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# The Perspective of Bullying According to Students with Asperger Syndrome

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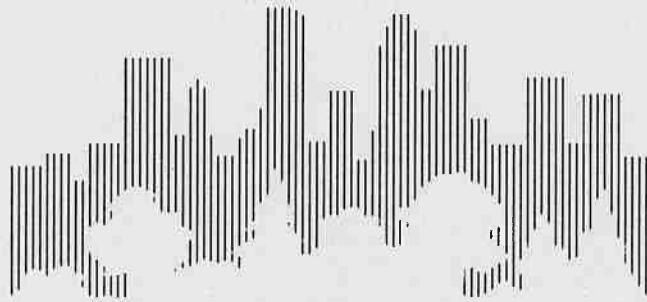
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**C • O • L • L • E • G • E**

**MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION**

**Ryan B. Barnick**

**The Perspective of Bullying According to Students  
with Asperger Syndrome**

**2010**

THE PERSPECTIVE OF BULLYING ACCORDING TO  
STUDENTS WITH ASPERGER SYNDROME

RYAN B. BARNICK

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Education

AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION  
AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the **Action Research Project** of  
RYAN B. BARNICK

Has been approved by the Review Committee, and fulfills the requirements for the  
**Master of Arts in Education** degree.

Date of Symposium: \_\_\_\_\_ December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009

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## DEDICATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank those who have been instrumental in both my career and the completion of this project. While I have done the research and compiled the data, none of it could have been done without the assistance of various significant individuals.

First, I would like to thank those at Augsburg that have assisted me in this endeavor. My advisor, Elizabeth Ankeny, deserves much credit for the continued guidance and support she has given throughout the entirety of this project. I would also specifically like to thank her for the time she has devoted to me; thank you Elizabeth for believing in me and your constructive feedback. I would also like to thank Susan O'Connor for being my reader. Susan has been instrumental in my career as she was the very first person I ever met on the campus of Augsburg and convinced me that Augsburg was a good fit.

I would also like to thank the students and staff at Anthony Middle School in Minneapolis, Minnesota for allowing me to conduct research in their school. I am forever grateful to those students for participating in my interviews and sharing their views in regards to bullying. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Jessica, for her continued support as this project was time consuming and required endless patience on her part.

## ABSTRACT

THE PERSPECTIVE OF BULLYING ACCORDING TO STUDENTS WITH ASPERGER  
SYNDROME

RYAN BARNICK

December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009

This study examines the perspective of bullying according to students' who are labeled with Asperger syndrome. Bullying is a growing problem in our schools today that greatly affects a student's education and life. The results are traumatic and linger for extended periods of time, greatly affecting the student's education both short and long term. For this study, I conducted my research utilizing an action research oriented framework. As part of my action research, I obtained and evaluated data utilizing the qualitative research and analysis methodology. Through in-depth interviewing, students shared their perspective on bullying. Data was analyzed and various themes emerged. In the results, students shared insight in regards to strategies that educators could create and implement to reduce and prevent bullying. The results also include perspectives on the definition of bullying, why students bully, and who is responsible to prevent bullying. Findings include a significant revelation; from the perspective of students labeled with Asperger syndrome, educators are at fault and not doing enough to prevent bullying.

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## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Noah is a sixth grade student who attends Clinton Middle School in south Minneapolis. He is a very well-behaved student that rarely has a behavior issue, well-spoken, likes to please others, and is known to be shy. If not approached, Noah would likely remain by himself for the entire school day. He is a student in the autism program at Clinton Middle School and is labeled with Asperger syndrome; a high functioning form of autism. Although he is a student in the autism program, he is able to attend class with his mainstream peers, thus he is considered 'high-functioning'. Noah is assisted by a special education assistant (SEA). She assists him with organization, note taking, and attentiveness. On this typical school day, Noah entered the resource classroom to gather his materials before he left for his first-hour class. As he entered the classroom, he immediately noticed that his binder was missing from his desk and approached the teacher. As he informed the teacher that his binder was missing, two students on the other side of the room gawked and giggled. Suspecting that these two students perhaps were the culprits, the teacher and Noah approached them and asked them if they knew where the missing binder was. One of the students responded in the direction of Noah, "Back up and get your breath away from me!" The other student responded, "Why don't you check under his shirt? He looks like he's got something underneath there. He looks like he's pregnant or something!" With tears falling to the ground, Noah ran across the room and out the doorway into the hall.

The situation described above is a common sequence of events in a middle school setting. Bullying is an increasing problem in our schools today that greatly affects both students performance and their perception of school. It impacts all

students; however, due to their vulnerability, students labeled with Asperger syndrome are more likely to be targeted by bullies .

### Identifying the Problem

I was bullied by a group of girls in sixth and seventh grade. I dreaded going to school. I cried myself to sleep at night and wished morning would never come. I never told anyone about what I went through. I didn't even mention it to my parents until last year... and I am 30 years old (Bolton & Graeve 2005, p.4).

I chose to research bullying because specifically in special education, I see the effects of bullying each and every day. The results are traumatic and linger for extended periods of time, greatly affecting ones education both short and long term. Research has confirmed that children who are the target of bullying are at a greater risk for low self-esteem, increased levels of anxiety and depression, lower academic achievement, and increased social isolation (Atwood, 2007). According to Bolton and Graeve (2005), in one study nearly sixty percent of males who were labeled as chronic bullies in junior high had at least one criminal conviction by the age of twenty-four. These statistics are indeed staggering, and only reinforce the dire need we have for stopping the violence.

### Background Information

For five years, I have been employed by Minneapolis Public Schools. I have been a teacher in an autism program for the past three years. Previously I was a special education assistant for two years, also in the autism program in Minneapolis Public Schools.

In school, students who are labeled with Asperger syndrome are usually placed in an Autism program, which provides special education services based on each student's individual needs. Depending on the ability of the student, students labeled

with Asperger syndrome are placed in programs that meet their specific needs. Some programs are resource based, which means the students are in the same room for the majority of the day. In contrast, some students are placed in a program supporting the inclusion model; which means that with or without the assistance of a SEA the student attends most of their classes with his/her mainstream peers. Students who participated in this research are students that have been placed in an autism classroom that supports the inclusion model; therefore they attend most of their classes with their general education peers in the mainstream classrooms.

Autism is a complex developmental disability that is present from birth or very early in development. It affects essential human behaviors such as social interaction, the ability to communicate ideas and feelings, imagination, self-regulation, and the ability to establish relationships with others. Although precise neurobiological mechanisms have not yet been established, it is clear that this disability reflects the operation of factors in the developing brain. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, autism is estimated to occur in as many as 1 in 150 individuals. Autism is four times more prevalent in boys than in girls and has no racial, ethnic, or social boundaries. Family income, life-style, and educational levels do not affect the chance of a child having autism. According to the Autism Society of Minnesota (AUSM), Autism is currently thought of as a "spectrum disorder." This means that the severity of symptoms differ in people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspective of bullying according to students who are labeled with Asperger syndrome in an effort to learn what we as

educators can do to prevent students with Asperger syndrome from being bullied. The purpose of this study was also to find strategies that students with Asperger syndrome could use themselves to avoid or prevent bullying. This research is necessary as bullying is an ongoing problem in our public schools today. Students with Asperger syndrome are often the target of bullying. As a result, both their education and overall school experience can suffer immensely.

In conducting my research, I hoped to gain insight into the perspective of bullying according to students labeled with Asperger syndrome. I wanted to find out in their own words what they perceive bullying to be, how often students bully, why they think people bully, who they believe is responsible with preventing bullying, how they would feel if they were bullied, what strategies they believe could be used to avoid being bullied, and what should be done to help reduce bullying in our school. An underlying goal in my research is to raise bully awareness in my school. Eventually, I want to provide suggestions and strategies to school administration so that we as a school can help students with Asperger syndrome avoid being bullied. I believe bullying is an increasingly problematic dilemma in our school, and someone needs to address the issue before it gets worse. The question that ultimately drives this research is: How can we, as educators, help all students, but particularly student's who are labeled with Asperger syndrome prevent being bullied? The specific research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What is bullying?
2. Why do students bully others?

3. How prevalent is bullying?
4. Who is responsible with preventing bullying?
5. What strategies could students with Asperger syndrome use to avoid being bullied?
6. What can schools do to prevent students with Asperger syndrome from being bullied?

#### Importance of Study

The information gathered will be of value to students, parents, teachers, administrators, bullies, victims, and any interested stakeholder. Neither one person nor one group can prevent bullying. This information is important because as a team we need to create, develop, and implement new strategies while teaching our students with Asperger syndrome strategies they can utilize to avoid bullying.

## CHAPTER II – REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For the purpose of this literature review, I will review literature regarding bullying and autism. This literature review will look at literature around bullying in schools and more specifically how bullying impacts students labels with Asperger syndrome. Also included is research regarding strategies and interventions that students with Asperger syndrome can use to prevent being bullied, and students with Asperger syndrome are often bullied.

### Bullying and Asperger Syndrome

#### Bullying

Bullying has become a national issue in our schools and an issue that is greatly affecting students lives and education. According to a national study published in the Harvard Mental Health Letter (2009), nine percent of students in the United States bullied others at least once a week and eight percent were victimized once a week. Bullying can be both subtle and psychological (such as spreading rumors or excluding someone), verbal (making threats or demeaning someone), or physical (punching someone in the stomach). Regardless of form, specific core characteristics define bullying: it is intended to harm someone else, usually occurs repeatedly, and involves a stronger person physically or psychologically attacking a weaker person (Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2009). In a 2009 bullying study completed by Finnish researchers Christina Salmivalli and E. Nieminen, they modified their definition of bullying in an effort to make it easier to understand for American students. Salmivalli and Nieminen (Cho, Hendrickson, & Mock, 2009,) state:

Bullying occurs when one student is repeatedly harassed and attacked verbally or physically by one or more students. Harassment and attacks include repeatedly calling another student names; making jokes about a student, spreading rumors about a student, excluding a student from a group; threatening a student; shoving, hitting, or fighting with him or her; taking or destroying his or her things; or behaving in a way meant to hurt another student. It is not bullying when people of equal strength, power, or status have a fight; when a student teases another from time to time; or when a student makes a joke that is not intended to hurt anyone (p.659).

Shore (2009) sums this up by saying, "Bullying has three characteristics: It is intentional, it takes place more than once, and there is an imbalance of power between the bully and victim (p.39)." Shore adds that it is important to note that while all acts of bullying are aggressive, not all aggressive acts are bullying.

Within the past decade a new form of bullying has emerged; cyberspace bullying. Adolescents are misusing the internet and cell phone technology to harass, humiliate, and manipulate both enemies and friends alike (Bolton & Graeve, 2005). Like other forms of bullying, cyber-bullying also contains specific core characteristics such as it is intended to harm someone else, it usually occurs repeatedly, and involves a stronger person physically or psychologically attacking a weaker person (Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2009).

If I were to ask five different students to define bullying in their own words, I likely would get five different answers. One person's definition of bullying could be another person's idea of entertainment (Atwood, 2007). The truth is there is not one specific answer as bullying is something different to everyone involved. Bullying can be anything from a simple hello to selfless close-fisted punch. In fact, despite common belief, girls who bully others girls tend to be more passive and often are less aggressive

than boys. That being said, girls also tend to give more verbal insults, intimidate, threaten, and name call (Ernsperger, 2007).

Many teachers fail to acknowledge that bullying is in-fact a major problem in their respective schools. Perhaps even more disturbing is that when children bully in front of an adult and receive no consequence, they are actually being reinforced for their negative behavior (Dubin, 2007). As Jackson (2002) states, "The most important thing for teachers to know is that being bullied is not simply a part of life that any kid has to deal with" (p.149). According to research, educators aren't exactly aware of the extent of bullying that is present in their school. Although teachers report intervening 71% of the time, as compared to student reports of 25%, observations have indicated that teachers only intervene 14% of the time. These observations also reveal that when on the playground, teachers only intervene 4% of the time (Heinrichs, 2003).

According to a recent U.S. government report, "Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2004, seven percent of students between the ages 12 and 18 reported being bullied at school during the last six months of 2003 (Cho, Hendrickson, & Mock, 2009).

### Bullying & Asperger Syndrome

According to S. Olsen (personal communication, February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010), autism teacher at Jefferson Community School in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to be labeled a student with Asperger syndrome in a public school, that student must have either a diagnosis by a medical professional or a diagnosis by an educational team of professionals. That being said, just because a child is diagnosed with Asperger syndrome by a medical professional does not mean that they will automatically be



diagnosed by a team of educational professionals. To be labeled as a student with Asperger syndrome, a team of educational professionals must complete an initial evaluation. Special education services are designed to support students that demonstrate one or more of the characteristics relating to Autism as described below:

- Significant impairment in reciprocal social interaction.
- Significant impairment in verbal and nonverbal communication.
- Restricted repertoire of activities and interests.
- Apparent sensory dysfunction as evidenced by under-or-over-responsiveness to touch, light, sound, or pain.
- Uneven acquisition of skills and difficulty integrating and generalizing acquired skills.
- Repetitive, self-stimulatory behaviors including obsessive-compulsive behaviors and ritualistic behaviors (Childs, 2009).

In addition to an educational diagnosis, as previously mentioned there also is a medical diagnosis of Autism. In 1944 Hans Asperger, a Viennese physician, published a paper that described a pattern of behaviors in several young boys. These boys had normal intelligence and language development, but exhibited autistic-like behaviors and noticeable deficiencies in social and communication skills (Atwood, 2007). In response to the findings exposed in his paper, Asperger syndrome was named after Mr. Hans Asperger. Although his paper was published in the 1940's, Asperger syndrome wasn't added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until 1994. By definition, those with Asperger syndrome have a normal intelligence quotient (IQ) and often exhibit exceptional skill or talent in a specific area. Because of their high degree of functionality and their naiveté, those with Asperger syndrome are often viewed as eccentric or odd and can easily become victims of teasing and bullying (Bashe & Kirby, 2005). In a clinical definition Asperger syndrome is a neurobiological disorder that is characterized by abnormalities of social interaction and communication

that affect the individual's ability to function. Perhaps the simplest way to describe Asperger syndrome is to think of it as describing someone who perceives and thinks about the world in a different way compared to most people (Atwood, 2007). Hans Asperger may have explained Asperger syndrome best in this one simple quote: "How odd is his voice, how odd his manner of speaking and his way of moving. It is no surprise, therefore, that this boy also lacks understanding of other people's expressions and cannot react to them appropriately (Frith 1992, p. 46)." In his 2002 book, Jackson describes Asperger syndrome as a communication disorder or mild form of Autism.

In the medical profession, mental health professionals use the DSM-IV when working with patients in order to better understand their illness and potential treatment. The manual is published by the American Psychiatric Association and covers all mental health disorders for both children and adults. In addition, psychiatric diagnoses are also categorized by the DSM-IV. According to the DSM-IV, autism and Asperger syndrome are described by the following characteristics in the subsequent table below:

**Table 1**

Number	Characteristics of Autism
1.	Qualitative impairment in social interaction
2.	Qualitative impairment in communication
3.	Restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities

Number	Characteristics of Asperger Syndrome
1.	Qualitative impairment in social interaction

2. Restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities
3. No clinically significant delay in the acquisition of speech

In the state of Minnesota, Asperger syndrome occurs in about one out of every one hundred and fifty children (L. Bresnahan-Stansbury, personal communication, July 27, 2007). According to the National Autistic Society, based off their 2006 data, 41% of children with autism had been bullied. Of those students, those who have Asperger syndrome, an astounding 59% are reported to have been bullied (Scott, 2008). While both these numbers seem high, according to research by Brahm Norwich and Narcie Kelly (2004), bullying isn't always more prevalent among our special education students than it is with the mainstream students. For example, in the primary grades a higher percentage of girls who attend class in a general education setting reported that they are bullied in school as compared to the girls in special education. There was no such contrast with boys in primary school. In the secondary grades while in school, boys that attend class as mainstream students reported less bullying as compared to those in special education. The girls, in contrast to the results from the primary grades, reported no difference (Norwich & Kelly, 2004). This is interesting because one would think that in all grades, students with special education needs would experience more bullying than students who are not in special education. Eighty-five percent of teachers and seventy-three percent of parents believe that the overall school experience for most students suffer at the expense of bullies (Bolton & Graeve, 2005). What makes these statistics even more astonishing is that the data we have comes from only the incidents that are actually reported.

“A recent study of the prevalence and frequency of bullying in a sample of more than four hundred children with Asperger syndrome, ages between four and seventeen years old, found the reported rate of bullying to be at least four times higher than for their peers” (Atwood, 2007, p.98). In the same survey, more than ninety percent of mothers of children with Asperger syndrome reported that their child had been the target of bullying in some form. In comparison to students in the general population, students with Asperger syndrome more often experience shunning. In the teenage years one in ten adolescents with Asperger syndrome reported that they were a victim of a peer gang attack (Atwood, 2007). No doubt numerous incidents of bullying go unreported day after day.

Bullying is more often than not thought of as being something physical, such as a kick or shove. This is often true; however, it is the less apparent forms of bullying that greatly affect students with Asperger syndrome. The power imbalance can be related to others factors such as, the physical presence of friends, social status, or social awareness (Dubin, 2007). Luke Jackson (2002) explains this and says, “Don’t think that you are not being bullied just because you may not be getting punch or kicked or physically hurt” (p. 138). For example, students’ with Asperger syndrome often feel bullied when they are singled out. “It makes me feel that it is only me that needs help. When she (teacher or teacher assistant) comes up to me and I tell her to go away, they (other students) start laughing. It makes me feel like I’m different” (Norwich & Kelly, 2004, p. 53). If this were to happen to the average student, they most likely would not feel bullied; rather they would feel assisted or grateful for the help. Here, as Heinrichs

previously stated, the student's lack of social awareness hinders her ability to react appropriately in this situation, and results in her feeling bullied.

According to Heinrichs (2003), the definition of bullying includes some type of power imbalance, intent to harm, a distressed target, and repeated negative actions. In the following example given by Dubin (2007), a few of the aforementioned bully characteristics are present.

While in the third grade, Nick Dubin was invited by two boys to play with him after school. This, of course, was something new for Nick as he had never been asked to stay after school and play. After school the young boys noticed Nick leaving the school building and yelled for him to join them over by the swing set. When he arrived, they informed him that they were going to play cops and robbers and that he should put his wrists against the pole if he wanted to play. Nick was overly excited to be playing with friends after school, and although he was unsure that this was a wise idea, he went ahead and put his wrists against the pole. At this point, the boys handcuffed his wrists to the pole, and rode off on their bikes. Nick thought that they were just playing or worst-case scenario they would just leave him sit. Instead, the boys rode circles around the parking lot yelling insults at Nick each time they drove by. Nick yelled for help until eventually his dad heard him from his nearby house. Before his dad arrived to help, the boys told Nick that he had better tell his dad that they were just playing cops and robbers. When Nick and his dad arrived at home, Nick finally came out and told him the story in its entirety (Dubin, 2007).

This is a classic case of bullying that includes power imbalance, intent to harm, a distressed target, and repeated negative actions. Due to Nick's lack of social awareness, he was sucked into the boys' scheme and unable to immediately come clean, and waited until he got home to share what really happened. In his article about including students with Asperger syndrome in the mainstream classroom, Neil Humphrey (2008) states the obvious, "Their difficulties with 'mentalising' may mean that they are less likely to report incidents of bullying to teachers, because they are unaware that adults do not automatically know what is going on in their heads" (p. 43).

Another prevalent and often overlooked form of bullying students with Asperger syndrome is being ignored. Choosing to not engage by simply ignoring someone or not responding is a form of bullying. Luke Jackson (2002) states that when someone doesn't talk to you when you approach them it makes you feel unwanted. According to Atwood (2007), "A form of bullying that frequently occurs with children with Asperger syndrome is peer shunning or social exclusion, such as not being included in a group at meal times, not having questions answered, deliberately being chosen last in a game or team, or not being invited to a social event" (p. 96). To help clarify, it is safe to say that bullying is anything that you don't want or like that is brought on to you by others. It is vitally important that you remember the key word in that statement is 'anything'.

According to Atwood (2007), another form of bullying that was reported in a recent study is that students with Asperger syndrome are more likely than their peers to experience a non-sexual genital assault. I am unaware of the variables that played into such accusations, but I would be interested to know how many of these accusations

were made by other students with Asperger syndrome. Such claims seem like something that would be done by students that lack social awareness.

Unfortunately, there are also types of bullying experienced by students with Asperger syndrome that are committed by adults. Tony Atwood (2007) gives the example of a relative or family friend enjoying a practical joke at the hand of a child diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. While inconceivable to some, bullying actually takes place by way of a student's teacher. "The definition of a bullying act is confirmed when a teacher uses his or her position of authority to ridicule and humiliate a child, respond with sarcasm, be overly critical or punitive, or use facial expressions that discredit or reflect non-acceptance (such as a glance that indicates to the class that 'I think he's stupid')" (p.97). Due to a lack of awareness and knowledge of autism and Asperger syndrome, teachers actually sometimes may unknowingly bully. This behavior might be practiced with other students with Asperger syndrome, but students with Asperger syndrome may not have the social skills to accurately read or understand what the teaching is implying. For example, some teachers constantly demean students regarding some area of deficit, such as chronically telling a girl with Asperger syndrome to "Pay attention," "Look at me," "Organize your books," "Write more clearly," "Stop daydreaming," and "Turn in your homework" (Ernsperger, 2007). Teachers who verbally thrust these commands at students likely feel they simply are doing their job and causing no harm. However, due to their lack of knowledge of Asperger syndrome, they inadvertently could be causing severe hurt and pain.

As previously illustrated in the playground story involving Nick Dubin, bullying is not something that only takes place inside our school buildings. For both primary and

secondary students, students reported significantly more bullying by neighbors and peers outside of school as compared to when in school (Norwich & Kelly, 2004). One would think that the statistics would remain consistent from when the students are in school as compared to when they aren't in school. However as this young boy, a primary student, explains, there is valid reasoning behind the contrasting statistics. "Cause when I came to this school...when I went home they would laugh at me and say 'Oh he goes to the special school', like our mainstream school's better than that special school, 'cause that school is even worse'" (Norwich & Kelly, 2004, p.57). Another girl stated, "I don't go out often 'cause you know... I don't have any much friends because, you know, I'm from a special school" (Norwich & Kelly, 2004, p.58). These two quotes provide evidence that perhaps students are taking advantage of the lack of supervision outside of school. As educators, we are supposed to be in the hall in-between classes, in the lunchroom during lunch, outside when buses arrive, outside when buses depart, and of course in the classroom. That leaves very little time for students to bully without being caught. Ideally, students are supervised in some form or another throughout the entire school day other than while they are in the bathroom. While this may not deter some students, it likely discourages many.

Another important finding, according to two national studies, is the reported rates of gang attacks (Finkelhor & Wolak, 1995). Like other instances of bullying, in comparison to the general education student population, children with Asperger syndrome are also more likely to be victimized via gang attacks. Although these are thought of as less common types of peer attacks, these forms of victimization are more severe. Due to the severity of these attacks, these forms of bullying have been



associated with higher rates of posttraumatic stress. According to Liza Little, assistant professor at the School of Health and Human Services at the *University of New Hampshire*, the rates for such attacks are considerably higher for children with Asperger syndrome (Atwood, 2007).

### Why are students with Asperger Syndrome bullied?

It is often thought that the peculiar and anomalous students are the targets of bullies. However, why are students' with Asperger syndrome targeted more than others? While this indeed is a complex question, the answer lies beneath the surface. According to Blacher and Lauderdale (2008), one reason is that students with Asperger syndrome are naïve, trusting, eager to join others, and will do what others tell them to do in an effort to gain acceptance. Luke Jackson, a student with Asperger syndrome, says that many students with Asperger syndrome are prone to meltdowns, or have difficulty controlling their emotions, thus have difficulty fitting in or keeping friends. Students labeled with Asperger syndrome are also looked at as being vulnerable simply because they may be passive. Passive targets are usually weaker children who are anxious in a social setting, have low self-esteem, and lack confidence (Atwood, 2006). In her auto-biography Nita Jackson (2002) states this clearly, "Having Asperger syndrome does not make me less human, less emotional, but simply more vulnerable" (p. 83).

Some students with Asperger syndrome may even have a physical weakness. However, it is more than simply being unique, or being different that makes one an easy target. It is vulnerability that makes the target a more desired victim. For example,

Blacher (2008) states that a child's response to bullying may in fact increase the number of bullying incidents. In this scenario not only do we have the issue of being bullied, but an underlying issue is the continuation of being bullied due to how one reacts to being bullied. An example of this would be how some students with Asperger syndrome react impulsively by yelling or screaming. If a bully were to bully a student by whispering his/her name across the table, a student with Asperger syndrome may respond by yelling as opposed to whispering back at them. At this point the bully receives the response he/she wants and the teacher now reprimands the student with Asperger syndrome that is being bullied (Blacher, 2008). Due to the student's social unawareness he/she did not know how to react appropriately and is seen or labeled as vulnerable by others. Children who cannot express themselves are also thought of as being more vulnerable. When one has difficulty understanding others and expressing themselves they are considered vulnerable. Hence, children who have both difficulty understanding and difficulty expressing themselves are at a higher risk to be bullied (Scott, 2008).

Tony Atwood (2007) gives a more specific reason as to why students with Asperger syndrome are bullied saying that these students sometimes seek out solitude, which is looked at as being different or weird amongst the general population of students. Again, such action results in the student with Asperger syndrome looking vulnerable in the eyes of the bully. Tony Atwood explains this in the following statement:

They (students with Asperger syndrome) may be able to cope reasonably well with the social demands of the classroom, but when class is over they are mentally and emotionally exhausted. Their restorative for mental and emotional

energy is solitude, in contrast to other typical young children whose emotional restoratives in the playground are being noisy, active, and social. Unfortunately, one of the prime characteristics of a target for bullying is being alone (2006, p.99).

Therefore, when children with Asperger syndrome choose to be alone, which they often do, they also may be positioning themselves to possibly become the victim of a bully.

### Strategies/Interventions to Prevent Bullying for Students with Asperger Syndrome

Bullying is a long-standing issue that has been around for years and one that is extremely difficult to stop. Research indicates that as educators, we need to realize that it isn't our job to eliminate bullying completely. It is, however, our job to hinder its presence. Specifically, we need be proactive and utilize various strategies and interventions that will assist students with special needs in their experience with bullying. "Proactive adults are the key to successful bullying prevention" (Sisk 2006, p.18). It is of the utmost importance to create and implement a team approach to attempting to reduce the frequency of bullying (Atwood, 2007). That being said, a team should consist of many members including the victim, the bully, school administration, teachers, parents of the victim, parents of the bully, and a school psychologist (Heinrichs, 2003).

According to research, an important step in assisting students with special needs is inclusion. Often, students with special needs are isolated from others and have little experience with general education students. Thus, mainstream students have little interaction with students that have special needs. That being said, research states that we need to focus on interventions that help make friends and fit in. A great example would be creating a buddy system for lunch or recess, or organized playground

activities (Scott, 2008). A similar approach would be to institute a buddy system in younger grades where students look out for each other and reports bullying when it happens to an adult (Blacher, 2008). Often times the largest hurdle is that first interaction. If we force that interaction by creating such groups we then are essentially breaking the ice.

Although a student with Asperger syndrome should not be expected to physically fight back, research states that they can respond intellectually with proper instruction and that all students could benefit from such instruction. It is no secret that in general students with Asperger syndrome lack social skills. According to Sisk, bullies see students who are socially vulnerable as easy targets, therefore they are targeted often. "Because students with Asperger syndrome are so frequently targeted and lack the inherent ability to interpret social situations, they may benefit from interventions that increase emotional, behavioral, and social skill awareness" (Sisk, 2006, p.18). Students need to be taught specific socially appropriate phrases to use in certain situations (Bullard, 2004). For example, if a bully did or said something negative to a student with Asperger syndrome and received a response in any form other than what they expected, that may be enough to deter them from bullying that particular child again. Bullies often are looking for a specific response or reaction. If they don't get that, they're likely to take their bullying elsewhere.

According to Blacher (2008), another strategy that could be taught is teaching students with Asperger syndrome to be proactive on their own, and identify the bully before the bully identifies them. This would prove beneficial as the victim could essentially dodge the bully, simply not giving the bully a chance to attack. If a student

with Asperger syndrome was able to label one as a bully ahead of time, they would then be able to be proactive on their own and simply not relate to that bully on any level. If at all costs the bully is avoided, victims then have a zero percent chance of becoming a attacked.

Jackson (2002) agrees with Blacker and says that one strategy students with Asperger syndrome should use to prevent bullying is avoidance. This concept is pretty simple. The less a bully simply see's or interacts with a targeted victim, the less opportunities they have to bully. In addition to avoiding bullying, students labeled with Asperger syndrome should also avoid certain areas that might make them vulnerable to being bullied. Avoiding certain people or areas is a strategy any victim of bullying should use. However, to employ such a strategy it is vital that students with Asperger syndrome be aware of the circumstances that could possibly put him/her at risk (Bolton & Graeve, 2005). Luke Jackson (2002), a teenager labeled with Asperger syndrome and author of Freaks, Geeks, and Asperger Syndrome, gives the following example and strategy:

One day things just got too much to bear. I had tried to hide in the changing rooms away from my tormentors – I wish I had written my book then as I would have realized that hiding away is the worst thing to do. These two lads (low-lifes) found me and began toying with me in much the same way as a cat plays with a mouse (p.137).

Don't go to a quiet corner somewhere at schools breaks. Try to be somewhere safe such as the library. I know it sounds strange but when you think you are hiding you are most likely to be found and bullied. Asperger syndrome kids are not good at working out how other people think. The best thing to do is to stay with your friend if you have one, or at least a place where there are lots of people around (p.151).

While avoiding certain individuals or groups of people and areas that could deem one vulnerable are wise choices for those trying to prevent bullying, according to Tony

Atwood choosing to simply ignore a bully is not a wise choice. In fact, ignoring might actually make the situation worse. "The advice to ignore the words and actions of the bully *does not work*. Ignoring acts of bullying as a means of preventing such behavior is a myth. The bully will escalate his or her actions until the child responds." (Atwood, 2007, p.108).

Another strategy, according to Ernsperger & Wendel (2007), parents or teachers of students labeled with Asperger syndrome can use to prevent bullying is to increase their child's social network. Although this is sometimes a very difficult and sometimes implausible strategy for students with Asperger syndrome, it is highly effective. If a student is surrounded by a group of friends, a bully is less likely to approach them, thus decreasing the likelihood of that student being bullied. To create a safe learning environment parents of students labeled with Asperger syndrome should enhance their child's social network and identify an accepting social group. However, Ernsperger & Wendel (2007) point how that increasing your child's social network doesn't mean simply enrolling them in every club or after school activity possible. If that is the route chosen, as a parent you are actually only increasing the chances of your child being bullied as you are providing more opportunities for victimization. Instead, a child is better off if taught how to initiate conversations and participate in group activities (Bolton & Graeve, 2005).

Perhaps the most tempting strategy, from the perspective of the victim and/or student's labeled with Asperger syndrome, is to prepare humorous or witty comebacks (Kirkman, 2005). However, Kirkman cautions while this may be a plausible strategy for some, because students with Asperger syndrome have difficulty understanding humor

and irony this may be a difficult strategy to use. In Carol Gray's Guide to Bullying (2004) article in *The Morning News* (as cited in Atwood, 2007, p. 108), she recommends the creation of one simple spoken response that is both true and can be used consistently. Examples of this include, 'I don't deserve this', 'stop it', and 'I don't like that, stop it.' A more humorous approach is to react with a response such as 'Are you teasing me to be friendly or not friendly?' It is important that the victim state, at some point, to the bully that the bully attempt with be reported (Atwood, 2007). In response to a bully making fun of another students glasses, Bolton and Graeve (2005) advise the humorous approach and respond by saying, 'Well, they're better to see you with'.

According to Atwood (2007), to help assist students with Asperger syndrome in identifying safe people of whom they can seek fortification, a teacher could require a buddy system. For example, a teacher can encourage a buddy system with the help from a student of a high social status and social conscience. The buddy's role is to monitor incidents involving the child with Asperger syndrome, to report any incident confidentially, to encourage the target to report the incident, and to state publicly that the situation is not funny and that the bullying must stop. "Another valuable characteristic of the guardian is to repair the emotional and self-esteem damage inflicted on the child or adolescent with Asperger Syndrome. An adult may be sympathetic and provide reassurance but the restorative value of a supportive comment from a popular peer can be a very effective antidote" (Atwood 2007, pg. 106).

Bolton & Graeve (2005) states that perhaps the most simple of strategies that each and every adult in the school building can implement is to supervise. While this may seem an obvious solution or step in preventing bullying, there just seems to never

be enough. Educators need to remember that it is our job to create a safe learning environment, thus providing constant supervision throughout the entire school building and not just in our classrooms. For example, it is important to look in restrooms in-between class periods or during lunch (Bolton & Graeve, 2005). The bottom line is when adult awareness and supervision increases, bullying decreases (Ernsperger & Wendel, 2007).

As previously described, there are numerous strategies that can be utilized to avoid or prevent bullying. That being said, the following are twelve specific strategies to remember that Tony Atwood (2007) believes should be used to reduce the frequency of bullying:

- Use a team approach, and include the target, school administration, teachers, parents, a child psychologist, other children, and the bully.
- Provide staff training in how to react to and reduce acts of teasing and bullying.
- Ensure that justice is equitable based on motivation, knowledge, and facts.
- Use the Scales of Justice activity to determine and explain the degree of responsibility and consequences.
- Create a map of the child's world to identify safe havens.
- Use positive peer pressure to prevent acts of teasing and bullying.
- Select a guardian who is 'street wise' and has high social status among peers to protect the child and repair self-esteem.
- Teach the target that he or she can find safety in numbers, and 'hide' in a group of children.
- Acknowledge that ignoring acts of bullying rarely, if ever, reduces the likelihood of being the target of bullying.



- Teach the child who is a target to have an assertive and honest response.
- Seek the help of specialist staff, such as clinical psychologists, who can use activities such as Comic Strip Conversations to discover the thoughts, feelings and interpretation of intentions of the person with Asperger syndrome and any other participants, and explain why he or she was a target and what to do in similar situations in the future.
- Use books, resources and programs to provide information and strategies to reduce teasing and bullying.
- Encourage parents to consider enrolling the child in a course for self-protection from physical acts of bullying.
- Be aware that changing school may have little effect on reducing the likelihood that a child will be a target of teasing and bullying, (p.110).

Heinrichs (2003) looks at bullying from a different perspective. Based on her research, she believes that parents do in fact play a vital role in the development of their children and their development of ability to prevent bullying. In general, she believes that children who have overprotective parents, lack independence. This, largely, is no one's fault other than the parent. She states:

We do know that parents of children who are targets tend to be overprotective and over-involved in the decisions and activities of their children. This may effectively make children more dependent and fearful, which are characteristics that are typically seen in children who are targeted for bullying (p.49).

If a child is known to be dependent on others and displays fear in any form, they then quickly become an easy target. This problem is magnified with students that have Asperger syndrome because parents tend to be far more protective with their children when they have a specific disability than those that have no disability. It is interesting that overprotective parents put forth effort in an attempt to assist their child, while when all is said and done their effort ends up negatively affecting their child. This all being said, a strategy that incorporates parental participation would be for the parent to take

every opportunity to expose their child. According to Linda Weinmeyer, an Autism teacher in Minneapolis Public Schools, “We takes kids out in the community almost every day because for some, this is the only time they get out in the community to practice their social skills.”

### Summary

According to the research, bullying is a rapidly growing problem in our educational institutions today. Students, specifically those with Asperger syndrome, are more often than not the target and victims of such harassment. Educators need to acknowledge the problem and put effort into stopping bullies before they strike. It is important that bullying is acknowledged as any unwanted attention brought onto others. Bullying is something that is being overlooked by many. Therefore it is in the best interest of teachers and administrators to consider bully prevention a priority and deter this growing trend.

## CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY

### FRAMEWORK

For this study, I conducted my research utilizing an action research oriented framework. According to Geoffrey E. Mills, action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by any education stakeholder that is intended to gather information about how their specific school operates, how they teach, and how well students learn. This information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved (Mills, 2007). The major emphasis on action research is to provide concrete solutions to issues that affect social and educational systems in a localized setting. Action research is contextual, small scale, localized, and it identifies and investigates problems within a specific situation (Burns, 1999). Action-oriented research is a methodological approach for doing collaborative research with practitioners and community partners that can inform practice, programs, community development, and policy while contributing to the scientific knowledge base (Small & Uttal, 2005).

As part of my action research, I obtained and evaluated data utilizing the qualitative research and analysis methodology. As defined by Sharan Merriam (2009), the overall purpose of action research is to simply understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences. Qualitative researchers conducting a basic qualitative study are interested in the following: How people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Action research done by teachers involves collection of persuasive data. Such

data is persuasive because teachers are invested in the authenticity of the data collection process, which means that they have identified data sources that provide persuasive insights into the impact of an intervention on student outcomes (Mills, 2007).

In regards to collecting the actual data, I used in-depth interviewing as a means to extract information. According to Gubrium & Holstein (2001), "To be effective and useful, in-depth interviews develop and build on intimacy" (p. 104). I chose to utilize in-depth interviewing because I already had a relationship with the participants and had previously earned their trust. Because I previously had established a relationship with the participants, I was able to determine the appropriate level of structure for the interviews (Thyer, 2001). A researcher who uses in-depth interviewing generally is seeking in-depth information that is usually not given via surveys or informal interviewing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). Thyer (2001) explains, "Language is the data of in-depth interviews, enabling the researcher to capture the complexity of individuals' feelings, thoughts, and perceptions" (p. 310).

### Data Analysis

Once data was gathered I commenced data analysis and developed coding categories, which I utilized to organize my data. Data analysis is the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

To analyze data I concentrated on the questions that I created as a guide for my research. First, I read through all of the responses that were given to the foundation

questions that I asked each participant. While reading and analyzing the responses, I noticed that themes emerged. At that point, I allocated one color to each theme and highlighted any data that was relevant to a theme in the specific color relating to that particular theme. Once I read through all of my field notes and highlighted data that was pertinent to each theme, I compiled the information into sections, which then became hard data that was used to form the analysis section in this paper.

To generate theory, I utilized the grounded theory method. The grounded theory approach is to repeatedly read data in an effort to discover and label variables such as concepts or categories. The basic definition of grounded theory is the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### Participants

The participants in the study were students attending school at a public middle school in an urban school in the Midwest. This particular school serves approximately 530 students in grades six through eight. The student body comprises sixty-one percent White, twenty-four percent African-American, eight percent Hispanic, six percent Asian American, and two percent American Indian. The school hosts six city-wide special education classes and special education students account for nineteen percent of the school population. Six percent of the students are designated as English Language Learners and twenty nine percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

The participants in this study are all students in my classroom and are on my caseload. I am responsible for each student's educational setting, goals, objectives,

and Individual Educational Plan (IEP). Other than one student, I have had each student for more than one year. The six participants are all male students in grades six, seven, or eight, and are 11 to 13 years of age. One student is African-American while the other five are Caucasian. One student attends all of his classes in the general education setting, one student attends sixty-six percent of his classes in the mainstream, and the remaining four students attend eighty-three percent of their classes in the mainstream setting. Each student has been labeled with Asperger syndrome and placed in the Citywide Autism Program in the district. In this particular setting, two teachers along with six SEA's serve nineteen students in the Autism program.

### Materials

Each student adheres to a specific schedule as outlined in their Individual Education Plan, so to complete the interviews I needed time. I also needed a place where the student and I could sit down and complete the interview. Since the interviews took place during third hour, which is the schools lunch period, I was able to use the media center/library as it was empty during that period. This worked out nicely as no one interrupted the interviews. What I liked most about this setting was that it was comfortable for the student. Students relaxed on the couch while I proceeded with the interview questions. Once I was able to arrange the setting, I simply adhered to the interview questions that I had previously created. A copy of the sample questions are attached in the appendix.

### Data Collection & Procedures

For each student that I thought I would possibly like to participate, I informally introduced my research topic and asked them if it was something that they might be interested participating in. I created a consent form that both the student and parent of the student needed to sign in order for the student to participate in the study. I called each parent on the phone introducing the study and discussing the consent form. After discussing with each parent and student, I sent the consent forms to the students' home addresses via the United States Postal Service. While the timeline was sporadic, each student returned the consent form signed by both the student and parent.

Once I obtained completed consent forms, I sat down with each student to discuss a timeline of events. We discussed when we would be conducting the interview and that they did not need to prepare in any way. At this time, I again asked the student if he wanted to participate. I informed the students that when conducting the interview, I would be taking notes, and that they should not be concerned about me doing so. I did allow for the students to have the option of asking me to not take notes during the interview. For each student, his or her time slot for the interview was during third hour, immediately after he returned to classroom from his lunch break. Interviews lasted from forty-minutes up to one hour and thirty minutes. Each interview was unique from the previous interviews as each student understood each question differently. What was interesting and beneficial for me is that each student was not shy, and spoke at length. In fact, each question inadvertently turned into a lengthy one-sided discussion, generating ample data for my research and interesting information that allowed me to get to know my students better.

## CHAPTER IV - FINDINGS

When I decided that I wanted to research bullying from the perspective of students labeled with Asperger syndrome, I considered various questions that would guide my research. I wanted to find out from students labeled with Asperger syndrome what bullying is, how prevalent bullying is in our school, why students bully others, what strategies could students with Asperger syndrome use to avoid bullying, who they perceive to be responsible in preventing bullying, and what we as educators can do to prevent our students with Asperger syndrome from being bullied.

While analyzing the collected data from the interviews, five themes emerged. First, according to the students interviewed, teachers need to do more; teachers are not addressing incidents of bullying appropriately or promptly. Second, a theme that emerged is that students do in fact take accountability for their action and believe that they are responsible in preventing bullying. Another theme that emerged is that sometimes students with Asperger syndrome think that kids deserve to be bullied and that it is okay to fight back by antagonizing the bully. The fourth theme that emerged is that according to the students interviewed, schools are not providing adequate security for our students and we need to increase security in our schools today. Finally, according to the students interviewed, in response to incidents that involve bullying, schools and school administrators need to administer more severe consequences. All themes suggest strategies that if implemented, could decrease the occurrence of bullying in our school.

### Teacher Accountability



It is apparent that according to the participants, a very useful strategy to prevent bullying is simply to tell a teacher. Furthermore, students suggest teachers are simply not doing enough and need to do more. For example, one student stated, "Some teachers react immediately and some don't." Teachers need to understand and realize that they play a large role in bully prevention, and that students rely on them to put forth effort into bully prevention.

According to 83% of the students interviewed, teachers often do not respond appropriately when addressing incidents regarding bullying, and according to 50% of the students interviewed, teachers do not respond promptly. Students stated that incidents of bullying often go ignored by teachers or aren't addressed appropriately by underestimating the seriousness of the incident. For example, Mitchell stated, "I see it every class period, but it is always behind the teacher's back. Even if the teacher does see it happen, they don't do anything because they think it isn't bullying or that they are just playing around. Erik stated that telling a teacher is a sensible strategy, but added that it never helps for him when does tell a teacher. "There are no strategies, bullying is inevitable. Telling an adult never helps for me, but that could be one strategy."

Of the interviewed participants, 100% agreed that teachers are responsible for preventing bullying. However, the students suggest that when given the opportunity, teachers often don't respond promptly or appropriately. For example, when asked if bullying happens at his school, Nick replied, "It happens but barely ever gets caught. When it happens, it almost always is behind the teacher's back. I think teachers ignore it on purpose sometimes because they are so sick of dealing with it." Interestingly enough, when asked what strategies schools should implement, 50% of the participants

used the word 'immediately' in their response. Thus, according to 50% of the students teachers are not reacting promptly to bullying incidents. Mitchell summed it up stating, "Teachers are responsible because it is their job to promote a safe classroom and school."

Although teachers do play a large part in thwarting bullying, it simply is not enough. Bullying is a large problem in schools today, and to prevent bullying it must be approached as a team effort. In his response, Roland seemed to agree. "Both the teachers and principal is responsible. Teachers are the ones who see it, but the principal needs to make sure it doesn't happen again, or at least follow through on some punishment. If the bully gets away with it, then they will do it again."

Even though the students said teachers are not doing enough to reduce or prevent bullying, 100% of the participants responded that the best thing to do would be to tell a teacher. According to Mitchell, "You should tell a teacher immediately, that way the bully doesn't get a chance to bully again before they are talked to by the teacher." Roland agreed and added, "If you tell a teacher right away, the bully is more likely to see you tell on them, and possibly won't bully you again because they know you will go tell a teacher."

### Student Accountability

While reviewing interview transcripts, I noticed a very intriguing re-emerging theme. Interestingly enough, fifty percent of the interviewed students responded that students believe that they too are responsible in preventing bullying. For example, Samuel bluntly stated, "The bottom line is students are responsible for their own

actions. You (teachers) can do whatever you want for punishment, but at the end of the day students are always responsible for what they do.” While Mitchell agreed that students are responsible, he also took a different approach by saying that students are responsible because they should be able to work problems out for themselves.

This is middle school. We are getting ready for high school and we should be able to take care of our self. We don't need to be babysat. We are at that point in our life where we should be able to take care of our self.

Students believe that while parents and administrators are responsible, it is the teachers and students who are most responsible in preventing bullying. As previously mentioned, one hundred percent of the participants believe that teachers are the most responsible in preventing bullying.

### Victimization

Another theme I discovered while analyzing the data is students actually think the victim is sometimes at fault in bullying incidents. This came to a surprise because generally, from the teacher's standpoint, victims of bullying are never thought to be at fault. According to the students interviewed, educators are missing something vital and perhaps are jumping to conclusions when accusing a bully of victimizing another student.

Students' shared their opinion that the victims sometimes just deserve to be bullied. For example Nick stated, “Sometimes kids deserve to be bullied because they don't know when to stop.” Mitchell added, “I seen a kid get bullied once for his clothes. But he should have known better to wear pants so small. That's just asking to be picked on.” From the perspective of the students interviewed, students apparently

deserve to be bullied for something they unknowingly have committed. In addition stating that sometimes students deserve to be bullied, Nick also added that he understands why students with Asperger syndrome are bullied.

I know I am different, and I know that I piss people off. That makes them hate my guts, and then they want to bully me. I do things in class and say things in class that irritates them. Sometimes I do it on purpose because I like their reaction. Sometimes I see people bully others because they are retarded, but really they (the bullies) are retarded because those kids (the victims) can't help it. Or if they can, they don't care.

This statement is interesting because although Nick realizes what he is doing and states that he is doing it on purpose, he is implying that he too deserves to be bullied. Even though he claims that he understands the bullies' motives, he still doesn't understand that it isn't right or okay for him to aggravate others. Although he didn't choose appropriate words of description, Nick also stated that he sees students being bullied because they are different, and that those students (victims) don't know any better.

Students held another surprising viewpoint; they think it is okay to fight back by antagonizing the bully. In the eyes of the victim this strategy is useful because each offense committed by the bully increases the severity of the consequences. Mitchell explained this by saying the following:

Bullies always get in more trouble once they bully more than once. I don't think their parents ever come in until the principal gets involved. And the principal doesn't usually get called when it happens the first time. But if it happens again, the teacher sometimes calls the principal.

In this example, Mitchell is implying bullies don't get in that much trouble unless they are repeat offenders, thus he tries to antagonize the bully so he gets caught more than once, which results in harsher consequences.

## Safety and Security

Nick stated the following in regards to his perception of school. "No place is safe in this god-forsaken school. Do you ever wonder why people say things just to piss you off? Do you even care?" As implied in the previous quote, students do not feel safe while at school, and are not sure anyone cares enough to do something about it. According to students, as educators we need to provide a more safe and secure learning environment.

A fourth theme revealed in the data is that students interviewed believe that there is a need for both increased security and an increase in the severity of consequences. Mitchell stated, "Everyone in the school doesn't feel safe and that you can tell just by watching the way some kids walk in the halls." Samuel shared Mitchell's concern, "I feel safe now, but that's because I am an eighth grader. When I was in sixth grade, I didn't like being in the halls or sometimes outside at recess." Nick stated, "Schools should raise security and install cameras everywhere in the school. They would have to hire people too to watch them, so I'm not sure if that could be done." Roland took a more simplistic approach and said, "Teachers simply just need to be in the halls because that is where it always happens." Charlie agreed with Nick's idea of installing cameras, but added a more humorous approach by stating the following:

I think there should be cameras all over the school. If someone (whoever is in charge of monitoring the cameras) sees a bully bullying someone on the camera, they could press a button; like an alarm that says 'Bully Alert!' 'Bully Alert!' that comes from the camera.

In regards to security, students also identified the police as an important resource that needs to be utilized more. Charlie said, "If a bully is bullying you should be able to

call Officer Dallman because what they are doing is a crime. This would work good if students knew upfront that if they bully they'll deal with the police instead of the principal." Roland suggested that if the police get involved and nothing happens to the bullies, the punishment likely wouldn't prove to be effective. "If the police do something, they need to do something then. They (bullies) should get hauled down to jail or something that really scares them." Involving the police could be a powerful and useful strategy, but like any strategy there has to be consistent consequences and follow-through.

### Severe Punishment

While analyzing the data, a theme that emerged over and over is that students believe that punishments need to be more severe. Mitchell took it a step further by explaining that the severity of punishment should increase with each bully infraction by stating:

Teachers need to make the punishment worse each time they (bullies) bully. Bullies need to get silent lunch, field trips take away, detention, suspension, and if those don't work, they eventually need to be moved to a different school. That makes the most sense because you then are giving them a few chances, and they need to know that if they don't stop, they will be moved to another school.

Nick felt the same way saying, "After a few incidents and depending on how serious it was, bullies should be kicked out of school." Erik bluntly stated, "If a punishment is harsh enough, then it wouldn't happen as much. Bullying is harsh, so the punishment should be too." If bullies think they can bully and only get some sort of minor punishment, they likely will accept the tradeoff and continue to bully.

## CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION& RECOMMENDATION

### Overview of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspective of bullying according to students who are labeled with Asperger syndrome in an effort to learn what strategies we as educators could implement to help prevent students with Asperger syndrome from being bullied. The purpose of this study was also to find strategies that students with Asperger syndrome could use themselves to avoid or prevent bullying. Due to the bullying I see each and every day at the middle school level, I wanted to hear from actual students that have Asperger syndrome and obtain their perspective and beliefs about bullying.

### Summary of Findings

By interviewing students labeled with Asperger syndrome, I feel I was able to obtain important insight into the world of bullying and was introduced to strategies that they perceive to be useful when trying to avoid or prevent bullying. Through interviewing students I was able to gain a more clear understanding about what bullying is to them. According to students who have Asperger syndrome, bullying is essentially any unwanted attention given from one student to another. Bullying can be physical and/or verbal and happens when students take advantage of the weak.

While reviewing data collected from the student interviews, I realized that the students perceive that bullies bully other students simply to make themselves feel better emotionally. Fifty percent of the students stated that students bully to make themselves feel better. For example, Erik believes that bullies bully because it makes them feel

better about their own problems. "Bullies bully to create problems for others. That way, they feel better if they can make someone have worse problems than they have. If someone is feeling bad about himself/herself or having problems, he/she can bully another person to a point where they feel worse than the bully was feeling. The problem doesn't have to be the same, just as long as the person feels bad about something that the bully did or pointed out." Samuel agreed and stated that when bullies prey on a victim, it results in an emotional high. "It makes them feel good inside because at that moment, they feel better than the other person."

I also discovered that, according to the students interviewed, they believe bullies sometimes attack others because they are neglected in some fashion at home. Thirty-three percent of the students believe that bullies bully because they need attention or are neglected at home. Unfortunately, a student's home life and upbringing apparently plays a negative role in bullying. According to Roland, "I think students bully because they are neglected at home and when they bully, it empowers them and makes them feel stronger." Mitchell had a similar thought and stated that people bully because they have emotional problems, and maybe are bullied or abused at home.

### Strategies

In analyzing the data collected via student interviews, I found very interesting, specifically because the group of participants are middle school students who are labeled with Asperger syndrome, that sixty seven percent of the participants stated that bullying back the bully is a useful strategy to avoid bullying. Roland even went so far as to say that he likely would get physical with the bully stating, "I might pop them just to



show them that I won't take it." Nick also stated that bullying back is a wise decision, and that victims need to defend themselves by having witty comments ready just in case they are bullied. "When you're in the halls, you should always have some quick comebacks in your head because you never know when you are going to get bullied. I do that because then sometimes it makes the bully look stupid, despite the fact that he already is."

Based on the data gathered, a rather intelligent strategy to avoid or prevent bullying is to ignore the bully. Fifty percent of the interviewed participants stated that simply ignoring the bully is a strategy that one could use. Samuel said, "If you don't want to tell a teacher, you just need to ignore it. Eventually, you learn to ignore the bullies and it becomes a lot easier." Nick too stated that ignoring the bully is a smart way to go about avoiding being bullied, and he took it a step further by stating,

You should just stay as far away as possible from the bully. If you avoid the bully, then you are avoiding being bullied. Just go out of your way to make sure that you never are around the bully. For example if you see them, take a different route to class. This works really good.

### Summary

The students not only confirmed that bullying is prevalent in our school building, but also declared that teachers aren't responding as they (students) deem fit. When incidents of bullying take place, teachers are not responding appropriately or timely as often teachers underestimate the seriousness of the incident. According to the students, students with Asperger syndrome need be thoroughly taught skills that equip and prepare them for encounters with bullies. According to the students, perhaps the single most important action that should be taken is that our schools need to increase

security. The bottom line is that our students do not feel safe in our school. As educators and professionals it is our duty to provide a safe learning environment for our students, which at this point apparently is not being created.

In analyzing the data, it is apparent that students labeled with Asperger syndrome need extensive, thorough social skills instruction. This is because as previously described, these students often misinterpret other student's behavior regarding bullying. In an effort to assist students labeled with Asperger syndrome understand their peers' actions, as educators we must thoroughly teach social skills and provide this population of students with the tools they need to comprehend daily encounters that they have difficulty understanding.

It is also apparent, based on the data gathered from the participants, that when addressing incidents of bullying, teachers are not reacting appropriately or promptly. As an educator this is both startling and disheartening because it is our job to not only educate, but also serve students. I suggest that perhaps teachers aren't reacting appropriately or promptly because they don't know what to do. If this is indeed the case, administrators need to be involved and teachers properly trained.

While analyzing the data I found that more security is needed because students feel that an increase in security would decrease bullying. An increase in security is needed in various forms including an increase in cameras, police, and school staff. According to the data, bullying seems to happen generally when staff are not present or if present, are not looking. If more security is added, it is the belief of the students that bullying will decrease because students are then more likely to be caught. While

cameras and staff to monitor the cameras are a costly option, I believe the presence alone of cameras will reduce bullying as students will become more conscious of being watched, thus less likely to bully.

I was also able to obtain information in regards to why students bully. According to the students interviewed, people bully for various reasons. For example, fifty percent of the participants responded by saying that students bully to both gain an emotional high and in an act of revenge. Students also stated that bullying happens because students want to impress their friends and thus try to establish their place in the student hierarchy by bullying others. One third of the students also responded that students might bully because they possibly are neglected at home, which they believe would result in bullying others at school.

Because bullying is a widespread problem in our schools today, I wanted to find out how often bullying occurs. According to the participants in the study, bullying in some form or fashion occurs every hour in school. However, while it occurs hourly, often times the incident is neither viewed or reported as teachers often are unaware that bullying is actually taking place. Unfortunately bullying often happens behind the teacher's back.

According to the student participants, various people are responsible to prevent the bullying of others. While the participants believe that parents and administrators are partially responsible, they also believe that students and teachers are primarily responsible for the prevention of bullying. All of the interviewed participants believed

that teachers are responsible and fifty percent believed students are responsible for the prevention of bullying.

By doing this research, I wanted to gain insight in to what student's labeled with Asperger syndrome perceive are useful strategies that could be used to avoid or prevent bullying. All of the students interviewed believe that telling a teacher is the best strategy. Although questionable, bullying the bully back was also identified as a popular useful tactic.

Another important piece of information I set out to obtain was what schools can do to help students labeled with Asperger syndrome avoid or prevent bullying. According to the responses, schools need to enforce more severe punishment with each subsequent punishment getting more severe after each infraction. Other ideas include involving the police, increasing security, and creating a bully club or class.

### Conclusions

The results indicate that as educators we must be proactive in our effort to reduce or prevent bullying. While many teachers may be unaware of bullying, it is our job to provide the least restrictive environment for our special education students, which first and foremost means providing a safe environment. There clearly is too much bullying in our schools today, and every stakeholder involved must address this burgeoning issue. As teachers we have high expectations for our students, and need to support their learning by ensuring they are able to attend school and learn without worrying about being bullied. As staff members of a school district we are in a position to enlighten others and introduce new strategies that can be implemented school wide.

We must not forget to also teach our special education students strategies they can use on an individual basis. It is important that we teach this vulnerable population about bullying, and provide them with the tools and strategies needed to prevent from being bullied. Again, this requires a team effort. If all stakeholders unite in the fight against bullying, incidents will dwindle and quality of education will soar.

### Recommendations

Based on the results obtained, I now have ideas and tools of which I can share in both my classroom and school in an effort to reduce and prevent bullying. Because I teach a social skills class to students that are labeled with Asperger syndrome, I have a unique opportunity to teach specific strategies they can utilize in an attempt to prevent bullying. I will share my results with colleagues and encourage them to utilize the aforementioned strategies.

I also plan to address the issue of bullying in a staff meeting by sharing my results with colleagues within my school building. Since the autism department has only been in my school building for one year, I feel that many staff and personnel in the building are uninformed about both Asperger syndrome and the effects bullying has on special education students. I would like to create and present a list of strategies that each and every staff member in our school building can do to take part in the fight against bullying. If each staff member is informed and motivated, and students understand their role, as a team we can reduce incidents of bullying.

### Limitations

While I feel I have obtained authentic data that has resulted in useful information that can be utilized by many, one must take in to consideration limitations that may have hindered or affected the study. It is important to remember that students interviewed were actual students in my classroom that I teach daily. These students may or may not have held back information in fear of retribution. A random researcher may have received lengthier responses as students then would have no ties to the interviewer.

A limitation of applicability in this study is that strategies identified are for the purpose and benefit of middle school students. Although they certainly could work for elementary or high school aged students, for the purpose of this research the identified strategies are intended for middle school aged students. Elementary students, for example, would have much more difficulty implementing strategies on their own. In such case, bullying would need to be addressed more at the school level as opposed to an individual basis.

### Further Research

In regards to future research, I would suggest that researchers continue the research a step further and implement the suggested strategies. Once the strategies are implemented, the researcher could collect data and report which strategies worked well and which strategies didn't prove as useful. This could be done at an individual student level and at a school level with school staff. Teachers could then concentrate on those specific successful strategies when teaching future students about bully prevention. As a result, schools would have a better idea as to what strategies work best and what they can do to prevent bullying.

## CHAPTER VI – SELF REFLECTION

While many acts of bullying are similar in nature, we must remember that there are numerous variables that greatly affect each incident from both the bully's and the victim's standpoint. Therefore, we must also remember not to generalize any accusations and/or assume anything based on prior information or offenses. Just because a student has a past of bullying others does not mean he or she is always at fault in future bullying incidents. As a teacher this is a difficult concept to grasp as it is easy to assume Johnny did this because he has done it in the past.

In regards to Roland's statement about needing more security, I tend to agree as in today's society everywhere we go there is heightened security, so why not in the schools? I understand that security costs money, but I think it would be money well spent. In fact, I think parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, and any other stakeholder would likely agree that the price of security is money well spent. However that being said, the problem lies within. While all stakeholders would likely agree that security is important, I do not think that they would agree that bully prevention falls under the umbrella of security. I agree with Roland's statement in that if we are going to involve the authorities, there should be an established process that is followed, which perhaps includes the bully visiting the local juvenile detention center. Again, like with added cameras, this would be an expensive strategy for a school to enforce, but at this point bullying needs to be addressed in full force. That being said most schools have a liaison officer or are assigned to share a liaison officer with another school, so the cost may be shared by districts or schools.

After collecting and analyzing data, I feel that the findings provide important information that teachers and parents can utilize when developing and implementing a plan to reduce and eliminate bullying. Teachers absolutely must play their role and do so appropriately by promptly addressing each and every bullying incident while not letting any incidents go without notice. Students, specifically students labeled with Asperger syndrome, need to be thoroughly and consistently taught social skills; No one ever deserves to be bullied regardless of behavior or dress. These students also need to be taught appropriate social skills so they know how to act properly when in a group, and learn how to fit in so they are not targeted as often by school bullies. Whether anyone wants to admit it or not, bullies do target others because of their behavior and dress. In an effort to reduce bullying, schools also need to increase security. Regardless of the cost, we must provide a safe learning environment to each and every student. If students are saying that more security is needed, then I believe they aren't feeling safe in their own school. How can we as educators expect students to learn if they are concerned about their safety?

I believe the two examples provided by Mitchell and Nick about students deserving to be bullied are a result of the affects of Asperger syndrome. Nick stated that apparently students sometimes just don't know when to stop. He is likely referring to students being socially inappropriate and not knowing when to stop talking, laughing, etc. Unfortunately, this could is a social deficiency that affects many students labeled with Asperger syndrome, and would be considered common among many students in this population. Mitchell's statement comes to me as no surprise because students labeled with Asperger syndrome often are looked upon by their peers as being 'geeky'



or 'nerds' because of the way they act (due to a lack of social skills) and/or dress. Perhaps this is no different than students bullying others in the general education setting because of their clothing selection. However, one must remember that because students with Asperger syndrome are often viewed as being 'geeky', due in part to their dress, they have a higher percentage of being bullied than the general education population. Indeed, in the eyes of an adult such situations do not warrant bullying.

In doing this research, I learned a lot about myself and my students. I learned that I am in a unique position in that every day I work with students that have autism. Not only do I have the opportunity to educate these children, I have the opportunity to change their lives. I also learned that as an educator, I have not done enough. I need to focus more on bullying in my school, and be an advocate for my students.

I learned that my students trust me and enough so in that they are able to open up to me. This, especially for students with autism, is extremely difficult as they often are not open with their thoughts or feelings. I also learned that my students are disappointed in their teachers and expect more. Based on their responses, we are not providing a safe learning environment.

I must say that while I am thankful that I was able to interview my own students for the purpose of this research, it makes me sad to hear firsthand how the students view bullying. This saddens me as I know how difficult school is for many of them since Asperger syndrome presents additional challenges each and every day that most students don't have to deal with. Difficulties that are an afterthought for many are complex issues with students with Asperger syndrome. I sincerely wish that students

would never have to worry about bullying, and simply utilize their energy and minds towards learning. This research has enlightened me and I will do anything and everything in my ability to make bully prevention a priority. In an attempt to reduce and prevent bullying, I will share successful strategies with my colleagues and will teach my students how to prevent and avoid bullying.

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**APENDIX A – STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE**

- 1. In your own words, describe to me what is bullying?**
  
- 2. Why do you think students bully others?**
  
- 3. How do you think someone would feel if they are bullied?**
  
- 4. What strategies do you think a person could use to avoid being bullied?**
  
- 5. What do you think Anthony Middle School could do to reduce bullying?**
  
- 6. Does bullying happen in our school? If so, what do you see?**
  
- 7. Who is responsible to make sure bullying doesn't happen?**
  
- 8. Would you tell someone if you knew someone was being bullied?**

