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## **What Limits the Effectiveness of Antibullying Programs? A Thematic Analysis of the Perspective of Teachers**

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*Prevention programs yield modest reductions in bullying in North American schools. This study explored the perspective of educators regarding factors limiting the impact of these initiatives. Transcripts*

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*from nineteen 90-min focus groups with 103 educators were coded thematically. Educators felt that off-site incidents, cyberbullying, and the growing involvement of boys in psychologically aggressive incidents have increased the complexity of bullying. Curriculum demands limit time for training, implementation, and prompt responses to bullying. Principals failing to back teachers up, ambivalent colleagues, uncooperative parents, and a lack of evidence reduce their commitment to implementation. Promising programs are discontinued in favor of new initiatives. Some educators modified programs; others, feeling frustrated and discouraged, struggled to mobilize the enthusiasm needed to ensure successful implementation. Dealing with bullying in the face of limited time, training, and support may increase emotional exhaustion and compromise program effectiveness.*

*KEYWORDS* bullying, prevention, psychological reactance, qualitative methods

Bullying has been defined as an intentional, repeated, physical, verbal, social, or electronically aggressive act by an individual or group directed at a person without the power to defend themselves (Olweus, 1994; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). In a meta-analytic review of 80 studies 36% of children ages 12–18 years reported victimization by their peers (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014). Bullying in North American schools is, in comparison to the levels reported in Scandinavia, relatively high (Craig et al., 2009; UNICEF Office of Research, 2013). The impact of this problem is reflected in longitudinal studies reporting that involvement in bullying as either a victim or perpetrator is associated with a significant increase in health and mental health problems (Fekkes, Pijpers, Fredriks, Vogels, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2006; Rudolph, Troop-Gordon, Hessel, & Schmidt, 2011).

Despite a growing body of research on the effectiveness of antibullying programs, bullying and victimization in schools remain significant public health concerns (Craig et al., 2009; Modecki et al., 2014; Perlus, Brooks-Russell, Wang, & Iannotti, 2014; UNICEF Office of Research, 2013). Systematic reviews and meta-analyses show that antibullying programs have, on average, contributed to very modest reductions in bullying and victimization (Ferguson, Miguel, Kilburn, & Sanchez, 2007; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007), particularly in North American schools (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Indeed, the effectiveness of these interventions in more rigorous randomized trials is not statistically significant (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). A within-study meta-analysis suggests that, although these programs may yield positive outcomes with younger students, their effectiveness declines during the middle school years (Yeager, Fong, Lee, & Espelage, 2015). Meta-analyses suggest that lack of monitoring, ineffective consequences, and a failure to engage parents

are associated with reductions in the impact of these programs (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Studies examining the implementation of a broader range of evidence-based social-emotional learning programs suggest that local participation in program selection, standardization, a focus on skills and supportive environments, effective training, and administrative support may contribute to the successful implementation of antibullying programs (Greenberg et al., 2003; Payne, Gottfredson, & Gottfredson, 2006). Although many social-emotional learning programs have, individually, proven effective, Greenberg and colleagues argued that a lack of coordination among prevention initiatives and competing curriculum demands may limit their impact (Greenberg et al., 2003).

### The Current Study

Although meta-analyses point to design factors that may limit the effectiveness of antibullying programs, there is a need for further research addressing this issue (Espelage, 2013; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Apparent age-related declines in the effectiveness of antibullying programs are of particular concern (Yeager et al., 2015). Although investigators have speculated regarding this finding, it is not well understood (Yeager et al., 2015).

This study was conducted as one component of a mixed-method project (Hong & Espelage, 2012) employing qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative methods (discrete choice conjoint experiments) to understand the views of educators regarding factors limiting the effectiveness of antibullying programs. The perspective of students, who may view antibullying programs less favorably than teachers (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004), is the focus of a previous study (Cunningham, Cunningham, Ratcliffe, & Vaillancourt, 2010) and a separate article (Cunningham et al., 2015). Qualitative methods represent a valuable component of a more comprehensive approach to the analysis of educational interventions (Hong & Espelage, 2012). Focus groups, for example, provide the flexibility to conduct an in-depth exploration of moderating or mediating processes that may influence the implementation and effectiveness of antibullying programs. In contrast to quantitative studies, which are typically designed to address hypotheses of a priori interest to investigators, the inductive methods adopted in qualitative studies are more likely to identify issues of relevance to participants and to detect processes that may not be captured in quantitative measures. Qualitative approaches are a method of choice for identifying measures that should be included in the quantitative stage of mixed-method projects (Bridges et al., 2011).

Educators who are responsible for the implementation of school-based antibullying initiatives (Strohmeier & Noam, 2012) bring an important perspective to the program development and improvement process. Educators are in a position to determine the acceptability of the different components of antibullying initiatives, anticipate barriers to the introduction of new programs, discuss the extent to which the components of antibullying programs were actually implemented, identify antibullying activities that may be ineffective, or provide insight into the ways in

which the response of educators and students may support or undermine these initiatives. Educators can provide input on organizational processes that may not be apparent to investigators and comment on the mechanisms via which psychological constructs such as self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion may influence their response to the antibullying programs in their schools (Feuerhahn, Bellingrath, & Kudielka, 2013; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008).

We conducted a thematic analysis of focus group discussions exploring three general questions. First, what factors do teachers feel are limiting the effectiveness of their efforts to reduce bullying in their schools? Second, how do teachers respond to these limiting factors? Third, how does their response influence the effectiveness of antibullying initiatives.

## METHODS

### Participants

This project was approved by the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Board and the review panels of the participating boards of education. To ensure our sample captured the social and economic diversity of the region, we grouped the public and Catholic schools in a moderate-sized central Canadian community into quadrants based on the social demography of the immediate neighborhood in which schools were located. We selected a stratified random sample of 21 JK–Grade 8 or Grade 6–8 schools (JK = Junior Kindergarten ages 3 to 5). Table 1 shows considerable variation in the social and economic characteristics of the neighborhood of participating schools. A member of the team contacted the principals to determine their willingness for their school to participate. Of 21 schools selected, 18 principals (15 JK–Grade 8, 3 Grade 6–8) agreed to participate and forwarded a recruitment letter to teachers and educational assistants. Our focus on these grades reflected the broader context of a research program that included a study of the perceptions of students in Grades 5–8 regarding factors limiting the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs. Of 118 teachers who volunteered to participate, 103 (17 men and 86 women) signed an informed consent and participated in a group.

### Focus Group Procedures

Focus groups were scheduled from 4:00–5:30 pm and 7:00–8:30 pm at a university hospital location. Experienced facilitators conducted nineteen 90-min groups according to a structured interview guide. A second member of the research team assisted with the conduct of groups and recorded observations. Participants completed written informed consents assuring confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Discussions were recorded with Sony (ICD-DX 312) or Olympus (VN-3100PC) digital audio recorders equipped with external microphones. Groups began with a review of the

**TABLE 1** Neighborhood Demographics of Participating Schools

School/ grade level	Variables												Overall rank <sup>2</sup>
	Median income		Percentage of immigrants		High school dropouts		Single-mother families		Children below poverty line		Psychiatric-related ER visits		
	R	N	R	%	R	N*	R	%	R	%	R	N*	
1 (JK-8)	5	45,724	4	17.5	1	155.0	2	18.6	2	31.6	2	22.2	5
2 (6-8)	4	49,980	1	37.4	3	61.5	4	12.5	3	19.1	2	19.3	5
3 (6-8)	4	50,904	1	34.5	2	76.0	1	22.1	1	35.3	4	13.2	4
4 (6-8)	4	54,494	2	27.6	3	62.9	1	24.2	1	33.8	4	12.9	3
5 (JK-8)	4	54,627	2	28.4	2	67.9	2	20.8	2	23.0	2	17.2	4
6 (JK-8)	4	55,276	4	16.7	3	62.3	2	17.8	3	13.0	2	17.6	3
7 (JK-8)	3	59,669	3	24.5	5	22.9	3	14.5	2	20.3	3	13.7	4
8 (JK-8)	3	65,233	1	43.4	4	48.9	4	12.6	4	9.0	3	13.7	2
9 (JK-8)	3	68,756	2	27.7	2	76.2	5	7.2	4	8.3	3	17.1	4
10 (JK-8)	2	73,276	3	26.8	4	46.7	4	10.8	5	0.0	4	9.6	2
11 (JK-8)	1	82,045	4	18.4	5	19.8	3	14.8	4	10.1	4	12.4	2
12 (JK-8)	1	84,575	1	38.7	3	60.9	5	6.7	5	0.0	4	9.7	2
13 (JK-8)	1	88,843	5	11.4	4	50.0	5	6.8	5	5.6	4	9.7	1
14 (JK-8)	1	89,874	3	21.8	5	25.0	5	7.1	5	5.9	5	5.4	1
15 (JK-8)	1	100,692	5	14.1	3	53.2	5	9.1	5	6.0	5	6.7	1
16 (JK-8)	1	104,950	2	29.0	4	38.1	5	6.7	4	7.1	5	6.0	1
17 (JK-8)	1	109,626	5	11.4	4	34.2	5	4.7	5	1.3	5	8.9	1
18 (JK-8)	1	112,506	4	18.4	5	28.6	5	8.1	5	3.3	5	6.6	1

*Note.* Adapted from DeLuca, Johnston, and Buist (2012). R = Quintile ranking of each school (1 = highest, 2 = high, 3 = middle, 4 = low, 5 = lowest); N\* = rate per 1,000; overall rank = quintile ranking on a composite variable based on 24 health, education, and demographic measures. JK = Junior Kindergarten (ages 3 to 5).

Ontario Ministry of Education's definition of bullying (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/144.pdf>). Next, educators were encouraged to discuss the antibullying programs conducted in their schools ("Can anyone give us an example of something that schools are doing to stop bullying?"). The interview guide suggested prompts to encourage participation ("What do others think about this?") and in-depth exploration ("Could you tell us a little more about this example?"). Next, participants explored factors that enhanced or limited the effectiveness of antibullying programs ("Can anyone think of an example of something that educators do that helps antibullying programs work better?"). Participants received a \$50.00 gift certificate and a parking pass.

### Data Analysis

We adopted an approach based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A team composed of researchers with content expertise, qualitative analysts, representatives of the educational system with responsibility for program implementation and dissemination, and several members who were parents of school-age children ensured data analysis and interpretation was informed by a diverse range of views (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We began by identifying biases that might influence our analysis and interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Several members of the team, for example, had been involved in schoolwide approaches to the promotion of social competence. During the development of the coding system and the analysis of transcripts, we made an effort to suspend or limit the influence of these views (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gearing, 2004). Recordings were transcribed verbatim without identifying information. Three members of the research team read all transcripts and identified preliminary themes. Rather than imposing an a priori model, codes were generated inductively (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic team met to discuss emerging themes, define codes, and draft a coding manual. Code definitions were incorporated as properties in NVivo 10. Digital copies of transcripts were entered into NVivo-10 with groups represented as individual sources. Overarching themes were entered as parent nodes; individual codes as child nodes. Before coding commenced, each coder reached a minimum criterion of 85% agreement with a series of standard training transcripts. During the coding stage of the study, twice-monthly reliability checks against standardized transcripts averaged 94.5%. Each theme included in the manuscript was linked to supporting quotes; the three members of the data analytic team reached a consensus that each was consistent with the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As an operational measure of recurrent themes (Patton, 2002), the number of focus groups in which each theme was coded was obtained from NVivo-10.

## RESULTS

Although educators discussed components of antibullying programs that they believed to be promising, our focus in this article is on their perspective

regarding factors reducing the effectiveness of antibullying programs, their response to these limitations, and the potential impact of their responses on these initiatives.

### Bullying is Becoming More Complex and Difficult to Detect

The observation that bullying is becoming more difficult to detect, complex, and challenging for educators to deal with emerged in 16 of the study's 19 focus groups. Bullying occurring off school property, for example, posed considerable difficulty:

Because they're not doing it out on the playground anymore, they're doing it on the way to school or on the way home after school, when we're not around, they just work harder at being better at it and not getting caught.

Social media platforms have added an additional layer of complexity to the detection and solution of bullying problems: "It used to happen in the playground in the schoolyard, but now it gets dragged home. It gets thrown up on Facebook. It gets all around the neighborhood quite quickly so it's not just something that stays at school."

In addition to the challenge of responding to bullying occurring in different locations or electronic environments, several groups noted that boys involved as perpetrators are employing an increasingly versatile range of aggressive tactics. In contrast to physical bullying, these incidents are more difficult to detect and respond to: "As a system, we are not allowing boys to be boys. So, now they are becoming more calculating, more vicious, and they are doing things to each other, and to the girls, under the surface." Similarly:

And one of the male teachers ... he noticed ... boys are more physical when they're dealing with an issue, girls are more psychological when they're dealing with an issue. He's noticing now that we're really putting the lid on the physical, aggressive side to the boys, that they're starting to figure out other ways of dealing with their bullying issue. And they're starting to learn the psychological part. And all of a sudden it's like, jeez, we have opened another can of worms.

This comment reflected a recurring concern that efforts to reduce bullying may inadvertently compound the problem:

They get sneakier too, when you try to watch and supervise and handle it then they just go deeper down. So that is another way where maybe some of the things that we try to do can actually make it worse.



Similarly, “I don’t know, sometimes the efforts that we make to stop something can make it worse, maybe just for a short time, but, it can sometimes kind of put wood on the fire.”

### Design Factors Limiting the Impact of Antibullying Programs

Educators in 15 groups critiqued the design and delivery of antibullying materials:

I think sometimes when these presentations come in, it is above the kids, it is dry, and they are talking at them instead of to them. You can already see the disengage that’s happening so it’s frustrating to you as an educator because you know the message that they’re trying to purvey is one that these children need to be exposed to, but they’re just going about it in the wrong way.

In 16 of 19 groups, educators argued more specifically that the failure to adapt the developmental level of antibullying activities limited their application across grades: “But, in our case, it might work for our group, because it’s younger, but I think when they get into the older groups, it may not work that way.” A number of educators described an age-linked reduction in the effectiveness of antibullying programs: “The little ones will carry it, but the bigger ones will just be ‘like, nah, yah, whatever.’ They kind of brush it off unless it’s like a constant every day.” Another noted: “I really feel Grade 5 is sort of the pivoting point. And then by the time they get to Grade 8, I don’t know what happens.” Similarly:

My experience around that has been with the younger kids, it seems to work better. With the older kids, there’s sort of that still, I don’t know how to describe it. They’re level of understanding is higher but the empathy, the sympathy, is still not always there.

Others felt that programs for older students should shift to a more active problem-based process:

Yeah and I think with the Grade 8 and Grade 7 boys, it’s more not sitting them down in a circle and saying how do you feel about that because that definitely wouldn’t work. It’s like, “okay guys. Let’s come up with a solution”, giving them that ownership. Like “what’s going on here?” Coming down to their level, talking their language.

Some attributed the reluctance of older students to participate in antibullying activities to the influence of peers: “A Grade 7 boy may not want to show the empathy that he really truly has because of peer pressure.” Another

attributed age-linked reductions in the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs to shifts in the motivational influence of teachers and peers:

“But I think it has to do with peers. Peers are their number one influence at that age ... it’s not cool to try and impress your teacher all the time. Whereas the younger kids, if they think they’re making you proud by following these rules.”

Others suspected older students reacted to the repetitiveness of programs that failed to adjust their content or learning process over the course of the elementary and junior years:

I guess it can be just as simple as they disengage, and they shut down from what you’re saying. Year after year they’re told the same thing, and by the time they get up to Grades 7 and 8 they’re like “Oh, this again, this bullying presentation or this conversation we’re having. Can we just do something else?”

### Implementation Factors Limiting the Impact of Antibullying Programs

Top-down selection and imposition of antibullying programs, lack of supporting evidence, insufficient training, inadequate time to implement antibullying initiatives, and lack of longer-term maintenance limited the impact of potentially effective initiatives.

#### TOP-DOWN DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Participants in 10 groups thought administrative imposition of antibullying programs reduced the support needed to implement initiatives successfully:

Sometimes from higher up will implement something and you won’t agree with it. Just like that, and then you have a divide in your school. People agree. People don’t agree. You lose the community, the school community feeling, but then the kids get it. If you’re not into it, if you’re pretending, they know. They will pick that up.

Similarly:

I think it works better bottom up than top down. If you involve people in the program, the development of the program, the delivery of the program, and assessing how it’s going, it’s much more successful than if your boss just comes in and says [...].

Others were angered by top-down implementation processes: “All teachers who are told to do anything are angry, nobody wants to be told, don’t

tell me to do anything.” Although some sought active involvement in the program decision making and implementation process, others preferred clear directives regarding program design and implementation:

Yeah, I can be on a team that helps the antibullying program but I can't develop it. I cannot develop it, I can implement it, I cannot develop it, it has to be, you know what. ... Tell me what to do, we can talk about it, but you get it out there, you talk about it, you enforce it, you make the announcements, you put it in the bulletin.

#### LACK OF SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

In 16 of 19 groups, educators felt that they were not provided with convincing evidence regarding the effectiveness of antibullying programs or that their experience provided little indication that bullying was actually declining:

I think maybe some of us would be more prone to use it if there were research and statistics behind it, and perhaps there are that I haven't been made aware of. But, if there was a group that was followed from the time they were in Kindergarten or Grade 1, and now they're in Grade 10 and incidences of bullying have decreased by a certain percentage ... I think, without knowing its efficacy and seeing the same people over and over again, for us, it's just a burden, and with little benefit.

As another participant noted:

It gets kind of put on our plate and we're going okay, you know, how do you know what works over there is gonna work over here, but they don't have the stats for it. They just say do it.

Educators were also reluctant to implement programs having little apparent impact:

I don't have any tracking record of its effectiveness, but just through observation, it was difficult for me to confidently tell somebody, yes, I feel this program works. When, time and time again, the same students were the ones that I had to take curriculum time away from, or my class was left to independently read or to do a couple of extra practice questions, when I really wanted to be doing the lesson I was supposed to be doing.

#### IMPLEMENTATION TRAINING

In 10 groups educators expressed concern that the staff who implemented antibullying programs were not adequately trained:

It was simple, basic, quick, fast and like we said, originally it was a four-day pull-out all day training to a half day, your class is still there and you

know your mind is really not here. And in a half day you have no books, there are no books, no resources were ever bought for anybody new. It's up to you to go borrow from the staff who were originally trained.

Educators were concerned that, although training was available when a program was first introduced, the School Board's commitment to implementation support declined over time: "We were lucky that there was more funding then, and we had days, weeks really. Now there's a kit for each school, but there's not a lot of time to do it." Although staff present at the introduction of the program often benefited from more extensive training, the availability of training for new staff was limited: "So the staff were trained the way we were, the original staff, I should say that properly but since then, we've grown exponentially and three quarters of the staff is not trained."

#### TIME ALLOCATED TO IMPLEMENTATION

In 18 of 19 focus groups, participants concluded that competing time demands imposed by the provincial curriculum limited the extent to which educators were able to implement potentially successful antibullying initiatives:

I know some teachers feel like there is so much on their plate already, that is one extra thing that you have to teach but I think that it is so important to teach that because it is all part of the good atmosphere in a school.

Similarly:

I think we are pressed for time. It's not that you don't want to address it ... I really need to teach another strand of that so I don't have time for this. I don't think it's ill intended. I think it's honestly that there's a lot of pressure. We've got curriculum to cover.

Another participant noted:

The programs can be made a little less effective, not so much by students but by the time factor. There are times when something happens in the yard, and I would really love to delve into it, but there are two classes waiting for me.

#### POTENTIALLY SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS ARE NOT SUSTAINED

In 14 of 19 groups, educators noted that schools failed to extend promising initiatives across grades, apply programs consistently across schools, or sustain potentially successful antibullying programs:

Another issue from a teaching perspective, is that our board jumps on band wagon, after band wagon, after band wagon. ... So, it's the same stuff that we grew up with, but they call it something different. And, that didn't work last year, so let's try this this year ... we're just not giving any one thing enough time to work.

This participant reached a similar conclusion:

I know I've been at several schools ... I find sometime we don't stick with something long enough and a new thing or a new term or a new flavor of the week comes along. You know what I mean? See something through. Things don't happen overnight.

### Limitations in Monitoring and Disciplinary Infrastructure

In addition to limitations in the program design and implementation process, educators questioned the supervisory and disciplinary infrastructure in which antibullying programs were embedded.

#### MONITORING

In 13 of 19 groups, educators expressed concern that schools were not providing the level of monitoring needed to detect bullying in the settings where it was most likely to occur. For example:

We have [two socio-emotional learning programs] but it's a matter of keeping an eye of the students outside, in the classroom, in the hallways, and trying to prevent these things. Unfortunately though it's there, it still happens, and we don't see it.

Some questioned the number of educators monitoring playgrounds: "And we have two staff members on duty for a large playground and there are lots of spots that if two people on our big field, what is happening in those opposite two corners right?" Another noted:

I think the hardest part with all these programs and with bullying is that a lot of times it doesn't happen in front of us, the teachers. It happens out there in playground, in the class when we're not looking.

#### MEANINGFUL CONSEQUENCES

In 15 of 19 groups, educators expressed concern that when bullying was actually detected or brought to the attention of educators, the consequences for students involved as perpetrators were sometimes inadequate: For

example: “I think sometimes certain incidents aren’t necessarily taken as seriously as I think they should be, and I know other staff members feel the same and that there are not always consequences for actions of some students.” Another participant noted:

Like I personally have never sent a student to the office in 13 years of teaching, but I just don’t find it effective, ‘cause I saw when I was in the inner city what happened. Kids went to the office and they just hung about there all day and had fun in the office. So, okay, that’s not gonna work.

This educator argued, “There’s a lot of discussion and there’s a lot of sharing of feelings and thoughts, and a lot of children are smart enough to realize, well, okay, that’s it.” Educators were particularly critical of consequences involving suspensions. “Nowadays, you give a child a suspension, hey, that’s a holiday, I don’t have to go to school.”

## Limitations in Social and Administrative Support

### ADMINISTRATIVE BACK-UP

In 16 of the study’s 19 focus groups, educators argued that a lack of administrative support compromised the implementation of antibullying programs: “If the principal doesn’t buy into it you’re not going to get everybody on board, because you’re always going to have a reluctant people to start it.” Principals also provide important back-up to educators responding to bullying episodes and working with the parents of students involved in serious incidents: “The problem at our school, and this is where all of us are starting to really feel like we just . . . our principal just doesn’t have our back.” In addition to being a source of frustration, participants suggested that a failure of administrative back-up could affect programs by reducing student participation: “Well, the other students see that as well, if the principals [*sic*] not doing anything about it how can I do something about it?”

### COLLEAGUE SUPPORT

Educators said the extent to which their colleagues supported the school’s antibullying program influenced their commitment to these initiatives and the ultimate success of the program: “There will be recidivism no matter what if you do not have the entire staff on board, right, along with students.” As another educator noted, “If you’ve got a dynamic, a positive dynamic in a staff, then people will buy into the program; and if you’ve got a negative influence, then those kind of programs will never work.” This theme emerged in 12 groups.

## PARENTAL SUPPORT

Educators felt that a lack of support from the parents of some students involved as perpetrators compromised the implementation of antibullying programs and reduced their commitment to these initiatives. This theme emerged in 17 of 19 focus groups. As one educator noted, “Where I’ve found it hardest is when someone who frequently bullies other kids it’s a real challenge if their parents aren’t onboard to try to help the situation, and the majority of the time they’re not.” This educator, for example, described the following situation:

And he looked both the principal and the VP in the face, and he goes, “my mom says I don’t have to apologize, they’re just empty words, anyway.” And they’re like, okay, what do you think you could do to make this person feel better if you don’t feel like apologizing for it? And it was kind of like, blank stare, I don’t have to do anything, and you can’t make me do anything, because my mom says you can’t. And I’m underage, so you can’t even call the police. So, all this came out, and it’s like ... you know there is absolutely zero support at home for their own child, and for the children he works with, and the staff that he deals with at school, because then where do you go? Where do you go from there?

## STUDENT SUPPORT

In 10 of 19 groups, participants noted that students sometimes refused to cooperate with or threatened teachers attempting to deal with bullying episodes: “Or adults in the building are pretty powerless because ... I mean, I had somebody in grade—kindergarten say to me don’t touch me, I’m—I’m going to get my parents to sue you.” Another participant noted: “And if you even try to curb that, my mother will be in, or my mother, the police officer, will be in, and you will be sued.” Teachers felt that intimidation by students and parents exerted a chilling effect on their efforts to intervene:

So, I have to admit that there have been times when I would have maybe intervened a little more with a particular person who’s bullying, but I know full well it’s going to end up with me being bullied, or the child is going to be laughing at me.

## How Do Teachers Respond?

In all 19 focus groups, participants reported that, despite limitations in the time available to master and introduce antibullying initiatives, difficulty detecting improvement, and a lack of support from administrators, colleagues, and parents, educators did their best to implement antibullying initiatives.

#### MODIFYING ANTIBULLYING PROGRAMS

In 11 of 19 groups educators acknowledged that, given the complexity of some programs, and the limited time available, they introduced modifications and short cuts: “But anything like you said that comes with a manual and a CD and I have to ... forget it, I won’t do it. You know I’ll do my own version of it which is more practical.” Others dealt with time conflicts by discontinuing key components of these programs:

So we don’t have the chance to—to get the—the parties that are involved in a—in a situation, we won’t get the chance to get them to sit down and show them the effects of what bullying is and all the different people, the chain reaction from bullying. So, that part, that’s what we miss, that’s what we’re not getting, that’s what we’re not doing.

#### SELECTIVE INTERVENTION

In 11 of 19 groups, educators felt that competing curriculum demands sometimes prevented them from responding to students requesting help:

Sometimes the kids will come in and say can we have a circle because we have really problems outside. And sometimes you actually say, no, because I’ve—I’ve got three strands of math to do before the June report cards and I don’t have time to sit and chat about this.

Some justified their inability to respond by down-playing the severity of bullying episodes: “I think sometimes we just put off the situation or say come on guys, get along.” Similarly:

I think sometimes bullying can get brushed aside because of that, “oh, they are just teasing. Just don’t listen. They will just walk away,” Exactly. Because I just feel like some of the things seem very menial to teachers maybe.

#### COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL COMMITMENT

In 16 of 19 groups, faced with limitations in training, time, and administrative support, educators found it difficult to mobilize the energy and commitment required to implement antibullying programs successfully:

So any like things that require additional time out of an already stacked curriculum make it very difficult for teachers to implement and implement properly and implement with passion and implement like they care about it, because it’s just like I got to get this done. It’s hard to embrace.

Another participant noted, “As a teacher or as a facilitator, you have to be a believer ... if you can’t project it, if you don’t believe it, then it doesn’t work,



or it might not work if you're not a believer." Other educators found themselves frustrated and discouraged:

It affects all of us in a negative way. We're starting to feel like, why bother doing the paperwork? Why bother, because nothing is going to get done, and we're only three months in, and we're starting to roll our eyes.

Similarly: "But, I think you can become jaded after a while. If your experience, like you said, has not been positive and you go from school to school and you don't see it working but you just see different names." And finally, "It makes you cynical. It gets to the point where you're just, what's the point?"

## DISCUSSION

It doesn't matter how effective or ineffective you find certain features, say a current bullying prevention program, but if you're not given the time and the administrative support to back it up, nothing's going to work. (Educator)

The effectiveness of antibullying programs in North American schools has been limited (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Programs that reduce bullying and victimization in the early grades, moreover, may not be effective for older students (Yeager et al., 2015). This study used qualitative methods to explore the perspective of educators regarding factors contributing to the poor performance of these programs. Educators felt that off-site incidents, 24/7 access to Internet-based social media platforms where cyberbullying often occurs, and the tendency of boys to adopt more psychologically and relationally aggressive tactics have increased the complexity of bullying. Although some programs were promising, weaknesses in program design, limitations in the time and training needed to implement new initiatives, ineffective monitoring and disciplinary responses, lack of colleague support and administrative back-up, and uncooperative parents limit their ability to address this very troubling problem. We consider these issues next.

### Design Factors Limiting the Impact of Antibullying Programs

Many educators felt that the effectiveness of antibullying programs declined during the junior to middle school years, an observation consistent with the results of meta-analyses (Yeager et al., 2015). From a design perspective, educators attributed this to repetitive materials and presentations, antibullying activities inconsistent with student preferences (e.g., a reluctance to share feelings or display empathy), the failure to engage students in problem-solving processes that contributed to a sense of ownership, programs relying

on the declining motivational influence of teachers, and failure to capitalize on the growing importance of peer group norms.

### Implementation Factors Limiting the Impact of Antibullying Programs

Although some participants preferred antibullying programs mandated by their school board, others responded negatively to implementation processes that failed to engage educators in program selection and development. This finding is consistent with latent class analyses suggesting that, although some educators prefer antibullying programs selected centrally by their school boards, a segment of “decision-sensitive” educators (31% of those participating) preferred school-based decisions (Cunningham et al., 2009). These findings should be seen in the context of a broader set of studies finding local participation in program selection and development linked to improvements in the implementation of prevention programs (Payne et al., 2006). The negative response of some educators is consistent with psychological reactance theory’s prediction that prevention programs restricting choice may elicit emotional responses, negative cognitions, and efforts to reassert decision control (Quick, 2013).

Participants questioned the effectiveness of the antibullying training available to teachers. They wondered, for example, whether the duration of the training they received was adequate. This concern is supported by studies linking extended training to improved program implementation (Boulton, 2014). Teachers in the current study also felt that inadequate longer-term training and support compromised the sustained implementation of antibullying programs. Potentially effective programs were not extended to all classes and schools, were allowed to fade, or discontinued in the hope that new initiatives would improve outcomes. In reviewing the result of meta-analyses, Ttofi and Farrington (2011) concluded that, “Our findings show that programs need to be intensive and long-lasting to have an impact on this troubling problem” (p. 45).

### Limitations in Monitoring and Disciplinary Infrastructure

The teachers participating in this study felt that the disciplinary consequences for perpetrators were inconsistent and inadequate. Inconsistency in the administration of consequences was attributed to factors ranging from an effort to accommodate exceptional pupils to intimidation by students and their parents. Teachers believed that inconsistent or ineffective administrative consequences encouraged perpetrators, discouraged students from reporting bullying or seeking help, and reduced the likelihood that educators would attempt to deal with similar incidents in the future. This observation is consistent with the views of students who contend that ineffective

consequences embolden perpetrators and discourage victims from seeking help (Cunningham et al., 2015). This view is supported by systematic reviews concluding that “firm and consistent consequences” for perpetrators contribute to the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Although choice studies show that students prefer antibullying programs that combine preventive activities with moderate consequences for bullying, the introduction of more punitive options reduces the support of students involved as either victims or perpetrators (Cunningham, Vaillancourt, Cunningham, Chen, & Ratcliffe, 2011).

### Limitations in Social and Administrative Support

Educators felt that the implementation of antibullying initiatives, and their ability to deal with complex bullying episodes, was influenced by the commitment and support of colleagues and principals. This observation is consistent with modeling studies suggesting that educators prefer antibullying programs supported by at least 75% of their colleagues (Cunningham et al., 2009). These findings suggest that a relatively small group of educators could undermine the broader commitment needed to implement these initiatives. The participants in this study, moreover, suggest that because students are sensitive to the attitudes of their teachers, the potentially counterproductive effects of limited collegial support will be compounded.

Attempts to engage the parents of students alleged to be involved in bullying episodes were a source of considerable stress. This finding is consistent with studies linking difficult relationships with parents to depersonalization and burnout among teachers (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Teachers feeling threatened by students or parents were particularly troubled when principals failed to provide adequate back-up, an observation consistent with studies linking limited principal support to burnout and emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Social support and self-efficacy represent important buffers between interpersonal conflicts with students and parents, and the emotional exhaustion which is common among teaching professionals (Feuerhahn et al., 2013).

### How Do Educators Respond?

The conflict between an increasingly complex problem, and the limitations in time, training, and support that were available had a significant impact on the educators participating in this study. Some responded by modifying antibullying programs or implementing components of the program as time and curriculum demands allowed. Although these educators were, despite resource limitations, attempting to respond to a complex problem, systematic reviews suggest that selective implementation would reduce the effectiveness

of anti-bullying initiatives (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). In a study of the outcome of a Finnish antibullying program intervention effects were largely restricted to schools evidencing a “high degree of implementation of the program” (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, & Voeten, 2005).

Finally, in the absence of adequate training and support, educators became frustrated and discouraged. They found it difficult to devote the energy and enthusiasm needed to ensure the success of these programs. These findings are consistent with studies linking student behavior problems to emotional exhaustion among teachers (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010). The effect of student behavior on emotional exhaustion among teachers appears to be mediated by self-efficacy, the perception of teachers as to their ability to deal with these problems (Tsouloupas et al., 2010). Teacher self-efficacy has also been linked to burnout (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007) which appears to be a mechanism via which high demands (e.g., student behavior problems, workloads, and the quality of the physical work setting) translate into health problems among teachers (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). A closely related component of burnout, emotional exhaustion, has been linked to lower job satisfaction and an increase in the desire to leave the field (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

### Strengths and Limitations

We studied the perspective of relatively large group of elementary and middle school educators in a moderate-sized central Canadian region. It could be argued that the conclusions of qualitative studies are specific to the context in which they were conducted (Patton, 2002). International differences in both the prevalence of bullying (Craig et al., 2009; UNICEF Office of Research, 2013) and the apparent effectiveness of anti-bullying programs (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011) suggest the need for replication.

This study represents one component of a project that includes both qualitative and quantitative studies of the views of students and educators regarding the design of antibullying programs. Using discrete choice conjoint experiments (Cunningham et al., 2009, 2011), future studies will quantify the relative importance of key themes, understand heterogeneity in the views of different segments of educators, and simulate an approach to program improvement which considers evidence regarding key components of anti-bullying programs (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011) and the views of the educators who implement these initiatives.

### Summary and Conclusion

From the perspective of educators, bullying has become more complex, difficult to detect, and challenging to respond to. In addition to effective

programs, educators believe that dealing with bullying requires more time, extended training, enhanced monitoring, more effective strategies for responding to bullying incidents, and more successful ways of engaging and securing the cooperation of parents. They value administrative back-up and a commitment to sustaining and extending the implementation of potentially successful approaches. The stress of dealing with an increasingly complex problem in the face of limited time, training, and support may be contributing to a more general increase in emotional exhaustion.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

None.

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