bullies and victims of bullying. After introducing the study and the interview and asking participants to sign a form allowing me to use (anonymously) the data I collected in the research study and to collect that data by recording the interview, I asked interviewees to take notes on personal experiences related to bullying. As needed, I then asked a series of questions about those incidents, prompting participants to expand on their accounts of what they remember. Rather than asking explicit questions about bullying, I asked questions that prompted interviewees to tell me more about individual experiences, showing what interviewees remembered rather than what they believed they remembered or knew. After I gathered a thorough description of each incident, I concluded the interviews by thanking the participants for their time and help and reminding them that I would like to meet with them once again in the near future to go over with them the poetic version of their experiences.

Data Analysis

Following these individual interviews, I transcribed participants' words from the recordings to written narratives. I studied each narrative and gathered the information that best told participants' stories. I arranged the text in short lines, with line stops for poetic effect at crucial moments, and altering line breaks and spacing without changing participants' words. The

goal in arranging the narratives this way was to enhance the narratives' meanings, making more apparent language that reveals aspects of the stories that might not be noticeable in a narrative format (participants' emotions, perspectives, etc.), but without changing the meaning or implied meanings of the narratives.

Second Interviews

I then reviewed the poetic renderings of the narratives with participants in a follow-up interview. In the same manner as the initial interview, the interviewee and I met in a private location at a time convenient for the interviewee to read the poems I had arranged from participants' stories. I asked participants whether the analysis accurately represented their stories and what, if anything, should be changed to make the poems more closely resemble what actually happened and how participants perceived each incident discussed during the first interview. When participants found other things to add to or remove from the poems, I edited the poems and reviewed the new versions with participants.

In this study, participants reacted similarly, but not the same, to seeing their words presented as poems. Several mentioned how much more powerful their own spoken words seemed to them when they were written. Most purposely limited their own revisions, so the poems could reflect their individual speech styles, but one participant insisted that unnecessary words like "um," and "uh," be removed. Most participants chose to remove poems or sections of poems they believed were less important and two participants reorganized similar poems to strengthen a point they were trying to make during their first interviews. Those who used names of people or places in their initial interviews either chose pseudonyms for those people and places or found ways to remove the specific reference without diminishing the story. One participant made no revisions at all, saying that she did not want to change anything because the

story she read in those poems was, indeed, her story. And all participants emphasized for a second time how much they hoped their experiences could be used to help others.

The poems created from participants' interviews will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Each bully's, victim's, and bystander's experience with bullying is different. Five people were interviewed for this study and each participant gave a unique account of her own memories of bullying. One person believed she was her own worst bully, while some were bullied by several different people. Some focused on the difference they were able to make in their own situations, while others felt completely helpless and were able to handle only the aftereffects on their own.

In this chapter, the poems created from participants' interview data are presented. The poems are organized by case and all of the poems from each participant are together. Because each participant's story is unique and different from the others, this is the most logical way to organize their poems. At the end of each participant's poems, I include my own reaction to her experiences and to my interviews with her. Participants had varying reasons for participating in this study and different reactions to their interviews and drafts of their poems, some of which are not included in their finished poems, so with my own ideas, I try to shed some light on "outside the interview" information that might have been missed. All names for people and places are pseudonyms.

Jlynn

The first participant, Jlynn, provides an unexpected perspective on bullying, which she calls "self-bullying." Jlynn believes that she, herself, is the worst bully she has encountered in her life. Many aspects of her story are reflected in the stories of the other participants, contributing to how they felt about being bullied by others. Jlynn begins her story with

suggestions for others who went or are going through the same thing. This will pave the way for our understanding of other participants' stories.

Jlynn's story is focused on an internal struggle and she makes suggestions for people experiencing the same thing or otherwise doubting themselves or who they could be. She starts with examples from her own life, whether related to little things like eating right and exercising, or to bigger things, like choosing a career and pursuing happiness. Then, she makes general recommendations that others could apply to their own lives, like talking to other people to gain new perspectives, setting small goals, or just finding ways to become comfortable with themselves.

I started thinking about, like, when I was a kid
 Like who really was the biggest bully
I think the biggest person in my life
 Who's just been the cruelest to myself
 And who's probably said the worst things to me
 Is...just literally me
I am the biggest bully to myself
 Which I don't think most people think of when they think of bullies
 It's kind of a different take on it

I started thinking about when I was a kid
 Like in elementary school
 Probably around, like, fifth grade
And, you know
 When you're getting older and stuff
 You start really thinking about yourself
 And that image of yourself
 To other people becomes such a big thing
And...I don't really know
 I can't even picture why
 But I started developing, like, insecurities
 Just things to pick on myself
 Things I didn't like about myself
 Physically or...just as a person
And it never really stopped
 I think it just got worse as I got older

I think the biggest contribution to that
Is just caring what people thought about me...way too much
Especially in high school
It was a spiral
Like a ball of negativity just building and building
It didn't really stop until I got to college
And stopped caring what people thought

You know, your inner world really does reflect your outer world
My whole world was starting to become negative
And I would push people away without any real reason
Because I made myself believe things that weren't true
Like, that this person didn't like me
Or that I wasn't good enough
Or whatever

And...it doesn't really make sense
Thinking about it with a clear head
But when you're in high school
You don't sit down and think about things
Or why you do things
But later on you can reflect on it

Like now
Now I understand more of why I cared so much
Or why I couldn't stop caring about what other people thought

It's hard when you're trying to give advice to someone, too
Especially when I talk to my little sister
The same things that I faced, she'll face
And it's hard to tell her things
Because I don't want to be a hypocrite
But I want her to not make the same mistakes I made

I used to be very closed off
And didn't really like sharing personal things with others
But once I did start opening up
And becoming an open person
Like that...that helped a lot
People connect with you
Like, you can see people open up when you open up
To people who want to
It's easier to admit to things
And, like, tell my little sister why she shouldn't do this
Because of how I messed up
And then she understands more
Instead of just being like,

“Don’t do this because – don’t do it,”
You know

In middle school
I played volleyball
And I was in eighth grade
It was, like, the eighth graders and the seventh graders
So it was an A team and a B team
The older girls were typically on a A team
And the younger girls were on the B team
I remember me and these two other girls who were my friends
Were on the A team at the time
And...I think that we just started slacking
We started, like, goofing around at practices
And we weren’t taking it as seriously
As a lot of the other girls were
And we got put on the B team
And replaced for three younger girls
And that was just really, really embarrassing at the time
And it made me feel so crappy
And I hated our volleyball coach for so long
Until the day I realized
That was on me
That wasn’t really on him
He didn’t do that to be spiteful
He did that because I really was not trying
I wasn’t applying myself

So, for things like that
It’s not about not being good enough
It’s not about anything like that
It’s more about, like, the effort you’re putting into things
And I definitely did not react in the way that was mature
I was just mad
I stopped going to practice altogether
Because I was so personally offended by something
That was not personal at all
I mean, it was personal in the sense that I deserved it
But not in the case that, like
“Oh, my coach hated me.”
Or like, “Oh, it was something...else.”

It really comes down to just caring more about what you think about yourself
And doing small things to help you love yourself

‘Cause it is really hard to love other people when you don’t love yourself
It is hard to form relationships when you’re so uncomfortable with yourself
Sometimes, like when I was bored and I was thinking
About how I wanted to make a transition
And to stop being this negative person
It helped me to write down a lot of the things that I was afraid of in life
And also things that I wanted to change
Like wanting to actually start trying in school
And wanting to wake up in the morning and eat something healthy
And just paying more attention to yourself
And I think it is important to be a little selfish
Definitely
You can’t set yourself on fire to provide warmth to other people
There are times where you have to really know what you want
It’s hard
It is so important to go with you intuition
Like, your gut feeling
If you feel like something’s bad
Or you feel like you don’t want to do something
You shouldn’t feel that you have to
You should just be like, “I don’t feel good about this.
And I don’t want to do this.”
Or, “I feel good about this.
And nobody’s going to tell me that I shouldn’t.”
Unless it’s something, like, reasonably bad
It’s all about just not caring what other people think
To some extent
You should be able to take advice
But take it with a grain of salt
Don’t think that what they tell you is the most important thing

Becoming comfortable with who you really want to be
And doing things you want to do
And dressing the way you want to dress
Is really, really important
Because if you fake all that and you’re just kind of conforming
You won’t find the people who are gonna be down with what you are about
Like, not so much anymore
But I remember,
When I was like younger
I didn’t like admitting to things
That I thought were weird that I liked
Like liking old rock music
I thought was, like, a weird thing
We were all, like, little girls

So everyone else liked... whatever
 Pop music or something
And I really liked anime, too
 And I never wanted to admit that
 Because I thought it was, like, geeky
 It just didn't matter
But if I never talked about those things and kept them hidden away
 I wouldn't have found the people who also liked those things
 And no matter what crazy, nerdy, weird thing you think you're in to
 There's always someone out there your age
 Or not
 That is into it
You can find a friend who's into whatever you're into
 And that initial isolation is hard to get over
 But it'll pass
Just becoming comfortable with yourself is really important

I kind of bullied myself for a long time into believing that
 I would just kind of go to college and...
Since there was never something I wanted to do
 I always thought I would go to college
 And just kind of pick whatever job I thought would work out for me
 And I'd just get a desk job and be unhappy
 And that was just kind of the belief I had held for so long
But now I'm starting to believe that I don't necessarily have to go that route
 And that I can find something that makes me happy
 And it doesn't have to be about money
But just the beliefs that you bully yourself into thinking...

I think that there probably are a lot of contributing people
 Like, at least slightly
 Who have brought on the bad self image or bullying
But at the end of the day
 That was all me
 It was never anyone else's fault but myself
 And it's hard to overcome that
But when you do
 You start realizing
 Like, wow, it is totally possible
I think, if more people reached out
 It wouldn't be an issue
No one wants to talk about why they're feeling bad
 And I know sometimes, even when I'm sad or upset
 I don't really want to talk to people

And if it's something that I feel bad about
I don't want to talk and it'll blow over
That's okay 'cause it's okay to feel sad
So we can literally beat ourselves for feeling bad 'cause...who knows why
But it's okay to feel sad sometimes
If it's something that's gonna fester
It's not okay to keep it hidden
Like, you should shed light on it
'Cause if you lock that stuff away
Pushing things down and keeping them locked inside
Was what made me so unhappy

And it...it is hard
'Cause sometimes we...we can't talk to, like, our family members
Or we can't talk to our best friends
People we feel closest to
But you really have to find somebody
No matter what
Somebody who you can rely on and talk to

And it doesn't really matter what kind of relationship it is
Even if that person can't talk back
Even if it's, like, your dog
And it can't really respond to you
Still talking to something is shining light on it
'Cause you're opening your mouth and speaking
And...you still can reflect that way

All in all, the most important thing that everyone says
Is to be yourself
But to be yourself and strive to be the best person you can be
Really caring about your inner self is so important
Caring about your health, in all senses
Physical and mental
You should never undermine your own problems

Not being afraid to be open and honest with people
Is another important thing
Because if you're not honest and open
No one else will be
So someone has to start it
And it should be you

I know I...I do live in fear a lot
In a lot of different ways
But it's important to overcome everything that you're afraid of
Even if it's hard
Like, being brave and just taking that first step

Someone has to take the initiative
And if it's you, you'll feel better about that

Setting goals for yourself is important
Just small goals
Just anything that you want to do
Whether it's getting into shape
Or focusing more on your art or what you're interested in
Just every day a little bit

And I'll say lastly
The most important thing that I've found that's helped me out
Is that we really do shape the world around us
It is so true
Your perspective on everything changes your entire world

Once I started not wanting to be pessimistic anymore
And remind myself when I think something bad
To turn it into something positive
It changes...everything
Like a domino effect

Once I start thinking positively
I start wanting to do things that help benefit me
Whenever I would feel bad about myself
I would just eat whatever I wanted to
Without thinking and kind of just laze around and sleep a lot
And not focus on things I even liked to do

But when I started thinking positively
About life and like, man, it's not even such a bad place at all
Now I actually want to get out and do things
And I enjoy just being outside and looking at other people
And...yeah...it's just all about perspective

And you can change
It's completely possible
To tell yourself that you can't
Is so defeating...so self defeating
I hope...I hope that someone else recognizes that self-bullying
'Cause it's a true thing that you just don't think of
People really can be hard on themselves
Harder than other people on themselves
I know I was, for sure
Like, the biggest bully
But we have all of our entire lives to change ourselves
Which is really, really nice
There is no law or any obligation
That says you can't be a different person

In the next hour than you were
You can always change
 You can make that happen
If someone is trying to prevent that
 You also don't have to keep anyone in your life, either
Once you start thinking about yourself
 And thinking about life in a different way
 You gain a lot of control
 Over your thoughts and your actions
And you can make your life how you want to

I did not attempt to specifically define bullying for participants, but rather, let them define it for themselves and Jlynn did exactly that. She started her interview by saying how much she wanted to tell her story because she believed lots of people went through a similar period of insecurity and disliking themselves and that “self-bullying” (Jlynn’s own term), someone bullying him- or herself, is often overlooked as a serious problem. Talking to Jlynn, it became clear she had thought about the things she was saying quite a lot. Jlynn’s story is a great way to start talking about other participants’ stories, since many of them went through thought processes and emotions similar to Jlynn’s, even though many of their problems were caused by others, rather than their own views of themselves.

Jlynn extends traditional definitions of bullying to include and emphasize inner conflict. While most people describe bullying as something one person does to another, Jlynn focuses on the battle of bullying within her own mind – she both causes and receives pain based on what she thinks of herself. Jlynn reminds readers that, usually, the most significant and worst part of bullying happens in someone’s head as they react to their own thoughts or what others say or do, making the victim feel less valuable as a person. However, with help from other people, Jlynn also leads her own healing process, showing that victims of bullying are not completely powerless and, with support from others, do have some say in their own recovery.

Katie

Katie rarely refers to her experiences as “bullying” and may not have entirely viewed them that way, but rather as a “give and take.” Katie mentions several times during her interview that, when she was younger, she was very insecure about how others viewed her and got into minor or, sometimes, major verbal fights with people who sometimes were and sometimes were not her friends. She captures the ever-changing internal and external environment experienced by many young people in elementary, middle, and high school.

Katie starts by describing her school as “benign” and, as far as she could tell, without stereotypical “bullying,” as many people understand it. She talks about how she did not fit in well with others in her class and projected her insecurities onto others, describing herself as a very principled person, especially for her age. Throughout her story, she talks about why she thinks she felt insecure, particularly because of her feeling that she needed to be friends with everyone, and the pressure to not have anything go wrong in her life because her family was focused on her brother, who has autism. She discusses ways, which she does not feel were available at her school, that she believes adults could have helped her and her friends or could help students going through the same thing in the future – by providing clubs to encourage individuality, teaching interpersonal skills, or just noticing what students do when teachers are not paying close attention. She gives suggestions for students, too – that they look for ways to think about life outside of their own perspective by volunteering, talking with older adults, becoming involved in the community, or finding other ways to create themselves as individuals.

I went to

I don't know, a really benign school

So, I never saw anyone, like, shoved in a locker per say

There wasn't a lot of bullying in high school that I can recall

And it like was never as severe as you'd imagine

Like in the movies
And I think in high school
Sometimes, I think I projected my insecurities on other people
As I think teenage girls definitely have a tendency to do
Where they're like, "Oh, they don't like me.
They don't think I'm good enough."
But they are so stressed about their own lives
That they don't even see you in the hallway
So I think I could have taken advantage of meeting more people
And I wouldn't have felt so alone sometimes
Had I branched out more

Elementary school and middle school were a different story
I went to a Catholic elementary school
I was sometimes obedient to the point of
Not thinking about what I was doing
I was so principled
I called it yesterday, like, a "potato sack of principles"
I had such a high moral high ground
And I think a lot of that
You know, projected insecurity

We were in this huge fight when I was younger
From third to fifth grade
Over you know, trivial, petty, day to day stuff
And I went to a smaller school
So how I saw it at the time
Was that there was, like, the group
And then there was a couple outsider people
That wasn't sure what they were doing with themselves
And because I was this bombastic, morally principled
Passionate son of a gun
I didn't have a filter
So I had to find unique people
For my friends

But, so there was, like, the main...
I would consider it like the main group of popular people
Essentially there was, um, me
Another girl who was more overweight
With divorced parents
Even knowing that, I was still hard on her
Um, a girl who was twice as tall as I was
Who I was very good friends with
Another blonde haired girl
That was, like, the rebel in my group

She's the one who fell off my swing and broke her arm
And was going after the boys
 And I was like, oh my, oh my god
 Like, you're so crazy
 You're so crazy
 We've switched roles now, by the way

But, um, and then there was another girl
 Who was like the Tomboy
 Who didn't understand why we were so dramatic

We had lots of different intertwining personalities
 And they would ebb and flow as the day went

Um, and I think, there was always this bitterness I felt
 Because I was the "empathetic" one
 That I always had to be friends with the kids that didn't have friends
 It felt like a consistent pattern to me
 And it made me very bitter

It's not what I think parents ever want to believe about their kid
 Or what a person ever wants to believe about themselves
 They would get tired of being empathetic
 But I think it's a very real emotion
 And parents should address that

Because telling your kid just to be nice to everyone all the time
 Is like Cinderella
 Like, just be nice all the time
 It's like, no, just kill the stepsisters

But you almost make children inept
 You take away their executive function

Then because they don't make decisions
 About what works for them and what doesn't
 They're just being nice to everyone
 And you don't want them to be manipulative
 You just want them to be able to call the shots
 You want them to be able to play the hand they're dealt

I was always bitter about the fact that I had to be friends with her
 So I was not nice to her sometimes
 But it was a small school
 So we were still sort of friends
 'Cause we were in the same Girl Scout troop

And we just... I mean, we went back and forth every day
 Like, "Oh, so and so doesn't like you today."
 Or, you know, just stupid, catty things
 "I just want you to know, so and so doesn't like you today."
 Looking back, like, who are you, Katie?
 Get outta here

I think, one time
 I don't know why I felt the need to let her know
 But I wanted to let the more overweight girl know
 Like, that she was, in fact, a loser
 I had to let her know that

And looking back
 I'm almost positive it's because
 Like, I had to be one above
 I had to make sure everyone knew their place
So, I actually made my other friend tell her

The fighting wasn't around any one central thing
 Just the way that we interpreted our surroundings
 And then projected on other people

The way that I saw how unsure I was
 I was always so frustrated that I had this perception of the world
 And I was so defined in what I wanted and couldn't attain it
You know, people are so happy in their 30s
 'Cause they are so clearly separate from everyone else they know
 Because they've gone a completely different life path
But when you're 10 years old
 You are very much like everyone you're in school with
I felt like I was an individual
 Um, I think like...bothered me 'cause I had no...path
 I was passionate without anything to do with it

And the other thing, too,
 That goes with that
Is that, because I was so passionate
 I never felt like anyone ever liked me
 That made me bitter as well
 Probably for a long time
So it wasn't that I didn't want to be friends with the girl
 The more overweight girl
It was just that, I think
 At the time, I felt like she was, like, too nerdy for me sometimes
 And if I was seen with her too often
 I couldn't be friends with the other people

But by the time we got to fifth grade
 And this fight had been going on for two years
 Without any parents or teachers noticing
Um, we finally...we thought that my one friend

The Tomboy
Had told her mom
 ‘Cause she talked to her mom more than we did
And we were so afraid that she had told her we were in this fight
 That we started passing around a note that said something like
 “We know what you did and we’re super upset.”
And while we were passing it back
 The teacher caught it
 She’s like, “I’m not dealing with this.”
 And we’re like, oh my god, we’re so stuck
 We are so caught right now
And we got sent to the principal’s office
 And he actually had us sit down
 And we basically just cried it out
He was asking us, like, “Why did this happen?
 So as I understand it, this is how you feel.
 And this is how you feel.”
 And it was great
 And he was so calm
 And he took what we had to say
 And took it from every point from there
And I think
 I actually don’t remember
 It was so long ago
But I think a lot of what we said was how other people made us feel
 Like, So-and-so made me feel that way
 And, like, boxed me in
I think my friend who was really tall
 Who I had tell my other friend that one time that she was a loser
 Always felt like I was pushing her to do things she didn’t want to do
And so I think that was a wonderful way to deal with that
 ‘Cause it definitely dissipated after that
I’m not sure if it went down entirely
 But we felt like we were ousted
 So we couldn’t have done anything or else they would have found out
And we were really ashamed because
 The Tom girl’s actually my neighbor
 We all could have been good friends
 And I probably could have got along
 With a lot of the rest of the people in my grade
 If I’d have just been a little bit more chill
 About how I felt about things and did things
I got a high from being different, I think

I actually do remember the darkest day of that whole fight

I was in fifth grade
 And we'd just come back in from recess
 And someone said something really terrible
And just like war in the real world
 Everyone was switching sides all the time
 Like these two people
 Were friends with this girl
 And tomorrow they didn't like her, you know
And I think I shut my desk
 And I just remember thinking
 In, like, fifth grade world
 "I can see why people would kill themselves."
Because there's just this feeling of complete
 Desperation, you know, like...
 Even though you know your family loves you
 That's so already pre-programmed into you
 I mean, hopefully you have a good family life
 And that's something that you're used to
 That not having the other half of your life have any calmness to it
 Totally throws off you ability
 To be able to function and operate
And I think throughout middle school it...it got better
 Because I think we just sort of let our differences go
The girls who were nerdy still got made fun of, unfortunately
 But we sort of just decided that it wasn't a good thing to be mean
 We just got more mature
I don't know, we weren't always nicer
 But we just knew that you couldn't act like that

I think part of it that influenced me
 And I'm always afraid that my mom will hear about it and find out
 This is something I think I've told my friends in college
 The more I've been able to process
 That aspect of it
Is I have a brother who's special needs
 And so because of that
 He was always the needy one
 So I overcompensated
 As I think is well documented in the literature on
 You know, anyone who has a needy sibling
 Or family member
So I never wanted there to be a problem with me
 I also hated the hospitals, so like
 Physical problem – oh, it's just a flesh wound
 No big problem, you know

And so I never...I never said anything
I just lumped in the whole sex talk and conversation with, like, hospitals
And that kind of stuff

So if anyone brought it up
I'd be like, "I don't know what you're saying
I don't know what that is.
What's sex? I don't know."
Kind of stuff

Basically, if it was a problem, I would have never said anything
I'd be like, "No problem here. We're all fine."
So it was never like I was going to say anything, unfortunately

And I think that was not necessarily the best way to go about it
Because you might have some people
Like myself that are, like, happy, cheery, like, everything
And everything is just, like, boiling inside

Like, no one had any idea this was happening
For two years, girls screaming at each other on the playground
Not screaming, but like, the, "Get a life"
Across the playground
And no one noticed for two years
Not my parents
Not my teachers

And I feel like I shouldn't, like, blame them for our misgiving
But you'd think, like, after one year
Someone would have noticed what was going on

And that process that comes about when we're older
Where we're, like
"My co-workers do not deserve for me to project
This break-up I just had on them."

You know, all that stuff that comes about
That I think adults frequently forget about
Is something that they have to process
And process and process with their kids

And it's something that
As someone who works with students with autism
It's been a really good training
Because you have to explain things you didn't think you had to explain

Different concepts, like
Why is it my fault?
And you're like, well, of course it's your fault
You're like, "OK, well
Here's why you should have turned down
Grandma Mae's cookies because
Even though she offered them to you

She didn't have any more for anybody else."
 That sort of thought process, executive functioning, that projects into
 Like, "Well, maybe I don't like Jenny
 But she's had a really rough day
 And she particularly relies on positive feedback
 So I'm just gonna say nice things to her
 Because that's what *she* needs to get by
 Even though that's not what *I* need to get by."
 That, like, separation of needs was not something that I ever
 Ever, ever would have picked up on
 I don't think even in high school
 'Cause I think high school
 I was still like goofy, nerdy, not sure what to do
 Like, came in right from Catholic school
 Like, tidal wave of
 "Oh, we're wearing our own clothes now.
 Oh, I don't know how to dress.
 Oh, what are pants?"
 And it was just like...that part was a mess
 I just didn't know what to do with myself
 And I think self esteem and
 Inability to have that...that maturity and confidence
 I know a lot of it comes with age
 But a lot of it comes with recognizing emotions in other people
 And I feel like that is something that you can teach as well
 'Cause you can talk kids through it
 You can speak to them
 And I feel like, the more that you do that
 And the more that you're able to constantly reference and re-reference rules
 And things that you've talked about before
 Then you're able to be proactive about it
 I feel like that would be the best way to curb bullying
 Provide clubs and things that students are able to risk assess
 And venture out and do dangerous, cool things
 Because you can't be bullying Sandra
 You bully her when you're bored
 You're talking to her and mouthing off 'cause you're bored
 But if you're watching liquid nitrogen blow up into bubbles
 You're so unconcerned with what Sandra's doing
 And you're so invested in this community interest
 Once you tie in all those things together...
 Like, it's not foolproof obviously
 Kids are kids...they just...they're just not there, yet
 Piaget will tell you...you just can't do it
 But at the same time
 We're our most benevolent at 3 years old

It doesn't serve us the rest of our life
You can't just give away all your resources and food
For free all you life
Some people try
But you just have to take that and never let it go
Keep that benevolence of that 3 year old
And be able to lead it through
You know, while making good decisions

In college

There was a girl
And thank God I was in college when I met her
Because she was just so...
I mean, if passive aggressive had a face, it would be her
And she was very, very bright
But she was just so manipulative
Like, she was very good at making you feel
Like what you said wasn't worth it
I actually went on a trip with her
And trying to tell her directions was like
"I think we should go this way."
"Well, OK, I guess if we have to."
I mean, just constant
And I'm a very kind of go-with-the-flow person
When it comes to that
And it was like
You don't even recognize it at first
'Cause it's been so long since you've been truly bullied
That you're not even sure what's going on
And I was like, this is ridiculous
This girl's my age
What's going on here?
But you know what?
She's very good to work with because she gets things done
So I was actually her vice president
For a club she ran later
She's very bright
So I enjoyed talking with her about that
And when I got more confident as I got farther in college
I sort of, like...water off a duck's back
Once I had that recognition
Of what, you know, we recognize bullying is
I never hung out with her sociably
I only hung out with her as a work partner
Because she respected me as a work partner

In high school

I think I said some pretty mean things to people

Because I was so bitter

I was so, like, not sure what to do with myself

That I said some really dumb things

Or really charged things that didn't need to be said

Like one time, I think I told a girl

Like, instead of buying Uggs

She could have bought, like, fifteen mosquito nets

Like, why I even had that in my head, I don't know

But it was probably just I wanted Uggs

And didn't bother to ask my parents for them

Or wasn't sure how to weigh the benefits of my first world experience

With the idea of being able to give back

I just feel like the benefit we can do for kids

Is to be able to give them that perspective

'Cause if they had that perspective

Then they wouldn't have said that comment about the Uggs

Because they would have been like, "Well, that's ridiculous.

You can't tell people how to spend their money."

I think, had I had that perspective and that self confidence

I wouldn't have made some of those decisions

What's funny is

I'm sure, sometimes, I still do

You know, we still say things we don't mean

I remember one girl in a college class said

Uh, what was it?

We were talking about designer babies

Like, that whole thing about mapping the human genome

And parents being able to select blue eyes, brown eyes

And then we started to get into, like

Select whether they have Down syndrome or not

And that whole ethical debate

I'm like, this is gonna be great

Great ethical debate

And that was as great as it was

Just me saying it was great

Um, one of them said

"If we have designer babies, we won't be able to feed everybody"

Another person said

“If we map the human genome
Science will have nothing left to discover”
Like, just ridiculous comments
And, like, I was probably condescending
You know, I think I did that a lot
We had a social studies class and I so badly wanted to talk about
You know, the racial history that has occurred in the United States
And the process of red lining
And how it, like
Disenfranchised the whole African American population
And about the history of women and sexism
And I wanted to talk about how we could integrate that
Without ever saying those words
You know, just being like
“Wasn’t it unfair that Jackie Robinson didn’t get to play
And people were mean to him?
Wasn’t that so unfair?
Just, like, really unfair?
Just because of the color of his skin?
So much unfairness.”
Um, but we just...I felt like no one was ever willing to go there
And sometimes they were, but...
I just remember this one kid
We started getting into one of those “piggybacking” conversations
Where one person says something
And people just keep adding on
And it turned into like
“Social studies should just be a celebration of American history.”
And I wanted to be like, “How about slavery?”
I think I said something like
“Well, see, I disagree entirely.
I think social studies should be
A thorough analysis of American history.”
He’s like, “Well, I didn’t mean slavery.”
And in my head, I thought
“Yes, but I am going to challenge you and your statement
Because this is an academic setting
And I can do that.”
I’m not gonna fight you in a Starbucks
But I am going to question what you’re saying
While we’re talking about it in class

I think it occurs in every form
Every gender and every grouping of people

There's the bullying where, like, you are the victim
And there's some like
Well, you weren't great last week

I guess my advice for students that are, like, 8 would be
To try your best to get out into the world
And do things like volunteering or visiting your grandparents
Because that will give you perspective
They will gain perspective
Because they realize that their grandparents
Don't treat each other like dirt

As a third grader, find something for yourself to do
Whether it's writing a journal
Learning a new skill
Finding a hobby that's unique to you
Find something you can do for yourself
That no one can take away from you
That creates you as an individual
And then, hopefully, that will give you the courage
That you need to persevere
When you feel like your world
Is more than you can handle

Katie is the only participant who found her way into this study without responding to my flier. She is my friend and, while we were having lunch together one day, I was talking about my study. After I finished a basic description of what I was doing, she said, "I should probably do that." I had asked her if she could think of anyone she knew who might want to talk about his or her experiences, so I was surprised (and delighted to be able to work with my friend) when she said that could be her. At that moment, at lunch, she seemed more hesitant to talk about her experiences with bullying than other participants did, but by the time we sat down for her initial interview, she had no problem talking about her experiences and giving suggestions for how adults and maybe even other students and friends her age could have helped her situation turn out differently.

In her suggestions, Katie focused on how teachable some of her proposed solutions were, especially helping students learn to see things from someone else's perspective. Katie is studying to be a teacher and clearly pulled from her experience in various classrooms and teaching environments. She talked about things she would like to do differently in her own classroom and ways she tries to do things differently as a student teacher. Of all the participants, she also has the clearest action plan of her own to combat bullying and I was impressed by how she kept connecting her experiences and teaching style to things she was learning in college classes. She frequently drew from her own experiences with bullying and what she is learning as a future teacher, and plans to use those tools to help prevent bullying in her work with children.

Katie defines bullying using a place more than individual people. Instead of pulling out one person or another, she mostly refers to her friends as a whole group with ever-changing sides in one giant verbal fight. Her descriptions depict bullying as a normal, though certainly not good, part of going to school. Katie even mentions being almost thankful when she and her friends were finally caught bullying each other because then, the fighting was pretty much over – adults were able to help save friendships in that school when the students involved could not end the struggle themselves and those in the middle of the fight were grateful for that help. Through her experiences, Katie shows readers that bullying is common and that both bullies and victims want and need help from peers and adults to make it stop.

Leah

Leah dealt with the confusion of bullying throughout middle school. She comments on her own insecurity and how that made bullying worse as she tried to make friends and escape the isolation forced upon her by those who bullied her.

Like most of the participants in this study, Leah starts by describing her school, which was made up of friends and other classmates until around sixth grade when, according to her, all her friends left for other schools and her real problems with bullying began. She has seen one former classmate, who she describes as the worst bully of them all, since she left that school, but has never had the chance to talk with her about what happened. Like several other participants, she mentions how she wishes adults who knew what was going on would have done something about it, even if they only privately talked with her or her classmates. Leah says she did not fit in because certain aspects of her personality and her general preference for being by herself made her the “odd one” and a target for potential bullies. While helping a new friend understand that what she had done when she was younger might have been bullying, Leah realized many bullies really have no idea about the effect they have on others. She also makes suggestions for both adults and students, specifically that they talk with the victim and let that person know he or she is not alone.

I went to the same grade school from Kindergarten through eighth grade
It was a Catholic grade school

As grade school progressed

Things basically got worse

Around sixth grade

All my friends left the school

And it was just the people I didn't like left in the school

When I graduated

I was one of twelve

Seven girls, five boys

I started counting down to the day I could leave

On the first day of seventh grade

After that, I went to a high school where I did not know anybody

Some people would hate that

But for me, that was the best thing possible

I was very happy to go somewhere

I didn't know anybody

I haven't dealt with my classmates a lot since grade school
I've just disassociated from them
I've kept them out of my life
But sometimes I'd see them around

There was one girl
She came to our school
In third grade
And she was my least favorite person in that school
In my opinion, she was the worst bully of them all
I saw her one time
Maybe tenth or eleventh grade
At an open house

I really wanted to stop and ask her
If she even *realized* what she had done to me
I really wanted to have a conversation with her
When we were both a little bit more mature
Than we had been in eighth grade
But she was talking with an old teacher
And we left before I could say anything to her
I wanted to say something to her so much since then

Do you know what you did?
Do you know how you made me feel?
Do you even realize what you did?
And are you sorry?
I want to know if you're genuinely sorry

I'd like to tell her
I've moved past that
I'm a stronger person now
You didn't get to me
And I've overcome all the bullying that you did

I can forgive you
Can you forgive yourself?
I will never forget what you did to me
But do you even know what you did to me?

I've had to come to grasp that
I may never know the answers to those questions
I would love to know
But I probably never will

My mom ended up being a teacher at the school that I went to
And I found out after the fact

It was sometime in high school
That my mom told me that she knew what was going on
Maybe not to the extent that it was going on
But she didn't know what to do
And she never did anything
I was surprised that my mom knew what was going on
Because she never gave any indication that she did
And I would say this
For anybody going through this now
This is more for parents than for kids
If you know something's happening, *talk* to your kid
Because they might not know that you know what's going on
My mom was afraid about making things worse
Which is why she might not have stepped up
And I can understand not saying something to the principal or the teachers
Or getting involved at the school
Because she didn't want to make things worse
I understand that
I understand my mom's thinking with that
But I lived with her
She could have *at least* talked to me
And I really wish she had because
The way they bullied me was very isolating and lonely
And the fact that I felt like I had nobody I could go to
Just made it worse
I didn't even feel like I had my parent
It's not easy for a 12 year old or a 13 year old
To speak up about what they're experiencing
I didn't even realize
That it was bullying until afterward
I knew that I hated that school
And I hated those girls
I did at the time
I don't hate them anymore 'cause hate's a very strong thing
At the time, I did
But it's hard for somebody in that situation to speak up
So somebody else needs to say something
Because they might not have the courage to do it
Even if it's just a parent reassuring the kid or talking to them about it

I don't know if this is why they targeted me or not
But I never fit in as a kid
This was something my mom didn't tell me until years later
She insists she did tell me
But she didn't

I had... I have Asperger's
So social situations
Especially when I was young
Were never easy for me
Even when I was in, like, second or third grade
Before any of this really started
I was just more content to be by myself
Playing my own games
That kind of stuff builds up to the bullying
Because you're the odd person
You're the odd one out
They single in on that

I would do a lot of things that
In hindsight, were stupid
I did a lot of things that I thought would try and make me fit in more
But they would see right through it
And they would tease me
And it would just make the bullying worse
It just made me stand out as the odd one out even more

There was the movie Mean Girls
That was popular at the time
So all of them had seen it
And, they're like
"Oh, Leah, did you see this movie?"
Of course, I hadn't
My mom didn't want me to see it
But I'm trying to fit in
So I'm gonna pretend that I did
And then they know that I'm lying
So they try to catch me in this lie
Which then they'll tease me for even more
They're like, "Oh what do you think about this scene?"
Which was a completely fake scene in the movie
I found that out when I saw the movie for the first time
When I was a freshman in college
And, then, I'm like, oh yeah
Those scenes weren't in it
And they tried to get me to talk about things that never happened
Because if I had seen the movie
I would know that they're lying
And they would catch me in these lies
But the only reason I told them
Was 'cause I was trying to fit in
And then, they would know that I'm not telling the truth

It would just make things worse

I did speech therapy for several years

I was in individual counseling for several years in grade school

I also joined band in fourth grade

I wasn't the only one who joined band

All of these things took you out of the classroom

They would pull you out of the classroom

And you would miss class time and you would go do them

I felt

Awkward

I can't even fully put words to the feeling

But they were kind of making fun of me

For being taken out of the classroom

My mom let me stop all of these activities when I asked to

Even though I still needed counseling and speech therapy

And the reason I asked to stop

Was because of those social pressures

When things like that

Which would make me stand out

Occurred

It made me more different from everybody else

And it just made all this bullying worse

Despite how much they bullied me

I hated the social isolationism

So that, when they would hang out in groups

And I was rarely invited to things

I would still go

Because I wanted to try and fit in

I wanted something to do

I didn't like being alone

They wouldn't invite me to a lot of things

They would go over to watch the high school football games

And hang out then

They rarely invited me to that

One time I actually kind of self-invited myself

That was awkward

That exclusionism

I keep going back to that

But that's what it was

The summer between eighth and ninth grade

It was either a graduation party or an end of the semester party

Or something like that

This one girl was hosting the party

So I went over

And then it was a sleepover afterwards

Some things happened that I don't even want to detail

Because it was traumatic

But a lot of the girls ended up leaving before the sleepover

I was staying because I didn't want to call my parents

And admit that I wanted to go home

Even though I probably should have

The one girl whose house was hosting

Had her bedroom

There was a room next door to it

With a pullout couch kind of thing

During the sleepover

It was myself and three other girls

They all slept on the pullout bed

They just piled in there and slept together

I had to sleep in my sleeping bag

That was a long night

I barely got any sleep

I tried to sleep in chairs

I tried to sleep in my sleeping bag on the floor

'Cause the way the pullout couch pops up

I was underneath it

In my sleeping bag on the floor

That was just a really long night

Because I was isolated

They didn't want me there

But they were refusing to directly kick me out

Because they can't be like, "Oh, you're not invited."

I mean, they could

But they wouldn't

That's the type of bullies they were

It was more discrete

Oh God, it was such a long night

Thirteenth birthday parties were a big thing

And so this one girl was having another sleepover

I think we did stuff early in the day

And then we pitched a tent on the back porch
And we were sleeping out there
Leslie was still there
Leslie was a nice girl
She must have left after seventh grade
Or she was just invited
Even though she wasn't in our class anymore
I can't remember
I don't know if my mother ever found out what happened at that sleepover
But I know Leslie basically ended up telling her mom the next day
Or at least that's my theory
A lot of them got in trouble for what happened
Because, I mean,
I'm pretty sure it was Leslie who told on them
I'm glad Leslie said something
Because it's nice to know they got in trouble
For what they did
And faced consequences for their actions
At least once

We were all in the tent
I remember, at one point
There being a fight between me and the girl who came in third grade
They just made fun of me
That was one of the times when they were very directly teasing me
At one point, they pantsed me
It's stupid, but...it's embarrassing
And they kept making sexual jokes and stuff like that
That was very tough

I remember
My senior year in high school
Just goofing off in the band room with a few other kids
I think we were talking about
Some of the things we had experienced in grade school
Because more than myself
Had been victims of bullying
And we were just talking about it
And this one girl
Started sharing her own stories
But she was telling the stories of what she did to other people
And it was kind of in that moment that we made her realize
That she was a bully
She didn't realize it at first
When she started talking, she didn't realize it

And we're like, "You were a bully."
We pointed that out to her
And she said, "I never realized that."
I just kind of remember that moment
It makes me wonder
Do they even know?
Do they even know what they're doing?
Because they may or may not
They may not
We had to point it out that what she was doing was bullying
I guess that's just kind of
Something to reflect on

As for teachers
Talk to the kids
If nobody acknowledges what's happening
If no adults or people in authority acknowledge what's happening
Students might feel alone
Maybe talk to your students one on one
Pull them aside
Not when other students can see you pull them aside to talk to them
Individually
Start by asking the kids if they're okay
If you think something's going on
Ask the kids if they're okay
It's hard for kids to open up
So not all kids will open up
They will deny it
'Cause they don't want to make the situation worse
If it's too much for the teacher
Try and get a counselor involved
I mean, isn't that what their jobs are?
If they notice Sally is being bullied by Sophie
Maybe it's a good idea for the teachers to talk to Sophie
But that could also make it worse
How you handle the situation with the bully
Versus how you handle the situation with the victim
Is very different
I don't have a lot of good advice
But talk to them
Let them know they're not alone

As for students
If an adult approaches you

Let them know what's going on
You might be too scared to tell an adult
 But if somebody asks
 Don't deny it
If somebody tries to reach out to you and help
 Grab their hand
 Hold on
 And accept that help
I would try and tell somebody in the same situation to ask for help
 But that's really difficult
 You might not even realize what's happening
 Especially with emotional bullying
If the bullying is not happening right now and it's been a long time since then
 And you're trying to deal with it
 And it's in the past
I would tell people in that kind of situation
 I mean, it's a lifelong struggle
 But you can move past this
 It negatively affects your self-esteem
 But you'll become a stronger person because of it
 And all that hurt and all that pain will go away
 And it helps you become the person you are
You might not realize that now
 And I'm not saying be grateful for what happened
 But it defines you
But don't let it be the only thing that defines you
 It's one part of your story
 But it doesn't have to be the your whole story

I'd like to tell students
 It might sound stupid
 But treat others the way you want to be treated
 Because you might not realize
 What you're doing is actually bullying
Think about how you're treating other people
 And ask yourself, "Is that how I'd want to be treated?"

It's hard to address bullies specifically
 It's easier for me to address the people that are peer pressured into it
 And that are bullies by association
It's hard to stand up to somebody one on one
 Because you don't want to be a victim yourself
If you feel like you don't want to be a bully by association
 But you don't know how to stand up to the bully yourself
 And you're afraid of becoming a victim

When you and the victim have a moment alone
Talk to them
Let them know they're not alone and
That you know what's happening
And you don't want anything to do with it
Maybe you could even become their friend

At this point in my life
I forget a lot of it
'Cause it's been eight years
I've given you some stories
But I can't give you a lot of...deep stories
Because I've blocked out most of it
Since then
It's become something that I've accepted
And I'm not ashamed of it
It's a private thing
But I'm not ashamed to say that I was bullied
I've overcome it

Leah fully captures the sense of feeling trapped in a situation involving bullying. It seemed like every time Leah tried to make friends, it never worked out well. But how could it not work out this many times? Jlynn mentioned that being different is how you make friends – you find other people with compatible personalities who like similar things. But being isolated seems to take that possibility away. Like Jlynn, Leah felt insecure and she said she usually preferred to be on her own anyway, but every time she tried to fit in, she was pushed away. Leah also emphasized that victims might not even know they're being bullied and that bullies might not understand the effects of what they're doing. And somehow, despite the apparent hopelessness of trying again and again to make friends with always the same result, Leah knew that life could get better and talks about not letting that part of her story define her. She may not forget, but life is better now – she has quite a few friends and will continue to heal over time.

Like several other participants, Leah mentions “the one person who helped” and how much she appreciated that person when she felt essentially helpless. In Leah’s case, that person was a friend who told an adult about the bullying. In other participants’ cases, it was a principal, teacher, or parent. But every time, there always seems to be “that one person” – in these five participants’ experiences, they are a boyfriend, principal, friend, teacher, and another friend, making “that one person” extremely special in the minds of each person who struggled with bullying. If one person was so important to each participant, it makes me wonder what every one of us could do to be “that one person” for someone who is struggling.

Leah defines bullying as something that separates one person from a group of people, making the victim feel like her differences make her less valuable. According to Leah’s account of her own experiences with bullying, the feeling among peers that one individual’s differences are negative seems to be created mostly by bullies. That feeling is then spread among those who are friends with or follow the bully until the victim feels left out of the group. On the other hand, though, Leah’s concept of bullying leaves room for people who can have the opposite effect and through her experiences, she encourages peers and adults to work to bring a potential victim of bullying back into the group by recognizing his or her differences as valuable.

Rebekah

Rebekah faced frequent incidents of physical bullying. She laughs about it now, making listeners laugh along with her storytelling style, despite those stories’ jarring and sometimes violent topics. Rebekah is the only participant who was able to switch schools, although she returned to the same public school after two years in cyber school.

Rebekah also focuses more than other participants on the role adults played in her bullying, whether because students learned from them how to treat her or simply because they

did nothing when they saw her situation. Similar situations repeated themselves over and over again, going back and forth between students and teachers bullying her. She mentions one teacher who helped her when others did not and how her parents are starting to believe her now, but also describes how desperate she became when no one believed her and how, looking back, she is concerned that her school still does very little to help students in situations similar to hers.

I moved across the state when I was 8 years old
And I started at a tiny rural school
My first day of third grade
I walked into the classroom
And my teacher looked at me
And gave me the once over
And saw what I was wearing
And told me that I didn't belong
And I should go back to where I came from
That was my very first experience at this new school
And it did not get better
My classmates saw the way that my teacher treated me
I guess she had some sort of, like,
Pre-formed opinion about people who moved in from different areas
I don't know, specifically, what her deal was
But she never really gave me a chance to...
I mean, I was in third grade
So I didn't really know that I had to prove myself
So all my classmates took on the same attitude
Towards me and my brother
I have a younger brother
All through school
We were treated differently
And it was mainly me, I think,
Mostly because my brother's classmates were younger
So maybe they just didn't think as much about it
Like, third grade...
You're getting to that point where you'd notice
That there's differences between you and others
So I was, like, what?
7, 8, I don't know
Something like that
There's a lot of things that happened
I've broken my right wrist twice
Left wrist once

And then my ankle twice
And it was all because of other people doing it to me
It was never, like, an accident on my own
It was always somebody else harming me

Probably the first significant...
And by "significant,"
I mean something that harmed me in a long-lasting way
Was in seventh grade
Right around September
There was a school dance
Like a get back to school kind of dance
Like welcome to the school year
There was a group of people who did not like me
And I'm not really sure why
I would tell you why if I knew
But I don't
And so they decided to
Take my drink because I was oblivious
I mean, obviously I knew the whole
Don't drink alcohol kind of thing
But I didn't really know about the whole
Poisoning people's drinks or roofie-ing drinks
So I didn't know
That you should not keep your drink unattended
So when I...
I think I went to the bathroom
Or I did something where I left my drink unattended
And I came back
And they poured chemicals into my drink
And it was pretty strong
I don't know what chemicals they were
Although I'm thinking
It was probably, like, household cleaners
I don't know what else they would have had contact with
But I drank it
And I didn't realize until after I had swallowed some
That it was poisonous
And so it ended up burning my esophagus
And damaging my vocal cords
So I could not speak for eight months
I was able to whisper sort of
It damaged my vocal cords
And they were, basically, in shock from the trauma
So they were partially paralyzed

Sometimes I'd be able to speak in, like, a squeak type of voice
But most of the time
It would be whispering or mouthing

So as a result of that
I spent the whole school year
Wasn't able to talk
Went through all kinds of medical treatments
Speech therapy
Back and forth from the hospital
All sorts of tests trying to figure out
What the frick was wrong with me

Because I didn't tell anybody
You know, what had happened
Every time I tried to tell people that I was being bullied
They didn't believe me or they told me it was my fault

So when this happened
I didn't tell them that I had been poisoned
Because I knew they wouldn't believe me
So then, of course, they thought there was something medically wrong
But they didn't check my vocal cords
They thought it was something more like...like laryngitis
Or something like that

They didn't do extensive testing
Eventually, they put a camera down my throat
And that's when they figured it out
But before that, they thought it was just, like, laryngitis
Or, you know, vocal strain or something like that

Then, once too much time had passed and I still couldn't talk
Then they just said, "Well, it's psychological.
You're doing it for attention."

I believe it was the speech therapist that I was seeing at the time
She contacted my school
My teachers
And they had a conference

And the speech therapist told my teachers
To bully me into talking
She said, "Do whatever you have to do to get her to talk."
Humiliate her.
Don't say the words, 'You're a piece of shit.'
But, basically, treat her in a terrible way
Because that will make her want to talk."

Um, I would not recommend that to anybody
That completely damaged me psychologically

I did have one teacher that came to me
And she refused to do it
 She was my seventh and eighth grade history teacher
She said, "Listen we had a meeting before school.
 They told me that I'm supposed to bully you into talking.
 I don't think that's my place
 But I want to warn you that other teachers are gonna do it
 And I can't stop them."
 That's what she said
So I understood that's what they were doing
 And I think that helped a little bit
 But it still was not acceptable
And I really don't know
 Why someone would tell professionals or teachers
 To bully a child
 Or an adolescent
So, you know, they would
 Try and call on me to answer a question
 And, obviously, I couldn't speak
 So I would try to whisper the answer
And then they would just yell at me
 And say, like, "You're a horrible student.
 You just need to talk.
 You need to give up the act.
 We all know you're faking.
 We all know you want attention."
 Other things of that sort
And then my parents started to believe it
 So I had nobody that believed me
And to this day
 My parents don't know that I was poisoned
 They know that there was chemical damage
 They don't know who did it
I made up some sort of a story that I swallowed it by accident
 Because I didn't think they would believe me
 If I said other people did it
So to this day
 My parents do not know that somebody else poisoned me
 Only a couple of people do
Now you do

It wasn't just students
 A lot of it was teachers, too
In eighth grade
 We were starting this thing

Where you transition to high school
My middle school and high school were in the same building
Because we were small
So we had the guidance counselor and she would come in
And she came into our English class
And so we were sitting
And I was towards the back because they did it by alphabetical order
And the guidance was talking about career transition
And, like, "Do you want to do the college prep track?
Or do you want to do vo-tech?"
And she went around the room
And asked everyone to say what they thought they might want to do in the future
Or what they were interested in
And then what track they wanted to do
So blah blah blah, everyone goes around
And then they get to me
At that time I think I wanted to be a nurse or an occupational therapist
One or the other
So that's what I said
And so I said I wanted to go into college
The college prep track
And I said I wanted to attend a 4-year university
And then my teachers looked at me and they laughed
And it wasn't just a chuckle
It was, like, hard-core laughing
And then the guidance counselor looked
And she's like, "Sweetie you're...you're not smart enough for that.
You're too dumb.
Your family's dumb.
You can't do that.
Try something easier.
Maybe you want to go into, like, the culinary track.
Or be a homemaker or something."
And I had pretty decent grades
Like As, Bs, that kind of thing
I wasn't, like, the top 10 of the class or anything
But I wasn't failing either, you know
There was no real reason to say
"You can't go to college."
Just because my parents don't have college degrees
Does not mean I cannot
But they literally...they were laughing at me
And then, of course, the whole class saw my teachers modeling that behavior
And then they did the same thing to me

And then I remember the kid behind me

And he was put in the back of the room
Because he had, like, ADHD
Which is, like, a legit condition
But there's a difference between ADHD and, like, you can't help it
And ADHD and then you still wanna be a douche bag
Like, I don't know how to say it, but you know what I mean
He was the latter of the two
So he was sitting behind me
You know, to not distract other people
And he'd do stupid stuff like put gum in my hair
That wasn't really bullying
That was more just him being stupid
But they get to him and he said he wanted to be a truck driver
Like his dad
And that he really did not care about school
And he just wanted to do the bare minimum to graduate
And they told him, "Oh, you're way too smart for that.
You should go to college.
Maybe you could be an engineer."
And I'm like, well, then what the frick is this?
Why'd you tell him
The kid who's putting gum in my hair currently
That he can go to college
And you're telling me
That I'm not smart enough to even graduate high school?
'Cause they literally said that to me
They said, "We'll be surprised
If you make it through high school."
Yea, and obviously I did
This is my Junior year, but I have Senior standing
So I mean, I've done more than what I needed to do
And I'm going to Graduate School
So clearly, that's not true
But a lot of it was teachers and their attitudes
The way they modeled towards me and some other students as well
And then my peers kind of took that and ran with it
I don't think that all teachers are bad
Obviously, because I'm going to become a teacher
But I do wish that they wouldn't have done that kind of thing

I have asthma
And I'm not athletic
So in gym class
We would go outside and we had a soccer unit
So we would run around the field

Like, a couple laps before we actually started playing
Well, this was during allergy season
And I'm very allergic to grass
I have exercise-induced asthma and allergic asthma
Basically, my lungs hate me
So, you know, I was trying to run around
And I'm breathing in
They're, like, mowing grass at that time
Like, while we're running
And so, obviously, I had an asthma attack
And I had asthma attacks, like
Every single day in middle school
I don't have them as much anymore
But, basically, my inhaler was glued to my back pocket
That kind of kid
So I had stopped and I was using my inhaler
And then there were a group of girls
Tiffany was the one who led this
She was a lot bigger than I was
Like, taller
She tackled me to the ground
And then she held my head down
With her hand against the back of my head
And so my face was smashed against the grass
And then she was screaming
I didn't catch a lot of the words because I still had hearing loss at that time
Although I didn't wear hearing aids
So I didn't catch a lot of what she said
But she was screaming things like...
Well, she called me a fat piece of shit and things like that
And, you know, saying a lot of really horrible things
And then somebody else sat on me
Which, when you can't breathe
Someone sitting on you back is not gonna help
And then the gym teacher
Came over and she asked what was going on
And Tiffany said, "I'm just trying to motivate this lazy piece of shit."
And the gym teacher goes, "Oh, OK, good luck with that."
And leaves
And then she watches from the sidelines
And then they started pulling my hair and punching me
And they still were holding my head to the ground
So I couldn't move
I mean this was, like, three or four girls
Girls can be vicious
I don't care what anybody says

There were a lot of things like that that happened
I mean, there were, like, little things
People would throw things at me
People would slam me against lockers
A couple times actually
People would try to push my head into a toilet and then flush it
So there were a lot of things like that

I didn't have a very good school experience
I used to cry about it a lot
I guess I've just kind of gotten to a point
Where I recognize what it was
And then kind of healed

I mean, at the time, I was sort of suicidal
I...I shouldn't say sort of
I was suicidal

And so I did try several times to commit suicide
Thankfully, that did not work
I am here

But I just thought that, like
Swallowing an entire bottle of Advil or Tylenol
Was gonna fix it because
I mean, I had people all the time like, "Go kill yourself.
Nobody likes you.
Why don't you just go die?"

And so when you have people telling you that
And then you have teachers treating you like that
And then you have...

Like, my parents love me
But they didn't understand
My dad was around as in, like, my parents were together
But he worked a lot
So he wasn't really around to see things

And my mom kind of had...
She still does honestly
She has this feeling that people from her alma mater cannot be mean

So there's this idea that, like
Oh, rural and country life is amazing
But it's just as bad as anywhere else

I mean, my mom is starting to believe me a little bit
Because I keep telling the same stories over and over again
And she recently told me
"I thought you were making that up."
And it's like, no, I've told the exact same story with the exact same details

For, like, nine years or...
I'm not good at math
But however much time it was
I told the exact same story
So, like, no, I'm not making that up
I'm being legit

Teachers, don't do that
Be nice to students
I don't care what background they come from
Or who you think they are
It was not fair for my third grade teacher
To tell me the moment I walked in the door
That I didn't belong there
Even if my other family members
Like cousins who went to the same school
Did act in such a way
I am not them
I am my own person

Don't turn the other way
If you're seeing it with your own eyes
And you acknowledge it
And don't do anything about it
You're part of the problem
If you see something and you're just like,
"Oh, OK, whatever. You know, kids will be kids."
You're part of the problem
And someday you're gonna be one of the people
That somebody's gonna talk about
Like I am right now
And say, "Well, they didn't stop it."
And, I mean, I am here to talk about it
But I could have been successful with taking all those pills
I was very close
And I know people in my own life
Who did
Who were successful
And they're not here to tell their stories
You don't want to be one of those people
Who causes someone to do something like that

What you do really affects students
I'm 21 years old and I'm sitting here telling these stories
From sixth grade

Or third grade
So it really does matter the way you treat people
And it's your responsibility as a teacher
To model appropriate behavior for students
Like, I've seen teachers
They'll gossip about students in the hallway and stuff
But when you're doing things like gossiping versus discussing
There's a difference
If you're gossiping about a student or saying horrible things about a student
In the hallway where there's other students around or even that student present
Other students are gonna pick up on that
And then they're gonna think it's okay

Older students
Even if they don't respect teachers
Do look to teachers and they think
"Well, Mr. So-and-So is doing it, so I can do it, too"

And so you can have all the anti-bullying campaigns in the world
But if you don't practice what you preach
And you don't model appropriate behavior
It means absolutely nothing

To students
Don't be douchebags
We've heard so many stories
Honestly, it should be common sense
To not physically abuse somebody
And even if it's not common sense
Is there really a reason to?

Get a hold of yourself
Grow up
That sounds so...terrible, I guess
But it's true

If you have a problem with somebody
Talk it out with them
I honestly don't think I did anything to cause any of this
But if I did, I don't know what it is
And if somebody would have said,
"Hey, you said something and it pissed me off."
I'd have done my best to try to fix it
And that could have prevented things

Bullying is not a necessary thing
They had no reason to put poisons in my drink
They had no reason to beat me with crutches

They had no reason to push me down the stairs
That's not necessary
 And you should really know better
 To be honest
But even if you don't know better
 If you don't want someone else doing it to you
 Don't do it
If you would love someone to, like, throw you off a stairwell...
 I highly doubt anyone would want to be thrown off a stairwell
 Or beat to death with crutches
So if you wouldn't want me to do it to you
 Then why should you think that I would want you to do it to me?

So, what you do matters
 To everyone
What you do matters
 And it does make an impact
'Cause I've heard people say,
 "Well, that's just middle school stuff.
 Forget about it and move on."
Clearly, I didn't forget
 I moved on
 But I didn't forget about it
 There's no such thing as forgetting things like that
It stays with a person
 And it has the potential to mold the way that a person lives the rest of their life

Rebekah and Bernadette were together when they saw my flier and decided to participate in this study. Both of them are also my friends and recognized my name listed as the researcher. Bernadette was very enthusiastic about participating and Rebekah said she would, too, if I needed another person. I will talk about Bernadette in the next section, but I really appreciate Rebekah's willingness to participate because I believe that her story bolsters the stories and experiences of every other participant. The other four participants have slightly less tangible stories, which make up most people's experiences with bullying, but also allow bystanders to believe that they did not see what was happening and could not have done anything about it.

Other participants' stories involve mostly emotions, words, thoughts, and other media not visible or even available to anyone out of earshot. Rebekah's story is different because, while the average student, teacher, or parent is still learning to understand emotional bullying, physical bullying is a concept with which almost everyone is familiar. Her experiences repeated themselves with different people and different transgressions, almost all of which were physical. The evidence was there, right in front of everyone, whether anyone chose to look her way or not. I wondered with each participant how so many people could have missed what was going on, but also recognized that "hindsight is 20/20" and I am hearing from the person who experienced it, rather than from anyone else for whom the solid evidence I was hearing might have seemed more vague. But "hindsight is 20/20" can hardly be a part of repeated experiences involving bruises, broken bones, and burned vocal cords. Instead of fighting battles in her own head (which she also did) or with words (which she also endured), most of Rebekah's experiences are with shoves, restraint, and all manner of very physical, very obvious occurrences. And still, the result was similar to those of other participants with less tangible examples of bullying – nothing was done. Even if onlookers somehow missed Jlynn's inner battle, Katie's verbal fights, and Leah's isolation, not to mention all of Bernadette's struggles, how on Earth did anyone miss all the bullying in Rebekah's life? And how can we make sure we do not miss such obvious signs of bullying in the future?

I also mentioned before Rebekah's poems that she had a surprisingly funny storytelling style, especially considering the jarring experiences she had. There were several times I laughed out loud during her interview and again while transcribing her words from the interview recording. What is quite possibly even more astounding than the list of Rebekah's extreme experiences with bullying is how well she has healed. Like Leah and every participant, I am sure

these experiences are not memories she will soon or maybe ever forget, but I was amazed by how Rebekah viewed her experiences and talked about them. Most of the participants in this study seem to be healing exceptionally well, but Rebekah seems to have truly moved on – she is confident in herself, has many friends (like all the participants, as far as I could tell), and appears to struggle with these memories least of anyone in this study. (I am not sure I could put the others in any specific order, though all were healing well enough to talk with me about their experiences.) Like other participants, she is also hopeful for the future and believes that incidences of bullying can be significantly reduced with help from teachers, fellow students, parents, and community members. I wholeheartedly wish I could share whatever Rebekah's secret to healing is with every other participant in this study and everyone who has experience with bullying.

Rebekah has a very broad outlook on bullying, since she experienced so many different types of bullying from different groups of people. Her experiences with bullying were physical and emotional and came from peers, as well as adults. She seemed to view bullying as just another part of her life or anyone's life – a normal thing that happens, but is not good or necessary. Rebekah also focuses on bullying coming from individual prejudices about someone based on how that person looks or acts or where he or she comes from. The diversity of Rebekah's experiences, though, also provides many more ways the bullying could have been stopped or prevented, had anyone tried to see what was happening and worked to end the problem as completely as possible. Rebekah defines the visible side of bullying and encourages readers to actively look for incidences of bullying and work to stop them or find ways to prevent them from happening in the first place.

Bernadette

The final participant, Bernadette, like many of the participants, experienced and continues to experience serious mental and emotional consequences likely as a result of bullying. She describes her struggle with anxiety and depression and how bullying further complicated and worsened that struggle. A great deal of that bullying was online, which makes her story different from those of the other participants. Her story finishes these five participants' conversations with her own continued healing process and hope for the future.

Bernadette mentions several people who helped her in varying degrees through the bullying, from a best friend to a professional counselor, but also that the number of people bullying her was likely more than the numbers suggested in other participants' stories. She focuses on the importance of talking to someone and having a strong support system because it is hard to recover alone.

I remember being in Kindergarten
I remember going down the hallway
 And I remember kids used to laugh at me
When I was younger
 “Bullying,” the word, never existed
It never really occurred to me
 That kids were bullying me
 Until I started growing up
And as I started to grow up
 Kids got meaner
And I had to deal with bullying not only in person
 But online, as well

I just don't think people understand
 How words
 Affect other people
They think it's funny
 But it's not
It truly does hurt

I remember being in sixth grade
That's when I started showing symptoms of depression
 But I wasn't diagnosed with depression
 Until ninth or tenth grade
I used to not be able to leave my house
 Because I used to get so
 Nauseous
 And I used to sweat
 Shake
I used to not be able to go into my own backyard
 Because I would get so sick
 I would throw up
I developed social anxiety disorder
 From the bullying
 The constant people teasing me
 From the constant
 Everything

In sixth grade
 I was alone
 And I felt like I had no one
 And I don't know where I got this idea
I think
 I think I got the idea from my friend because she did it
 But I started to cut myself
 And I couldn't stop
 And I don't know...like, I don't know why
And it makes me sick to think about
 Because
 No, it
 It honestly just makes me sick to think about
Because you think you do it
 Because you deserve the pain

My best friend since I was four
 She's the only constant thing in my life
 She gave me some tricks to do
 Like with the hair tie
If you ever feel like cutting
 You snap the hair tie on your wrist
Um
 But that never helped
 At all

In ninth grade was my first suicide attempt

And I don't really remember much
Because they all seem kind of blurred together
I just remember sobbing
On the floor
And I was alone
Depression is like
It follows you everywhere
You can't get rid of it
It's a shadow that follows you around every single corner
It's always in your head
In the back of your mind
And you can't get rid of it

So when I came to college
I thought
That I was going to get a new start
But that never happened
When I joined a sorority here
In the fall
Things were going pretty well
But my depression meds started to wear off
I was stressed
I hadn't been home since August
Things kind of just started shitting the bed
And I tried to kill myself again
I remember
Campus police pounding on my door
And I remember
They called the counselor
To stay with me until two in the morning
To make sure I was OK
I had a Head CA with me
It's just mind-boggling
That they only care
When you try to kill yourself
Or after you kill yourself
But they don't care before you kill yourself

I don't know
I guess I've not reached out
But like
In psychology we learn
The signs of suicide
And I pretty much have had every single one of them
And yet

You don't see anyone reaching out to me
Or any of that
So it's like
If you know someone that has these signs and symptoms
Why do you wait
Until after they're dead to care?
Because doing something afterwards doesn't really prevent suicide

It's important to talk to someone
I know when I go home
I plan on seeing a psychiatrist
I wish I saw a psychiatrist sooner
Because I hate the fact that I let myself go like this
Because I thought I could do it by myself
But you really can't
You should have a strong support system
It's really hard living like this
It sucks
And living with depression and anxiety
It's kind of like being on a seesaw
I get so antsy
I have OCD
Everything has to be perfect
But my depression
I can't leave my room
So it's like being on a tug-of-rope, too
And it's very hard
So I think talking to someone is very important
Because keeping things on the inside is so hard
And I am the queen
Of keeping my emotions held deep inside me
My friends call me a "ticking time bomb"
I keep my emotions bottled up inside of me for years
Until I explode
And it's really bad
It's not healthy
And I know that
It's important to talk to someone

The Internet is a very powerful thing
It's very good to have
However, it can be used for evil
I have been cyber bullied before
Pretty badly, actually

Over Twitter

Have you ever heard of sub-tweeting?

Ok, I'm about to get New York on you

Sub-tweeting is when people are too pussy to "at" you

Instead of hitting the "@" button

And "@username"

They'll just indirect tweet you

So they won't say your name or anything

They'll just say things

That you know it's about you

And other people will know it's about you

But they won't say your name

So this girl

Who I'm no longer friends with

Because she likes to indirect tweet

Start drama

She honestly is just a horrible human being in general

I don't know why she enjoys this

But she lives for social media

And it makes me sick to my stomach

Because I told her that she needs to be careful

Because one day someone will kill themselves

Because of something she says on the Internet

And it wasn't the first time that she bullied me over the Internet

And we used to be friends

Which is I think what hurt the most

But she just went on and on about...

Something happened

And I don't really quite remember

I try not to remember these things

But I do remember how hurt I was

And I do remember how many people were bullying me

Because it was not just her

Because like fifteen people

Favorited the tweet

And I want to say

Eight people re-tweeted it

And then I had like

Ten or twelve people "at" me

Which means, like, they replied to me

So I had a lot of people attacking me

And it's humiliating

I didn't want to go to school the next day

I don't believe in God
 But I was praying to God
 That I would die in my sleep
So I would not have to wake up and go to school the next day
 And face these people
And I'm a very confrontational person
 I hate social media
 Because I'm more of the
 "I will get in your face
 And punch you in the face
 And yell in your face"
 Type of girl
 Just like my dad
So these people
 Couldn't even look me in the eye
 When I confronted them
And I think that's what pissed me off the most
 They hide behind a computer screen
 And it's disgusting
I think cyber bullying
 Is honestly probably worse
 Than regular bullying
 Because you hide behind a computer screen
It just makes me sick to my stomach
 Because I don't think anyone deserves to go through that

I know a lot of people in my school
 That were bullied
 And no one spoke up
And that's what disgusts me about my school
 Is that the kids who did speak up...
 Nothing was done
 Because
 The school really didn't care
Every year we had an anti-bullying campaign
 But it was just for show
 They didn't...they didn't care
No one cared
It just...it just blows my mind
 Even that this still continues to happen to other people
 It's just crazy

I think the most important thing

To take away from all of this is
Not to be an asshole
The second thing
On a serious note
Is that you really need a good support system
And if you are feeling suicidal
Or even just sad
Talk to someone
Because I started showing symptoms
Really young
And I kept it bottled in
And that was probably the worst thing I could ever do
Because here I am at 18 years old
And I
I am so messed up
And it's OK
But it's not because
I struggle every single day
And it's hard
But I
I think I can get through it
And that's all that matters

Bernadette's experiences come last among participants' stories because her healing process is most obviously still in progress. Like every other participant, she seems to be doing well now – she has many friends, feels confident in herself, knows when and how to ask for help, and even chose to participate in this study alongside a friend, but her experiences still contribute an extremely strong sense of urgency to work harder to combat bullying. Hearing Bernadette's story, I wondered how many other people were going through the exact same thing even while we were talking. Bernadette also shows more than other participants how bullying is evolving to include new technology and how preventing bullying through new media needs to be the responsibility of more than just the students and young people using it. The idea that victims of bullying and even bullies themselves might suddenly not be around to help others understand what happened to them becomes very real in Bernadette's account of her struggle with suicidal

thoughts and other aspects of mental illness potentially caused, at least in part, by bullying. Several participants mentioned mental illness and suicide attempts and I am extremely thankful those attempts were unsuccessful. I am also amazed and encouraged by their sincere hope and belief that incidences of bullying can be curbed and that situations like theirs can be prevented now and in the future. Now, what are we going to do to ensure that no one ever again feels bullied into believing they are not valuable enough to be on this Earth? To every participant who shared their stories with me and to everyone struggling with bullying or mental illness, thank you for staying, thank you for sharing your experiences, and thank you for helping others through your stories.

Bullying, to Bernadette, is a frustrating way to hurt someone and an added obstacle among life's other challenges. Her definition of bullying shares aspects of social anxiety, depression, and a host of other struggles in her story. It can complicate existing problems or bring pain to an otherwise happy life. She echoes every other participant and adds her own voice defining bullying as a problem that needs to be reduced or eliminated. Bernadette's experiences push readers to remember that bullying is happening right now and can have terrible consequences if left unchallenged – she encourages readers to find and help victims of bullying (and bullies) and help them through all stages of the healing process.

Conclusion

Every story is different. Each participant had a different experience with bullying and appears to be at a different stage in her healing process. All of their stories combined help define bullying, while still leaving the idea open to other interpretations. With even more participants, stories, and poems, how those interpretations are linked would likely become more obvious, but the number of interpretations would become no fewer.

These five participants told their stories in the hope that sharing their experiences could help others facing similar problems and possibly even prevent bullying from occurring in some situations. In the next chapter, possible ways to use these poems to that end will be suggested. The relationship between these stories and the original research question, as well as recommendations for future research, will also be discussed.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In this study, we have explored five very different perspectives, which would likely have been just as diverse with the addition of more participants. The answers to the question, “What are undergraduate students’ experiences of bullying or being bullied?” are limitless, but the stories shared by these five participants begin to shed light on the experiences they still remember many years later.

In beginning to discuss the poems in the *Results* chapter, we can start with what each participant taught us about bullying. Jlynn told us that bullying goes beyond traditional definitions of the word and that every person has a unique view on bullying. She also told us that bullying is as much an internal struggle as an external one, sometimes confining itself entirely to one person’s mind or working between two or more people. Katie fully described a more-or-less “average” middle school experience, leaving her description open enough to include just about any school in her culture. She talked about what “being different,” meant to her, a sentiment echoed by every participant who handled her own feelings of being different in unique ways, from choosing to like what made her different, to simply learning to tolerate those differences. Leah introduced the complete imbalance of many people’s experiences with bullying, recognizing that lots of people participate in bullying unwillingly, even as she struggled with feeling like so many people were knowingly or unknowingly working against her. She blamed few people, but encouraged students and adults to help potential victims find ways out of their negative situations. Rebekah contributed her impossible-to-ignore accounts of physical bullying, while also focusing on the important roles adults play in causing or preventing bullying. Bernadette reminded us that bullying is happening right this moment and encourages us through

her stories to act quickly to help those currently experiencing bullying in their lives, whether we are students, teachers, parents, or community members. While each participant provided and enforced viewpoints echoed in other participants' accounts of their experiences, they also reinforced several ideas already found in literature on bullying and discussed in the next few sections.

Definition of Bullying

In these five participants' stories, we explored the definition of bullying found in a number of studies and expanded the traditional view of bullying to include self-bullying. We saw the aggressive behavior described in a number of studies (Long & Alexander, 2010; Harris & Pétrie, 2002; Olweus, 1991). As mentioned in those studies, the examples of bullying found in participants' stories were repeated over time, were intentionally harmful, and occurred with no provocation. This theme repeated itself in all five stories, from Jlynn's being hard on herself, to Rebekah's classmates jumping on her ankle or holding her face to the ground. In all cases, victims of bullying did not know why they were being bullied and several even mentioned that they would have wanted to make the situation better if it were based on something they did. Those who were bullied were frequently those who could not easily defend themselves, which builds on definitions found in other studies (Peguero, 2012; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Olweus, 1993). This aspect of bullying and victims of bullying was particularly obvious in Leah's sense of isolation, Rebekah's being the new student at her school, and Bernadette's encounters with cyber bullying where she could not even see the people bullying her to try and defend herself against what they said. DeVoe, Murphy, and the National Center for Education Statistics (2011) found that 28% of students in the United States reported having been bullied at school and 6% reported having experienced cyber bullying either at school or away from school. While that rate

of “traditional” in-person bullying has remained steady, cyber bullying has increased in recent years (Rigby & Smith, 2011, p. 441), making Bernadette’s story about being bullied over Twitter and Rebekah’s story about receiving mean text messages particularly important today. However, despite several participants mentioning cyber bullying and bullying via other technology, the stories of more “traditional” types of bullying are no less shocking. This may be true, in part, for no other reason than that physical and emotional in-person bullying still occurs after all the work done to prevent it and several participants mention how unbelievable they think it is that bullying still occurs.

Bullying in Specific Populations

Because participants came from diverse backgrounds, sharing only certainly a university in common, we saw through their five stories how bullying was not limited to a specific group of people. Unfortunately, many of the factors that predict whether a student might become a bully or victim of bullying are beyond anyone’s control. Those factors include race (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007), ethnicity (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O’Brennan, 2009; Nieto, 1994), nationality, religion (Nieto, 1994), age (Huang et al., 2013), sex (Huang et al., 2013; Bradshaw et al., 2009), sexual orientation (Schneider, O’Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012), and health problems or disabilities (Huang et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2013; Bradshaw et al., 2009), among others. One of the participants in this study has Asperger’s and another has hearing loss, making each of them unique among their classmates. One participant was new at her school in third grade and remained one of the “different” ones for some reason unknown to her, while several others described themselves as always having been different from their classmates. Katie, in particular, defined herself as part of her class’ group of “outsiders”:

“And I went to a smaller school
So how I saw it at the time

Was that there was, like, the group
And then there was a couple outsider people
That wasn't sure what they were doing with themselves
And because I was this bombastic, morally principled
Passionate son of a gun
I didn't have a filter
So I had to find unique people
For my friends"

At some point during their interviews, all participants expressed a sense of feeling "different," whether by their own choices, like what they chose to wear or enjoyed doing, or through some factor that they could not control, like moving to a new school.

Effects of Bullying

Each participant experienced the effects of bullying, which is why they chose to participate in this study. In their accounts, we listened to and read stories about those effects, from unpleasant memories to depression, anxiety, and even attempted suicide. Several participants told stories that supported Houbre, Tarquinio, Thuillier, and Hergott's (2006) findings that victims of bullying often show increased symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Leah, in particular, focused on the social alienation in her situation that Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter (2012) also found among some of their participants who were victims of bullying. Bernadette believed that her social anxiety disorder was caused, at least in part, by the bullying she faced from classmates:

"I developed social anxiety disorder
From the bullying
The constant people teasing me
From the constant
Everything"

All participants mentioned or suggested they faced the high levels of distress and poorer self-esteem that were also found in victims of bullying in the same study. Overall, researchers found

that both bullies and victims suffer health consequences from bullying and being bullied and participants' stories reflect the accuracy of their findings.

Suggestions for Possible Use of This Data

Participants in this study have provided unique viewpoints and stories. For a reader, the most noticeable feature of all five stories may be just that – each is so different from every other story. The stories do share a number of important aspects, though, including that each participant remembered her experiences well enough to describe them, sometimes in great detail, to someone else, even though those experiences took place sometimes more than 10 years ago. According to these participants, bullying had a profound impact on their lives and each of them expressed how excited she was to be able to use her story to help others.

The original hope for these stories was that teachers or schools could use them in anti-bullying lessons and again, each participant echoed her wish for this or something like this to happen. Participants' stories speak for themselves – rather than having a teacher tell a student not to bully for a number of hypothetical reasons that may or may not entirely make sense out of context, reading participants' stories allows students or others interested in this topic to see the impact bullying has had on these individuals, even many years into the future. Readers can see how well some are recovering and how much of a struggle that recovery is for others. And regardless of their stage in the healing process, all participants' stories show how vividly they remember the events they describe.

Each participant also took time to make suggestions for teachers, parents, and students who may have experience with bullying. All participants made recommendations that, to them, seem to be common sense, like the importance of treating others the way you wish to be treated.

They also told teachers, parents, and other authority figures not to look the other way. Rebekah even said,

“If you’re seeing it with your own eyes
And you acknowledge it
And don’t do anything about it
You’re part of the problem”

Both Leah and Katie discussed how important it is for parents to talk with their children about what is going on at school and how they feel about it. All participants also mentioned the importance of a strong support system and suggested ways bystanders can be part of that support system and victims of bullying can begin to reach out to others. Most studies have slightly more formal definitions for what is needed to prevent bullying than those recommendations found in participants’ stories. However, even Franks, Rawana, and Brownlee’s (2013) findings, suggesting that fostering students’ school functioning and pro-social attitudes might decrease incidences of bullying, were echoed in Katie’s recommendation that schools work to help students learn conflict resolution skills and increase the executive functioning that allows students to see situations from another person’s point of view.

Several participants also mentioned that their schools did not do anything about the bullying and that the incidents may not have been recorded as bullying. Rebekah even mentioned seeing statistics from her school that indicated that there were zero incidents of bullying during certain academic years, and that she knew this to be untrue. Among those who participated in their 2007 study, Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O’Brennan found that both the students and staff from elementary to high school greatly underestimated the number of students involved in bullying, so alerting school communities about the extent of the problem would likely be an important first step in stopping or preventing bullying. Aside from that basic suggestion, though, the participants in this study began to disagree with experts on what actually decreases bullying in

schools. Many programs have been created and implemented in schools to reduce incidences of bullying, but participants whose schools used any anti-bullying program (though no program was mentioned by name) stated that those programs did not work. Sometimes, bullying would lessen for a few weeks after the program, but it would then resume and, in some participants' schools, students thought of the programs as more or less a joke. According to many of the researchers who reviewed anti-bullying programs, bullying decreased in schools where the programs were used. However, participants question their own schools' recording of bullying statistics and their insecurities might make readers wonder how much emphasis schools really place on recording incidences of bullying. Researchers continue to look into as many potential causes of bullying as possible to help improve existing anti-bullying programs and inform the creation of new ones, while participants wait to find a program that will force schools to take bullying as seriously as they do and that will have a positive impact of more than a few weeks.

Recommendations for Future Research

Though a great deal of research has been done on bullying and its effects, the methods used and populations studied are frequently similar between studies. Many studies on bullying are based on surveys, rather than individual cases, leaving out important individual stories, like those from Jlynn, Katie, Leah, Rebekah, Bernadette, and Keaton. While surveys often give teachers and schools excellent data and allow readers to understand the extent of the problem, survey data may not always provide students with the ideas and tools they need to understand and prevent bullying. The data in this study, as well as that in other qualitative studies, helps students see bullying from individual points of view, which are often more relatable than statistics. Understanding how bullies and victims feel about and react to bullying is often easier after reading poems from this study's participants or watching Keaton's video than it would be

after studying a list of numbers. For future research, I recommend more qualitative studies on any number of subjects related to bullying. For example, this study involved talking with undergraduate students, but even more currently relevant information might be gathered from high school or even middle school students. More information that shows just how long these memories last might be found in the stories of people who are older than the 18- to 22-year old undergraduates I spoke with. And, though the fliers hung around campus to ask for participation in this study made no preference for the gender of participants, only women volunteered, so further research is needed on similar stories for men. Perhaps other people could tell stories about how well certain anti-bullying programs worked in their schools or how they learned to stand up for a friend being bullied. Finding former (or current) bullies willing to participate in studies like this is even more challenging, and hearing their stories could provide valuable insight into how we can help bullies learn to change their thoughts and actions. And even without “official” research, continuing to talk to people who have experienced bullying in any way can greatly improve our understanding of others’ experiences.

Other possible questions could come from participants’ disagreements with experts who say that anti-bullying programs are decreasing the incidences of bullying in schools. Are schools recording the incidences of bullying that their students report? If not, why? What are the effects of inaccurate reporting? Why was the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs limited to a few weeks in some participants’ schools? Would an anti-bullying program have made a difference in participants’ schools where they did not have a program? On what should those programs focus? What can classroom teachers and parents do to help students develop the social skills necessary to combat bullying, so they will not become bullies, victims, or silent bystanders? Quite a few more questions, many of which they have asked themselves, can be found within participants’

stories. Interviewing more bullies, victims of bullying, and bystanders would also likely yield more questions for future research.

Final Thoughts

Like Keaton Jones, each participant in this study believed she could make a difference by sharing her story with others. Once compared with the findings of experts in research on bullying, their stories reflect the commonly found negative consequences of bullying, but also question the effectiveness of today's methods for decreasing incidences of bullying in schools and communities. Through their suggestions for students, adults, and communities, participants stress the importance of continuing to look for new ways to combat bullying and teach acceptance among potential bullies, victims, and bystanders. This study begins to answer the question: what are undergraduate students' experiences of bullying or being bullied? Now, the question is, "What can we do to help their stories make a difference?"

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Appendix A

Interview Script

“Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. As you know, I am doing a study on bullying and I am interested in your personal experiences. I would like to remind you that this interview is confidential and all information gathered in this process will only be reported anonymously. Participation is voluntary, so although I certainly hope that you will stay and talk with me, you are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time. Also, a while ago, you signed a form saying that it would be okay for me to record this interview – is that still all right?”

Okay, thank you very much. Before we get started, are you comfortable? Is there anything I can get for you?

All right, then, please take a few moments to think back over your life and consider whether you have ever been the victim of what you consider to be bullying or have yourself bullied someone.

(Pause somewhat briefly.)

Okay, on this piece of paper, would you please write a short list of all the experiences related to bullying that you just thought of? Please do this in ‘note’ form.”

(Participant notes experiences...)

“Finished? Is there anything else you would like to add? If you think you are done, may I please see what you have written?”

(Take a moment to look over what the participant has written.)

“[Comment briefly and generally on what the participant has written.] Okay, let’s talk about the first item on the list. Pause, close your eyes if you like, and think about this experience for a few moments.”

(Pause briefly.)

“Could you please describe this event for me in as much detail as you can?”

(Participant speaks.)

“Thank you, that is very interesting. Could you tell me a little more about this event?”

[Use follow up questions about the people, setting, timing, and actions in the story.]”

(Continue for each event listed...)

“All right, have we covered everything in your notes? Is there anything you would like to add to any of your stories? Okay, then, I will contact you once I have finished working with your stories to set up another meeting to discuss what I have written and how it could be improved to better help readers understand your experiences. Thank you again for your time and for talking with me and I look forward to speaking with you again.”