

Understandings and Experiences of Bullying: Impact on Students on the Autism Spectrum*

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In this qualitative study, we explored the perspectives of 10 adolescents with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their experiences of bullying. Through individual semistructured interviews, they were asked to describe their understandings and experiences of bullying. Details of their experiences are described as well as the perceived impact on the students and their schooling. Data analysis revealed a number of common experiences including high rates of traditional bullying and more specifically verbal bullying, with fewer incidents of cyberbullying reported. In support of literature in the area, the results of the study indicate that bullying can be a significant inhibitor, which may prevent students with ASD from taking full advantage of their schooling. Listening to and reflecting on the voices and personal stories of adolescent students with ASD is critically important for developing more supportive approaches to their education and needs. The reports of bullying by students on the autism spectrum emphasises the need for more effective interventions and management strategies to be implemented in a whole-school approach as well as targeted strategies to prevent bullying experiences for this particular population of students.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, children at risk, school-based interventions, bullying, cyberbullying, whole-school approach, student voice

Current Australian estimates suggest that one in four children are subjected to some level of bullying victimisation (both traditional and cyber) during their school years (Chisholm, 2014; Cross et al., 2009; Shaw & Cross, 2012). Current studies suggest that children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are especially vulnerable to bullying (e.g., Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Maïano, Normand, Salvas, Moullec, & Aimé, 2016).

Bullying is defined by three key characteristics: (a) it hurts or harms another person, (b) it is carried out repeatedly or over time, and (c) it involves an imbalance of power in an interpersonal relationship that makes it difficult for the victim to defend themselves

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(Monks & Smith, 2006; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2002; Smith & Monks, 2008). Bullying can take many forms; the most common categories are physical, verbal, and relational (Slonje & Smith, 2008), which are now referred to as traditional bullying. In relational bullying, the intent of perpetrators of bullying is often to damage the status and/or social relationships of the victim through their actions (Rigby, 2002). More recently, cyberbullying has emerged as a new form of bullying that occurs through the use of modern technologies. Some researchers have conceptualised cyberbullying as another form of traditional bullying (Chisholm, 2014; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Thomas, Connor, & Scott, 2015); other researchers suggest that it is a distinct, separate phenomenon because of the unique psychological processes involved that are often fuelled by anonymity and witnessed by a much larger audience (Aboujaoude, 2011; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; van der Wal, de Wit, & Hirasing, 2003).

Although younger children are more likely to bully others physically or verbally, relational bullying behaviour is known to peak in the middle primary school years and the first year of high school (Delfabbro et al., 2006; Rettew & Pawlowski, 2016). This is often linked to rapid changes in students' social skills, increased social demands on students at this age, as well as the transition to high school, which disrupts the social status for many students (Cross et al., 2009). Bullying often diminishes later in adolescence and adulthood (Rettew & Pawlowski, 2016). Although verbal bullying is generally considered more commonplace than physical bullying, the prevalence of online bullying or cyberbullying increases as students' access to electronic devices, such as computers and mobile phones, rises (Rettew & Pawlowski, 2016; Slonje & Smith, 2008). The actions of students who perpetrate bullying can result in victims of bullying experiencing a range of verbal, physical, social, or psychological issues (Rigby, 2002; Thomas et al., 2015). Therefore, the impact of bullying on children and their families can be significant, with bullying often causing damage to self-esteem, mental health, progress at school, and relationships (Dombeck, 2014), and this impact can be even more significant for students with disabilities including ASD (Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011).

Students with ASD and Bullying

Students with ASD are now being increasingly educated within mainstream settings. The proportion of children with ASD enrolled in mainstream Australian schools is estimated to be 73% based on a survey of 1,500 parents (Autism Awareness, 2014). As a result, an increasing focus of research internationally has centred on the bullying of students with disabilities, with the finding that this group is at a greater risk of being bullied than their peers (Didden et al., 2009; Kowalski & Fedina, 2011; Rose et al., 2011).

Difficulties in social interaction and communication are common indicators of student victimisation (Chen & Schwartz, 2012), which may contribute to increased bullying victimisation in students with ASD (Chen & Schwartz, 2012; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014).

Previous findings have supported this view, with research suggesting higher frequencies of peer shunning and victimisation in this group (Carter, 2009; Chen & Schwartz, 2012; Liddle, 2001). Rates of bullying range from 36% to 78% in studies of students with ASD (e.g., Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Maïano et al., 2016), which may be 2–4 times higher than rates reported for the typically developing population or most other students with disabilities (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Maïano et al., 2016; Sterzing, Shattuck, Narendorf, Wagner, & Cooper, 2012; van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010). Students with ASD experience higher levels of peer shunning that increase with age or peak at high school (Bitsika & Sharpley, 2014; Nowell, Brewton, & Goin-Kochel, 2014; van Roekel et al., 2010).

Boys with ASD are also more likely to be bullied than girls on the spectrum (Bitsika & Sharpley, 2014; Nowell et al., 2014; Sterzing et al., 2012). Moreover, research suggests that mainstream schooled students on the autism spectrum are more likely to experience bullying than students with ASD in other settings (Bitsika & Sharpley, 2014; Nowell et al., 2014; Sterzing et al., 2012; van Roekel et al., 2010; Zeedyk, Rodriguez, Tipton, Baker, & Blacher, 2014). Other studies have investigated the prevalence of students with ASD being the bully as well as bullies and victims. A recent meta-analysis suggested students with ASD were involved in bullying as the bully (10%), the victim (44%), or bully-victims (16%), with being bullied being the most common experience of students with ASD (Maiano et al., 2016).

The types of bullying reported by students with ASD have suggested that on average 56% of bullying was of a physical nature, 30% of a verbal nature, and 14% took a relational form (Bitsika & Sharpley, 2014; Nowell et al., 2014; Sterzing et al., 2012; van Roekel et al., 2010; Zeedyk et al., 2014). In addition, frequent bullying was often related to the mental health issues children with ASD may experience (Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2012), with higher levels of bullying being linked to higher levels of anxiety, hyperactivity, self-injurious and stereotypic behaviour, and other sensitivities in children with ASD (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Students with ASD tend to exhibit risk factors and lack protective factors associated with victimisation, such as vulnerability to exploitation and difficulties engaging with others socially, and many of these reflected characteristics or behaviours are associated with a diagnosis of ASD, consequently placing these children at high risk for victimisation (Schroeder, Cappadocia, Bebko, Pepler, & Weiss, 2014).

The Current Study

Although a number of studies to date have identified the higher prevalence of bullying in students with ASD and the risk and protective factors that may be involved, very few studies have looked in detail at the bullying experiences of students with ASD and listened to their voices to determine what is involved in the act of bullying, which may help inform measures to prevent bullying of this population in schools. We used a qualitative dataset in this study to explore the perspectives of 10 adolescents with a diagnosis of ASD and their understandings and experiences of bullying in Australian schools. The dataset was drawn from a larger Australian study to explore the understandings and experiences of bullying by students with ASD and their parents.

Listening to and reflecting on the voices and personal stories of adolescent students with ASD is critically important for developing more supportive approaches to their education and needs (Peters, 2010; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). Specific aims of the current study were to investigate:

- students with ASD's experiences of bullying, and
- the impact of these experiences on their personal wellbeing and schooling.

Method

A qualitative methodology in the form of semistructured interviews with students was used to investigate the study aims. The focus on students served to utilise the *insider accounts* of students with ASD (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Lawson, 2001), thus giving the study the potential to uncover issues and perceptions related to bullying that may otherwise have remained hidden (Mertens, 2007). Ethical approval for the study was obtained through Queensland University of Technology (approval number 1100000186).

Recruitment

Various methods were used to invite participants from the south-eastern area of Queensland, Australia, to take part in the study. Advertisements were posted on both the Autism Queensland Facebook page and through the email communications of Asperger Services Australia. In addition, invitations were distributed to students (11–16 age range) at Autism Queensland to take home, as well as to teachers and families of new clients seen by Autism Queensland's outreach services. Families who were interested were asked to contact the research team directly.

Participants

There were 10 students with ASD interviewed (two students were from one family), with one semistructured interview conducted with each student. Nine of the 10 children were males, and their ages ranged from 11 years 5 months to 16 years 3 months. Six of the students attended public schools, two attended Catholic schools, one student attended an independent school, and another was home schooled. Further demographic details are provided in [Table 1](#). All students had a diagnosis of ASD as determined by the diagnostic criteria of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., text rev.; *DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) that were in use at the time. The students accessed the services of either Autism Queensland or Asperger Services Australia, which are both community-based organisations established to support children and adults with ASD.

Procedure

Once contact was made with the research team, the participation information sheet and consent form were posted out to interested families prior to the date of the interview. Student participants were offered entry into a draw to win a A\$50 iTunes card as an incentive to participate. Nine parents (including a parent who had two children with ASD) provided informed written consent for their child to participate in the interviews. The students also provided assent to participate in the interviews. The interviews were conducted by a research officer trained in interview techniques. The research officer had a degree in psychology and a sound knowledge of bullying research, having previously managed two projects on cyberbullying.

Bullying is a sensitive issue; to ensure that we minimised any distress and anxiety that the students experienced while being interviewed, a number of support strategies were put in place. First, the interview times and locations were negotiated with the participants and occurred at a time and location that the students preferred. For example, some students chose to be interviewed in the home environment, whereas some had a preference for phone interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of all participants. The purpose of the interview was explained to the participants prior to their consent and they were again reminded of the purpose immediately before the interview. Second, students also had the option of having a familiar adult or support person present with them, and in most cases, the students chose to have a parent sit in on the interview. Third, the interviews were kept short. Last, any student who was distressed by the content of the interview was given the option by the research officer to stop the interview at any time. If it was felt that any student had been distressed by the interview, a member of the research team made follow-up contact with the family afterwards to check in and also provided additional support and counselling information if it was felt necessary. This was required for only one student involved in the interviews.

TABLE 1
Demographics of Students who Participated in Semistructured Interviews

Student name (pseudonym)	Bruce	Dennis	Michael	Joseph	Kieran	Mark	Frederick	Tara	Harry	Kevin
Student number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Gender	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	F	M	M
Age (years and months)	16 years 3 months	12 years 6 months	11 years 5 months	14 years	16 years 2 months	14 years 9 months	13 years	12 years 4 months	12 years	13 years 5 months
Diagnosis	Asperger syndrome	Asperger syndrome	ASD	Asperger syndrome	Asperger syndrome	Asperger syndrome	Asperger syndrome	Asperger syndrome	ASD	ASD
Type of school attended	Catholic high school	Private	Public	Home schooled	Public	Public	Public	Catholic high school	Public	Public

Thirteen phone calls about the interviews were received, resulting in three phone interviews, one face-to-face interview held at the university, and six face-to-face interviews held at participants' homes, with a total of 10 students interviewed. The interview length ranged from 20 to 65 minutes, with an average length of 20 minutes. Written visual information about the interviews was shared with the students by email prior to interviews occurring, and they were provided with a list of sample questions that would be asked. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The interview questions for the students related to their perceptions of their experiences of bullying and the impact these experiences had on them and their schooling. If a student did not understand a question, the question was repeated for the student, asked differently to help with the comprehension of the question, or further explanation was provided. These interview questions were developed by the research team to support the research questions and were used as a framework for collecting the information during the semistructured interviews. The questions were as follows:

1. What do you think bullying is?
2. What do you think cyberbullying is?
3. Have you ever been bullied?
4. How old were you when you were bullied?
5. When and where did it happen?
6. How often did it happen?
7. What did the bully do to you?
8. Who bullied you?
9. Did you tell anyone? If you did tell someone, whom did you tell?
10. How much of an impact did it have on you?
11. How did you react to it?

Each student was assigned a pseudonym and was represented as a number in the data so that their identity was not revealed. When reporting on the results, the assigned student pseudonym has been used. Comments are reported verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen to guide data analysis, as it is a flexible method for qualifying patterns in the data and aids in organising, describing, and interpreting these patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An advantage of thematic analysis is that it is not tied to a specific theory and its requirements, such as the case of grounded theory and the condition of reaching saturation point (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were generated via qualitative content analysis, which is a widely used method of eliciting contextual meaning from text (Bryman, 2001).

The taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and prepared for importing into the software program NVivo 10 (QSR International, 2014). This program aided in organising, recording, and managing the data. The research officer who conducted the interviews and a research assistant coded the data independently. The research assistant was experienced in conducting qualitative analysis for education projects about disability inclusion and developmental disabilities. Data were initially organised under the interviewee's code number (one document per interviewee). The data were systematically coded and compressed into main categories. These categories were made up of words or concepts (Mayring, 2000)

that have similar meanings. After initial open coding, the interview questions were used as key organisers for the development of higher order categories, and the coded data were then grouped under these higher order categories (Patton, 2002). Interview data were then analysed according to student understandings and experiences of bullying and the impact of these experiences on them personally and on their schooling in order to abstract themes and subthemes (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Establishing Trustworthiness

Data triangulation. Although the research design offered limited scope for triangulation during the data collection phase, efforts were made to address this issue during data analysis. Two researchers independently conducted a qualitative analysis of the transcribed data and conferred with the first author to verify their interpretation of themes. To further add to the credibility of the findings, the thematic data codes were also quantified by a research assistant with quantitative data analysis experience, who conferred with the first author during the process.

Member checking and researcher reflexivity. A member-checking procedure (Creswell, 2013) involving all students was used to test the accuracy and validity of the findings and involved the students being given the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of their interview answers at the end of the interview while it was fresh in their minds. This was achieved by providing each student with a verbal summary of the answers progressively throughout the interview. This gave the students the opportunity to add to their answers or change anything along the way. Additionally, at the end of their interview, the students were provided with a verbal summary of key information they had shared and at this point were given the opportunity to add further comments or change anything they felt should not be included (Creswell, 2013).

Results

Three main themes were identified from the transcribed interview data: understanding of bullying, experiences of bullying behaviour, and responses to bullying. These themes are illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

Theme 1: Understanding of Bullying

In general, the students had a clear understanding of what acts defined bullying and cyberbullying. When asked as part of their interview what they thought bullying was, all 10 students (100%) provided definitions that were strongly aligned with widely used definitions of bullying within the research literature (Monks & Smith, 2006; Smith & Monks, 2008). The descriptions provided by all of the students focused on bullying involving behaviours that were intended to hurt or harm others. In addition, Tara, in her explanation of bullying, emphasised the psychological aspects of bullying: ‘being nasty to someone or when they are using attitude towards them’. Bruce’s definition of bullying highlighted the repetitive nature of bullying: ‘it’s not making fun of somebody once it’s repeatedly making fun of them at their expense repeatedly over and over again’. Both the physical and verbal aspects of bullying were emphasised by Harry: ‘I think bullying is when someone intentionally physically or verbally harms another person’.

Additionally, six of the 10 students (60%) described verbal bullying specifically of a psychological nature or that which involved an imbalance of power. Furthermore, nine of the 10 students’ (90%) descriptions of cyberbullying were clearly aligned with definitions

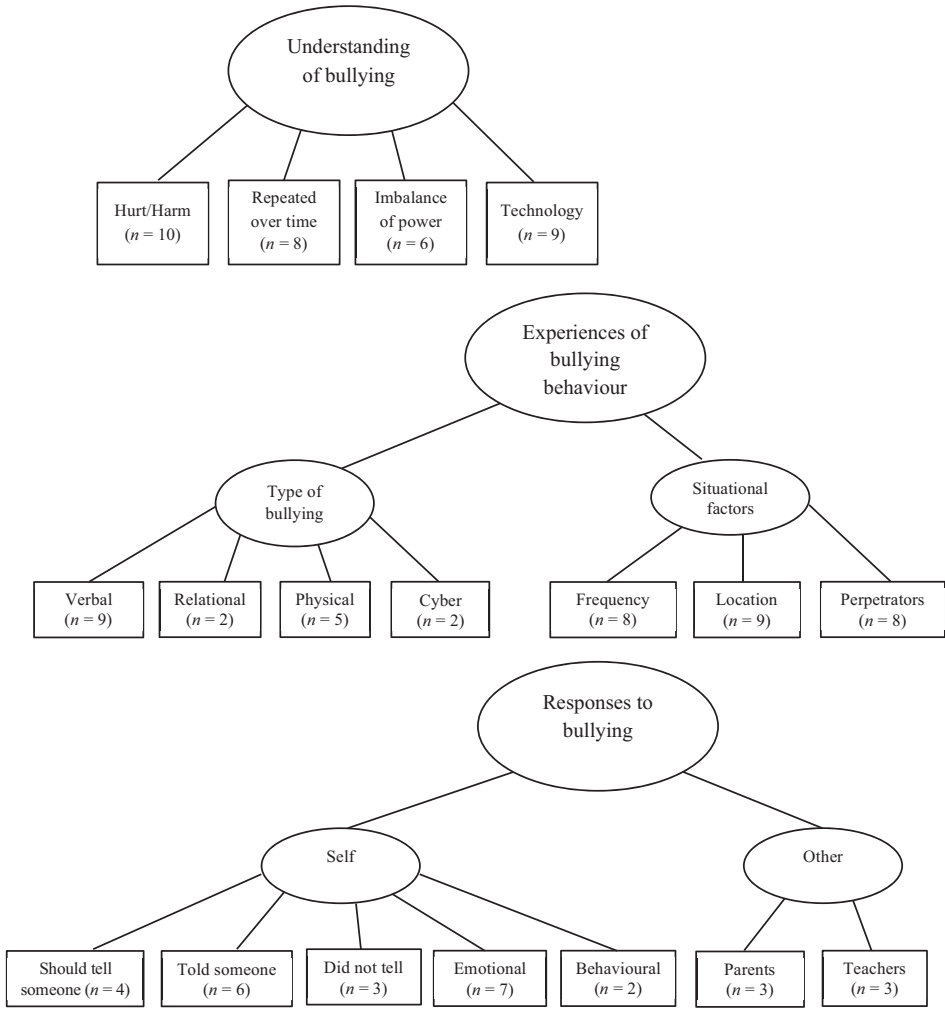


FIGURE 1
Thematic Map Illustrating Themes, Subthemes, and Codes.

of cyberbullying used in the research literature (Monks et al., 2009; Smith & Monks, 2008). The students’ definitions highlighted the use of information and communication technologies as the vehicle for acts of bullying, as demonstrated by Harry’s description: ‘I think cyberbullying is doing the, like, bullying just like via, um, technologically, like, with technology and phones and stuff and being, like, really verbally offensive’. Moreover, most of the students stated they had been victims of bullying behaviour during their school life.

Theme 2: Experiences of Bullying Behaviour

The majority of students had experienced bullying behaviour, with nine of the 10 students (90%) indicating during interviews that they had been bullied at some time during their school life. One student (Kieran) stated during the interviews that he had never experienced

any form of bullying behaviour, but his mother (who attended the interviews with Kieran) indicated that he had been a victim of bullying on more than one occasion. However, due to the student's response, there was no further probing of his bullying experiences, and the interview was stopped at that point as none of the remaining interview questions applied.

Type of bullying. Of those students who confirmed that they had been victims of bullying, all of them referred to verbal bullying as the most common bullying act they had been subjected to. All of the nine students described acts of verbal bullying. Of these nine students, almost half had also been victims of physical bullying, and two of these students had also been the target of cyberbullying. Interestingly, one student (Dennis) admitted he had not perceived what he had experienced as bullying at the time it had occurred but realised now that it was bullying. In comparison, a less common experience was cyberbullying, with only two of the students (Mark and Tara) stating that they had also been targeted by cyberbullying. Students' experiences of bullying are summarised in [Table 2](#).

The most common acts of verbal bullying were in the form of name-calling and insults. Threats, insults related to ASD, and put-downs related to skills were less frequent and often occurred with name-calling or insults. For example, '... called me names and said I was a really bad boy and has ... that I was not good at doing stuff' (Michael) or 'Call me names, rough me up, just insult the fact that I was reading so much' (Kevin).

Moreover, half of the students, or five of the 10 (50%), had also been subjected to physical bullying. These acts included being physically hit, restrained, or forcibly removed from a social setting, or having their food or property interfered with. All students who had experienced physical bullying had also experienced verbal bullying. An account by Mark illustrates a repetitive and escalating pattern of verbal and physical victimisation:

*I always deal with people swearing at me, saying [inaudible] things ...
Little punches, then it would start to get worse ...*

... We're out eating lunch and they touch my food and stuff and sometimes they throw it in the bin. Or they knock it off and it falls to the ground. (Mark)

Less common were experiences of relational bullying or cyberbullying. Students who experienced either form of bullying had also experienced physical and verbal bullying. In the case of relational bullying, the perpetrators threatened the victim's social networks to further isolate the student or their siblings. The two students who had experienced cyberbullying stated that this form of bullying started later in their school and had become more frequent as they had gotten older.

In summary, all of the nine students describe acts of verbal bullying. Of these nine students, almost half had also been victims of physical bullying, and two of these students had also been the target of either cyberbullying or relational bullying.

Situational factors. For the students interviewed, the frequency of the bullying experiences varied, but the bullying was repeated and regular over time. The frequency ranged from daily occurrences (Mark), every second day (Bruce and Kevin), once or twice a week (Joseph), to less frequent occurrences including every few weeks (Harry), monthly (Tara), sports days (Dennis), or sometimes (Michael). In retrospect, Dennis described bullying that occurred every sports day, but at the time he did not perceive it as bullying.

The students' experiences provided a range of insights into where and when the bullying occurred. All the students reported experiences of bullying in the school environment. Six of the nine students who identified as being bullied described bullying as most commonly occurring during lunchbreaks. Students also described times of transition or unstructured

TABLE 2
Experience of Bullying

Subtheme	Code	Subcode	Example
Type of bullying	Verbal (n=9)	Name calling/insults (6)	'You're stupid, you're an idiot and you stink like someone actually ripped you out of something' (Mark)
		Threats (3)	'They get a gun and shoot me and then he's actually burned me and break all my bones . . . and breaking it all up and feeding it to my little brother' (Mark)
		Related to ASD (2)	'Never any physical things but they were always asking me bad questions like that invoked my autism like saying one person asked me do you go to the retard centre' (Harry)
	Physical (n=5)	Put downs (related to skills) (2)	'Once a lot of times they would say, you know, that I am so terrible at soccer that I wasn't allowed to watch the game and literally force me way from the field' (Joseph)
		Hitting/punch/pushed (4)	'Always people giving me hits on the arm or hits on the leg or just throwing stuff at me like pencil sharpeners, rubbers, or even including money. They throw it at me and they expect me to pick it up' (Mark)
		Physically restrained or removed from a situation (2)	'They pushed me to the ground and then when I got up, they took me into the toilets and they locked me in with themselves in the toilets and started saying if I didn't do this I would, like, be beaten up by someone' (Tara)
		Interfering with food or property (2)	'I was, like, enjoying a slushie and kid came over and shoved a pen in my slushie and insulted me and stuff. I got a free one from tuckshop though cause they were sorry for me' (Frederick)
	Relational (n=2)	Disrupting friendships (1)	'Another time someone actually bought my best friend for five bucks and he never spoke to me again' (Joseph)
		Threatening friends/family (1)	'They were in my sister's grade and they, like, something went wrong with my sister and they said I had to fix the problem so they could be friends again [sister 1 year older]' (Tara)
	Cyber (n=2)	Older age (2)	Victimised by bullying since Grade 2; cyberbullying did not start until age 11 (Tara)
Threatening emails (1)		'I have over, like, 20 emails in this last year and it increased by 40 this year. I'm just upset that it happened. There was swearing. People actually said "Get this kid . . . I'm gonna bet him how much money . . . I'm gonna punch your lights out"' (Mark)	
Situational factors	Frequency (n=8)	Daily (1)	'Usually it would happen every few weeks and eventually it would stop but it was usually repeat people like the same person doing it to me continuously' (Harry)
		Every second day (2)	
		Once or twice a week (1)	
		Less frequently (3)	
	Location (n=9)	Sometimes (1)	'All the time it would happen during school hours whenever it happened and at school usually, like, just after school, like, after the bell's gone and I am just walking to the car usually at that point in time' (Harry)
		School (9)	
		Lunchtimes (6)	
		Transitions (2)	
Perpetrators (n=8)	In class (1)	Frederick: Younger, same grade, older, had seniors bully me, I have had younger kids bully me. Interviewer: So was it just like one person or was it like a group of the . . . Frederick: Sometimes I've had groups, like, when the bully has friends. I dread the day the bully has friends.	
	Outside of school (1)		
	Groups (3)		
	Same grade as student (5)		
		Older than student (4)	
		Younger than student (1)	

times as other examples of when bullying took place (e.g., after the school bell in the afternoon, sports events). Only one student (Mark) indicated bullying occurred in class. Common examples of locations where bullying occurred included the school oval, the playground, the girls' bathroom, and on the way to the car in the afternoon. Only one child (Michael) indicated an additional location to the school environment (the park) where he had been bullied.

The students identified a range of perpetrators. Mark and Bruce, for example, could identify the perpetrators only as 'a bunch of people' with no key descriptors being provided. Three of the students pinpointed the bullies as being from the same grade (Kevin, Dennis, and Joseph). Michael identified the bullies as being of the same age and older; Harry described bullies who were 1 year older. Tara described bullies who were older kids in her sister's class. In comparison, Frederick stated that he had been bullied by perpetrators of varying ages (e.g., younger, older, and the same age).

Theme 3: Responses to Bullying

Responses to bullying included students' reactions to bullying, and their understandings of reporting and responding to bullying. This included to whom they think bullying should be reported, and to whom (if anyone) they reported their own experiences of bullying. Students also discussed their own emotional and behavioural responses to bullying, and follow-up responses to reports of bullying. Their responses are summarised in [Table 3](#).

Responding to and reporting bullying. Key people the students identified as important to report bullying to included parents, teachers, principals, and significant adults in the school environment. Bruce highlighted the importance of reporting the bullying to someone: 'how is anybody going to know unless you tell them; you have got to tell the people that you are being bullied'. Harry suggested a number of significant adults that bullying could be reported to: 'I reckon they should tell a trusted adult including parents and teachers or principals at the school'. Teachers were the most commonly identified adult to report bullying to, followed by parents. Students identified that it was important for the school to know about the bullying: 'Parents should definitely tell the school that their child is being cyberbullied' (Tara).

Six students had reported bullying to a parent or teacher. Many of the students reported the bullying to their parents, specifically their mothers, and relied on their parent to follow up with the school. However, in cases where parents or students had reported the bullying that had occurred, many of the students felt this was not adequately dealt with. Two students had indicated that the teachers had tried to address the bullying but that not enough was done: 'They [teachers] tried to stop it but they couldn't really effectively do anything at that time' (Kevin). Furthermore, Harry stressed the importance of reporting the bullying to stay out of trouble: 'I would just tell an adult what they said so I wouldn't get in trouble as well'. Three students indicated that they did not report the bullying. For instance, Mark did not always tell his mother, as he knew how much it upset her.

Impact of bullying behaviour on victim. The majority of the students interviewed identified the significant impact the bullying experiences had on them. This impact ranged from emotional reactions to experiencing a lack of self-confidence to more extreme reactions such as school refusal and decisions made to home school. They described emotions such as being scared (Tara and Frederick), feeling emotionally upset (Harry and Michael), and lacking self-confidence (Bruce) or trust in others (Mark).

TABLE 3

Responses to Bullying (Should Tell, Did Tell, Didn't Tell)

Subtheme	Code	Subcode	Example
Responding to and reporting bullying	Should tell someone (<i>n</i> = 4)	Teacher (4)	'The child should actually let the teacher know and the teachers can sort it out with like other teachers and talk to their teachers and definitely tell like a parent if you are being bullied' (Tara)
		Parent (2)	'Bullied, um, go find a friend or parent or something. Just talk about it. Inform your teacher or parent' (Frederick)
		Friends/other students (2)	
	Told someone (<i>n</i> = 6)	Principal (1)	
		Parent (4)	
		Teacher (2)	'I told my mum and she contacted the school and got them to know about it and I also told teachers down at the advancement centre because like I used be in touch with them heaps' (Harry)
	Did not tell (<i>n</i> = 3)	Other adult (1)	
		Assumed bullying was normal (1)	'No [I didn't tell anyone]. I assumed it was normal that this happened' (Bruce)
		Received threats from others (1)	'Not all the time. Mum or a teachers. Sometimes I got like threats not to stuff' (Frederick)
	Parents (<i>n</i> = 3)	Did not want to upset parent (1)	'And I don't tell my mum this because I know that she's upset all the time and it just makes me feel even worse... ' (Mark)
Followed up with school (2)		'After it happened and when I got home I told mum straight away and she let the school know about it. I didn't really feel safe telling a teacher' (Tara)	
Upset about bullying (1)		'... I see her [mother] being tortured because she's getting upset because I'm getting bullied. And we tell each other it's ok but it isn't. It always isn't.' (Mark)	
Teacher (<i>n</i> = 3)	Not resolved (3)	'Yeah, the teachers didn't do enough. They said I should have told the teacher on duty when it happened, but I was only in Grade 3 so I didn't really ... and I was only new to the big school so I really didn't understand that you had to tell teachers when that stuff happened.' (Tara)	
Impact of bullying behaviour on victim	Emotional (<i>n</i> = 7)	Scared (2)	'It made me feel really scared what was happening' (Tara)
		Upset (2)	'It usually made me really hurt, like, emotionally really hurt mentally and emotionally most of the time, but I always told someone so they always helped me, like, make sure that it didn't kind of, I didn't take it too personally.' (Harry)
		Lack of confidence (1)	'I had no self-confidence. Yeah, it was horrible I had no confidence in myself at all' (Bruce)
		Lack trust (1)	'I have Asperger's and it's hard to trust anybody now.' (Mark)
	Behavioural (<i>n</i> = 2)	Anger (1)	'Lost my temper a lot' (Kevin)
		More isolated (1)	'I suppose it made me focus more on reading than I would have otherwise. So more individualistic behaviours' (Kevin)
		Home schooled (1)	'Well, we just took up home schooling it was getting so bad I was barely getting schoolwork due to the bullying. I literally wouldn't eat lunch. I would eat like an apple; that was it, that was my lunch' (Mark)

Other students, such as Kevin, described behavioural responses to bullying in the form of reverting to more introverted behaviour or individual activities as a result of bullying. Some students described more extreme emotional and behavioural impacts as a result of bullying, such as no longer trusting people or not wanting to go to school, thereby resulting in home schooling because they felt school was unsafe:

'Big' is nothing to describe it [the impact]. Let's see – as big as my house that is three stories high. That's how big it is. I have Asperger's and it's hard to trust anybody now. I used to be able to do that, but I wanted to play, I didn't really care. I was a go-lucky kid that just wanted to have friends and fun and just have a good life. But shouldn't ever been that. It's just this day of age that everyone is all evil and just mean all the time. It hard in primary, it's worse in high school. I don't know what's going to happen if I go to college. I'm afraid to go to college if that happens. (Mark)

Discussion

The information collected about students with ASD and their bullying experiences during this study is useful in providing information from the 'student voice' to assist in tailoring appropriate bullying strategies in schools that can more specifically and effectively meet the needs of students with ASD. The results of the study reinforce that all of the students' understanding of bullying was well aligned with definitions held by the wider community (Smith & Monks, 2008) and, similarly, that the majority had a good understanding of cyberbullying with definitions that were aligned well with wider community views (Monks et al., 2009).

Although most of the students were victims of bullying, traditional bullying occurred far more regularly than cyberbullying, with verbal bullying more common than either physical or relational bullying. Examples of traditional bullying the students experienced reflected the imbalance of power and repetitiveness of the acts (Monks & Smith, 2006) that were involved and included verbal insults, perpetrators interfering with items owned by the victim (particularly food), threats to the student's social networks, threats of physical harm, and being physically forced away from social events (Slonje & Smith, 2008). The students highlighted that the cyberbullying had started to occur when they were older (Chisholm, 2014). All but one student reported that the bullying occurred in the school environment, with it most often occurring at lunchtime or during periods of transition or less structure. Most cases involved perpetrators of the same age or older. The students could generally identify significant adults in the home or school environment that they felt were important to report the incidents to.

Currently, the results suggest that although students were aware of the need to report bullying incidents, they did not always find this to be an effective strategy. Students did not always report incidents to teachers, as they perceived the teachers' responses to be inadequate, or were deterred from doing so due to feelings of intimidation or threats from other students. Most students were comfortable about reporting bullying to their parents, but one student was reluctant to do so for fear of adding to his mother's existing high level of anxiety. This suggests that some students with ASD may opt to 'suffer in silence' and not report bullying. In addition, study findings highlighted the magnitude and extreme impact bullying can have on the individual with ASD and their lives (Maiano et al., 2016). Student comments suggested that bullying had a substantial impact on their emotional wellbeing, as they reported symptoms including ongoing fear, loss of confidence, and social withdrawal. In one case, the impact of bullying was sufficient to prompt the decision to abandon school attendance in favour of full-time home schooling.

The results highlight the importance of more specific targeted interventions that help provide explicit, individualised, and responsive support on how to respond to bullying for students with ASD at the individualised level as essential in a multi-tiered framework of support. The use of Social Stories and visual supports as effective strategies to support students with ASD are now well documented (Kokina & Lee, 2010; Spears & Turner, 2011) and could be used to develop more individualised, tailored, and explicit specific instructional supports provided to students on the spectrum on how to report bullying and who to report it to. Furthermore, students with ASD may need to be consulted about who they would feel comfortable reporting incidents of bullying to in the school environment. Systems of peer mentoring have been effectively utilised to support students with ASD and also to effectively support and prevent incidents of bullying in all students (Ryan, 2016; Zins, Elias, & Maher, 2007).

The implementation of a system of peer mentoring whereby appropriately trained peer mentors counsel students with ASD who are experiencing issues with bullying may be useful if students on the spectrum feel confident in reporting incidents to their mentor (Zins et al., 2007). In addition, there needs to be increased staff awareness of ASD and the increased risk of bullying for students with ASD and other vulnerable groups in the school environment. This may include providing ongoing support and training to staff, the development and implementation of clear policies on bullying, monitoring, and tracking bullying behaviour, increased active adult supervision, and sustained attention to ongoing concerns related to school climate and peer relations (Molnar-Main et al., 2014).

In addition to these strategies, the findings of the study point to a need for a whole-school approach to prevent bullying. This is evidenced by study participants identifying a range of age groups as perpetrators (i.e., same age, older, and younger peers), and the majority of bullying incidents reported as taking place at times of transition or unstructured times in the whole-school environment, particularly during lunchbreaks. A whole-school approach is the only way preventive measures can be effectively implemented to address the issues and help ensure intervention and support are targeted during these times where students with ASD may be at the highest risk of bullying.

A whole school-approach will require a tiered response to intervention and support (Olweus & Limber, 2010) to facilitate the establishment of a safe, supportive, and caring learning environment where school rules are taught explicitly to all students so that everyone understands what acceptable behaviour looks like and that bullying will not be tolerated (Molnar-Main et al., 2014). Linked to this would be the establishment of an effective system for students in the school to be able to safely report an incident to a teacher or the school office. For example, a positive behaviour support framework is a well-documented and evidence-based approach that would work well to help implement and support the use of these effective systems (Positive Behavioral Interventions & Support, 2016).

As a component of establishing a safe, supportive, and caring learning environment, it is important that peer support and mentoring strategies particularly focus on lunchtimes to support all students, especially those on the autism spectrum. In addition, it is important, as highlighted in the findings of this research, that certain areas of the school without supervision are identified by the students as hot spots for bullying. Further supervision may therefore be required in lunchtime play areas, school toilets, and school drop-off and pick-up zones. Cases of bullying need to be responded to promptly when they are reported. A formalised system of reporting will be required, including a student services team that is actively involved in managing and responding to incidents and providing appropriate support to the students involved.

To help support this approach, it is important to improve policies and procedures at a federal, state, and local level and ensure that they are more clearly communicated to students, teachers, and parents. Furthermore, support programs that develop communication and relationship building within families and in schools to both prevent bullying and provide coping strategies to deal with bullying if it occurs need to be implemented.

Limitations

Although the results of the study aligned with previous research in the area (e.g., prevalence, age, type) and provide insight into the nature of the bullying experience for students with ASD rather than just prevalence and the context in which it is occurring, there were some limitations. The main limitation is that the study involved only a small number of students and therefore caution is required before generalising the results of this study. The interviews were kept deliberately short to ensure the students were not overwhelmed; however, this could also be considered a limitation. There was no piloting of the interview questions prior to their use or any follow-up interviews involved. The research provides scope for more research and further investigation into student voice around issues related to bullying with larger cohorts of students with ASD.

Conclusion

Details of the experiences of students with ASD were described in the current study, as well as the impact of bullying on students' wellbeing and their schooling. Listening to and reflecting on the voices and personal stories of adolescent students with ASD is critically important to developing more supportive approaches to their education and needs. Analyses of transcripts revealed a number of common experiences including high rates of traditional bullying with fewer incidents of cyberbullying reported in this population (Slonje & Smith, 2008). The results of the current study support prior studies in that students with ASD frequently experience bullying, which can significantly inhibit students from taking full advantage of their schooling. For example, the impact of bullying on some students with ASD meant they did not feel safe going to school; others experienced a lack of self-confidence and negative emotions such as anxiety.

The reports of bullying by students with ASD emphasise the need for more effective interventions and management strategies and help to highlight the environments within which students with ASD interact, and where support and prevention needs to be implemented. These findings can help schools to prevent bullying experiences and to tailor and refine interventions to ensure they provide maximum support and protection.

Key initiatives towards this end include the development of (a) more formalised processes for reporting and monitoring bullying activities within schools, with a focus on supporting students with ASD in reporting bullying to others; and (b) a whole-of-school approach to bullying prevention. Strategies to support these initiatives include the use of Social Stories around peer relationships and bullying, peer support, and mentoring programs for students with ASD, and implementing a positive behaviour framework within the school. Communication, support, and possibly training around initiating bullying prevention strategies in schools and the broader community for students, parents, teachers, and other school staff is required, along with greater support in the form of policies and procedures at the broader state and federal levels.

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