

THE ROLE OF EDUCATOR PREPARATION PROGRAMS IN BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND REDUCING BULLYING: CONSIDERATIONS FROM PRESERVICE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

*With the success of the show *13 Reasons Why*, school bullying was forced into the spotlight to be debated. For many years, researchers have been working on understanding the effect of school bullying on students' academic performance and the emotional toll. This study explores the impact of experiences and perceptions of preservice teachers with school bullying. The results indicate that school bullying is pervasive, including typical bullying on campus, relational bullying and cyberbullying. The influence of a positive adult on the campus is also explored. Finally, the role of educator preparation programs and the need for training is contemplated.*

Keywords: bullying, positive classroom environment, student-teacher relationship, educator preparation program, preservice teachers

The most recent media depiction of bullying which leads to suicide is the Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why*. On May 18, 2018, Season 2 of this Netflix series became available for students to watch. In response to the reactions from the first season, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) made available resources for how to address the issues related to this series. The first topic addressed is bullying (ASCA, 2018). The popularity of this series has highlighted the need for discussion and awareness of bullying with children and adolescents. *13 Reasons Why* is only the most recent media representation of a topic that has been present in schools for hundreds of years: bullying and the consequences in schools.

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior that occurs between children, typically involving a real or perceived power imbalance (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2015; U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, 2018). Bullying has plagued K-12 schools for many generations; in addition to the typical bullying on campuses, cyber bullying or electronic aggression is a prevalent form of bullying among digital natives now. The forms of bullying are as many and varied as the impact on victims, ranging from academic problems and minor emotional or physical injury to life altering changes, including death (CDC, 2017).

Educator preparation programs (EPPs) have been charged with providing initial training for preservice teachers by the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2017). Across the country, the damage bullying causes to victims and the school environment makes it difficult for children to learn (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011; Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2013; Robers, Zhang, Morgan, & Musu-Gillette, 2015; CDC, 2015). The seriousness of the damage to students and the potential for bullying to be present in schools underscores the importance of the role teachers play in promoting a non-violent educational environment and being prepared with interventions (Craig, Bell, & Lescheid, 2011; Elinoff,

Chafouleas, & Sassu, 2004). Teachers are key in decreasing bullying behaviors as they often act as both the authority figure and a trusted mentor. Yet, current research suggests that practicing teachers and their preservice counterparts may not be prepared for their role in addressing bullying in the classroom and are uncertain how to address bullying, although they understand the importance of this knowledge (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Oldenburg, Bosman & Veenstra, 2016). EPPs are not providing needed training for preservice teachers related to the prevention and intervention of bullying in schools (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Craig et al., 2011) which impacts their preparedness to create safe caring learning environments essential for both student academic achievement and to address social emotional needs.

This research study explored the relationship between preservice teachers' experiences with bullying and positive teacher relationships during their own K-12 experiences. Additionally, the study explores the role of EPPs in preparing teachers to handle bullying. Researchers posed the following research questions in this mixed-methods study:

- 1) What types of bullying experiences, if any, did preservice teachers experience during their K-12 school experiences?
- 2) To what extent are preservice teachers' perceptions and experiences with bullying impacted by relationships with teachers or adults?
- 3) What methods should EPPs use to help prepare preservice teachers to handle bullying?

Experiences with Bullying

What is Bullying?

To be considered bullying, the behavior is repeated or has the potential to be repeated and the perpetrator and victim may have serious, lasting problems as a result of the behavior (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011). Bullying is a prevalent problem in schools and includes the bully, the victim, and the individual that is both a bully and a victim (Blosnich and Bossarte, 2011). In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education reported that bullying occurred with 22% of the school population between the ages of 12 –18 years and occurred as often as *at least once a month* to a more sporadic occurrence of *on occasion*. Seven percent of this same population reported being cyber-bullied (Robers, et al., 2015). In 2015, the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* indicated a range from 19.6% to 20.2% of students reporting having experienced being bullied which was a decrease from 2014 (CDC, 2015). A nationwide study completed by Florida Atlantic University and the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire in 2017 indicated a sharp increase of 73% of students being bullied at some point during their K-12 experiences (Florida Atlantic University, 2017).

In 2007, Kowalski and Limber predicted that cyberbullying would become a significant challenge for teachers, as it impacts the classroom but happens off campus. Ten years later, researchers of the Florida Atlantic University and University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire determined that there is a significant overlap between online and school bullying. Eighty-three percent of the students who had been cyberbullied within a month of their study reported having been bullied at school as well. In August 2017, the Texas Legislature unanimously passed Senate Bill 179 (David's Law). This law amends the Texas Education Code so that a single significant act may constitute bullying rather than a series of events and requires districts to create policy to address all aspects of bullying. The law, for the first time, requires schools to act if the bullying occurs off school grounds, including through cyberbullying, if the student's educational environment is impacted or the rights of the victim are infringed (Childress, 2017).

Impact of Teachers on Reducing Bullying Behaviors

Bullying may inflict harm in multiple ways including physical, psychological, social, or educational (Gladden et al., 2013). One's ability to focus at school and feel safe is directly impacted by bullying behaviors (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011; Gray, & Lewis, 2015). Teachers play a significant role in reducing bullying behaviors. For example, the simple presence of a teacher in the hallway reduces bullying behavior (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011). Gutt and Randa (2016) found that an empathetic adult could minimize the bullying experience by lessening the impact. These findings support the idea that a caring adult is likely to help students feel more comfortable, even after a victimization (Gutt & Randa, 2016). Additionally,

students preferred teachers to be their primary source of support in terms of bullying prevention (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011). In contrast, some studies found that some students have the impression that teachers and district personnel are passively disinterested or even unwilling to help, certainly not helpful resources (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Mehta, Cornell, Fan, & Gregory, 2013). Yoon, Sulkowski, and Bauman (2016) found that teachers' reaction to bullying was tempered by their own experiences of bullying in their childhood and this affected their ability to evaluate the bullying situation and their resulting responses; this also resonated with previous research completed by Bauman and Del Rio (2006).

In 2006, Bauman and Del Rio found that teachers were more willing to discipline physical bullying since physical bullying had harm that was easier to assess. Ten years later, Yoon et al. (2016) still found this to be true, as physically bullying was seen as more severe and teachers continued to provide emotional support to victims.

Casas, Ortega-Ruiz, and Del Ray (2015) found that how teachers managed their classroom had a strong impact on inhibiting victimization of bullying. The teachers that were perceived as having an interest in students' wellbeing, by adopting a safe environment, being aware of needs, and providing consistent discipline contributed to preventing victimization (Casas, et al., 2015). Teachers' attitudes contribute to the school climate and a positive climate which provides academic and emotional support reduces bullying and raises academic and social competence (Espelage & Swearer, 2008; Yoon & Barton, 2008). In contrast, Grumm and Hein (2012) stated that an aggressive classroom climate disrupts the learning process and students tend to be uncomfortable and there is a higher association of bullying aggression (Casas et al., 2015).

According to Mehta et al. (2013), when student perceptions are that bullying is pervasive in a school, there were lower levels of student engagement. In addition, Cornell, Gregory, Huang, and Fan (2013) found when a prevalence of bullying was perceived, drop-out rates increased. Their results underscore that the prevalence of bullying is an important factor in high school academic performance. If the perception of the school climate for students includes that bullying is widespread, there is less commitment to succeeding at school and being engaged because of the fear (Mehta et al., 2013).

These studies support the need for preservice teachers to receive training from their EPPs, resulting in an ability to establish a classroom conducive to positive learning and academic support for students before an environment of aggression takes hold. The potential for teachers to impact bullying behaviors is recognized by the federal government. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires that states collect and include data about bullying, and school climate in their report cards (National Association of School Psychologists, 2017; National Education Association, 2015). The data are required to be made public, but it is optional for states to include these data as part of the accountability plan. States must include specific ways they will help districts address areas of concern, monitor school climate and reduce bullying and harassment. Federal funding is available to address these concerns through professional development activities, collaboration with community partners and increase personnel.

Role of Educator Preparation Programs

According to Craig et al. (2011), EPPs could assist with training on the identification of forms of bullying in order to help raise preservice teachers' knowledge and awareness of bullying. In addition, training regarding the specifics of prevalence, types, and impact is needed and would be welcomed by preservice teachers. Benitez Munoz, Garcia-Berben, and Fernandez-Cabezas (2009) found that EPPs needed to include training on bullying in order to raise self-efficacy levels in teachers. Teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to be involved with bullies and victims (Yoon et al., 2016). Banas (2014) found that self-efficacy could be raised in preservice teachers' ability to perform bullying prevention activities when authentic learning exercises were used. The authentic learning experiences allow a preservice teacher to master the skill necessary for addressing bullying through practice.

Teachers are seen as key components to effective program and policy implementation (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). As such, Bauman and Del Rio (2006) reported that EPPs need to focus on the importance of relational bullying within the scope of other forms of bullying to provide the much-needed information for preservice teachers to be prepared for handling situations of bullying on school campuses.

Since 2016, Texas Educator Preparation Programs have been required by 19 TAC §228.30(c)(3) to provide preservice teachers instruction related to mental health, substance abuse and youth suicide training. The exact nature of the training is left up to the EPP while the state provides some resources and guidelines (TEA, 2017).

Methods

Participants

Junior and senior undergraduate preservice teachers were selected for this study. The participants all attended a four-year university in South Texas. The student body of this university was 90% Hispanic with a high percentage of first-generation college students. Those who participated were enrolled in a course addressing the teaching of diverse student populations, a required pre-education course prior to formal admission to the College of Education with a common syllabus. This course has a field-based component requirement which is directly tied to the course assignments. Data were collected over the course of several semesters.

Survey Instruments

An online survey instrument was created by the researchers. The survey was divided into three sections: 12 demographic questions, 17 Likert-scale quantitative questions, and 4 open ended qualitative questions related to the respondents' perceptions and experiences with school violence (Lewis & Dinkel, 2017). The 5-point Likert-assessments were formatted using two different scales: 1 *Strongly Agree*, 2 *Somewhat Agree*, 3 *Agree*, 4 *Somewhat Disagree* and 5 *Strongly Disagree*; and 1 *Continuously*, 2 *Frequently*, 3 *Sometimes*, 4 *Once in a While* or 5 *Never*. This article focuses on the survey items related to bullying and preservice teachers' thoughts regarding their preparation for the field.

Results

Preservice Teachers

102 respondents completed the online survey instrument. Of the respondents, 85 (83.33%) of the participants were female, and 17 (16.35%) were male; 80 (78.43%) were between the ages of 18-25, 16 (15.69%) between the ages of 26-33, 4 (3.92%) between the ages of 34-40, 2 (1.96%) between 41- 46, and none 47 and older. 48 (47.06%) of the participants' native language was English and 54 (52.94%) of the participants' native language was Spanish.

Preservice Teachers Experiences with Bullying

Preservice teachers were asked to self-report on their experiences with school violence (encompassing all forms of violence): seventeen (16.83%) participants self-reported experiences during elementary school, 48 (47.06%) in middle school, and 52 (50.98%) in high school. Participants were then asked to differentiate types of school violence and focus on their experiences with bullying behaviors. This data indicated that participants experienced varying degrees of student-on-student bullying (Table 1). Participants experienced the highest rates of *continuous*, *frequently*, and *sometimes* bullying related to another student who made fun of them, calling them names or insulting them, and spreading rumors about them or trying to make others dislike them (Table 1). The data indicate that the second highest rate of bullying was related to another student spreading rumors about them or trying to make others dislike them (Table 1). The type of bullying least experienced by the participants was another student who made one do things he/she did not want to do, such as giving them money or other things of value, with 76.24% (77) of the participants *never* experienced this type of bullying.

Table 1

Preservice Teachers' Reflections on their K-12 Experiences with Other Students

	Continuously	Frequently	Sometimes	Once in a While	Never
<i>Did another student:</i>					
make fun of you, called you names, or insulted you, in a harmful way?	14 (13.86%)	21 (20.79%)	23 (22.77%)	19 (18.81%)	24 (23.76%)
spread rumors about you or tried to make others dislike you?	10 (9.9%)	18 (17.82%)	19 (18.81%)	18 (17.82%)	36 (35.64%)
threaten you with harm?	7 (6.93%)	12 (11.88%)	5 (4.95%)	16 (15.84%)	61 (60.40%)
push you, shove you, trip you, or spit on you?	7 (7%)	10 (10%)	10 (10%)	18 (18%)	55 (55%)
make you do things you did not want to do?	2 (1.98%)	1 (0.99%)	5 (4.95%)	16 (15.84%)	77 (76.24%)
exclude you from activities on purpose?	7 (6.93%)	10 (9.90%)	11 (10.89%)	14 (13.86%)	59 (58.42%)
destroy your property on purpose?	2 (2%)	8 (8%)	9 (9%)	12 (12%)	69 (69%)

Participants also reflected on their experiences with cyberbullying. The majority of the students reported *never* experiencing bullying related to the internet, texting, online gaming or other online communications (Table 2). Comparing data from Table 1 to Table 2, it indicates that the most frequent type of bullying was traditional bullying, not cyberbullying.

Table 2

Preservice Teachers' Reflections on their K-12 Experiences with Cyberbullying

	Continuously	Frequently	Sometimes	Once in a While	Never
<i>Did another student:</i>					
post hurtful information about you on the internet?	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	7 (7%)	18 (18%)	74 (74%)
purposefully share your private information, photos, or videos on the internet or mobile phones in a hurtful way?	0 (0%)	3 (3%)	4 (4%)	10 (10%)	83 (83%)
threaten or insult you through email?	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	3 (3%)	9 (9%)	87 (87%)
threaten or insult you through instant messaging or chat?	1 (1%)	3 (3%)	7 (7%)	14 (14%)	75 (75%)
threaten or insult you through online gaming or similar activities?	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (4%)	7 (7%)	89 (89%)
purposefully exclude you from online communications?	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	6 (6%)	8 (8%)	83 (83%)

Participants focused next on the verbal bullying, related to hate-related words. For the most part, the participants did not report high levels (*continuously, frequently*) of hate-related bullying. Religion, ethnic background or national origin, disability, gender and sexual orientation had the highest rates of *never* experiencing this form of bullying (Table 3).

Table 3

Preservice Teachers' Reflections on their K-12 Experiences Related to Verbal Bullying

	Continuously	Frequently	Sometimes	Once in a While	Never
<i>During your K-12 school experiences in the U.S., did you experience anyone saying hate related words about:</i>					
your race?	3 (2.97%)	4 (3.96%)	18 (18.82%)	11 (10.89%)	65 (64.36%)
your social economic status?	5 (4.95%)	1 (.99%)	20 (19.80%)	13 (12.87%)	62 (61.39%)
your language?	3 (3%)	2 (2%)	14 (14%)	15 (15%)	66 (66%)
your religion?	3 (2.97%)	1 (.99%)	12 (11.88%)	15 (14.85%)	70 (69.31%)
your ethnic background or national origin?	1 (.99%)	1 (.99%)	6 (5.94%)	20 (19.80%)	73 (72.28%)
any disability you may have?	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	7 (7%)	7 (7%)	73 (72.28%)
your gender?	2 (1.98%)	1 (.99%)	7 (6.93%)	16 (15.84%)	75 (74.26%)
your sexual orientation?	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	5 (5%)	5 (5%)	88 (88%)

Tables 4 and 5 show the relationship participants had with both adults and teachers during their K-12 experiences. Due to attrition, only 100 participants responded to these questions. When asked if they felt "*teachers treated students with respect,*" 71 (71%) *strongly agree or somewhat agree.* Similar positive results were reported for the stem "*teachers cared about students,*" with 68 (68%) responding *strongly agree, or somewhat agree.*

Table 4

Preservice Teachers' Reflections on their K-12 Teacher-Student Relationships

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
<i>Thinking about the teachers during your K-12 school experiences, indicate your response to the following:</i>					
Teachers treated students with respect	41 (41%)	30 (30%)	24 (24%)	3 (3%)	2 (2%)
Teachers cared about students	37 (37%)	31 (31%)	25 (25%)	7 (7%)	0 (0%)
Teachers did or said things that made students feel bad about themselves	6 (6%)	18 (18%)	19 (19%)	38 (38%)	19 (19%)

The majority of the participants indicated positive relationships with adults and teachers (Tables 4 & 5). 70% or higher of the participants strongly agreed that the adults really cared about you, told you when you did a good job, always wanted you to do your best, and believed that you would be a success (Table 5). 56 (55.45%) preservice teachers indicated that they had an adult who noticed when they were not there and 61 (60.40%) preservice teachers reported they had an adult who listened when you had something to say (Table 5).

Table 5

Preservice Teachers' Reflections on their K-12 Adult-Student Relationships

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
<i>Thinking about the adults in your school, indicate your response to the following:</i>					
Adults really cared about you	73 (72.98%)	14 (13.86%)	12 (11.88%)	1 (.99%)	1 (.99%)
Adults noticed when you were not there	56 (55.45%)	15 (14.85%)	23 (22.77%)	5 (4.95%)	2 (1.98%)
Adults listened to you when you had something to say	61 (60.40%)	19 (18.81%)	16 (15.84%)	3 (3.97%)	2 (1.98%)
Adults told you when you did a good job	71 (70.30%)	14 (13.86%)	14 (13.86%)	1 (.99%)	1 (.99%)
Adults always wanted you to do your best	74 (73.27%)	16 (15.84%)	9 (8.91%)	1 (.99%)	1 (.99%)
Adults believed that you would be a success	71 (70.30%)	16 (15.84%)	12 (11.88%)	1 (.99%)	1 (.99%)

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Bullying

Participants completed open-ended questions focused on their perceptions of bullying. The sample size for this data set was 95, due to attrition. The data set was analyzed by the researchers. Each response and/or phrase was analyzed and coded. The codes were based on the main idea of the phrases, after which the researchers grouped the codes by similarities and identified overarching themes (Glesne, 2006; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). For the purposes of this study, the following open-ended questions were points of focus; “What do you feel are the most common types of school violence happening currently in the local area?”, “What characteristics create a safe nonviolent classroom environment?”, and “What could your educator preparation program do to help you be prepared to handle school violence?”.

Several overarching themes emerged from the question stem, “What do you feel are the most common types of school violence happening currently in the local area? Coding indicated that physical fights, gangs, drugs and bullying are common types of school violence happening within the local area.

- 1) Preservice teachers felt that the violence was mostly physical fights. *“Physical fights between students and bullying.”*
- 2) Preservice teachers felt gangs were a large contributing factor to school violence. *“I felt like there are more students being pressured into getting into a gang, getting into fights, and bullying.”*
- 3) Preservice teachers viewed drugs as second significant factor in school violence. *“Students in secondary are becoming more aware of drugs and some are becoming more violent with bullying.”*
- 4) Preservice teachers strongly felt bullying was a prevalent form of violence *“Bullying is probably one of the bigger issues locally. Only two years ago (or so), a young girl I knew from high school committed suicide after being continuously and viciously harassed online.”*

The themes of physical fights, gangs, and drugs as forms of violence were all linked by the participants to bullying. This demonstrates the prolific nature of bullying within the local area. Participants differentiated cyberbullying from bullying. While the two forms were linked together some participants did make note of cyberbullying as a separate form. “Cyberbullying. Everything ends up online and people are set out to hurt others through this outlet.”

An outcome that surfaced from the coding were the number of responses indicating the preservice teachers had feelings of despair/frustration that nothing is being done to stop the bullying within the schools. Some examples of the

participants' responses include: "They could be prevented if teachers identify the real problems students are experiencing and stop ignoring children when they come with an issue or complaint for as minimum as it may be." and "I feel that there is a lot of bullying in my local school area and nothing is being done about it." The preservice teachers also recognized that the students may not make the connection between their behaviors and the harm. An example of a participant's response, "I feel like kids are kids, they are young and don't realize the destruction they are causing to themselves and others."

Participants also responded to the question "*What characteristics create a safe, nonviolent classroom environment?*" Several themes were identified.

- 1) Preservice teachers felt teachers play a significant role in influencing student behavior. "Students must feel comfortable in their class by knowing that they can trust in their teachers. Also, if they see that the teachers protect them they will want to continue coming to school."
- 2) Preservice teachers believe that a caring environment focused on respect greatly impacts student behavior. "Making sure the students know that the teacher cares about them and will listen to them if they need help."
- 3) Preservice teachers felt a focus on communication between teachers and students is essential for creating a safe environment. "Good communication, trust, understanding and tolerance."
- 4) Preservice teachers believe that rules and order are essential to creating a safe secure environment. "A vigilant teacher, strict rules and consequences, educating students on their improper behaviors."

Finally, participants were asked "*What could your educator preparation program do to help you be prepared to handle school violence?*" Several themes emerged:

- 1) Preservice teachers expressed a desire learn more about the different forms of violence. "Continue to remind us all forms of what school violence is that not only does it entail major things like shootings."
- 2) Preservice teachers want more classroom management strategies which specifically address how to handle bullying behaviors. "I think they could prepare us how to deal with this sort of situation in the classroom, the procedures that should be taken, and what we can do to try to get rid of the tension that the students will still have after the bullying as not to let it happen again."
- 3) Preservice teachers believe role playing and practice scenarios would be beneficial. "Provide real life scenarios (hands on experiences and what-would-you-do type of exercises.)"
- 4) Preservice teachers find value in hearing from teachers who have experienced and responded to bullying situations. "Have teachers talk to us about ways they have handled bullying."
- 5) Preservice teachers recognized that a one-time session would not be enough to prepare them to handle bullying in schools. "Make sure we have quarterly trainings or follow ups where we could discuss problems and strategies."

Discussion

Results of this study show that preservice teachers experienced varying degrees of school violence, specifically bullying during their K-12. Preservice teachers experienced the least amounts of school violence during elementary school, with the numbers rising to about half of the participants during middle and high school. This is consistent with the findings of the U.S. Dept. of Education which found the lowest frequency rates in elementary schools (Gray & Lewis, 2015). The 2016 change to Texas Educational code to include language which indicates a single act may be considered bullying recognizes that student behaviors both on and off campus impact learning. In analyzing the data, it is evident that the majority of these participants have experienced bullying in K-12 (Tables 1-3).

Table 1 supports research findings that relational bullying is pervasive. Over 80% of participants had *sometimes to continuous/frequently* experienced bullying; Fifty-eight (57.42%) preservice teachers reported *continuous, or frequently* having someone make fun of them, called them names or insulting them (Table 1). Students spreading rumors about them or trying to make others dislike them was the second highest rate of bullying experienced by these preservice students (Table 1). This data is slightly higher than the numbers reported by the U.S. Department of Education which indicates that 22 percent of the school population, between the ages of 12-18, experiences bullying (Gray & Lewis, 2015).

Relational bullying, including hate-related bullying, was not as prevalent, but preservice teachers did report experiences across the entire Likert scale ratings (Table 3). The homogeneous nature of this region may have impacted on the overall lower levels of hate-related bullying. However, relational bullying was present as evidenced by the quantitative (Table 1 & 2) and qualitative data. One participant stated, “I feel that socioeconomic status may cause a bullying or make feel someone less than the others. Language is also a big issue when it comes to bullying because people may laugh at your accent.”

Cyberbullying was not a large concern for this group of preservice teachers with the majority of them reporting *never* to have experienced bullying related to the internet, texting, online gaming or other online communications during their own K-12 experiences (Table 2). With the influx of cyberbullying in schools (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Mehta et al., 2013), one would have expected this number to be higher, especially as the age of the majority of participants fell into the bracket of 18-25 year olds.

After reflecting on their own K-12 experiences, preservice teachers shared their views of the current situation of violence in schools. Bullying was the most prevalent form of violence currently seen in the schools and is seen to be interwoven with the others forms of violence (physical fights, gangs, and drugs) according to the preservice teachers. This supports the research which shows that there are various forms of bullying, and relational bullying is predominant within schools (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011, TEA, 2017).

Data indicated for the most part that preservice teachers felt that they had an adult or teacher who supported them (Tables 4 & 5). Ninety-five percent (95%) of the preservice teachers strongly agree or agree that the teachers treated students with respect; 93% felt that the teachers cared about students (Table 4). Fifty-six (55.45%) preservice teachers indicated that they had an adult who noticed when they were not there; 61 (60.40%) preservice teachers reported they had an adult who listened when you had something to say (Table 5). The feeling that teachers care about students and treat students with respect has been shown to be a critical influence in the reduction of bullying behaviors (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011; Casas et al., 2015; Espelage & Swearer, 2008; Gutt & Randa, 2016; Yoon & Barton, 2008).

Research indicated that one's personal experiences with bullying influences how one addresses bullying in the classroom (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Yoon et al., 2016). Findings in this study indicate that the majority of participants experienced a form of bullying at some point during their K-12 schooling and the majority of the participants were impacted by a positive relationship with a teacher or adult. Teachers who treat students with respect, are caring towards students, notice a student's absence, are available to listen, praise and believe in the students are all positive dispositions which are key to developing student-teacher relationships and creating a positive classroom environment. Overwhelmingly, the data indicates these participants were positively impacted by a teacher/adult in their school (Tables 4 & 5). These characteristics of teacher behaviors are supported by the research as critical to good classroom management and providing a class climate that is conducive to learning and a positive environment, reducing the likelihood of bullying situations (Casas et al., 2015; Esplage & Swearer, 2008; Yoon & Barton, 2008).

Yet, 43 (43%) of the participants indicated that they strongly agree, somewhat agree, or agree that the teachers did or said things that made students feel bad about themselves. This data suggests that not all preservice teachers experienced the safe caring learning environment connected to positive teacher relationships. Similarly, in the research, students express a lack of teacher caring behaviors or a false sense caring attitudes (Agatston et al., 2007; Grumm & Hein, 2012; Mehta et al., 2013).

Participants connected the reduction of bullying behaviors to the role of teachers in the qualitative data. For example, one participant wrote, “They could be prevented if teachers identify the real problems students are experiencing and stop ignoring children when they come with an issue or complaint for as minimum as it may be.” This sentiment is reflected in the literature where teachers express a lack of training to handle bullying (Banas, 2014; Benitez Munoz et al., 2009; Craig et al., 2011). Bullying is a complex and dynamic problem which has been recognized by the Department of Education as well as the need to provide teachers with the tools to address bullying (TEA, 2017).

One element of reduction in bullying behaviors is the teacher's creation of and maintaining a safe caring learning environment. (Casas et al., 2015; Esplage & Swearer, 2008; Gutt & Randa, 2016). The preservice teachers identified several characteristics of what contributes to a positive classroom environment, including; rules, order, communication, caring, and respect, all of which centered on the role that the teacher plays. These findings align with research showing the pivotal role a teacher plays in reduction of bullying behaviors (Casas et al., 2015; Esplage & Swearer, 2008; Gutt & Randa, 2016). Based on the data, it appears that the topic of how to create safe caring learning environments is being addressed in the EPP involved in the study. Understanding the characteristics of a safe caring learning environment is essential to reducing bullying behaviors.

Research suggests professional development focused on bullying should include forms of bullying, specific examples of the prevalent types, and the impact of bullying behaviors on the student and school environment (Craig et al., 2011). Texas Education Agency recognizes this need and 19 TAC §228.30(c)(3) requires EPPs to provide training for preservice teachers but leaves the specifics to the discretion of the EPP (TEA, 2017).

Participants responded to "how they felt their educator preparation program could help prepare the students for school violence." Five themes emerged: a need for training focused on the different forms of violence, classroom management strategies for handling bullying, role -playing and scenarios as well as opportunities to review real incidences of bullying and hearing from current teachers on how they handled the behaviors. Finally, preservice teachers recognized that they need ongoing training focused on ways to address bullying in the classroom. These suggestions of ways to prepare preservice teachers mirror the research findings which identify areas of training including authentic learning experiences as well as direct instruction (Banas, 2014; Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Benitez Munoz et al., 2009; Craig et al., 2011; TEA, 2017). The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments created the Training Toolkit: Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment in Our Nation's Classrooms (Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center, n.d.). This toolkit focuses on helping teachers create and maintain the safe learning environment and was created with the intention of providing well rounded professional development for teachers. This might be a good starting point for EPPs as the two modules address the many facets of bullying as supported by current literature and this study.

Conclusion

Findings of this study show a positive relationship between preservice teachers own experiences with bullying and their perceptions of the role that a teacher plays in reducing bullying behaviors. An established safe caring learning environment along with positive student-teacher relationships directly impact the reduction of bullying behaviors. Preservice teachers recognized that teachers do not always seem to address bullying and indicated a desire to learn strategies to be prepared to handle bullying behaviors in the classroom. The critical role teachers play in reducing bullying behaviors is recognized within *ESSA*, and the Texas Education Agency code which requires EPPs to provide training to preservice teachers related to school health issues; including bullying. However, a gap still exists between the EPPs and the level of preparedness that preservice teachers are entering the field in regarding to addressing bullying. Future research should address this need and provide guidance for EPPs as to how to identify specific training requirements so that preservice teachers are graduating with the skills needed to recognize and address bullying behaviors in the classroom.

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