

## VICTIM AND BULLY: THE TWO SIDES OF BULLYING IN GIFTED CHILDREN

Jennifer L. Groman

When the gifted child is mentioned in the context of the bullying scenario, he is usually pictured as the victim: small and slight, wearing glasses and a pocket protector, exhibiting nerdy and unsociable behavior. Even within the gifted literature, the gifted individual tends to be researched in the context of *being* bullied, rather than being *the bully*. However, the more we learn about the characteristics of the bully and the reasons children bully others, the more it is evident that the gifted child has the capabilities, personality attributes, and impetus to be a very successful bully. Indeed, there are two sides to bullying in gifted children. This chapter relates the research about giftedness, gifted individuals' behavior and characteristics to aspects of bullying and victimization.

The literature on bullying with a focus on gifted and talented children is scarce. The most comprehensive research on bullying as related to gifted populations emerged from Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) and outlined prevalence and types of bullying by age. In another research study, Estell et al (2009) explored students with exceptionalities (students with disabilities as well as academically gifted students) in bully and victim roles, recognizing that these populations differ greatly from general education students in social functioning, behavior, and characteristics.

This chapter begins with working definitions for gifted children and bullying. Next is a short review of literature of bullying within populations of school-age gifted children, which then focus further on the gifted child as the victim, the potential of a victim moving into the bullying role, and the gifted child as the bully. The chapter then turns to the author's research exploring what a small group of gifted Grade 6 students believed was in the mind and motivation of the gifted bully and victim. The chapter ends with possible directions for future research in giftedness and bullying and conclusions and suggestions for adults working with gifted students to prevent or ameliorate bullying incidents.

### Gifted Children: A Definition

The National Association for Gifted Children’s definition for gifted and talented students are those who “perform—or have the capability to perform—at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains” (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d., para. 1). It is the NAGC’s position that educational modifications are required for these students to realize their potential. Gifted individuals come from all populations, cultures, and economic backgrounds, and require support and guidance to develop both academically and in social/emotional wellbeing. Areas of giftedness may include academic domains, cognitively gifted, visual and performing arts, creativity, and leadership. There is no federal funding or requirement for identification or service of gifted populations in K-12 schools in the United States, thus states and local entities recognize and financially support gifted students in varying capacities. NAGC estimates that children who test at the top 10% using national and local norms in a given domain would be considered gifted and talented and estimates that 6% of public school students are enrolled in school-sanctioned gifted and talented programs.

**Commented [DrJ1]:** Add a space between “that” and “educational”

**Commented [DrJ2]:** Space between “in” and “K-12”

Characteristics of gifted children vary greatly, but a number of common traits emerge from the literature. Perceived positive characteristics of gifted individuals include early and rapid learning, superior language and analytic ability, advanced and varied interests, high task commitment, strong empathy, inquisitiveness, and high expectations of self. Perceived negative characteristics include uneven mental development (asynchrony), perfectionism, extreme awareness of being different, sensitivities, poor self-image, and interpersonal and social difficulties with age-peers, often due to intellectual differences. While these traits cannot be applied to every gifted and talented individual, they are characteristics that recur in multiple studies of gifted children and adults in the last 25 years (see Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018).

**Commented [DrJ3]:** Space between “while” and “these”

### Bullying: A Definition

Peterson (2014) indicates that schools seeking to identify instances of bullying need a broader definition of bullying than researchers. Precision in research definitions means that research findings can be compared across multiple studies, while schools must be more alert to developing and subtle forms of bullying indicative in a definition that allows for wider interpretation. Peterson states that more precise definitions of bullying, however, tend to focus only on written, physical, and oral aggressive communications intended to intimidate but may overlook forms of bullying that

include subtle behaviors meant to socially exclude for purposes of ostracizing another individual. Some forms of bullying occurring in classrooms are often missed entirely by teachers, especially in short conversations or transitional classroom periods (Groman, 2019; Hamarusa & Kaikkonen, 2008). For the purpose of this chapter, Cross's (2001a) definition, which is grounded in the bully's *intent* rather than the bully's *behavior*, is relevant:

A bully is a person who uses any approach at his or her disposal including, but not limited to, intimidation (physical, emotional, verbal), positional authority, relational authority, or societal authority to create limiting effects on another's behaviors, thoughts, or feelings. (p. 43)

In this definition, Cross delineates that the bully's intentions toward control is not just of another's outward behaviors, but also their inward thoughts or feelings, which can significantly impact emotional well-being and identity formation. Researchers' awareness of bullying behaviors now include the impact of bullying on identity and identity development as well as observable behavioral responses (Sanchez, 2019). It is also important to consider that in the bully/victim scenario the victim has difficulty defending himself because of the bully's choice of timing and behavior limit the victim's ability to do so (Allen, 2017).

Bullying behaviors are often based on differences. Guilbault (2008) suggests the balance of power in the bully/victim relationship may be based on any physical difference (size or strength) or psychological difference (social status), but mostly a bully looks for potential victims by their inability or unwillingness to fight back: an "easy target" (para. 20). Bullies have a unique ability to suppress or dominate others they view as different (Allen, 2017). It appears as though even despite their differences, gifted children are as likely to be victimized as general education students, but not as likely as special education students to be a bully or victimized by a bully (Estell et al, 2009).

Behavior attributed to bullying can be direct (pushing, hitting, teasing, verbal threats) or indirect (social exclusion, manipulating others to isolate another student, gossip). The act of bullying is often hidden from teachers and adults, especially by female students. In fact, motivation, bullying behavior, and perception of causation varies greatly between male and female school-age populations. Male bullying tends to be direct, males are more likely to attribute the cause of the bullying to the victim, and to externalize problem-focused strategies (Guilbault, 2008; Tenenbaum, Varjas, Meyers, & Parris, 2011; Thornberg & Knutson, 2011). Males are more likely to be bullied, to be a bully, or to think about or act on violent thoughts (Peterson & Ray, 2006b). Female bullying

**Commented [DrJ4]:** Space between "Hamarusa" and "&" and between "&" and "Kaikkonen"

**Commented [DrJ5]:** Space between "relationship" and "may"

**Commented [DrJ6]:** Space between "Thornberg" and "&"

is often indirect, females are more likely to attribute the cause of bullying to the bully, and seek social support when they are bullied (Guilbault, 2008; Tenenbaum, Varjas, Meyers, & Parris, 2011; Thornberg & Knutson, 2011). Peterson and Ray (2006b) determined that most victims told no one.

### **Bullying And Gifted Populations**

Bullying in school situations has garnered a great deal of research in recent years, however Peterson and Ray (2006a) found no studies of bullying among gifted children prior to their own. Their national study focused on pervasiveness and impact of bullying on gifted students from kindergarten through Grade 8, and included 432 eight graders in 16 schools of varying population density levels in 11 US states. The researchers, while acknowledging that gifted bullies were present in schools, hypothesized that their study would focus primarily on gifted students who were victimized. Their findings told a different story of the prevalence of the gifted bullies and victims. Estell et al (2009) found that teachers are most likely to view disabled students as bullies and victims and least likely to view gifted children as bullies and victims. Peterson and Ray's research (2006b) challenges these teacher assumption.

The research on bullying in gifted populations which follows outlines findings related to the gifted child as the victim, then explores research on the possibility of the victim moving into the bully role, and moves on to describe the literature related to the gifted child as the bully.

### **The Gifted Child as the Victim**

Much of the research connecting gifted children and bullying focuses on the gifted child as the victim in the scenario. Overwhelmingly, researchers found that no significant differences exists between gifted and nongifted children in terms of how often and how much they are bullied (Oliviera& Barbosa, 2012: Peterson & Ray, 2006a, 2006b), even in cyberbullying scenarios (Mitchell, 2011; Siegle, 2010) except that children gifted in the arts tend to endure more targeted bullying behavior (Oliviera & Barbosa, 2012), as do androgynous or LGBTQ gifted students (Hebert, 2002: Peterson & Ray, 2006b). Children identified for special education programs experience bullying more than identified gifted and general education students (Estell et al, 2009).

Peterson and Ray (2006a) found that bullying of gifted children and adolescents occurs universally. Sixty-seven percent of surveyed gifted students experienced some type of bullying between kindergarten and Grade 9, with 73% of gifted male students self-reporting victimization.

**Commented [DrJ7]:** Space between "these" and "teacher"

**Commented [DrJ8]:** Space between "follows" and "outlines"

**Commented [DrJ9]:** Space between "Oliviera" and "&"

**Commented [DrJ10]:** Should be LGBTQ not LGTBQ  
Also, space between "LGBTQ" and "gifted"

More students were bullied repeatedly in Grade 6 than in any other grade, yet Grade 8 had the highest percentage of gifted bullies, at 16%. They determined that the characteristics exhibited by gifted children who are victims include low self-esteem, small stature, sending a tacit message that there would be no retaliation, low assertiveness, depression, and social anxiety. Guilbault (2008) found that bullies choose their victims not by appearance, but because of their isolation, perceived defenselessness, ease at being upset or influenced, introversion, appearance of passive personality and less likely to retaliate. Passive victims are sensitive, quiet, lack confidence, they display heightened emotional sensitivity, prefer to associate with older children and adults, have few friends, and are excluded from play activities – experience isolation and otherness. To this Peters (2012) adds that advanced intensities and sensitivities more common in gifted children add to the impact of their experience of victimization.

### ***Isolation and Otherness***

An early American pioneer in the challenges and characteristics of extremely intelligent children, Hollingworth (1916) claimed that profoundly gifted learners experience social isolation in age-peer groups. She believed institutions of learning that do not value high intelligence make it more challenging for gifted to fit in with their age-peers. This isolation made gifted children more susceptible to a bully, as popular children are less bullied (Estell et al, 2009). A century after Hollingworth, Peters (2012) concurred, saying that “the higher the intelligence a child possesses, the more different the child is from everyone else” and “the more vulnerable they are to being bullied” (p. 17). He posited that gifted students’ characteristics often make them targets for bullies simply because these characteristics make them stand out from peers. Their advanced abilities and vocabulary and their distain toward (or lack of awareness of) social hierarchies make them unwilling or unable to play the “game” of social acceptance, which may open them as targets to bullies. Silverman used the term “developmental asynchrony” (as cited in Allen, 2017, p. 270), meaning the more cognitive development experienced by the individual, the less she may fit in emotionally or socially with age-peers, contributing to victimization. In addition, it has been established that the uniqueness of gifted children creates a sense of isolation or otherness. Many gifted adolescents feel a “stigma of giftedness” (Peairs et al, 2019, p. 187) constructed by the perception that peers see them as different. Regardless of whether or not this stigma is real or simply a perception by the individual,

**Commented [DrJ11]:** Space between “made” and “gifted”

the feeling of otherness significantly interfered with peer social interactions (Coleman & Cross, 1988).

### *Emotional Intensities*

It is apparent that bullying is a serious issue for all populations, so while gifted individuals may not experience less or more bullying than non-identified gifted individuals, due to their distinct characteristics and sensitivities, gifted individuals may experience bullying in a profound way compared to their general education and special education counterparts. Foley-Nicpon (2016) found that giftedness alone does not heighten vulnerability to bullying, but does add complexity to the experience. Guilbault (2008) states that an active imagination can intensify fears, anxiety, and depression at being bullied, and to the gifted child reacting to bullying in a way that provokes more bullying.

This active imagination may be characterized by extreme sensitivities or overexcitabilities, or OE, which are based on the work of Dabrowski (1964).<sup>1</sup>“Piechowski (1999) characterized overexcitabilities as enhanced modes of being in the world. The word *over* used in connection with *excitability* connotes responses to stimuli that are beyond normal and often of a different quality” (O’Connor, 2002, p. 54, italics in original). Overexcitabilities, emotional intensities, and sensitivities (often used interchangeably) are well researched in the field of gifted education (Fonseca, 2016; Daniels & Piechowski, 2008; Piechowski, 2013), and indicate the presence of intense responses (psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional) to everyday events and ideas.

Allen (2017) found that gifted children experience interpersonal problems due to emotional intensities and overexcitabilities, and Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) believed these were relevant in gifted populations in terms of their anxieties and phobias, and may add to the potential impact of bullying. They commented that gifted children may lack the social skills to respond to aggression, social competition, and even everyday competitive banter, adding to the stress of being bullied. While they warn against assumptions that gifted students may react more intensely to bullying than general education students, they also speculate that gifted students might respond with more sensitivity than others, specifically when teased about their appearance. This heightened sensitivity in responding to the bully may, as Guilbault (2008) indicated, reward or provoke the bully to continue the teasing. Allen (2017) also stated that overexcitabilities may mean that the gifted child re-lives the bullying experience repeatedly, well after it is over.

Commented [DrJ12]: Space after period.

Commented [DrJ13]: Space between “&” and “Piechowski”

Commented [DrJ14]: Space between “commented” and “that”

Commented [DrJ15]: Space between “adding” and “to”

Other characteristics of the gifted individual that may relate to victimization include perfectionism, leading to the belief that the child must deal with bullying problems on his own (Guilbault, 2008), and neurotic perfectionism emerging from peer pressure, giving rise to self-defeating emotions, depression, and social isolation (Allen, 2017). Bullying disrupts the learning process, increases anxiety, and contributes to low self-esteem, self-doubt, and avoidance of school, all of which add to the isolation of the gifted child. Being bullied contributes to self-doubt (Peterson, 2016), but when he has support, takes action, and is able to make changes, there is less loss of self-esteem.

### **Do Gifted Victims Become Gifted Bullies?**

Haynie et al. (2001) found that more than half of bullies reported being victims. Groman's (2019) research and interaction with sixth graders in a gifted self-contained classroom suggested that gifted children who find themselves the target of bullying may direct their anger, knowledge of the weaknesses of others, and intellectual ability to becoming a bully themselves. In their studies, Peterson and Ray (2006a) attempted "to determine whether being bullied led to bullying others later in school" (p. 158), using logistics regression

...with being bullied in fourth grade as a predictor variable and being a bully in fifth, sixth, seventh, or eight grade as a response variable. In addition, analyses using height or weight as predictor variables and being a victim of bullying as the response variable resulted in nonsignificant findings. (p. 158).

They continue, finding that

1 in 5 gifted males was a bully in Grade 8 [which] might suggest that gifted victims become gifted bullies, but this study did not continue to pursue that relationship after finding no significance initially. However, even if the percentages of gifted students who experienced threats, intimidation, damaged possessions, or teasing about family or social status were under 10% in Grade 8, these percentages had continued to increase through Grade 8. Perhaps a child who was repeatedly bullied throughout the school years, especially during early adolescence, became an angry, reactive bully by Grade 8, although the contrast in percentages between victims (46% in grade 6) and bullies (16% in grade 8) suggests that most victims do not become bullies. (p. 162)

Regardless, they were disturbed by the numbers of gifted children involved in bullying behavior and violent thoughts. They found that when the *types* of bullying by gifted students shifted in style and increased in Grade 6 and 7, with hitting as a bullying style disappearing completely, gifted bullies moved into nonphysical types of bullying behaviors, suggesting that “intellectual nimbleness and capacity for subtlety” (p. 162) became a foundation for nonphysical styles of bullying. Peairs et al (2019) posited that that “advanced cognitive abilities associated with giftedness may make some gifted children effective perpetrators of covert relational aggression” (p. 187). So while bullied gifted children may not be more predisposed to becoming a bully, their characteristics and behavior may allow them to be an effective bully to less able peers (Groman, 2019).

Groman’s (2019) work with urban sixth-graders exploring the bully/victim scenario, which will be considered in more detail below, used arts-based techniques. She states that through her discussions with gifted students about bullies and victims

I thought that the students would begin to see the victim’s point of view and realize that bullying hurts others. Surprisingly, most of our discussion focused on the bully, because many of [those gifted] students identified with the bully. By identifying and discussing both the bully’s feelings and behaviors, the students and I discovered that the bully was once a victim who “had enough.” These students told me they believed that many victims could not take the pressure of being picked on, so they, in turn, became bullies to deal with this rage and anger. We talked about the shape of this behavior, how it became a cycle, around and around: Bullies created bullies out of victims. (p. 15)

This phenomenon is well worth continued study.

### **The Gifted Child as the Bully**

The bully is often believed to be an individual with poor self-esteem who gains status by dominating others. Guilbault (2008) counters this assumption, stating that bullies actually tend toward average to high self-esteem. Olweus (1993) lists characteristics of effective bullies, some of which can be seen as aspects of characteristics of gifted individuals include: like to dominate others, feeling rewarded by bullying others, lacking compassion for victims, manipulative, and can talk their way out of situations, impulsive, easily frustrated, lack conforming behaviors.



Peterson (2016) found that “physical bullying by gifted students declined and verbal and indirect bullying increased over time, and teasing about grades and intelligence peaked in grades 7 and 8” (p. 132). Peterson and Ray (2006b) also reported that 28% of gifted students bullied someone at some point between kindergarten and Grade 9. One in five gifted males bullied others in Grade 8, and one in ten gifted females were bullies in the middle grades. Overall, the percentages of gifted students who were bullies increased through the school years, peaking at about 16% in Grade 8, after which bullying declined. Types of bullying by gifted children include name calling, pushing, threats, teasing about appearance, and hitting. Their findings that the percentage of gifted bullies steadily increased through kindergarten to Grade 8 contrasts Weir’s (2001) findings that bullying peaked in Grade 1 and again in Grade 4. Peterson and Ray (2006a) determined that at least 10% of gifted bullies bullied repeatedly, which is supported by Guilbault (2008). Jacobson “argued that bullying reflects an ‘insatiable’ pursuit of identity” (as cited in Peterson, 2014, p. 98).

Leiken (2010) used his counseling experience to step inside the mind of a bully, and stated that the social pressures in the middle school milieu gave pre-adolescent and adolescent students the perception that they were one wrong choice or embarrassing comment away from being ostracized by peers. Isolation, or being kicked out of their peer social group was a main concern. They may not regret harming others’ feelings because they were too busy fighting for their own social survival, to them this felt like life and death. They felt it was what they needed to do to survive in a stressful competitive world. Leiken viewed the act of teasing outside of school as a way for individuals to establish dominance and survive in a world where competition reigns supreme, and teasing inside of school demonstrated that they were funny and ruthless, which proved their worth in today’s competitive culture.

Three themes relevant to the gifted bully include responses to lack of intellectual challenge in the educational institution, asynchronous development (uneven development of social-emotional aspects of the gifted child in comparison to intellectual ability), and a sense of rage within the gifted student. These themes lead to a discussion of Groman’s (2019) small research study with gifted sixth graders who were showing signs of bullying their gifted and general education peers.

### ***Lack of Challenge***

As stated earlier in this chapter, the National Association for Gifted Children’s definition for gifted and talented students are those who “perform—or have the capability to perform—at higher

**Commented [DrJ16]:** Space between “adolescent” and “students”

**Commented [DrJ17]:** Space between “were” and “funny”

**Commented [DrJ18]:** Space after “Groman’s”

levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains” (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d., para. 1). In the author’s state of Ohio, this means students performing in the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile on a nationally normed achievement test in a specific academic area (Reading, Mathematics, Science, or Social Studies) (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). An identifying score of 95% in Mathematics, for example, indicates that the child, scored the same as or better than 95 percent of their age-peers, knowing and having the ability to perform math tasks better than 95 percent of their peers. It is understood that most schools focus their attention on students falling below average (usually those with a Special Education identification) and general education students, to ensure their passing of the state-sanctioned assessments. Because there is no federal funding for gifted identification or service in US public schools, these students are usually the ones who are “left behind” (Finn & Wright, 2015), and their needs underserved. Gifted students may deal with monotony in their school day in negative ways – with irritability, inattention, and even depression and hopelessness about the future (Allen, 2017).

Dull classrooms may also serve to open gifted students to neurotic (unhealthy) perfectionism, especially in mixed ability and collaborative classrooms (Cross, 2011a; Robinson, 1990; VanTassel-Baska, 1992). In addition, when gifted students are expected to tutor or guide struggling or general education students and are blamed for their peers’ lack of progress, they sacrifice their learning at the hands of an educational system that does not recognize or value their progress at the same rate as their age-peers of different learning levels. Allen (2017) found that children with psychomotor overexcitabilities who find themselves in a less than challenging classroom environment may opt to find stimulation in various and unacceptable ways. Allen goes on to state that a culture of anti-intellectualism intensifies overexcitabilities and neurotic perfectionism, and increase the chances that the gifted individual will resort to bullying behaviors to keep themselves stimulated and engaged.

A need for peer status and a desire to fit in increases in middle grades, paired with a perceived intolerance of differences, becomes a reason for the gifted to attempt to gain popularity through deviant behavior such as bullying (Allen, 2017). Groman (2019) found that the gifted bully in the general education classroom felt superior to their peers, but misunderstood, left out and lonely, and were often simply trying to get attention by making their classmates cry, something they were more adept at because of their ability to hone in on and attack small errors, their advanced verbal keenness and sophisticated humor (Piirto, 1999), impulsivity, and their need and desire to dominate others

(Guilbault, 2008). Groman (2019) also found that gifted students were “shrewd about the proximity and acuity of the teacher” (p. 13) and had a highly evolved ability to use it to their advantage to bully peers.

Commented [DrJ19]: Space after “Groman”

### ***Asynchrony***

The concept of asynchrony, or uneven development, is “a defining element of giftedness” (Wiley, 2016, p. 4) that pervades the gifted literature as it pertains to gifted children’s social and emotional needs. Cross (2016) defines asynchronous development as that “in which cognitive development outpaces social, emotional, and/or physical development” meaning that “they will be out of step with classmates” (p. 42). Wiley (2016) states that asynchrony “provokes a qualitatively different social experience” (p. 4). Allen (2017) sees the connection between asynchronous development and bullying in relation to certain socioemotional contextual issues they experience such as loneliness, identifying with intellectual (older) peers over age-peers, difficulty making friends, being perceived as unfriendly in social situations, and the challenge of holding high ambition in a peer culture that does not value it.

### **The Rage of Gifted Students**

For gifted children seeking a sense of identity and who are keenly aware of social pressures by nature of their giftedness, find themselves in a culture that does value intellectualism (Cross, 2011b), and experience a sense of rage simmers below the surface. In the days following the April, 1999, high school massacre in Littleton, Colorado, Katz (1999) observed that

Commented [DrJ20]: Space between “pressures” and “by”

the country went on a panicked hunt for the oddballs in high school, a profoundly ignorant and unthinking response to a tragedy that left geeks, nerds, non-conformists and the alienated in an even worse situation than they were before. (para. 1).

Katz went on to state that “for some of the best, brightest and most interesting school kids, high school is a nightmare of exclusion, cruelty, loneliness, warped values and rage” (para. 1). He coined the term “Hellmouth” and the Slashdot.org blog “Voices from the Hellmouth” as a platform for gifted individuals to share true stories of their treatment in school. Cross (2011) points to the rage of the gifted student as a result of receiving mixed messages from the school culture: gifted are encouraged to do well in school, yet often giftedness is either ignored, outright denied, or there is a

belief that gifted children are already advantaged and therefore undeserving of special services. Groman (2019) saw relevance in her classroom as she noticed sixth grade gifted students taking on roles of gifted bully and victim with their gifted and general education peers.

### **The Voices of the Gifted Bully and Victim**

*Author's note: As I move into the following section, I am shifting my writing voice from third person to first person. This is admittedly a nontraditional choice, however, the research that follows is my own, and I feel compelled to add recollections and information not shared in the original published article to explore and gain insight into the mind of the gifted bully and victim. In my concluding section I return to third person writing voice.*

In the years immediately following September 11, 2001, and before school shootings went from being a rarity to a regularity, I performed a mini exploration of the bully and victim roles in a small, urban, gifted sixth-grade self-contained English/Language Arts (ELA) classroom (Groman, 2019), all students were identified in superior cognitive ability (two standard deviations above the mean, minus the SEM) and Reading/Language Arts (testing at the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile). Some students were identified in other areas as well. Students were pulled out daily for 50 minutes where they received differentiated instruction in reading, writing, and language arts. For the remainder of the school day these students were in the general education, Grade 6 classroom.

The Grade 6 general education and special education teachers approached me one day with concerns about bullying within their classrooms, bullying that included the identified gifted students often in the role of the bully. The teachers recounted a recent even where one of the students had been discovered with a knife in his backpack, as well as incidents of verbal bullying perpetrated by another gifted student. It was time to talk about bullying with these gifted students.

In my study of creativity and therapeutic techniques using the arts, I decided to try an art-based technique I had used in the past: Torn Paper Monsters, based in Cameron's (2016) creativity work. Arts-based techniques allow teachers to gain access to the inner feelings and motivations of the gifted victim and gifted bully as interpreted and experienced by students by using the image as a go-between. Students created torn paper representations of the bully and the victim, and used those representations to consider and write about what the bully and victim were thinking, feeling, and experiencing. In revisiting the narratives written by these gifted students more than fifteen years

later, interesting impressions emerge. What follows are seven such narrative insights into the gifted bully and victim, and further discussion on my interactions with **these** students in my gifted classroom. They are presented here as one teacher/researcher's experience with bullying among gifted students, but I hope that the insights explored here provide possible ideas for future research and study. The original research is presented elsewhere (Groman, 2019).

It should be noted that the students themselves gave their bullies and their victims pseudonyms as part of their narratives.

This is Susan's narrative, writing as the victim.

*I'm nice, I try hard, find the good things about something. I try my hardest, but someone always tells me that it's wrong, or it should be better.*

Susan used her own name as the name of the victim representation. I assigned Susan's pseudonym for research purposes to protect her identity. She was the only one to use her own name in any of the writing, and yet she used a pseudonym in her writing of the bully. Susan had arrived mid-year as an introverted, sensitive, and easily embarrassed and flustered young lady. She appeared keenly aware of being the "New Kid," and often found herself on the receiving end of Tammy's (whose narratives appear below) bullying and biting comments. In Susan's case, her status as a new student, her introversion, and her lack of self-confidence in her own abilities gave the bully a perfect opportunity to attack her self-respect.

These are two sections of Tammy's bully narrative.

*I think my life is fun. It's cool to make fun of other people, to hurt their feeling as long as I'm happy. They think I'm mean and I think they're jealous. I am the best and most perfect person in the universe.*

*I hurt people's feelings and break their hearts. I don't care what other people say. I am the only one that matters on this earth! People call me Blender Kid because I take their hopes, hearts and dreams and squish them like blenders.*

It is interesting also to note that Tammy was indicated by the general education teachers as one of the bullies while in with the general education class, something I had observed as well in her interactions in the gifted pullout classroom. Tall for her age and solid, she was on a larger scale than all of the other students, including male age-peers. Her verbal abilities and wit were quick and sharp,

**Commented [DrJ21]:** Space between "these" and "students"

often to the point of wounding, and she tended to talk over others. She was popular with her gifted peers, but it appeared to be more out of fear than friendship. She instigated seat saving upon entering the classroom as well as a game where she would write the name of an undesirable peer on a fellow student's hand, and dare them not to look at it.

Tammy wrote quite a bit more than her peers on the bully narrative, and her powerful statements appear to show a sense of superiority and an utter lack of empathy for others. In retrospect, I believe that Tammy's intuitive knowledge of others' feelings (empathy) may actually have existed at quite a high level, but it appeared she used this intuitive knowledge and her advanced verbal abilities to her own advantage as a bully. She seemed to know that Susan's introversion and sensitivity would mean that the simplest remark might call attention to or hurt without the teacher (me) even knowing it was happening. Early bullying research indicated that bullies lacked empathy (Olweus, 1993), but other research shows two types of empathy, affective empathy (the ability to understand and experience the feelings of others) and cognitive empathy (the ability to understand and recognize the feelings of others) (Davis, 1994). Stavrinides, Georgiou, & Theofanous (2010) posit the possibility that bullies may have high cognitive empathy, knowing very well how their victims feel, but lack any affective empathy that would keep them from attacking others. In other words, individuals with high cognitive empathy may use that empathy to their advantage in bullying others (Werber, 2017). Another more recent study of cyberbullying/online trolling (Sest & March, 2017) found that

High levels of cognitive empathy make these people adept at recognizing what will upset someone, and knowing when they've pushed the right buttons. The lack of affective empathy allows [bullies] not to experience or internalize the emotional experience of their victims. (Werber, 2017, para. 5).

Further research into the type of high empathy present in gifted individuals and high cognitive empathy/low affective empathy in bullies is needed to determine any causal relationship or connection.

This is Annette's bully narrative

Commented [DrJ22]: Space between "Tammy" and "wrote"

Commented [DrJ23]: space

Commented [DrJ24]: space

Commented [DrJ25]: space

*He deceives people. He helps to make everyone feel good and then turns around and stabs them in the back. He feels misunderstood because everyone knows what he has done in the past.*

This is Annette's victim narrative

*He is "quiet, mean to others, cries because of feelings that were hurt, scared, frightened, hurt, ashamed, unliked, feels like no one likes him."*

Annette/Mary was outgoing, small and slight, also extremely advanced cognitively, and probably the closest Tammy had to a friend in the classroom. She was fiercely loyal to Tammy, as they had been friends from a young age, but also extremely kind and gentle-natured with her classmates, a marked difference in her friend's behavior toward others. Her narrative of the bully's thoughts of feeling misunderstood and inwardly ashamed of her bullying behavior may show strong insights into friend Tammy's possible feelings about her role as a bully. Though Peterson and Ray (2006b) speak to feelings of regret by the victim in not being able to stand up to the bully, the literature is scarce on the feeling of regret in the bully. Annette's thoughts on the bully's regret might indicate another area of future research into the motivations of the bully as stuck within a cycle of behavior she cannot end.

This is Randy's narrative of the bully.

*I am destructive, absent minded. I feel misunderstood.*

Randy experienced a bully/victim interaction two weeks prior to this art and writing lesson. One of his sixth grade general education classmates had filed the fingernails on one hand into points and terrorized him on the playground, eventually scratching him severely. She was reprimanded by the principal, but no further punishment was given. Randy, feeling unsafe on the playground thereafter, began bringing a knife to school as protection and had been caught with it and suspended for three days from school. His personality, however, was anything but that of a bully. He wore wire-rim glasses, and was quiet and friendly with his peers in the gifted classroom. I remember thinking that he did not have a mean or destructive bone in his body. His insights into the bully's mind show frustration at his inability to understand why he had been perceived by the administration as a bully

Commented [DrJ26]: space

Commented [DrJ27]: space

Commented [DrJ28]: space between "experienced" and "a"

Commented [DrJ29]: space between "him" and "on"

and was punished for protecting himself. Research into the experiences of victims who feel the need to protect themselves would prove insightful for students like Randy.

Julie's writing as the bully shows a powerful look into the mind of the bully as someone who is not getting the attention they desire and using bullying behavior to simply be seen.

*I sometimes feel like I am the strongest and best person, but other times I feel left out and lonely. I want people to know I exist and it seems like the only way to get their attention is to make them cry.*

The gifted individuals in Peterson and Ray's (2006b) study wanted to make sense out of the reasons why someone would bully others. The gifted victim's tendency to want to determine causation for the bullying act, and the observations offered most often from their research subjects posited that bullies sought attention because they do not get enough of it at home or at school.

### **Conclusions**

Bullying and victimization in the lives of gifted students is very real. Gifted students most likely do not experience bullying at a higher rate than general education students, but as bullying is a problem in the lives of all students, gifted students are at risk for bullying behaviors. Researchers agree that their distinct characteristics, including isolation from age-peers and increased sensitivities, put gifted children at greater risk to experience bullying in a more profound and complex way compared to their peers. In addition, lack of challenge, asynchrony, and deep-seated rage within the gifted student at the educational process that does not understand them may put them in a powerful position to bully others.

### **Topics for Further Research**

A number of areas of further study are apparent. The field may benefit from research into the development of the bully and the possible trajectory of the victim becoming the bully. Research into the bullying of gifted students, especially LGTBQ and arts-identified gifted students, would add to the field of knowledge on gifted students. Other topics of study might include the impact of intensities and sensitivities on victimization of gifted students, how an increase of challenge in the classroom impacts bullying of and by gifted students, the connection of cognitive and affective



empathy on the bullying behavior of gifted individuals, and continuing and extending the research by Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) and Estell et al (2009) on the specific aspects of bullying within gifted populations. The literature, however, is replete with suggestions for parents and teachers to assist gifted students to navigate the specific challenges of the bully/victim scenario.

### **Suggestions for Children**

Groman's (2019) gifted students created a list of suggestions and a model for proactively responding to feelings leading up to angry confrontation between peers. Name calling, insults, mocking, broken promises, bragging, taking things, excluding, shunning, backstabbing and keeping secrets from friends were all things the students indicated cause hurt and anger between peers and friends. The students created a list of stages of anger-inducing confrontations (the Kitchen, the Oven, the Freezer) and anger management techniques for each stage. In the Kitchen all is well, and they suggested self-care activities including meditation, art activities, and physical activities such as dance or sports. When confrontational pressure increases in The Oven, when someone does hurtful things, and activities such as deep breathing and using a stress ball were suggested. After the confrontation, they suggested relaxation exercises like taking a long bath, playing with pets, doing some favorite activities, and talking about the event with a friend.

Peters (2012) suggested children tell a trusted adult, such as a parent, teacher, or counselor. He also suggested that children find a trusted person during the bullying event and stay with that person. Walking away and avoiding bullies, and not showing emotional engagement may also diffuse bullying situations.

### **Suggestions for Parents**

Peters (2012) continues by suggesting that parents be cognizant of children's behavior and recognize when changes occur and should seek professional help if the child shows signs of depression, anxiety, or an unwillingness to go to school. Guilbault (2008) suggests that parents encourage children to practice assertiveness and to understand the difference between telling and tattling, and refrain from walking alone in places where bullying might occur.

Multiple researchers suggested that children seek help from a trusted adult, that parents listen to and validate the child's feelings and investigate bullying incidents closely with the school by informing the teacher, then the counselor, then the administration (Guilbault, 2008; Peters, 2012).

Some researchers suggest that school-based peer mediation and conflict resolution systems may make matters worse, akin to forcing an abused victim to confront his attacker. Adults should

intervene in bullying interactions and avoid blaming the victim, and should not encourage victims to stand up to bullies (Guilbault, 2008; Peterson & Ray, 2006a).

### **Suggestions for Teachers and School Counselors**

Teachers should be aware of the types of behaviors indicative of bullying – ostracizing, teasing, power struggles (Peters, 2012), and nonphysical bullying which Peterson and Ray (2006a) found to be associated with gifted bullies. It is also important to teach children resilience and strategies for situations when they are faced with a bully. Providing challenging curriculum that focuses overexcitabilities into positive performance (Allen, 2017) can prevent bullying by and of gifted children.

Allen (2017) also stressed the importance of getting to know students on an individual basis, using discretion when resolving social issues, monitoring classroom **behavior, talking individually** with the perpetrator, and avoiding victim and perpetrator embarrassment or humiliation.

**Commented [DrJ30]:** space after comma

Guilbault (2008) warned teachers to carefully watch student interaction and play to determine whether playing, fighting, or bullying is going on, including considering: the past relationship of the students (past friendship, or differing social and academic groups); the facial expressions and body language of the involved students (Is there fear? Enjoyment? Distress?); the presence and behavior of bystanders; any imbalance of power, strength, or popularity between the involved students.

Drawing from elements of good counseling relationships, researchers suggest establishing and maintaining a therapeutic alliance (Pfeiffer & Burko, 2016; Pfeiffer, 2014; Peterson, 2020), establishing relationships based in trust. In addition, therapeutic and educational discussion groups should be part of any bullying-prevention program (Peterson & Ray, 2006a), especially those that include a focus on the emotional and expressive domains in gifted individuals. Two authors in the field of gifted education, Fonseca (2016) and Peterson (2020) provide detailed instructions for starting these types of groups, and dozens of specific activities – including discussions about bullying, victimization, and bystander roles - to use with children in the classroom and in small dialogue groups. To understand and support gifted students in bullying situations, it is imperative that teachers and counselors improve and increase techniques for talking about bullying with gifted and all populations.



## References

- Allen, W. T. (2017). Bullying and the unique socioemotional needs of gifted and talented early adolescents: Veteran teacher perspectives and practices. *Roeper Review*, 39. pp. 269-283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2017.1362678>
- Cameron, J. (2016). *The artist's way: The spiritual path to higher creativity*. Jeremy P. Tarcher.
- Coleman, L. J., & Cross, T. L. (1988). Is being gifted a social handicap? *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* 11(4),41-56. DOI:10.1177/016235328801100406
- Cross, T. (2001a). Social/emotional needs: The many faces of bullies. *Gifted Child Today*, 24(4). 36-37.<https://doi.org/10.4219/gct-2001-545>
- Cross, T. (2001b) Social/emotional needs. The rage of gifted students. *Gifted Child Today*, 24(4). 43-45.<https://doi.org/10.4219/gct-2001-530>
- Cross, T. L. (2011). *On the social and emotional lives of gifted children*. Prufrock Press.
- Dabrowski, K. (1964). *Positive Disintegration*. Little, Brown.
- Daniels, S., & Piechowski, M. M. (2008). *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and the emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults*. Great Potential Press.
- Davis, M. H. (1994). *Empathy, A social Psychological approach*. Wm. C. Brown Communications, Inc.
- Estell, D. B., Farmer, T. W., Irvin, M. J., Crowther, A., Akos, P., & Boudah, D. J. (2009). Students with exceptionalities and the peer group context of bullying and victimization in late elementary school. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 18, 136-150.<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-008-9214-1>
- Finn, C. E., & Wright, B. L. (2015). The bright left behind: While everyone focuses on boosting the weakest students, America's smartest students are no longer being pushed to do their best. *The National Association for Gifted Children* [Web blog]. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-bright-students-left-behind-1440024541>
- Foley-Nicpon, M. (2016). The social and emotional development of twice-exceptional children. In M. Neihart, S. I. Pfeiffer, & T. L. Cross (Eds), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (2nd ed., pp. 103-118). Prufrock Press.
- Fonseca, C. (2016). *Emotional intensity in gifted students: Helping kids cope with explosive feelings*. Prufrock Press.
- Groman, J. L. (2019). The bully's face: Using art to understand bullying in gifted children. *Gifted Child Today*, 42(1). 12-18.<https://doi.org/10.1177/1076217518804852>
- Guilbault, K. (2008). Bullying and gifted learners. *Gifted Education Communicator* 39(2). <http://www.davidsongifted.org/Search-Database/entry/A10854>
- Hamarusa, P., & Kaikkonen, P. (2008). School bullying as a creator of pupil pressure. *Educational Research*, 50(4). 333-345.
- Haynie, D. L., Nansel, T., Eitel, P., Crump, A. D., Saylor, K., Yu, K., et al. (2001). Bullies, victims, and bully/victims: Distinct groups of at-risk youth. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 21, 29-49. DOI: 10.1177/0272431601021001002
- Hébert, T. P. (2002). Gifted males. In M. Neihart, S. M. Reis, N. M. Robinson, & S. M. Moon (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (2nd ed., pp. 137-144). Prufrock Press.

Commented [DrJ31]: space before Prufrock

Commented [DrJ32]: space before Piechowski

Commented [DrJ33]: space before Boudah

Commented [DrJ34]: space before Kaikkonen

- Hollingsworth, L. S. (1916). Sex differences in mental traits. *Psychological Bulletin*, 13. 377-384. DOI: 10.1037/h0072261
- Katz, J. (1999, April 26). Voices from the Hellmouth.  
<https://news.slashdot.org/story/99/04/25/1438249/voices-from-the-hellmouth>
- Leiken, J. (2010, October 12). A peek inside the mind of a bully. *Evolution Mentoring*.  
<https://www.evolutionmentoring.com/a-peak-inside-the-mind-of-a-bully/>
- Mitchell, M. S. (2011). *Cyberbullying and academic achievement: Research into the rates of incidents, knowledge of consequences, and behavioral patterns of cyberbullying* (Publication No. AA13475527). [Doctoral dissertation, University of Connecticut]. UConn Open Commons.  
<https://opencommons.uconn.edu/dissertations/AA13475527>
- National Association for Gifted Children. (n. d.). What is giftedness?  
<https://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/what-giftedness>
- O'Connor, K. J. (2002). The application of Dabrowski's theory to the gifted. In M. Neihart, S. I. Pfeiffer, & T. L. Cross (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (1st ed., pp. 51-60). Prufrock Press.
- Ohio Department of Education. (2019). *Gifted screening and identification*. <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Gifted-Education/Gifted-Screening-and-Identification>
- Oliviera, & Barbosa, (2012). Bullying among students with and without characteristics of giftedness (Trans). *Psicologia: Reflexiao and Critic*, 25(4). 747-755.  
<https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-79722012000400014>
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying in school: What we know and what we can do*. Blackwell.
- Peairs, K. F., Putallaz, M., & Costanzo, P. R. (2019). From A (Aggression) to V (Victimization): Peer status and adjustment among academically gifted students in early adolescence. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 63(3), 185-200. DOI: 10.1177/0016986219838973
- Peters, D. B. (2012). Gifted and bullied. *Gifted Education Communicator*, 43, 16-18.  
[https://summitcenter.us/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/GiftedandBullied\\_GEC\\_Spr2012.pdf](https://summitcenter.us/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/GiftedandBullied_GEC_Spr2012.pdf)
- Peterson, J. S. (2014). Bullying. In J. A. Plucker & C. M. Callahan (Eds) *Critical issues and practices in gifted education: What the research says*. (2nd ed., pp. 95-108). Prufrock Press.
- Peterson, J. S. (2016). Gifted children and bullying. In M. Neihart, S. I. Pfeiffer, & T. L. Cross (Eds) *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (2nd ed., pp. 131-144). Prufrock Press.
- Peterson, J. S. (2020). *Get gifted children talking: 76 Ready-to-use group discussions about identity, stress, relationships, and more grades 6-12*. Free Spirit Publishing.
- Peterson, J. S., & Ray, (2006a). Bullying among the gifted: The subjective experience. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 50(3), 252-269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001698620605000305>
- Peterson, J. S., & Ray, (2006b). Bullying and the gifted: Victims, perpetrators, prevalence, and effects. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 50(3), 148-169.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001698620605000206>
- Pfeiffer, S. I. (2014). Gifted Children: Research. In L. Grossman & S. Walfish (Eds). *Translating psychological research into practice* (1st ed., pp. 57-60). Springer.

Commented [DrJ35]: space before "The"

Commented [DrJ36]: space before "free"

- Pfeiffer, S. I., &Burko, J. (2016). Counseling the gifted. In M. Neihart, S. I. Pfeiffer, & T. L. Cross (Eds) *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (2nd ed., pp. 243-257). Prufrock Press.
- Piechowski, M. M. (2013). *Mellow out, they say. If only I could: Intensities and sensitivities of the young and bright*. Royal Fireworks Press.
- Piirto, J. (2007). *Talented children and adults: Their development and education*. PrufrockPress.
- Robinson, A. (1990). Point-counterpoint: Cooperation or exploitation? The argument against cooperative learning for talented students. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 14(3), 9-27. doi:10.1177/016235329001400103
- Rimm, S. B., Siegle, D., & Davis, G. A. (2018). *The education of the gifted and talented*. Pearson.
- Sanchez, F. R. (2019). "The effects of bullying on identity." *Counselor Education Capstones*, 98. <https://openriver.winona.edu/counseloreducationcapstones/98>
- Sest, N., & March, E. (2017). Constructing the cyber-troll: Psychopathy, sadism, and empathy. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 119, 69-72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.06.038>
- Siegle, D. (2010). Cyberbullying and sexting: Technology abuses of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Gifted Child Today* 33(2), 14-16. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ881324.pdf>
- Stavrinides, P., Georgious, St., &Theofanous, V. (2010). Bullying and empathy: A short-term longitudinal investigation. *Educational Psychology*, 30(7), 783-802. DOI: 10.1080/01443410.2010.506004
- Tenenbaum, L. S., Varjas, K., Meyers, J. & Parris, L. Coping strategies and perceived effectiveness in fourth through eighth grade bullying. *School Psychology International* 32(3), 263-287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034311402309>
- Thornberg & Knutson (2011). Teenagers' explanations of bullying. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 40(3), 177-192. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-010-9129-z>
- VanTassel-Baska, J. (1992). Educational decision making on acceleration and grouping. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 36(2), 68-72. doi:10.1177/001698629203600203
- Weir, E. (2001). The health impact of bullying. *CMAJ*, 165(9), 1249.
- Werber, C. (2017). Psychologists have identified the kind of emotional intelligence that makes internet trolls so mean. *Quartz Daily Brief*. Retrieved from <https://qz.com/1021205/psychologists-identified-the-kind-of-emotional-intelligence-that-makes-internet-trolls-so-mean/>
- Wiley, K. (2016). The social and emotional impact of acceleration. In M. Neihart, S. I Pfeiffer, & T. L. Cross. (Eds) *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (2nd ed., pp. 219-230). Prufrock Press.

**Commented [DrJ37]:** space between "Prufrock" and "Press." Also, hanging indent.