Individual and Collective Well-Being: Ten-Year Study of Bullying-Prevention Programming in an All-Girls'[1] School

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Since 2005, Branksome Hall has committed to a bullying prevention program that uses a whole-school approach: one that involves system-wide changes—from policies to professional development to creating student activities—that work in concert to change a phenomenon in the school environment. This particular whole-school approach has a twofold purpose. The first is to move to the forefront conversations about fostering healthy relationships and conflict management skills. The second is to build a prevention strategy to reduce bullying within the school and to support students, teachers and their families. During the ten years since this program began, the school has planned, implemented and regularly assessed its efforts. This report shares findings from a ten-year research study on the program's impact.

Introduction

The promotion of healthy relationships has been a long-standing focus for educators, particularly in all-girls' settings, and healthy, positive relationships are the cornerstone of bullying prevention. Bullying — a particularly aggressive use of power by individuals — has a significant impact on relationships, especially among girls. Bullying is characterized as unwanted negative actions: typically repeated aggressive behaviours that are grounded in power differentials (Olweus, 1999). Various types of bullying can occur in a school, including physical (e.g., hitting, kicking); verbal (e.g., name calling, teasing); social (e.g., exclusion from groups); and cyber (e.g., through social media). When bullying occurs, a student may have one or more roles: as victim, perpetrator, and/or witness. While bullying is often thought of as actions toward a single person, research has shown that bullying is complex and can be experienced as either an individual or a group phenomenon.

Bullying is a reality in Canadian society. The National Healthy Behaviour in School-Aged Children Survey found that 43 per cent of 13-year-old Canadians and 32 per cent of 15-year-olds reported they had been victims of bullying (Statistics Canada, 2017). The effects of bullying on girls can be harmful to many aspects of their lives, including their well-being, their academic performance and their sense of community (Damour, 2016; Jenkins & Frederik, 2017).

Relevant literature suggests that "girl bullying" is dominated by relational aggressions—both overt and subtle acts of exclusion of individuals or a group (Felix & Greif-Green, 2010). Recent discussions propose that because conflict happens between people, it is important for schools to support students in navigating relationships and also to address bullying within school communities. The school's aim is not to be punitive, but rather for adults to help girls "see alternatives" and "promote growth" (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). Other scholars stress that bullying prevention in a school needs to focus on both individual well-being *and* the collective well-being of a community (Boak et al., 2015; Pepler & Craig, 2014). Schools also need to help students understand that negative behaviours toward others are harmful, whether they occur as an isolated act or are patterned behaviours.

For a school planning to embark on bullying prevention and community development, scholars recommend research-informed practices and a regular assessment of the program's impact (Bradshaw, 2015). Assessing program interventions enables the school to create responsive programming. There are only a few studies on the impact of bullying-prevention programs in schools and these cite success in raising awareness. However, these studies do not show a definitive reduction in reported victimization or demonstrate the sustainability of the program (Bowllan, 2011). There are even fewer studies that focus on an all-girl, independent school setting, such as Branksome Hall.

Branksome Hall's Bullying-Prevention Program

In 2005, the Branksome Hall administration formed a task force comprising administrators, parents, teachers, students and external professional experts, with the goal of reducing bullying among students. Dr. Jennifer Connolly, the Director of the LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research at York University, served as the research expert on this task force based on her extensive research in this area. She also helped facilitate the integration of evidence-based approaches into the Branksome Hall Bullying-Prevention Program.

The two administrators who have been part of the program since its inception described the work as stemming from a desire to create a more "empathetic, principled and caring environment." The impetus for the program occurred when administrators recognized a "frequency and seriousness [of behaviours] that … were going to take our full attention." As a school, one of the administrators said, Branksome Hall has "an obligation and a responsibility to approach bullying-prevention intentionally, not just as a response to one of the many discipline or behavioural situations that occur at the school."

As a result of the task force's work, the school developed a multifaceted program with the following main components:

• Policies—a code of conduct and a system for reporting bullying incidents (see Appendix A, Confidential Bullying Report Form)

• Education and intervention—training and information sessions for students and faculty, to encourage them to take action and provide skills in this area; bullying workshops for parents and lessons on cyber safety; keynote speakers on a range of topics (e.g., bullying, resilience, community, a growth mindset)

• Student support—an advisor program, Guidance Counsellors, peer promoters, social detectives, girls' circles and new leadership positions; the hiring of two Social Workers for both the Junior and Senior Schools; increased supervision in remote or less-trafficked areas of the school

• Research—biannual surveys, and the regular review and evaluation of program components.

> "The commitment to engage in an intentional process, to create sustainable programming and to integrate research into practices was reinforced by the school's values."

The commitment to engage in an intentional process, to create sustainable programming and to integrate research into practices was reinforced by the school's values. As a continuum JK–12 International Baccalaureate (IB) World School, Branksome Hall asserts the values that stem from the IB Learner Profile, which encompasses 10 character values. Such values as open-mindedness and principled action, underpin the entire curriculum. Branksome Hall's mission and school values reinforce the importance of creating a caring community.

Data Collection and Analysis

The 10-year study of the Bullying-Prevention Program at Branksome Hall combined both quantitative and qualitative research methods to create a case study that uses mixed methods—data integration at the reporting level (Creswell, 2014; Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2010). For the quantitative sources, we used the results from six surveys. The surveys are validated measures commonly used in bullying research and originated from Connolly's work on youth-led aggression prevention programs (see Connolly et al., 2015, for more information).

The school surveyed students, beginning with a pre-implementation assessment in 2006. These anonymous surveys provided data to analyze the program's impact and, in 2016, allowed a comparison of perspectives between pre-intervention students (in 2006) and cohorts of students who have always been exposed to the program (in 2014 and 2016). Due to the anonymity of the surveys, the 10-year tracking references a cohort of students in a given year rather than particular individuals within the school community.

Initially, only Grades 7–12 students were asked about whether they had seen or been the victim of bullying since the start of the school year. They were asked to rate the Bullying-Prevention Program's effectiveness and to give their views on teacher interventions. In 2014, Junior School students from Grades 4–6 also completed the survey and became part of the data set. The survey response rates were high and the school obtained sufficient data for a comprehensive understanding of the program's impact. In 2016, 88 per cent of students completed the survey.

The data was statistically analyzed to examine how mean ratings, of victimization, perpetration, school safety and program effectiveness varied across the years. Since 2005, Connolly and her team conducted quantitative analysis of the surveys and issued eight reports based on their work (Appendix B: List of Research Reports). They used a series of tests, including one-way analysis of variances (ANOVAs) and non-parametrical chi-square tests, to identify significant differences between individual responses.

For qualitative sources, the researchers used interviews and program documents. Interviews with six school administrators enabled the researchers to learn more about the phases of program development and the program's components. Each interview was about one hour in length, audio-recorded and then transcribed. The school administrators interviewed were integral to either the planning or the delivery of program components. The interviews were manually coded for emerging concepts and themes about Branksome Hall's whole-school approach.

Key Findings: Students Perceptions' of Bullying in an All-Girls' Setting Over Time

The following is based on recorded perceptions of Branksome Hall students over the past decade. This section focuses on key results of the school's biannual surveys: the reduction in overall rates of bullying over time; insights on the predominant forms of bullying in an all-girls setting; perceptions of teacher and student interactions; and the value of school connectedness and peer engagement.

A SIGNIFICANT REDUCTION IN BULLYING RATES

The surveys asked students how often they had been the victim of bullying, had bullied, or had witnessed bullying. Combined, these three indicators provide a sense of the bullying rates within a community. When the program began in 2006, the mean average of reported bullying within the school was characterized as "sometimes" (see Table 1). A moderate subset of the population reported having been victimized, having bullied, and/or having witnessed bullying. When compared to 2006, by 2016 reduced bullying rates have been maintained and students report bullying has occurred almost "never." Between 2006 and 2016, bullying incidents dropped by about 50 per cent. Figure 1 represents the mean average of reported bullying incidents for 10 years since inception of the program (2006–2016).
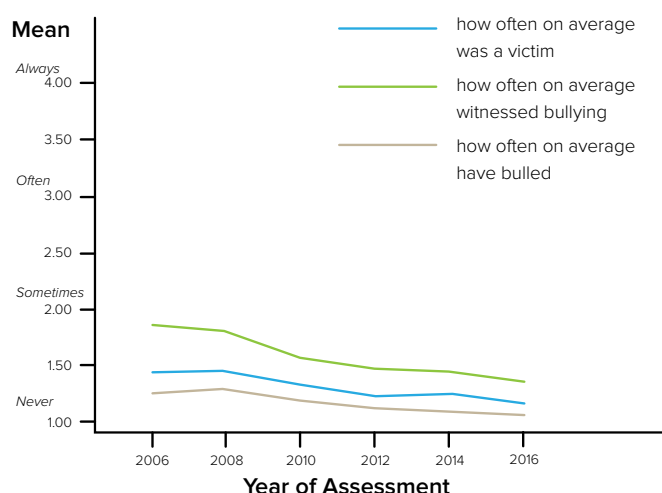

Figure 1. *Average Scores Pertaining to Victimization, Bullying and Witnessing Across Time*

Source: Bravo & Connolly, 2017a

As shown in Figure 1, according to student reporting, it has taken some time for the impact of Branksome Hall's bullying-prevention programming to be evident.

Year of Assessment	Mean Rates of Victimization	Mean Rates of Witnessed Bullying	Mean Rates of Perpetration
2006	1.370	1.763	1.221
2008	1.373	1.700	1.233
2010	1.245	1.505	1.128
2012	1.173	1.415	1.076
2014	1.197	1.385	1.062
2016	1.143	1.298	1.048

Table 1. *Average Rates of Victimization, Witnessing and Perpetration Across Time.*

Source: Bravo & Connolly, 2017a

There was little change in the results from 2006 to 2008. In learning these results, the school increased its peer-support programming and established girls' circles.

Branksome Hall's whole-school approach to bullying prevention is making an impact. At the program's inception, in 2006, when students were asked whether or not they felt the program was effective, 64 per cent said "yes"; the number steadily increased to 74 per cent responding "yes" in 2016.

THE PERSISTENCE OF SOCIAL, VERBAL AND CYBERBULLYING

To assess the types of bullying that occur in a school community, the surveys asked students to share their views of seven forms of bullying in the school: physical, verbal, social, cyber, racial, sexual and religious. Congruent with literature on girls' bullying, the two most frequently reported types were social and verbal. Over time, another form emerged: cyberbullying. The rates of different forms of bullying reported in 2006 were 73 per cent for social victimization, 54 per cent for verbal victimization and 32 per cent for cyber victimization. In 2016, the rates of these forms of bullying lowered significantly to 37 per cent, 32 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively.

*The school's efforts have also led to a significant decrease in the number of reports of victimization, bullying and witnessing of bullying. In 2016, the percentage of students who report witnessing social and verbal bullying are **56** and **56.5 per cent**, respectively. Although significant, this represents more than a **30 per cent** reduction from the prevalence rates in 2006. Figure 2 provides a proportional representation of bullying in Branksome Hall's all-girls community. The most prevalent forms of bullying are consistent, whether viewed from the perspective of victims, bullies, or witnesses.*
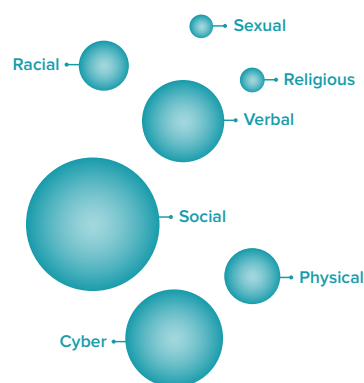

Figure 2. *Proportional Representation of Forms of Bullying in an All-Girls' Setting*

Table 2 provides an example of how bullying rates for reported victimization changed over time. The table supports the proportional comparisons for the forms of bullying in Figure 2.

FORM OF BULLYING	2006	2016
Physical	26.0%	5.6%
Verbal	54.0%	32.2%
Social	72.7%	37.5%
Cyber	32.0%	10.9%
Racial	15.1%	6.5%
Sexual	16.6%	1.9%
Religious	5.7%	2.1%

Table 2. Frequency Rates of Ever being a Victim of Bullying in 2006 and 2016

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF PEER AND TEACHER INTERACTIONS

Education and encouraging all members of the community to take action are central to Branksome's whole-school approach. In the early years of the program, faculty members learned how to intervene in bullying situations. Since 2006, consistent with the intentions of the bullying-prevention program, students have reported that teachers are helping more and are less likely to "not notice" or "never help" in instances of bullying among students. In 2016, students reported that teachers helped victims of bullying "sometimes" or "often"; this is significantly more frequent than reported 2006 and 2008, when the average frequency was between "never in" and "sometimes."

Between 2006 and 2016, the girls' engagement with bullying shifted in two ways. In 2016, students reported helping their peers less often—with 71 per cent reporting "ever" having helped a peer—than in 2006, when 85 per cent reported "ever" having helped a peer. At the same time, students reported increased annual rates of abstaining from helping a peer: from 14.8 per cent in 2006 to 29 per cent in 2016. The decrease in peer-to-peer intervention may be attributed to the school's formal system for reporting incidents of bullying and fewer instances of bullying in the school; thus, fewer occasions for a student to intervene.

SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN REDUCING BULLYING

The survey asked students about their sense of belonging to the school community. The more the girls felt connected to the school, accepted, and valued by their teachers and peers, the lower they reported the rate of bullying by all indicators. On average, girls stated they felt connected to their school. Students who felt less connected were more likely to witness and report bullying. These findings reinforce the importance of ensuring that every individual has a sense of belonging to the school community.

Key Findings: The Fundamentals of Branksome Hall's Whole-School Approach to Bullying Prevention

The following discussion draws from the administrator interviews about the program, providing insights into successful features of the whole-school approach. Key aspects of the whole-school approach include being grounded, dynamic, student-led and research-informed.

A GROUNDED APPROACH FROM THE OUTSET

The bullying-prevention program was grounded both by the engagement of the community and the program's policies. Administrators attribute the success of the program to this dual foundation. The architect of the process in 2006 explained: "All steps in the beginning were important in laying the foundation for all the good work that followed." The school carefully planned its approach to the program over several months, involving multiple stakeholders from students to parents, bringing a bullying expert onto the team and inviting the broader community to help create the program components.

Also essential to grounding the program were clear policies and reporting tools. The Branksome Hall anti-bullying policy has provided direction because it stipulates "supporting every girl" involved in an incident. According to an administrator, when cases get "complicated or messy, or if there is ambivalence", the school can confidently state: "This is our policy, this is how it works, and it guides us."

Part of what guides the school is an approach to bullying prevention that involves helping girls decode relational aggression. All the administrators agreed that the school's policy is to help girls understand their relationships and learn to navigate conflicts with others. The first step is to listen to all parties involved and, when possible, decide a course of action together.

A DYNAMIC AND RESPONSIVE APPROACH

Administrators agreed on the importance of a dynamic program. One administrator explained: "One thing we try to do is to have a variety, so that students are not fatigued by hearing exactly the same messages every single year, delivered in the same way." The school aims for a consistent focus on raising student awareness in Grades 4–12 and introducing different ways to engage students with the issue of bullying. This includes annual activities around bullying prevention that differ from year to year, through guest speakers, theatre productions and different activities in the Junior School than in the Senior and Middle Schools.

> "The school aims for a consistent focus on raising student awareness in Grades 4–12 and introducing different ways to engage students with the issue of bullying."

AN APPROACH THAT PROMOTES STUDENT-LED INITIATIVES

Another aspect of the school's approach is cultivating a sense of community responsibility for school safety. The school focuses on providing the skills to intervene and the tools to "not ignore" conflict and bullying. When appropriate, students are brought early into the process to discuss an incident, fostering mutual understanding of the impact of individual actions. Both educators and students have access to facilitated conversations and other intervention tools. This helps create a sense of student ownership of their actions.

One way to achieve a sense of shared ownership was to create peer leaders. Branksome Hall already had a practice of peer support, which includes regular meetings across grades, within grades and in small groupings. The Peer Support Program for bullying prevention began with community circles, where older girls join younger girls on a regular basis to share their experiences and serve as mentors. By 2016, peer leadership opportunities included social detectives - where Grade 5 students help younger students on the playground during recess - and the peer promoter group of students who submit "résumés of care". The Peer Support Program for bullying prevention features limited adult involvement. One administrator said: "I take more of a backseat approach to not giving too much input, wanting it to be student-led and student-driven."

A RESEARCH-INFORMED APPROACH

From the outset, the program was intended to be research driven, based on an initial assessment of the school's climate through a pre-implementation survey in 2006. According to the administrators, research was a key component that provided "direction" for the program and led to "deeper conversations" about survey results and "next steps". As a partner in this study, Connolly, along with her graduate students, returned to the school on a biannual basis to discuss the findings with educators and parents.

PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR ONGOING WORK

After more than a decade of bullying prevention in the school, several considerations for the ongoing work have come to light. The administrators acknowledge there is now a level of consciousness about bullying both nationally and in the school. Today, students learn bullying awareness at a younger age and from a range of sources (through the media and at school). Branksome Hall hopes to focus in the future on other aspects of bullying prevention, such as socio-emotional learning. Administrators express belief that the components of the bullying-prevention program should be revisited to ensure that they are purposeful, meaningful and effective. They also maintain that gendered experiences of bullying occur differently in all-girls settings from what occurs in co-educational or all-boys environments. They also believe that a strong program helps girls engage in dialogue, try anew to build relationships, develop self-confidence and act as allies for each other.

For the future of the bullying-prevention program, administrators question the optimum frequency of student meetings, best practices for peer support and how to harmonize educators' agendas with student-driven involvement bullying prevention. There is also the question of whether the term bullying *is dated and losing its appeal to a desensitized generation.*

Both the survey and interviews reinforce that bullying prevention is ongoing work. Administrators and educators are continually learning about the most effective programming for students. Several administrators reinforce the importance of supporting students and parents. Proposed future work includes bringing parents and students together for conversations about conflict, resilience and bullying.

One challenge is preparing students for a changing world and digital citizenship. More and more students are online at a younger age. Technology is a reality for which the school needs to prepare girls, including how they relate to each other online. One administrator states: "Girls have always been connected relationally, they've always had conflict, they've also always had deep, deep bonds—that's not going to change I don't think. But the technology piece is a concern."

All parties acknowledge that relational aggression exists and, after 10 years, students report that some forms of relational bullying persist. The changes in social dynamics from Junior, to Middle, to Senior School require different approaches. The shared value is that girls engage in conversations, support all peers in their community, and acknowledge the impact of their actions and words.

The school needs to maintain its whole-school approach in a way that is intentional, multifaceted and evolving. Branksome Hall is at an important juncture. The school has program features with proven success, such as girls' circles, but also needs to redesign its bullying-prevention program to fit the contemporary world. All administrators agreed that the focus should be on giving students the skills to build healthy relationships.

Conclusion

The key components of Branksome's whole-school approach include community-wide policies, education, and intervention; student-support programming; and research-informed practices. Anonymous, biannual surveys have captured the voice of students and a decade of analysis enables us to see how their experience has, and has not, changed since 2006.

Girls now report significantly less bullying and teachers intervene more than ever. Yet, relational aggression persists in an all-girls setting.[3] Regular evaluation and sharing these findings with the community allows administrators to be responsive and to engage in difficult conversations.

Branksome Hall shared key findings of the program assessment with teachers, students and parents. This led to discussions about articulating and reinforcing the school's approach to healthy relationships. The whole-school conversation centres on how all school stakeholders can help students take action and find support in instances of bullying.

Outside the context of Branksome Hall, this study contributes to research on experiences of bullying in all-girls settings. It reinforces findings that verbal and social forms of bullying still dominate, yet it also demonstrates that whole-school approaches can be effective when all involved see bullying prevention as an ever-evolving, responsive and meaningful endeavor. Ultimately, the goal is to help girls thrive in schools that continually work to ensure their well-being and safety.

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[3] *Please refer to the two literature reviews that support this brief: Girls and Bullying* **and** *Girls and Cyberbullying. They provide an analysis of research in the last decade on girls and aspects of bullying.*

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Appendix A: Confidential Bullying Report Form

Date: _____   Submitted by (optional):_____

BRANKSOME HALL

Confidential Bullying Report

"Bullying Happens…Whenever someone uses his or her power unfairly and repeatedly to hurt someone."

This form is for anyone in the Branksome community who has witnessed or been involved in an incident of bullying. If you would like to be involved in the follow-up, please submit your name. Anonymous forms are also accepted.

Students Involved	Student Bullying	Target (Student being Bullied)	Onlookers

Where incident(s) occurred:
☐ hall ☐ rotunda ☐ washroom ☐ gym ☐ locker room ☐ library ☐ computers ☐ other
☐ in class: Period ___ Room no.___

Time (s) of day:
☐ before school ☐ after school ☐ lunch ☐ during class ☐ between classes

Type of Bullying: Describe in your own words or check off boxes below:
_____
_____
_____
_____

☐ **Physical Bullying:**
- Hitting, pushing, shoving, slapping, kicking, spitting at, or beating others up
- Damaging or stealing someone's property

☐ **Verbal Bullying:**
- Name- calling, hurtful teasing
- Insulting, humiliating, or threatening someone

☐ **Social Bullying:**
- Excluding others from "the group" or from an activity
- Gossiping or spreading rumours about others
- Setting others up to look foolish
- Making sure others don't associate with someone

☐ **Cyberbullying:**
- Sending an email or phone text messages or pictures to threaten or hurt their feelings; single out, embarrass, or make them look bad; or spread rumours or reveal secrets about them

☐ **Racial / Ethnocultural bullying:**
- Treating others differently or badly because of their culture, racial or ethnic background, or the colour of their skin
- Saying negative things about someone's race, culture, ethnic background of skin colour
- Calling someone by a racially or ethnically derogatory term
- Telling racist jokes

☐ **Sexual Bullying:**
- Touching, pinching, or grabbing someone in a sexual way
- Making crude comments or spreading rumours about someone's sexual behavior
- Calling someone "gay" or "fag" or a "lesbian" or something similar to upset them
- Making sexual gestures at someone

☐ **Religion-based bullying:**
- Treating others differently or badly because of their religion
- Saying negative things about someone's religion

Please provide your reflection on this incident. Can you suggest actions or steps that you think would be helpful?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Thank you for filling out this form. By taking the time to report this incident, you are making our school safer. Please submit completed form to Head, Senior School or Head, Middle School

Administrator notes:
_____
_____
_____
_____

Follow-up and Recommendations:
_____
_____
_____
_____

☐ parent notified (student with bullying behaviour)
☐ parent notified (target)
☐ guidance counsellor follow-up required
☐ agency support or professional counselling recommended

Input from Parent of targeted student
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_____

Input from Parent of student demonstrating bullying behaviour
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_____

January, 20 2013 CLF

Appendix B: List of Research Reports from 2009-2018 by Connolly, Bravo and Dilouya, York University's LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research.

Bravo, V., & Connolly, J. (2011). *Bullying prevention study survey: Branksome Hall, 2010 survey and comparison of results from 2006 to 2010* (Report No. 2). Toronto: York University, LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research.

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Bravo, V., & Connolly, J. (2017a). *Branksome Hall, bullying prevention study: Student survey results* (Report No. 5). Toronto: York University, LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research.

Bravo, V., & Connolly, J. (2017b). *Branksome Hall, bullying prevention study: Employee survey, 2016 survey and 2014 to 2016 comparison* (Report No. 6). Toronto: York University, LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research.

Bravo, V., & Connolly, J. (2017c). *Branksome Hall, bullying prevention study: Elementary junior school (grades 4 and 6), a comparison of 2014 and 2016 student survey findings* (Report No. 7). Toronto: York University, LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research.

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