

## **Underneath the Mask: Reflecting on personal experiences of school age bullying and its long term effects in adulthood**

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### **Abstract**

*A qualitative study reflecting on individuals' experiences of being bullied in secondary school and its long term effects into adulthood. This report used semi-structured interviews to understand individuals' experiences of bullying; how they coped and how it has impacted their self-esteem as an adult. Participants reflected on their experiences of being bullied and spoke about their interpretation of their own personal development which was then analysed using thematic analysis (TA), coding the information to identify common themes throughout the interviews. The codes that emerged across the interviews were related to how participants felt at the time of the experience, where they feel they are now and looking to the future of what can be done next. The themes were 'belonging' relating to groups and institutions, 'under the mask' relating to how participants felt about, and coped with bullying and 'whose problem is it?', looking at the direction for the future. This study found that school age bullying impacts adulthood, leaving negative feelings and residing anxiety in social situations.*

### **Keywords**

mental health, bullying

## Introduction

This study took place in the context of Higher Education, all participants were mature students studying at Undergraduate Degree level. A qualitative approach was used to gain insight into how being bullied in secondary school has an impact on life as an adult and how adults coped with bullying when they were younger. The aim of this study attempted to answer these three questions:

- 1) How does being bullied in secondary school have lasting effects on individual's self-esteem as an adult?
- 2) How did they cope with being bullied in secondary school?
- 3) How do they perceive bullying in schools today?

The topic originated from personal exposure and experiences of bullying. It got me thinking about my journey and where I would be without those experiences, which sparked the curiosity, wondering if others feel the same way. A review of previous research was conducted to determine what research had previously been undertaken. From this the above questions were formed, a target audience narrowed and methodology selected. The interviews were then conducted and analysed using TA.

In today's society, children are facing countless obstacles to their education; one of these considerable problems that schools must deal with is bullying (Salmon et al., 1998). Bullying impacts a wide variety of people, not only those who are being bullied but also their peers, parents and school staff. Nordqvist (2013) reported that children that experience repeated and ongoing bullying have an increased risk of developing anxiety disorders and depression. Towards the end of twentieth century there was an increase in research done on bullying due to the changes in social attitude (Wójcik and Kozak, 2015; Postigo et al., 2013). Wójcik and Kozak (2015) found that students expect their teachers and authority figures to find effective ways of dealing with bullying and including the point of view of students when designing and implementing new anti-bullying programmes and policies. It is necessary in research to consider some of the psychological theories that support the results, as well as reflecting on the initial area of focus (Rigby, 2004; Sánchez et al., 2012). Table 1 shows multiple theories that have been connected to bullying.

*Table 1*

<b>Underlying theories associated with bullying</b>	<b>Foundation of the theory</b>
Social learning theory (SLT) (Bandura, 1973)	Learning to use violence repeatedly as instrumental behaviour. Imitating violent behaviour as a means of maintaining personal satisfaction.
Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1984)	Using bullying to preserve, gain, recover and maintain a socially desirable identity. E.g. Popularity
Social dominance theory (Sidanius, 1993)	Using bullying as a form of social control over other students.
Learned helplessness (Abramson et al., 1978)	The passive victim surrenders to the bully. Often blame themselves and develop the sense of hopelessness and shame.
Frustration-aggression model (Dollard et al., 1939; Tam and Taki, 2007)	The active victim uses the bullying they receive and transfer it onto someone else. The victim becomes the bully.

This dissertation comprises of a literature review, where the concept of bullying is defined, as well as its impact on individuals' mental health and educational performance; a methodological discussion where a reflection on the research approach, research methods and ethical considerations is carried out; an analysis and discussion of the findings; and a conclusion where the research questions are answered, implications are drawn and further research suggestions are made.

## **Literature review**

Research consistently suggests that 50% of young people experience bullying at some stage in their education. A study conducted on students aged 12-20 found that out of 2.9 million students, 145,800 were bullied daily, and 1.5 million had been bullied within the year 2012 (DitchtheLabel, 2016). Bullying was rated to be the second worst experience that someone can go through, the first being the loss of someone close (Maxwell, 1996, cited in Sullivan et al., 2005).

### **What is bullying?**

Bullying is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to accurately define due to its subjectivity. Howell (1997) defined bullying as "repeated oppression, physical or psychological, of a less powerful person by a more powerful one" (Howell, 1997, p.144). This study used this definition to recruit participants; participants were those who perceived their experience to fall under this definition. Alternatively there are other definitions such as Banks (1997) who defines bullying as having two tiers, 'direct' and 'indirect' (see table 2), whereas others group all forms under one.

*Table 2*

<b>Forms of bullying</b>	<b>Overview</b>	<b>Possible actions</b>
Physical	The most identifiable/ obvious form of bullying. i.e. intentionally causing physical harm to someone else.	Hair pulling, being tripped up, being bitten, punched, kicked, hit, or any other form of physical attack.
Non- Physical		
• Verbal	This kind of bullying is not always easy to spot.	Name-calling, threats of violence, abusive phone calls, racist remarks, intimidation, teasing, and the spreading of malicious and false rumours.
• Non-verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Direct: Often seen as relatively harmless and not often regarded as bullying.</li> <li>➤ In-direct: Manipulative and sneaky often hard to prove.</li> </ul>	<p>Often accompanies verbal or physical, including making mean faces and rude gestures.</p> <p>Systematically isolating, ignoring and excluding, sending poisonous (often-anonymous) notes; and persuading other students to dislike someone (threatening to do the same to them)</p>
Damage to property	Vandalising someone else is property.	Damaging books, ripping clothes

*(Sullivan et al., 2005)*

Thanks to the advances in technology over the years we now have another form of bullying called cyber-bullying, i.e. when bullying is done electronically e.g. through social media (Anderson et al, 2014). Cyber-bullying can be both direct and indirect (Williams, 2008). According to a recent study by the Urban Institute (2013), 17% of the participating students reported being a victim of cyber-bullying, 41% being victim to physical bullying and 15% of various forms of bullying (Janine et al., 2013). Cyber-bullying was not included in the definition given by Banks as it was not an issue at the time it was written, however it is something that must be taken into consideration now. Previous research in this topic area has focused on various themes (see below).

### ***Reporting bullying***

The Education Inspections Act 2006, section 89 states, "that by law all state schools must have a behaviour policy in place that includes measures to prevent all forms of bullying" (Gov.uk, 2017). The Department for Education's Preventing and Tackling Bullying guidance advises that behaviour policies should be communicated to all pupils, parents and school staff and that incidents that do occur they are dealt with quickly (Gov.uk, 2017). Since this Act was implemented in 2006, some would argue that there has actually been an increase in bullying (Wójcik and Kozak, 2015; Bradshaw et al., 2007; Holt and Espelage, 2007). In a recent study, out of 1160 secondary school students 82.2% reported being bullied at least once in the past year with 9.7% reporting being bullied on a more regular basis (Alex-Hart et al., 2015). Findings from this study showed that 45.2% of those who reported being bullied told researchers that 'nothing was done to the bully' with 33.8% of those stating they were 'not satisfied' with how school authorities handled it (Alex-Hart et al., 2015, p.3). Over the years it has been suggested that a reason for this is the difference in perception of bullying (Salmivalli, 2014). Bradshaw, Sawyer and O'Brennan, (2007) suggest that this maybe because teachers don't see it or they perceive bullying differently to students, such as it being natural harmless teasing, considered to be a normative developmental process.

### ***Bullying and learning***

Research has shown bullying can cause school absences, students dropping out (Cornell et al., 2013) and poor academic performance (Juvonen et al., 2011). Maslow (1954) suggests, in the hierarchy theory, that in order for learning and critical thinking to be achieved, the individual's safety needs must first be met. Like Maslow (1954),

Howell (1997) states that bullying is detrimental to the security and comfort that is essential to the learning process. Furthermore, Bonilla (2000) believes that bullying can cause disengagement from learning, draw attention away from daily lessons and destroys the security that children should feel in an educational environment (Aronson, 2000; Coggeshall and Kingery, 2001). It could be construed from this that bullying can cause a cycle such as children stop attending school, meaning missed lessons; resulting in disengagement and therefore their ability to learn. Then again as Bosworth et al., (1999) states the absence of bullying does not guarantee learning, however, it can enhance an effective learning environment when bullying is eliminated (Williams, 2008). This could imply that bullying should be substantively addressed in secondary schools.

### ***Bullying and Violence***

Howell (1997) suggested that there is a connection between bullying and violence. In 2005, he made a prevalent assumption that being a victim of bullying can sometimes lead the victim into violent acts in retaliation (Druck and Kaplowitz, 2005; Simmons, 2002). Aronson (2000) found that perpetrators in several school shootings were identified as being victims of bullying. This is supported by the modelling component of the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1973), this theory suggests that traits such as aggression are learnt through observation (Kauffman, 2001). At its basic concept this suggests that there is a potential that if children witness someone being aggressive or bullying, without them receiving consequences for the victimisation of others, then they are more likely to copy that negative behaviour.

However, this does not apply to all children. Blumberg et al., (2008) found that watching violent acts on the television or in video games without consequences does not lead to children mimicking that behaviour. This theory also does not account for a child's development of knowing what is right and what is wrong in which Kohlberg's (1958) moral development stages suggest this happens before the age of 10 (Pound, 2009). Banks (1997) suggested that bullies often come from households where physical punishment is enforced and are taught to physically hit back when dealing with a dilemma.

## ***Bullying leading to Suicide***

A study conducted by Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (2015) revealed that the second most common cause of death in 10-34 year olds is suicide. In a year, approximately 6,078 of these suicides are committed by 15-24 year olds. This was also found by Suicide Awareness Voices for Education. In their study, 16% of students considered suicide, 13% made a plan and 8% made a serious attempt (SAVE, 2015). The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Paediatrics suggests that bullying causes a higher rate of suicide in boys aged 14-16 (Mitch et al., 2014; Copeland et al., 2013). Nevertheless, not all children who are bullied commit suicide, but that does not mean that they are not affected by the experience. The Centers for Disease Control reported that victims of bullying are twice as likely to suffer from a variety of problems, such as depression (CDC, 2015), leading to low self-esteem, which can bring about negative thoughts and a feeling of helplessness. Therapist Dr Balick, stated that feelings about experiences of bullying depend on how resilient you are as a person, as well as the nature of the bullying (Balick and Szymanski, 2013).

Moreover, Copeland et al.,(2013) evaluated the impact that being bullied in childhood has on the individual later in life. The study looked at both the victims of bullying and the bullies themselves, and found that both were more likely to suffer from a psychiatric disorder. Furthermore, Sparks (2014) monitored brain development in adolescents of individuals who had experienced bullying since the age of 9. He found that their amygdala's, the area of the brain that is responsible for emotions and emotional behaviour such as anger, showed a significant difference in size and structure. This could explain why some bully victim turn into the aggressors on themselves, creating an internal dialog of low self-esteem, inturn leading many to commit suicide.

The literature above focuses on victims of bullying aged 8 -24, however, as the research above has implied, bullying can have long lasting effects, resulting in suicide and low self-esteem after the fact. Therefore, this research project focuses on mature students (average age of 24) studying in Higher Education, who were bullied in school; reflecting on their experiences to see how they feel they have been affected in order to influence future incidents of bullying whether it be to inform people working in secondary schools, or parents in their attempt to diminish bullying. This study attempts to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals feel being bullied in their secondary school has affected them as adults through the use of semi structured interviews (see

methodology). Questions focused on participants' reflection of personal experiences of bullying and their interpretation on their personal development, e.g. confidence/ self-esteem.

## **Methodology**

### ***Approach and Process***

In order to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experience, qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews (SSI) taking a naturalistic approach, to allow people to tell their stories. Qualitative research allows the researcher to understand and illuminate the emotions behind individual experiences (Hoepfl, 1997), rather than just statistics on occurrence (Yates, 2004). Merriam (1998, p.31) stated that "qualitative research is the greatest promise to making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education". This is due to it being focused on insight, and the understanding from the participants' point of view. Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research has the purpose of generating understanding (Stenbacka, 2001). By using SSI the researcher is able to guide the interview but at the same time, it gives them the freedom to follow up on information that arises in the interview that is not necessarily stated in the research question (Seidman, 1998). This is both an advantage and disadvantage as participants can provide insight into an area not previously considered by the researcher; or head off on a tangent irrelevant to the topic. The degree of quality for the study in question lies within the established research paradigms. For instance, reliability and validity often underpin quantitative research methods, whereas qualitative methods hold credibility, neutrality or conformability, consistency or dependability, and applicability or transferability as necessary criterion for quality (Lincoln and Guba, 1985 cited in Golafshani, 2003). Furthermore, using SSI allows an accurate picture of the participants' experiences; their reflection is entirely their own. Drawing on common themes throughout these interviews shows the transferability.

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of being bullied as reflection allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of experiences the participants have gone through (Helyer, 2015). It also allows the participant learn about their experiences from a different perspective and encourages the exploration of thoughts and emotions, looking for insights into maximising self-awareness (Lacan, 1977). All



interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), coding the data into organised themes that emerge across all the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2000). Thematic analysis was used to develop codes emically, by distinguishing themes that resonated from the transcripts and etically, by drawing on and bringing the focus back to the research questions. King and Horrock (2010) describe coding as recurring and distinctive aspects of participants' accounts, which the researcher deems as relevant to the research question, that characterise certain experiences or perceptions.

### ***Sampling***

This study used convenient sampling consisting of 6 mature students (4 female, 2 male) studying at undergraduate level in Higher Education, known as an acquaintance to the researcher; completing a short semi structured interviews reflecting on their perceptions of bullying from their time in secondary school, specifically 11- 16 and self-esteem as an adult. For this research participants were asked to retrospectively reflect on their experiences in secondary school, this was to limit the focus on a time in compulsory education as participants experiences happened at different times in their lives. A limitation of convenient sampling is the risk of bias, however, for this study it is an individual's personal experiences that is being explored. The interviews allowed participants to reflect on their experience of bullying and how they coped. Each interview lasted between 10 - 20 minutes, and in order to maintain accurate information they were recorded using a Dictaphone.

### ***Ethical guidelines***

In order to abide by ethical guidelines all participants were briefed and asked to give verbal and signed consent before taking part (Reynolds et al., 1997). Precautions were put into place to ensure the protection of confidentiality and anonymity of the participants as well as their safety and emotional wellbeing.

### ***Analysis/ Discussion***

This analysis uncovered three themes which were 'Belonging', 'Under the mask' and 'Whose problem is it?', these will be discussed in turn, making links from past experiences to how participants interpret them in the present day.

## ***Belonging***

The theme that resonated through each interview was this idea of 'Belonging' in their school. In the context of bullying, feeling disconnected or excluded from groups and institutions can have a negative effect on the overall experience of school life and impact the learning process (Juvonen et al., 2011; Williams, 2008). Belonging is defined as the individual's sense of security and comfort based on the perception that they are an integral part of an institution, organisation or community (Asher and Weeks, 2014, p.287). Some participants expressed a positive experience of belonging to their secondary school through student engagement in school activities, while others articulated the opposite, for example:

LW(13-14) "I felt more embarrassed when I participated, people would snigger so I just stopped contributing".

DS(8) "Eventually I stopped turning up altogether".

SKW(42-44) "I was close to a few friends and teachers who made me feel like I was valued in the groups I was involved in like choir and the football team".

AB(29-30) "I hated school (...)even with the friends I hung around with, I didn't feel like I belonged there, even when I was with them I just felt alone".

RC(54-55) "I just felt isolated and lonely".

Participants reported this idea of belonging from opposite ends of the spectrum, those who felt like they did belong and those who felt like they did not. On a personal level belonging means feeling connected, valued, accepted, respected and feeling like they matter to other people or a specific group (Strayhorn, 2012). Some of those who did not feel like they belonged during their time in school talked about belonging to an outside group as a way of dealing with bullying. Being a part of these groups allowed the participants to feel like they were accepted for who they were. This allowed them to cope with the negativity they were experiencing. It was noted during interviews that the participants' tone and body language changed when talking about the groups they were involved in, they smiled and were more open to talking about their participation. Dölek (2002) argues that encouraging individuals to participate in various social activities aids in helping victims cope with bullying.

On the other hand, Thomas et al (2012) stated that feeling like you belong in an institution or group is closely aligned with student engagement, which encompasses both social and academic engagement which is connected to deep learning. Participants who felt like they did not belong in school told of how they became disengaged and isolated from both the lesson content and the people around them, for example: "stopped contributing" and "stop attending". Experiencing bullying and feeling like they do not belong in an institution can have negative impacts on an individual's engagement in and out of the classroom (Bonilla, 2000; Coggeshall and Kingery, 2001). Although no cause and effect can be established it appears that feelings of belonging, to a specific group inside or outside the school, can help students cope when they are being bullied. Brown (2000) found that there is a correlation between being a member of a group or society, that gives people a sense of belonging, and a higher level of confidence and self-esteem.

The lack of self-esteem and confidence is another topic that emerged throughout the transcripts; the theme of having to hide who they really are in order to attempt to reduce the bullying has been coded 'Underneath the mask'.

### ***Underneath the mask***

This theme has been used as it represents both how participants felt during their school experience and how they managed to cope. As we saw from the literature review in table 2 (above) there are a various reasons for why people are bullied. This can have a negative effect on a person's self-esteem; participants described that during their time at school they felt like they were pretending to be someone they were not, in order to fit in. Participants expressed this as a regret stating they would encourage anyone going through bullying to not be afraid to be who they are:

AB(20-22) "being in a musical theatre group helped me put on a mask, it kind of helped me develop this facade that I didn't care. Obviously I did care but the school mask was more like yeah whatever".

RC(167-170) "I would put on a brave face then go home and cry to my mummy, or if she was having a bad day cry to myself in my room".

SKW(78) " Don't be afraid to be yourself!".

LW(32-48) "Take the mask off! Everyone of us is unique and this should be celebrated. Embrace your qualities, you have a lot to offer, don't let anyone put you down".

Participants said that wearing a mask was a necessary component of getting through their school years using it as a coping tool. From this data it could be viewed that by not letting the bullies see how their actions affected them on the surface they were able to conquer the bully-victim dynamic which aids in the reduction of bullying. Similarity was also found by Flett and Hewitt (2013) stating that adolescents who experience profound distress disguised it as a result of a personality style characterised by self-concealment. However, underneath this brave face is still a hurt child. In order to produce good coping strategies for people being bullied requires individual knowledge of victims lived experiences (Davies et al., 2014). Without these strategies, youth have a higher risk of long-term victimisation (Smith et al., 2001), and long-term psychological issues such as depression (Schneider et al., 2012). It is no surprise then that Cook et al., (2010) found that it is common amongst victims of bullying to suffer from diminishing self-esteem, solitude and depression. Victims of bullying can start to develop what's called learned helplessness, they start to believe that their basic desires and needs are no longer obtainable resulting in withdrawal, and potentially committing suicide.

With that in mind participants were asked how they feel being bullied had affected them as an adult. There was two opposing sides; negative effects and positive effects:

RC(98-101) "In a way I'm still wearing a mask. I run my own business on my own from home so no one can hurt me (...) I don't let anyone see if something is bothering me (...) the wall has never come down".

AB(32-34) "I was so anxious going back into education, what if they didn't accept me, the mask went back on, all the memories came flooding back".

LW(82) "made me a stronger person..."

Interestingly instead of listing the achievements in their lives such as spouses, children, successful businesses etc. the focus was emphasised on the negative aspects of their lives, their emotions and insecurities that they relate to their childhood. Kumpulainen (2008) found that subjectivity on a regular basis may lead to socio-

emotional and cognitive consequences for both children and young adults, including feelings of helplessness, insomnia, depressive symptoms and damaged self-esteem (Due et al., 2005; Vreeman and Carroll, 2007). This idea that when they were at school they had to put on a mask and be something they are not, whether it was changing their clothes, to pretending to be unaffected by hurtful comments, all have had an impact on who they are now as individuals. However, not every individual who has been bullied as a child describes the difficulties that these studies suggest, some turn their experiences into a positive force SWK(89) "made me stronger" believing that it made them who they are today (Mathiassen, 2014).

There is limited research on the correlation between childhood experiences of bullying and adult life as pointed out by Lund et al. (2008) and Mebane (2010). However existing quantitative research suggests negative consequences in adulthood as a result of childhood bullying (Kokko and Pörhölä 2009; Mebane, 2010), including psychological and psycho-pathological difficulties (Kumpulainen, 2008; Lund et al., 2008). For that reason, the final theme that emerged was around how we implement change, what can be done and whose responsibility it is to reinforce anti-bullying. The theme was coded 'whose problem is it?'

### ***Whose problem is it?***

Throughout the interviews there was this idea that secondary schools should do more to tackle bullying yet at the same time the problem starts at home. Participants with children of their own spoke about they feel now about bullying in secondary schools by looking retrospectively at their own experience and how that has influenced their opinions of schools now. There were mixed responses as to where we take the issue of bullying from here. It was interpreted by some of the participants that in order to reduce bullying there needs to be more education about what bullying is, what to look out for and how to tackle it.

LW(63-64) "Bullying should be discussed and tackled at a young age. More education for everyone is needed".

SWK(134-137) "Personally I think a lot of it comes from a person's upbringing; if a person hasn't be brought up with manners, (..) and aren't taught that bullying other children is wrong before they get to school, it is a big issue".

Some participants believed that bullying is a problem that starts at home, whether it is due to SLT or lack of discipline. Çayırdağ (2006) suggests that bullies tend to come from families where parents have low-educational and socio-economic levels. Parents fail to draw definite lines of negative behaviours therefore allowing the children to exploit bullying behaviours onto others (Olweus, 2008). Participants believe that these behaviours are learnt from the parent. The SLT suggests that if the parent was a bully then the child is more likely to become one (Bandura, 1973). There are however, cases where this does not happen. SLT does not take into consideration why the parents were a bully, they could have done it as to not get bullied themselves. Pişkin (2002) agrees that the family circle play a crucial role in a child's development of personality.

Shafii and Shafii (2001) however, state that schools are where educators have the greatest impact so therefore it is where we must direct our focus, as educational opportunities are at risk. Participants also agree that schools should have more authority and more discipline. In the participants view schools appear to be trying to deal with the issue of bullying but are failing, based on their past experiences and the view they have of schools presently .

AB(123- 127) "Talking to the older generations, they used to get the Cain, the teacher used to throw the chalk duster at you (...) Then at home they would get a crack for miss behaving at school. Now teachers are so limited in what they can do (...) children know they can get away with this stuff because no one is going to stop them".

DS(9-11) "I genuinely don't think anti bullying policies work... teachers can't control what is posted on social media, they can't even control what goes on in the playground"

Participants perceived a lack of positive teacher involvement within the cases, with bullies increasingly using social media as a tool to reach victims (Anderson et al., 2014). Although cause and effect cannot be established, the interviews suggest that there is a fear that because bullying is not always visible to the teacher, forcing students to participate in class can have a backlash for the student, often unintentionally making the situation more difficult for the victim. It was interpreted that teachers now have less control over their classroom, making it difficult to allow those being bullied to come forward for help. One thing raised in the interview was the phrase

"no one is going to stop them". This provides another layer into perceived intervention of bullying that could be explored in future research as it poses the question of what can we do to ensure that people being bullied come forward to get the support they need. Yüksel-Şahin's, (2015) study found that when schools had onsite counsellors victims of bullying had a sufficiently high level of coping with bullying. Listening to students and trying to understand their situation allows establishments to learn and adapt the way the school is run, this also gives the individual a sense of belonging in a connected and caring environment (Haselswerdt and Lenhardt, 2003). Again highlighting that the connection to the institution is beneficial to those suffering from bullying.

Bradshaw et al., (2007) believe that schools experience difficulty with prevention programmes for bullying due to the differences in perceptions of the staff, students and parents. There needs to be better communication between staff and students as well as staff and parents/guardians. (Totan and Yöndem, 2007). Participants reflected on the discourse between how teachers would handle situations to advice from parents.

DS (53-59) 'they would just turn a blind eye... they didn't care!.. Even when they did intervene they were just told to say sorry. Then as soon as the teacher was gone they did it again. It didn't matter how long it went on for or how bad it got nothing ever changed'

DR (67-69) 'they didn't do anything, I was just told to toughen up and get on with it... my parents used to go in for meetings all the time and promises were made but never kept'

DS (64-67) 'they would even make me apologise to them, even though it was me being targeted... after my second year of being constantly bullied my parents told me to start fighting back. My dad use to tell me the only way to sort out a bully was to do it back twice as hard'

Parents must support the staff when it comes to reinforcing that behaviours that are identified as bullying are not acceptable. However, the reality of this happening is not very high, some parents can be in denial about their child's involvement e.g. "it's not even him that starts it" and therefore work against the school. Participants believe that

better policies need to be designed to enforce discipline and that sanction bullying (Alex-Hart et al., 2015). With participants reflecting retrospectively, some of the participants were going through their experience within this time frame. In their opinion school's rules should be clear to all those involved; staff, students and parents. Implementing policies is a difficult and on-going process; anti-bullying policies and other school-based interventions need constant reviews to ensure maximum effectiveness. It is important to engage with the student voices, learn from individual experience, translate the policies to all those affected by it and recommend sustainable and effective solutions (Cross and Barnes, 2014). The problem with policies is that bullying has a wide definition with various forms and what is a suitable outcome for one aspect may not be for another. There should be sufficient training about bullying and how to reduce it (Limber et al., 2004), staff should be alert to bullying, carefully observing and intervene immediately (Ayas, 2010).

Although cause and effect cannot be established participants believe that their experiences of bullying, whether positive or negative, has impacted their adulthood. One of the potential reasons why participants gave different responses as to how bullying has affected their adulthood life, is to do with how people perceive their experience over time. How participants felt at the time and how they perceive their experience now can differ based on their perspective, once emotions have lifted (Cross and Barnes, 2014). Furthermore, definitions of what bullying is have changed overtime conversely, what one person may deem a bit of fun can have serious negative effects on someone else. How participants felt about belonging to their institution influenced the way they felt about themselves, introducing this idea of wearing a mask. It was determined that people should not be made to feel like that, which lead to the idea of whose responsibility it is to prevent bullying from happening.

## **Conclusion**

The phenomenon of bullying takes many different forms, experienced in different ways by different people (Howell, 1997). This study focused on the reflections of mature students in the higher educational setting on their experience of being bullied during secondary school. The research sought to answer three questions 'How does being bullied in secondary school have long lasting effects on individuals self-esteem as an adult?'; 'How did they cope with being bullied in secondary school?' and 'How do they



perceive bullying in schools today?'. Using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2000) to analyse the semi structured interviews, three themes were identified; 'Belonging', 'Underneath the mask' and 'Whose problem is it?'.

Within these themes we see that being bullied in secondary school can have long lasting effects into adulthood with participants speaking about the residing memories of their experiences of being bullied and the continued anxiety that remains within certain situations. This supports the notion that being bullied has long-term psychological effects that impact life as an adult as found by Cook et al., (2010) and Schneider et al. (2012). Participants told how they managed to cope with the negative experiences; through a supportive network of friends who made the participants feel connected and welcomed which allowed them to feel as though they belonged. Participants expressed their views on current anti-bullying programmes used in schools, highlighted most by the participants who have switched roles from student to parent. They expressed that improvements could still be made to protect victims of bullying, taking into consideration technological advances. Future research is needed to review policies and implement new procedures to protect any future victims (İlhan-Alper, 2008). This short study was female dominated due to convenient sampling. For future research, I would argue that studies should focus solely on one gender type at a time in order to explore the possible similarities and differences.

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