

## **Pre-service Teachers' Knowledge and Attitudes Regarding School-Based Bullying**

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### **Abstract**

Pre-service teachers responded to two questionnaires exploring perceptions of school violence. Responses to the “Teachers’ Attitudes about Bullying” and “Trainee Teachers’ Bullying Attitudes” questionnaires suggest that teachers across all academic divisions view bullying as a serious concern with implications for their role within the profession. There were considerable differences regarding what was defined as bullying, with variability related to the potential of intervening to end the violence. Covert forms of bullying including relational, homophobic, and cyber were viewed as less serious than overt violence and therefore less worthy of attention. The research findings point to the importance of providing pre-service teachers with training regarding anti-violence strategies.

### **Résumé**

De futurs enseignants ont répondu à deux questionnaires explorant les perceptions de la violence scolaire. Les réponses aux questionnaires sur les «Attitudes des enseignants face à l'intimidation et le harcèlement » et les« Attitudes intimidantes des enseignants stagiaires » suggèrent que les enseignants, dans toutes les divisions académiques, voient l'intimidation et le harcèlement comme un problème sérieux avec des implications pour leur rôle au sein de la profession. Il y avait des différences considérables en ce qui concerne la définition du mot « intimidation », avec des variances liées au potentiel d'intervention pour mettre fin à la violence. Des formes dissimulées d'intimidation, y compris relationnelle, homophobe, et la cyberintimidation, étaient considérées comme moins graves que la violence manifeste et donc moins dignes d'attention. Les résultats de l'étude soulignent l'importance de fournir aux futurs enseignants une formation sur les stratégies de lutte contre la violence.

## **Pre-service Teachers' Knowledge and Attitudes Regarding School-Based Bullying**

Statistics reveal that young people are the primary perpetrators, victims, and witnesses of interpersonal violence in the broader society, as well as within the school environment (Coloroso, 2002), with school-based violence now considered so pervasive that its ramifications go beyond the context of schools making it a matter of public health (Pepler & Craig, 2000; Stoltz, 2005). Bauman and Del Rio (2006) suggest that teacher preparation for developing violence prevention strategies in faculties of education is a necessary part of the effective response to school violence. Yet, comprehensive pre-service teacher training in prevention and intervention of bullying is lacking. Based on previous work examining the nature of school-based violence, this study investigated the knowledge and attitudes of pre-service teachers regarding their sensitivity and understanding of school-based violence at the point when they enter their teacher preparation program.

### **Literature Review**

Bullying as a form of aggression reflects an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim, with school-based bullying ranging from playground pushing and shoving to sexual harassment, gang attacks and dating violence (Pepler, Craig, & Connolly, 1997). Victims of bullying experience a lack of control and fear the power of the perpetrator's actions, while bullies take advantage of this power in the control of others. Problems associated with chronic bullies include disruptive and externalizing behaviour disorders such as Conduct Disorder, described as a pattern of repetitive behaviour where the rights of others or current social norms are violated (American Psychiatric Association [*DSM-IV-TR*], 2000; Pepler & Craig, 2000). Other problems include aggression, sexual harassment, internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety and depression), academic problems, and school dropout (Pepler & Craig, 2000). The serious repercussions for both the bully and the victim underscore the importance of the role that teachers play in promoting violence-free schools and healthy relationships for children and adolescents.

**Myths Regarding Bullying.** There remain misconceptions among teachers regarding bullying; most notable by some being the belief that bullying is a 'normal' developmental phase of childhood (Coloroso, 2002). Additional myths held by some teachers regarding school-based violence are reflected in comments such as, "Being bullied in school does no one any harm", "Bullying is just a normal part of growing up", "Bullying is character building," "Sticks and stones can break your bones but words can never hurt you," and "Don't tell or you're a rat" (Moore, 2000). It is also common for some teachers to suggest that victims are responsible for addressing their vulnerabilities and thus are in some way to blame for their misfortune, reflected in the comment, "Bullying will make a man out of you" (Coloroso, 2002). At times, teachers will express intolerance at the victims' inability to address their own problems and defend themselves.

**Definitions of Bullying.** Understanding perceptions of bullying is an important issue since evidence suggests that the nature of how teachers choose to define bullying is linked to their willingness and preparedness to intervene (Boulton, 1997). Teachers who minimize what constitutes bullying are less likely to advocate against it, often showing a higher threshold and tolerance for aggressive behaviour (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000). Craig et al. (2000)

report that while 91% of teachers acknowledge that bullying occurs in their class, sadly, 25% report that they believe that it is actually helpful to ignore it.

Bullying includes three elements: an imbalance of power, intent to harm, and a threat of further aggression (Coloroso, 2002). It is important for teachers to recognize and actively address all forms of bullying behaviour, including physical, verbal (e.g., name calling, teasing), relational (e.g., rumour spreading, social isolation), cyber (e.g., involving the use of email, cell phones, text messages, and internet sites) and homophobic aggression.

### **Role of Teachers in Reducing School Violence**

The presence of violence negatively affects the school climate, reflected in student elevations on scales assessing fear, depression, psycho-somatic disorder and physical health complaints. These factors, in turn, affect students' attention, concentration, and ultimately, academic performance (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Teachers hold considerable influence in the lives of students and can play a pivotal role in recognizing and responding to bullying incidents (Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2003; Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005; Smith & Sharp, 1994).

Pepler et al. (1997) report that teachers witness only one of every 25 bullying incidents. No doubt, this lack of awareness in part reflects the covert nature of the bullying behaviour itself. This data may also reflect, however, the tendency for students to engage in bullying behaviour when teachers are not present, and hence, as Coloroso (2002) suggests, there is a need for an increased intensity for supervision and recognition of bullying thereby increasing teachers' opportunities to intervene. For this reason, Craig et al. (2000) underscore the need to develop awareness on the part of teachers of the problem of bullying in all of its forms as a necessary first step in responding to violence in schools.

Teachers also play a critical role in identifying signs of victimization, and in assisting children in disclosing threats and breaking the culture of silence that is all too prevalent in the school setting (Smith & Shu, 2000). One meta-analysis of 13 evaluation studies concluded that an important component of successful outcomes in reducing violence in schools is related to the degree of commitment of the teacher to end the violence (Pepler, Smith, & Rigby, 2004).

**Teacher Attitudes Regarding Violence.** There is considerable variability among teachers in their attitudes toward and confidence in implementing anti-violence programs (Craig et al., 2000), with research suggesting that teacher beliefs about bullying also reflect the rate at which they will choose to intervene following a violent incident (Craig et al., 2000; Dake et al., 2003). Teachers who do not perceive bullying incidents as serious will tend to be passive and ineffectual in addressing such behaviours. Teasing, social exclusion, and relational aggression, while constituting what it means to be bullied, tend to be viewed as less severe forms of violence, thereby decreasing the likelihood that teachers will intervene (Stankiewicz, 2007). The absence of intervention not only allows the violence to continue, but also implies that the bullying is acceptable and can be carried out without the fear of consequence (Boulton, 1997).

### **Individual Teacher Characteristics**

**Sex of the Teacher.** Research shows that there are a variety of individual teacher characteristics that influence attitudes and responses of teachers to violence. Sex of the teacher is related to the tendency to respond to school violence (Craig et al., 2000.), with males tending

to be more tolerant of student aggression than females across widely ranging situations, and female teachers expressing more negative attitudes towards bullying (Craig et al., 2000).

**Role of Teacher Empathy.** Teachers who are viewed as effective in taking a stand against violence are characterized by their promotion of empathy in encouraging victims to explain their feelings, while assisting aggressors to increase their awareness regarding how hurtful bullying behaviour can be on the victim. Mishna and Alaggia (2005) report that teachers' personal experience with respect to bullying is an important individual characteristic that may influence their attitudes. Teachers who reported previous personal experience with bullying were more sensitive and aware of the nature of bullying, watched for signs of covert bullying, and encouraged students to disclose victimization in their classroom (Boulton, 1997; Craig et al., 2000; Dake et al., 2003; Mishna et al., 2005; Raj, Aluede, McEachern, & Kenny, 2005). However, evidence also suggests that student victims are often unwilling to involve teachers out of a fear that it will make the situation worse or that teachers will downplay or not validate their disclosure, hence minimizing and dismissing the significance of the bullying (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005).

### **The Importance of Pre-service Teacher Training in Anti-Violence Initiatives**

Bauman and Del Rio (2006) investigated pre-service teachers' responses to physical, verbal, and relational bullying, reflecting that pre-service teachers differentially rated types of bullying with regard to the consequences, with relational bullying viewed as least serious and less likely to stimulate an intervention. Birkinshaw and Eslea (1998) also reported that pre-service teachers tend to rate physical bullying as most distressful for victims—followed by verbal and relational bullying—and were most likely to punish physical and verbal acts of bullying while taking no action in cases of relational bullying (Birkinshaw & Eslea, 1998).

**The Present Study.** Prior to entering teacher-training programs, pre-service teachers possess particular beliefs and attitudes concerning various aspects of school-based violence and intervention. These attitudes can in turn influence the effectiveness of anti-violence initiatives once the graduating student enters the teaching profession. The current study investigated individual characteristics of pre-service teachers that may influence their attitudes and beliefs concerning their likelihood of intervening in school violence and bullying. These characteristics serve as important markers in appreciating how these teachers-in-training will respond to a violent incident. Areas of investigation included: the pre-service teachers' personal histories with respect to bullying; the extent to which the developmental focus of pre-service education (e.g., primary/junior, junior/intermediate, and intermediate/senior) reflects differences in knowledge and understanding with respect to bullying; and the extent to which the sex of pre-service teachers influences their attitudes toward and perceptions of the seriousness of bullying. Pre-service teachers' concerns, confidence, willingness to intervene, and commitment to ensure violence-free schools were accounted for, as well as their definition and knowledge of bullying in schools.

### **Methods**

**Participants.** Participants in the current study included students in an educational psychology course in a Faculty of Education at a major Ontario University that provides pre-service teacher education to approximately 750 students. This Faculty of Education provides a

one-year program for entry into the teaching profession predicated on students already having completed an undergraduate degree. The number of participants who consented to participate was  $N=160$ ; 37.5% ( $n=60$ ) were male and 62.5% ( $n=100$ ) were female. The characteristics of the sample proportionally reflected the sex of the larger student population. The majority of participants were pursuing teacher training with a focus on the intermediate/senior division (76.9%,  $n=123$ ). Thirteen participants (8.1%) were in the junior/intermediate division and 24 participants (15.0%) were in the primary/junior division.

## Materials

Two standardized instruments were used to evaluate teacher knowledge with respect to school violence.

**Teachers' Attitudes about Bullying Questionnaire (TAABQ).** The TAABQ (Beran, 2005) is a 22-item questionnaire that measures pre-service teachers' perspectives on bullying. Pre-service teachers were asked to rate the degree to which they agree with each of the items on a 5-point response scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' Items related to perceptions of system commitment, teacher commitment, concern, confidence, and level of preparation in managing bullying. The reliability of the measure's internal consistency is reflected in Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 for the eight items that measure system commitment, 0.87 for the six items that measure teacher commitment, 0.78 for the four items that measure teacher concern, and 0.61 for the three items that measure teacher confidence (Beran, 2005).

**Trainee Teachers' Bullying Attitudes Questionnaire (TTBAQ).** The TTBAQ used in the present study is a 16-item questionnaire adapted by Boulton (1997) and based on previous questionnaires (Pervin & Turner, 1994; Toda, 1997). The measure espouses an inclusive approach to the definition of bullying in its exploration of attitudes toward: bullying in general, and physical, relational, homophobic, and cyber bullying individually. Pre-service participants were asked to rate the extent to which they considered each behavioural description a reflection of bullying on a 5-point Likert Scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' Successive sections included the respondent's previous experience with bullying (e.g., 'I have witnessed the following types of bullying'), confidence while working with victims and parents, and perceived seriousness of bullying.

## Data Collection

Permission was obtained from instructors in a required educational psychology course in the faculty to request participation of their students in the study. Questionnaires were distributed early within the academic year prior to pre-service teachers attending their first practicum. This time period avoided any direct influence on the results with regard to pre-service training or the teaching practicum. Participants were informed that their information was anonymous and that the objective of the research was to gather information about future teachers and their attitudes regarding school violence. To avoid a social desirability response set, participants were not informed about the specific focus of the study. A statement informed students of their right to refuse to participate without any negative consequences. Student names were omitted, and student identification numbers were not part of the data collection. Replies were voluntary and participants were requested to place the completed surveys in a designated 'return box' within a two-week period in the Pre-service Education Office that was secured within the faculty.

## Results

Cronbach alpha co-efficients for the present sample of the 160 pre-service teachers' responses revealed moderate to high levels of reliability for the TAABQ, reflected in Cronbach's alpha of 0.85 for system commitment, 0.81 for teacher commitment, 0.71 for teacher concern, and 0.70 for teacher confidence. The definitions of bullying (e.g., relational) were correlated with the corresponding rating of perceived seriousness. The following correlation coefficients for the 160 pre-service teachers were obtained, relational bullying ( $r(158) = .31, p < .001$ ), homophobic bullying ( $r(158) = .26, p < .001$ ), and cyber-bullying ( $r(158) = .17, p < .05$ ).

### Previous History

A significant positive correlation was found between pre-service teachers having witnessed relational bullying and their perceived seriousness of relational bullying,  $r(158) = .17, p < .05$  and witnessing cyber-bullying and perceived seriousness of cyber-bullying,  $r(158) = .26, p < .001$ . Thus, the greater the number of relational and cyber-bullying occurrences that pre-service teachers had personally witnessed or experienced, the more egregiously they perceived incidents of relational and cyber bullying. However, witnessing homophobic bullying was unrelated to attributing increased seriousness to homophobic bullying. Significant correlations were found between witnessing bullying (physical, relational, homophobic, and cyber) and teacher confidence in identifying and managing bullying  $r(158) = .19, p < .01$ , as well as witnessing bullying (physical, relational, homophobic, and cyber) (same order as presented in the description of the measure) and teachers' show of concern,  $r(158) = .22, p < .001$ . Generally, the more experiences that pre-service teachers had in witnessing bullying, the more concern and confidence they reported in identifying and managing it.

**Influence of Prior Violence Prevention Training.** A series of *t*-tests explored the relationship between violence prevention training and the five categories in the TAABQ (system commitment, teacher commitment, concern, confidence, and level of preparation). Pre-service teachers with violence prevention training, which would have occurred prior to their entry into the Faculty of Education, reported more confidence in identifying and managing bullying,  $t(158) = 2.38, p < .05$  and registered greater concern and perceived need for violence intervention than those without any previous training,  $t(65) = 2.20, p < .05$ . No differences were found with respect to teacher commitment, system commitment, and perceived seriousness of bullying.

**Differences between Teacher Divisions.** A one-way analysis of variance examined pre-service teacher attitudes, level of preparation, and perceived seriousness of bullying for the three academic divisions within the Faculty of Education; primary/junior, junior/intermediate, intermediate/senior. No significant differences were found between any of the divisions with all divisions reported a high degree of concern regarding bullying and reported being somewhat confident in identifying and managing bullying regardless of the academic division they were in. Pre-service teachers across all three divisions were similar in their endorsement of having a sense of responsibility and commitment to ending bullying while acknowledging that greater system commitment is needed in order to support their involvement. Participants in all divisions perceived that their previous undergraduate education had not prepared them to respond effectively to bullying ( $M = 2.86, SD = 1.85$ ).

**Perceived Seriousness of Bullying.** A within-subjects analysis of variance examined the relative seriousness of physical, relational, homophobic, and cyber bullying. Differences in

seriousness scores among the four bullying types were statistically significant,  $F(3, 457) = 34.83$ ,  $p < .001$ . Pre-service teachers perceived physical bullying as more serious than homophobic, relational, and cyber bullying. In addition, both homophobic and relational bullying were perceived as more serious than cyber bullying. There were no significant differences between perceptions of seriousness of homophobic and relational bullying.

Table 1

## Perceived Seriousness of Bullying Scores by Bullying Type

| Measure             | M                 | SD   |
|---------------------|-------------------|------|
| Direct Bullying     | 4.69 <sub>a</sub> | 0.62 |
| Homophobic Bullying | 4.38 <sub>b</sub> | 0.81 |
| Relational Bullying | 4.17 <sub>b</sub> | 0.86 |
| Cyber Bullying      | 3.91 <sub>c</sub> | 1.05 |

*Note.* Means that do not share a common subscript differ at .05 using Tukey HSD.

**Sex Differences.** Independent samples *t*-tests were performed to determine whether sex differences in pre-service teachers influenced their responses to the perceived seriousness of, as well as attitudes towards, bullying. While both male and female pre-service teachers perceived each of physical, relational, homophobic, and cyber bullying as serious, significant differences were noted in several relevant areas. Female pre-service teachers perceived bullying in general as more serious than males,  $t(67) = -2.63$ ,  $p < .01$ ; homophobic bullying as more serious,  $t(158) = -3.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and cyber bullying as more serious,  $t(98) = -5.62$ ,  $p < .001$ . No significant differences were found for relational bullying,  $t(101) = -1.40$ , *ns* or physical bullying,  $t(158) = 0.36$ , *ns*.

Both male and female participants were equally concerned about bullying and considered it their responsibility to respond to bullying; however, females differed significantly in their perceptions of teacher commitment,  $t(158) = -4.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ; teacher concern,  $t(100) = -4.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and system commitment,  $t(103) = -4.32$ ,  $p < .001$ . No significant differences were noted with respect to confidence in identifying and managing bullying. Both males and females reported that their education had not prepared them to respond effectively to bullying.

Table 2  
Sex Differences in Attitudes Regarding Types of Bullying

| Measure                   | N   | M    | SD   |
|---------------------------|-----|------|------|
| <b>General Bullying</b>   |     |      |      |
| Male                      | 60  | 4.75 | 0.60 |
| Female                    | 100 | 4.96 | 0.20 |
| <b>Homophobia</b>         |     |      |      |
| Male                      | 60  | 4.25 | 0.59 |
| Female                    | 100 | 4.56 | 0.57 |
| <b>Cyber Bullying</b>     |     |      |      |
| Male                      | 60  | 3.81 | 0.74 |
| Female                    | 100 | 4.43 | 0.55 |
| <b>System Commitment</b>  |     |      |      |
| Male                      | 60  | 3.71 | 0.73 |
| Female                    | 100 | 4.20 | 0.58 |
| <b>Teacher Commitment</b> |     |      |      |
| Male                      | 60  | 3.88 | 0.69 |
| Female                    | 100 | 4.34 | 0.59 |
| <b>Teacher Concern</b>    |     |      |      |
| Male                      | 60  | 4.44 | 0.50 |
| Female                    | 100 | 4.74 | 0.38 |

## Discussion

Bullying is one of society's most enduring and universal problems and the emotional and psychological scars from it can last a lifetime (Craig et al., 2000). Teachers can be instrumental in responding effectively to bullying and yet, their attitudes toward school-based violence and readiness to be involved in anti-violence strategies have been largely neglected in research (Beran & Li, 2005). The present study was designed to gain an understanding of the level of concern, commitment, and confidence in addressing physical, relational, homophobic, and cyber bullying by surveying pre-service teachers at the earliest stages of their career.

**Relevance of Personal Experience.** Pre-service teachers who had personal experience involved in or witnessing bullying incidents were more sensitive to labelling an aggressive act as bullying. They also were more confident in identifying and managing the bullying behaviour. Similar to the conclusions drawn by Craig et al. (2000), the present study found that pre-service teachers' personal history of witnessing bullying was related to an increased concern for intervening in aggression at school. When the behaviour included acts of social exclusion, pre-service teachers who had experienced these types of victimization were more likely to label them as bullying and would actively intervene.

**Relevance of Previous Training.** The present study identified that violence prevention training is related to pre-service teachers' expressing increased concern and confidence in identifying and managing bullying. Congruent with the observations of Kallestad and Olweus (2003), the current study also noted that pre-service teachers with prior violence prevention training responded to bullying with more confidence and concern in comparison to those without such training. It will be particularly important for pre-service teachers without prior instruction to

engage in violence prevention and intervention training as part of their teacher preparation programming.

Consistent with the findings of Merrett and Wheldall (2003), pre-service teachers in all academic divisions reported that their post-secondary education to date had not prepared them to meet the challenges of bullying in the school system. The majority of these pre-service teachers expressed a desire for further development of their knowledge and skills in behaviour management and bullying prevention. Unfortunately, most initial teacher training programs do not offer substantial and specific coverage of this topic (Boulton, 1997). In an informal review of eight Ontario Faculties of Education, only one had a formal course entitled “Safe Schools,” two had courses with related titles such as “Teaching at Risk Adolescents and Young Adults” and “Creating Healthy, Safe and Supportive Learning Environments,” while five had no course content related to school violence (Craig, 2010).

**Defining School Violence.** The current study suggests that there is a discrepancy in the manner in which pre-service teachers define bullying. While all academic divisions perceived bullying as serious, it would appear that not all teacher candidates are aware of the extent of bullying, and are less likely to consider relational, homophobic, and cyber bullying as serious and problematic. These findings are not surprising given that these forms of aggression are less overt than physical bullying. Pre-service teachers’ perspectives regarding the extent of seriousness of the bullying may be influenced by the lack of visible effects from certain types of bullying (Craig et al., 2000). What might explain the tendency of pre-service teachers to perceive physical forms of bullying as more serious than relational, homophobic, and cyber bullying? Some teachers experience discomfort with ambiguity, which may influence their attitudes toward less obvious forms of bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). More apparent forms of bullying such as pushing and kicking allow teachers to rely on standard policies and procedures to respond to such overt behaviours. Unfortunately, teachers tend to be less certain regarding the best course of action in responding to covert forms of bullying (Nishina, 2004). Teachers also may fear that if they report such incidents of relational, homophobic, and cyber bullying to their administration, they may be perceived as having ineffective classroom management, whereas referrals for incidents of physical bullying are expected (Nishina 2004).

**Sex Differences.** The present study analyzed male and female responses separately because sex differences have been reported as an important source of variation regarding teacher attitudes towards bullying (Boulton, 1997; Craig et al., 2000; Rigby & Slee, 1999). In the current study, small but significant differences between male and female pre-service teachers emerged on several attitude variables. Females perceived homophobic and cyber bullying as more serious than males. These results suggest the possibility that the sex of a teacher may contribute to whether bullying will be viewed as a problem requiring a response. Craig et.al. (2000) suggested that variation in empathy may serve as a possible explanation for sex differences in teacher’s bullying responses, since females tend to score higher on measures of empathy relative to males.

## Implications

**Identifying What Constitutes Bullying** The present study highlights the importance of educating pre-service teachers to: identify bullying episodes, perceive all violence-related behaviours as serious, and introduce effective methods of prevention and intervention within the classroom. Active teacher involvement is critical to raising awareness of the issue, supporting effective program and policy implementation, and in developing and implementing anti-violence

school curricula. Given the findings of the current study reflecting the willingness yet lack of preparation of pre-service teachers to participate in anti-violence programs in schools, teacher training will need to focus on the identification of all forms of bullying as important and worthy of attention.

These findings also suggest that in order to increase pre-service teachers' awareness of bullying, teacher training and continuing education programs need to acknowledge the diversity of behaviours that constitute bullying (Craig et al., 2000). Educational goals also should include the specific short and long-term consequences of bullying for both victims and perpetrators (Yoon, 2004). This is of particular relevance given the underestimation of the impact of certain types of bullying in the current study such as relational, homophobic and cyber bullying.

Teachers-in-training should be provided with opportunities to develop confidence in managing school-based violence early in their teacher-training program. It is recommended that teacher preparation programs include training specifically on the prevalence, types, and impact of school bullying, in addition to effective prevention and intervention strategies (Beran & Li, 2005). Self-efficacy and preparedness also can be addressed through professional associations emphasizing the topic of school violence in their journals and during conferences (Beran & Li, 2005). Furthermore, given the importance identified in previous research regarding the role of empathy in increasing sensitivity in teachers, anti-violence programs in pre-service education should examine the possibility of delivering course content that targets the development of empathy in teachers (Boulton 1997).

**Sexual Orientation as a Form of School Violence.** Although it has been over a decade and a half since O'Connor (1995) acknowledged that the threat of violence regarding gender and sexual orientation conformity is pervasive in schools, teacher education programs in Canadian universities continue to focus on curriculum and pedagogy. The exploration of concerns regarding equity in education comprises only a minor portion of undergraduate education programs (Walton, 2004). Teacher training needs to incorporate school violence prevention programs that target and cultivate the values of tolerance and respect for differences, and which seek to eradicate the use of homophobic language.

**Cyber Bullying.** Combatting cyber bullying has been more difficult for schools to contend with than initially expected (Li, 2007). Bullies who use the internet in targeting other students are often anonymous, and those who use the internet as part of their bullying behaviour are frequently socially isolated, creating yet another challenge for teachers and the school system to acknowledge the bullying and effectively intervene. Nelson (2003) reported on the high rates of cyber bullying, which has quickly become an increasingly critical problem for schools. This fact highlights the need for teachers to be knowledgeable about the extent and variety of forms of cyber bullying in developing appropriate prevention and intervention strategies to ensure safety of all students.

## Limitations

The primary limitation of the current study relates to the use of a single Faculty of Education, which calls into question the degree of generalizability of the findings. There also may exist a bias within the current sample of pre-service teachers who responded to the surveys as they may represent the more motivated and well-informed teachers in training. Hence, there is the concern that the current results may represent an overestimate of the degree to which this group of pre-service teachers are informed about the issues related to school violence.

## **Future Research**

The current study used standardized questionnaires to elicit pre-service teachers' beliefs and attitudes about school violence. Future studies could present pre-service teachers with realistic situations to assess their perceptions of and attitudes toward specific types of bullying. Vignettes are widely used in awareness and attitudinal research, as they approximate real-life decision-making or judgement-making situations, and thus may garner insight into such processes. The purpose of the current study also was to assess pre-service teachers' beliefs and attitudes regarding school violence at the beginning of their teacher training. What is unknown is the extent of influence of the pre-service teacher training program on these same beliefs and attitudes. Such follow-up studies would provide useful information about the relevance and importance of curricular additions that relate specifically to school violence.

## **Summary**

Teachers play a critical role in the success of school-based, anti-violence interventions. Findings from this study suggest that while most pre-service teachers acknowledge school bullying as an issue of importance, they differ in their perceptions of the seriousness of physical, relational, homophobic, and cyber bullying. The willingness of these teacher candidates to intervene is based on their perceptions of the relative gravity and impact of the less overt forms of bullying. The results of this study also indicate that many pre-service teachers would welcome more training in violence prevention in their Bachelor of Education program.

Finally, it is imperative to recognize that violence thrives in a climate of silence. Given that children spend a considerable portion of each day in academic settings, there is impetus to develop and implement anti-violence curricula to foster a safe and healthy climate and culture in schools (Wolfe, Crooks, Chiodo, & Jaffe, 2010). The current study has highlighted the crucial role of teachers in this regard and recommends that pre-service teacher training in violence prevention be deemed a priority.

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