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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Students’ Social-Emotional Competency And Mathematics Academic Development: A Clustering Analysis On China</td>
<td>1-8</td>
<td>Zhaoxi Yang, <strong>Yehui Wang</strong>, Yingbin Zhang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Could We Think About Friendship Relationships Without Emotions? The Other-Oriented Emotions</td>
<td>9-21</td>
<td><strong>Ana Romero-Iribas</strong>, Consuelo Martínez-Priego</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Relationship Between Social Competences And Coping Strategies In Czech University Students</td>
<td>22-34</td>
<td>Lucie Křeménková, Irena Plevová</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Comparison Of Victimized And Nonvictimized Teachers’ Ways Of Handling Schoolbullying Incidents</td>
<td>35-46</td>
<td>Kristi Kõiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Impact Of Bullying Experiences On Preservice Teachers Studying At University</td>
<td>47-57</td>
<td>Carolyn Broadbent, Jill Burgess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Quality Of Infant Sleep, Electronic Devices And Bullying Behaviors In Schools</td>
<td>58-72</td>
<td><strong>Ana Gomes</strong>, Sandra Figueiredo, Beatriz Silva, Edite Ferreira, Alexandre Castro-Caldas, Juliana Cercatti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Direct Bullying At School And Depressive Risk In Early Adolescence</td>
<td>73-82</td>
<td><strong>Maria Luisa Pedditzi</strong>, Loredana Lucarelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Paradigmatic Changes In School Heads’ Attitudes Towards Leadership Functions</td>
<td>83-93</td>
<td>Nijole Cibulskaitė</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>School Principals’ Attitude Toward Music Education In Lithuania</td>
<td>94-103</td>
<td><strong>Rasa Kirliauskiene</strong>, Jolanta Abramauskiené</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Anatomical Foundations Of Music Perception By Non And Foreign Language Learners</td>
<td>104-112</td>
<td>Petra Besedova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The Factors That Influence The Choice Of Music Teacher’s Profession</td>
<td>113-121</td>
<td><strong>Jolanta Abramauskiene</strong>, Rasa Kirliauskiene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Intergenerationality And Sharing Stories In Inclusive And Digital Contexts</td>
<td>122-134</td>
<td>Cristina Gomes, Esperança Ribeiro, <strong>Sara Felizardo</strong>, Lia Araújo, Maria Figueiredo, Susana Fidalgo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
No: 13
Title: Possibilities Of Using Internet Educational Videos For Motivation In Computer Science Education
Pages: 135-144
Author(s): Tomáš Dragon

No: 14
Title: Internet Resources As A Motivating Factor In Teaching Foreign Languages
Pages: 145-153
Author(s): Svetlana Korovina, Anna Pushkina, Liudmila Krivoshlykova

No: 15
Title: Perspectives Of Educational Psychology Distance Course For Pre-Service English Teachers
Pages: 154-159
Author(s): Victoria Skakunova

No: 16
Title: Response To An Ambiguous Stimulus And Its Cultural Aspects
Pages: 160-170
Author(s): Petra Potměšilová, Miloň Potměšil, Magdalena Belza-Gajdzica

No: 17
Title: The Relationship Between Personality Traits And Anxiousness
Pages: 171-181
Author(s): Lucie Křeměnková, Simona Dobešová Cakirpaloglu, Jana Kvintová, Martina Zouharová

No: 18
Title: Gender Differences In The Perception Of Celebrities By Adolescents
Pages: 182-187
Author(s): Blandína Šramová

No: 19
Title: Parenting Styles, Gender-Role Orientations And Romantic Beliefs And Experience In Emerging Adulthood
Pages: 188-197
Author(s): Eva Papazova, Magdalena Garvanova

No: 20
Title: Exploring Engineering Undergraduates’ Emotional Intelligence: A Gender Comparison Study In Malaysia
Pages: 198-210
Author(s): Jeya Amantha Kumar

No: 21
Title: The Perspectives Of Teachers And Mothers On Peer Relations Of Preschoolers
Pages: 211-223
Author(s): Çağla Öneren Şendil

No: 22
Title: Creativity Of Preschool Children With Varied Ability To Detect Contradictions
Pages: 224-231
Author(s): Alla Belousova

No: 23
Title: A Preliminary Model Of The Social Situation Of Social Adjustment Of Homeless Children
Pages: 232-240
Author(s): Soňa Vávrová, Kateřina Glumbíková, Alice Gojová

No: 24
Title: Students’ Performance And Teaching Practices In Science Across Eu Countries: Evidence From Pisa 2015
Pages: 241-254
Author(s): Saulė Raižienė, Dovilė Stumbriienė, Laura Ringienė, Rita Dukynaitė, Audronė Jakaitienė
No: 25
Title: Team Selection And Performance: The Role Of Migratory Background And Social Class
Pages: 255-270
Author(s): Stephan Schmucker, Sönke Häseker, Jana Sprengel

No: 26
Title: Relationship Of Setting And Gender With Teachers' Self Efficacy In Pakistan
Pages: 271-284
Author(s): Rashida Qureshi, Mahwish Zahoor, Mahrush Zahoor

No: 27
Title: Supporting Students’ Key Competences In Visual Art Classes: The Benefits Of Planning
Pages: 285-299
Author(s): Helen Arov, Edna Vahter, Erika Löfström

No: 28
Title: Study Of Motivation In Portuguese Students
Pages: 300-306
Author(s): Sónia Alexandre Galinha, Ricardo São-João

No: 29
Title: Social Context Of Thefts At Czech Schools
Pages: 307-319
Author(s): Bohdana Richterová

No: 30
Title: Computer Games As A Tool For The Development Of Algorithmic Thinking
Pages: 320-331
Author(s): Veronika Stoffová

No: 31
Title: Professional Self-Concept Of Students Within Final Pedagogical Practice
Pages: 332-339
Author(s): Yveta Pohnětalová, Denisa Kubová, Radka Bečková

No: 32
Title: Performance Technology And Project Method In The System Of Art Education
Pages: 340-346
Author(s): Irina Lisovetc

No: 33
Title: Family Self-Determination Of Students In The Process Of Professionalization
Pages: 347-355
Author(s): Svetlana Merzlyakova, V.A. Zhilkina, O.A. Zobnina, N.A. Sokova

No: 34
Title: Learning And Teaching More Foreign Languages
Pages: 356-366
Author(s): Jana Ondrakova, Vera Tauchmanova

No: 35
Title: Homework In The Curricular Area Of Mathematics In Primary Education
Pages: 367-376
Author(s): Fabiana Lopes, Ana Paula Cardoso, Luís Menezes, Ana Lopes

No: 36
Title: Volunteering Of University Students As A Resource For The Development Of Higher Education
Pages: 377-386
Author(s): Maria V. Pevnaya, E. I. Pevnaya

No: 37
Title: Cognitive And Motivational Constructs In Portuguese And Chinese Students: An Exploratory Case Study
Pages: 387-400
Author(s): Cristina Maria Gonçalves Pereira
No: 38
Title: Raven Mother Stories In Flt
Pages: 401-408
Author(s): Nadezda Heinrichova, Lenka Pikmanova

No: 39
Title: Attitudes Of Grammar School Students To Selected Lifestyle Risk Factors
Pages: 409-419
Author(s): Marie Chrásková

No: 40
Title: Factors Influencing The Level Of Reading Strategies Of Fifteen-Years-Old Pupils In The Moravian-Silesian Region
Pages: 420-434
Author(s): Dana Vicherkova

No: 41
Title: Learning History Through Stories About East Germany
Pages: 435-443
Author(s): Nadezda Heinrichova

No: 42
Title: Emotional Components Of Religiousness Among Students In Kazakhstan
Pages: 444-448
Author(s): Aliya Tolegenova, Shugyla Duanayeva, Danna Summers, Manzura Zholdassova, Dariga Kapasova

No: 43
Title: Using Music In Foreign Language Lessons
Pages: 449-456
Author(s): Petra Besedova, Kristyna Stockova, Karolina Soukupova

No: 44
Title: Description Of Knowledge About Puberty Among Primary School Pupils In Selected Countries
Pages: 457-475
Author(s): Miluše Rašková, Dominika Provázková Stolinská

No: 45
Title: Spontaneous Play As An Indicator Of Children’s School Readiness In Social Skills
Pages: 476-485
Author(s): Eva Šmelová, Alena Berčíková

No: 46
Title: The Typology Of Modern Students’ Family Self-Determination
Pages: 486-493
Author(s): Svetlana Merzlyakova

No: 47
Title: Reading Skills In Relation To Reading Practice Methods
Pages: 494-502
Author(s): Iva Košek Bartošová, Eva Kozlová, Helena Matějová

No: 48
Title: Achievement Motivation And Regulatory Emotional Self-Efficacy In University Students
Pages: 503-513
Author(s): Maria Luisa Pedditzi, Manuela Spigno

No: 49
Title: Problematic Pedagogical Situations At School From The Pre-Service And In-Service Teachers’ Perspectives
Pages: 514-523
Author(s): Iva Košek Bartošová, Dora Janouchová, Hana Kleprlíková
No: 50  
Title: Gender Differences In Attitudes To Ict Lessons In Czech Primary Schools  
Pages: 524-534  
Author(s): Radek Novotny, Martina Maněnová

No: 51  
Title: Student Projects As A Tool Of University Pr And Brand Building  
Pages: 535-543  
Author(s): Jiri Pavelka

No: 52  
Title: Possibilities Of Extension Of The Algorithmization And Programming Teaching At Primary Schools  
Pages: 544-557  
Author(s): Milan Klement

No: 53  
Title: Positive Orientation, Hope For Success And Acquiring Bibilotherapeutic Competences  
Pages: 558-564  
Author(s): Kamil Kurackí

No: 54  
Title: Incorporation Of Complementary And Alternative Medicine In An Undergraduate Pharmacy Curriculum  
Pages: 565-574  
Author(s): Zoriah Aziz, Muhammad Danish Badrul Hisham, Low Hui Yi

No: 55  
Title: Subjective Evaluation Of Health Education By Czech Students  
Pages: 575-584  
Author(s): Michaela Hřivnová

No: 56  
Title: Individual Planning As The Application Of The Recovery Concept For Homeless People  
Pages: 585-593  
Author(s): Kateřina Glumbíková, Barbora Gründelová, Zuzana Stanková, Marek Mikulec

No: 57  
Title: German As A Second Foreign Language At Czech Schools  
Pages: 594-602  
Author(s): Marie Mullerova

No: 58  
Title: Need For Complementary And Alternative Medicine (Cam) Education Among Pharmacists  
Pages: 603-614  
Author(s): S.M. Chew, Zoriah Aziz, W.K. Huin

No: 59  
Title: Verb Forms – Contrastive Grammar  
Pages: 615-625  
Author(s): Jana Ondrakova, Vera Tauchmanova

No: 60  
Title: Pupils' Questions In Relation To The Teacher's Approach To Teaching  
Pages: 626-636  
Author(s): Marie Pavelková

No: 61  
Title: Czech Primary Pupils' Special-Interest Preferences In The Context Of Learning Aspirations  
Pages: 637-644  
Author(s): Barbora Petrů Puhrová, Klara Urbaniečová

No: 62  
Title: Challenges To Preschool Age Children's Free Play  
Pages: 645-652
No: 63
Title: Financing Of Regional Education From The Perspective Of Secondary Schools
Pages: 653-663
Author(s): Vladimíra Hornáčková, Zdenka Nováková, Vlado Balaban

No: 64
Title: The Contexts Of Organ Performance Education In Selected European Countries
Pages: 664-671
Author(s): Jan Lorenc, Kateřina Juklová, František Vaníček

No: 65
Title: Creativity Development Of Kindergarten Teachers
Pages: 672-677
Author(s): Vladimíra Hornáčková, Eliška Fischerová, Denisa Konečná, Terezie Fendrychová

No: 66
Title: Promoting The Nonlinear Model Of Higher Education In Russian Universities
Pages: 678-686
Author(s): Maria Pevnaya, E. A. Shuklina

No: 67
Title: Pre-Service Teachers' Resilience Towards School Children's Problems In Remote Areas
Pages: 687-699
Author(s): Lufi Kartika Sari, Free De Backer, Koen Lombaerts

No: 68
Title: Appraising The Core Communication Proficiencies Of Professionals
Pages: 700-708
Author(s): Ameena Zafar

No: 69
Title: Analysis Of Pedagogical Practice In Teaching Fields
Pages: 709-716
Author(s): Yveta Pohnětalová

No: 70
Title: Application Of Current Trends In Finnish Music Education Within Czech Music Education
Pages: 717-732
Author(s): Marie Kovářičková

No: 71
Title: Professional Qualifications In The Sphere Of E-Learning In An Alternative Discourse
Pages: 733-739
Author(s): Olga Fedotova, Vladimir Latun, Natalia Moskovskaya

No: 72
Title: The Role Of Cultural Studies In Contemporary Art Education
Pages: 740-747
Author(s): Tatiana Sidneva

No: 73
Title: Universities In The Knowledge Society: Models Of Generative Learning Environment
Pages: 748-758
Author(s): Alexander Karpov

No: 74
Title: Experimental Use Of Electromagnetic Articulography In A Person With Myofunctional Disorder
Pages: 759-767
Author(s): Jana Mironova Tabachová, Kateřina Vitásková

No: 75
Title: The Discourse Of Professional Identity Construction Of Beginning Teachers
Pages: 768-775
Author(s): Štefan Chudy, Jiří Kropáč, Vlado Balaban, Iva Koribská
No: 76
Title: Psychological Research On Sleeping Sickness In Kalachi Village, Kazakhstan
Pages: 776-782
Author(s): Aliya Tolegenova, Man Cheung Chung, Elmira Boribay, Intik Shayahmetova, Zhanar Moldagaziyeva, Saltanat Usbulieva

No: 77
Title: Typology Of Czech And Polish Grammar School Students By Computer Game Addiction
Pages: 783-793
Author(s): Miroslav Chráška

No: 78
Title: Language Maturity In Roma Children In The First Year Of School Attendance
Pages: 794-802
Author(s): Katarína Vanková, Rastislav Rosinský, Miroslava Čerešníková

No: 79
Title: Historical Poetry For Humanistic Education
Pages: 803-812
Author(s): Sayed Ibne Ali Jaffari, Ayesha Fatima Barque
9th ICEEPSY 2018
International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology

IMPACT OF BULLYING EXPERIENCES ON PRESERVICE TEACHERS STUDYING AT UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This research study describes the occurrence of bullying of preservice teachers within a university environment, the emotional impact of such behaviour and the challenges for universities in countering the behaviour. The study investigates preservice teachers’ knowledge of bullying; bullying behaviours towards others; and those directed at them; the emotional impact of bullying; and utilisation of sources of support. Predominantly quantitative methodologies are used for the collection of data, with some qualitative methods used, such as open-ended questions, to further bring meaning to the data. A modified questionnaire originally developed by the School of Psychology was distributed to ninety-five pre-service teachers from one campus of a multi-campus university in Australia. Results from the study indicate that 91 of the 95 students (96%) did experience some form of bullying behaviours in their lives; by the second year of university, 45% of this bullying was experienced at university. Bullying behaviours directed towards others were investigated, including, making jokes about others (29%), direct teasing of another (28%), and rude remarks directed against another (27%). Friends (55%), family (28%) and other university students (24%) were the main reported bullies towards the students, with teaching personnel (2%) not rated highly.

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Keywords: Bullying, cyberbullying, university, preservice teachers.
1. Introduction

The impact of bullying in schools and workplaces continues to be at the forefront of the research literature, along with recommendations on anti-bullying approaches, usually by government agencies, to address the issue (Ybarra, Espelage & Mitchell, 2014; Ciby & Raya, 2015; Hein, Koka & Hagger, 2015). Less research has focused on the undergraduate years at university, especially related to pre-service teachers’ experiences of bullying while at university and the impact of this behaviour on their wellbeing. This may be an important omission, given the role teachers play in facilitating anti-bullying programs in schools.

Available studies of pre-service teachers have focused on perceptions, knowledge and attitudes about bullying and cyberbullying (Gorsek & Cunningham, 2014; Spears, Campbell, Tangen, Slee & Cross, 2015) and the comparison of preservice teachers’ responses to cyber versus traditional bullying (Boulton, et al., 2014; Davis, 2015); yet few have focused on the reality of incidence and impact of bullying while at university.

Universities, schools and workplaces differ; universities offer an element of choice, freedom and increasingly flexible program delivery modes that set this period of time in an individual’s career apart from the earlier more restrictive school and work environments (Coleyshaw, 2010). The development of positive social relationships and sense of belonging while at university is also of importance, given its significant influence on student retention (de Souza & McLean, 2012), further supporting the need to investigate more fully the incidence and impact of bullying in preservice teacher education courses at university.

This study draws on the principles of the Quality of Life framework focused on ensuring all participants are able to live life to the fullest. Brown and Brown (2005) identify three major life domains that embody quality of life: being, focusing on individual attributes; belonging, relating to individuals and their environments; and becoming, an individual’s fulfilment of life’s goals (Burgess 2014, in Brown & Faragher, p.66). Although much research in this area has focused on intellectual disability, the underlying principles of the QOL framework have applicability to all people and avenues of life, encompassing both objective and subjective dimensions.

Jokinen (2014) highlights the significant influence of social relationships in the lives of individuals and on all people and the impact this has on the quality of life experienced. Opportunities for choice and self-determination are also important and a necessary ingredient in being able to live life to the fullest, no matter the environment. These are important elements relevant to this research study of preservice teachers’ experiences and impact of bullying while at university; the QOL framework helps bring meaning to the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining bullying

The study of bullying behaviours is complex and definitions of bullying, including cyberbullying, can vary according to the context of the study undertaken and viewpoint of the authors. It is commonly regarded as a multi-faceted and complex social phenomenon and has been identified as a significant social
stressor for both children and adults (Nielsen, Tangen, Ildsoe, Matthiesen & Mageroy, 2015). The substantial work of Olweus (2010) has had a significant influence in the field, with a general view of bullying as an intentional hostile behaviour that is sustained or repeated by a group or an individual towards another. This characteristic hostile behaviour can be physical, verbal, cyber, social or psychological and occurs within an imbalanced power relationship (Olweus, 2010; Rigby, 2012). The areas of intent of harm, repetition of the behaviour and a power imbalance, where the bully is more powerful, are required in order for the behaviour to be classified as bullying. This definition is also offered for the purpose of this paper.

Specific examples of these types of bullying can be found in both children and adults (Dogruer & Yaratan, 2014). Physical bullying can include any range of physical violence; for instance, punching, pushing, tripping and kicking another, while verbal bullying is language-related, where the action deliberately hurts another; for instance, spreading a rumour or name-calling, mocking and intimidating another while targeting differences, perceived or real. Emotional bullying can include both psychological and nonverbal; for example, isolating another by excluding them from digital or face-to-face interactions and pointing, laughing, staring or drawing pictures. Although not the main focus of this paper, the emergence of cyberbullying is also a growing concern and can occur in numerous ways including: intimidating and excluding others online, using hurtful messages and images and online gossip (Australian Government Office of Children’s eSafety Commissioner, n.d).

To more fully comprehend the social nature of bullying, Swearer, Siebecker, Johnsen-Frerichs, and Wang (2010) used a continuum to establish whether students are victims, bullies, bully-victims (both), bystanders (those who watch the bullying) or not involved. In their study, the role of a school student is changeable, rather than fixed, depending on the social setting. A continuum, it was argued, could more accurately capture the social nature of bullying.

Bieber (2013) found that the definition of bullying based on Dan Olweus’ (2010) work to be the most used by researchers and incorporating the key elements of intent of harm, repetition and power imbalance. This was not always well understood, particularly in regards the requirement of repetition in order to be classified as bullying. While there is still debate around Olweus’ key elements, it would appear that intentionality, persistence, asymmetry of power, different forms in which bullying occurs and the social nature of bullying continues to remain open to ongoing analysis (Elamé, 2013).

2.2. Diversity

Bullying behaviours in children and adolescence is a major social problem worldwide. A possible explanation for children becoming targets of bullying has been attributed to difference, including physical, racial, religious and ethnic differences (Carpenter & Ferguson, 2009). Studies of educational settings have also identified cultural differences in bullying behaviour (Piskin, 2010). Walton (2011) argues that the ‘dominant discourse on bullying shapes the ways in which the problem is conceptualised and strategies are designed and carried out’ (p.142). The diversity in our schools and community impacts not only on the cultural differences in understanding bullying, but also on how the dominant group acts to address bullying through rules, policy and legislation. This becomes particularly important when considering how preservice teachers address the dominant discourse and prepare themselves for schools and classrooms.
2.3. Bullying at universities

The long-term damaging effects of bullying on mental health and emotional wellbeing have been recognised by Ortega et al. (2012) in their European cross-national study, Tokunaga's (2010) critique of the research which highlights serious psychosocial, affective and academic problems of victimisation from bullying and cyberbullying, and the meta-analysis on cross-sectional and longitudinal data undertaken by Verkuij, Atasayi and Molendijk (2015).

There are a number of avenues and ways in which those encountering bullying can access support. A person can act constructively towards finding a solution, do nothing, or choose a destructive functioning approach that can be harmful to all involved and cause long-term or permanent damage (Sinkkonen & Merilainen, 2014). Numerous studies explore the necessary support systems available to school-aged students (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory & Fan, 2010) including online resources and targeted websites such as Bullying: No Way (2016); Cybersmart and telephone help lines such as Kids Helpline (2016). Similar support services for young adults are notably less in number. Despite university students being vulnerable to a range of psychological difficulties (McKenzie, Murray, Murray & Richelieu, 2015), counselling services are variably resourced with poor student-counsellor ratios and time and access restrictions evident depending on where a student studies (Stallman, 2012).

Many children and adults do not ask for help when they experience bullying, and as children grow older they become increasingly reluctant to seek help. The long-term implications of not seeking a productive course of action when targeted by bullies include psychological and physical symptoms (Sinkkonen, Puhakka & Merilainen, 2014). In their study of preservice teachers across three universities, Spears et al., (2015) found that preservice teachers had limited knowledge, competencies and confidence in dealing with bullying, including cyberbullying.

3. Problem Statement

Recent expectations of government and professional bodies requiring new teachers to be thoroughly informed about the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APSTs) have increased the pressure on universities to ensure pre-service teachers are classroom ready on the completion of their degree. Of further importance is the expectation that exiting pre-service teachers are cognisant of the values, ethical behaviours and characteristics that underpin the principles of the profession, including an ability to provide high quality teaching and safe, inclusive learning environments for all students.

Informal reports or anecdotal evidence of bullying experiences at university had raised concerns regarding the effect of these experiences on pre-service teachers’ health and wellbeing, while also highlighting the potential future impact of such behaviour on schools as these preservice teachers leave university to enter the profession. Emerging from these concerns was the development of the following research questions.

4. Research Questions

This research study was guided by the following questions:
5. Purpose of the Study

The impetus for this research project stems from a need to establish a deeper understanding of the prevalence and forms of bullying behaviours within preservice teacher education programs.

6. Research Methods

This research study utilises predominantly quantitative methodologies for the collection of data. A modified questionnaire originally developed by the university’s School of Psychology department was distributed to 95 pre-service teachers from one campus of this multi-campus university in Australia. The students selected for the study were in their first (n=26), second (n=29), third (n=6) and fourth (n=34) year of study for a Bachelor of Education Primary (n=50) or a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) combined degree (n=43) and a Graduate secondary education course (n=2). The average age of students in the study was 21 years.

A comprehensive survey was utilised. The questionnaire included seven sections:

Preliminaries: involving personal details, excluded from this paper:

- About you (to gain information about the participant, including age, cultural heritage, university year level and degree)
- Bullying knowledge (to ascertain what the participant knew in the area)

Sections:

Section 1: How you behave with others (investigating participants bullying behaviours towards others)
Section 2: How others behave towards you (investigating bullying behaviour from others experienced by the participants)
Section 3: About your use of technology (investigating the participants use of technology and accessing the Internet both at university and home)
Section 4: Your activities in cyberspace (investigating participant cyberbullying behaviours toward others)
Section 5: Your experience in cyberspace (investigating cyberbullying behaviour from others experienced by the participants)

These sections provide a suitable framework for the presentation of results. There were 95 respondents. Some Level 3 results are not shown due to the low number of students involved.
7. Findings and Discussion

Table 1a. Where preservice teachers bullied others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Recreation</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All levels</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1b. Who did preservice teachers bully?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Friend</th>
<th>Uni Student</th>
<th>Lecturer/tutor</th>
<th>Stranger</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All levels</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For all levels most bullied others at home (Level 1: 65%, Level 2: 52%, Level 4: 56%). After home, the next highest places Level 1 preservice teachers bullied others was during recreation activities (31%) and at work (27%). After home, Level 2 (38%) and Level 4 (47%) preservice teachers mainly bullied others at university, with 29% of Level 4 students also bullying others at work. For preservice teachers the highest percentage for those who were targeted to be bullied was a friend (Level 1: 77%; Level 2: 55%; Level 4: 56%) followed by a family member (Level 1: 69%; Level 2: 41%; Level 4: 50%). Twenty-four percent of Level 4 preservice teachers indicated that they bullied another university student.

7.1. Being bullied

A significant percentage of respondents indicated they had experienced one or more of the behaviours surveyed. Of those bullied, the percentage who indicated that these behaviours were repeated once or twice a month or more was highest for having jokes made about them (29%), being teased (28%), having rude remarks made by someone towards the respondent (27%), being ignored (20%), name calling (14%), having a friend turn against them (12%), comments about their looks (11%), being left out of activities (11%) and being purposefully excluded (10%).

Table 2a. Where preservice teachers were bullied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Recreation</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All levels</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For Level 2 (45%) and Level 4 (41%) preservice teachers, most bullying behaviours they had experienced occurred at university. While Level 1 preservice teachers indicated that most bullying occurred for them at home (42%).

7.2. Who bullied preservice teachers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Level</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Friend</th>
<th>Uni std</th>
<th>Lect/tutor</th>
<th>Stranger</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All levels</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Level 1 preservice teachers who were bullied 73% were bullied by a friend, 42% by a family member and 8% by another university student. Level 2 preservice teachers indicated that 34% experienced the listed behaviours by another university student and 26% for Level 4 preservice teachers. So while the highest score targeted a friend as the most likely bully, a sharp increase from Level 1 to Level 2 was found in bullying from other university students.

A significant percentage of respondents indicated they had experienced one or more of the behaviours surveyed. The percentage who indicated that these behaviours were repeated once or twice a month or more was highest for having jokes made about them (29%), being teased (28%), having rude remarks made by someone towards the respondent (27%), being ignored (20%), name calling (14%), having a friend turn against them (12%), comments about their looks (11%), being left out of activities (11%) and being purposefully excluded (10%).

Survey results of the impact of bullying on feelings found that a significant percentage of respondents noted a negative impact with repeated negative feelings experienced once or twice a month or more of feeling sad and hurt (32%), angry (32%), anxious (29%), embarrassed (28%), cried (24%), had difficulty concentrating (20%) and blamed themselves for the bullying (17%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Sad/hurt</th>
<th>Angry</th>
<th>Anxious</th>
<th>Embarrassed</th>
<th>Cried</th>
<th>Difficulty concentrating</th>
<th>Blamed myself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once or twice a month</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times a week</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All levels</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.3. Cyberbullying

Being cyberbullied outside the home was not rated as a concern for the majority of preservice teachers in the survey, the logic being that the means readily exists to remove the threat; i.e. to delete the offensive message.

Table 3. Where were you when you were cyberbullied?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Recreation</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All levels</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most often being cyberbullied occurred at home (Level 1 - 46%, Level 2 - 45%, Level 4 - 44%), although the percentage experiencing cyberbullying increased at university from 8% for Level 1, 17% for Level 2 and 21% for Level 4.

Table 4. Who cyberbullied you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Friend</th>
<th>Uni Student</th>
<th>Lect/tutor</th>
<th>Stranger</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All levels</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most often a friend was responsible for the cyberbullying (Level 1: 58%, Level 2: 31%, Level 4: 32%). A small percentage of preservice teachers indicated that they were cyberbullied by a lecturer/tutor (Level 1: 4%, Level 2: 7%, Level 4: 3%).

Table 5. Sources of help

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Did not ask for help</th>
<th>Parent Guardian</th>
<th>Uni friend</th>
<th>Friend outside uni</th>
<th>Lect/Tut</th>
<th>Family member</th>
<th>Other Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All levels</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall most preservice teachers sought help from a friend outside of university (42%), while 35% utilised the assistance of a friend at university. About one third of students did not ask for help or sought help from a parent/guardian.

Forty-six percent of level 1 preservice teachers did not ask for help when they were bullied. The highest source of help when they experienced bullying behaviours was sought from parents/guardians.
(35%) or a friend outside university (35%), followed by other family members (19%) and another university friend (15%).

Most Level 2 preservice teachers sought help from a parent/guardian (52%), a friend outside university (48%) or a friend at university (45%). Twenty-four percent did not ask for help nor sought help from other family members.

Most Level 4 preservice teachers sought help from a university friend (41%) or a friend outside university (41%) or other sources such as a counsellor. 32% did not ask for help, while 24% sought help from another family member. The category of ‘other sources’ includes counsellors (totalling 6%), clergy (4%) and telephone helpline (1%)

7.4. Limitations of the study

Bullying and cyberbullying are serious problems that can have a substantially debilitating long-term impact on victims; however the impact of bullying remains an individual experience and the reliability of self-reported questionnaire responses needs to be taken into account. While the anonymity of the questionnaire may have improved reporting, the use of self-reporting questionnaires can also lead to both over and under reporting of the problems of bullying (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). This study is situated at one campus of a multi-campus university and therefore the findings should not be generalised across campuses nor to other universities.

8. Conclusion

This study sought to ascertain the extent and impact of bullying on preservice teachers while at university. From the data presented, there is little doubt that many preservice teachers do experience bullying while undertaking their studies as part of their teacher education course at university. Students displayed a surprising openness about their own bullying of others.

Overall, bullying in all its available forms, such as physical, verbal, cyber and more, is sufficiently widespread to warrant strict protocols at university and to ensure they are articulated clearly to students, especially in regards preservice teachers, considering the relatively high negative emotional impacts on some students. Of some concern is the finding that bullying of others by preservice teachers increases over the four years of the teacher education program. This requires further investigation, especially given the impact of such behaviour on the nature and effectiveness of the program in preparing preservice teachers for the profession. It also has implications for preservice teachers’ overall quality of life while at university and the level of social connectedness experienced as they near completion of their program. Opportunities to learn within a safe and inclusive learning community is especially important given the role future preservice teachers will play in implementing educational programs specifically designed to educate children and young adults about bullying behaviours in schools. Although a variety of safety courses including bullying does exist and these are conducted at secondary schools as well as at this university and at other venues, a disappointing total of 38 of the 95 students (40%) stated they had not attended these; such initiatives aimed at the prevention of bullying need to be further encouraged.
References


