Girls and Bullying: A Literature Review

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This research brief provides a synthesis of selected literature that focuses on girls' experiences with bullying. It serves as a companion to our recently published study, *Individual and Collective Well-being: A Ten-Year Study of Bullying Prevention Programming in an All-Girls' School*. The content is based on a review of the most recent literature on youth and bullying, specifically, literature produced between 2005 and 2017 based on research with students in Grades 4–12; however, it also includes a few relevant articles from prior to 2005. The research studies included in this brief are primarily from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

The purpose of this literature review is to use a gender lens to understand girls' experiences of bullying. To accomplish this, we first note that the findings reported in the literature about girls' bullying are typically contrasted with the experience of boys' bullying. Having identified this distinction, we include these findings because they reinforce the gendered experience of bullying and being bullied, and also the disproportionate effect of bullying on girls because they are more likely to be bullied than boys. To prepare this literature review we examined more than 70 books, book chapters, and journal articles. Of these, only five summarized research conducted in single-sex schools, and other research projects on girls' experiences with bullying took place in publicly-funded schools.

We begin this literature review by defining bullying, and then we summarize the research literature on girls' experiences of being a victim of bullying, a perpetrator, and a bully-victim. We then turn to research that has assessed (1) girls' likelihood of intervening or reporting when they see others being bullied, and (2) the effect that bullying has on girls. Finally, we highlight empirical research designed to understand girls' perspectives on bullying and strategies for prevention.

Bullying defined
When defining *bullying*, scholars generally draw from the work of Dan Olweus (1999), who was the first to associate the term *bullying* with specific actions. *Bullying* is generally defined as interpersonal aggression that is characterized by intentionality, repetition, and an imbalance/abuse of power (Olweus, 1999). Most broadly, it can be divided into direct/overt and indirect/covert forms (Mishna, 2012). Many forms of school bullying exist and could be rooted in perceived differences to others; however, school bullying tends to be dominated by three forms of aggressions: physical, verbal, and relational (Coloroso, 2002; Peguero, 2012). The latter, relational aggressions, can be direct or indirect and refer to manipulation that causes harm: for example, spreading lies or rumours, withdrawing friendship, gossiping (Felix & Greif-Green, 2010; Mishna, 2012).

Distinct points of view are apparent in the literature: some authors see relational aggression as a form of bullying (Peguero, 2012), and others see relational aggression as a level of exclusion in which bullying is the next step (Ophelia Project, n.d.; Bowker & Eitken, 2014). In the 1990s, the insertion of relational aggression into the study of bullying (e.g., Crick, et al., 1999) was groundbreaking for several reasons: (1) it inserted gender awareness into bullying research; (2) it revealed that relational bullying was more often perpetrated by girls; and (3) it revealed how relational aggression is a powerful tool used by girls because of their tight friendship patterns (Felix & Greif-Green, 2010). Prior to the 1990s, the focus had been on physical bullying, which is more commonly perpetrated and experienced by boys. Felix and Greif-Green (2010) purport that a more accurate depiction of overall bullying rates

among girls can be drawn from peer-victimization rates that include relational aggression, because girls are more likely to experience relational aggression than boys. Scholarly research on bullying makes a distinction between victims (those who are being bullied), perpetrators (those who are bullying others), and bully-victims (those who are consecutively being bullied and bullying others). The research that unpacks girls' experiences in each of these three categories is described in the next three sections.

Victimization

Research generally suggests that girls are more likely to be victims of bullying than boys (Boak, Hamilton, Adlaf, Henderson, & Mann, 2015; Cénat, Blais, Hébert, Lavoie, & Guerrier, 2015; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012; Peguero, 2012; Statistics Canada, 2017). For instance, the national Healthy Behaviour in School-Aged Children Survey found that 43 per cent of 13-year-old Canadian girls reported being bullied in the previous couple of months, as compared to 33 per cent of boys. Further, for 15-year-olds, 32 per cent reported being bullied in the past couple of months, as compared to 29 per cent of boys (Statistics Canada, 2017). In the literature we surveyed, girls are more likely to experience indirect, verbal, and relational bullying (Bevans, Bradshaw, & Waasdorp, 2013; Boak, et al., 2015; Peguero, 2012; Rueger & Jenkins, 2014). More specifically, girls are more likely than boys to be bullied in the following situations at school: (a) if they are sexually active, (b) if they are sexual minorities, (c) if they have low-quality relationships with parents and peers, (d) if they have high-quality relationships with teachers, (e) if they have a greater number of positive peer relationships (referred to as "prosocial affiliations") (f) if they believe their friends have pro-bullying beliefs, and (g) if they attend co-ed schools (Boak, et al., 2015; Dunn, Gjelsvik, Pearlman, & Clark, 2014; Jamal, Bonell, Harden, & Lorenc, 2015; Johnson & Gastic, 2014; Nickerson & Mele-Taylor, 2014a, 2014b; Schneider, O'Donnell, & Smith, 2015). These scenarios were identified as the most statistically significant in the studies we reviewed. Shifting our focus from national patterns to provincial, we note that in Ontario, 27.8 per cent of girls report being bullied in any way at school, compared to 19.6 per cent of boys (Boak, et al., 2015). These bullying rates in Ontario have remained consistent for girls over the last two decades, whereas they have declined for boys (Boak, et al., 2015). However, research shows that these rates do vary by type of school. For example, a national U.S. sample of students reveals that 21 per cent of girls attending co-ed high schools experienced bullying in the past semester, compared to one per cent of girls who attend single-sex high schools (Johnson & Gastic, 2014).

Perpetration

Research suggests that girls are less likely than boys to be perpetrators (i.e., bullies) in co-educational contexts (Mishna, 2012). A nationally representative American sample showed that 22.8 per cent of girls said they were bullied during the 2014–15 school year, compared to 18.8 per cent of boys (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The following characteristics are associated with girls who are likely to be perpetrators: (a) they highly prioritize popularity, (b) they have low-quality relationships with parents and peers, (c) they have a negative bias toward peers, (d) they exhibit low self-control, (e) they have many positive peer relationships, (f) they believe their friends have pro-bullying beliefs, and (g) they are highly assertive (Jenkins, Demaray, Fredrick, & Summers, 2016; Lansu, Cillessen,& Bukowski, 2013; Nickerson & Mele-Taylor, 2014b; Pepler & Craig, 2012, 2014). For example, analysis of a behavioural survey administered to adolescents in Canada between the ages of 11 and 15 reveals that 61.5 per cent of girls who had a low-quality relationship with their parents and 54.4 per cent of girls who had a low-quality relationship with their peers reported bullying others (Pepler & Craig, 2012).

Bully-victims

The term *bully-victim* refers to people who identify themselves, in survey responses, as both perpetrators and victims of bullying. This means that bullying and being a victim of bullying are not mutually exclusive; sometimes girls are consecutively being bullied and bullying others. Although research is scant in this regard, work out of Norway suggests that girls are less likely than boys to be bully-victims (Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007). According to this study, for students in Grades 4–10, 2.6 per cent of boys were bully-victims, compared to 1.1 per cent of girls. According to Dane, Marini, Volk, and Vaillancourt's (2017) study of adolescents between the age of 12 and 16 in southeastern Ontario, girls who have had more dating partners are more likely to be relational bully-victims, and girls who have had more sexual partners are more likely to be physical bully-victims.

Intervention (defending) and reporting

When they witness bullying, girls are more likely to report it than boys are. Specifically, a study of 5th and 7th graders in Australian girls' and boys' schools had students view hypothetical videotaped scenarios and respond to a survey; 42 per cent of girls and 21 per cent of boys indicated that they would report the bullying (Sokol, Bussey, & Rapee, 2016). Research on the association between

gender and intervening when someone is being bullied (i.e., encouraging the bully to stop) is mixed. Some studies suggest that girls are more likely than boys to intervene when they see someone being bullied (Batanova, Espelage, & Rao, 2014; Goldammer, Swahn, Strasser, Ashby, & Meyers, 2013; Lambe, Chloe, Craig, & Pepler, 2017). For example, a survey of over 5,000 Canadian youth in Grades 4–12 found that defending behaviour was more common among girls and that 62 per cent of girls in Grades 11–12 reported they had recently defended someone who was being bullied, as compared to 48 per cent of boys (Lambe, et al., 2017). Other research suggests boys are more likely to defend a bullying victim (Nickerson & Mele-Taylor, 2014a).

For girls, the willingness to intervene is associated with girls who are assertive and have strong problem-solving skills, and whose schools have clear rules and a climate that makes them feel safe and successful (Batanova, Espelage, & Rao, 2014; Jenkins & Fredrick, 2017; Goldammer, et al., 2013). Compared to girls who do intervene, girls who do not intervene are more likely to internalize problems and be binge drinkers (Goldammer, et al., 2013; Jenkins & Fredrick, 2017). These are just two examples of the negative impact on girls who witness bullying, but feel unable to intervene, or act, in the moment. However, they represent significant factors when considered in relation to research that shows girls are more likely to interpret bullying as an emergency (Jenkins, Demaray, & Tennant, 2017). Furthermore, other research suggests that girls who are willing to intervene have fewer emotional and social difficulties, such as relationship problems and acceptance by peers (Goldammer, et al., 2013; Lambe, et al., 2017).

Effects of being bullied
Girls who are victims of bullying experience an increase in psychosomatic problems, psychological distress, and maladjustment anxiety, specifically in relation to school attendance and school grades (Landstedt & Persson, 2014; Peguero, 2012; Rueger & Jenkins, 2014). Research has also shown that bullying has an indirect effect on girls' academic achievement (Jenkins & Demaray, 2015). In one U.S. study, sexually active, bullied girls have been identified as having higher odds of depression and suicidal ideation (Dunn, et al., 2014). Compared to boys, girls experience more psychological distress, self-doubt, insecurity, and academic struggle as a result of being a victim of bullying (Peguero, 2012).

Girls' understanding of bullying
Qualitative research with girls reveals the important ways that girls define, interpret, and experience bullying. For example, girls at a high school in the northeastern United States use the term "drama" to describe what is known to adults as bullying, and they perceive bullying as an old-fashioned concept (Allen, 2015). Focus groups and interviews with adolescent girls from two schools in London, England, have revealed that girls see "bullying" as a group act rather than an individual act, which is contrary to how schools define bullying and develop strategies for its reduction (Jamal, et al., 2015). Counter to assumptions about the relationships between bullies and victims, bullies and victims may even belong to the same social networks (Nickerson & Taylor, 2014).

Bullying prevention strategies may also be received by girls in ways that are different than intended. Analysis of conversation heard while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Sweden with a peer group of 5th-grade girls revealed that school intervention policies (e.g., encouraging girls to tell teachers) can be turned into a system of retaliation, whereby girls who report bullying are victimized further (Evaldsson & Svahn, 2012). Further, girls in the London schools study believed that teachers were not helpful in identifying or addressing bullying because they lacked the cultural capital to understand what bullying looked like (Jamal, et al., 2015).

Implications for Future Literature Reviews
This review of the literature clarifies some of the areas of need with respect to bullying, and also makes readily apparent the gendered experiences of youth bullying. Compared to boys, girls are more likely to be negatively affected; however, researchers can further consider the intersectionality of this gendered experience with other dimensions, such as race, sexuality, and citizenship. The literature supports a call for dedicated research concerning the experiences of girls, particularly in all-girl environments.

The nature of the studies we reviewed also points to a real challenge in how bullying research is approached. For example, bullying is identified or reported as an individual experience, and, as such, solutions are also suggested in this vein. Although some scholars allude to the tribal or social nature of group processes, further research is needed to deeply explore the relations between this pattern of social group process and girls' experience of bullying. In addition, although this research brief did not address the increased attention in the literature to cyberbullying, a future literature review will do so. Cyberbullying is shaping girls' experiences of schooling because bullying has become increasingly intertwined with technology and students' life experiences.

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