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IMPACT OF BULLYING EXPERIENCES ON PRESERVICE TEACHERS STUDYING AT UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This research study describes the occurrence of bullying of preservice teachers within a university environment, the emotional impact of such behaviour and the challenges for universities in countering the behaviour. The study investigates preservice teachers' knowledge of bullying; bullying behaviours towards others; and those directed at them; the emotional impact of bullying; and utilisation of sources of support. Predominantly quantitative methodologies are used for the collection of data, with some qualitative methods used, such as open-ended questions, to further bring meaning to the data. A modified questionnaire originally developed by the School of Psychology was distributed to ninety-five pre-service teachers from one campus of a multi-campus university in Australia. Results from the study indicate that 91 of the 95 students (96%) did experience some form of bullying behaviours in their lives; by the second year of university, 45% of this bullying was experienced at university. Bullying behaviours directed towards others were investigated, including, making jokes about others (29%), direct teasing of another (28%), and rude remarks directed against another (27%). Friends (55%), family (28%) and other university students (24%) were the main reported bullies towards the students, with teaching personnel (2%) not rated highly.

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1. Introduction

The impact of bullying in schools and workplaces continues to be at the forefront of the research literature, along with recommendations on anti-bullying approaches, usually by government agencies, to address the issue (Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014; Ciby & Raya, 2015; Hein, Koka, & Hagger, 2015). Less research has focused on the undergraduate years at university, especially related to pre-service teachers' experiences of bullying while at university and the impact of this behaviour on their wellbeing. This may be an important omission, given the role teachers play in facilitating anti-bullying programs in schools.

Available studies of pre-service teachers have focused on perceptions, knowledge and attitudes about bullying and cyberbullying (Gorsek & Cunningham, 2014; Spears, Campbell, Tangen, Slee, & Cross, 2015) and the comparison of preservice teachers' responses to cyber versus traditional bullying (Boulton, et al., 2014; Davis, 2015); yet few have focused on the reality of incidence and impact of bullying while at university.

Universities, schools and workplaces differ; universities offer an element of choice, freedom and increasingly flexible program delivery modes that set this period of time in an individual's career apart from the earlier more restrictive school and work environments (Coleyshaw, 2010). The development of positive social relationships and sense of belonging while at university is also of importance, given its significant influence on student retention (de Souza & McLean, 2012), further supporting the need to investigate more fully the incidence and impact of bullying in preservice teacher education courses at university.

This study draws on the principles of the Quality of Life framework focused on ensuring all participants are able to live life to the fullest. Brown and Brown (2005) identify three major life domains that embody quality of life: being, focusing on individual attributes; belonging, relating to individuals and their environments; and becoming, an individual's fulfilment of life's goals (Burgess 2014, in Brown & Faragher, p. 66). Although much research in this area has focused on intellectual disability, the underlying principles of the QOL framework have applicability to all people and avenues of life, encompassing both objective and subjective dimensions.

Jokinen (2014) highlights the significant influence of social relationships in the lives of individuals and on all people and the impact this has on the quality of life experienced. Opportunities for choice and self-determination are also important and a necessary ingredient in being able to live life to the fullest, no matter the environment. These are important elements relevant to this research study of preservice teachers' experiences and impact of bullying while at university; the QOL framework helps bring meaning to the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining bullying

The study of bullying behaviours is complex and definitions of bullying, including cyberbullying, can vary according to the context of the study undertaken and viewpoint of the authors. It is commonly regarded as a multi-faceted and complex social phenomenon and has been identified as a significant social

stressor for both children and adults (Nielsen, Tangen, Idsoe, Matthiesen, & Magerøy, 2015). The substantial work of Olweus (2010) has had a significant influence in the field, with a general view of bullying as an intentional hostile behaviour that is sustained or repeated by a group or an individual towards another. This characteristic hostile behaviour can be physical, verbal, cyber, social or psychological and occurs within an imbalanced power relationship (Olweus, 2010; Rigby, 2012). The areas of intent of harm, repetition of the behaviour and a power imbalance, where the bully is more powerful, are required in order for the behaviour to be classified as bullying. This definition is also offered for the purpose of this paper.

Specific examples of these types of bullying can be found in both children and adults (Dogruer & Yaratan, 2014). Physical bullying can include any range of physical violence; for instance, punching, pushing, tripping and kicking another, while verbal bullying is language-related, where the action deliberately hurts another; for instance, spreading a rumour or name-calling, mocking and intimidating another while targeting differences, perceived or real. Emotional bullying can include both psychological and nonverbal; for example, isolating another by excluding them from digital or face-to-face interactions and pointing, laughing, staring or drawing pictures. Although not the main focus of this paper, the emergence of cyberbullying is also a growing concern and can occur in numerous ways including: intimidating and excluding others online, using hurtful messages and images and online gossip (Australian Government Office of Children's eSafety Commissioner, n.d).

To more fully comprehend the social nature of bullying, Swearer, Siebecker, Johnsen-Frerichs, and Wang (2010) used a continuum to establish whether students are victims, bullies, bully-victims (both), bystanders (those who watch the bullying) or not involved. In their study, the role of a school student is changeable, rather than fixed, depending on the social setting. A continuum, it was argued, could more accurately capture the social nature of bullying.

Bieber (2013) found that the definition of bullying based on Dan Olweus' (2010) work to be the most used by researchers and incorporating the key elements of intent of harm, repetition and power imbalance. This was not always well understood, particularly in regards the requirement of repetition in order to be classified as bullying. While there is still debate around Olweus' key elements, it would appear that intentionality, persistence, asymmetry of power, different forms in which bullying occurs and the social nature of bullying continues to remain open to ongoing analysis (Elamé, 2013).

2.2. Diversity

Bullying behaviours in children and adolescence is a major social problem worldwide. A possible explanation for children becoming targets of bullying has been attributed to difference, including physical, racial, religious and ethnic differences (Carpenter & Ferguson, 2009). Studies of educational settings have also identified cultural differences in bullying behaviour (Piskin, 2010). Walton (2011) argues that the 'dominant discourse on bullying shapes the ways in which the problem is conceptualised and strategies are designed and carried out' (p.142). The diversity in our schools and community impacts not only on the cultural differences in understanding bullying, but also on how the dominant group acts to address bullying through rules, policy and legislation. This becomes particularly important when considering how preservice teachers address the dominant discourse and prepare themselves for schools and classrooms.

2.3. Bullying at universities

The long-term damaging effects of bullying on mental health and emotional wellbeing have been recognised by Ortega et al. (2012) in their European cross-national study, Tokunaga's (2010) critique of the research which highlights serious psychosocial, affective and academic problems of victimisation from bullying and cyberbullying, and the meta-analysis on cross-sectional and longitudinal data undertaken by Verkuil, Atasayi and Molendijk (2015).

There are a number of avenues and ways in which those encountering bullying can access support. A person can act constructively towards finding a solution, do nothing, or choose a destructive functioning approach that can be harmful to all involved and cause long-term or permanent damage (Sinkkonen, Puhakka, & Meriläinen, 2014). Numerous studies explore the necessary support systems available to school-aged students (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010) including online resources and targeted websites such as: Bullying: No Way (2016); Cybersmart and telephone help lines such as Kids Helpline (2016). Similar support services for young adults are notably less in number. Despite university students being vulnerable to a range of psychological difficulties (McKenzie, Murray, Murray, & Richelieu (2015), counselling services are variably resourced with poor student-counsellor ratios and time and access restrictions evident depending on where a student studies (Stallman, 2012).

Many children and adults do not ask for help when they experience bullying, and as children grow older they become increasingly reluctant to seek help. The long-term implications of not seeking a productive course of action when targeted by bullies include psychological and physical symptoms (Sinkkonen et al., 2014). In their study of preservice teachers across three universities, Spears et al. (2015) found that preservice teachers had limited knowledge, competencies and confidence in dealing with bullying, including cyberbullying.

3. Problem Statement

Recent expectations of government and professional bodies requiring new teachers to be thoroughly informed about the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APSTs) have increased the pressure on universities to ensure pre-service teachers are classroom ready on the completion of their degree. Of further importance is the expectation that exiting pre-service teachers are cognisant of the values, ethical behaviours and characteristics that underpin the principles of the profession, including an ability to provide high quality teaching and safe, inclusive learning environments for all students.

Informal reports or anecdotal evidence of bullying experiences at university had raised concerns regarding the effect of these experiences on pre-service teachers' health and wellbeing, while also highlighting the potential future impact of such behaviour on schools as these preservice teachers leave university to enter the profession. Emerging from these concerns was the development of the following research questions.

4. Research Questions

This research study was guided by the following questions:

- What is the nature and prevalence of bullying behaviours in a university teacher education program?
- How and to what extent do bullying behaviours impact on preservice teachers' wellbeing and quality of life while at university?
- In what ways do bullying behaviours and experiences impact on the social and psychological wellbeing of preservice teachers?
- What strategies do preservice teachers employ to manage and or prevent bullying experiences while at university?

5. Purpose of the Study

The impetus for this research project stems from a need to establish a deeper understanding of the prevalence and forms of bullying behaviours within preservice teacher education programs.

6. Research Methods

This research study utilises predominantly quantitative methodologies for the collection of data. A modified questionnaire originally developed by the university's School of Psychology department was distributed to 95 pre-service teachers from one campus of this multi-campus university in Australia. The students selected for the study were in their first (n=26), second (n=29), third (n=6) and fourth (n=34) year of study for a Bachelor of Education Primary (n=50) or a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) combined degree (n=43) and a Graduate secondary education course (n=2). The average age of students in the study was 21 years.

A comprehensive survey was utilised. The questionnaire included seven sections:

Preliminaries: involving personal details, excluded from this paper:

- *About you* (to gain information about the participant, including age, cultural heritage, university year level and degree)
- *Bullying knowledge* (to ascertain what the participant knew in the area)

Sections:

Section 1: *How you behave with others* (investigating participants bullying behaviours towards others)

Section 2: *How others behave towards you* (investigating bullying behaviour from others experienced by the participants)

Section 3: *About your use of technology* (investigating the participants use of technology and accessing the Internet both at university and home)

Section 4: *Your activities in cyberspace* (investigating participant cyberbullying behaviours toward others)

Section 5: *Your experience in cyberspace* (investigating cyberbullying behaviour from others experienced by the participants)

These sections provide a suitable framework for the presentation of results. There were 95 respondents. Some Level 3 results are not shown due to the low number of students involved.

7. Findings and Discussion

Table 1a. Where preservice teachers bullied others

	Home	**University**	**Work**	**Sport**	**Recreation**	**Other**
Level 1	65%	23%	27%	19%	31%	31%
Level 2	52%	38%	10%	3%	14%	17%
Level 4	56%	47%	29%	15%	12%	9%
All levels	**57%**	**37%**	**22%**	**12%**	**18%**	**18%**

Table 1b. Who did preservice teachers bully?

	Family	**Friend**	**Uni Student**	**Lecturer/tutor**	**Stranger**	**Other**
Level 1	69%	77%	4%	4%	0%	12%
Level 2	41%	55%	17%	0%	3%	10%
Level 4	50%	56%	24%	6%	6%	3%
All levels	**53%**	**62%**	**16%**	**3%**	**3%**	**3%**

For all levels most bullied others at home (Level 1: 65%, Level 2: 52%, Level 4: 56%). After home, the next highest places Level 1 preservice teachers bullied others was during recreation activities (31%) and at work (27%). After home, Level 2 (38%) and Level 4 (47%) preservice teachers mainly bullied others at university, with 29% of Level 4 students also bullying others at work. For preservice teachers the highest percentage for those who were targeted to be bullied was a friend (Level 1: 77%; Level 2: 55%; Level 4: 56%) followed by a family member (Level 1: 69%; Level 2: 41%; Level 4: 50%). Twenty- four percent of Level 4 preservice teachers indicated that they bullied another university student.

7.1. Being bullied

A significant percentage of respondents indicated they had experienced one or more of the behaviours surveyed. Of those bullied, the percentage who indicated that these behaviours were repeated once or twice a month or more was highest for having jokes made about them (29%), being teased (28%), having rude remarks made by someone towards the respondent (27%), being ignored (20%), name calling (14%), having a friend turn against them (12%), comments about their looks (11%), being left out of activities (11%) and being purposefully excluded (10%).

Table 2a. Where preservice teachers were bullied

Levels	**Home**	**University**	**Work**	**Sport**	**Recreation**	**Other**
Level 1	42%	23%	35%	15%	31%	31%
Level 2	38%	45%	17%	3%	17%	21%
Level 4	26%	41%	32%	18%	15%	3%
All levels	**34%**	**39%**	**27%**	**12%**	**21%**	**16%**

For Level 2 (45%) and Level 4 (41%) preservice teachers, most bullying behaviours they had experienced occurred at university. While Level 1 preservice teachers indicated that most bullying occurred for them at home (42%).

7.2. Who bullied preservice teachers?

Table 2b. Who bullied you?

Year Level	Family	Friend	Uni std	Lect/tutor	Stranger	Other
Level 1	42%	73%	8%	0%	8%	19%
Level 2	21%	48%	34%	0%	7%	10%
Level 4	26%	47%	26%	6%	15%	12%
All levels	**28%**	**55%**	**24%**	**2%**	**9%**	**13%**

For Level 1 preservice teachers who were bullied 73% were bullied by a friend, 42% by a family member and 8% by another university student. Level 2 preservice teachers indicated that 34% experienced the listed behaviours by another university student and 26% for Level 4 preservice teachers. So while the highest score targeted a friend as the most likely bully, a sharp increase from Level 1 to Level 2 was found in bullying from other university students.

A significant percentage of respondents indicated they had experienced one or more of the behaviours surveyed. The percentage who indicated that these behaviours were repeated once or twice a month or more was highest for having jokes made about them (29%), being teased (28%), having rude remarks made by someone towards the respondent (27%), being ignored (20%), name calling (14%), having a friend turn against them (12%), comments about their looks (11%), being left out of activities (11%) and being purposefully excluded (10%).

Survey results of the impact of bullying on feelings found that a significant percentage of respondents noted a negative impact with repeated negative feelings experienced once or twice a month or more of feeling sad and hurt (32%), angry (32%), anxious (29%), embarrassed (28%), cried (24%), had difficulty concentrating (20%) and blamed themselves for the bullying (17%).

Table 2c. Emotional impact of bullying

Frequency	Sad /hurt	Angry	Anxious	Embarrassed	Cried	Difficulty concentrating	Blamed myself
Once or twice a month	20%	23%	15%	16%	15%	10%	10%
Once a week	2%	4%	5%	6%	4%	3%	3%
Several times a week	6%	4%	4%	4%	3%	6%	1%
Everyday	4%	1%	5%	2%	2%	1%	3%
All levels	**32%**	**32%**	**29%**	**28%**	**24%**	**20%**	**17%**

7.3. Cyberbullying

Being cyberbullied outside the home was not rated as a concern for the majority of preservice teachers in the survey, the logic being that the means readily exists to remove the threat; i.e. to delete the offensive message.

Table 3. Where were you when you were cyberbullied?

	Home	**University**	**Work**	**Sport**	**Recreation**	**Other**
Level 1	46%	8%	12%	8%	4%	15%
Level 2	45%	17%	3%	3%	3%	3%
Level 4	44%	21%	12%	0%	3%	0%
All levels	**45%**	**16%**	**9%**	**3%**	**3%**	**8%**

Most often being cyberbullied occurred at home (Level 1- 46%, Level 2 – 45%, Level 4 – 44%), although the percentage experiencing cyberbullying increased at university from 8% for Level 1, 17% for Level 2 and 21% for Level 4.

Table 4. Who cyberbullied you?

	Family	**Friend**	**Uni Student**	**Lect/tutor**	**Stranger**	**Other**
Level 1	15%	58%	0%	4%	4%	15%
Level 2	10%	31%	14%	7%	3%	10%
Level 4	12%	32%	12%	3%	12%	3%
All levels	**12%**	**39%**	**9%**	**4%**	**7%**	**8%**

Most often a friend was responsible for the cyberbullying (Level 1: 58%, Level 2: 31%, Level 4: 32%). A small percentage of preservice teachers indicated that they were cyberbullied by a lecturer/tutor (Level 1: 4%, Level 2: 7%, Level 4: 3%).

Table 5. Sources of help

	Did not ask for help	**Parent Guardian**	**Uni friend**	**Friend outside uni**	**Lect/ Tut**	**Family member**	**Other Sources**
Level 1	46%	35%	15%	35%	0%	19%	16%
Level 2	24%	52%	45%	48%	14%	24%	9%
Level 4	32%	6%	41%	41%	3%	24%	24%
All levels	**32%**	**29%**	**35%**	**42%**	**6%**	**22%**	**17%**

Overall most preservice teachers sought help from a friend outside of university (42%), while 35% utilised the assistance of a friend at university. About one third of students did not ask for help or sought help from a parent/guardian.

Forty-six percent of level 1 preservice teachers did not ask for help when they were bullied. The highest source of help when they experienced bullying behaviours was sought from parents/guardians

(35%) or a friend outside university (35%), followed by other family members (19%) and another university friend (15%).

Most Level 2 preservice teachers sought help from a parent/guardian (52%), a friend outside university (48%) or a friend at university (45%). Twenty-four percent did not ask for help nor sought help from other family members.

Most Level 4 preservice teachers sought help from a university friend (41%) or a friend outside university (41%) or other sources such as a counsellor. 32% did not ask for help, while 24% sought help from another family member. The category of 'other sources' includes counsellors (totalling 6%), clergy (4%) and telephone helpline (1%)

7.4. Limitations of the study

Bullying and cyberbullying are serious problems that can have a substantially debilitating long-term impact on victims; however the impact of bullying remains an individual experience and the reliability of self-reported questionnaire responses needs to be taken into account. While the anonymity of the questionnaire may have improved reporting, the use of self-reporting questionnaires can also lead to both over and under reporting of the problems of bullying (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). This study is situated at one campus of a multi-campus university and therefore the findings should not be generalised across campuses nor to other universities.

8. Conclusion

This study sought to ascertain the extent and impact of bullying on preservice teachers while at university. From the data presented, there is little doubt that many preservice teachers do experience bullying while undertaking their studies as part of their teacher education course at university.   Students displayed a surprising openness about their own bullying of others.

Overall, bullying in all its available forms, such as physical, verbal, cyber and more, is sufficiently widespread to warrant strict protocols at university and to ensure they are articulated clearly to students, especially in regards preservice teachers, considering the relatively high negative emotional impacts on some students. Of some concern is the finding that bullying of others by preservice teachers increases over the four years of the teacher education program. This requires further investigation, especially given the impact of such behaviour on the nature and effectiveness of the program in preparing preservice teachers for the profession. It also has implications for preservice teachers' overall quality of life while at university and the level of social connectedness experienced as they near completion of their program. Opportunities to learn within a safe and inclusive learning community is especially important given the role future preservice teachers will play in implementing educational programs specifically designed to educate children and young adults about bullying behaviours in schools. Although a variety of safety courses including bullying does exist and these are conducted at secondary schools as well as at this university and at other venues, a disappointing total of 38 of the 95 students (40%) stated they had not attended these; such initiatives aimed at the prevention of bullying need to be further encouraged.

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