AT THE HANDS OF THE "MEAN GIRLS": THE EFFECTS OF BULLYING ON YOUNG

WOMEN IN THE SECONDARY CLASSROOM

by

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(Under the Direction of Elizabeth St. Pierre)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the kinds of bullying that most affect girls in secondary schools and the ways that bullying affects their lives both personally and academically. Young women are mostly affected by nonphysical bullying, such as teasing, sexual harassment, and exclusion from social groups. While some male students may respond to bullying with physical means (as in the recent school shootings including those at Columbine and Red Lake High Schools), female students more often respond emotionally, experiencing drops in grades in school attendance, academic performance, and self esteem.

INDEX WORDS: Bullying, Secondary Education, Female Aggression, Peer Relations

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As recently as March 21, 2005, parents, teachers, and high school students in America have been shocked as students have taken their own lives and the lives of others in attempts to exact revenge on those who made them feel unwanted, neglected, or bullied within their peer groups. Even before the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999, in which two teenage boys murdered 13 students and teachers before turning their weapons on themselves, social psychologists asserted that these schoolyard rampages are based on students' social environments. The young killers in nearly every case were identified as loners, often bullied by their peers and ostracized from the most popular groups at their schools (Aronson, 2000; Garabarino, 1999). However, none of these young killers has been female.

Young women encounter bullying in their schools every day. While this emotional kind of bullying may not always leave marks as obvious as stolen lunch money or a black eye, the effects of bullying can leave emotional scars that affect relationships with peers for years into the future as well as how they act during the school day when they are most likely to come in contact with aggressive peers. Films like *Carrie* (1976)*, Heathers* (1989), and *Mean Girls* (2004) illustrate the effects of bullying on high school girls who are victimized repeatedly.

Until the 1990s, very little research was done to discover what effects bullying might have on the young women who suffer as victims within their own schools. Because American society teaches young women that physical bullying is a male characteristic, young women are more likely to bully through exclusion and harassment and are more likely to bully other girls than to bully young men (Simmons, 2002). Young men who bully women usually use sexual harassment as a method of teasing; this is often because physical altercations between men and women go against the lesson that "boys don't hit girls" that they are taught as children (Land, 2003). Girls are more likely to bully each other than to bully young men because they see other women as rivals for the attention of teachers, potential boyfriends or girlfriends, roles in school plays, and spots on gender-divided sports teams.

The nonphysical conflict that most often affects young women was long considered not to be a form of aggression or bullying but simply "what girls do" (Simmons, 2002). Since the late 1990s, however, social psychologists have taken a sudden interest in the forms of bullying that most affect young women both at school and in their adult lives. Teasing, sexual harassment, exclusion, and other forms of aggression often used to harass young girls have been found to stunt social growth and to hurt young women emotionally for years after the incidents. Out of fear of being bullied, girls hide academic success from their peers, deliberately miss classes, and even go to the lengths of attempting or committing suicide. Because bullying can affect girls so deeply, it is the responsibility of their teachers to recognize and understand the problem and organize successful interventions in the classroom environment.

   The purpose of this study is to selectively review the literature on the bullying of young women by their peers and to investigate the effects of bullying on these young women in the secondary classroom. By understanding these effects, teachers at the secondary level can establish a basic understanding of the effects of bullying on their students, and they may begin to assist the victims who deal with these difficult situations both on school property and in their social lives outside of the school setting.

CHAPTER 2

BULLIES IN THE SCHOOL

<u>What Is Bullying?</u>

Bullying is a pervasive problem throughout the American school system, but it is difficult to pinpoint incidents within the school that can be classified as bullying because definitions of bullying vary greatly from school to school. Dan Olweus (1986, 1991), one of the major theorists on bullying in the school environment, defines bullying as a situation in which a student is "exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (p). Olweus (1973) further defines the negative actions inflicted by bullies as "when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another" either verbally or physically (¶3). However, many female students are the subjects of aggressive behavior only once and do not suffer "repeatedly" as Olweus indicates is a requirement for the definition of bullying. Students may find themselves at the mercy of peers who seek to hurt them emotionally in ways that do not fall within the bounds of Olweus' definition. Less work has been done to examine the effects of one instance of bullying on a student, and Olweus (1991) hesitates to say that only one instance of bullying can be considered bullying at all. In fact, surveys of students have shown that they may not even consider one instance of teasing, sexual harassment, or exclusion as bullying, even though it may affect them deeply at the time.

One reason that female students are bullied differently is that sex differences between the bullies become more marked at the beginning of secondary school. At this point, the number of girls who participate in physical bullying greatly decreases, but they have in turn increased their involvement in indirect forms of bullying, especially spreading rumors about schoolmates (Ahmad & Smith, 1994). Female bullies are more likely to tease other girls or become malicious in a more indirect form, causing pain for their victims socially or emotionally.

In turn, female victims define bullying differently as they enter the high school environment, building their definitions on the negative actions they see as most harmful to themselves and their peers. In a study at Keele University in 2002, a large group of female and male participants were asked what methods of bullying most affected them. Female secondary students most commonly reported incidences of being called names and being laughed at by other girls. However, a smaller, but still substantial number of female students identified threats from other students, rumors circulated by other students, and situations in which they were forced by other students to commit actions against their own wills (Boulton, 2002).

For female secondary students, bullying can be anything from a secret told to a rumor spread, and it does not have to be a direct physical action on someone to achieve the desired affect. Female bullying incorporates more indirect techniques than male bullying, and females tend to be bullied by each other more than by males at the secondary level (Ahmad & Smith, 1994). Bjorkqvist (1992) suggested four categories for the enactment of female aggression: "gossiping, suggesting shunning another person, spreading vicious rumours as revenge, and becoming friends with someone else as revenges" (¶2), although there are other actions that young women use to dictate the behavior of their peers through bullying.

Studies have found that 5 to 25% of students experience bullying in high school (Lane, 1992), and 52% of these students have experienced "indirect" bullying (Glover, 2000). When students experience indirect bullying, they most often cite specific experiences including teasing, exclusion from social events or social groups, and rumors being spread about them. Bullies find safety in numbers, as 15 to 20% of females who are bullied state that they have been bullied by groups that include members of both sexes (Olweus, 1991).

<u>Lockers and Lunch Lines: Where Are Students Bullied?</u>

According to the Sheffield Project (Smith & Sharp, 1994), bullying activity is generated in any place where pupils are together and the classroom itself is often the chief site of interaction between students. In fact, twenty-one percent of reported physical bullying and fifty percent of reported teasing occurs within the classroom (Glover, 2000). Lack of teacher supervision can give bullies the opportunity to pick on their classmates within the confined environment of the classroom. Teachers who share students' work in front of the class may provide a situation in which bullying can occur by providing fodder for teasing in the form of a student's grade or through the actual written work of the assignment. Other teachers might assist bullies by sharing political opinions that conflict with a student's. For instance, a teacher who is openly against homosexuality might be silently blessing the teasing of a lesbian in her classroom. When teachers decide to use quieter female students as "buffer students" to separate notorious bullies or students who talk in class a great deal, teachers may actually facilitate bullying in their own classrooms without even knowing that they are doing it.

Two other environments in which students most use indirect forms of bullying are the lunchroom and school hallways. Students comment that "the hard girls decide to pick on somebody and then make her life hell, but to the outside world it looks as if a group are talking together" (Smith & Sharp, 1994) in the hallways, and bullying in the form of teasing can occur directly within the gaze of administrators. These "hard girls" or "mean girls" may target a student whom they see daily, one they have several classes with, or one who they find easy to pick on because of her class, race, sexual orientation, or extracurricular interests. Since students have to walk through the halls to reach their lockers and their classes, they cannot escape the bullying that occurs in the hallways, a perfect location for bullies to unleash their fury on fellow students.

Similarly, the lunchroom can be a battlefield for students who are concerned about where to sit, who will speak to them, and the ultimate concern for many-- not eating alone. In Rosalind Wiseman's (2002) book on the bullying and reactions to it, *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, a fifteen year old girl explains that her social group has a number of rules including how members must wear their hair, dress, and formally invite members from outside their group to dine at lunch. Young bullies are aware that eating at a certain lunch table can carry social privilege, and thus they enact certain rules and enforce them with vigor.

<u>Why Bully?</u>

The reasons for the bullying of other students have been examined, and while 40% of students surveyed have indicated that "people who are picked on rarely or never deserve it," (Glover, 2000, "Motivation to Harass Others" ¶1) there are several reasons students feel justified as bullies. Students often feel pushed into bullying by their peers who bully, because the disapproval of the social group could lead to being bullied in the future.

The most common reasons bullies cite for their actions are other students' race, religion, gender, class, fashion sense, deviation from the social norm, and attitudes in school. The majority of bullies surveyed in the Keele University study (2002) indicated that students who work hard in school are targeted more than any other group in the early secondary years. Because the bully often does not value academic success or is not capable of the same success as the victim, the bully chooses to harass the victim when the victim is successful at school. Because the bully does not value education, or does not value cultural difference, the bully exerts authority to show that she is superior over the person she is teasing.

Bullies who focus on class or other elements of their victims' home lives are often from families of a much higher or lower class than those of their victim. Upper class students who bully their poorer peers often do it to gain recognition for their wealth among their peers; lower class students do this to make being a "rich kid" undesirable for their classmates. Another element of the home environment that can feed a student's need to bully is the involvement of parents in her life-- a girl whose parents are not involved in her schoolwork or social life will often bully a girl whose parents are very involved in order to make her personal family structure seem more desirable.

While home environment or desire for social status within the school are possible causes for a student's aggressive nature, it is widely believed that students who bully do so because they are in some way jealous of the victim and want to feel that they have a dominant position over the person they are bullying. For instance, in the case of the academically successful student being bullied by a classmate, the classmate is rarely a very successful student. The bully is usually a student whose grades are average at best and who might be frustrated that another student is obtaining higher grades because she works harder or is innately more capable. One

student commented that bullies are usually students who "are not as good at something" and lash out because of insecurity (Glover, 2000, "Motivation to Harass Others" ¶1).

The cycle of bullying is maintained by the last group of bullies, the group of students who bully because they have been targeted in the past. This can occur often in groups of girls who may not feel comfortable exacting revenge through physical means like male students who choose mass homicide as a method of vengeance. Females feel that they cannot come to school with a gun to make those who bullied them pay for their actions (Aronson, 2000), so instead they come to school bent on making someone else feel inferior and improving their own social status.

CHAPTER 3

BULLIES OUTSIDE SCHOOL

"You Can't Come to My Birthday Party:" Bullying Outside the School

Nearly every girl is on at least one side of the equation at some point in her school experience: it's time for the birthday festivities of the most popular girl in school, and she must decide which students are most deserving of an invitation to her party. One girl, in particular, is excluded from the party. She is devastated. Her social stock has dropped ten points with the withholding of one party invitation. The popular girl's party is the most popular event for that evening because some students have been chosen and others have not, and those who have not been chosen can only hope that they will be chosen the next year.

While schools divide students by grade and class and therefore mix up the social groups during the day, the social environment outside the school allows students to cultivate friendships with people they choose. They are in no way required to be with students who they find to be below their social level. Female students in particular use this environment outside the school to build on friendships with the girls in their own cliques, but "something in the way girls group together also sows the seeds for the cruel competition for popularity and social status" (Wiseman, 2002, p. 20). Wiseman argues that within these groups, females often take certain roles in the exclusion, teasing, and bullying of other girls in the group and girls outside of the group. Through these roles, the bullying can secure their own social positions, but they also cause harm to the girls they are bullying which can carry over into the victim's personal and academic life outside of the bullying situation. When a student is in the school environment, the

group is split up during class periods, but outside school, bullies can adopt this team strategy against their targets.

According to Wiseman's (2002) social classifications, the Queen Bee is the head of the bullies. The Queen Bee is popular based on fear and control, and she gives orders to the other members of the bullying group and never is actually required to physically do the bullying herself. The Sidekick does the Queen Bee's dirty work for her, spreading the rumors, making fun of the victims, and delivering the birthday party invitations. The Banker's job is to collect incriminating information about possible victims so that other girls will fear both her and the group as a whole. In an effort to please the Queen Bee and her top two henchmen, other members of the clique accept any position in the efforts to bully other girls, which often include jobs such as explaining to the victim in the birthday party scenario why she did not merit an invitation.

For girls, bullying outside of school is largely a situation in which certain students exclude others. Because there is no forced togetherness as there is during the class periods of the school day, there are plenty of birthday parties, sleepovers, group dates, and other activities from which young girls can exclude each other. This form of bullying, which occurs more often from girl to girl than from boy to girl (Wiseman, 2002), forces young women who are ostracized from the social group to feel even less secure when entering the bully-filled school atmosphere.

<u>The Wheels on the Bus: How Bullying From Outside Enters the School</u>

A female victim's social life outside the school and social life in the classroom can be linked by one thing, the ride to school on the bus each morning. Because owning a car or catching a ride to school from a peer are not realities for many girls, particularly those living in

less affluent areas, girls ride the bus school each morning. At least 25% of all bullying victims, males and females, report having been bullied on the bus (Smith & Sharp, 1994).

Because students on the bus become familiar with the areas of town the bus travels through, they know the social class of each bus rider based on the location or look of the student's home. Similarly, because students become familiar with the location of a victim's home, the bullies can go directly to the girl's home to stir up trouble after school if they so desire.

On the bus, a girl is physically unable to escape those who seek to bully her. Other students can physically and verbally attack her, shun her, and refuse her a seat near them. The only adult is too busy driving the vehicle to notice the victim's plight. The victim cannot exit the bus until it reaches the school, where she is trapped in the hands of her bullies all day long, enduring their attacks in the classroom, lunchroom, hallways, and again on the bus before she can reach the safety of her own home again.

CHAPTER 4

EFFECTS OF BULLYING

<u>Students Who Fear School</u>

As most bullying occurs within the school and is most often done by fellow students, it is surely not coincidental that students who are bullied typically have difficulties in the school environment. Students who are bullied may commit truancy, experience a drop in grades, or act out. Because their bullies often attend the same school, many victims grow to fear the school environment.

Frequent bullying has been linked to absenteeism (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996) and to dropping out of school (Reid, 1989). The presence of a bully or group of bullies at school creates a climate of fear and an atmosphere of intimidation (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 1988) for victims, making it difficult to focus on classroom tasks or even the idea of going to school at all. In fact, 20% of the victims of bullies tend to "stay away from certain places in school" and 8% "stay away from school related events" altogether (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1993).

The presence of a bully can also greatly interfere with a student's grades and academic success. In the 2004 film *Mean Girls*, the main character feels that she has to lower her math grades in order to fit in with the popular girls and escape the social ridicule she would suffer as a "Mathlete" (*Mean Girls*, 2004). Evidence supports the assertion made in the plot of this movie. Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver (1992), it was reported that 90% of students who were bullied experienced a drop in their grades in at least one class. Whether the bullies specifically targeted

their victims' academic success or not, the victim's grades were affected by the bully's sheer existence.

Students also find that even completing some assignments can create fodder for bullying. Forty percent of high school students report a fear of speaking in class, and many of these students comment that this is because bullies "listen to the way you speak and then make rude remarks" (Glover, 2000, "School Life" ¶2). The fear of speaking in class is greatest amongst girls, who are teased by both male and female fellow students for seemingly every comment or error made when giving a speech in front of the class (Glover, 2000). One 15-year old girl commented that years after doing a project on sandpipers and receiving the highest grade in the class, her female peers still refer to her as "Ms. Sandpiper," reinforcing her fear of speaking in class (Karres, 2004).

Other female students may feel more uncomfortable doing group assignments because of the presence of bullies. While every intelligent girl isn't teased for her excellent grades, a girl who obtains superior grades often finds herself in a difficult situation when assigned to work with a group of less motivated students. Being grouped with even one bully can mean that a victim will "take the notes, do the footnotes, cover the longest and most boring chapters" (Karres, 2004, p. 7), and, in some cases, complete the entire assignment out of fear of being bullied. In other non-group academic situations, a girl might be bullied into writing an assignment for a bully or allowing him/her to copy her homework. While the girl might do these things out of fear of further bullying, the effect of this type of bullying can be a fear of group work or of doing assignments in general.

An astounding 27% of high school girls feel threatened by the school environment (Glover, 2000) because the presence of a bully shifts their focus away from their academic goals,

extracurricular activities, and social skills. A bully can make a female student lower her grades, switch classes, and even switch schools to escape her problems (Batsche, 1994).

<u>Students Who Fear Life</u>

Sadly, victims of bullying may not only be forced out of their school environments by bullies but may also be forced to seek out more severe and permanent methods of escape. While several male high school students have made headlines by committing homicide as a reaction to bullying, females commit harm to themselves and go to extremes other than killing another student to silently voice their anger and sadness. The presence of a bully at school can not only make a young woman fear the school environment but fear her social world in general.

Young women who are frequently bullied rarely have a strong base of peer advocates to support them (Batsche, 1994). Because these young women feel alone in their school and community's social world, they often feel as though they would not be missed if they disappeared from the school. One girl commented in the Keele University study (2000) that she "was very unhappy because the girls ganged up on [her] and called [her] names, but it was better to just stay miserable" ("Parental Attitudes" ¶3). In fact, the girl went on to matter-of-factly state that she had been suicidal many times and would become that way again because she was alone at the school and there was no one to help her with her aggressive female peers (Glover, 2000).

For a teenage girl, a complete and happy social life is a very important factor in her contentment with life in general. A girl who is bullied often finds herself lacking friends who act as advocates for her and can find herself too depressed even to attend school (Simmons, 2004). This depression based on bullying can often lead a girl to harm herself through cutting, adopting an eating disorder, or even considering suicide. Young women who cut themselves often do so as a reaction to a fear of the opinions of others or as a reaction to a hurtful comment made by

another peer. About 1 to 3% of teenagers admit to engaging in this form of self-mutilation habitually and even more may cut themselves only occasionally (Favazza & Conterio, 1988). Ice (2004) reported that 40 to 60% of high school girls dieted and 13% purged after eating. Many young women admit that their desire to lose weight stems from a fear of being teased about their body size. In 1999, one in five adolescents reported seriously considering suicide; one in ten had attempted to end his or her own life (Aronson, 2000).

The capability to exert violent rage on one's aggressors is not absent from female victims, however. For instance, the parents of Cassie Bernall, a Columbine High School shooting victim, claim that they found letters in Cassie's room in which she detailed plans to kill her parents and those who bullied her at school several years prior to the shooting (Aronson, 2000). Cassie was sent to therapy and became a more popular student at Columbine by the time of the shooting in 1999, but her experience as the victim of bullies had led her to feel the same rage felt by the boys who perpetrated the crime. After therapy and attending a private Christian school for a couple of years, Cassie became a born-again Christian and, according to some other students, she was murdered because of her faith and her position as a more popular girl at the school.

Cassie is not the only girl who sympathizes with the Columbine murderers. On an internet posting soon after the shooting, a 17-year old girl commented that "the kids say they did this because they were constantly teased and I can understand where they are coming from and I think what they did to all of those kids was wrong but a person can only take so much torture" (Aronson, 2000, p. 82). These comments were echoed by many other students on online message boards at the time. And while it may seem that the number of girls who act with rage

toward those who bully them is minimal, it may only be a matter of time before one of these angry young women decides that she, too, has borne enough torture.

<u>Long-Range Effects</u>

A girl who is bullied in her early high school years is affected by her aggressors for many years following. One mean comment can follow a girl into her future. Being called fat can establish an eating disorder than may never be cured. Being teased for excellent grades might make her fear academic success through her college years. Being socially excluded by peers, teased, sexually harassed, or bullied in any other way can create problems for victims in their adult lives and in relationships for the rest of their lives.

Research in child development indicates that being rejected by one's peers increases the chance of problems with long-term adjustment in relationships (Parker & Asher, 1987), and this is confirmed by the women interviewed in Rachel Simmons' (2002) studies of female aggression. Simmons spoke with many women who had been bullied as secondary students, and these women were remarkably mistrustful of other women and were so deeply affected by being bullied that they could recall the events with perfect clarity years afterward. Likewise, younger women who wrote to Simmons about their experiences with bullying and exclusion found themselves afraid of their aggressors upon entering school property years after the attacks (Simmons, 2004). Years after being bullied, the aggression victims experience from bullies is alive and well within their memories and can affect how they perceive both the school environment and their peers.

James Garbarino (1999) argues that children are like orchids, and they thrive when cared for by nurturing parents. However, subjection to competitive peers, bullying, and rejection, "especially in large, impersonal high schools," can cause these orchids to "wilt" (p. 25). Up to

fifty percent of these "orchid children," Garbarino asserts, have significant difficulties upon entering the adolescent atmosphere of emotional assault, and these students tend to have difficulty adjusting emotionally for several years after high school. After all, research on peer-group relations indicates that a student's relationships with her peers become more important as she is "distanced from adult supervision" (Finders, 1997). A series of difficulties with peers who reject or emotionally harm a female might force her to shut off emotionally, as Garbarino suggests, because these relationships were not provided as they were becoming most important.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

As a young woman enters the high school environment, peer relationships are some of the most important in her life. In high school, they may even supercede the importance of those with her parents and other family members. An approving base of peer friends is important to a girl in the secondary school environment, and being bullied can make a young woman feel as though she lacks friends and can drive the friends she does have away from her because they also fear bearing the weight of bullying. Being bullied is harmful to a young woman emotionally and can damage her relationships with peers for years after her secondary schooling is completed.

But how can a teacher help? In the secondary classroom, a teacher learns about the personal opinions and relationships of her students through writing assignments, class discussions, and student interpretations of literature. A teacher may often observe bullying directly in her classroom, or she may become aware of it through the behavior of one of her students.

The tendency in a situation where a teacher discovers a bully-victim relationship in her classroom might be to ignore it and rationalize that "boys will be boys," "it's what young girls do," and "I shouldn't intervene." However, the effects of bullying can be drastic. A young woman who finds herself the target of a bully could experience a drop in grades or in self esteem. A young woman who is bullied could avenge herself violently by bringing a weapon to school or could completely abandon all will to live, choosing suicide as her method of escape.

The victim of a bully experiences emotional pain both inside and outside of the school, and it may not be visible to the other adults in the child's life.

Teachers should provide successful interventions in the classroom to help both the bully, who feels she must attack another student because of her own inadequacies, and the victim, who feels she is alone in the school's social universe. Understanding the effects bullying may have on her students, a teacher must take the initiative to mediate between her students before irreparable damage is done.

Films portray the victims of bullying glamorously as they take their revenge. In the 1970s, *Carrie* showed Sissy Spacek setting fire to her school's gym to teach a lesson to those who bullied her. *Heathers* of the 1980s allowed Winona Ryder to murder the girls who excluded members of their school from their social group without consequence. Most recently, 2004's *Mean Girls* showed Lindsay Lohan's descent into the world of bullying that her school's popular girls inhabited so that she would not be targeted by these girls. A female victim of bullying experiences deep emotional pain every day, even though this heartache is not apparent to all who see her. And although none has yet made the evening news after slaughtering her classmates, the capability, the warrant, and the possible desire is there. Until teachers assist their students in lowering the level of bullying in secondary schools, young women will experience severe emotional damage, and the possibility of their physical damage to others is a powder keg only waiting to be ignited.

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