Bullying, School Climate, Social Climate and Intellectual Development: Implications for the Lives of High-Achieving, Creative Students

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Abstract

This paper consists of a selective, critical literature review of research dealing with the potential relationship between bullying and the characteristics associated with potential status as creative, gifted, and talented. While no clear and direct indication exists that gifted or talented status produces risk for victimization, indirect evidence for such a relationship may be associated with three sets of mediating variables. First, we noted a more direct association between bullying and the intellectual and social climate within schools. Second, some bullying is probably motivated by the nature of gendered expectations, differentially impacting boys in literacy and fine arts and girls in mathematics and science. Finally, the individual level of social and linguistic skills appears to be associated with victimization. We propose a model for exploring bullying as a mediating variable between school climate issues and gifted-talented status and for investigating gender differences in manifestations of creativity and intellectual giftedness. In the proposed model, bullying serves as a mediating variable when considering the climate of the school and gender expectations on students' academic achievement as well as on the Creative, Gifted, and Talented (CGT) status and the quality of school life for these individuals.

***Keywords*:** Effects of bullying; models of resilience; gifted and talented students; high achieving students.

In 2004, a model was proposed (Hoover, Hoover, Simanton, & Dorheim) at a Lost Prizes seminar in Winnipeg suggesting that bullying may, under certain circumstances, prevent students from living out their intellectual and artistic potential. Hoover and colleagues argued that peer-on-peer aggression, filtered through schools' intellectual climate, gender expectations, and social skills might explain the loss of intellectual prizes. In this paper, we follow up on some of the claims made at that time.

Nearly a decade later, it is time to revisit this topic; using a comprehensive review of literature, we propose to explore the relationship between bullying and intellectual or artistic gifts and subsequently to propose a second, more comprehensive model that reasonably organizes current findings. We elect to emphasize empirical findings and avoid opinion pieces or polemics—unless these papers bring new, ultimately researchable ideas to the topic. We first lay out a brief definition of bullying; this is followed by an exploration of the magnitude of the direct association between bullying and giftedness, as well as indirect associations between bullying identification as gifted and talented mediated by gendered behavioral expectations as well as school climate. We address the following interrelated topics:

- Whether or not bullying, mediated by several individual and sociological factors, is differentially experienced by students with intellectual gifts;
- The degree to which intellectual climate of schools, operating through bullying, may diminish learning thus impacting manifestations of giftedness and artistic talent;
- Whether bullying, as it is currently understood, serves as a mechanism by which the school intellectual climate is managed by peers unintentionally or intentionally enforcing local behavioral standards;
- Whether bullying is differentially experienced by students with gifts and talents who display either social skills deficits or who take little interest in the school's social whirl; and

- Whether or not, or to what degree, masculinity and femininity affect giftedness through bullying.

Bullying

Since it is an emerging research field, no universally-accepted definition of bullying exists. However, many researchers and theorists start with a characterization of bullying as a situation wherein an individual experiences repeated attacks from one or more peers (paraphrased from Olweus, 1993). Olweus stipulated that perpetrators intend these attacks to harm or demoralize recipients. Others have claimed that bullying may not consist of entirely intentional attacks—that in the absence of meaningful feedback from targets, verbal playfulness and mild physical intrusions may be intended as humor or as efforts to initiate social interaction (Hoover & Oliver, 1996). In such cases, the reaction of the recipient constitutes the most salient definitional element.

Researchers tend to agree that bullying includes both physical and verbal attacks. Verbal attacks can be direct or can occur indirectly through gossip or via electronic means. Bullying's effects have been reviewed thoroughly elsewhere (Hoover & Oliver, 2006), but certainly include pejorative outcomes in the following life domains: social, cognitive/academic (Barnes, Belskey, Broomfield & Melhuish, 2006, see also this review), and health/wellness (Rigby, 2001).

Roughly speaking, four classifications of bullying participation can be inferred from large-scale population studies (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001; Rose, Espelage & Monda-Amaya, 2009; Simanton, Burthwik, & Hoover, 2000); first, researchers observe young people who bully others but suffer bullying infrequently (13-20% depending on the characteristics of the sample). A second category is made up of students, so-called passive victims, who frequently experience bullying but rarely pick on others (9-15%). Finally, a mixed category occurs, individuals who pick on others but who also fight back on occasion, albeit ineffectually (bully-victims or provocative victims, 6-9%). A bystander group can be subtracted from the three studies cited above that includes from 60% to 70% of the students in a given school. Craig, Schumann, Edge, and Teske, (2012), provided statistics in a similar range for Canadian children and adolescents. Participation rates differ by gender and age; males tend to participate more as both bullies and victims, while incidence figures tend to rise during middle school and fall off again at the secondary level, though these generalizations differ in detail from study to study.

Bullying and Giftedness: General Findings

We start the review with an exploration of the direct relationship between gifted and talented status and peer victimization[1,2]. This topic is probably too broad to reveal much; thus, a second general theme suggests itself: the nexus between bullying and academic performance. We view the latter topic as a more fruitful approach to understanding the quality of school life for creative, gifted, and talented individuals, as well as for their parents and professional advocates.

Though surprisingly few studies exist and more are needed, several research teams have studied the relationship between bullying and academic achievement. As will be explored below, a reasonably clear trend has been observed for a bullying-heavy climate to reduce students' academic performance. Such achievement reductions probably reduce the number of young people identified as gifted and talented and negatively affect the quality of life for those who are identified. No clear mechanism has been established for a link between bullying and giftedness; one purpose of this review is to advance the parameters of a plausible and ultimately researchable model for understanding and studying the bullying of creative, gifted, and talented[2] (CGT) students.

Identification as Gifted as a Risk Factor for Peer Victimization

It seems reasonable to start by examining the overall relationship, if any, between bullying and giftedness or designation as gifted/talented. This topic can be put to rest fairly quickly as no clearly discernible statistical or research-based relationship of this nature is systematically observed; an excellent review of this topic is part of a recent paper by Peters and Bain (2011). The finding of no direct relationship between gifted/talented status and peer aggression appears to characterize the current state of affairs, despite persistent anecdotal accounts that intellectually able youth differentially experience peer aggression (Schuler, 2002). The relationship between bullying and

giftedness is multifaceted, with ***at least*** social skill level, school intellectual climate, and school gender expectations serving as key mediators.

Peters and Bain (2011) compared rates of victimization between students designated as gifted and talented versus a comparison sample of other high-achieving 9th- and 10th-graders. The two groups did not differ either on indices of bullying or victimization. While this is not a comparison of gifted versus average-achieving students, it does suggest that the gifted label does not place students differentially at risk for bullying. In fact, Peters and Bain (2011) noted that scores (on the dependent variable, digital video, they collected) of bullying and victimization, "…fell into the normal range" (p. 632).

No gender differences accrued between identified gifted and talented individuals versus other high achieving students; as is typical among high school students, Peters and Bain (2011) identified greater rates of verbal than physical bullying and victimization, but detected no statistically-significant differences between students identified as gifted and other high achievers in rates of bullying or victimization. These findings parallel Terman's venerable findings that students with intellectual gifts tend to adjust well to school (Terman & Oden, 1947).

Though ultimately the relationship between bullying and gifted/talented status remains complex, the correlation has been studied from within the gifted universe (c.f., Peterson & Ray, 2006a) or via qualitative investigations of the experience of bullying by high-achieving students (Peterson & Ray, 2006b). Significant percentages of CGT young people have either experienced bullying (67% of grade eight students), or have engaged in bullying others (33%, Peterson & Ray, 2006a). Gifted and talent students reported that bullying about physical appearance was most distressing during late elementary years through middle school. Peterson and Ray (2006a) reported that proportionately more males experienced victimization and engaged in harassment.

In a structural analysis (Peterson & Ray, 2006a), two bullying items factored into what was otherwise an ability-based latent construct (teasing about [1] grades and [2] intelligence). While the existence of a correlation between gifted status and bullying variables is suggestive, it does not, by itself, support the notion that gifted or talented status places young people at risk for bullying. It is important to recognize that students regularly identify teasing and harassment as bullying and that teasing shares the negative outcomes of other types of harassment (words are important; Hoover & Oliver, 2006). The finding could be an artifact of the finding that high ability middle-schoolers would more likely suffer teasing about manifestations of talent than would other students. This would work in the same way that students with disabilities are more likely than others to be teased about their perceived low abilities (Rose, et al., 2009). The confounding of status and bullying variables suggests that cluster analyses might prove useful in classifying subsets of the CGT population that might prove vulnerable to victimization or who might be expected to bully others. This is particularly salient when one considers the potential relationship between bullying, giftedness, and social behavior.

Talented pupils often express that they experience unique risk and that this risk is experienced on the basis of their abilities and the gifted label (Peterson & Ray, 2006b). Whether this feeling reflects an actual increase in risk may prove doubtful, but the phenomenon remains important for practitioners and advocates. Unfortunately, many CGT individuals attributed the peer victimization that they suffer to internal causes, thus potentially decreasing the actualization of their intellectual and creative endeavors. Such feelings probably correlate with risk in schools and communities with anti-intellectual social climates. Peterson and Ray (2006b) noted that advocates can help students respond positively to these negative experiences and feelings, a not- surprising result, given the learning and adaptability evidenced in this population.

A view emerges that gifted and talented students likely experience no more bullying, nor perpetrate harassment [of others] at rates higher than the general population and probably at a lower rate than students assigned formal labels (i.e., with emotional and behavioral disabilities). In addition, no overwhelming evidence exists that CGT individuals as a group suffer differentially from the bullying that they experience. In fact, given their learning characteristics, it remains likely that these

individuals may respond more successfully [than do others] to mentoring and counseling addressing peer harassment.

The lack of difference in rates of bullying and victimization between gifted and other students appears representative of existing quantitative results. However, the anecdotal findings of bullying victimization among CGT students (and their perceptions of risk) should not be ignored; perhaps a more complex model will support the untangling of these factors. We hypothesize that other influences affect creative, high-achieving individuals. The most probable mediating variables include: (1) the strength of local gender expectations; (2) manifestations of social skills; and (3) the climate of schools and communities. As we develop below, bullying appears to be a mechanism whereby potent, but sometimes unstated and subtle, social expectations are communicated and enforced.

Bullying and Academic Achievement

Schools and communities can support or inhibit the care and feeding of intellectual, creative, and artistic gifts; for example, many researchers have noted that within-school variability explains differences in achievement (Ma, 2008)—often more than does between-student variability. For one of many examples, see school belongingness (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). In other words, schools appear to possess local sets of customs differing significantly by buildings and programs. A disorganized school may produce an academic climate inhibiting educational attainment, thus reducing the likelihood that intellectual gifts receive the nurturance required for maximization of this crucial human resource—even to the point of systematically decreasing the number of youngsters formally referred and identified and who obtain differentiated supports. In such institutions, it is possible that educators' attention is turned to workday survival and thus students might not receive the levels of support they need to truly flourish. These social "rules" may differ for the case of athletic talent—primarily due to the extreme popularity of sports (O'Connor, 2012).

Though the research record is mixed, investigators have revealed that students at-risk of peer victimization and who undergo such trauma perform more poorly academically than their counterparts not at such risk (e.g., Beran, 2009; Beran & Lupart, 2009; Moore, Huebner, & Hills, 2012). Working in Canada, Beran et al., 2009, calculated a prediction model demonstrating that adolescents, displaying disruptive behavior and suffering peer victimization perform at systematically lower academic levels. The same is true among students perceiving educators as non-supportive, in addition to those experiencing parental estrangement. In another study with slightly younger Canadian adolescents; victimization and disruptive behavior together and separately predicted lower academic achievement (Beran & Lupart, 2009). Electronic bullying has been negatively associated with grades, another achievement indicator, among both bullies and victims (Moore, Huebner, & Hills, 2012).

Eccles and colleagues (1983) offered a structure, expectancy-value theory that may prove useful in organizing findings about a CGT student's reactions to perceived expectations of significant others in their environments. In this view, students integrate educational goals with their expectations of task success; students estimate their chances of success, in part, on perceptions of socializers' (parents, teachers) value systems (Eccles, et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Wigfield, Tonks, & Eccles, 2004). We may reasonably extend this to the expectations of peers, perhaps as transmitted by means of harassment.

Bullying, School Climate, and Academic performance

Though not axiomatic, it appears reasonably certain that disorder, broadly defined, and including bullying, systematically lowers academic achievement. In addition, it appears likely that the factors affecting academic achievement produce a host of secondary influences on identification of and services to school-aged CGT individuals. Two classes of outcome or dependent variables that should interest researchers come to mind: (1) the number of identified individuals perhaps indexed against expectations based on the population served; and (2) the indicators of satisfaction with life at school. School effects are explored in light of three related topics: (a) disorganization; (b) attendance issues; and (c) general intellectual climate.

Disorganized Programs

One might speak of generally disorganized schools as organizations wherein students experience low levels of perceived or actual safety characterized by uneven, ineffective approaches to curriculum and behavior management. Students-at-risk are likely overrepresented in such schools. Disorganization may be reflected in the physical surround, manifested in decrepit buildings, degraded classrooms, along with insufficient laboratory and library services (Soumah & Hoover, 2013; Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008). Perhaps this level of disorganization reflects the so-called Broken Windows Effect (BWE) as applied to schools (BWE; Coles & Kelling, 1996; Plank & Bradshaw, 2009). Disorganized schools certainly produce higher rates of peer harassment (Bradshaw &, Sawyer, 2009; Gendron, Williams, & Guerra, 2011; Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008), accompanied by lower academic achievement levels.

Plank and Bradshaw (2009) reported that poor building conditions predict social disorder by means of increasing individuals' threat-based physical arousal. As with the original BWE theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), the operative mechanism may well be that disorder transmits a no-one-cares attitude. The causal mechanism worth exploring for the nexus between peer-on-peer aggression and giftedness is that schools with physically and socially disordered environments probably produce lower levels of academic achievement through lowering expectations traceable to the not-so-subtle message that significant adults, not to mention peers, do not care about wellness or academic success (Soumah & Hoover, 2013). Disordered environments may well inhibit students' willingness to admit to artistic and intellectual interests. If the Broken Windows Effect Model holds for school intellectual climate, practitioners may find that failure to see small instances of incivility will serve as an invitation for future bad behavior—especially those directed towards outward manifestations of intellectual and creative talents. Certainly, this is worth the consideration of researchers and educators.

Truancy & Non-attendance

Bullying operates on achievement partially through the mechanism of attendance and engagement; this would operate identically across levels of ability, except that resilience is somewhat related to intellectual performance and thus might serve as a palliative factor in the nexus between bullying and achievement (Baker, & Hoover, in review; Pinkus, 2009). Bullying and a general dislike for school strongly correlate with nonattendance (Atwood & Croll, 2006). Certainly, anything that makes life difficult for creative students will affect attendance and that this bullying-induced lack of engagement produces measurable achievement decrements.

Intellectual Climate and Other School-Based Variability

Among many school-based factors that have been studied is general intellectual climate. Schools differ on such variables as academic pressure, at both the teacher and the building level. So-called academic "press" is the real or perceived emphasis placed on achievement by a teacher at the classroom level or by teachers within institutions (McLaughlin, & Drori, 2000). Students, for example, can reliably identify teachers with high academic expectations; these outlooks correlate positively with value-added outcome measures (MET Project, 2013); similar variables can be detected at the school level. An emphasis on academic attainment could serve as an indicator of school-level pro- or anti-intellectual climate.

Other school-level influences appear to correlate with performance, thus potentially affecting the proportion of students identified as gifted and the perceived quality of school life for these individuals. McLaughlin, utilizing the *Schools and Staffing Survey* (SASS), identified behavioral indicators (especially behavioral problems as perceived by educators, perhaps best categorized as "disorder") as a school-level factor significantly predicting academic achievement for middle- and secondary-level schools, though the factor disappears when organizational aspects of the school are controlled. School size, teacher-perceived cohesion, and class size were other factors that may interest researchers studying the experiences of high-achieving students.

Educators can organize schools and classes in ways that enhance students' sense of belonging. School-belonging correlates in the expected direction with such outcome measures as disciplinary

climate, academic performance (Gonzales & Padilla, 1997), expectations of academic performance (Goodenow, 1991), teacher-rated student effort (Goodenow & Grady, 1993), and graduation rates (Ma, 2003). A low sense of belonging in a school probably decreases the number of students willing to be seen as different—including the willingness to overtly participate in artistic and academic endeavors. As we develop below, this factor likely interacts with gender and the nature of activities, for example, climate issues may reduce the proportion of young women identified as mathematically talented.

Dijkstra, Lindenberg, and Veenstra (2008) demonstrated elevated levels of negative outcomes when students experience bullying from their most popular peers. The salience of the popularity of bullies suggests that the intellectual climate in a school may well be set and then transmitted through the attitudes of the most popular students. It may be important for educators to reach the student-opinion leaders as part of the effort to improve the institution's climate.

In contrast with a direct relationship between bullying and CGT status, a reasonably strong effect appears to exist between school-level factors and intellectual performance. As can be seen in Figure 1, we suggest that this may well affect CGT status with bullying as an intervening variable. We propose that disorganized institutions and those with lower intellectual climate indices may produce such effects as lower levels of gifted-talented identification, poorer programming, fewer supports (and protections), and lower indicators of quality of school life expressed by high performers. An unhealthy school climate affected by bullying and/or victimization will likely be observed. That is, disorganized schools will likely place CGT students at more risk than do other institutions.

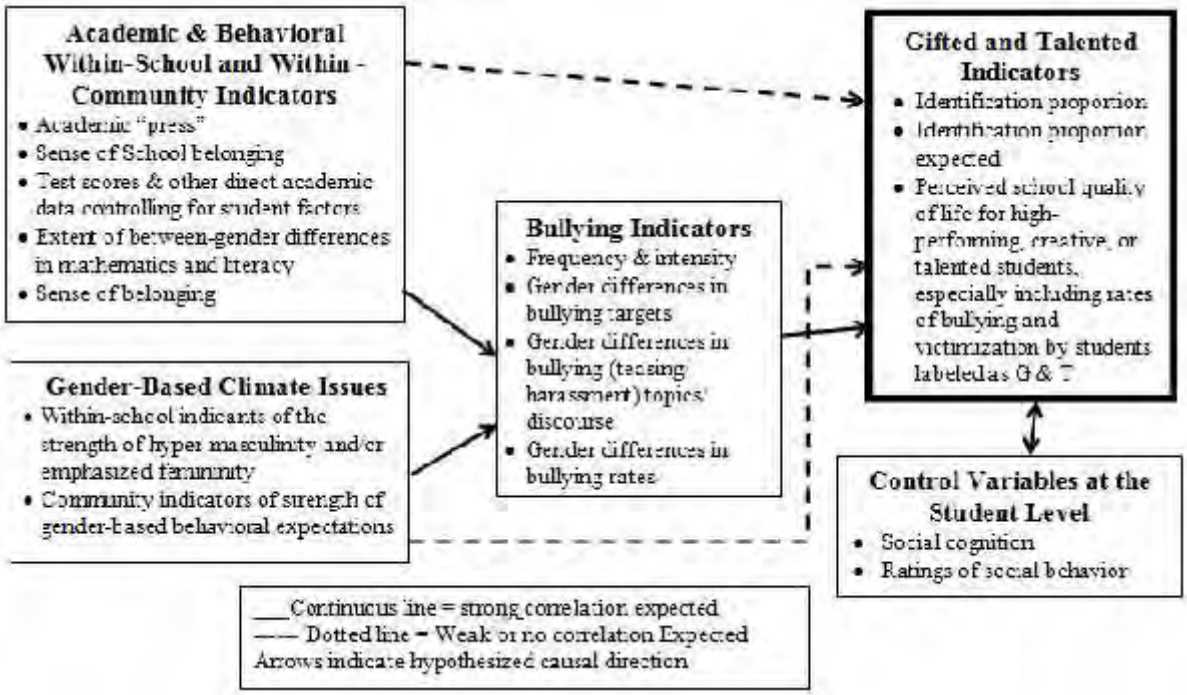

Figure 1: A preliminary research and causal model for the relationship between bullying and gifted-talented status.

Social- and Related Skills, Bullying, and Giftedness

Hoover et al. (2003) argued that individuals with Asperger Syndrome or other types of social skills deficits and who were also gifted more frequently experienced bullying on the basis of their interests in intellectual, technical, and artistic pursuits. In the intervening years, we have not found anything to contravene this contention; we still see variability in social cognition and behavioral skill deficits as significant predictors of bullying and victimization. Perhaps we could refer to this as the Sheldon Cooper Effect, after the popular character in television's *Big Bang Theory*. It is essential to

recognize that Sheldon reflects an erroneous stereotype held by many Americans about CGT individuals. That is, people in the general population and even many educators see social skill deficits and physical frailty existing as a function of giftedness (Moulton, Moulton, Housewright, & Bailey,1998; O'Connor, 2012), whereas we have long known that the opposite tends to be true (Terman & Odin, 1947). Thus, it is essential to reiterate that we see young people, who both manifest gifts and talents ***and*** who experience social skill deficits, facing more risk for bullying.

Successful programs have been developed to help gifted students analyze social situations and behave more appropriately. For example, Cohen, Duncan, and Cohen (1994) found that fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade students who participated in a social skills intervention program received higher social desirability peer-ratings than comparable, untreated students. We have noted that CGT individuals respond well to assistance with feelings associated with peer harassment. Perhaps, ultimately, educative approaches ought to be developed around gifted and talented programs—especially in environments that may place these students in particular risk. Indeed, it may be necessary in challenging environments to inoculate all students (through the use of educational programming) against factors reducing the potential for students to manifest artistic and intellectual gifts. See also Evans's (2007) excellent argument that all factors associated with bullying are exacerbated in environments wherein adults do not intervene. A little advocacy goes a long way.

Language disorders. Roughly three times as many students with language disorders experience bullying than do their non-disabled counterparts (Knox & Conti-Ramsden, 2003). This suggests that behavioral decrements might differentially affect students with language disorders, particularly as these deficits affect pragmatics. Language disorders, particularly poor receptive skills, may produce greater perceptions of bullying by the misunderstanding of neutral or positive approaches as hostile. For example, Luciano and Savage (2007) found similar rates of bullying experienced by students with and without learning disabilities, but only once they controlled language skill levels.

It is important to recognize that both social and language skills among students identified as gifted will alter their risk of experiencing peer victimization. It is certainly possible to experience language problems along with status as gifted and talented, though it also plausible that gifted students with language disorders may be under-identified.

Gender Issues as Mediators between Bullying and Intellectual Achievement

At least two gender gaps are observed in the U.S. and many other nations. Young women and girls perform differentially lower in mathematics and science, while their male peers tend to achieve at lower rates in literacy (Ma, 2008; Skelton & Francis, 2011; NAEP, 2010). The gap favoring girls and young women in literacy is much larger and more ubiquitous internationally than are gaps favoring males in science and mathematics (Ma, 2008). In forty of 41 nations studied utilizing the *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA, undated; Ma, 2008), females outperformed males. In fact, the magnitude of differences has created a situation where boys may be performing lower than girls and young women in overall academic achievement. Schott Foundation representatives (2012), for example, have noted that African-American boys remain singularly at risk for underachievement. Performance-based gender gaps accrue across expressions of interest, putatively objective test scores, and ultimately in employment fields.

Skelton and Francis (2011) conjecture that the low performance of North American and British boys in literacy may be tracked to hegemonic masculinity, which implies that traditional male gender roles serve as normative expectations. The ideal male role includes dominance of other males and the subordination of females. To the extent that role expectations in schools and communities would endorse this version of masculinity, we would expect to see more bullying of males and females who operate outside of such expectations. Greig and Hughes (2009) ironically lay out the social standard, by means of their evocative article title, "A boy who would rather write poetry than throw rocks at cats is also considered…wanting in masculinity" (p. 91).

Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2006) pointed out that girls must negotiate a thin line between the dominant social identities in schools and their construction of individual selves that challenge these discourses. One of their respondents voiced this aptly, noting that, "You're supposed to be a

certain way. The other girls expect you to be that way. You go against them then they *hate* you" (p. 431). We surmise that the social and appearance discourses that constrict girls' intellectual and artistic experiences might align with the narrative that we have referred to as bullying.

It is highly likely that bullying may serve as a primary mechanism whereby local gender behavioral standards (involving school-level and community-level climate issues) are imposed, brought to school, in other words. Academic achievement differences in science, mathematics, and literacy suggest that the expression of intellectual gifts may systematically differ by gender as mediated by community attitudes. Gender performance differences are not innate—but socially-based norms foisted on young people through unthinking acceptance of myths about biological causation and the naturalness of restrictive social roles (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2006).

In our model, bullying serves as a mediator between gender-based community and school norms and the intellectual climate of the school. The end results will affect the willingness and/or ability of students to manifest their potential—for boys differentially in writing and reading (Greig & Hughes, 2009; Skelton & Francis, 2011), for girls and young women in mathematics and science. The causal chain runs from community attitudes, through bullying, to academic and artistic achievement and, ultimately, to the proportion of children identified as gifted and talented. We potentially waste essential human resources in failing to critically examine the effects of hypermasculinity and emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987) on attitudes toward intellectual achievement.

Conclusion: A Research Model

No strong, direct link exists between risk for bullying and status as gifted and talented. However, the salient relationship between school climate and gender-based issues suggests that researchers will likely identify a more subtle relationship. Our prediction is that bullying rates in schools, as mediated by between-school and between-community differences, produce at least three integrated effects:

1. High rates of bullying and other types of systemic behavioral disturbances at the building or program level likely produce decrements in either or both (a) the numbers of students identified as gifted and talented or (b) the willingness of candidates to manifest high-risk behaviors related to their gifts and talents.
2. Related to point # 1.b., rates of bullying will predict aspects of perceived quality-of-school life among students identified as intellectually gifted, or who otherwise demonstrate high levels of creativity and unusual talents.
3. The above-predicted effects will interact with gender in gifted identification, and need for supports in mathematics and science among girls and young women, and literacy among boys.

Figure 1 represents our emergent model. It is meant to serve as an invitation to researchers to delve deeper into the degree to which bullying may serve the function of enforcing local norms and producing decrements in school climates likely to negatively affect students developing their singular creative and intellectual prizes. Due to its complexity, examining bullying and status as gifted and talented will likely require a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Footnotes

[1] Though by no means a convention in the research literature, we employ the term victimization in this paper exclusively to situations where the subject of the sentence receives bullying from others; that is, the person or group is the victim of bullying. We reserve the term bullying (as a verb), when not otherwise specified, for situations where the person or group picks on others. This is done to simplify wording and for no other purpose.

[2] As a convenience, we developed the acronym CGT (Creative, Gifted, and Talented) to refer to students, formally identified or not, that display traits typically associated with those receiving formal identification. When researchers have studied a formally identified population, we indicate this using the indicator, "identified as…".

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