

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF VIOLENCE: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF  
STUDENT ESSAYS

BY

GINGER GUMMELT

B.S., Texas Woman's University, 1991  
M.S.W., University of Houston, 1993

DISSERTATION

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**Dedication**

For Madeline, Julia, and Gabe,

Randy

Mom & Dad

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**List of Abbreviations**

ACJS	Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
DtWT	Do the Write Thing
DV	Domestic Violence
EcoD	Economically Disadvantaged School
EcoS	Economically Stable School
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
JVQ	Juvenile Victim's Questionnaire
MinS	Minority School
NASW	National Association of Social Workers
NatSCEV	National Survey of Children Exposed to Violence
NCSV	National Campaign to Stop Violence
NTFCEV	National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence (Attorney General)
OJJDP	Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
PI	Principal Investigator
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RQ	Research Question(s)
TEA	Texas Education Agency
WHO	World Health Organization
YRBS	Youth Risk Behavior Survey

### **Abstract**

Exposure to violence which affects approximately three out of every five children in America is clearly a threat to the health and well-being of society. Previous research on youth exposure to violence has focused primarily on the implications for victims or the treatment of the offenders. While some research has concentrated on the lived experience of the children who are subjected to violence, it has generally been defined within a specific domain such as domestic violence or bullying. By understanding children's perspective on the violence experienced within their everyday life, professionals can design comprehensive prevention and intervention programs that better target children who have been exposed to violence. Using the secondary data available from the "*Do the Write Thing*" (DtWT) Challenge, this research project explored significant issues of violence as experienced and perceived by children in 13 middle schools from 9 districts in Region V of Texas. The DtWT Challenge is an initiative of the National Campaign to Stop Violence in which participating students engage in classroom discussions about violence and then write essays addressing the issues. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze significant issues that are related to exposure to violence after controlling for demographic differences. Qualitative data in the form of the submitted written essays were coded, and categorized to identify major themes of how children describe their experience of violence and assign meaning to violence. Results indicate that students wrote more about bullying than other forms of violence, and they more likely identified their role as a witness than victim or perpetrator. Protective factors were described proportionally more by students in schools identified as Economically Disadvantaged or Minority Schools. Several themes within three domains (cognitive, social, and moral) arose including defining violence in terms of bullying, violence as a universal experience, and complex emotions related to violence.



## Chapter 1

### **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

A teen-age boy reflects on how he was bullied as a younger child, experiences which have led him to tormenting his peers today. Nearby, in another middle school, a 12 year-old girl writes about the moment when she lifts her father's head and realizes he has taken his own life after killing her stepmom and unborn baby brother. Stories like these, taken from excerpts of middle school student essays, demonstrate how American society is riddled with a dark underbelly of violence perpetrated on, by, and within the lives of those least equipped to face it – children.

Three out of five children in our society have been exposed to violence, and according to recent research, violence will impact the lives of an estimated 46 million children in the coming year (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, & Kracke, 2009; Kaufman, Ortega, Schewe, & Kracke, 2011; Listenbee et al., 2012). Whether in their home, schools, or community, children are being exposed to multiple types of violence every day which threaten their health, security, and happiness (Cook et al., 2005; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007). Children living in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods are frequently exposed to weapons, drugs, and random violence within their communities (Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004), while exposure to domestic violence and media related violence crosses all racial, cultural, and socioeconomic boundaries (Osofsky, 1999). Researchers estimate that approximately 15.5 million children in the United States live in families where domestic violence has occurred (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006). Children are definitely subjected to various forms of violence even within their immediate environment.

In 1979, the United States Surgeon General, Julius Richmond, proclaimed violence as a public health crisis (Listenbee et al., 2012). In 2002, The World Health Organization (WHO) declared violence a significant health issue which threatens the lives and well-being of America's youth (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002). Yet, after years of research, program development, and social interventions, children continue to be exposed to violence at alarming rates. In fact, the 2009 National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) found that nearly half of the children surveyed had been assaulted within the past year and more than one-fourth had witnessed a violent act (Finkelhor et al., 2009).

Furthermore, as children are exposed to one type of violence, the likelihood of exposure to other types of violence increases significantly (Berson, Hernon, & Pearsall, 2012). Poly-victimization, defined as a pattern of numerous or repeated victimizations, has become the norm for many of our most vulnerable children, rather than the exception (Finkelhor et al., 2007). In today's society, children are victimized both directly (as the recipient of the violence) and indirectly (as witnesses of violence) (Kilpatrick, Smith, Saunders, & National Institute of Justice (U.S.), 2003; Saunders, 2003), which increases their exposure and risk of poly-victimization. Direct victimization includes any form of explicit harm to a child, including child abuse, bullying, maltreatment, neglect, criminal acts, etc. Indirect exposure is roughly defined as a disruption to the safety or security of the child and includes witnessing violence (visually and auditory), losing a close family member to violence, and distress to the family functioning due to violence. For many children, direct exposure is accompanied by indirect exposure, which means that the child must deal not only with the violent episodes, but also with the extending repercussions of the violence (Huth-Bocks, Levendosky, & Semel, 2001; Osofsky, 2003). For example, in an essay from 2013, a twelve-year-old boy discusses his experience of being slapped

and hit by his step-father for earning bad grades. When his mother attempts to intervene, the boy becomes subject to witnessing the violence that erupts between his mother and step-father.

Results from The National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence indicate that approximately one-third of America's children have experienced more than one direct victimization within the past twelve months (Finkelhor et al., 2009). Other recent studies have further revealed that children are more likely than adults to experience violence and are more than twice as likely to be victims (Baum, 2005; Finkelhor, 2008), and that witnessing emotional and physical violence has a more significant impact on children than the direct experience of the violence (Carroll-Lind, Chapman, & Raskauskas, 2011).

Historically, society's response to the issue of children's exposure to violence has been problematic for a couple of reasons: it has been mainly reactive and is most often based upon the perspective of the adults closest to the situation rather than that of the affected children themselves. In the face of family and community violence or trauma, adults are often preoccupied with containing or managing the situation, and the experience and needs of children are often relegated to the background (Harris, Lieberman, & Marans, 2007; Shavers, 2013). Thus, by the time these adults turn their full attention to the children who were involved, directly or indirectly, in the violent episode, they can only react to the damage caused by the event; it is too late to mitigate the trauma. Many of these efforts are launched after a violent event that receives high media coverage (e.g., school shootings), and are often undertaken with an adult-centric perspective failing to take into account the perspectives of the children themselves. For example, (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003) found that adolescents involved in severe school violence and shootings had previously been victims of teasing and excessive bullying. The case studies used for their research were provided by the media (national magazines and

local newspapers) who reported in the high profile incidents, yet neglected the voices of those most directly involved.

One more reason this neglect occurs is that researchers often have difficulty gaining access to children who are considered traumatized, fragile, or too young to be interviewed and are therefore forced to rely on the reports of the caregivers (Øverlien, 2010). This presents particular difficulties for researchers as reports of child maltreatment from parents and family members are typically difficult to obtain and may not include all of the information pertinent to the episode. When the experience of violence is interpreted by the caregiver, it then fails to gather the critical knowledge from the child. Furthermore, reports by caregivers may have limited accuracy and are subject to the parent/caregiver's perspective. In other words, caregivers are subject to underreporting for a number of reasons (i.e., protect the child or aggressor, avoid legal involvement, etc.) (Holden, 2003; Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008).

Despite the violence and trauma in contemporary society, many children manage to survive and even thrive under challenging circumstances. As social workers, we aim is to ameliorate human suffering and improve the quality of life – especially for the vulnerable and marginalized. Children living within a violent context certainly meet this targeted population. Yet while committees, task forces, programs and interventions focus on changing the environmental and social factors which contribute to a violent society (Krug et al., 2002), little is still known about how children define and give meaning to the violence in their lives. Policies and programs that serve children at risk should be informed by young people's views, and in order to provide more effective prevention and intervention, it is imperative we gain a comprehensive understanding of how children experience and cope with violence.

**Key terms and definitions**

Throughout the literature, the intersections of the topics of children and violence vary widely in definition and clarity. Terms such as “domestic violence” and “exposure” often lack precision, resulting in confusion and inconsistency in the reporting of information. While Holden (2003) recommends that, instead of “witness” or “observer” which encompass a great range of experiences and limits assumptions, researchers utilize the term “exposure” to indicate absorption of violence, however, exposure still leaves a large gap in meaning. In 1999, in an effort to guide the data collection of intimate partner violence, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) established several uniform definitions related to family violence. In 2008, the CDC added recommendations for definitions of child maltreatment. Guided by the CDC recommendations, this study will use the following operational definitions of key terms, including exposure.

**Bullying** – an act of aggression or intimidation by a more powerful child or group of children which threatens the security and safety of a perceived weaker child or group of children - often repeated over time

**Child Abuse** – Overt actions toward a child by a caretaker resulting in serious harm or exploitation of the child.

**Domestic Violence (DV)** – an act of violence by a household member on another household member

**Exposure** – direct, indirect, or peripheral contact with violence (i.e. witnessing violence, hearing violence, direct victimization, indirect victimization, bullying, etc.)

**Intimate-Partner Violence (IPV)** – any act of violence within an intimate spousal, dating, or significant relationship

**Resilience** – attaining positive outcomes and succeeding despite threatening or challenging circumstances

**Violence** – an intentional act, direct or indirect, that threatens the security and safety of another person and results in terror, fear, despair, or harm.

**Witness** – direct visual or auditory presence or perception with a violent episode.

(Gosselin, 2000; Leeb, 2008; Saltzman, Fanslow, McMahon, & Shelley, 2002)

Although social workers, law enforcement officers, educators, and medical professionals have all sought to better understand the causes and impact of violence on today's children, few studies are designed to analyze children's expression of their experience related to violence. And yet, in order to provide effective evidence-based interventions, it is critical to understand the experience of violence from the youth's perspective (Listenbee et al., 2012). Maxfield and Babbie (2014) acknowledge that, for better understanding of a marginalized population or aberrant phenomenon, it is most effective to gather data and information directly from the source. Furthermore, addressing the recommendations set forth by the Report of the Attorney

General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence (2012) requires a thorough understanding of the concerns and needs of the direct population impacted by the violence.

In order to better understand the impact and experience of violence in the lives of children, it is critical to explore the personal meanings portrayed in their writing. Written narratives serve not only as a means of communication, but also as a way of interpreting an experience (Baumeister & Newman, 1994). Examining stories by multiple authors (subjects) can offer insight into the ways that emotions and experiences are structured and understood by the selected population (Bohanek & Fivush, 2010). Furthermore, extensive research indicates that stories reveal an individual's subjective evaluation of the subject matter and that narratives are a natural part of the emotional regulation process (Pennebaker, 1997).

As children are increasingly exposed to violence within the context of their everyday lives, it is critical that social workers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to best meet the needs of the youth. Such knowledge and skills are developed through rigorous research which leads to informed evidenced based practices. Historically, research on this subject has been somewhat problematic in terms of access to the children and uniformed definitions and understanding of key terms. By seeking the direction of previous research, and listening to the children's voices through their written essays, this research project will delve into the way in which children make sense of violence within their everyday lives.

## **Chapter 2**

### **EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL REVIEW**

This research project aims to explore the events which children identify as violence by developing a nuanced understating of how children define and ascribe meaning to their exposure to violence. In order to better understand this research purpose and its potential impact on the field of social work, it is necessary to review the history of research that links how children experience the world around them to the violence they are exposed to. From both empirical and theoretical perspectives, this chapter looks to the literature to establish a framework for researching and targeting the topic of how violence was perceived by children. By basing this project within the structure of past research, with a focus on children's writings, one can begin to construct a context for how young people describe violence and assign meaning to it within their worlds.

#### **Past Research with a Focus on Violence Exposure**

##### **Children Exposed to Violence**

The topic of children's exposure to violence has been methodically researched over the past few decades. Throughout the literature, researchers have used a variety of methods including conducting national surveys and focus groups (Carroll-Lind et al., 2011; Finkelhor et al., 2009; McIntyre & Widom, 2011), analyzing crime statistics (McIntyre & Widom, 2011), interviewing children and caregivers (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2011; Kaufman et al., 2011), and even evaluating children's writings (Zimmerman et al., 2004), all with a general focus on the role of the child within the context of the violence.



Such research has focused on the role of the child as the victim of violence (Baum, 2005; Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999), the aggressor (Linquanti & Berliner, 1994; Resnick et al., 2004), or the witness of violent events (Finkelhor, 2008; Harris et al., 2007; Shavers, 2013; Van Horn & Lieberman, 2011). Over the past few decades, research has shown that children who live in violent homes (as both victim and witness) struggle with emotional, behavioral, and medical issues (Finkelhor, 2008; Kaufman et al., 2011; Osofsky, 2003; Shavers, 2013). Additionally, many children who are victims of violence become perpetrators of further violence before reaching adulthood (Harris et al., 2007; Listenbee et al., 2012) – a trend which is particularly evident among peers. Recent research has found that it is more likely for a child to be both a bully and a victim of bullying than it is to be in only one role (Hopkins, Taylor, Bowen, & Wood, 2013; J. Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009a). Such findings in turn lead to questions regarding the impact of violence on the development of morality in children (Astor, 1994a; Dunn, 2006). In the end, arguably the most potentially impactful research for the purposes of the field examines the importance of resilience, the child's ability to cope with violence and overcome the deleterious effects of exposure to it (Goldstein & Brooks, 2013; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Overton, 2013).

Other studies, like the present one, have sought to qualify children's exposure to violence in an effort to more effectively intervene in their lives. In 2007, researchers in Florida undertook a qualitative study to examine student's perceptions of violence in order to create a social marketing campaign to reduce violence. The researchers recognized that before the issue of youth violence can be addressed with prevention and intervention models, it is vital to understand the cultural context in which the children experience the violence. In the initial phase of the project, the researchers conducted interviews with 79 middle school students to gain

knowledge about how the youth perceive violence in their lives. Among the findings of this phase of the research were five predominant themes; (a) definitions of violence, (b) reasons youth fight, (c) perceptions of violent youth, (d) consequences of violence, and (e) benefits of violence (Quinn, Bell-Ellison, Loomis, & Tucci, 2007). These themes were later applied to a student-directed social marketing campaign to reduce violence within the schools.

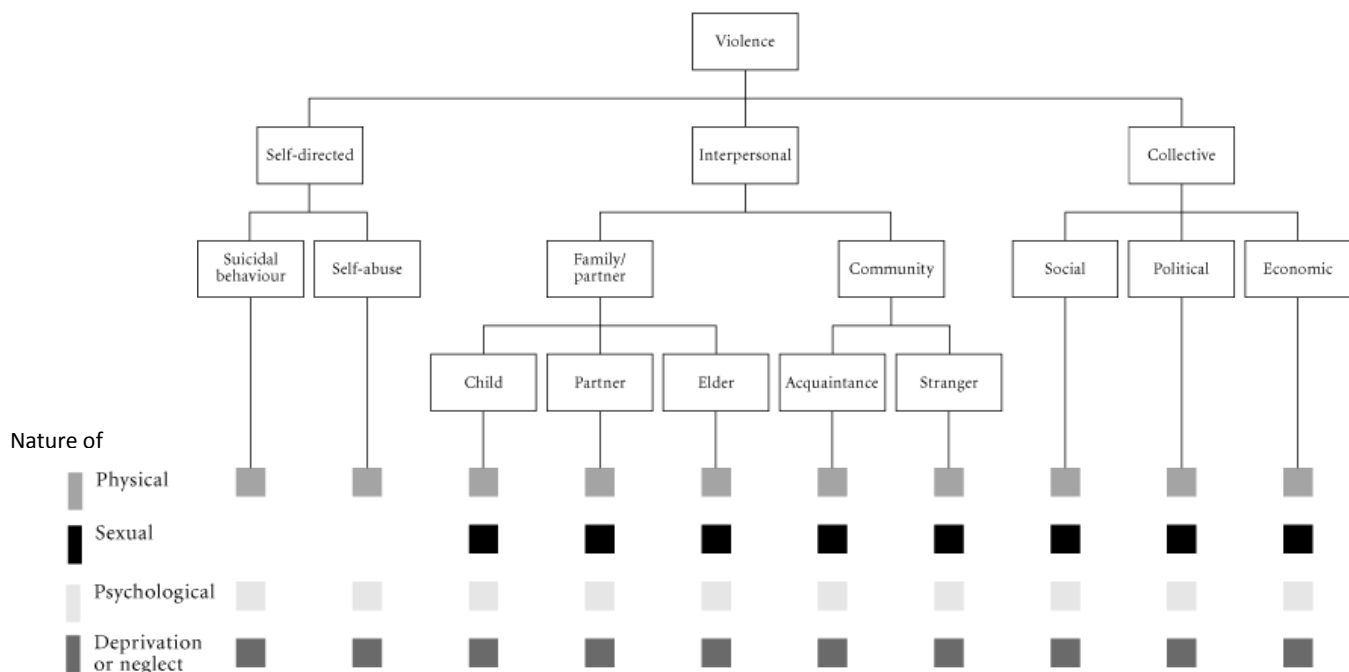
Finally, researchers have sought to understand the impact of violence by examining its relation to society in an effort to develop theories and typologies that might guide prevention and intervention strategies. Structural theories of violence have traditionally been analyzed by criminologists and sociologists. These theories focus on the ways in which violence occurs within society and how it is related to the system of society (Reid, 2006). In 1996, when the World Health Assembly declared violence a leading health problem, the World Health Organization (WHO) was charged with developing a typology of violence which characterizes the various natures of violence and the connections between them. The initial finding of this endeavor revealed that few typologies of violence had been developed, and none of these were considered inclusive or comprehensive (Krug & World Health Organization, 2002).

The typology of violence outlined by the WHO identifies three overarching categories of violence which are classified according to the commission of the violent act: self-directed violence, interpersonal violence, and collective violence. Within these three categories are multiple sub-categories which are reflected within the nature of the violent acts. This typology of violence clearly underscores the issues of violence as related to the public health crisis and presents a structure for comprehending the complex patterns intrinsic in today's society (see Figure 1). This typology, however, was developed for the general society and does not translate well to children as it does not address either the multiplicity of roles for children (i.e. victim and

witness of domestic violence) or the issues unique to status (such as child abuse or bullying).

Furthermore, this typology is static in its characterization and does not lend well to the co-occurrence of violence.

**Figure 1**      **Typology of Violence**

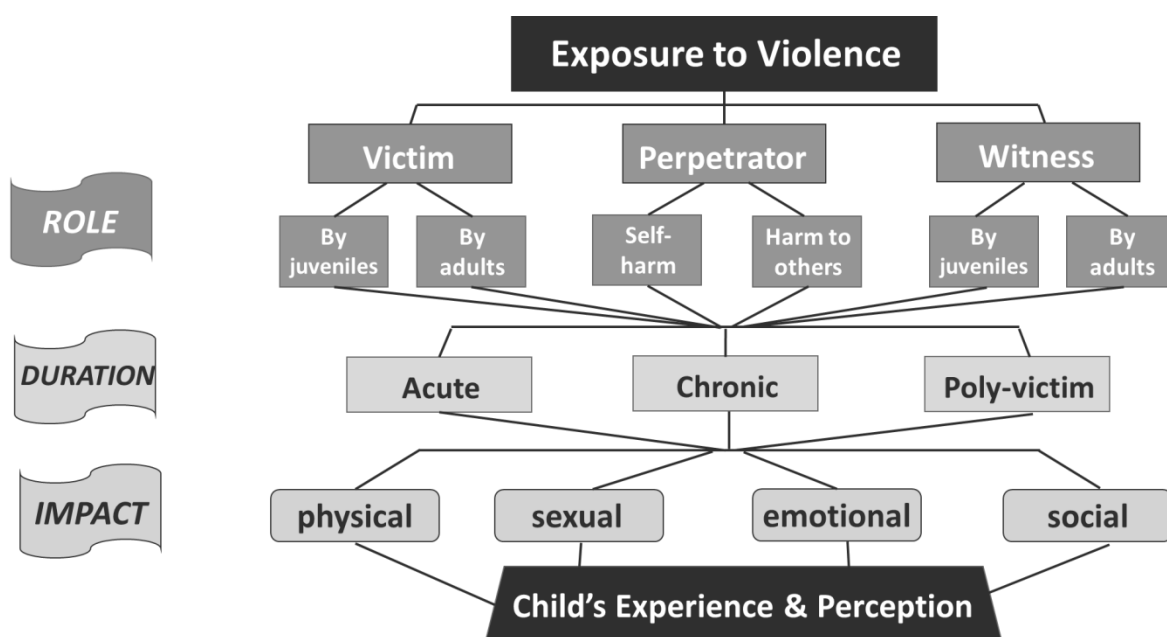


Source: (Krug & World Health Organization, 2002)

Further research on theory and typology of violence as it relates to children generally focuses on the predicting factors or the severity of violence (Collyer, Gallo, Corey, Waters, & Boney-McCoy, 2007; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; Gonzalez, Durrant, Chabot, Trocmé, & Brown, 2008). Collyer et al. (2007) provide a typology which ranks violent

offenses by the brutality of the offense while Foshee et al. (2007) and Gonzalez et al. (2008) establish typologies of predicting factors for violence. For the purpose of this study, an integrated typology of violence presents as the most thorough theoretical approach for classifying the roles of children within the context of violence (see Figure 2 – Integrated Typology).

**Figure 2**      **Integrated Typology of Violence**



### Children as Victims

The area of children as victims is of particular interest to the field of social work as it is grounded in its centralized mission of helping the voiceless. According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, the primary objective for all social

workers is to enhance the well-being of all persons with particular consideration for the needs of the vulnerable and oppressed (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). By the nature of size, dependence, and maturity, children are among the most vulnerable sub-group in society. Finkelhor (2008) asserts that, due to these factors, children also represent the most highly victimized group in society. While children are victimized by the same crimes as adults, they are also exposed to additional offenses specific to their position, such as maltreatment in the forms of child-abuse. Furthermore, as dependents, children have fewer options to change their circumstances. Unlike adults who can move out of unsafe areas, report crimes, or seek separation/divorce from unhealthy relationships, children are often forced to remain within the boundaries of the unsafe environment (Finkelhor, 2008; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

In 2008, with the support of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), researchers undertook a comprehensive National Survey of Children Exposed to Violence (NatSCEV) by interviewing 4,549 children under the age of eighteen (interviews for children under the age of 10 were completed by the parent or caregiver). While the researchers identified the primary objective of the NatSCEV as exploring children's "exposure" to violence, it is clear in the report that the research focused on the children as victims of violence. The screening questions used for this study covered "48 types of victimization" (Finkelhor et al., 2009) based on items from the Juvenile Victim's Questionnaire (JVQ). The 48 types of victimization were separated into seven main categories:

- conventional crime,
- child maltreatment,
- peer and sibling victimization,

- sexual victimization,
- witnessing and indirect victimization,
- school violence and threat,
- internet violence and victimization.

It is noted that the category of *witnessing and indirect victimization* fall more clearly within the role of witness to violence rather than victim to violence; however, the remaining six categories clearly address the child as the victim (Finkelhor et al., 2009).

Results of the NatSCEV revealed that more than 60% of the youth in America have been victims of violence within a 12 month period. More than half (57%) of the children surveyed reported a physical assault within their lifetime, while 46% reported a physical assault within the previous year. Approximately one in every five children (19%) in the survey reported some form of child maltreatment (including physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, or custodial interference) within their lifetime. Rates of child maltreatment increased as children aged, particularly for children ages ten and older. Sixty-five percent of the children who reported direct victimization (as opposed to witnessing violence) reported more than one direct encounter within the past year and 11% of those reported more than five encounters. Further results from this research revealed that children who were physically assaulted during their lifetime were also more than five times as likely to experience child maltreatment. Similar results were found describing the relationship between physical assault and sexual abuse as well as sexual abuse and maltreatment (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009; Finkelhor et al., 2009), thus leading to the conclusion that children who are exposed to one episode of victimization are at an increased risk for further victimization.

While researchers have explored issues of community violence and terrorism, an overwhelming amount of the literature on children as victims of violence relates directly to the exposure to domestic violence. A 2007 study of domestic violence reports by law enforcement officers found that children were present in the homes of nearly half of the investigated crimes of domestic violence. Of those exposed to the violence, 81% of the children either saw, heard, or were injured by the violent episode. The researchers also found that homes with substantiated cases of domestic violence were significantly more likely to have children in them (Fantuzzo & Fusco, 2007).

In 2013, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) estimated that 686,000 children had experienced abuse and/or neglect in their home during the previous year. More than three-quarters of the substantiated cases (78%) reported neglect, and nearly 20% cited physical abuse. Sexual abuse was reported in nearly 10% of the substantiated abuse cases, with children in the early adolescence (ages 10-14) with the highest report (26%). The DHHS further determined that 29% of the children who had experienced abuse and/or neglect were also exposed to other types of violence within the home (including domestic violence and intimate partner violence) (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

To better understand the children's perspective of living in homes where domestic violence is present, Buckley et al. (2007) used qualitative methods to gather data from service providers, mothers, and children exposed to domestic violence in Dublin, Ireland. This study used repeated focus groups with 22 children between the ages of 8 and 17 and sought to explore the impact of the violence on the children. The findings of this study were categorized into five domains: (a) anxiety, fear, dread; (b) loss of confidence and self-esteem, stigma and secrecy; (c) relationships with parents and peers; (d) educational experiences; and (e) what children want

from services (Buckley et al., 2007). More specific results of this research indicated a clear link between intimate partner violence and the co-occurrence of child abuse; noting that broader family functioning is generally disrupted in violent homes. Subsequently, children in this study were also three times as likely to be involved in physical altercations in the school setting, thus increasing their exposure to violence. The researchers also noted that children respond very differently to the violence, generally determined by a combination of the events and the individual characteristics of the child.

While it is well documented in the research that children who have been victims of violence are often re-victimized later in life (Berson et al., 2012; Finkelhor et al., 2009; Finkelhor et al., 2009; Kilpatrick et al., 2003), the relationship of re-victimization to the initial victimization remains speculative. McIntyre and Widom (2011) infer that the link between childhood victimization and subsequent victimization(s) is not a clear linear relation. Using the framework of lifestyle theory, they suggest that children who have been victimized develop characteristics which later place them at risk for future victimization. Lifestyle theory is grounded in the field of criminal justice and was originally developed to examine the disparities in criminal victimization between various social groups (Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978; Nagin & Paternoster, 1993). When applied to the issue of childhood victimization, lifestyle theory indicates that many of the traits often associated with child victims (such as running away, substance abuse, criminal activity, and transient behavior) inherently increase the child's risk of further victimization (McIntyre & Widom, 2011).

Childhood victimization certainly impact children in a number of different ways. The differences depend on a variety of factors including the nature of the victimization and the age and developmental stage of the child. The nature of victimization describes the type of



victimization, severity of trauma, duration, and relationship with the perpetrator (Carroll-Lind et al., 2011; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012a). For example, a child who experiences repeated sexual abuse in his or her home may experience more significant problems related to the violence than a child who is physically assaulted by a peer on a single occasion. The developmental stage of the child causes the victimization to manifest differently as it relates to factors such as the chronological age, emotional development, and cognitive functioning of the child (Finkelhor, 2008). For example, a toddler who is assaulted by a caregiver may react in fear and hyper-vigilance, while an adolescent may respond with increased aggression and acting out.

Increased research in this area of how children respond to violence at different developmental stages combined with the nature of the victimization has led to the growing and notable body of knowledge in complex trauma (Cook et al., 2005; Levendosky, Bogat, & Martinez-Torteya, 2013; Shavers, 2013). Differing from previous research on violence which focused on one or two isolated events, complex trauma emphasizes the intersection of victimizing conditions (often occurring over a long period of time) as they relate to the developmental stage of the individual. Complex trauma is noted to lead to both internalized symptoms (such as somatic, dissociative and biological issues) and externalized symptoms (such as affect regulation, cognition, and self-concept). Addressing victimization in light of the complex trauma, therefore, reduces the fragmentation within the scope of analysis and treatment (Cook et al., 2005; Finkelhor, 2008; Levendosky et al., 2013). Cook et al. (2005) identify seven areas of impairment for children exposed to complex trauma; (a) attachment, (b) biology, (c) affect regulation, (d) dissociation, (e) behavioral control, (f) cognition, and (g) self-concept. Developmental issues are addressed within each of these domains and have differing significance. For children in early adolescence, for example, complex trauma can lead to

compounded problems in developing relationships (attachment and biology), in the ability to effectively express emotions and self-regulate (affect regulation, dissociation, and behavior control), and seeking social connectedness and support (self-concept). Understanding and treating complex trauma, therefore, is a centralized issue in addressing the direct and long-term needs of children who are victims of violence.

The research clearly demonstrates that children who are victimized face multiple challenges including emotional and psychological problems (Kaufman et al., 2011; Krug et al., 2002; Saunders, 2003); lower academic performance (Harris et al., 2007; Osofsky, 1999); social difficulties (Kaufman et al., 2011; Shavers, 2013); substance abuse (Kaufman et al., 2011; Kilpatrick et al., 2000; Shavers, 2013); a higher risk of becoming a victimizer or violent offender (Finkelhor et al., 2007; McIntyre & Widom, 2011); and a higher likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system (Harris et al., 2007; Listenbee et al., 2012). Unfortunately, these consequences mean that the majority of children who have been victimized are often relegated to an institutional system such as child protection, criminal justice, and treatment centers. In these environments, only the most palpable issues are generally addressed and their difficulties related to victimization are often left unrecognized and untreated (Harris et al., 2007).

### **Children as Witnesses**

While some attention has been focused on children who witness community violence and warfare, a larger body of research in the United States has been dedicated to children who witness violence in the family or home (Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008; Holden, 2003; Holt et al., 2008; Sousa et al., 2011). Often termed as “exposure” to violence or “indirect victims”, children who witness violence experience similar lasting and detrimental effects as victims (Evans et al., 2008). Obtaining accurate information on children who witness violence, however,

is far more challenging, as this information is rarely documented and often overlooked. The Department of Justice estimates that children are present in more than one third (35%) of the documented episodes of intimate partner violence (IPV) in the United States. In an additional 16% of IPV cases, it is unknown whether children were present, suggesting that the number of children present in violent homes is considerable greater. These numbers indicate that more than 200,000 children witness violence within the home each year (Catalano, 2012; U.S. Department of Justice, December 19, 2007).

While the information on victims is more regularly recorded by law enforcement, social workers, educators, and health care professionals as required by law, researchers still have difficulty gaining access to children who are considered traumatized, fragile, or too young to be interviewed (Øverlien, 2010). For child witnesses to violence, this phenomenon is further compounded as witnesses are often circumstantial in cases of violence and remain unreported. Consequently, researchers often rely solely on the reports of caregivers in the gathering of data and information. This presents complications as reports of domestic violence (including child maltreatment) from parents and family members are typically difficult to obtain and are often inconsistent. Furthermore, the caregivers' unwillingness to disclose family matters can further complicate the research as the reliability and validity of the data, as those data may have limited accuracy as caregivers are subject to underreporting their family problems for a number of reasons (i.e., protect the child or aggressor, avoid legal involvement, etc.) (Holden, 2003; Holt et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, the voices of such witnesses are important as research indicates that domestic and intimate partner violence significantly touches the lives of all persons living in the home. It is an inescapable experience, particularly for children, who become entangled in the

abusive family system (Buckley et al., 2007; Mohr, Lutz, Fantuzzo, & Perry, 2000). Much like direct victims of violence, children who witness violence experience significant emotional distress which may interfere with healthy development. A 1998 qualitative study on the children's exposure to domestic violence revealed that as a whole, children marginalized their exposure to violence (specifically domestic violence). The researcher in this study interviewed 14 children between the ages of 10 and 13 who were recruited from the domestic abuse and community awareness programs in Minneapolis. Through the qualitative interviews in this study, the researcher found that the children generally emphasized the consequences of the violence (such as strained family relationships and moving to shelters or safe-houses) over their perception or discussion of the violence (Peled, 1998). The children in this study reported a marked change in their perception of family dynamics and routines following the first episode of violence, which may have impacted the child's recollection of subsequent violent episodes. This indicates that the child's initial experience of violence is the transformational event which in turn shapes their perception of the violence (Peled, 1998).

According to developmental theory, children must successfully master one developmental task or phase before they can effectively move on to the next stage (Newman & Newman, 2014). Significant trauma during a developmental phase may result in stagnation or even regression to an earlier phase (Trickey, Siddaway, Meiser-Stedman, Serpell, & Field, 2012). For example, the fear brought on by witnessing a violent act may result in a young child (age 6) regressing to bedwetting or daytime accidents. School age children face increased complications in development as they are faced with compounded developmental tasks, as they must also adapt to school environments and the influence of peer relationships. During middle childhood and early adolescence (ages 10 – 14), children are developing cognitive and social

skills that are crucial to later life stages and successful independence. The cognitive development during this phase leads to complex cognitive skill expansion and intricate strategies for problem solving. These cognitive abilities are then applied to the school-related domains including academic and social platforms (Newman & Newman, 2014). Successful progression during this phase can lead to increased capacity for self-evaluation, social cooperation, and peer participation, while delayed or underdeveloped growth may lead to isolation, inability to regulate affect and emotions, and consequential behavioral and social difficulties (van Batenburg-Eddes & Jolles, 2013).

Exposure to violence shapes the way in which children view the world around them. It influences their concepts about the meaning of life, their hopes for the future, and their overall moral development (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). In order to better mediate the impact of the violence on children, researchers have sought to gain a better understanding of the ways in which violence is evident in the children's lives (Osofsky, 2003). While children experience violence in multiple settings including home, schools, and community, a large fraction of recent research has focused on the impact of domestic violence (including intimate partner violence) on children. Quantitative studies have looked at the presence of children in homes where domestic violence is present (Catalano, 2012), the negative outcomes for children exposed to domestic violence (both as witness and victim) (Sousa et al., 2011), and the risk and protective factors for children exposed to domestic violence (Holden, 2003). Qualitative studies, on the other hand, seek to report how the children experience domestic violence and the general themes present in their lives (Buckley et al., 2007; Øverlien, 2012; Peled, 1998).

Assuming that children experience multiple realities of violence within the home, Overlien (2012) used qualitative methods to gather information about children living in domestic

violence shelters in Norway. This study used a narrative approach consisting in the form of individual interviews with 22 children. The children were asked to narrate about their future with a generalized focus on their life expectations. The results of this study indicate that children who have been exposed to domestic violence focus a great deal on the future and change in their lives. They discuss creating a “happy” or “good” life which constitutes the ordinary life for most children (not exposed to domestic violence). The researchers also indicated that most children focus more on their resilience and ability to live a “different” life, than one mired in the hardships they had previously endured.

In 2003, Wolf et al. conducted a meta-analysis of 41 studies on children's exposure to domestic violence, focusing primarily on children as witnesses to the violence. The analysis also examined the moderating roles of gender, age and developmental level of the children in the studies. Results revealed first of all that children who witness violence experience extreme distress resulting in both externalizing and internalizing symptoms which impair their functioning. Data initially suggested that school-age children experience the most significant impact to their developmental functioning; however, further analysis indicated that the samples used for the studies were biased and may have resulted in a misleading interpretation. Additional exploration found no significant effect due to developmental moderators, noting that the disparity in the methodology and variability in sampling created difficulty in examining these factors.

A significant issue in the research of children who witness violence can be attributed to a lack of continuity in the terminology. The lack of consistent and agreed upon vocabulary hinders a comprehensive understanding of the extent and range of children's exposure to violence (Holden, 2003) and poses interpretive challenges for researchers. For example, while some

research loosely refers to domestic violence as aggression between adult caregivers (Buckley et al., 2007; Koenen, Moffitt, Caspi, Taylor, & Purcell, 2003), other studies use the term to encompass more dimensions of violence that occur within the home such as child abuse, intimate-partner violence, and sibling aggression (Holden, 2003; Lepistö et al., 2011; Van Horn & Lieberman, 2011). Similarly, the terms “exposure” and “witness” are sometimes used interchangeably (Kracke, 2001; Sousa et al., 2011; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003), while in other research, “exposure” also includes other roles within the spectrum of violence such as victim and indirect victim (Holt et al., 2008; Saunders, 2003).

### **Children as Perpetrators**

Sensational stories of school shootings and children killing other children often create the impression that childhood violence is on the rise. As these stories gain public awareness, educators, social workers, and law enforcement are summoned to respond to the public's generalized fear that more and more children are becoming violent criminals (Dahlberg & Potter, 2001). Current research on the topic of youth violence, however, actually shows that aggression and violence perpetrated by minors has been on the decline (Finkelhor, 2013; Kann et al., 2014). Among youth ages 12 – 17, violent victimizations at school dropped by an estimated 48% between the years of 2007 and 2010. Although less significant, physical fighting was also noted to decrease by 7% overall and by 3% on school property between the years of 2007 and 2011 (Finkelhor, 2013).

Researchers have long attempted to examine the nature and causes of youth offending and violence. Tolan and Guerra (1994) identified four main categories of violent offending in juveniles based on the causes of the violence: (a) situational violence which is shaped by sociological factors such as community norms, access to weapons, poverty, substance abuse,

etc.; (b) interpersonal violence which is influenced by the relationships with family members, peers and society; (c) predatory violence which relates to antisocial and criminal acts aimed at personal gain; and (d) psychopathological violence which is characterized by patterns of violence related to psychological trauma or neurological factors (Tolan & Guerra, 1994).

Dahlberg, Lloyd, and Potter (2001), on the other hand, focus on the social and developmental context of youth violence within the complex schema of the person and environment interaction. In early childhood, the primary influence of the youth rests on the family. Children in this phase of development develop behaviors based on the modeling of parents and the physical, verbal, and emotional responsiveness of the parents. While somewhat dependent on the development in early childhood, development in adolescence is influenced highly by peer relations. With peers as the primary model, negative peer influence and interaction can lead to delinquent, aggressive, and criminal behavior. Throughout each of the developmental phases, moderating factors such as poverty, exposure to community violence, transience, and educational dynamics further influence a child's risk of acting out violently. According to this view, adolescents are subject to an increased number of external influences, thus setting them at higher risk for engaging in risky and/or violence behavior.

A phenomenon known in the field of criminology as the *age-crime curve* suggests that violence follows a somewhat predictable rate within a population depending upon a child's youthful offending. The age-crime curve suggests that criminal offending and violence rises slowly during childhood and increases rapidly during adolescence, following a somewhat consistent curve depending on the individual's offending rates. In other words, a child who engages in multiple criminal and aggressive acts as a youth will experience an increase in such behavior in adolescence proportional to a similar increase for a child who engaged in only



minimal aggression and violence (Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003; Walker, Bowen, & Brown, 2013). Some researchers who have conducted surveys of aggressive acts contradict the age-crime curve, noting that aggression peaks at age 10 and decreases in adolescence (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariepy, 1989; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). However, criminal pervasiveness (including violence) for both official and self-report data follows a trajectory similar to the age-crime curve (Walker et al., 2013).

### **Bullying**

As opposed to family or community violence, students are more likely to experience multiple roles in bullying. Loosely defined, bullying comprises a set of physical and psychological behaviors by a more powerful youth(s) targeted at a perceived weaker youth(s) and often repeated over time (Baldry, 2003; Hansen, Steenberg, Palic, & Elklit, 2012; Juvonen & Graham, 2014; J. Wang et al., 2009a). Key elements of bullying include intentional acts, an imbalance of power, and repetition (Orpinas & Horne, 2006). In a 2009 study of the prevalence of bullying, researchers found that children experienced the dual role of bully and victim at nearly twice the rate of either role separately (J. Wang et al., 2009a). Witnessing bullying was not addressed in this study, however, possibly leaving out a large population impacted by bullying behaviors.

Like other forms of violence, peer violence in the form of bullying has detrimental impacts on children both immediately and in the long term. Victims of bullying frequently experience depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and academic problems (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010; Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006). The bullies themselves often suffer from low self-esteem, unhealthy relationships, unstable environments, and inadequate coping skills (Eaton et al., 2006; Orpinas & Horne, 2006), and are

at an increased risk of substance use, academic failure, and engaging in future aggressive and criminal behavior (Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004).

As a form of violence and aggression, bullying has several important features which distinguish it from other forms of violence. Traditionally, bullying is viewed as an issue of childhood, and school campuses are the primary location of bullying episodes. Incidents of bullying (both perpetration and victimization) reportedly peak during middle school years and then decrease as the children progress through adolescence (Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2003; J. Wang et al., 2009a). Children generally spend an average of 8.5 hours in school each day, and the homogeneous and contained environment sets the ideal stage for children to establish a subversive hierarchy. For middle school children, in particular, the shift of power and roles becomes a crucial component of daily interaction as they move into the developmental phase which initiates separation from parents and increased reliance upon a peer group (M. Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Consequently, research indicates that children report bullying at higher rates than any other form of violence. A survey of 346 middle school students in America revealed that 83% of the students considered bullying to be a problem (Pergolizzi et al., 2011).

In 2003, researchers in the field of education used a qualitative approach to better understand children's beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes on school violence and bullying. These researchers found that previous studies on school violence were constructed on the information and perceptions of educational administrators and school faculty, and as a result, they failed to focus on the experience of the students. The researchers then utilized repeated focus groups with 82 students in 10 northeast middle and high school settings. A key finding of this study was that students have a narrow definition of school violence which does not account for the nuances of

emotional and psychological violence. While the students could clearly identify the physical violence present at the school by the specific episodes, they expressed more concern over the daily impact of the emotional and psychological violence (including bullying) which often served as a precursor for physical violence. The researchers found that the students often struggled with a clear definition of violence even though they discussed seeing it daily within the school environment. Additionally, this study indicated that the middle school students believed that the teachers and administrators at their schools only recognized and addressed the physical definition of violence, and therefore, permitted the less overt forms of violence (such as psychological bullying and intimidation) to occur without consequences or intervention (Haselswerdt & Lenhardt, 2003).

To examine how children understand bullying within the context of their lives, researchers have also analyzed the children's perceived role of bullying compared to the language and definitions of bullying. One study in 2008 (Vaillancourt et al.) looked at a sample of 8-18 year olds who were separated into two groups. One group was asked to specify their involvement in bullying according to their own definition of bullying, while the other group was given a standard definition to indicate their involvement. Results of the study showed that the group who received the definition reported lower rates of involvement with bullying. When the group who was not given a definition was asked to define bullying, they generally focused on overt acts and behaviors rather than specific criteria (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). The content analysis performed in this study revealed four major themes of bullying: (a) power imbalance, (b) repetition, (c) intentionality, and (d) negative behavior. Furthermore, the negative behaviors (including aggression) were noted more significantly for boys than girls, which the researchers attribute to the children's lived experiences of bullying. A similar study of 13 year olds in

Sweden asked the participants to define bullying within a relationship and discuss what led to the cessation of the bullying. The researchers found little difference in the ways in which the bullying stopped regardless of gender, age, and frequency. Like the Vaillancourt study, the participants discussed the physical, verbal, and indirect behaviors of bullying, but failed to address conditions such as the power imbalance and repetition (Frisén, Holmqvist, & Oscarsson, 2008).

Hopkins et al. (2013) interviewed 20 adolescents (ages 11 – 17) in the United Kingdom to examine how children define bullying and differentiate it from other forms of violence. The researchers found that the subjects generally constructed their definition of bullying by the behaviors involved and their perception of these behaviors. More specifically, the subjects defined bullying by the intended harmful acts, while aggression was defined by the feelings of anger associated with reactive behaviors. The researchers identified three main themes of bullying: (a) both physical and verbal negative interactions, (b) control of behavior, and (c) the perception of the event depended upon the perceived intent of the behavior. These results suggest that children may have a misconstrued understanding of bullying which includes highly varied conditions of perceived aggression and violence. Consequently, the information provided to researchers based on the academic definition of bullying may vary greatly from the information offered by the children (Hopkins et al., 2013).

Over the past ten years, bullying has gained noteworthy attention at the national level. In 2010, the CDC released statistics of the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) which indicated that 20% of all students had experienced some form of bullying on school property within the past year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2010). In response to the prevalence of bullying, 45 states have established laws on bullying behavior and in 2010, the

U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) implemented regulations for all schools and districts (Children's Safety Network, 2011). Such regulations forced schools to move beyond the rudimentary bullying intervention techniques and abolish any environment which may be hostile or harmful (National Association of School Psychologists, 2012). By requiring schools to do more to ensure a safe environment, recognition of bullying behavior has increased markedly within the public school system and awareness among students has equally risen.

### **Conceptual Framework**

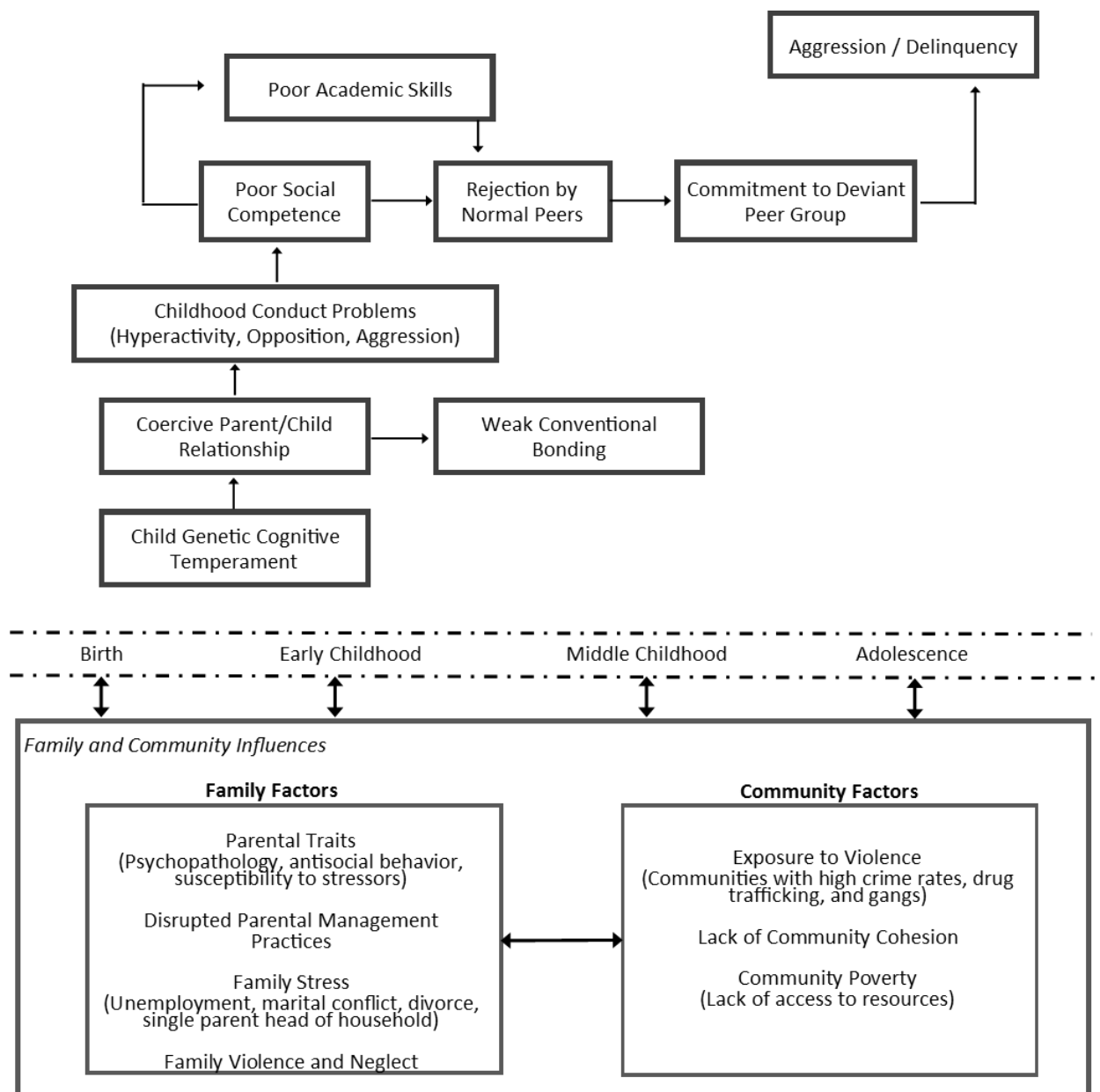
The conceptual framework used in this study has four components: 1) social interactional aspects explaining the importance of looking for children's perceptions toward violence, 2) the impact of moral dilemmas that may create multiple views toward interpersonal violence, 3) use of narrative approach that children know how to express violence experience, and 4) resilience that may increase children's protective power against future violent behaviors. In these, first, the Social Interactional Model links the various explanations of how children's perception can be influenced by their immediate environment.

### **Social Interaction: The Link**

Developed initially by Horne, Norsworthy, Forehand, and Frame in 1991, the Social Interactional Model establishes a contextual framework for the developmental aspects found in of the presence of aggression and violence with children, whether being victims or perpetrators, having direct or indirect experiences, and/or witnessing violence or participating in violent acts. All these action-oriented concepts (exposure, victimization, witnessing, bullying) which have been illustrated in previous research cited earlier, can be connected to children's developmental

stages described in this framework. This connection aligns well with the constructs of social interactions from individual to family to social dimensions, in conjunction with children's learning (see Figure 3). This framework also incorporates the interaction of significant milestones in the development of aggression, the child's developmental level, the family and community influences. In the development of aggression, both internal and external factors are considered for children who develop aggressive and violent behaviors. For example, a highly impulsive child who is easily distracted may face significant challenges in school, leading to academic failures. Each of these characteristics moves the child further through the progression of delinquency and aggression. Concurrently, a child who is transitioning from middle childhood to adolescence who is pursuing acceptance from peers may seek out an alternative peer group.

The Social Interactional Model also accounts for family and community influences on the child. Within the family, a child who lives in a home where intimate partner violence is present is not only exposed to an increased amount of violence, but may also experience an erratic relationship with parents or caregivers. Children living in impoverished communities and attending sub-standard schools regularly have limited access to resources which creates additional risks for violent or aggressive behaviors. According to the Social Interactional Model, interventions at any level of the model can reduce the negative influences which progress a child through the development of aggression. For example, teaching children social skills and behavior management may decrease their conduct problems in school and increase academic success. This in turn encourages more positive peer interactions and better social adjustment (Horne & Sayer, 1991; Orpinas & Horne, 2006).

**Figure 3 Social Interactional Model**

Source: Orpinas &amp; Horne, 2006

Based on the Social Interactional model, the violence present in children's lives can be grouped into four categories: 1) personal violence, 2) interpersonal (peer) violence, 3) family

violence, and 4) community violence. These categories address the types of violence present in children's lives with consideration for the influencing developmental and external factors.

Furthermore, as the progression of this model demonstrated, this model addresses the relationship of positive/negative influences on positive/negative outcomes for the child.

### **Violence and the Moral Dilemma: The Value**

As children enter early adolescence, the ways in which they think about and address a moral dilemma change rather drastically. In fact, many theorists consider moral development to be the most significant aspect of adolescent development (Steinberg & Steinberg, 2010). Developed by Lawrence Kohlberg, moral development theory is separated into three distinct levels focused on the reasoning used to make moral decisions. According to Kohlberg, pre-conventional moral reasoning is dominant during childhood and is characterized by an external locus of events. This is the phase of obedience and punishment, where moral decisions are based on the punishment or reward associated with the action. Conventional morality, which develops during adolescence and often remains through adulthood, is focused on justice and judgment as determined by the needs of influential groups such as peer groups, family, society, and culture. Decisions made during this phase of moral development are generally based on how the individual will be perceived by others for acting in a certain way. Conventional moral reasoning maintains that when the individual fulfills their roles and obligations (behaves dutifully), they will receive the approval of others and help maintain the social order of the larger group. The final level, post-conventional morality, is considered a relatively rare level of reasoning. In this phase, justice and decisions are based on ethical principles determined by the individual. Generally, the laws of society are followed unless these laws violate a moral principle. This



phase is characterized by reciprocity, universality, consistency, and fairness (M. Green & Piel, 2002; Steinberg & Steinberg, 2010).

Based on Kohlberg's theory, the moral development of middle school children vacillates between the perceived "right" or "wrong" and how decisions will be seen by others. The perceived "right" or "wrong" is subject to interpretation based on the individual and the group. For example, in a home where intimate partner violence is prevalent, a brother hitting his sister may not be perceived as "wrong". For the children entering the conventional phase of development, morality will be based on the society (often the peer group) which the child is in. As such, in a peer environment where physical power is applauded, a child may enforce physical dominance in the form of aggression. A 1994 study of 108 subjects between the ages of eight and twelve revealed that children who had been exposed to violence recognized social norms similar to children who reported no exposure to violence (Astor, 1994b). However, the children who had been exposed to violence were significantly more likely to approve of provoked violence in response to name calling and family relationships. Subjects in this study were asked to view situations of provoked and unprovoked violence and then respond to several open ended questions which focused on moral reasoning. Results of this study indicated that the majority of children viewed unprovoked violence as a violation of the social norms, but that children exposed to violence considered "hitting back" a justified behavior (Astor, 1994b).

As Holt, Buckley, and Whelan (2008) note, violence is not a one-dimensional phenomenon which can be easily contained and defined. Rather, multiple forms of violence are often present in a child's life and examining the co-occurrence of these along with the variability in exposure are crucial in understanding the differential impact on a child's life. While health care professionals, social workers, educators, and policy makers worry that exposure to violence

will obstruct a child's development, many children who encounter violence and other adversities adjust well despite these significant obstacles (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Brooks, 2006; Masten, 2011; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012a). The first step toward understanding children's experience of violence is to learn how they define and give meaning to this experience as it can influence their ability to cope.

### **Children's Written Narratives on Violence: The Media of Expression**

Letter writing, storytelling, and written narratives have long been established as an effective method of communicating thoughts and feelings (Gortner, Rude, & Pennebaker, 2006; Gross, 1998; James & Owens, 2005; Pennebaker, 2012; Slivinske & Slivinske, 2014). Research indicates that writing not only reflects an individual's thinking and understanding but also sheds light on the emotional infrastructure connected to the written cognitive activity. In fact, a well-organized writing assignment can illuminate the way in which beliefs and behaviors shape the individual's reasoning (Hudd, Bronson, & Bronson, 2007; Zinsser, 1988). Writing about an emotional or stressful topic, in particular, serves to help the author make sense of an incident and generally leads to increased self-disclosure (Brewin & Lennard, 1999; Smyth, Hockemeyer, & Tulloch, 2008).

Much of the research to date on children's written narratives is grounded in the therapeutic effectiveness of writing. In the narrative therapeutic approach, change is sought through the exploration of how written language is used to formulate problems. The written samples are the instrumental tool for understanding the client and for constructing change (Etchison & Kleist, 2000). Examining the effectiveness of this technique, one study found that the use of narratives was helpful in reducing the ongoing parent-child conflict in six families with 8 – 17 year olds (Besa, 1994); however, much like other research involving children, the

focus of the intervention was primarily on the parents. Similarly, a group of researchers used an ethnographic approach to examine the family's experience with a narrative approach. Presenting issues in this study were varied and included issues of family violence, oppositional behaviors, divorce, and death. Conclusions indicated that the families believed the narrative therapy was instrumental in the endeavor to change (O'Connor, Meakes, Pickering, & Schuman, 1997).

While a great deal of research has been done to evaluate the narrative writing technique, little has been focused specifically on the writing samples of the children. Studies of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), domestic violence, and other social issues have traditionally focused on adult narratives, (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Gortner et al., 2006; Smyth et al., 2008; Vromans & Schweitzer, 2011), thus leaving a significant gap in the literature on children's views. Furthermore, research which examines children's writings on the topic of violence or aggression is particularly scant.

In 2004, Zimmerman and a team of researchers looked at how children understand the causes of violence by examining their assigned written essays. Subjects in this study were the middle school participants in the "*Do the Write Thing*" Challenge in Flint, Michigan, which encourages children to write about violence using directive prompts. While this research focused on how children view the origins of violence within their lives, it did not address how they define or make meaning of their experience. Another study, in South Australia, used note writing assignments to examine female peer conflicts. In this research, 39 girls between the ages of fifteen and sixteen were asked to write letters (which mimicked a note to a peer) about conflicts with other girls. Results of this study revealed that the narrative methodology was effective in producing detailed information related to the girls' victimization and ways in which they resolved the peer conflict (James & Owens, 2005).

As students, especially in the middle school years, are accustomed to writing as a daily form of expression (in academic assignments and personal communication), it stands to reason that their written assignments offer a unique platform to examine the cognitive and emotional processes associated with any given topic. Written narratives also offer an alternative method for gathering direct information from children. As seen in the research of James and Owens (2005), the information contained in the written work of children is a very rich and valuable resource to understanding the way in which a child perceives a situation or event.

### **Resilience in Healthy Coping: The Desired Outcome**

Despite exposure to violence, whether direct or indirect, many children adapt well to their life circumstances; a phenomenon of great interest to many social workers. This ability to cope with obvious adversities, known as resilience, has been explored and recorded in the sociological and biomedical research for decades (Garmezy, 1971; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1985). By focusing on the strengths rather than deficits, reliance theory seeks to understand healthy development within the context of vulnerability (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012b). The early research in resilience targeted the verifiable occurrence of children who thrive under adversity. This exhaustive counting and recording of the factors influencing the lives of children with identified risk led to the development of the basal models which identified the core protective and risk factors (Hetherington & Blechman, 1996; Masten & Obradović, 2006). While the concepts of protective and risk factors have expanded and changed, these models have been corroborated over time and are consistently used within resilience research.

In the 1980's, the research on resilience made a significant shift toward gaining a better understanding of the processes which influence the varying range of responses to vulnerability and risks (Goldstein & Brooks, 2013). While the early research focused on a few identifiable risks such as abject poverty, cognitive delays, and developmental difficulties, researchers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century began to recognize that resilience was effected by the interaction of multiple processes across the lifespan. As the world has transformed to a more pressure-filled, technology-dependent environment the study of resilience has increased rapidly and radically. Researchers began to struggle to keep up with the vast number of children exposed to multiple adversities which had not been studied in the early years. Understanding that no child is immune to risks, much of resilience research now aims to promote competence in all children by equipping them with the knowledge and skills to deal with life stressors (Masten, 2006).

In recent years, scientists and scholars have focused the study of resilience more exclusively on understanding of the complex adaptive systems which establish and define resilience in children. Contemporary research focuses on a dynamic systems model which accounts for the interaction of the child's development with the fluid and transforming adaptive systems (Overton, 2013; Schoon, 2012). By incorporating concepts from numerous systems theories (developments, ecological, family, and biological), this model accounts for the influence of societal, cultural, familial, environmental, ecological, and biological factors which are constantly changing throughout the lifespan. Resilience therefore is viewed as an ever-changing process which fluctuates and adjusts as opposed to a static or linear relationship between protective factors and vulnerabilities. Consequently, the resilience of a child will vary throughout the lifespan as the ability to adapt will be dispersed over multiple interacting systems (Masten, 2014; Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013).

Defining resilience involves consideration of the interaction of risks, vulnerabilities, or adversity with a positive or favorable outcome generally influenced by protective or buffering factors. Traditional definitions of resilience consider patterns of positive adjustment within the context of adversity and focus on a theoretical equation which balances these polarities (Hetherington & Blechman, 1996; Luthar, 2003). The influence of more recent research, however, has led to a series of definitions of resilience which include a shift from thriving *despite* identifiable risks to thriving *on* the identifiable risks or challenges (Goldstein & Brooks, 2012; Masten, 2014). Within both frameworks, the definition of resilience requires two fundamental inferences: (a) the child is thriving and (b) the child has been exposed to a significant risk or adversity (Luthar et al., 2000; Luthar, 2003; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Based on the literature, the operational definition of resilience for this research is the ability of the youth to develop positive outcomes within the context of threatening circumstances or obvious adversity (Goldstein & Brooks, 2012; Luthar, 2003; Masten, 2014; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012b).

The concept of resilience is an interpretive and relative construct dependent on protective factors and discernible risks. Protective factors include individual personality and characteristics, temperament, self-concept, community supports, family conditions, and pertinent cultural and developmental factors (Masten, 2011). Increasing the protective factors in children's lives is considered vital in increasing their coping skills and resiliency. The risks, however, are loosely defined as dangers or threats to the normal development of the individual (Brooks, 2006; Masten, 2011). Researchers have examined risks including developmental and biological deficits (Curtis & Cicchetti, 2003; Rutter, 2002), cognitive and emotional disabilities

(Murray, 2003; Werner & Smith, 2001), and environmental factors such as poverty and abject circumstances (Ong, Bergeman, & Boker, 2009; Yeung, Arewasikporn, & Zautra, 2012).

## **Summary of Chapter 2**

In the field of social work, researchers and professionals strive to better understand and more effectively intervene with vulnerable and marginalized populations. Looking at the developmental and environmental factors outlined in the Social Interaction Model, it is clear that children, particularly pre- and early adolescent children, are among this vulnerable population. Recognizing the ways in which their experience is shaped by the interaction of their cognitive, emotional, and moral development is critical to better understanding how they make sense of the world around them. And yet, gathering quality information directly from children is a complicated and often problematic task. The written works of children, however, offer a unique and powerful agent for exploring their perceptions and experiences which can in turn, better inform the prevention and intervention measures which enhance the resiliency in children.

As with the research on bullying, children are likely to ascribe different meanings to violence than do researchers or professionals, particularly within the context of their daily lives. The vast majority of the research on children and violence exists within a narrow context of a particular form of violence (i.e., domestic violence or bullying), the child's specific role within the violence, or a limited setting (i.e. shelters or refuges) and only limited qualitative data has been obtained on the impact of violence within the general population. Collecting information and data from a more generalized non-clinical population (such as schools) with an open-ended focus on violence can increase our understanding of the many themes of violence present within children's lives. Furthermore, allowing children a medium to express their perception and experience of violence can increase our knowledge of multiple roles within the violence, poly-

victimization, and demographic or regional differences in violence. Gathering and synthesizing this information, therefore, is critical to reducing risk factors and increasing the protective factors in the lives of children.

Despite the plethora of research on children and violence, little is still known about children's direct encounters with violence and how they make sense of the violence within their worlds. Methodological problems, especially in the sampling and reporting of subjects, have plagued the research and resulted in only limited information from the children themselves. A lack of clear and consistent terminology and taxonomy has resulted in both overlaps and significant gaps within the research. Developing a unified definition of violence based on information gleaned from the children is essential in formulating prevention and intervention strategies necessitated by a world in which violence has become a normalized experience.



### Chapter 3

#### METHODS

This study examined the submissions collected by the “*Do the Write Thing*” Challenge, a local chapter of a national writing competition, in Region V of Southeast Texas in 2014-2015 school year, as the primary data source. To enter the contest, participants were encouraged by their teachers to submit their writing in the form of essay, poem, or song. Since the vast majority of submissions were in an essay format, the student submissions will be referred to as *essays* throughout this research. By responding to the questions outlined in the competition, students have the opportunity to communicate their personal experience and viewpoint related to violence. “*Do the Write Thing*” empowers students to speak out about violence in a safe and up-front manner (Caliber Associates, November, 2004). The information in these essays provides rich data and information which can be analyzed for themes and issues related directly to the youth’s perspective.

#### **Study Setting**

The “*Do the Write Thing*” (DtWT) Challenge is the hallmark initiative of the National Campaign to Stop Violence. In 1996, the National Campaign to Stop Violence (NCSV) was established by bringing together business, community, and government leaders to focus efforts on reducing youth violence in society. Founders of this campaign sought to understand the issue of youth violence as seen through the eyes of the children involved by implementing the “*Do the Write Thing*” Challenge in schools (Callister, March 11, 2014) . The DtWT challenge encourages middle school students to explore issues of violence and write about its impact on their lives. DtWT encourages students to engage in candid and open discussions in the classroom and then

explore the causes and effect of violence in their written word. In the written essays, students respond to three essential questions:

- How has violence affected my life?
- What are the causes of violence?
- What can I do to reduce violence?

(National Campaign to Stop Violence, 2013)

A panel of volunteer judges, recruited and trained by the local DtWT committee, review the essays. Writings are evaluated on the responsive and dynamic content of the material rather than the format and structure. Outstanding students are then named the School Ambassadors, and their essays are evaluated at the regional level. Each region selects one boy and one girl as its National Ambassadors who are invited to Washington DC for an annual National Recognition Week designed to honor the students' commitment to reducing violence. Finally, the essays submitted by each National Ambassador are compiled in a book which is published by the NCSV and placed in the Library of Congress. During the 2012 – 2013 school year, thirty communities across the nation participated in the DtWT Challenge with an estimated 210,000 essays submitted (Callister, March 11, 2014; National Campaign to Stop Violence, 2013).

While the DtWT program aims to address the issues of violence as related to the children's perspective by raising awareness and increasing discussion, little has been done with the empirical information gathered from the essays. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one study of 389 submitted DtWT essays in Flint, Michigan (Zimmerman et al., 2004), explored the causes of violence identified in the children's essays. The results of this research found that the youth identify peer factors, societal factors, individual factors, and family factors as the most common causes of violence in their lives. These findings were consistent with factors identified

by researchers in previous studies, but the research shed little light on the children's meaning, perceptions, and lived experiences of violence.

The Region V site of the DtWT Challenge in Texas serves twenty middle schools from thirteen districts in Southeast Texas, including private and charter schools. The Honorable Judge Randy Shelton serves as the District Chair and supervises the coordination of services and essay collection for this site. Student information is collected by the District Coordinator, and all essays are de-identified in order to maintain anonymity in the evaluation process. That anonymity is preserved in this research as this secondary data is evaluated for this research project. This study was approved by the University of Houston Institutional Review Board (IRB), Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (Protocol Number: 14355-01; see Attachment A).

### **Specific Aims**

Using the DtWT data from in middle schools in Jefferson County, Texas (n=1,165 essays), this research pursued the following specific aims:

1. Explore the elements and features of events which children identify as violence.
2. Develop a nuanced understanding of the nature and magnitude of how children define and experience violence.
3. Increase the understanding of the meanings that children ascribe to their exposure to violence.

## Research Questions

A qualitative secondary data analysis was used to explore the content of the essays submitted by the youth in Jefferson County, Texas, during the 2014-15 school year. In the essays, the students were prompted (with the three questions noted earlier) to write about their exposure to violence, the types of violence to which they are exposed, their role in the violence (victim, perpetrator, witness), and possible causes and solutions to violence. From this dataset, the researcher pursued three overarching research questions:

1. What are the dimensions of violence present in the children's written narratives?
2. How do children define violence within the context of their everyday life?
3. What meanings do children ascribe to their experience of violence?

Since qualitative data were analyzed, dimensions were operationalized in terms of types of violence, the child's role in the violence act (such as being a victim, perpetrator, bystander, or indirect hearsay, etc.), external factors present in the essays (such as police involvement, weapons, drugs, etc.), and protective factors which mitigate the harmful effects of exposure to violence. As the Social Interactional Model outlines, the types of violence are grouped into four categories: 1) personal violence, 2) interpersonal violence, 3) family violence, and 4) community violence. A fifth category (media) was added to this model to address the influence of media and technology on children. The media category includes exposure to violence from television, movies, internet, video games, and social media. In order to gain a better understanding of these dimensions in terms of the children who are experiencing them, similarities and differences between demographic groups were also explored including gender, grade level, district, minority schools and low-income schools. Only limited data was available for the participating students (age, gender, grade-level), but demographic information for schools on the whole is available for

all public schools. Therefore, information about socioeconomic status and racial breakdown was determined by the overall school statistics, rather than the individual participants. Research indicates that children may be at greater or lesser risk depending on subgroups such as low-income status, gender, and age, and exploring the interaction of the dimensions with these subgroups served to illuminate any differences (Buckner, Beardslee, & Bassuk, 2004; Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001).

Since research questions 2 and 3 (RQ2 and RQ3) both addressed the ways in which children find meaning in the violence within their lives, these two questions were examined together. In order to examine the definitions which children assign to violence, essays were explored according to behavioral content, societal context, emotional content, roles, persons/entities involved, and perceived consequences. When looking at meanings, areas of exploration included emotional factors, behavioral factors, relationships, events, and protective/risk factors.

### **Sample: Region V Contestants**

Using the secondary data available from the DtWT Challenge in Region V of Texas for the 2014-15 school year, this research project explored significant issues of violence as seen or perceived by children through their writing. Region V consists of 36 separate school districts and all middle schools (public, private, and charter) in Region V were invited to participate in the DtWT Challenge. Situated in the southeast corner of Texas and bordering on Louisiana, Region V has districts as large as 20,000 students (K-12) and as small as 179 students (K-12). In order to encourage participation by each school district, the Regional Chairperson and Primary Investigator met with the superintendents of the Region V schools to discuss and encourage participation. Teacher packets were then made available to all participating schools which included instructions for participation (see Attachment B), classroom discussion prompts, and

parent permission forms. Prior to the essay writing, teachers were encouraged to engage the students in a classroom discussion on the meaning of violence within the context of their (the student's) lives. Students then began the writing portion of the assignment and were encouraged to respond to all three prompts in their writing.

The essays were collected from participating schools by the Regional Coordinator of the DtWT Challenge and are the property of the DtWT Challenge. During the 2014 – 2015 school year, thirteen schools from nine school districts in Region V participated in the challenge. A total of 1,165 essays ( $n = 1,165$ ) were submitted with a parent consent form (Attachment D). Once submitted to the school, the essays were labeled according to the school and district, and basic demographic information (gender, age, grade-level, and race/ethnicity) was recorded for the participating essays. To protect anonymity, personal identifiers were removed and each essay was labeled with an Identification Number which grouped the essays according to district, school, and teacher. Essays which included a signed permission slip were then submitted to the DtWT Coordinator without revisions or grading by the classroom teacher. The information in these essays provided data and material which was then analyzed for themes and issues related to the children's perspective toward violence.

## **Methods**

By using primarily qualitative methods, this research explored the children's experiences through their written essays about violence, and examined the meanings that these children assigned to the topic of violence. For the purpose of this study, thematic analysis was used to investigate shared themes within the data. Thematic analysis is a method generally used within the social sciences to identify and analyze patterns within a data set and is distinguished by its flexibility (Boyatzis, 1998). While Braun and Clark (2006) contend that thematic analysis is an

autonomous method, most researchers characterize it as a process which is maximized when used along with other qualitative methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Furthermore, thematic analysis allows the researcher to employ both manifest-content analysis and latent content analysis at the same time, as proposed for this study. First, this study used pilot data from the previous school year (2013-2014) to inform the study directions. Then, the analyses of manifest and latent contents were conducted for the 2014-2015 data. Illustrative quotes from the essays are used as examples throughout both the presentation of the methods and the results. Many of the essays contained spelling and grammar errors which were not modified or identified when included in these sections.

### **Pilot Exploration**

In an effort to better understand the overall content and quality of the data, the researcher engaged in a sample pilot study of the DtWT data in the previous school year (2013-2014). At the time of the 2013-2014 grading, 22 volunteers completed a general content analysis of each essay along with the grading rubric for the contest. The grading rubric and content analysis were separate forms, however, in order to simplify the process, these forms were copied (front and back) on the same page. Volunteers were undergraduate college students at Lamar University, and the majority of the students were majoring in social work or criminal justice. These students were trained on information, definitions, and application using the content analysis form (see Attachment B) and multiple examples were provided. Information gathered from the content analysis forms was entered into a database and outstanding themes were assessed for each school and district.

Results of this content analysis revealed that bullying was the most commonly reported form of violence in the combined sample. Overall, bullying was mentioned in 42% of the

essays, and at one school, bullying was noted in over 64% of the essays. It was also noted that the majority of the essays that mentioned bullying referred to the bullying of peers (which places the participant in the role of witness to the bullying). The actual definition and description of bullying, however, was highly varied among the essays, and as discussed below, may have highly different meanings in the context of the students' lives.

A significant concern with these content results lies in the form used to gather the content information. In an attempt to thoroughly examine the role of the child within a wide context of violence, the form created was very detailed and exhaustive (see Attachment B). Many of the terms used may have been misinterpreted by the volunteers or were not adequately defined given the volunteers' knowledge base. For example, many volunteers identified that the essay addressed "child abuse" by a peer. The confusing content of the document (such as allowing the categorization of child abuse by a peer) along with the minimal training and expertise of the volunteers, may have increased confusion and led to inaccurate recording of the content.

Upon initial review of the essays (a random sample from each school), it was clear that not all essays contained content related to the directive questions. Some essays did not address any of the questions: for example, one essay discussed the symptoms and causes of lung cancer. Other essays responded to only one or two of the directive questions – most commonly omitting how violence has impacted the author's life. Because of these inconsistencies in the essays, it was initially believed that the essays would fall into one of two categories: *topic only* (giving no personal insight or experience) and *content* (with insights and perspectives from the student). In order to reduce the number of essays analyzed for this study, it was determined that essays identified as *topic only* would be omitted from the data set. This coding was completed by the volunteer judges during the grading process for the 2013 – 2014 year.



For the pilot study of the 2013 – 2014 data, the Principal Investigator (PI) selected ten essays from each category (*content* and *topic only*) for further coding and analysis. During transcription, it became evident that while the *topic only* essays might not directly respond to all three directive questions, many of them did contain personal insight and experience from the child author; and therefore, the PI decided to combine the topic only essays with the content essays for analysis. For example, the two following excerpts were taken from two of the essays listed as *topic only*:

“I was told that I would be nothing when I was older or nobody would ever want me. I never let that stuff mess with me because I knew that none of their words were true.”(PS1)

“My brother was bullied just because he is special needs. People called him names. Even when I told my family and the principle. People did not stop bullying him.”(PS2)

When looking at the 2013-2014 essays as a combined sample (n=20), rather than separated by overarching content, a few variables became clear. First of all, most students addressed all three directive questions, thus separating the coding into three distinct categories: personal experience, causes, and solution. Personal experiences, when detailed in the essay, contained the largest amount of data. Students who recounted personal experiences generally devoted at least 75% of the essay to their experience and included very detailed and rich data. On the other hand, personal experiences were the most commonly omitted category in the essays (with students many focusing solely on causes or solutions).

Throughout the essays, bullying was a common theme, yet it appeared to take on multiple meanings. Some students identified bullying as “being picked on” by peers, while others referred to verbal aggression by a parent as bullying. It was noted that the stem of the word “bullying” (all words containing a conjugation of the word) was the most common word used in the essays evaluated. Some form of the word “bullying” appeared 99 times (2.71 weighted percent) while the word “violence” (second most common word) appeared 78 times (2.14 weighted percent). Further exploration is needed to better understand the perception and use of the word bullying.

Results of the pilot study indicated that students who responded to the first prompt (*how has violence affected my life*) were more likely to discuss personal encounters with violence, and therefore offered more data directly related to the research questions. In order to simplify the process for identifying the essays which responded to this prompt, the analysis forms for the following year were modified to include this information. Also, many essays from the same teacher showed similar patterns and themes within the essays and often strayed off-topic. An evaluation of the Teacher Packet revealed discussion prompts that did not encourage direct discussion of violence (i.e. *Do teen celebrity role models influence today's youth to dress provocatively, diet to be thin, drink underage and make poor decisions?*) Modifications to the Teacher Packet for the DtWT competition were suggested for the following year. The pilot study also indicated that students might experience bullying at a higher rate or confuse it with other forms of violence.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Using the data collected directly from the writings of the children in the 2014-2015 school year DtWT contest, this research adhered to the fundamental focus of qualitative research.

Such research is situated in explaining and describing the actions and events which take place within an identified social framework (Neuman, 1994). This study drew from the frameworks of Boyatzis and Krippendorff in which values, attitudes, and beliefs are examined through both an evident and latent perspective (Boyatzis, 1998; Krippendorff, 2012). According to Boyatzis (1998), manifest content analysis (used in Stage 1 of this research) looks at the apparent or evident content within the data; such as frequency of a word or concept. Latent content analysis (Stage 2 of this research), on the other hand, focuses on the underlying features and is more interpretive than manifest content analysis. By combining both approaches of thematic analysis, this research examined the connectedness of significant themes and issues which can provide a framework for practice or further research with children exposed to violence. The thematic analysis further emphasizes the complexities of the subjects and recognizes the depth of multiple views, actions, and realities, while attending to the embedded events and relationships in the data.

### *Stage 1 – Manifest Content Analysis*

Student essays were initially coded by a group of trained volunteers (college students and faculty in social work, criminal justice, education, and nursing) for overarching themes, during the grading process. A total of twenty volunteers participated in the grading session. All submitted essays were labeled and identified by school, grade level, and individual student number, creating a unique identification label for each submission. Volunteer coders/graders were trained by the PI prior to the grading session. A forty-five minute training session was offered to all volunteer graders and included two practice sessions with common essays. The volunteer graders identified the child's role(s) in the violence (victim, perpetrator, witness), which of the directive questions were addressed, and the nature of the violence that is evident in

the essay on the supplied grading form. As with the pilot study, the grading rubric and content analysis were separate forms that were copied (front and back) on the same page. The manifest content analysis form contained a checklist separated into six sections: 1) prompts/personal encounter, 2) student role in violence, 3) type(s) of violence present, 4) external factors, 5) protective factors, and 6) solutions. On the content analysis sheet, volunteers were given a list of roles, types of violence, external factors, and solutions - with the option to include missing information in the space marked "other". Since resiliency is based on the interaction of protective factors and risk factors, the volunteer graders were instructed to determine if any protective factors were mentioned in the submitted essay. Based on the research of protective factors for resilient children, 7 types of protective factors were included: 1) family support, 2) cultural identity, 3) stable environment, 4) economic stability, 5) social support, 6) connection with a faith based community, and 7) personal factors - including empathy, problems solving skills, and temperament (Holden, 2003; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten & Obradović, 2006). The initial coding was then used to perform a content analysis similar to that in the Pilot Study but more methodically organized according to relevant content (see Attachment C). To ensure inter rater reliability, the PI randomly selected 45 essays (selections were randomly generated using MS Excel) and independently coded them with the content form. A minimum of two essays were selected from each volunteer grader and three essays were selected from the five graders who reviewed larger samples. Of the 45 selected essays, 87% (38) matched at 99% or greater between the original coder and the PI, with the exception of one grader. Further selections from this grader were taken and all samples matched at 50% or lower. The section of essays (n = 26) coded by this grader were then graded by another volunteer who participated in the original

grading. In the final sample for inter rater reliability, all of the selected essays matched at 90% or greater of the coded content.

Once the volunteers coded for manifest content analysis, the information was entered into a database for analysis. Identification codes from each essay were used to label each entry, and each variable was listed separately in the spreadsheet (see Table 1 for a full list of variables). The spreadsheet was modified to include three additional types of violence which were not included on the coding sheet; intimate partner violence (IPV), family violence (including sibling), and community violence. These three categories were covered in the volunteer training and were hand written in the section titled "other". Each school was then entered into a separate spreadsheet. Separate spreadsheets were created for each school district (combining all participating schools from that district) and for the entire sample (combining all data in one sheet). The data were analyzed for percentages of the child's role in the violence, each of the forms of violence, the extenuating influences (such as police involvement or substance abuse), the presence of protective factors, and solutions identified. Types of violence were also grouped according to the categories outlined in the conceptual framework of the Social Interactional Model – personal, interpersonal, family, and community violence. Media violence was added to this framework in order to incorporate the influence of technology and bullying was separated into a standalone category (rather than included in Interpersonal Violence) due to high reporting (See Table 2).

**Table 1**      **List of Coded Variables****Coded Variables:**

Student Role	{	Victim
		Witness
		Perpetrator
		Indirect
Type of Violence	{	Child physical abuse
		Verbal abuse
		Bullying
		Dating violence
		Gang related
		Self-Harm
		Suicide
		Video Game
		Media
		Social Media
		Family violence
		Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
		Community violence
		Internet
		Other
External Factors	{	Alcohol
		Drugs
		Weapons
		Police
		Jail
		EMS / Hospital
Protective Factors	{	Family Connectedness
		Cultural Identity
		Stable Environment
		Economic Stability
		Affiliation with Faith Community
Solutions	{	Personal Characteristics
		None
		Tell someone
		Fight back
		Walk away
		Police / Jail
		Get Active
		Faith
		Kindness
		Other

**Table 2**      **Categories of Types of Violence**

Self-Harm	}	Personal Violence
Suicide		
Bullying	}	Interpersonal Violence: Bullying
Gang Related	}	Interpersonal Violence: Other
Dating violence		
Verbal		
Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)	}	Family Violence
Family Violence		
Child Physical Abuse		
Community Violence	}	Community Violence
Media (television / movies)	}	Media Violence
Video Game Violence		
Social Media Violence		
Internet related violence		

Since this study focused on the ways in which students define and make sense of violence within their lives, particular attention was paid to the essays which contained personal stories of violence (personal encounters). The pilot study revealed that students offered more detailed and descriptive information, in either the personal stories or the response to the first prompt (how has violence affected my life?), and this information was used in the selection method for the latent

analysis. Frequencies were recorded for each of the variables within the sample of personal encounters and cross-tabulations were run to explore relationships between students reporting a personal encounter and students who did not.

To further explore the dimensions of violence within the children's lives, it was important to examine demographic factors which may impact their lives. Cross-tabulations were used to examine the relationships between a specific demographic (such as gender, socioeconomic status, or minority status) and an identified factor (such as bullying, the presence of weapons, or protective factors). To look at SES, schools were placed into one of two groups: Economically Disadvantaged (EcoD) or Economically Stable (EcoS). Determination of a school labeled EcoD was made after identifying the schools percentage of low-income status students as reported by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) for the most currently reported school year, 2012 – 2013. According to the TEA, students who qualify for free lunch or a reduced-fee lunch, as recorded on the National School Lunch Program Application are considered Economically Disadvantaged. The number of students listed as EcoD in any given school is then divided by the total number of students at the school to calculate the percentage of low-income students at the school (Texas Education Agency, 2013). Using the research by Tajalli and Opheim (2005) as a framework, the PI determined that schools with more than 60% of the students classified as EcoD would be considered an Economically Disadvantaged School. In the sample for this study, this included eight schools in five districts (Tajalli & Opheim, 2005).

Based on research performed by (Orfield & Lee, 2005) and (Borman et al., 2004), a minority school was defined as any school in which more than 50% of the population was of ethnic or racial minority. In the Region V area of Texas, the schools are predominately made up



of African American (27.2%), Hispanic (17.8%), and Caucasian (50%). All other racial/ethnic groups are recorded at less than 3%. With this in mind, the cut point for minority schools was established at 50% or more of the school comprised of African American and/or Hispanic students. For this study, MinS included 6 schools in 2 districts. Some of the schools identified as EcoD were also identified as MinS, resulting in an overlap of these subgroups. Demographics of the contestants in EcoD schools and MinS schools were described using cross-tabulation results, which guided part of the manifest content analysis.

In order to address the first research question, content analysis was performed on all submitted essays to explore the dimensions of violence within the students' lives. The data set included 42 variables for each essay which explored the students' role in the violence, the type of violence discussed, external factors (such as weapons, alcohol, etc.), presence of protective factors, and solutions to violence (see Table 1 for full list of variables). Analysis forms were compiled into an Excel spreadsheet which was used for overarching analysis (percentages) and uploaded into SPSS 22 for more detailed analysis. Data were evaluated by school for each variable and used to explore the dimensions of violence present in the student essays. These results were also used as a reference for exploration of the meaning of violence.

Overall percentages and cross tabulations (run in SPSS 20) were used to explore student roles, types of violence, external factors, protective factors, and solutions. Descriptive analyses were used to determine frequencies of each variable and guide further investigation. Relationships between variables were explored by with chi-square statistics. Since most variables reported were dichotomous, the phi coefficient was selected as the best measure for effect size (S. B. Green & Salkind, 2011).

***Stage 2 – Latent Content Analysis***

In order to examine the ways children define and find meaning in violence (RQ 2 &3), a deeper analysis of the latent meanings within the essays was needed. Expressed within the discourse and language of the students, this information was embedded in the essays and required a more thorough exploration. Therefore, in order to address RQ 2 and RQ3, a qualitative thematic analysis was performed on selected essays. Based on the results of the Pilot study, the essays which clearly respond to all three writing prompts had been determined to contain more useable data for this study. It was also noted that essays describing a personal experience contained more information pertinent to understanding the children's perception. As such, the essays selected for the latent content analysis either responded to all three prompts, or a combination of two prompts and a personal experience. A computer generated random sample, stratified by schools, was then used to identify which of these essays were used for latent content analysis. The randomly selected essays were reviewed until saturation criteria were met and at least 10% of the entire sample was included. The sample of the submitted essays was determined by the school size proportionate to the entire sample; in other words, between 8% and 10% of the essays from each school were selected. Since four of the districts in the region were noted to be very small (or submit very few eligible essays;  $n < 30$ ), additional samples were taken from that school/district (oversampling) in order to reach saturation and gain information for that school/district. A total of 132 essays were selected for the latent content analysis. Selected essays were then transcribed into electronic format for analysis. The demographics of the overall contestants (1,165) and the sampled participants (132) were not significantly different and the qualitative sample was determined to be a good representation of the overall contestants.

A comparison of the essays selected for qualitative analysis and the entire sample used for this study is available in Table 4.

The essays were transcribed from their original format into a discrete digital file and then uploaded into QSR International's *NVivo10* (2014) software for qualitative research. Each file was named according to the de-identifying PIN number assigned by the DtWT Coordinator. Student essays were coded initially by the overarching themes identified from reading the essays (both in Pilot Study 2013-2014 and grading session 2014-2015), and then more specifically as further codes developed. Features of *NVivo 10*, along with the PI's analytical interpretation, were used to infer discursive patterns in the essays including proximity searches and coding features. The word frequency tool was used to identify the language and text most often used by the students and to initiate the codebook development. Proximity searches were used to identify the relationship of frequently occurring words and better understand the context of the frequently occurring words.

To direct the analysis of the data, the researchers (PI and two Lamar University Criminal Justice graduate students) created a codebook to offer an operational formalization of codes. The codebook used the essays to develop data-driven codes (parent codes) and further identify sub-codes (child codes) throughout the coding process (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). While it is important to let the data guide for unforeseen themes (Boyatzis, 1998), the framework for the codebook was based on five overarching categories from the pilot study and the literature. The overarching domains which establish the framework for the codebook are: (a) the definition of violence, (b) the causes of violence, (c) the solutions of violence, (d) the consequences of violence, and (e) the emotional experience of violence. Using this foundation, all three researchers reviewed ten common essays for initial codes. From the initial codes, a

codebook to compare specific themes was created to identify emerging sub-themes. The first set of ten essays was discussed at the next meeting and initial codes (22) were agreed upon. A second set of 10 essays were then coded independently and codes were further discussed and refined. To further analyze the subcategories and themes within the constructs, the coders then discussed observed themes in relation to the codebook and revised the codebook as needed. Using the model outlined by DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2011) each code was structured in the codebook by three components: label, definition (including inclusion and exclusion criteria), and example. Table 2 and Table 3 are excerpts from the original coding session and the final codebook, demonstrating the evolution of codes and the codebook.

**Table 3 Excerpts from First Draft of Codebook**

<b>Causes Are:</b>	<b>Code Name</b>	<b>Meaning</b>	<b>When to Apply</b>
	Poor Parenting	Comments about how parents' behavior or influence causes or teaches a child to behavior violently or tolerate violence	EXAMPLES: "caused by how kids are raised" "happens because parents yell at their kids"
	Violence begets violence	Violent behavior leads to more violent behavior; being exposed to violence	EXMPLE: "kids become bullies because they were bullied themselves"
	Suppressing Emotions	Comments about violence being caused by holding in emotions which leads to an "explosion" or outburst of emotions	EXAMPLE: "stuffing it all in"

**Table 4** Excerpts from Final Codebook

Causes Are:	Code Name	Meaning	When to Apply
	Parenting Issues	Comments about how parents' behavior or influence causes or teaches a child to behavior violently or tolerate violence	EXAMPLES: "caused by how kids are raised" "happens because parents yell at their kids"
	Exposure to violence	Comments about violence happening because of exposure to violence – excluding parenting. Explains violence in terms of being exposed to violence	EXMPLE: "kids become bullies because they were bullied themselves"
	Suppressing Emotions	Comments about violence being caused by holding in emotions which leads to an "explosion" or outburst of emotions	EXAMPLE: "stuffing it all in"
	Anger	Violence is caused by overwhelming anger – not suppressed or controlled anger. An inability to control anger	EXAMPLE: "I get so mad....."

Once the initial codebook was developed with the first ten common essays, researchers selected a second set of ten common essays to code with the codebook. The second set of common essays allowed for new themes and sub-themes to surface and offered additional opportunities for application and interpretation of the existing codes. Once the coding team developed consistency in the second set of common essays and interpretation of the essays was steady, the remaining randomly selected essays were coded for data analysis. The coding team met twice weekly during the coding process to examine new data. Initially, 27 codes were operationalized and applied to the essays. After weekly coding meetings and essay reviews, a total of 36 child codes (or subcodes) were identified under the 5 parent codes mentioned above. Multiple codes were often applied to the same excerpt when the selection suggested nuanced themes which were distinguished by the discrete codes. An excerpt of an essay, for example, could be coded with the broader "personal experience" code, but also with an "emotional experience/helplessness" code when it involved emotional references within the details of the experience. Multiple coding of this type is evident in the following student excerpt, "when I got

there I saw Miguel my godmother's boyfriend, hitting my godmother. I started to cry and tried to stop Miguel, but he was too big." (S8). *NVivo* 10's cluster analysis was used to determine if any codes paralleled significantly in application and theme and if any codes had minimal reference. During the coding meetings, team members collectively coded one essay to ensure inter rater reliability. A total of 132 essays were coded by all three researchers. The coding process was strengthened by the coding entry process in which the PI entered all codes into the data management software (*NVivo* 10), resulting in a second review of the initial coding. Data saturation for this study was met when new information provided little or no change to the codebook and at least 10% of the data had been analyzed (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

### **Summary of Chapter 3**

Codes were assigned to chunks of data and for this research as essays were coded by level of meaning rather than by line or paragraph. Assigning codes by level of meaning allows the splitting or grouping of text at different levels and offers more flexibility in coding (MacQueen, McLellan-Lemal, Bartholow, & Milstein, 2008). Based on the coding experience in the pilot study, we found a need for this type of coding as the essays were generally handwritten by students with little consistency in structure and format. Lines and paragraphs, therefore, are determined by the child's handwriting and essay structure and may offer inconsistent amounts of information by paragraph or line.

Descriptive statistics (including frequency, percentage, and cross-tabulation with  $\chi^2$ ) were used to explore incidents of single- and poly-victimization as well as relationships between demographics and identified variables in the manifest analysis. These statistics, run through the SPSS 22 program, were also used to guide the latent analysis. Dimensions of violence found in the manifest content analysis such as roles and types of violence were used to guide the code

development for the qualitative analysis. The data management software *NVivo* 10 was used to handle the data throughout the research process. Further research, beyond the scope of this project, may include multivariate statistics used to analyze the various themes by the frequency (i.e., multiple vs. isolated) of violence exposure, after controlling for students' demographic diversity including gender and school.

## **Chapter 4**

### **RESULTS**

A total of 1,165 students submitted their writing along with the required Parent Permission form for the contest participation in the 2014-2015 school year. All essays from these “contestants” were reviewed in original format and included in the manifest content analysis. A smaller sample of these essays from 132 “participants” was then selected for a more thorough qualitative analysis. In order to select the essays with the richest data, selection for the qualitative analysis was based on responses to the writing prompts and the inclusion of a personal experience (based on the information gathered during the content analysis and grading session). Essays were then selected randomly from each school based on this criterion. Research question one (What are the dimensions of violence present in the children’s written narratives?) is addressed in the Manifest Content Analysis for all 1,165 contestants, and research questions two and three (How do children define violence within the context of their everyday life, and what meanings do children ascribe to their experience of violence) are addressed in the Latent Content Analysis from the essays of the 132 participants. Content, examples, and themes in the latent content analysis are illustrated with quotes directly from 72 of the 132 students’ essays. These quotes presented here are not corrected for grammar or spelling and are identified by student number (S1 – S72). For identification purposes, students attending EcoD schools are labeled with (D) and students attending Minority schools are labeled with (M).



## **Manifest Content Analysis**

### **Descriptions of Overall Contestants (n=1,165) and Sampled Participants (n=132)**

The manifest content analysis of this study focused on all 1,165 contestants and was used for both demographics and to explore the dimensions of violence present within the students' essays. The qualitative analysis, on the other hand, focused on a stratified selection of participants (132) which was representative of the larger group of participants. Essays were selected from all participating schools for the qualitative analysis. As mentioned previously, the overall sample was stratified by school and essays were then randomly selected for the qualitative analysis. The qualitative selection represented similar demographics to the overall contestants with no significant differences. A comparison of the essays selected for qualitative analysis and the overall contestants used for this study is available in Table 4.

The 1,165 contestants in the DtWT Challenge during the 2014-15 school year came from 13 participating schools where the number of participants ranged from 4 students (0.3%) to 349 students (30%). All participating schools consisted of only sixth, seventh, and eighth grade in the middle school. Seventh grade had the highest number of submissions (565), followed by 8<sup>th</sup> grade (403) and sixth grade (195). More females (n=686; 58.9%) participated in the contest than males (n=479; 41.1%). The average participant was a 7<sup>th</sup> grade female student age 12.5 years (see Table 6).

**Table 5**      **Comparison of Overall Contestants to Sampled Participants**

	<b>Overall Contestants (n=1,165)</b>	<b>Sampled Participants (n=132)</b>
<b>School</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
01A*	62 (5.3%)	7 (5.3%)
02A*†	349 (30%)	36 (27.3%)
02B†	73 (6.3%)	9 (6.8%)
02C*†	4 (0.3%)	1 (0.8%)
02D*†	91 (7.8%)	10 (7.5%)
03A	26 (2.2%)	5 (3.8%)
04A*†	51 (4.4%)	9 (6.8%)
04B*†	41 (3.5%)	5 (3.8%)
05A	20 (1.7%)	3 (2.3%)
06A	245 (21%)	24 (18.2%)
07A*	11 (0.9%)	3 (2.3%)
08A*	108 (9.3%)	11 (8.3%)
09A	84 (7.2%)	9 (6.8%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	479 (41.1%)	58 (43.9%)
Female	686 (58.9%)	74 (56.1%)
<b>Grade</b>		
6	195 (16.7%)	25 (18.9%)
7	565 (48.5%)	58 (43.9%)
8	403 (34.6%)	49 (37.2%)
<b>Age</b>		
11	138 (11.8%)	15 (11.8%)
12	404 (34.7%)	49 (38.6%)
13	465 (39.9%)	52 (40.1%)
14	113 (9.7%)	11 (8.7%)
15	3 (0.3%)	0 (0%)

\* Economically Disadvantaged School

†Minority School

**Table 6** Participating Schools and Overall Contestants

School Code	N	Grade					Age					Age Not Given	Sub- group†
		Male	Female	6	7	8	11	12	13	14	15		
ALL	1165	479	686	195	565	403	138	404	465	113	3	42	
		41%	59%	17%	48%	35%	12%	34%	40%	10%	<1%	4%	
01A	62	28	34	0	0	*60	0	0	37	22	*1	2	D
		45%	55%	0%	0%	97%	0%	0%	60%	36%	2%	3%	
02A	349	147	202	93	113	143	66	106	136	32	0	9	M/D
		42%	58%	27%	32%	41%	19%	30%	39%	9%	0%	3%	
02B	73	26	47	72	0	1	53	13	3	0	0	4	M
		36%	64%	99%	0%	1%	73%	18%	4%	0%	0%	6%	
02C	4	2	2	0	4	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	M/D
		50%	50%	0%	100%	0%	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%	0%	
02D	91	27	64	0	91	0	0	55	31	3	0	2	M/D
		30%	70%	0%	100%	0%	0%	60%	34%	3%	0%	2%	
03A	26	12	14	0	10	16	0	8	15	2	0	1	
		46%	54%	0%	39%	62%	0%	31%	58%	8%	0%	4%	
04A	51	22	29	3	20	28	1	13	27	5	0	5	M/D
		43%	57%	6%	39%	55%	2%	26%	53%	10%	0%	10%	
04B	41	18	23	0	41	0	0	24	15	1	0	1	M/D
		44%	56%	0%	100%	0%	0%	59%	37%	2%	0%	2%	
05A	20	9	11	0	19	1	0	12	6	0	0	2	
		45%	55%	0%	95%	5%	0%	60%	30%	0%	0%	10%	
06A	245	111	134	0	132	113	0	79	122	35	1	8	
		45%	55%	0%	54%	46%	0%	32%	50%	14%	0%	3%	
07A	11	5	6	0	9	2	0	8	2	1	0	0	D
		46%	55%	0%	82%	18%	0%	73%	18%	9%	0%	0%	
08A	108	34	74	27	42	39	18	37	39	9	1	4	D
		32%	69%	25%	39%	36%	17%	34%	36%	8%	1%	4%	
09A	84	38	46	0	84	0	0	46	31	3	0	4	
		45%	55%	0%	100%	0%	0%	55%	37%	4%	0%	5%	

\* 2 students did not report grade level

† M=Minority School D=Economically Disadvantaged School

### Dimensions of Violence

Based on the analytical framework, this study explored students' identified roles with violence as well as the types of violence present in their writings. The overall contestants reported an indirect role in violence more commonly than witness, victim, or perpetrator. All students who did not report a personal encounter with violence (those who only spoke to the general topic of violence) were coded as "indirect", and therefore influenced these results. The

term “indirect violence” generally refers to violence that has a significant impact on the individual, even though the individual was not actually present (i.e. murder of a parent), however, for the content analysis, indirect was used for all non-specific discussions of violence (i.e. when a fight breaks out at school or discussion of recent violent episodes which gained national attention). Since the sampled participants were selected according to their responses to the writing prompts and/or a personal encounter with violence, they recorded lower percentages of indirect violence (See Table 7).

**Table 7          Student Roles in All Essays (n = 1,165)**

		<b>Overall Contestants n = 1,165</b>	<b>Sampled Participants n = 132</b>
		<b>N (%)</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Valid	Victim	183 (15.7%)	44 (33.3%)
	Perpetrator	20 (1.7%)	6 (4.5%)
	Witness	241 (20.7%)	45 (34.1%)
	Indirect	652 (56%)	37 (28%)
	Total	1096 (94.1%)	132 (100%)
Missing		69 (5.9%)	0

Among all students, 46.3% of the students reported a personal encounter with violence. As many as 84.6% of the students reported personal encounters in one school (n = 91) and as low as 19.4% (n = 62) in another. From the group of students reporting a personal encounter, more students identified in the role of witness (38%) than the role of victim (33%) or perpetrator (4%). All remaining students discussed indirect contact with violence (See Table 8). Students who identified with a particular role, but reported no personal encounter, were noted to identify the role, but not specify the encounter. An example follows:

I have violence but the bullying violence. So far it has a medium affect on me and my life. When I write about it, it makes me cry ecause I don't why I get bullied. When they bully me I act like I don't care when I actually do I try to live my life and do I need to do, because life is too short to worry, but I cant help, but think about it at times. (S61DM)

**Table 8 Student Roles and Personal Encounters**

Violence Roles	Personal Encounter with Violence		Total N (%)
	No N (%)	Yes N (%)	
Victim	8 (1.4%)	175 (32.6%)	183 (16.7%)
Perpetrator	2 (0.4%)	18 ( 3.4%)	20 (1.8%)
Witness	38 (6.8%)	203 (37.9%)	241 (22%)
Indirect	512 (91.4%)	140 (26.1%)	652 (59.5)
Total	560 (51.1%)	536 (48.9%)	1096 (94.1%)
Missing			69 (5.9%)
Overall Contestants			1165 (100%)

Based on the contextual framework of the Social Interactional Model, the types of violence explored were grouped into five categories: 1) personal, 2) interpersonal, 3) family, 4) community, and 5) media. Exploration of the data revealed that bullying was coded at a higher rate than any other individual type of violence (bullying = 48.8%, all other individual types of violence < 20%), and therefore was kept in its own category (adding a sixth category) rather than including it with other forms of interpersonal violence (See Table 9). As mentioned in the empirical review, bullying is a distinctive form of violence which children (as opposed to adults) are at a greater risk to experience in any role. Generally conceptualized as a school-related issue,

bullying is a prevalent issue among middle school students, and therefore best categorized independently of other forms of interpersonal violence (Goldbaum et al., 2003; Pergolizzi et al., 2011; M. Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

**Table 9**      **Types of Violence**

	<b>Overall Contestants</b>	<b>Sampled Participants</b>
	<b>n=1165</b>	<b>n=132</b>
<b>Type of Violence</b>	<b>N (%)</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Bullying	569 (48.8%)	77 (58.3%)
Family	271 (23.3%)	39 (29.5%)
Media	239 (20.5%)	22 (16.7%)
Interpersonal	157 (13.5%)	26 (19.7%)
Community	130 (11.2%)	19 (14.4%)
Personal	117 (10%)	10 (7.6%)

Bullying was the most highly discussed form of violence within the essays with nearly half (48.8%; 569) of the overall contestants addressing some type of bullying. Nearly one-fourth (23.3%; 271) of the overall contestants discussed family violence in their essays and one-fifth (20.5%; 239) of the students addressed media violence. Interpersonal violence was discussed in 13.5% (157) of the essays, however, this number was influenced by the removing bullying as a form of interpersonal violence. Community violence was addressed in 11.2% (130) of the essays and personal violence was discussed the least (of the recorded types of violence) at 10% (117).

The sampled participants revealed similar results within their essays, however some variation was noted. For the sampled participants, bullying was again the most highly discussed type of violence; recorded at a slightly higher rate than the overall contestants. More than half of the sampled participants (58.3%, 77) discussed some form of bullying in their essays. Nearly one-third (29.5%, 39) of the sampled participants discussed family violence in their essays; once

again revealing higher rates than the overall contestants. Unlike the overall contestants, interpersonal violence was recorded at a higher frequency than media violence for the sampled participants. Nearly one-fifth (19.7%; 26) of the essays addressed interpersonal violence other than bullying. Media violence was discussed in only 16.7% (22) of the sampled participants' essays. Community violence was present in 14.4% (19) of the sampled essays and personal violence was again recorded the least often in only 10 (7.6%) essays.

The roles of violence were cross-tabulated with the six categories of violence to evaluate any significant relationships. Since students discussed the role of perpetrator in only 20 essays, the numbers were not sufficient for examining this role with the types of violence. The roles of victim (183) and witness (241), however, were evaluated by type of violence (see Tables 10 and 11). Significantly more students discussed the role of victim when discussing bullying, than other roles of violence. Furthermore, students discussed the role of victim within other forms of interpersonal violence significantly more than the other identified roles. In the role of witness, students were more likely to discuss witnessing family violence and less likely to address witnessing media violence.

**Table 10 Relationship between Victim Role and Types of Violence**

<b>Types of Violence</b>	<b>Victim (n=183)</b>	<b>Non-Victim (n=982)</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>	<b>Cramer's V</b>
Bullying	139 (76%)	430 (43.8%)	63.88**	.234
Family	37 (20.2%)	234 (23.8%)	1.126	.031
Interpersonal	37 (20.2%)	120 (12.2%)	8.46**	.085
Media	30 (16.4%)	209 (21.3%)	2.262	.044
Personal	16 (8.8%)	101 (10.3)	.406	.019
Community	14 (7.7%)	116 (11.8%)	2.696*	.048

\* significant at  $p < .05$

\*\* significant at  $p < .01$

**Table 11** Relationship between Witness Role and Types of Violence

	<b>Witness (n=241)</b>	<b>Non-Witness (n=924)</b>	$\chi^2$	<b>Cramer's V</b>
Bullying	117 (48.5%)	452 (48.9%)	.010	.003
Family	88 (36.5%)	183 (19.8%)	29.9**	.160
Interpersonal	32 (13.3%)	125 (13.5%)	.010	.003
Media	29 (12%)	210 (22.7%)	13.4**	.107
Community	29 (12%)	101 (10.9%)	.234	.014
Personal	20 (8.3%)	97 (10.5%)	1.023	.030

\*\* significant at  $p < .01$

### Factors Extracted from the Essays

External factors involved in the violence were also recorded and evaluated. The presence of alcohol was recorded in 6.5% (76) of the overall essays, however it was noted that several schools (02C, 02D, and 09A) indicated no presence (0%) of alcohol in their essay submissions. Drugs were present in 8.8% (103) of the overall essays. To better evaluate the external factors, the presence of drugs and alcohol were combined into one variable titled Substances. Substances were discussed in 11.8 % (137) of the overall contestants' essays and in 15.2% (20) of the sampled participants. Students reported the presence of weapons in 9.7% (113) of the total essays and 12.4% (67) of the sampled participants. Police involvement and jails were also combined into one variable for analysis under the name Police/jails. The presence of the police or jails in the student essays was 7.5% (87) in the overall contestants and 9.8% (13) in the sampled participants. EMS/Hospital was noted in 1.4% (16) of the essays. External factors were then cross-tabulated with the students who described personal encounters in their stories to explore any marked differences than the entire sample. It was noted that students discussing a



personal story reported the presence of all external factors at only slightly higher rates in comparison to the overall sample but no significant differences were noted.

**Table 12**      **Frequency of External Factors**

<b>External Factor</b>	Overall Contestants (n=1165)	With Personal Encounter (n = 539)
	<b>N (%)</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Substances	137 (11.8%)	20 (15.2%)
Weapons	113 (9.7%)	67 (12.4%)
Police/Jail	87 (7.5%)	13 (9.8%)
EMS/Hospital	16 (1.4%)	12 (2.2%)

Protective measures were recorded in the Content Analysis by both their presence and the type of protective factors. Based on the research of protective factors for resilient children, 7 types of protective factors were recorded including: family support, cultural identity, stable environment, economic stability, social support, connection with a faith based community, and personal factors (including empathy, problems solving skills, and temperament (Holden, 2003; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten & Obradović, 2006). In the overall sample, 36.3% of the essays contained content with the presence of protective factors. When the individual protective factors were evaluated from the group of students who reported protective factors, personal characteristics (43%) and family connectedness (38.5%) were among the highest scores. Social support was present in 22.7% of the essays and connection to a faith community was in 13%. Cross tabulations of protective factors within the personal encounters revealed that students were significantly more likely to discuss the presence of protective factors (PF) when addressing a

personal encounter with violence ( $\chi^2(1, N = 1165) = 50.737, p < .001, \Phi = .209$ ). A summary of the protective factors is available in Table 13.

**Table 13**      **Summary of Protective Factors (PF)**

	Overall Contestants (n=1165)	Percentages of PF Type Within students reporting PF	With Personal Encounters (n=539)
	N (%)	n = 423	N (%)
<b>Protect Factor(s) Present</b>	<b>423 (36.3%)</b>	---	<b>254 (47.1%)</b>
Family Support	163 (14%)	38.5%	118 (21.9%)
Cultural Identify	13 (1.1%)	3.1%	10 (1.9%)
Stable Environment	36 (3.1%)	8.5%	21 (3.9%)
Economic Stability	7 (0.6%)	1.7%	2 (0.4%)
Social Support	96 (8.2%)	22.7%	52 (9.6%)
Faith Community	55 (4.7%)	13%	28 (5.2%)
Personal Characteristics	182 (15.6%)	43%	95 (15.6%)

The final dimension explored was the type of solutions offered by the students. In 27.3% of the essays, students either made no mention of a solution or stated that there is no solution. The most common solution referenced in the essays was to tell someone (36.7%) followed by the subgroup of involvement (16.7%). Involvement, although not originally included on the Content Analysis form, emerged as a variable during the data entry process. Many evaluators had written in solutions on the Content Analysis form referring to actions the student either could, should, or did take. These actions included getting involved in forming task groups, support groups, or awareness coalitions, writing lawmakers and officials, or advocating for changes in policies. All other solutions, including fighting back, walking away, seeking help from police (including jails and laws), and being kind, were recorded in less than 10% of the essays. While the solution of

faith (i.e. prayer or church) was distinct in only 2.1% of the essays, one school (07A) recorded it in 18.2% of their essays. Frequencies and percentages of solutions are summarized in Table 14.

A cross-tabulation of solutions with the students who discussed a personal encounter with violence revealed very similar percentages as the overall sample (see Table 14).

**Table 14**      **Types of Solutions**

Type of Solution	Overall Contestants (n=1165)	With Personal Encounters (n=539)
	<b>N (%)</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Tell	427 (36.7%)	212 (39.3%)
Fight	26 (2.2%)	16 (3%)
Walk Away	25 (2.1%)	11 (2%)
Police	27 (2.3%)	14 (2.6%)
Involved	195 (16.7%)	86 (16%)
Faith	24 (2.1%)	10 (1.9%)
Kind	68 (5.8%)	31 (5.8%)

### **Subgroups**

While evaluating the schools together and individually provided some insights into the specific region, districts, and schools, it offered little information about the similarities and differences in demographic groups such as socioeconomic status (SES), gender, and race/ethnicity. Results indicate that students in EcoD schools were significantly more likely to report witnessing violence than students in EcoS schools. Students in economically disadvantaged schools discussed family violence in one-fourth of the essays, however it was at a significantly higher rate than the EcoS schools. Students in EcoD schools were significantly less likely to discuss bullying, community violence, and media violence. Students in economically disadvantaged schools discussed police/jails and weapons more frequently in their essays than

the EcoS schools, however it was not significant. Students in EcoD schools were more likely to discuss protective factors within the context of their essays, specifically the protective factors of family attachment, social support, and personal characteristics. As with all of the subgroups, the protective factor of economic stability was evident in only a trace number of essays. For the subgroup comparisons, economic stability was not reported in the results. Students in EcoD schools were less likely to discuss solutions of walking away or being kind. The discussion of the solution of police/jails had insufficient data to evaluate for the EcoD subgroup (see Table 15).

The minority schools consisted of a total of 6 schools from 2 districts in the region. Like the EcoD schools, Minority Schools were more likely to report the role of witnessing violence than the non-minority schools. The only type of violence that students in MinS schools reported at a higher rate than the non-minority counterparts was personal violence, although it was not a statistically significant difference. Students in MinS schools were significantly less likely to discuss bullying and media violence than the non-minority group. Like the EcoD schools, students in the MinS schools were more likely to record the presence of protective factors in their essays. More specifically, MinS students recorded higher frequencies of family attachment and personal characteristics. The protective factor of cultural identity had insufficient data to evaluate for the MinS subgroup. Student essays from the MinS schools revealed that they were more likely to reference the solutions of telling someone and police/authority than students in majority schools (see Table 16).

**Table 15 Dimensions of Violence by Sub-group – Economically Disadvantaged (EcoD) vs. Economically Stable (EcoS) Schools**

		EcoD (n=717)	EcoS (n = 448)		
Dimensions of Violence		N (% of total)	N (% of total)	$\chi^2$	Cramer's V
<b>Role</b>	Victim	121 (16.9%)	60 (13.4%)	2.549	.047
	Witness	169 (23.6%)	78 (17.4%)	6.262*	.073
	Perpetrator	15 (2.1%)	9 (2%)	.009	.003
<b>Type of Violence</b>	Bullying	324 (45.2%)	245 (54.7%)	9.957**	.092
	Personal Violence	83 (11.6%)	34 (7.6%)	4.851	.065
	Interpersonal	98 (13.7%)	59 (13.2%)	.059	.007
	Family	182 (25.4%)	89 (19.9%)	4.702	.064
	Community	60 (8.4%)	70 (15.6%)	14.65**	.112
	Media	100 (13.9%)	139 (31%)	49.33**	.206
<b>External Factors</b>	Substances	80 (11.2%)	57 (12.7%)	.651	.024
	Weapons	73 (10.2%)	40 (8.9%)	.494	.021
	Police/Jails	61 (8.5%)	26 (5.8%)	2.918	.050
	EMS / Hospital	10 (1.4%)	6 (1.3%)	.006	.002
<b>Protective Factors</b>	Present	291 (40.6%)	132 (29.5%)	14.75**	.113
	PF Family	114 (15.9%)	49 (10.9%)	5.64*	.070
	PF cultural	10 (1.14%)	3 (0.7%)	1.314	.034
	PF environment	23 (3.2%)	16 (3.6%)	.113	.010
	PF social support	69 (9.6%)	27 (6.0%)	4.72*	.064
	PF faith community	40 (5.6%)	15 (3.3%)	3.050	.051
	PF personal	125 (17.4%)	57 (12.7%)	4.64*	.063
<b>Solutions</b>	None	201 (28%)	117 (26.1%)	.511	.021
	Tell Someone	253 (35.3%)	174 (38.8%)	1.499	.036
	Fight Back	14 (2%)	12 (2.7%)	.666	.024
	Walk Away	9 (1.3%)	16 (3.6%)	7.04**	.078
	Police/Jail	---	---	---	---
	Get Involved	118 (16.5%)	77 (17.2%)	.105	.010
	Faith	18 (2.5%)	6 (1.3%)	1.874	.040
	Be Kind	23 (3.2%)	45 (10%)	23.45**	.142

\* significant at  $p < .05$ \*\* significant at  $p < .01$ --- insufficient data for  $\chi^2$

**Table 16 Dimensions of Violence by Sub-group – Minority Schools (MinS) vs. Non-Minority Schools**

Dimensions of Violence		MinS (n=609) N (% of total)	NON MinS (n = 556) N (% of total)	$\chi^2$	Cramer's V
Role	Victim	97 (15.9%)	84 (15.1%)	.149	.011
	Witness	147 (24.1%)	100 (18%)	6.59*	.075
	Perpetrator	13 (2.1%)	11 (2%)	.035	.005
Type of Violence	Bullying	275 (45.2%)	294 (52.9%)	6.94**	.077
	Personal Violence	70 (11.5%)	47 (8.5%)	2.975	.051
	Interpersonal	77 (12.6%)	80 (14.4%)	.759	.026
	Family	141 (23.2%)	130 (23.4%)	.009	.003
	Community	60 (9.9%)	70 (12.6%)	2.197	.043
	Media/Tech	76 (12.5)	163 (29.3%)	50.53**	.208
External Factors	Substances	61 (10.5%)	73 (13.1%)	1.923	.041
	Weapons	63 (10.3%)	50 (9%)	.607	.023
	Police/Jails	53 (8.7%)	34 (6.1%)	2.816	.049
	EMS / Hospital	11 (1.8%)	5 (0.9%)	1.765	.039
Protective Factors	Present	263 (41.5%)	170 (30.6%)	15.12**	.114
	PF Family	100 (16.4%)	63 (11.3%)	6.26*	.073
	PF cultural	---	---	---	---
	PF environment	17 (2.8%)	22 (4%)	1.220	.032
	PF social support	59 (9.7%)	37 (6.7%)	3.537	.055
	PF faith community	28 (4.6%)	27 (4.9%)	.043	.006
	PF personal	117 (19.2%)	65 (11.7%)	12.47**	.103
Solutions	None	172 (28.2%)	146 (26.3%)	.577	.022
	Tell Someone	244 (40.1%)	183 (32.9%)	6.40*	.074
	Fight Back	11 (1.8%)	15 (2.7%)	1.059	.030
	Walk Away	9 (1.5%)	16 (2.9%)	2.712	.048
	Police/Jail	20 (3.3%)	7 (1.3%)	5.63*	.067
	Get Involved	111 (18.2%)	84 (15.1%)	2.028	.042
	Faith	13 (2.1%)	11 (2%)	.035	.005
	Be Kind	28(4.6%)	40 (7.2%)	3.565	.055

\* significant at  $p < .05$ \*\* significant at  $p < .01$ --- insufficient data for  $\chi^2$ 

Differences in gender revealed fewer significant relations than the other demographics of EcoD and MinS. No significant relations in role (victim, witness, perpetrator) were noted between male and female students. In their essays, females were significantly more likely to

discuss personal violence and family violence. On the other hand, male students were more likely to address community violence in their essays. Male students were significantly more likely to discuss the presence of weapons in their essays, while females were more likely to discuss the presence of substances. Proportionally, more females report the presence of protective factors within their essays than males. Social support was the only individual protective factor that showed a significant relation to gender with females reporting it more frequently than the males. The “solution” variables revealed no significant differences in the essays between male and female students (see Table 17).

The manifest content analysis of the overarching content sought to address the dimensions of violence present within the submitted essays for all contestants which addresses research question 1 (RQ1). Based on the data, it is clear that the majority of the essays submitted discussed indirect or distant experiences of violence. Examples include: knowing of a fight that happened at school, but not being directly involved; or an awareness of violence in the world, but not direct personal connection. When discussing personal stories, however, students were more willing to discuss violence from the role of witness than that of perpetrator, victim, or indirect. Bullying was the most commonly discussed type of violence within the student writings and was documented at substantially higher rates than most other forms of violence. Violence in the media, domestic violence, and community violence were the most commonly reported types of violence after bullying. On the other hand, dating violence, gang related violence, and internet violence were documented minimally (less than 5%). Some types of substances (alcohol or drugs) were present in 16.3% of the essays, with drugs being mentioned more frequently than alcohol.

**Table 17**      **Dimensions of Violence present by Sub-group – Gender**

Dimensions of Violence		Female (n=686)	Male (n = 479)	$\chi^2$	Cramer's V
Role	Victim	105 (15.3%)	76 (15.9%)	.067	.008
	Witness	150 (21.9%)	97 (20.3%)	.441	.019
	Perpetrator	12 (1.7%)	12 (2.5%)	.799	.026
Type of Violence	Bullying	33 (48.5%)	236 (49.3%)	.060	.007
	Personal Violence	83 (12.1%)	34 (7.1%)	7.81**	.082
	Interpersonal	89 (13%)	68 (14.2%)	.362	.018
	Family	174 (25.4%)	97 (20.3%)	4.13*	.060
	Community	66 (9.6%)	64 (13.4%)	3.98*	.058
	Media/Tech	133 (19.4%)	106 (22.1%)	1.30	.033
External Factors	Substances	92 (13.4%)	45 (9.4%)	4.39*	.061
	Weapons	53 (7.7%)	60 (12.5%)	7.42**	.080
	Police/Jails	54 (7.9%)	33 (6.9%)	.394	.018
	EMS / Hospital	9 (1.3%)	7 (1.5%)	.046	.006
Protective Factors	Present	272 (39.7%)	151 (31.5%)	8.05**	.083
	PF Family	107 (15.6%)	56 (11.7%)	3.577	.055
	PF cultural	8 (1.2%)	5 (1%)	.038	.006
	PF environment	27 (3.9%)	12 (2.5%)	1.784	.039
	PF social support	68 (9.9%)	28 (5.8%)	6.17*	.073
	PF faith community	31 (4.5%)	24 (5%)	.151	.011
	PF personal	111 (16.2%)	71 (14.8%)	.395	.018
Solutions	None	186 (27.1%)	132 (27.6%)	.028	.005
	Tell Someone	262 (38.2%)	165 (34.4%)	1.704	.038
	Fight Back	14 (2%)	12 (2.5%)	.279	.015
	Walk Away	13 (1.9%)	12 (2.5%)	.500	.021
	Police/Jail	11 (1.6%)	16 (3.3%)	3.758	.057
	Get Involved	110 (16%)	85 (17.7%)	.592	.023
	Faith	15 (2.2%)	9 (1.9%)	.132	.011
	Be Kind	42 (6.1%)	26 (5.4%)	.249	.015

\* significant at  $p < .05$ \*\* significant at  $p < .01$ 

While not a specific directive for the essays, protective factors were noted to be present in over one-third of the essays. Among those protective factors, personal characteristics scored highest, followed by family connectedness and social support. While many essays mentioned no solution to violence, the most commonly mentioned solution was to tell someone. Getting



involved was the second most commonly mentioned solution and was interpreted to include student actions to combat violence as well as the students' desire to reduce violence in their worlds.

After evaluating the collective essays, submissions were evaluated according to noteworthy demographics. Schools identified by the Texas Education Agency as low-income were separated into a group marked Economically Disadvantage (EcoD) and compared with the remaining schools (labeled Economically Stable – EcoS). It was observed that EcoD schools were more likely to discuss witnessing violence than their EcoS counterparts. Bullying, self-harm, intimate partner violence and substance abuse were reported at a higher rate in EcoD schools. Students in EcoD schools were less likely to mention community violence, but were more likely to discuss police involvement in their essays. Protective factors were noted at a higher rate in EcoD schools, specifically family attachment, social support, affiliation with a faith community, and personal characteristics. Economic stability, as a protective factor, was less likely to be recorded by students in EcoD schools.

Next, schools were evaluated by racial/ethnic make-up. Minority Schools (MinS), like the EcoD schools, were more likely to discuss the role of witnessing violence than the mainstream majority schools. While they were more likely to include content about IPV in their essays, they were less likely to address bullying and child physical abuse. Minority schools were more likely to include protective factors in their essays and reported family attachment, cultural identity, and personal characteristics most often. Economic stability was identified less in MinS schools. Students in minority schools were more likely to refer to solutions of telling someone or police / authority involvement.

Lastly, gender differences were evaluated for all of the data. While females were noted to make up nearly 60% of the submissions, no significant differences were noted in the reporting of their role in violence. Females recorded topics related to self-harm and suicide more frequently than male students and discussed more events of family violence. Male students, on the other hand, discussed video game violence and community violence more often than females. Weapons were significantly more prevalent in the essays of male students than female students. Once again, the presence of protective factors revealed a significant variance, with females discussing more protective factors than the males. The only specific protective factor that revealed significance was social support which females identified at a higher rate than males. Females did address issues related to self-harm, suicide, and family violence more often than males; while males addressed issues of video game violence and community violence at a higher rate. Females were more likely to discuss protective factors in their essays and specifically referenced social support more often than males. Quite clearly this can be inferred that female students, at this age and developmental level, may be more connected and reliant upon a social support network.

### **Latent Content Analysis of Sampled Essays (n = 132)**

#### **Coding Results**

A word frequency query in *NVivo 10* tallied the top 50 words in the selected texts. When run as a compiled group of essays, the top six occurring words in descending order were: “violence” (1023), “make” (671), “people” (487), “bullying” (343), “someone” (345), and “stop” (295). Combined into sentences, these words suitably capture the essence of the DtWT

Challenge: *violence make[s] people bully, someone stop, someone make [the] violence [and] bullying stop, someone make [the] people stop violence, people stop [the] violence/bullying.*

The extracted count of words is not necessarily indicative of the context or combination of these words, so the PI ran several proximity searches to evaluate the relationship between high frequency words. Intrigued by the vagueness of the term “someone” in the context of a personal story, proximity queries were run with the words “someone” and “bullying” (5 references) and “someone” and “violence (53 references) within five words of one another. Exploration of the references indicated that the words were generally in proximity within separate thoughts or sentences and were not highly related to the content of the essays. For example, one student stated “One way it affects me is that *someone* makes fun of me. Another way *violence* affects me is rumors about me in a bad way” (S1D). Another student, when transitioning out of a personal story stated, “It was the most ridiculous thing that *someone* could do. Some causes of *violence* are, they could have mental issues...” (S2DM).

A proximity search of the words “bullying” and “violence” within 5 words of one another, however, yielded more intriguing and related results. The query noted 42 instances of these two words within a five word range and exploration of these in context revealed these terms were often used interchangeably or to define one another. Students would often begin a paragraph or thought focused on the topic of violence, only to shift to bullying as the writing progressed. “When I hear the word violence, bullying comes to mind” (S3DM) leads into a discussion of a personal experience. In another example, one student mentioned “Because bullying can cause as much damage as violence.” (S4M). Examples of this include: “there are many types of youth violence, but bullying is seen by all...” (S5). From this exploration, it is clear that students often refer to violence when addressing distant events or episodes, but

personal experiences are more regularly termed as bullying. Further exploration indicated that student discourse uses the terms to define one another, often in an inverted context. One student stated, "Violence is a type of bullying" (S6D) while another stated, "Violence is just like bullying" (S7D).

Analysis of the word frequency and word proximity searches provided discernment in the students' use of terms within context. The final selection of analyzed essays (n=132) contained 820 excerpts with the 5 finalized parent codes which were used during the coding process. The final codebook contained 5 parent codes and 36 child codes. These codes were later grouped according to emerging themes under four domains: cognitive, emotional, moral, and solutions. A summary of the domains is outlined in Table 19.

As indicated in the number of coded sources, students largely focused on the definition or experience violence and the solutions to violence. At 520 instances within 131 sources, it is clear that the solutions to violence permeated the student essays. Similarly, the 384 excerpts across 131 sources coded within the "violence as" code, offered explicit experiences of violence within the context of the students' lives. The "consequences" code (237 references within 92 essays) offered further insight into the students' experiences as it focused on the impact violence has within the lives of the students. The "causes" code spoke toward the students understanding of how violence begins both from a personal and theoretical framework. Furthermore, students frequently chronicled emotional experiences as indicated by the 178 instances within the application of the "emotional experience" code.

Among the child codes (subcodes of the 5 identified parent codes), the most frequently referenced code was of personal experience (125 references). Personal experiences were present in 111 sources which is about 84% of the entire qualitative sample. *NVivo*'s cross-tabulation

feature allowed the PI to cross-tabulate of codes to identify overlap or relationships between codes. Such a cross-tabulation of the personal experience code revealed that students were particularly likely to address the emotional experience of violence (including overall emotional experience, helplessness, and fear) within the context of their personal experiences. Students' reactions to the consequences of violence within their personal stories resonated strongly with the "harm to others" code. One student discussed harm to a cousin and the cousin's infant when stating, "Her husband came in and started hitting her, and he hit the 2 month olds crib, and broke it with the babe in it" (S13D). Other students addressed the "harm to others" from a personal context, such as, "All of a sudden, screams began to swallow up the room as desks were roaring across the room. The desks hit many students. I was one of those people." (S14). Both students' accounts of harm within a personal experience speak to their reproach of violence as a culprit in the pain and damage within their lives.

Following personal experiences, the second most commonly referenced child code (also under the parent code of "Violence As:") was the definition of violence (121 references). Similar to the results of the "Near" search using the terms violence and bullying, the definitions of violence coded from the student essays invokes students' apparent biases and distortions. While cross tabulation of the definitions did not reveal any considerable relationships to other codes, the definitions themselves offered insight and discernment into the students' meaning of violence. Three main concepts emerged within the definitions of violence (which are later addressed more thoroughly as themes) including the moral view of violence as "wrong", violence experienced as an emotional episode, and the universal experience of violence.

**Table 18**      **Themes: Domain, Code, and Examples**

Domain	Parent Code...child code	Theme	Examples
<b>Cognitive</b>	Violence Is....definition	<b><i>Defining violence in terms of bullying</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Violence is a type of bullying” (S6)</li> <li>• “Some synonyms for violence are: bullying, rude, and unkind to others” (S62)</li> <li>• “Violence is an act of bullying” (S63)</li> </ul>
	Violence Is...universal experience	<b><i>The universal experience of violence</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Violence is what you mostly see in America. It’s all over the news and Internet, and it sucks that the next Generation is going to have to born into a world of violence.” (S31)</li> <li>• “Violence is a bad thing, but its everywhere.” (S17)</li> </ul>
	<sup>1</sup> Causes are....exposure to violence <sup>2</sup> Consequences are...the cycle	<b><i>The cycle of violence</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Some violence comes from kids that have been bullied themselves. Then these people don’t know how to handle it and bully other kids so they don’t feel bad.” (S49)</li> <li>• “Most of the time bullies have there own problems so they are violent. Bullies treat others violently to make their self feel better.” (S6)</li> </ul>
<b>Emotional</b>	Emotional experience....negative emotions / fear	<b><i>Complex emotions</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “With each graze of violence in my life, I felt my heart shatter until even the tape that was holding it together gave up.” (S35)</li> <li>• “If anything makes me mad, I result to violence...Basically any emotion I have result in me wanting to hurt something or someone. To be completely honest, I don’t WANT to be mean or hurt someone.” (S21)</li> </ul>
	Emotional experience...helplessness	<b><i>Helplessness</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Once when I was little I saw one of my friends getting beat by older kids. I was filled with fear, and felt utterly useless like someone was holding me back.” (S11)</li> <li>• “And every time I tell them something, they ignored me and I feel like running. Sometimes they would beat me just for not saying good morning or good evening.” (S64)</li> </ul>

Domain	Parent Code...child code	Theme	Examples
Moral	<sup>1</sup> Violence is...definition <sup>2</sup> Consequences are...harm to others	<b><i>Violence is wrong</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Violence is a very bad thing that goes on in today world.” (S7)</li> <li>• “Violence is a bad thing because the anger associated with it is hurtful and sometimes harmful.” (S65)</li> </ul>
	Causes are...judging	<b><i>Judging</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Violence affects me because one way it affects me is that someone makes fun of me. Another way violence affects me is rumors about me in a bad way. Another is when bad words are said about me and to my friends for defending my friends I get pick on and other stuff.” (S1)</li> <li>• “At school I would always get bullied and teased because of religion. Towelhead, camel jockey, and other more vulgar names and been told or more like yelled at me.” (S59)</li> </ul>
	Causes are...parenting issues	<b><i>Parenting issues</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Then there’s several reasons for violence. One is that parents get mad easily. They hit their kids because they get bad grades, steal, lie, or talk back.” (S41)</li> <li>• “I’ve seen kids my age that have people who drink too much in their family. I mean they seem nice to me, but late at night their house is filled with screaming, fighting, and things are broken.” (S33)</li> </ul>
Solutions	Solutions are....stop it	<b><i>Stop the violence</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “VIOLENCE NEEDS TO STOP...Just cause you aren’t violent doesn’t mean the people around you aren’t, so stop violence.” (S66)</li> </ul>
	Solutions are...get involved	<b><i>Get involved</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I am going to fix this issue by starting a support group for women &amp; children who have been affected by violence.” (S58)</li> <li>• “I can do a lot of stuff by staring at preventing bullying at school....I will take a strike to make more laws against violence if I have to.” (S34)</li> <li>• A charity event to discourage gang violence is a good idea to use. Setting up posters to break bullying habits is a good thing to do.” (S54)</li> </ul>

The experience of violence as a verbal or emotional encounter, rather than a physical or forceful event emerged when analyzing the student definitions of violence. Many students included verbal violence along with the physical, such as, "Violence can be physically or verbally. People use both of these types of violence." (S28). Other students addressed it with more rhetoric such as this thirteen-year-old girl, "Violence can be in many forms verbal, physical, mental but they all have one thing in common they all hurt people the same way it be scars, marks, they can be verbal or physical." (S16). Once again blending the definitions of violence and bullying, one male student addressed the verbal aspects of violence as, "there is verbal violence, which mainly takes place at school. Bully's will say mean things or spread mean rumors. That is an example of verbal violence." (S29D). While descriptions of verbal violence emerged frequently, they appeared to be as a dimension of violence rather than an independent theme.

### **Themes**

Each of the themes found within the data addressed both how the children define and ascribe meaning to violence and, therefore, research questions two and three (RQ2: how do children define violence within the context of their everyday life, and RQ3: what meanings do children ascribe to their experience of violence) were addressed together in the qualitative analysis. While personal stories accounted for the greatest number of codes, it is not indicative of a theme. In the instructions, students were directed to discuss how violence has impacted their lives, thus requesting a personal story. Rather than subcategorizing the student themes according to the essays prompts, it is valuable to look at the themes in terms of power and prevalence within the student writings. Identified themes were structured under three domains: (a)



cognitive, (b) emotional, and (c) moral, which not only embody the thoughts and ideas of the students, but also the significant stages in their development.

### ***Cognitive Domain***

Three themes emerged within the cognitive domain which speak to the way the children define and make sense of violence. The most recognizable of these themes was *defining violence in terms of bullying*. When defining violence (RQ1), students used the terms bullying and violence to define and describe one another, and often shifted back and forth between the two terms. In many of these examples, a student would begin to define and discuss violence, but moved to the topic of bullying when personalizing the issue. In the following example, the student began talking about violence in general and then shifted to bullying, "People do violence because that person doesn't like that person. He/she would bully the person he/she doesn't like..." (S45). This type of example is just one of many where students switched one term for another, indicating that students equate the terms bullying and violence. In another example, when discussing solutions to violence, the student remarked, "one way to stop violence is you have to stop bullying because bullying is the cause of violence". (S46DM) This type of example further demonstrates how the student relates these concepts. Perhaps the most obvious example of the interchange of words is the example given in the previous chapter, "Violence is a type of bullying" (S6D). Defining violence in terms of bullying also included frequent references to verbal harassment and persecution that the children termed emotional and psychological violence (characteristics of the definition of bullying). This action suggests that children ascribe meaning to violence by (RQ2) by interchanging a familiar term or experience (bullying) with another (violence). The following student, a twelve-year-old female, demonstrates how many students connect violence and bullying (including the verbal/psychological component:

When I hear the word violence, bullying comes to mind. I think that victims feel tormented and alone with no one to stand up for them. To me, violence means teasing, insulting, and fighting. I define violence as a behavior involving physical force or hurtful words (S52DM).

The second theme that became evident within the cognitive domain was *the universal experience of violence*, which was revealed in their definition of violence as a “universal experience” (RQ2). Coded independently of the definition of violence, many students described violence as commonplace in their lives, or as something that touches everyone’s lives. For example, a thirteen year old girl wrote, “Violence is what you mostly see in America. It’s all over the news and Internet, and it sucks that the next Generation is going to have to be born into a world of violence.” (S31DM). Other children considered how the prevalence of violence in their world normalizes it and make it more difficult to identify, which responds to RQ2. For example, one girl stated, “Sadly in today’s society it is common for violence to carve a space into everyone’s lives...Since violence is written in our DNA it may be hard to understand when you are doing it...” (S36DM). A young boy added, “Violence is everywhere you go. No matter what you do, you will see it. Everyone does it. Even you do it, but you just don’t know it.” (S45). Student references to the prevalence of violence, especially within the context of their personal experiences, lends clarification to their understanding of its normalcy. Comments such as “Violence is all around us. We might not pay attention, but it is.” (S53DM) or “Violence affects everyone’s life at some point.” (S54DM) further illustrate this point.

Many students remarked about the widespread presence of violence with comments such as, “Violence is everywhere” (S30DM) and “You see violence everywhere: School, the Mall,

movies, News, or even at school.” (S31DM). One student addressed the social broadness of violence with the statement, “Violence is everywhere in todays society and its not just a spesific gender or race or sexuality its everybody...” (S32). The universal experience of violence was coded 88 times within 63 references, evidencing that is considered a substantial issue within the essays. Within the terms of the universal experience, some students addressed the universal impact of violence. For example, one student commented, “The truth is that violence is harmful to anybody. It is not just the person that is involved in the violent behavior; it affects the daily lives of their friends, relatives, and sometimes even strangers.” (S26). Another student addresses the normalizing impact of the comprehensive experience when stating, “Violence is a thing you can get used to. Its kind of weird but you can make excuses for the person. It just kind of slips into your life and stays.” (S33).

The final theme present within the cognitive domain, is the *cycle of violence*. Throughout the essays, the students used the cycle of violence to both explain it (in terms of a cause) and evaluate it (in terms of a consequence). When coding the essays, these two were separated by their parent codes and labeled differently in order to reduce confusion. As a cause, the code was labeled as “exposure to violence” (72 references), while as a consequence it was labeled as “the cycle” (37 references). As the highest coded cause of violence, it is clear that many students believe in the concept that violence begets violence (RQ2). For example, a thirteen-year-old girl stated, “People nowadays don’t think that they are being violent because thats what there used to. But that’s just the thing, they are hurting people because they have been hurt before!” (S7D). Similarly, a 12 year old boy from another district stated, “youth violence comes from kids that have been bullied themselves. Then these people don’t know how to handle it and bully other kids so then they don’t feel bad.” (S49). One perceptive eleven-year-old girl noted, “when

someone's heart is hurting [hurting] they don't know how to react so they act out in negative ways, they tend to try to make others feel bad about themselves because they do not have confidence in themselves." (S50M) Examples such as the previous ones demonstrate a clear position, expressed consistently throughout the reviewed essays, that violence is a learned behavior. When discussing their own engagement in violent or aggressive behavior, students explaining the cycle of violence verbalized intriguing and insightful comments which reveal how they assign meaning to it (RQ3). A thirteen-year-old boy states, "I've always tried to stay away from violence, but when people make fun of me I always get mad, and start shouting or fighting." (S51). Another example, from a twelve-year-old girl in another district, reflected:

Violence has affected my life by bullying. I was going through a rough time when I was little and I knew I was never the nicest kid around. I didn't know how I felt exactly. I was upset, angry, and confused. I didn't even realize what I was doing." (S22DM)

Within this framework of the cycle, students repeatedly looked to past experiences to better understand and make sense of violent behavior. They explicate and justify the actions of the aggressor by outlining a history of earlier exposure to violence. For example, a twelve-year-old girl writes, "Kids are getting abused at home and bottling up anger that their parents won't let them release so they go and take it out on other children at school which is bullying." (S55). On the other end of the cycle, students recognize it as a consequence of violence, exposure to violence leads to further violent behavior. In the following example, a 13-year-old girl sums up the full cycle of violence from her view:

When people get confused because there used to be violence And hurt in their lives they think that it's normal to that's who they grow up and marry somebody

who beats them and forces them to do things.....People nowadays don't think that they are being violent because that's what there used to. But that's just the thing, they are hurting people because they have been hurt before!" (S7D)

### ***Emotional Domain***

Especially meaningful in terms of how the students made sense of their experiences with violence are the emotional nuances ever present in the essays. Within the emotional domain, the first theme which surfaces is *complex emotions* related to violence. Students discussed their emotional experience most frequently in their personal stories, indicating that much of their definition, meaning, and experience of violence is founded in the emotive experience. Furthermore, students generally expressed multiple emotions (pain, fear, hurt, anger, etc.) within one concept, thus complicating the emotional experience. For example, one student described her experience of violence as "I felt pain and fear at the same time. I realized it had affected me seeing people hurt for no reason."(S52DM). Similarly, this twelve-year-old girl described complex emotions when stating, "...violence is a terrible thing that has gotten out of hand. It causes so much pain in peoples lives. It makes me sad to have to think about all these kids having to deal with violence". (S7D). Another student remarked, "The world, to me at least, is just one big violence and hate-filled rock floating around other rocks in the middle of nothing" (S35). Students repeatedly commented on what they termed "emotional violence" or "mental violence" which defines violence within their peer groups, families, and communities (RQ2). In these examples, students framed violence as a verbal or psychological encounter, rather than a physical confrontation. A twelve year old girl writes,

The mental violence is the pain that doesn't touch you physicaly, but you can feel it in the back of your mind. It's the pain that keeps you awake at night. It's the

pain that makes you cry for no reason. It's the pain that you will have to deal with for the rest of your life. Mental violence is the pain you think of that will not go away. (S39DM).

Another example of this perspective is written by a twelve-year-old boy from another district,

Violence doesn't need to be physical it can be emotional and mental. My school mates have been putting emotional and mental violence on me and my friends, but the only thing I can do is to be nice and pray for them. (S40).

When personalizing these experiences, students often expressed internalizing the emotions. A thirteen-year-old girl wrote, "Violence has affected my life from people trying to bring me down. Every day people wanted to make me feel alone and it worked." (S28).

Similarly, a fourteen year old boy offered this definition, "Violence is when somebody...hits or says mean things to people or just when you want to make fun of somebody for something."

(S23D). A twelve year old girl from another school described a related situation:

Violence has affected my life because it hurts my feelings tremendously. I have wanted to break down and cry in the middle of school multiple times because of people being violent to me or to others. I have been teased because of the clothes I wear on my back, how I do my hair each morning, my weight and how much money I have. (S48D).

Like all of these examples, many of the students equate teasing and harassing behaviors with the violence they experience every day. Terms such as hurt, pain, hate, and harmful surface repeatedly throughout the student essays paralleling multiple complex emotions occurring simultaneously within their explanations.

One day, it went very far, the word DIE had been written in my writing journal.

Sadly that was only the beginning of my problems....until it became physical...she shoved the end of her bat handle into my side...I was Terrified to say anything, since she might do something worse". (S56D)

Examples such as this one evidence discourse that demonstrates both evident and obscured emotions such as fear, dismay, torment, anxiety and distress. While some students were able to articulate the emotions clearly, others described them in terms of their behaviors. For example, one boy describes his behavior after a personal encounter with violence as "It affected me by getting my grades down....I became lazy, I don't do my homework, and I didn't care about school." (S60). All through the students' discussions, particularly personal experiences, emotions were clearly tied to their experiences, suggesting that their understanding of violence is heavily rooted in their emotional perception of the experience (RQ3).

The second theme identified within the emotional domain is *helplessness*, which responds to the way in which children make sense of the violence in their lives (RQ3). Some students expressed candid and clear proclamations of helplessness. For example, one student wrote "What could a 10 year old girl do, while her brother is laying down, in the middle of the street, and dead?" (S9DM). Similarly, another student stated "Looking back on it there was really nothing I could have done." (S10DM). Other students were noted to combine the feelings of helpless with other emotions in the context of their personal stories. For example, "Once when I was little I saw one of my friends getting beat by older kids. I was filled with fear, and felt utterly useless like someone was holding me back." (S11DM). Another student entered, "She began to cry, so I tried to comfort her. I wanted to help her so bad, but there was nothing I could do." (S12DM). Both students in these examples appealed to the emotional experience along with the

abject helplessness of the situation. Riddled throughout the essays was an undercurrent of both vulnerability and powerlessness, expressed as both personal and communal traits. In the following example of personal helplessness, a 13 year old girl attempts to alert her brother, "As usual he would always push me aside. He never cared what I told him. He thought I didn't knew what I was talking about....I tried to warn him, but my words for him were nothing." (S9DM). From a collective perspective, students addressed helplessness in terms of feeble dependence. Such an example follows, "Teachers don't see it all, and what they do see it is too late to stop it and fights break..." (S49).

### ***Moral Domain***

The third domain of evident themes in this research was the moral domain. Within this area, the most prevalent theme was the principle of *violence is wrong*. Typical of the moral and reasoning development of children in early adolescence, violence was categorized into a dichotomous grouping of "bad" or "wrong" (as opposed to "good" or "right"). This labeling served to morally define the violence (RQ2). For example, a thirteen-year-old girl wrote, "Violence is wrong and hurtful, because it is horrendous, painful to watch, and leaves many with horrific memories." (S12DM). Another fourteen-year-old girl captured this when she stated, "Violence is a bad opportunity for people. It can lead people down a dangerous road." (S38D). A thirteen year old girl from another school stated, "Violence is a bad thing because the anger associated with it is hurtful and sometimes harmful", defining it both in terms of morality (wrong) and emotions (hurt).

Student discourse within the essays attended the theme of *violence as wrong* as a way to classify it within their moral understanding. For example, a twelve-year-old girl remarked, "I think violence is wrong because it can never solve anything." (S22DM), while another echoed



this in terms of “bad” with, “Too get people to notice violence is bad. They might stop it. Violence is very bad for everyone.” (S69DM). In concordance with the term “wrong”, many students used “bad” as a method of expressing the iniquities of violence. One such student defined violence in the following manner, “Violence is bad. Violence is when somebody is when someone hits or says mean things to people or just when you want to make fun of somebody for something.” (S23D). While some students addressed the injustices of violence simply and directly such as, “Violence is a very bad thing, and can harm people in many different ways.” (S24M); others offered similar but more descriptive statements such as, “Violence is the worst aspect of human nature, and the world would be much better if it didn't exist. Violence can harm innocent people, separate people, and cause other terrible things.” (S25DM). Some students addressed the definition within the terms of the emotional consequences, “Violence is bad for any human being because it feels like you have a hole in your heart and it just keeps getting bigger.” (S26). Addressing both the morality of violence and the commonality, one student stated, “Violence is a terrible and cruel action, but it’s everywhere.” (S27). Each of these definitions and examples of violence clearly speak to the students’ beliefs of violence as iniquitous.

Within the *violence is wrong* theme was the noted consequence of “harm to others”. Students noticeably link violence to physical or emotional injury or damage and often explain the pain within their lives as related to violent destruction. For example, one thirteen year old girl wrote, “vilence [violence] is like a F5 Hurricane and twister mixed together. It causes loved ones pain, so unbearable.” (S43DM). A boy from another school added, “I know kids that died young. But this is a cold world and people die over volience [violence] and over stupid stuff.”

(S44DM). It is interesting to note that in many of the coded samples of “harm to others”, students would again address the emotional connection to violence.

Among the causes of violence within the moral domain were the themes of *judging* and *parenting issues*. The “judging” code was developed in response the number of students who described violence related to criticism, discrimination, or condemnation. The judging theme is focused more on how the children make sense of the violence (RQ3) than how they define the violence. Using the term “mess” to describe verbal and emotional criticism, the following student demonstrates how the judging leads to violence: “One cause of violence is starting mess. A girl named JaNea that lived in my apartments started some mess with a boy. Everything backfired on her and she went got a razor and tried to cut him, but he ran.” (S17DM). Another student (thirteen-year-old girl) expresses how belittling actions by others impact her personal world, “We come to school to learn, not to try to hide in lockers, in order to hide from that tall, broad guy who for some reason is picking on you”. (S31DM). A fourteen year old boy from another district describes how judging by his peers not only started violence, but also led to more violence: “I have been bullied all in elementary. Kids would make fun of me and say I was weird.....One day I just couldn’t take it. I fought each day to defend myself.” (S27). In these examples, students shed light on how judging behaviors are not only a cause of violence, but also lead to consequences and permeate their everyday worlds.

Researchers identified the “judging” code, within the “causes are” parent code, in response to the many student references to feeling judged, criticized, or condemned, or engaging in any of these actions. It was noted that racially motivated judgment (including prejudices and racism) were included in this code. While many of the personal experiences of violence depicted within the “judging” code were noted to be verbal or emotional, since the source of the code

(judging) was identified as value based, this theme was clustered within the moral domain. For example, a thirteen-year-old female student described the following event: "It was 3<sup>rd</sup> grade or 4<sup>th</sup> grade people use to bully me because I didn't know how to spell or read that much. It was hard on me because they teased me and called me names, like dumb or stupid." (S15DM). A thirteen-year-old girl from another school stated bluntly, "I get picked on all the time just so my peers feel better about themselves." (S16). When addressing judging behaviors in the essay, one student used language typical of the slang used with their peers: Examples of physical violence, like this one, were clearly linked as a consequence of the judging behaviors.

Also defined under the moral domain, students identified *parenting issues* (often poor parenting skills or decisions) as dishonorable or improper behaviors, which led to experiences of violence (RQ3). The code "parenting issues" was developed in response to the number of essays which linked violence to either their perceived treatment by parents or perceived parental modeling. Within the personal stories, students discuss both emotional and physical violence while often critiquing the parental authority structure. Examples such as, "When parents beat their kids for no apparent reason at all, it is not right. When I was around six years old, my momma used to beat me with the belt." (S18DM) demonstrate the student's assessment of being wrongfully treated by parents. More than 60 references of violence caused by parenting or child rearing factors were coded within the qualitative analysis. Many students clearly and directly related violent actions to family and home life. One well-defined example of this comes from a fourteen-year-old boy who wrote, "there's several reasons for violence. One is that parents get mad easily. They hit their kids because they get bad grades, steal, lie, or talk back." (S41D). Similarly, a 12 year old from another district wrote, "Lots of people think that guns or weapons are the cause of violence but it's not. The real reason is how kids grew up. If they were treated

bad as kids that is how they will when they are adults.” (S42D). Other students linked more negligent parenting behaviors such as this example:

Adults should also watch how they behave in front of children just in case you have been drinking with your friends. Don't leave ANY drugs around the house. You wouldn't want to see your child being killed over a bottle of pills. (S27).

One student described her experience of violence as it relates to her parents' role and authority: “The few people who hurt me the most are my mother and father, they verbally abuse me. When they call me names like stupid and dumb it hurts because there the ones who are supposed to be most supportive.” (S16). Parents who model violent behavior was also evident and criticized in context as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

“First, I saw my Dad slap my Mom so I went to him and he said he was just playing. So I let it pass but then I saw him hitting my Mom constantly. So one day when my Mom did not went to work I told her to go away from him.” (S19DM)

On the other hand, the student who explained, “I have a friend who is currently dealing with sexual harassment from her mother's boyfriend. Her mother doesn't believe her, so she has to deal with him everyday she goes home.” (S12DM) criticizes the parent's passive role within the experience of violence. Likewise, other students were quick to blame further violent behavior on the modeling behavior of their parents. One student captured this quickly in the statement, “When he goes back to his home in the Projects where he isn't loved he turns violent.” (S20). Similarly, another student who is discussing the parental relationship adds:

“When they're mean to me that's all I can think about so I block off my emotions so that no one can hurt me anymore. But I take it out on others and I don't like to

but that's all I can think to do is hurt people like how I am hurt and I often feel that no one needs me.” (S21D).

### *Solutions*

The final two themes which emerged relate to the students' view of solutions to violence. The first of these, *stop the violence*, resonated loudly within the context of the student essays, but offered little information or insight. Once referred to as *superficial solutions* by the coders, this theme was the most prevalent solution offered by the students in the qualitative analysis. While it seemed to logically follow the *violence is wrong* theme, it posed only minimal evidence of actual resolutions or actions for intervention.

Lastly, the theme of *get involved* echoed loudly the students' desire and intent to become an active part of the solution to violence. Emerging first in the grading session of all essays, the get involved theme included actions in which the students take part in larger activities aimed at helping victims and ending violence; a sort of social justice movement. In this theme, clear actions were delineated which reached beyond the common “tell someone” or “walk away” and offered productive solutions for students to engage in. One student wrote, “I am going to fix this issue by starting a support group for women & children who have been affected by violence. I want to start this group to tell them they're not alone & it will get better for you.” (S58DM). When discussing his plight with violence as a young Muslim American in Southeast Texas, a twelve year old boy writes:

I realize that I can't stop the violence that is happening, but I try by being a bridge between Muslims' and Americans' misunderstandings.....I can also help start interfaith conferences where all types of people can get together and learn about each other. (S59DM)

Examples such as these illustrate clearly how students wish to be a part of the solution, not only as a participant, but also as a catalyst for change.

### **Summary of Results**

Several interesting relations were revealed in the manifest content analysis of 1,165 submitted essays. When addressing a personal encounter with violence, students most commonly discussed the role of witness, as opposed the role of victim or perpetrator. The most common type of violence the students discussed was bullying, followed by violence in the media (television or movies), and child physical abuse. It was noted that students discussed bullying in 49% of the overall essays, while all other types of violence were discussed in less than 20% of the essays. External factors (such as alcohol, drugs, jail, or weapons) were present in less than 10% of the total sample. The only exception was the combined total of substances (alcohol and drugs) which were evident in nearly 15% of the essays. The presence of protective factors was noted in more than one-third of the essays (36.3%) with personal characteristics and family attachment scoring the highest among the individual protective factors. The most commonly reported solution was to tell someone (37%), however, more than one-fourth of the students mentioned no solutions in their essays. Students also mentioned getting involved (17%) as a solution to violence within their lives. A review of the demographics for the participant sample (used for the qualitative analysis) revealed similar results to the overall contestants, suggesting that the selected sample of participants was representative of the overall submissions.

While the gender breakdown offered little information about the differences in males and females, the Economically Disadvantaged and Minority schools revealed some unique characteristics. While the EcoD and MinS schools reported witnessing as the most common role, they reported it at a slightly higher rate than the overall sample. They also recorded bullying as

the most common type of violence, however, they recorded this at a slightly lower rate than the overall sample. While the EcoD and MinS schools did not reveal marked differences from the overall sample in external factors, it was noted that the EcoD schools did report more police involvement than their EcoS counterparts. Among the most interesting information revealed from the EcoD and MinS breakdown was the increased presence of protective factors in each of these subgroups. Both subgroups reported a higher presence of protective factors in their essays than the overall sample as well as a higher amount than their subgroup counterpart.

Interestingly, essays from the EcoD and MinS schools revealed the protective factors of family attachment and personal characteristics at a higher rate than the overall sample. Minority Schools revealed more connection to cultural identity as a protective factor than their subgroup counterpart.

Guided in part by the manifest content analysis, the latent content analysis of the student essays (n=132) revealed a number of themes which are grouped by domain and will be discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter. Personal experiences, often identified by the consequence of “harm to others”, were evident throughout many of the essays. Consistent with both their emotional and moral development, many students identified violence as concretely “wrong” or “bad”. When specifically defining violence, it was clear that many students interchanged the term with bullying; the most common form of violence present within their lives. Ignoring both the power differential and repeated acts unique to bullying, many students defined violence by describing bullying in their terms; this often included verbal and emotional violence among peers. Furthermore, students regularly defined the experience of violence as a “universal experience”; indicating that it is ever-present in today’s society.

Amid many of the stories and definitions of violence was the emotional undercurrent present in the essays. Many students expressed feelings of helplessness and powerlessness within the context of the violence in their lives. Students also referred to feelings of hurt and fear, particularly when discussing personal experiences. When discussing the root causes of violence, the students regularly mentioned judging behaviors and parenting issues. Judging behaviors generally related to the peer groups, while parenting issues focused on family issues. In terms of solutions, students focused strongly on telling an adult, often a teacher or a parent. It was noted that students often mentioned getting involved in an active solution to violence such as starting a campaign, school group, or community awareness activity. The overall meaning of violence, while being captured in multiple domains and dimensions, was typically described as a bullying incident (within varying definitions) which resulted in a complex emotional response by the student(s).



## Chapter 5

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the data analyzed in the previous chapter, this chapter presents a summary, discussion, and conclusions of the findings of the study based on the context presented through the literature review. In addition, this chapter examines the implications for social workers, school leaders, and allied health care professionals working with children, particularly children at risk of exposure to violence. The strengths and limitations of this study are examined and recommendations for future study are addressed. The purpose of the current study was to identify the ways in which middle school students experience violence within their everyday living as expressed in their written submissions to the local “*Do the Write Thing*” Challenge. Student demographics including gender, low-income status, and minority status were also involved in the analysis. The current study was not designed to determine the prevalence of violence within a specific demographic, but rather to examine the ways in which the students experience and make sense of the violence which they are exposed to. Information gleaned from the manifest content analysis was used to direct the thematic qualitative analysis which examined students’ inferred values, attitudes, and beliefs. This study supports prior research addressing the exposure of children to violence (Finkelhor et al., 2009; Osofsky, 1999), the children’s understanding of violence (Buckley et al., 2007; Quinn et al., 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2004), and strengthening both the response to violence and the children’s resiliency when exposed (Finkelhor, Turner, & Hamby, 2012; Masten, 2014; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012a).

The data in this study were used to evaluate both the dimensions of violence presence in the essays as well as the ways in which the children define and ascribe meaning to violence.

This section outlines the findings of this study and draws conclusions from these findings.

Interpretations and expansions of the findings are also included.

## **Discussion**

### **Research Question 1: What are the dimensions of violence present?**

Dimensions of violence were categorized into 1) the experience dimension such as roles of the writer and forms of violence, 2) the sources of violence such as media and interpersonal relationships, and 3) the protective factors. There was an overwhelming use of bullying as an interchangeable term to violence and the modern way of using media as a means to violence exposure. Family violence was recorded in nearly one-fourth of the essays, and among the students reporting witnessing violence, over one-third of those discussed witnessing family violence. Demographic comparisons also illustrated differences in perceptions found in various subgroups.

Based on the data, students are most likely to discuss violence from the role of witness, rather than victim or perpetrator. In the overall sample, and across most subgroups, the most active role that students regularly discussed was the role of witness. Whether students report witnessing because it is the most prevalent way in which they experience violence, or because they are more comfortable assuming the role of witness as a distancing or objectifying technique is unclear from this study; however, previous research suggests that witnessing is under-reported and highly prevalent among teenagers (Carlson, 1991; Edleson, 1999; Evans et al., 2008).

The prevalence of bullying as the most commonly discussed type of violence was both anticipated and insightful, in that it shed light on how youth of define and understand violence. In the overall contestants, bullying was reported in nearly 50% of the essays; substantially more

often than any other individual type or category of violence. This finding further supports previous research that indicates the prevalence of bullying is a significant issue for students in the middle school years (Pergolizzi et al., 2011; M. Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Previous research also identifies bullying as mostly a school-related issue for children, and as these essays were part of a classroom exercise, it is possible that the school environment had some influence on the essay content. Anti-bullying campaigns and educational programs used within the schools and have significantly raised awareness for students, however, this awareness appears to have been generalized by students to other forms of violence (Children's Safety Network, 2011). Within their essays, students commonly referred to mistreatment by parents, family violence, and generalized peer conflicts as bullying. When discussing bullying, the students were more likely to identify with the role of victim as opposed to witness or perpetrator. While many personal stories of bullying discussed multiple roles (i.e. victim and witness), 76% of the student essays about bullying addressed students as a victim of peer related bullying.

Following bullying, the next most frequently discussed types of violence in the student essays were family violence and media violence. Family violence was present in nearly one-fourth (23.3%) of the students' essays with students identifying most often with the role of witness. This suggests that students witness family violence more often than other forms of violence, and are keenly aware of the violence within their homes (even if they are not actively involved). Media violence was present in one-fifth of the essays (20.5%), but students did not identify with any particular role in media violence. This is likely related to the many ways in which media violence touches their lives. For example, students who choose to play violent video games are not clearly in any of the identified roles (not victim because of their willing

engagement, not witness because they are a participant, not a perpetrator because they did not create or distribute the game), but nevertheless are exposed to the violence.

Even though bullying was documented as the most prevalent form of violence, it was noted that EcoD and MinS schools reported it at a lower rate than the overall group. Similarly, the presence of media violence was also recorded at a lower rate for these groups and EcoD students discussed community violence at a lower rate than their counterparts. Interestingly, students in EcoD and MinS schools did not discuss any type of violence more frequently than students in the EcoS or non-minority schools. This finding is inconsistent with previous research which indicates that students who are considered economically disadvantaged or minority are at a higher risk for violence (Krug et al., 2002; Resnick et al., 2004). It is unclear, however, if the students are actually experiencing less violence, or are just less likely to discuss it in the content of their submitted essays. Furthermore, it is important to interpret this finding with caution as the results of this study do not necessarily indicate the socioeconomic or minority status of the participants, but rather the school. Whether attending an EcoD or MinS school influences the experience of the student (despite the status of the student) is not clear and cannot be determined by this study.

The presence of protective factors was of particular interest, especially as it surfaced in the EcoD and MinS subgroups. In the overall sample, more than one-third (36.3%) of the students discuss protective factors within the content of their essays. Students in the overall sample most commonly discuss the presence of personal characteristics as a protective factor, followed by family connectedness. This is consistent with the developmental level of children in the middle school years as they are internally focused, yet still dependent upon the family unit (Kington & O'Sullivan, 2001). The prevalent discussion of protective factors within the EcoD

and MinS populations (more than 40% for each population) suggests that students either utilize these factors more often, or they have greater awareness of the influence of these factors. While both subgroups evidenced the specific factors of personal characteristics and family attachment (like the overall sample), it was noted that EcoD students were more likely to discuss social support within their essays.

A gender comparison of the data indicated that males were more likely to discuss bullying and community violence within the context of their essays than females. On the other hand, females were more likely to discuss family violence and personal violence. These results make sense in light of other research which indicates that boys are more likely to relate to externalized behaviors and violence (such as peer fights or gangs) while girls are more likely to identify with internalized violence both within self (personal harm) and within the family (Moylan et al., 2010; Sternberg, Baradaran, Abbott, Lamb, & Guterman, 2006; Widom, 2000). Boys discussed the presence of weapons in their essays more often than girls did. Females were more likely to discuss protective factors, particularly social support, which again is confirmed in the social development of middle school girls who rely heavily on peers for support and validation (Rose & Asher, 1999; Rose & Rudolph, 2006).

The vast amount of information revealed in the DtWT essays was both illuminating and overwhelming. The latent content analysis revealed several key points and even illuminated some interesting relations, but with such a high number of variables, it is important to examine and interpret the results with caution. Many of the relations between variables in the content analysis revealed very small effect sizes. Social science researchers generally outline conventional phi values of .50, .30, and .10 as large, medium and small effect sizes respectively (S. B. Green & Salkind, 2011). Based on this information, many of the results were supported

by extremely small effect sizes which suggest that the magnitude of the relation between variables is small and further examination may be required. The manifest content analysis was an exploratory component intended to guide and inform the latent analysis. Due to this exploratory nature and limited previous research of this type, a formal hypothesis is not yet to be formed. Information learned from this section of the study illuminated children's experience and perception toward the key issues of violence in their immediate environment.

### **Research Question 2: How do children define violence?**

How children define violence appears to fall in three domains: cognitive, emotional, and moral. Interestingly, these domains are indicative of key developmental stages for children in the middle school years. Cognitively, children in the middle school years begin to understand abstract processes, are able to view issues or problems from multiple perspectives, and are better able to understand multiple steps within a process (Boyd, Bee, & Johnson, 2006). The students' focus on multiple definitions of violence aligns with this expanded cognitive development. Many of the students referred to violence in terms of emotional or verbal acts, indicating that they understand violence can be experienced in multiple ways and is defined as a force which extends beyond the physical domain. Students also discussed violence in terms of a universal experience, demonstrating the ability to view it more abstractly and in terms of a societal issue. The discussion of the widespread prevalence of violence appears to be an attempt to establish a critical context for their understanding. Furthermore, by normalizing the experience of violence, the students may be better equipped to discuss their experience with it.

Another intriguing observation within the cognitive domain was the way in which the students often interchanged the terms violence and bullying, or used these terms to define one another. The manner in which the students correlate these two concepts suggests a distorted

understanding of their definitions, which may be reflective of their experiences. It appears that the students have operationalized these definitions within the framework of their worlds, thus blending the two terms and blurring their distinctions. As illustrated in many of the submitted essays, students applied characteristics of a familiar term (i.e., the teasing and offensive features of bullying) to a similar term (violence). In doing this, students both discounted and highlighted the critical features of bullying. By equating bullying to violence in general, students ignored (or perhaps revealed) their ignorance of the differential power (a defining characteristic) in bullying. On the other hand, students reinforced the element of bullying as an experience of childhood especially within the school system (J. Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009b). The excessive referencing of bullying throughout the students' texts reveals clearly that it is an issue on the forefront of both their minds and their experiences. For many students, bullying may be the only form of violence which they have experienced or discussed within the context of their lives. While defining bullying as a form of violence is not a misuse of the term, defining violence solely within the scope of bullying is. In addition, this information is consistent with previous research which indicates that students actively misuse the term bullying, and therefore mislabel the related behaviors (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Perhaps much of this can be related to the increase in bullying awareness over the past decade (National Association of School Psychologists, 2012). As the students meld the terms bullying and violence together, it appears that they use the term they are readily familiar with (bullying) to define, describe, or explain what they deem a similar term (violence).

Evident in the moral domain was the children's definition of violence with the underlying morality as "bad" or "wrong". Typical of the pre-conventional and conventional stages of moral development, this view of violence is grounded in the sense of rules, consequences, and ensuring

societal order (Astor, 1994a; Smetana, 2006). This polarized thinking is indicative of the moral development of many young adolescents as they often struggle to objectively interrupt their own beliefs or reasoning in favor of an alternative or opposing view (Geil, 1998).

### **Research Question 3: How do children ascribe meaning to violence?**

Within the cognitive domain, the theme of *cycle of violence* illuminates the way in which students attribute violence to a cycle of behaviors – both as a cause and as a consequence. The concept that violence begets violence evident in the students' writings suggests that they understand it as both a behavior and an outcome which impacts their lives. Such reference to the cycle of violence, demonstrates an insightful understanding based on rudimentary inductive reasoning. The emergence of this theme is consistent with earlier research that suggests young adolescents are able to employ inductive reasoning especially when applied to their existing knowledge base (Byrnes, 2008; Sodian, Zaitchik, & Carey, 1991).

In the emotional domain, students in the middle school years are prone to heightened emotions and increased sensitivity (Kagitcibasi, 2013), which is consistent with the emotional undertones present throughout the essays. Many of the essays connected personal stories of violence to descriptive emotions and feelings indicating an emotional response to the recorded event. The presence of multiple emotions expressed within one sentence or thought indicate that many of these students struggle with a multitude of emotions surrounding violence and violent events. Fear and anger were two of the most prevalent emotions, however students rarely expressed these feelings independently of other emotions. Pain, hurt, hatred, and despair echoed throughout the students' emotional expressions as they attempted to make sense of the violence in their lives.



While memory is generally better for emotionally charged events, it may also be influenced by the intense emotions surrounding the event (Richard & Green, 2007). This increased sensitivity to emotions, coupled with the recall of a violent event, may significantly impact the students' recall and expression of the violent event(s); which then impacts their understanding and perception of the violence. Therefore, we can be fairly certain that middle school students are likely to ascribe increased emotional meaning to violence and connect more intently to the emotional experience than adults (Boyd, Bee, & Johnson, 2006; Gross, 1998). Throughout the students' essays, feelings and emotions were highly connected to their experiences and memory of a violent event, suggesting that students' shape their understanding of violence based on their emotional perception of the experience.

A cause of violence identified by many students was related to how parental/caretaker behavior influences or teaches a child to either behave violently or tolerate violence. This theme was consistent with Zimmerman's (2004) findings, which found that students frequently identified "parenting practices" as a cause of violence. Identifying parenting issues as a cause for violence is somewhat indicative of the students' developmental level and locus of control. As student in the middle school years are facing the early stages of adolescence, their awareness of the world around them (and outside of their own family) is increasing. And yet, they are evidently dependent upon and linked to the family which cares for them. This struggle, coupled with the emotional changes of adolescence, lends to both exploring and blaming behaviors as evidenced in their references to parenting issues. Parenting issues as both a cause and a consequence, however, cannot be entirely separated from the prevalence of family violence recorded within the students' essays. For students who experience violence as a result of

parenting practices, blaming may be justified and not simply an artifact of their developmental stage.

The opposing themes of *helplessness* and *get involved* (solution) suggest that the students are seeking opportunities to feel more empowered about the violence in their lives. The fact that these themes were both evident suggests that the students want to combat the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness by becoming actively engaged in a solution; an option that could benefit both the students and the greater community. Engaging the students in the development of solutions not only offers them an opportunity to be heard, but also to be a part of social change. Research indicates that solutions crafted by the target population, directly using their ideas and actions, has been an effective method for facilitating change for those most impacted by the injustice (Quinn et al., 2007). Based on the suggestions of the students, these solutions would include starting local anti-violence campaigns, raising awareness of the harmful effects of violence, and offering interventions for victims of violence such as school-based support groups.

The two most commonly addressed solutions were to “tell someone” (37%) or “get involved” (17%), with subgroup measures very close to the collective sample. It was noted that females reported “tell someone” as a viable solution more often than males, but not at a level of significance. It was also noted that the subgroups of EcoD and MinS discussed police involvement as a practical solution more often than their corresponding subgroups. Other than personal stories, “solutions” was the most commonly and thoroughly covered topic within the essays as evidenced by the number of references. Such solutions indicate that students may feel they have some viable answers to the problem of violence or that they have a strong desire for further intervention.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As this study sought to investigate children's perceptions and experience of violence from the essays submitted to the "*Do the Write Thing*" Challenge, it was limited to participating students in Region V. Region V consists of 6 counties and 36 public school districts. Much of the Region V area is noted to be a rural area with the majority of the districts enrolling less than 1000 students at all levels. The largest district in the sample reports 19,830 students has recently been taken over by the Texas Education Agency, suggesting that the district is in a state of unrest. The smallest district in the region reports 179 students enrolled in all grade levels. While the perceptions and experiences of the students in this sample may not represent middle school students in other regions, the information gathered may instruct future efforts.

The data provided for this research consists entirely of the essays written by middle school students ages 11 – 15, which presents several issues for analysis. The essays are submitted directly to the DtWT Challenge, without revisions or grading by the educators. As such, many essays contain spelling and grammatical errors which may impact the message. For example, one of the essays reviewed in the pilot study contained the following sentence:

They have all this ager built up inside them so they take it out on people  
they have sterth over people. (PS3)

While it appears that the underlined words were intended to be anger and strength, this is not entirely certain. Grammatical and spelling errors (such as the word *bulling* for *bullying* or interchanging *affected* and *effected*) not only lead to incorrect analysis with the software, but also made the interpretation extremely challenging at times. Furthermore, many of the submitted essays are handwritten which at times can be difficult to read. These handwritten essays do not

produce clear images when copied which limits the sample size and possibly excludes valuable information.

The students who submit the essays are instructed to write only about actual events, however, it is clear in some of the essays that the material was fabricated by the author. For example, in the pilot study, one of the essays which was randomly selected told a story about a boy whose father “died because of drug use”. The boy in the story then wanted to stop drug use:

And 6 month's later Billy decided to go get his savings. And buy all the drugs in the cities so he got his 180 trillion dollars and bought all the drug's in the citie and no one ever did drugs in the citie again. (PS4)

The reference to outrageous sums of money and the obliteration of drugs in this example, leads the researcher to believe that this story was at least partially fictitious. As the essays are submitted to the researcher once all identifying information has been removed, it is not feasible to validate the information or stories provided by the students. Furthermore, the content of the essays is entirely dependent upon the student's willingness to disclose events. Research on children who have been exposed to domestic violence indicates that the children generally report less violence than the adults involved (Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Rossman & Rosenberg, 1992). Therefore, it is likely that students may minimize, underestimate, or underreport the role of violence in their lives or the multiplicity of violence they are exposed to.

The nature of this research project presents several limitations simply within its design. Since data is collected anonymously from students in the form of essays, there is currently no opportunity to gather any additional information from the subjects. No additional interviews or follow-up sessions are available. The single form of data collection also limits triangulation in

the data gathering. On the other hand, the multitude of essays submitted offers a large data source for analyzing the experiences and perceptions of the students. By employing multiple coders and a systematic analytic strategy which provided a unified coding scheme, this study minimized the potential for researcher bias in the interpretation. Furthermore, as the PI was responsible for entering all qualitative data into the software, the coding was evaluated at least two separate times for accuracy and consistency.

Since the essay assignment is given by the classroom teacher, the content of the essay may be directly influenced by the prior classroom discussion. For example, students who discuss suicide in the classroom may be more likely to write about suicide as a form of violence. During the grading process, it was observed that some classes had distinct formatting and themes within the essays. For example, nearly all the students in one school used two literary references (generally movies and books) to describe and support their examples of violence. Another class included a paragraph which discussed how the world would be different with violence and then each of the essays ended with a thought-provoking question. These examples indicate that the classroom directions and discussion had an impact on the format, structure, and content of the essays submitted for this study.

Prior to the distribution of the DtWT Teacher Packets, the PI (under consultation with the Regional Chairperson) revised and edited the discussion prompts given to the teachers in the Teacher Handout. The goal of this revision was to allow for a more open and undirected discussion of violence and the meaning of violence within the lives of the children. Directed prompts (included in packets from other regions) such as, "Do teen celebrity role models influence today's youth to dress provocatively, diet to be thin, drink underage and make poor decisions? Are they sending the wrong message to their fans?" (Do the Write Thing, 2014) were

not included in the Teacher's Packet. Rather, the Teacher Packets contained less directive prompts focused specifically on the topic of violence. Examples of the added discussion prompts include, "When you hear the word violence, what thoughts or memories do you have?", and "What does violence mean to you?" While it seems that these prompts are better suited for non-directive discussions, it does provide the possibility that the researcher has some influence over the data which was gathered. Qualitative analysis is subject to influence by the researcher, particularly during the data analysis process, which could contribute to researcher bias.

Students participating in the DtWT Challenge are required to obtain signed parent permission, which presents another potential limitation. Parental permission, discussion with parents, or concern over parents reading the essay material may influence the content included in the essays. One teacher noted in the Teacher Evaluation Comment Page that several students did not turn in parent permission forms, because they did not want their parents knowing that they were writing about violence. As a result, in this particular case, several essays were excluded from the study. Additionally, simply discussing the assignment with parents could further lead to influence over the content of the essays and lead to underreporting, particularly of family violence. Students may feel inclined to focus the topic on information that is considered "safe" or acceptable to their parents or family. Furthermore, knowing that the winning essays would be published and shared in the Region V DtWT booklet could have significantly impacted the number of students who obtained parental consent as well as the content included in the essays.

It was originally the intent of this study to examine additional dimensions of violence such as frequencies, duration, multiplicity and intensity of exposure. The content in the students' essays, however, did not have the data to support these dimensions nor the follow-up information to retrieve it. Frequencies of exposure to violence was limited to what story, if any, the students

included in their essays and duration was covered only occasionally when the student added it to their story. Similarly, intensity of exposure was only available if the student included a personal incident, and would then have been determined by the volunteer grader. It is possible that multiplicity could have been documented, however, in order to simplify the analysis, volunteer graders were instructed to identify only the primary role of the student within their exposure to violence. Further research (with a revised design) would be needed to explore the additional dimensions of violence listed above.

While the manifest content analysis of the subgroups offered insight to the demographic make-up of the students, the subgroups of Economically Disadvantaged Schools and Minority Schools were determined by the school demographics and not necessarily the demographics of the participants. Furthermore, there was overlap between these two subgroups. Five schools met the criteria for both Economically Disadvantaged (5 of 8) and Minority status (5 of 6), meaning that most EcoD schools were also Minority schools (and vice versa). Results of the two subgroups were notably similar, suggesting that this overlap was influential.

The qualitative analysis of 132 was both representative and thorough, however, more than 1000 essays were not further reviewed. A following phase of this research could use the themes outlined in this study to guide further analysis of the remaining essays for a more comprehensive qualitative review of the data. As many of the essays responded to the directive prompts, further qualitative analysis could also focus primarily on the causes of violence and solutions to violence. Using the data from the overall contestants, further quantitative exploration could be performed to explore relationships between causes of violence, external or predictive factors, and/or consequences identified by the students. A comparison of the recorded types and frequencies of violence with the county or regional records of violence could also offer

further insight to the content discussed by the students. In the future, a more complex research design using a control group and intervention group could measure the effectiveness of an intervention on the middle school population. Another example could be building a logistic regression based on this data set to identify contributing factors that explain the presence of protective factors among various types of school in conjunction to the student's experience of a particular type of violence. Furthermore, as this challenge is done annually, results could be evaluated and compared with subsequent years.

### **Strengths and Implications**

A clear strength of this research project is the intense and powerful information available in the data. This study offers a unique perspective about the experience of violence through the stories of children. It allows researchers and professionals to examine the incidents, language, and meaning of violence from the words of the children. The manifest content analysis in this study offered demographic descriptions of the information in the data and gave an overall picture of the ways in which children write about their experience with violence. The qualitative analysis then supported this by exploring topics and issues in further detail. The end result provides information which will help inform prevention programs and interventions that are specifically relevant to the children involved.

Social workers and educators could benefit from education and training which specifically addresses some of the themes highlighted in this study. Knowing that students interchange the terms of bullying and violence can help professionals better understand the breadth of what a student may be reporting when discussing bullying experiences (i.e. "my parents bully me" may actually indicate child abuse rather than bullying). Students in this study often used the term bullying to define or describe other forms of violence, indicating that they



lack the terminology and knowledge to clearly articulate their experiences. By understanding this, practitioners and educators could better help students articulate and understand their experiences related to violence. Furthermore, the use of the term bullying to define violence further suggests that bullying is ever-present in the lives of middle school students. Pairing the anti-bullying campaigns with violence prevention programs could better inform and educate students about the risks and consequences of violence, particularly as they move into late adolescences and adulthood.

It is also clear from this study that middle school students attribute multiple complex emotions to the experience of violence and are likely to respond emotionally to the event. This information is critical for social workers when intervening after exposure to violence. As middle school students respond to the violence with many emotions (including fear, pain, hurt, confusion, anger, etc.) it is important to assess the emotional state of the child in order to most effectively intervene. Research on evidence-based practice and strength based practice indicates that a key component to healing is to “begin where the client is” (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larsen, 2009; Howard, Allen-Meares, & Ruffolo, 2007; Wodarski & Thyer, 1998). In order to effectively do this with children who have been exposed to violence, practitioners need to better understand the complexity of the emotions the children experience. For example, fear may be complicated by anger toward the aggressor and/or hurt by the betrayal. By understanding the multitude of emotions expressed by the youth who have been exposed to violence, social workers can more effectively support and empower these student(s) through the healing process.

Additionally, it is important that social workers and educators understand that students view violence as a universal experience; something that will be a part of their lives and possibly

something they must tolerate. As students normalize and distance themselves from violent experiences, as found in this study, they are at greater risk for enduring increased exposure to violence. It may be accurate that most children will experience some type of violence in their lives, particularly through bullying or the ever-increasing medium of media and technology, yet it is critical that students are able to differentiate between distant exposure and saturation. With this understanding, social workers can help students identify when violence is actually an imminent danger or a threat to their daily lives.

Social workers and educators could further benefit from training sessions focused on the specific dimensions of violence found in this study. Bullying, family violence, and media violence were among the most highly recorded forms of violence across all samples and sub-groups. Trainings focused specifically on these forms of violence could better equip professionals to work with the many students who are exposed to these types of violence. Furthermore, it is recommended that these trainings focus on the specific needs and implications for children who have witnessed violence as more children discuss this role than any other.

As students spend increasing amounts of time in the school setting, an estimated 31% of waking hours (Alliance, 2009; PEW Research Center, September, 2014), the schools not only define a great deal of the violence, but also offer an ideal platform for prevention and intervention services. The use of bullying as a term for violence suggests that recent efforts to increase bullying awareness within the schools has been effective. This impact, however, appears to have influenced students' definitions and perceptions of violence. As Vaillancourt et. al (2008) found, students are more likely to accurately report incidents of bullying when presented with an accurate definition, thus reducing over-reporting. Prevention programs, therefore, may be more effective by offering information which includes definitions and

examples of bullying as well as other forms of violence commonly experienced by youth. Once students have accurate definitions of different forms of violence, it stands to reason that they will be better equipped to identify it and seek help.

Another key implication for both policy and practice from this study is that nearly half of the middle school students who participated in the DtWT contest in this area of Texas report having experienced a personal encounter with violence. While this is lower than the national average of nearly 60% (Finkelhor et al., 2009), it is still clear that exposure to violence is prevalent among the youth. Therefore, at the very least, school social workers should have a clear protocol for dealing with this issue that includes referral sources to agencies equipped to explore, diagnose, and treat youth exposed to violence. With multiple agencies in the area serving the needs of the youth, it is further recommended that a Childhood Violence Task Force (modeled after the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence) is created to ensure that resources are available and not overlapping. The DtWT Chairperson (Judge Shelton) is ideally situated to mobilize this Task Force and include relevant agencies and programs (i.e. Victims' Assistance Program, IEA, Family Services of Southeast Texas, etc.).

Professionals in education, child welfare advocacy, and social workers are well situated to have a powerful impact on children who experience violence in their lives. Students in this study indicated a desire to be involved in solutions and social change, and social workers could help facilitate their involvement in local efforts and connect students and their families to existing resources. Engaging the students at the micro-level, within the schools they attend, could allow them to take action in both raising awareness and implementing solutions to the violence that impacts their world. Students frequently discussed starting anti-violence campaigns or groups in their schools as a solution to violence. By collaborating with teachers

and administrators, school social workers could help students further develop academic and action-oriented clubs and campaigns; thus engaging them involved in a solution while simultaneously combatting their feelings of helplessness. Additionally, social workers could potentially use the DtWT challenge as a platform to actively address and engage parents in violence prevention and intervention. Bringing together students, professionals, parents, agencies, and the DtWT committee for a collaborative workshop could not only further engage students in the solution to violence, but also offer continued education and support for the DtWT challenge. While the DtWT challenge is not active in all communities, it is currently operating in over 35 communities nationwide. Once a collaborative prevention/intervention model has been established using the support and outreach of DtWT, it could then be utilized and expanded to other regions throughout the county.

During the judging of the DtWT competition, it was noted by several volunteers that many students discussed and revealed very personal and potentially dangerous situations. Essays with particularly disturbing or concerning content were singled out and teachers were contacted by the DtWT committee (for both follow-up and referrals if needed). This action, however, occurred during the grading process - several weeks (even months) after the writing of the essays. Including referral information and intervention suggestions in the Teacher Packet may be helpful in offering more immediate and effective help to students and equipping the educators with access to appropriate resources.

Higher education in the fields of social work, criminal justice, and education do not currently include specific standards to address violence, domestic violence, or the resounding impact on the traumatized children (Danis & Lockhart, 2003; Finckenauer, 2005). While the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) attends to domestic violence within the Family

Violence Policy Statement, no separate policy or set of standards are currently in place to ensure that social workers are adequately trained or prepared to address issues related to violence (National Association of Social Workers & National Association of Social Workers, 2003). In 2005, The Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) adopted certification standards for criminal justice programs at the associate's, baccalaureate, and master's level. Even though the standards establish rigorous curriculum guidelines, they neglect to specifically address childhood violence (Finckenauer, 2005; Southerland, Merlo, Robinson, Benekos, & Albanese, 2007). Furthermore, criminal justice programs are not required to obtain accreditation under ACJS or any other governing body. It is clear that as the issue of childhood violence comes to the forefront of the complicated human experience, social workers and law enforcement professionals will benefit from specific competencies addressing this issue.

The Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence (NTFCEV) made several specific recommendations in the 2012 report which support the recommendations outlined in this study. Recommendation 1.3 seeks to engage the youth as experts in guarding children against violence and the impact of its effects. By using the voices of the children themselves, as expressed in their written word, this research project clearly employed the children as the authorities based upon their experience. Furthermore, the "Do the Write Thing" national challenge serves as an ideal platform for raising the public awareness of children exposed to violence (NTFCEV 1.4) and as an existing initiative to promote and influence professional training and education on the issue of children exposed to violence (NTFCEV 1.6). Results of this study can be used to directly influence professional development and agency programs which target working with children exposed to violence (NTFCEV 2.3 and 2.4). For example, as the research reveals that students have been using the term "bullying" to

refer to multiple types of violence, the information can then influence the form and content of the bullying campaigns implemented in the local school. Additionally, professional development (offered regularly through Lamar University – serving Region V) could address key findings from this study (including the emotional experience, helplessness, and parenting issues) within the educational curriculum. As the education and training for professionals becomes better informed, law enforcement, social workers, educators, and health care professionals, will be better prepared to implement evidence-based practices for children exposed to violence.

Results from this study add to the growing body of literature which examines children's exposure to violence. As one of the few studies which uses the children's voices directly, this study offers a unique and distinctive insight into how children perceive the violence to which they are exposed. Themes from this study were divided into three domains (cognitive, emotional, and moral), and mirror significant developmental changes typical in the middle school years. Within the cognitive domain, students define violence (often in terms of bullying) and discuss its universal presence brought on by other violence. In the emotional domain, themes of helplessness and complex emotions delineate the painful impact of violence within their lives. The moral domain outlined the way in which violence permeates through causes and consequences. In an effort to make sense of the violence in their lives, students also spoke out about their desire to become agents of change and active participants in the solution. By looking at the critical domains for middle school children, the presenting themes speak loudly to the issues and interests of the children.

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## ATTACHMENT A

## UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

## DIVISION OF RESEARCH

May 6, 2014

Virginia Gummelt  
c/o Dr. Monit Cheung  
Dean, Social Work

Dear Virginia Gummelt,

The University of Houston's Institutional Review Board, Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects reviewed your research proposal entitled "Children's Perception of Violence: A Thematic Analysis of Student Essays" on April 18, 2014, according to federal regulations and institutional policies and procedures.

At that time, your project was granted approval contingent upon your agreement to modify your protocol as stipulated by the Committee. The changes you have made adequately fulfill the requested contingencies, and your project is now **APPROVED**.

- **Approval Date: May 6, 2014**
- **Expiration Date: May 5, 2015**

As required by federal regulations governing research in human subjects, research procedures (including recruitment, informed consent, intervention, data collection or data analysis) may not be conducted after the expiration date.

To ensure that no lapse in approval or ongoing research occurs, please ensure that your protocol is resubmitted in RAMP for renewal by **the deadline for the April, 2015 CPHS meeting**. Deadlines for submission are located on the CPHS website.

During the course of the research, the following must also be submitted to the CPHS:

- Any proposed changes to the approved protocol, prior to initiation; AND
- Any unanticipated events (including adverse events, injuries, or outcomes) involving possible risk to subjects or others, within 10 working days.

If you have any questions, please contact Samoya Copeland at (713) 743-9534.

Sincerely yours,



Dr. Daniel O'Connor, Chair  
Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (1)

PLEASE NOTE: All subjects must receive a copy of the informed consent document, if one is approved for use. All research data, including signed consent documents, must be retained according to the University of Houston Data Retention Policy ([found on the CPHS website](#)) as well as requirements of the FDA and external sponsor(s), if applicable. Faculty sponsors are responsible for retaining data for student projects on the UH campus for the required period of record retention.

Protocol Number: 14355-01

Full Review: ☐

Expedited Review: ☒



**ATTACHMENT B**  
**Content Analysis Form – Pilot Study**

For **ALL entries** – note the duration of violence:      **Acute**    **Chronic**    **Unclear**    **Topic Only**

**Themes of Violence within the writing** – please check **ALL** that are present.

Type of Violence		Location			People Involved			
		Home	School	Community	Self	Other-Adult	Other-Peer	Child Witness
<b>Abuse</b>	Verbal	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	Physical	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	Sexual	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
<b>Peer Violence</b>	Bullying	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	Dating Violence	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	Peer Conflict	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	Gang Related	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
<b>Family Violence</b>	Intimate Partner	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	Sibling	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
<b>Hate</b>	Racial	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	LGBT	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
<b>Self - Inflicted</b>	Self-Harm	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	Suicidal Ideation	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	Suicide Attempt	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
<b>Media</b>	Social Media	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	Video Games	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	Music	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	TV / Video	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
<b>Substance use</b>	Alcohol	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
	Drugs	H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness
<b>Weapons</b>		H	S	C	Self	Adult	Peer	Witness

**ATTACHMENT C**  
**Content Analysis Form – REVISED**

Did the student respond to the **Writing Prompts**:

- |                                       |     |    |
|---------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 1. How has violence affected my life? | Yes | No |
| 2. What are the causes of violence?   | Yes | No |
| 3. What can I do about violence?      | Yes | No |

Did the student discuss a **personal encounter** with violence?                      Yes                      No

What was the child's **primary role** in the violence?      Victim              Witness              Perpetrator              Indirect

Identify the **forms of violence** addressed in the essay – select all that apply:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Child physical abuse | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-Harm (including cutting) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Verbal abuse         | <input type="checkbox"/> Suicide – ideation or attempt |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bullying             | <input type="checkbox"/> Violent video games           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dating Violence      | <input type="checkbox"/> Violence in media (tv/movies) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gang Related         | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____                   |

Identify if any of the following were **involved** with the violence – select all that apply:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Alcohol        | <input type="checkbox"/> Police involvement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drug use/abuse | <input type="checkbox"/> Jail               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Weapons        | <input type="checkbox"/> EMS / Hospital     |

**Protective Factors Identified:**              Yes                      No

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family attachment  | <input type="checkbox"/> Social Support   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cultural Identity  | <input type="checkbox"/> Affiliation with faith community                                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stable environment | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal Skills (problem solving, initiative, empathy, goal direction) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Economic stability |   |

**SOLUTION:**              None              Tell someone              Fight Back              Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Was the Solution Effective:    Yes    No    Unknown

## ATTACHMENT D

**2014-2015 STUDENT AND PARENT CONSENT FORM - (REQUIRED)****\*\*\*\*\*ALL SECTIONS MUST BE COMPLETED\*\*\*\*\***

(Clearly print information in the boxes below.)

STUDENTS FIRST NAME

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

MIDDLE NAME OR INITIAL

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

LAST NAME

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

STUDENT'S GRADE: \_

STUDENT'S AGE: \_

GENDER: Male \_\_\_\_\_ (or) Female \_\_\_\_\_

STUDENT'S MAILING ADDRESS (street number, street name, city and zip code):

STUDENT'S PHONE NUMBER: \_

SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_

DISTRICT: \_\_\_\_\_

TEACHER'S NAME: \_

**STUDENT AND PARENT CONSENT STATEMENT**

The National Campaign to Stop Violence, which sponsors the Do the Write Thing Texas Challenge, will publish selected student writings and quotations in a book and in a research paper on youth violence. Prior to publishing the student's essay, the Texas Challenge and the National Campaign requires the written consent of the student, and the written consent of the student's parent. If the above-named student and his/her parent agree to permit the Texas Challenge and the National Campaign to publish the student's writing, sign the following statement:

We agree to give ownership of the attached student writing to the Do the Write Thing Texas Challenge and to the National Campaign to Stop Violence so that the writing can be considered for analysis, recognition and/or publication in print and on the Texas Challenge Website.

**STUDENT Agreed:****PARENT Agreed:**\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Student\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name Student\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name Parent\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Email\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Email**\*\*\*\*STUDENT'S MUST: Staple this form on top of your original writing before submitting to your teacher\*\*\*\***