Research on bullying dynamics shows that bullying is often aimed at specific groups. Findings from three groups have become prominent in the research literature: children with disabilities, African American youth, and LGBTQ youth. Historically, the research literature has omitted, distorted, or underresearched these three populations. There needs to be much more investment in research that examines the unique bullying dynamics surrounding vulnerable populations.

Bullying Among Students With Disabilities

**Overall Prevalence of Bullying Among Students With Disabilities**

- Students with disabilities are twice as likely to be identified as perpetrators and victims as are students without disabilities (Rose, Espelage, Aragon, & Elliott, 2011; Rose & Espelage, 2012).

- Students with disabilities that are characterized by, or have diagnostic criteria associated with, low social skills and low communication skills have a higher likelihood of involvement in bullying incidents (Rose, Mond-da-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011).

Task Force members Dorothy L. Espelage and Brendesha Tynes took the lead in drafting this brief.
A meta-analysis of 152 studies found that 8 of 10 children with a learning disability (LD) were peer-rated as rejected; that 8 of 10 were rated as deficient in social competence and social problem solving; and that LD students were less often selected as friends by their peers (Baumeister, Storch, & Geffken, 2008).

The Importance of Type of Disability in Bullying

- Recent empirical investigations suggest that victimization may be predicted by the severity of the disability (Rose, 2010).
- For example, students with autism may be victimized more (Bejerot & Mörtberg, 2009), and students with learning disabilities may be victimized less, than other subgroups of students with disabilities (Wallace, Anderson, Bartholomay, & Hupp, 2002; White & Loeber, 2008).
- Unfortunately, much of the extant literature varies on victimization rates of individual subgroups of students with disabilities, making direct subgroup comparisons difficult (Rose, 2010).

African Americans in Bullying, Victimization, and Harassment Research

Prevalence Rates and Measurement Issues for African American Youth

- Research indicates that prevalence rates of bullying victimization vary considerably for African American youth based on the wording in measures. For example, both girls and middle school boys who are African American may report being a victim with behavior-based measures (including various types of bullying
behaviors), but may be less likely to report that these experiences are frequent with definition-based measures (Sawyer, Bradshaw, & O’Brennan, 2008). This suggests that African American youth may have differing conceptions of bullying victimization and therefore may underreport their victimization experiences.

- When considering six types of victimization in school and neighborhood contexts, including peer physical assault (being hit, kicked, punched, or attacked with or without a weapon), physical intimidation (being grabbed, chased, or forced to do something against one’s will), and relational victimization, researchers found that African American youth experience more physical assaults than their White and Latino counterparts (31.5% as opposed to 20.7% and 19.1%, respectively) (Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, Shattuck, & Ormrod, 2011). Although most of these incidents occur in school, 41.5% of assaults in the sample occurred outside of school.

- With regard to bullying and harassment perpetration, several reports show that African American youth are overrepresented (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007; Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012; Low & Espelage, 2012). However, these reports utilize race-comparative designs that may privilege one cultural perspective over another and often yield small effect sizes between groups. In a study using a sample that included 100% African American youth, bullying perpetration rates were similar to those found in nationally representative samples (Fitzpatrick, Dulin, & Piko, 2010).

- Measurement concerns similar to those found in victimization research have emerged in studies of bullying perpetration. For example, when Carlyle and Steinman (2007) tested the validity of their bullying measures, they found the most inconsistencies in bullying classifi-
cation of African American youth and males. They also found that any racial differences in bullying perpetra-
dition disappear by 12th grade.

Outcomes Associated With Victimization
and Harassment for African American Youth

- Victimization and harassment experiences are related to poorer social and emotional development, including depressive symptoms, greater difficulty making friends, poor relationships with classmates, peer rejection, negative self-appraisals, substance use, loneliness, below-average grades, and truancy (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Fitzpatrick et al., 2010; Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001; Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012).

- In studies conducted in Wisconsin and California, the percentages of youth who reported harassment were 35.8% and 40.3%, respectively. Of the reported incidents, 15.8% in Wisconsin and 17.7% in California were race based. This is cause for concern as those who experience bias-based harassment have worse mental health status and substance use levels than those who experience non-bias-based harassment (Russell et al., 2012).

A growing body of literature documenting racial differences in bullying, victimization, and harassment points to an urgent need to better understand the experiences of African American youth. Findings from research on African American youth highlight a need for additional research, particularly related to the strengths (individual, cultural, and contextual) that youth possess that may buffer against the negative outcomes typically associated with bullying, victimization, and harassment. There is also a great need for researchers who are from diverse backgrounds and trained in African American youth culture and child development. Discrepancies in the
literature highlight the fact that bullying, victimization, and harassment are major problems for this community and warrant culturally specific intervention and prevention strategies.

**Bullying and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (LGB) Community**

*State of the Knowledge About Bullying Among LGB Students*

- A large percentage of bullying among students involves the use of homophobic teasing and slurs (Espelage et al., 2012; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Poteat & Rivers, 2010).

- Bullying and homophobic victimization occur more frequently among LGB youth in American schools than among students who identify as heterosexual (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009).

- Some LGB youth report greater depression, anxiety, suicidal behaviors, and truancy than their straight-identified peers (Espelage et al., 2008; Robinson & Espelage, 2011).

- However, peer victimization does not appear to explain all of the mental health disparities between LGB and heterosexual youth (Robinson & Espelage, 2012).

*Effective Services and Programs for Preventing and Intervening in Bullying for LGB Students*

Russell, Kosciw, Horn, and Saewyc (2010), in their *Social Policy Report* article “Safe Schools Policy for LGBTQ Students,” highlight four practices that have been shown to promote safety and well-being for LGBTQ youth in schools:

- School nondiscrimination and anti-bullying policies that specifically include actual or perceived sexual ori-
entation, gender identity, or expression (Russell & McGuire, 2008)

- Teacher training and ongoing professional development on how to intervene when homophobic teasing occurs
- Presence of school-based support groups or clubs (e.g., gay-straight alliances)
- Inclusion of LGBTQ role models or issues in school curricula, including bullying-prevention programming and access to information and resources through the library, school-based health centers, and other sources

Conclusions and Implications

Research should be conducted to identify groups of individuals who are particularly vulnerable to bullying, harassment, and victimization, including individuals with disabilities, those who are gender-nonconforming or identify as LGBTQ, and African-American individuals. Although three groups are highlighted in this brief, research should include participants from other potentially vulnerable groups as well, including but not limited to those who identify as Native American, Latino/a, and/or Hispanic. Immigrant populations should also be included in future research studies. Race and ethnicity should be considered across class and socioeconomic status.

References


