Refugee Children in U.S. Schools:
A Toolkit for Teachers and School Personnel

Tool 4: Refugee and Immigrant Youth and Bullying: Frequently Asked Questions

To access the entire Toolkit, visit: http://www.brycs.org/publications/schools-toolkit.cfm

Refugee and Immigrant Youth and Bullying in School: Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is bullying? And immigrant bullying?

Bullying is typically described as a unique form of aggressive behavior that is intentional, harmful, repetitive in nature, and in which there is an imbalance of power (either psychological or physical) between the aggressor and victim.[1] Bullying can take many forms, including physical, verbal, and social (sometimes called "relational bullying" and can include exclusion, gossip, etc.). The way cultures define "bullying" can vary. While it always involves the abuse of power and harm to another individual, it takes different forms in societies based on culture.[2]

Some experts have specifically attempted to define **"immigrant bullying,"** which is "bullying that targets another's immigrant status or family history of immigration in the form of taunts and slurs, derogatory references to the immigration process, physical aggression, social manipulation, or exclusion because of immigration status."[3]

2. What do we know about the role of race, ethnicity, religion, or other identity factors in bullying?

Surprisingly, we know very little from the bullying literature. Despite the fact that there are increasing numbers of refugee and immigrant students in today's classrooms, there has been little academic research on bullying in multicultural contexts and no definitive conclusions can be drawn about factors such as race, ethnicity, and religion, let alone how these factors interact.[4]

Yet, there is much overlap between bullying and **bias incidents, harassment, and hate crimes** in schools, which typically involve race, ethnicity, or other identity factors. (A bias incident is an act or behavior motivated by bias or prejudice against someone's identity.) Bullying prevention practitioners and researchers have noted that most school violence escalates from incidents of teasing and bullying.[5] Research has shown that bias and harassment in schools based on factors such as race and religion is a pervasive problem. Students of color are often targeted more than White students and students who are Jewish or Muslim are often targeted more than students of other religions.[6] Since many refugees/immigrants coming to the U.S. are persons of color and non-Christian, they may be more vulnerable to bullying, bias, and harassment.

> "It is imperative that anti-victimization measures recognize race and ethnicity as possible basis for harassment and that immigrant youth are not excluded from school-based interventions." (Abada, et al, 2008, p. 565)

3. What do we know about refugee/immigrant students and bullying?

While some studies have looked at whether refugee/immigrant students are more likely to be targets of bullying than native-born students, overall, the research is limited and has revealed inconsistent results.[7] Anecdotally, those of us who work with refugee and immigrant children on regular basis know that unfortunately, bullying is a common problem for many of these children.[8] As mentioned above, refugee/immigrant students may be more vulnerable to bullying because many are persons of color and non-Christian.[9]

Some studies have also looked at refugee/immigrant adolescents as perpetrators of bullying. Some students, including refugee/immigrant students, bully other students because of a desire for affiliation, or to belong.[10] This is an important area to research for all students, but particularly for refugee/immigrant students, as it relates to larger conversations on immigrant integration.

Istockphoto.com/ Ana Abejon

4. What additional, unique factors from refugee/immigrant youths' past contribute to bullying?

Many refugee children spend years in refugee camps where they develop strong survival skills, including the ability to fight back when attacked. It can take time to teach refugee youth new skills for responding appropriately to threats, or perceived threats, in their new environment. A refugee resettlement program coordinator who works in an urban school district pointed out that sometimes refugee youth *think* they are being attacked and respond accordingly, even in situations where American-born students are just "playing games" or interacting as they typically would with each other.[11]

Service providers need to also look at the attitudes that foreign-born youth bring to the U.S. Many foreign-born youth have deeply-rooted opinions of particular groups that may differ significantly from commonly held stereotypes in the U.S. It is important for teachers to learn as much as they can about underlining ethnic, religious, or other conflicts that may be affecting how bullying plays out in their classrooms.

BRYCS Photo/ Claudia Gilmore

5. Do the demographics of the school or other contextual factors make a difference?

Yes. Refugee/immigrant students are in **diverse schools** all across the U.S. – they may attend schools that are mostly made up of students of color, White students, or equal numbers of students from various backgrounds. Some research has shown that greater ethnic diversity in schools reduces students' feelings of vulnerability and victimization because there is more of a balance of power among different ethnic groups.[12] Likewise, if immigrant youth make up the majority of a student population, this could influence their experience.[13]

This relates to what experts call the **social-ecological framework**. Twenty years ago, most schools focused on identifying and punishing bullies, but today, many anti-bullying programs operate from this framework that recognizes not only the importance of intervening at the individual and peer levels, but also the family, school, and community levels. This approach recognizes that bullying does not happen to individuals in isolation and that no one individual creates or maintains a bullying situation. Schools now talk about the importance of "school climate," which has to do with how safe students feel as well as the social norms with regard to bullying. Furthermore, many schools have created universal programs that recognize that a large number of students are bullied and virtually all youth are exposed to bullying as **bystanders** at some point. It is now expected that bullying prevention and intervention program teach children who witness bullying how to respond.[14]

> "Hostile behavior and bullying in school settings is a common reality for Muslim students, evidenced by incidents of discrimination that have occurred nationwide in the classroom, in the cafeteria, during extra-curricular activities, and on the school bus..." (Abo-Zena, et al, 2009, p. 5)

This model is particularly important when discussing refugee/immigrant youth because it acknowledges the impact of the **environment** students are in. For example, it is crucial to look at the attitudes of the community and larger society towards refugees and immigrants. Schools do not operate in a vacuum, but instead mirror the larger society. Racism, **anti-immigrant sentiment**, and religious or political tensions from the larger society are all reflected in children's bullying. For example, negative messages about Muslims have been particularly prominent since 9/11.[15] Overall, for these reasons, it is crucial for bullying to be discussed in larger conversations about **immigrant integration**.

6. Are certain groups of refugees/immigrants more likely to be bullied than others? Why?

As explained above, the school's climate and demographics (e.g. which group is the majority, etc.) greatly affects which groups of students are bullied, particularly since research shows that children and youth who are

different from the mainstream or majority groups are often the targets of bullying. Furthermore, one must recognize that the majority group, or the group with power, may change between settings within a single school.[16]

In particular, children of certain refugee/immigrant groups may be at greater risk for victimization due to cultural similarities or differences from the dominant group, their level of proficiency in the dominant language and other factors.[17] Those who work with refugee/immigrant children in the schools often mention the role that cultural orientation plays in bullying. For example, some refugee/immigrant students are bullied because of a lack of understanding of cultural norms related to hygiene, appropriate dress for boys vs. girls, how to make friends, boundaries and personal space, etc.

7. What role does acculturation or immigrant generational status play in bullying?

Many people who have worked with refugee or immigrant children in the schools have witnessed newer arrivals being made fun of by students from the same country of origin that have been in the U.S. longer. For example,

BRYCS Photo/ CSS Anchorage

sometimes more acculturated students call newer arrivals "FOB," which stands for "Fresh Off the Boat." Yet again, few studies in the bullying literature have taken a look at this phenomenon and the studies that do exist have conflicting findings.[18] One study shows that students who are more acculturated are more targeted by their peers,[19] another study found that first generation youth (less acculturated) are more targeted,[20] and a third study found that acculturation level did not affect students' victimization rates at all.[21]

Service providers report that many refugee/immigrant youth try to acculturate as quickly as possible in order to "fit in" with their peers and to avoid being bullied. It is important for parents to recognize this because many youth do not mean to reject their native culture, but find it important to dress or act "American" for these reasons.

8. What about cyber bullying?

Recently, more attention has been paid to "cyber bullying," which happens when teens use the Internet, cell phones, or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person.[22] Refugee/immigrant students may be more susceptible to cyber bullying because of a lack of experience with the Internet or a lack of understanding of its dangers. In addition, foreign-born parents may be less familiar with the Internet and the importance of monitoring their children's use of it.

9. What are some of the effects of bullying and are they any different for refugee/immigrant children?

Overall, students who are involved in bullying (as the bully, the victim, or the witness) are at risk for a host of difficulties. Most notably, children who are victimized are at risk for psychological difficulties (depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, and low self-esteem), social relationship problems, and more. Victimized children are also at risk for academic difficulties, substance use, stress-related illnesses, and aggression.[23]

There is not enough evidence to definitively say whether refugee/immigrant children are affected any differently by bullying, but one study found that immigrant teenagers were more sensitive than the native born to the effects of harassment and victimization.[24] Anecdotally, refugee service providers report that bullying can make newcomer students extremely frightened, erode their confidence, and

BRYCS Photo/ Katrina Hawkins-Hobbs

impact their transition to the U.S.[25] Others report that refugee students may avoid or drop out of school due to bullying, threats, and harassment.[26]

These students (and their parents) may not discuss the bullying with teachers or other authority figures due to language barriers, a fear of authority, or a sense of shame. Furthermore, students/parents sometimes feel powerless to change situations after having lived for years in refugee camps.

Sadly, many refugee youth are bullied because of the same reasons they fled their country (e.g. nationality, race, religion, etc.). Though bullying may not take as severe a form as persecution, it certainly may bring back unpleasant or even traumatic memories for refugee youth. Furthermore, for many refugee youth, the target is not often just that particular child, but the entire group(s) to which the child belongs.[27]

10. Are there ways to increase empathic understanding in American-born youth towards foreign-born youth?

BRYCS Photo/ Katrina Hawkins-Hobbs

The more empathy students have for each other, the less likely they are to bully or abuse each other. In addition, the more students identify with and understand each other, the more likely they are to reach out to help each other.[28] There are many instances where the bullying of refugee/immigrant students is reduced simply by teaching American-born students about their foreign-born peers (e.g. Why are they here? Why do they dress differently? etc.) and giving them an opportunity to ask questions and openly discuss their concerns. BRYCS has collected dozens of resources that can be used for these types of lessons and conversations. Check out BRYCS' lists of highlighted resources on Immigrant/Refugee Awareness Instructional Materials and Children's Books about the Refugee/Immigrant Experience.

11. What is restorative justice and how is it being used with refugee youth?

Another approach that is significantly different from what was done 20 years ago is based on the concept of **"restorative justice,"** which emphasizes repairing the harm that was caused, holding offenders accountable, bringing together the person who was harmed with the person who did the harm and the community, and preventing similar actions in the future. This is very different from the "zero tolerance" policies of the past where the bully is suspended and then returns to school without the underlying causes of the conflict ever being addressed. The restorative justice approach recognizes that while bullying interventions are often centered on giving the person who bullies consequences, consequences do not always stop the bullying, and in some cases punishment may make the bullying worse for the target.

This approach was first used in schools in Australia in the 1990's and is now being used in some locations in the U.S.[29] The Center for Multicultural Mediation and Restorative Justice in Minneapolis, Minnesota has been using the restorative justice model with the many East African refugees and immigrants in Minnesota. Among other things, they work with the Minneapolis Public Schools' Safe and Drug Free Schools Program to facilitate "peacekeeping circles" that allow diverse youth to express their thoughts and feelings. These have been primarily prevention oriented and are used as a means for building interpersonal relationships, particularly among East African and African American youth.

BRYCS Photo/ CSS Anchorage

It is important to note that using restorative practices in bullying situations requires training, not only in restorative justice, but also in bullying dynamics and trauma. Bullying and immigrant experiences are both

complex, so any intervention should be carefully chosen and evaluated for its impact on the target, the person who did the bullying, and the bystanders.

12. What are some cultural considerations when addressing bullying with refugee/immigrant students?[30]

- **Group vs. Individual Emphasis**: Individualistic cultures will tend to have more one-on-one bullying or one group vs. another less powerful group. Bullying in group-oriented cultures is more likely to emphasize ostracism from the larger group and solutions are more focused on how that person can better fit into the group. Where a family or culture falls on this individual-group spectrum will also affect how many people they prefer to bring to the table to discuss concerns about bullying in general, or about a particular child.

- **Small vs. Large Power Differences**: Depending on the culture, the difference between those with formal power versus those without can be small or large. For schools with large power differences, decisions about bullying prevention programs are likely to be made by a few key people in power. Likewise, in meetings about particular children, the group will likely hear more from those with authority.

- **Masculine vs. Feminine Approach**: Typical ideas about what it means to be "feminine" or "masculine" affect cultures' views about who deserves empathy. Since teaching empathy is an important component of many bullying prevention programs, service providers need to take this into consideration. Who is seen as deserving of concern and how much concern should those people receive?

- **Uncertainty Avoidance vs. Ambiguity Acceptance**: This has to do with a culture's preference to either eliminate as much uncertainty in life as possible or embrace it as an exciting part of life. This concept will affect bullying prevention and other types of programs from a program planning perspective. How strictly should rules, policies, and procedures be followed?

- **Confrontation vs. Harmony**: Some cultures value avoiding confrontation and maintaining harmony. This may affect students', parents', or community leaders' recognition of a bullying issue and/or desire to directly address it.

BRYCS Photo/ CSS Anchorage

13. Is it suggested that we adapt existing models or programs to meet the needs of refugee/immigrant students in our schools?

Yes. As mentioned above, there has been little research on bullying with refugee/immigrant students in general, and there is no scientific evidence on the approaches that work best for these populations. Yet, doing something is better than doing nothing! Service providers can start with evidence-based bullying prevention programs and make adaptations to best meet the needs of refugee/immigrant students and their families. Some suggested considerations for schools with large numbers of refugee/immigrant students are outlined below.

Best Practice[31]	Brief Description of Best Practice	Considerations for Schools with Refugee/Immigrant Students
Focus on the social environment of the school.	Change the climate of the school and the social norms related to bullying. All staff must be involved.	Look at the school and community's attitude toward refugees and immigrants. Recognize the impact of anti-immigrant sentiment, racism, and religious/political tensions.
Assess bullying at your school.	Administer an anonymous questionnaire to students about bullying to learn how much it is happening, what types, when, where, etc.	Translate the questionnaire and/or find other ways, such as focus groups,[32] for students with limited English or literacy skills to provide input.
Garner staff and parent support for bullying prevention.	Buy-in from the majority of staff and parents is needed.	Identify barriers for refugee and immigrant parent participation and develop a plan to address those.[33] Make sure school leadership is involved.
Form a group to coordinate the school's bullying prevention activities.	This group should include an administrator, teacher from each grade, school counselor, parent, etc.	Include ELL/ESL staff as well as representatives from community agencies (refugee resettlement, ethnic community based, etc.), and community leaders. Their buy-in is important!
Train your staff in bullying prevention.	All staff should be trained on the nature of bullying and its effects, how to respond, how to prevent it, etc.	Include information on cultural competence and any additional considerations for dealing with bullying of refugees or immigrants.
Establish and enforce school rules and policies related to bullying.	Make clear that students are expected not to bully, but also to not be passive bystanders, etc.	Most students are bystanders. Many youth, including refugees and immigrants, appreciate being given an opportunity for leadership or to help create change.
Increase adult supervision in "hot spots" where bullying occurs.	Bullying tends to thrive in locations where adults are not present so attention must be paid to these areas.	Refugee and immigrant students are particularly vulnerable when adults are not around, especially because of language barriers. Include areas outside of school, if possible, such as the bus.
Intervene consistently and appropriately in bullying situations.	Staff should hold follow-up meetings with students and involve parents.	Take steps to reduce any barriers to parent involvement for refugee/immigrant parents.
Focus some class time on bullying prevention.	It is suggested teachers set aside 20-30 minutes a week (or every other) to discuss peer relations with students.	Newcomer students should be invited to share, but never forced to be "cultural spokespersons" for their communities.
Continue these efforts over time.	There should not be an "end date" for these activities.	The populations in our schools are ever-changing, so the conversation must be on-going, too.

14. Are anti-bullying programs known to be effective?

Studies of school-based anti-bullying programs have yielded mixed results. Overall, some studies have shown school-based anti-bullying programs to be effective in reducing bullying,[34] but it is important to recognize that success in one school is no guarantee of success in another because each school's "social ecology" or context is different.[35]

15. Are there any particular anti-bullying programs being used specifically for refugee/immigrant children or other "Promising Practices"?

The Colorado Trust funded a large bullying prevention initiative from 2005-2008, which included a number of community-based grantees that worked with refugee and immigrant communities. One of those was the African Community Center in Denver, which developed an anti-bullying project called Refugee Education for Awareness, Change, and Hope program (REACH). Through this project, they produced a curriculum and video called Creating a Refuge from Bullying.

The Center for Preventing Hate has also been doing work in this area. Through their "Unity Project," they work closely with schools to assess the particular issues of bias and harassment that are most prevalent and collaborate with school personnel to offer educational workshops and dialogue programs. A major aspect of their approach is training student leaders and working with student bystanders. They have worked with a number of school districts in Maine and New Hampshire that were heavily impacted by large numbers of refugees who settled in the area in a short amount of time.

The McKay School Safety Program is a program being used for bilingual Hispanic children in the fourth grade. The program incorporates six themes, including bullying. The program was evaluated and overall found to be effective in improving knowledge of school safety topics, but the researchers emphasize that school districts have different cultural and linguistic needs and that a "one program fits all" approach should not be used.[36]

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Baltimore is using classroom dialogues to facilitate conversations between refugee and American-born youth on bullying as well as "Forum Theater" role plays, based on the "Theatre of the Oppressed" methodology, to help students explore non-violent ways of gaining respect. Using the "forum theater" approach, students act out bullying scenes from real life as they actually occurred and then again, utilizing alternative endings suggested by peers.

16. What are some practical resources we can use related to bullying prevention?

See BRYCS' lists of highlighted resources on Bullying and Addressing Ethnic Conflicts for such resources.
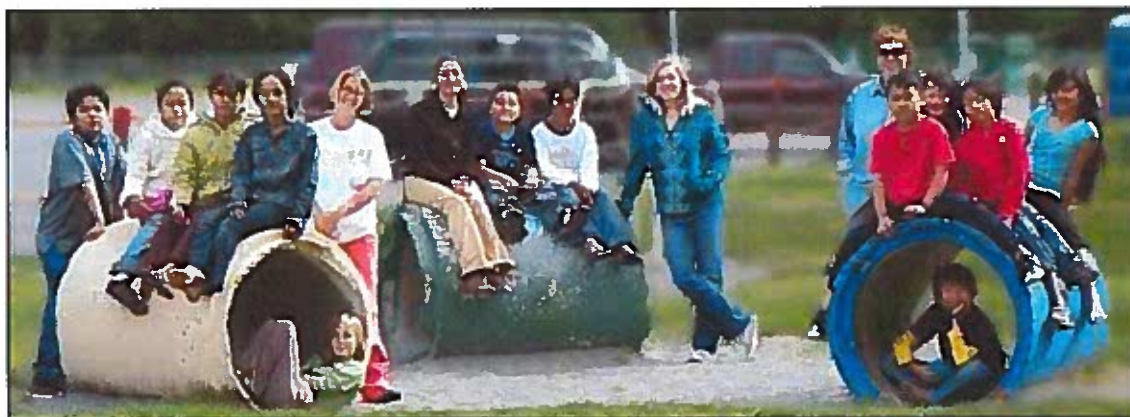
BRYCS Photo/ CSS Anchorage

[1] This is the definition used by one of the most influential researchers in the field of bullying, Dan Olweus, from Norway. It should also be noted that many researchers use the term "peer victimization" to refer to bullying or bullying-like behavior.

[2] Hazler, R. J. & Carney, J. V. (2010). Cultural Variations in Characteristics of Effective Bullying Programs. In S.R. Jimerson, S. M. Swearer, & D. L. Espelage (Eds), *Handbook of Bullying in Schools: An International Perspective*. New York: Taylor & Francis. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4039

[3] Scherr, T. G. & Larson, J. (2010). Bullying Dynamics Associated with Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration Status. In S.R. Jimerson, S. M. Swearer, & D. L. Espelage (Eds), *Handbook of Bullying in Schools: An International Perspective*. New York: Taylor & Francis. One should also note that "immigration status" here does not refer to whether one is documented or undocumented. It is referring to whether a student is an immigrant or not. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4040

[4] Many studies say this. See the references in Note 3 (Scherr & Larson), Note 23 (Swearer et al), Note 11 (Graham), and Note 6 (Fandrem et al).

[5] Wessler, S.L. & Preble, W. (2003). *Respectful School: How Educators and Students Can Conquer Hate and Harassment*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

[6] Wessler, S.L. & De Andrade, L.L. (2006). Slurs, Stereotypes, and Student Interventions: Examining the Dynamics, Impact, and Prevention of Harassment in Middle and High School. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(3), 511-532.

[7] Fandrem, H., Strohmeier, D., & Roland, E. (2009). Bullying and victimization among native and immigrant adolescents in Norway. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 29(6), 898-923. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4041

[8] BRYCS has provided technical assistance to those working with refugee children in the U.S. for 10 years and has consulted on countless situations of refugee bullying over the years.

[9] Ibid, Note 5.

[10] Ibid, Notes 3 & 7.

[11] Communication with Matthew Schultz on August 18, 2010. International Rescue Committee, Baltimore.

[12] Graham, S. (2006). Peer victimization in school: exploring the ethnic context. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15, 317-321. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4046

[13] McKenney, K.S., Pepler, D., Craig, W., & Connolly, J. (2006). Peer victimization and psychosocial adjustment: the experiences of Canadian immigrant youth. *Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology*, 9(4), 239-264. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4047

[14] Swearer, S.M., Espelage, D.L., Vaillancourt,T., & Hymel, S. (2010). What can be done about school bullying? Linking research to educational practice. Educational Researcher, 39(1), 38-47. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4043

[15] Imam, S.A. (2010). Separation of What and State: The Life Experiences of Muslims with Public Schools in the Midwest. In O. Sensoy & C.D. Stonebanks (Eds), *Muslim Voices in School*. Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

[16] Ibid, Note 3.

[17] Ibid, Note 3.

[18] Personal communication with Dr. Rebecca A. Robles-Piña, June 24, 2010.

[19] Peguero, A. (2009). Victimizing the children of immigrants: Latino and Asian American student victimization. *Youth in Society*, 41(2), 186-208. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4044

[20] Ibid, Note 13.

[21] Bauman, S. & Summers, J.J. (2009). Peer victimization and depressive symptoms in Mexican American middle school students: including acculturation as variable of interest. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Science*, 31(4), 515-535. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4048

[22] National Crime Prevention Council, http://www.ncpc.org/

[23] Ibid, Note 14.

[24] Abada, T., Hou, F., & Ram, B. (2008). The effects of harassment and victimization on self-rated health and mental health among Canadian adolescents. Social Science & Medicine, 67, 557-567. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4045

[25] Communication with Abdi Ali, Center for Multicultural Mediation and Restorative Justice, August 17, 2010.

[26] Communication with Lauren Swain, August 7, 2010.

[27] Ibid, Note 3.

[28] Ibid, Note 2.

[29] Stinchcomb, J.B., Bazemore, G., & Riestenberg, N. (2006). Beyond zero tolerance: restoring justice in secondary schools. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 4(2), 123-147. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4049

[30] Ibid, Note 2.

[31] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Stop Bullying Now! *Best Practices in Bullying Prevention and Intervention*. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4030

[32] Ibid, Note 5.

[33] See *Involving Refugee Parents in their Children's Education* for suggestions. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=2469

[34] Farrington, D. P. & Ttofi, M.M. (2009). School-Based Programs to Reduce Bullying and Victimization. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 6. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4038

[35] Ibid, Note 14.

[36] Robles-Piña, R.A., Norman, P., & Campbell-Bishop, C. (2010). McKay School Safety Program (MSSP): A Bilingual Bicultural Approach. In S.R. Jimerson, S. M. Swearer, & D. L. Espelage (Eds), *Handbook of Bullying in Schools: An International Perspective*. New York: Taylor & Francis. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4050