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"It's so fluid, it's developing all the time": Pre-service teachers' perceptions and understanding of cyberbullying in the school environment

Peter J. R. Macaulay\*, Lucy R. Betts, James Stiller and Blerina Kellezi  
Nottingham Trent University

\*Corresponding author

Department of Psychology, Nottingham Trent University, 50 Shakespeare Street,  
Nottingham, NG1 4FQ, England.

Tel: 0115 848 5558

Email: peter.macaulay@ntu.ac.uk

**Footnote:**

Abbreviations: (1) Pre-service teachers (PSTs), (2) Initial Teacher Training (ITT), (3) Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE)

**Abstract**

To gain an insight into how those entering the teaching profession regard cyberbullying, two focus groups were conducted with nine pre-service teachers (PSTs). Thematic analytical approach revealed three themes: (a) evolving nature of bullying (b) involvement in cyberbullying and (c) management of cyberbullying. PSTs discussed how cyberbullying was evolving and becoming socially acceptable in the modern world. Participants addressed features of victimisation and perpetration associated with cyberbullying. PSTs reflected on the responsibility to address cyberbullying, discussing effective strategies to manage the issue. Participants considered the extent to which their Initial Teacher Training course prepared prospective teachers to manage cyberbullying.

Keywords: cyberbullying; digital technologies; pre-service teachers; initial teacher training; education

## **Introduction**

Bullying is the intentional act of repeated aggression to another individual, characterised by an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). The issue continues to be recognised as a contemporary problem that needs to be addressed in the school environment and wider community (Espelage & Hong, 2017). The elements of repetition and power imbalance render victims defenceless, which can have a detrimental impact on their emotional well-being, self-esteem, depression, anxiety and psychosocial problems (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Despite this negative impact, the emergence of digital technologies has created new platforms for young people to engage in bullying behaviours in the online environment. Although the online world offers many educational and social benefits (Finkelhor, 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), young people can still be exposed to online risks and dangers, such as cyberbullying.

The extent to which traditional features of repetition and power imbalance can be applied to define cyberbullying behaviours, have been debated by scholars (Slonje, Smith, & Frisé, 2013). The accessibility of technology and the possibility to remain anonymous online means that cyberbullying is a serious and escalating public health concern (Slonje & Smith, 2008). This accessibility to digital technology means there are high levels of internet use across young people, making them more susceptible to cyberbullying involvement (Devine & Lloyd, 2012; Ofcom, 2016). A potential explanation for this resides in the large variability of digital technologies (Atkinson, Furnell, & Phippen, 2009), which continue to evolve making it easier for young people to engage in these cyberbullying behaviours.

These cyberbullying behaviours are complex to measure undermining practitioners ability to identify and respond to the issue (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur at any time both within and outside the school environment, and can reach victims even when they are alone (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Yet,

these behaviours will often occur outside the school environment, when access online is greater (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Shariff & Hoff, 2007). Exposure to cyberbullying involvement, both in victimisation and perpetration can lead to a deterioration in self-esteem (Devine & Lloyd, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010) and is associated with elevated levels of distress and depression (Tynes, Rose, & Williams, 2010). In addition, involvement can impact on psychological well-being (Devine & Lloyd, 2012; Livingstone & Smith, 2014), and in worst cases, can lead to suicide (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Although involvement in cyberbullying has been linked with a range of psychosocial outcomes, there is growing evidence that involvement has an impact in the school (Marsh, McGee, Nada-Raja, & Williams, 2010; Sourander et al., 2010).

Pre-service teachers (PSTs) go through a period of learning in a one or two-year post-graduate degree involving both practice and theory for preparation as an in-service teacher (Ryan, 2009). Li (2008) was the first to examine PSTs' perceptions of cyberbullying in a Canadian sample of 154 PSTs. Li found that PSTs recognised cyberbullying to be a problem affecting children in the school environment. Although PSTs had a high level of concern towards cyberbullying, only 13.1% and 11.1% could identify and manage cyberbullying incidents respectively (Li, 2008). Research by Yilmaz (2010) in Turkey also reported similar findings. Li (2008) and Yilmaz (2010) also found the majority of PSTs perceived their Initial Teacher Training (ITT) course had not prepared them to address cyberbullying. However, as PSTs held positive attitudes for additional training on cyberbullying (Li, 2008; Yilmaz, 2010), ITT courses need to implement specialised modules concerning cyberbullying.

Regarding PSTs' response to cyberbullying in the school, educating pupils on the consequences associated with involvement was perceived to be effective (Ryan, Kariuki, & Yilmaz, 2011), although awareness of appropriate responses was still inconsistent. For

example, although 120 PSTs from the USA were aware of different types of cyberbullying in the school, they were less aware of appropriate intervention strategies to manage these incidents (Styron Jr, Bonner, Styron, Bridgeforth, & Martin, 2016). In addition, perceived severity of cyberbullying incidents influenced the intentions of PSTs to intervene in a sample of 222 in the UK (Boulton, Hardcastle, Down, Fowles, & Simmonds, 2014). The limited research concerning PSTs perceptions, awareness and response towards cyberbullying has identified that PSTs recognise cyberbullying to be a problem, although their confidence to manage the issue is inadequate. Further, PSTs' perceptions of their ITT course have been consistent across eight years, in that their ITT courses do not prepare PSTs to manage cyberbullying, although they would like to learn more (Li, 2008; Styron Jr et al., 2016; Yilmaz, 2010). This values further investigation of current PSTs to consider their perceptions towards cyberbullying and how ITT courses prepare them to manage the issue. The limited research addressing PSTs' perceptions towards cyberbullying have so far largely utilised quantitative methodologies in the form of surveys (Boulton et al., 2014; Li, 2008; Ryan, Kariuki & Yilmaz, 2011; Styron Jr et al, 2016; Yilmaz, 2010). This is the first known study to utilise a qualitative approach in the form of focus groups and will aim to gain an in-depth exploration of PSTs' understanding and conceptualisation of a developing public health concern (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013). The qualitative exploration of PSTs' perceptions towards cyberbullying will provide a further insight by giving PSTs a voice to contribute to the largely survey based literature in this area.

The unique contribution of the current study is that it builds upon previous research by gathering PSTs' perceptions on cyberbullying, utilising focus groups to gain an additional insight. The study aimed to explore PSTs' conceptualisation, response and intervention of cyberbullying incidents and their current training addressing cyberbullying.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

PSTs were recruited from two ITT post-graduate degree courses at one public UK university institution in the Midlands, to participate in two focus group discussions. The university is based in an urban area and consists of a large cohort of students from a diverse body of backgrounds and nationalities. As such, the participants recruited in the current study provide a representative sample to other PSTs in the UK. In addition, the ITT programmes offered at the university have a large number of partnerships across schools in the Midlands, which illustrates the wide variety and experience offered to trainee teachers recruited in the current study. Focus group one comprised of four PSTs, including two male and two female PSTs. Focus group two comprised of five PSTs, including three male and two female PSTs. The sample size reflects previous qualitative research to examine teachers' perspectives (Malins, 2016; Phan & Locke, 2015) on a given phenomenon. In both focus groups, all participants had 6 months teaching experience, where they were working to complete their qualification to teach young people aged between 11 and 16 years. This is considered to be a prevalent period for cyberbullying involvement (Smith, Steffgen & Sittichai, 2013; Tokunaga, 2010), and so the participants' views would provide an important insight on PSTs perceptions and response to the phenomena. Participants were aged between 21-40 years.

Although practice recommends between six and eight participants for focus group discussions, smaller focus groups between four and five participants have been recommended for a number of reasons (Ritchie et al., 2013). For example, due to the interest in cyberbullying related issues in the modern world, professionals such as PSTs are likely to be highly engaged in the discussions, and therefore a smaller group is advised to allow participants the chance to contribute (Ritchie et al., 2013). In addition, due to the complexity of cyberbullying as a topic area, and the depth required to gain an insight into PSTs

perspectives, smaller groups provide an opportunity to explore the issue in further detail (Ritchie et al., 2013).

### ***Procedure***

As PSTs' perceptions may be marginalised to in-service teachers and senior management within the school, the use of focus groups can provide a voice and platform for discussion when considering their perceptions towards cyberbullying (Carey, 2015). In addition, the focus group format was a good method of data collection as it reflects real life discussions and decision making in the schools when addressing cyberbullying. The ITT course administrator/leader was contacted to gain initial consent to recruit PSTs completing the course. The time of recruitment aligned with the end of the ITT course, to truly represent PSTs perceptions towards cyberbullying *after* they have completed the program. All participants were provided with an information and consent form detailing the nature and purpose of the focus group discussion. Participants gave their written consent prior to taking part. The focus group format followed a free discussion on cyberbullying with a prompt sheet for the facilitator to provide structured guidance on the conversation, as recommended by Carey, (2015). Prior to conducting the focus group, the authors developed a focus group prompt sheet. The development of this prompt sheet was guided by prior research considering PSTs perceptions on cyberbullying, as outlined in the Introduction (Boulton et al., 2014; Li, 2008; Ryan, Kariuki & Yilmaz, 2011; Styron Jr et al, 2016; Yilmaz, 2010). The focus groups took place in a familiar but neutral setting on the university campus, to allow participants to feel more comfortable in their surroundings. During the focus groups, participants were encouraged to discuss a series of topic areas as a group. The topic areas included (a) Conceptualisation of cyberbullying, (b) Responding to cyberbullying, (c) Management strategies, and (d) Perceived development of cyberbullying in the future. The lead author facilitated the focus group with a prompt sheet as this is known to provide

structure to the free discussion, enabling rich quality data from the discussion (Carey, 2015).

Both focus groups lasted approximately one hour and were audio recorded.

### ***Data analysis***

A thematic analytical approach was undertaken to analyse the focus group responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2017). Once transcribed verbatim, familiarisation with the transcripts generated initial ideas and concepts. Features of the transcripts relevant to the research aims were coded and reviewed to generate common codes and patterns across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once codes were reviewed, these were collated into categories for the generation of initial sub-themes and themes that represent the data and collated codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes were reviewed against the extracted extracts and refined. In this analysis, an inductive approach was undertaken to allow the themes to truly represent the data and explore PSTs perspectives on cyberbullying (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2017). The quotes will be presented in the results section, with the associated focus group and participant number indicated.

### **Results**

Three themes emerged: (a) evolving nature of bullying; (b) involvement in cyberbullying and (c) management of cyberbullying. Table 1 provides a summary of the themes and sub-themes.

[Table 1 near here]

#### ***(a) Evolving Nature of Bullying***

This comprised of two sub-themes: understanding of bullying and dynamics of a changing online environment. Participants discussed definitional characteristics of traditional bullying and how these characteristics extend to cyberbullying as a result of advancement in digital technologies. The participants then discussed the unique characteristics of



cyberbullying, namely anonymity and the size of audience. Participants discuss the evolving nature of digital technologies and how this has permitted cyberbullying to become socially acceptable.

### *Understanding of Bullying*

Participants discussed recognised features of traditional bullying. The participants were aware that bullying behaviours were repeated intentional acts, to cause negative experiences to the victim:

P5: *“bullying is repetitive [...] erm, incidences where people are, tormented” (P5, focus group 2)*

P3: *“just negative behavioural incidences aren't they [...] designed for others detriment” (P3, focus group 2)*

While participants were aware of unique characteristics of bullying, including repetition and intent to inflict harm, they did not discuss power imbalance between the victim and perpetrator. The latter is a recognised feature of bullying (Olweus, 1993), so it is concerning PSTs were unaware of this during the discussion. In terms of repetition, some participants were confident defining the repetitive element of bullying:

*“it's got to be something like two or three incidences aimed towards the same person” (P1, focus group 2)*

In contrast to this, other participants debated the repetitive notion of bullying as a definitional characteristic:

*“I would argue it can even start with one [...] because where do you draw the line otherwise from when the bullying begins and ends. If somebody’s saying I’ve been subjected to an incident of bullying, you wouldn’t say to that, to that person who would feel like they’re bullied immediately [...] well I’d have to wait two or three more times to see how it rests on me” (P3, focus group 2)*

While not meeting the repetitive element of bullying, participants identified that even one episode can be harmful. Implications at the school level mean practitioners should acknowledge and respond to all incidences of bullying, irrespective of frequency. Participants recognised that cyberbullying occurred through digital technologies where they discussed unique facets that made it distinctive:

*“I think because it is so accessible now and it is so [...] erm you got that shrine of anonymity. [...] they got this monkey on their back they can’t get away from because obviously the internet is absolutely everywhere and there is so many different ways that they can be targeted now” (P3, focus group 1)*

As argued by P3 cyberbullying is unique due to aspects of anonymity and accessibility. PSTs perceived that this accessibility means there *“is no rest bite”* (P1, focus group 2) for the victims involved. As a result, victims of cyberbullying are vulnerable both within and outside the school environment as there is *“no escape”* (P2, focus group 1). PSTs perceived that young people are constantly connected to the cyber world (*“is there a time*

*people switch off from social media, not really” (P2, focus group 1)).* PSTs recognised cyberbullying can be susceptible to a large audience:

*“it’s a wider audience for it and there’s you know, it spreads a lot quicker” (P3, focus group 2)*

There is a potential cyberbullying can escalate and spread in the school environment, so strategies for teachers to respond in way to help attenuate the incident is recommended. Participants discussed and defined cyberbullying centred on the role of publicity:

*“I think public would be one that, is accessible to external people outside the, that group or that school perhaps. Semi-public is when its spreading through different groups within the school and that private side is when its perhaps between two people” (P3, focus group 2)*

In their discussion, participants showed a good awareness differentiating the publicity element of cyberbullying. Such views provide a new perspective from PSTs on the role of publicity in cyberbullying, and so provides an original contribution to the limited body of research in this area. It would be beneficial for schools and ITT courses to ensure all teachers have this knowledge, as this will help them be aware of different incidences and as such identification. Participants recognised the dynamic nature of publicity and difficulties in categorising such terms *“anything private could always become public” (P3, focus group 2).*

#### *Dynamics of a Changing Online Environment*

While cyberbullying was first recognised as a definitional term in 2003 by Bill Belsey (Bauman & Bellmore, 2015), the PSTs perceived it is still *“quite relatively new” (P3, focus*

group 1). Reflecting how cyberbullying will evolve in the future, participants recognised the growth of new social media platforms and the changing face of digital technology, which impacted on their confidence to address the issue:

*“it’s so fluid, its developing all the time, so it makes it difficult, to kind of say, yeah I’ve got that, you know, I’ve got that locked down, I’m happy dealing with any instances of cyberbullying that occur erm, because its dynamic” (P2, focus group 1)*

*“I don’t think I will ever be confident enough, because there’s always going to be err, next level and then next to cyberbullying where there’s apps being created [...] I don’t think I’ll ever feel absolutely 100% confident to be able to tackle it because as I said there’s always going to be a next level” (P4, focus group 1)*

The changing dynamics impacts on their confidence in a number of ways which has implications for taking actions to contain incidents while keeping up to date with emerging issues. This new perspective from PSTs provides an interesting and unexpected insight into their confidence to address cyberbullying, considering their on-going training on this matter. It is important PSTs are more aware of the phenomenon and are able to take actions against it. Such perspectives provide important implications for ITT courses to work towards increasing trainee teachers’ confidence and competence to address cyberbullying. PSTs identified the changing dynamic in the online environment was creating a socially acceptable world of cyberbullying behaviour. In particular, participants perceived the anonymity of online actions in certain contexts (e.g., online gaming) denotes to young people that behaviour is acceptable:

*“it breathes in one area and I think [...] that sort of behaviour, in games, anonymous is tolerated, but then does that start breeding an image in their head that it’s okay to say that sort of comment to people [...] if they can hide behind that anonymous factor, they’re not getting punished for doing it” (P3, focus groups 2)*

The anonymity feature of cyberbullying behaviour means young people find it hard to determine acceptable behaviour online. The participants perceived this was due to an attachment to the online world, which they refer to as the *“digital version of personality”* (P4, focus group 2). This means it is hard to determine true personality as young people have a separate online identity, becoming attached to their online self:

*“it becomes socially acceptable in a way doesn’t it [...] they can’t just step away from it and disconnect themselves because they’re, it’s just too much a detriment to themselves” (P3, focus group 2)*

### ***(b) Involvement in cyberbullying***

This comprised of two sub-themes: perpetration and victimisation. PSTs identified motivations behind cyber perpetration, while addressing young people’s understanding and bystander influences. The participants identify a number of consequences associated with cyber victimisation.

#### *Perpetration*

The participants perceived it was the anonymous factor associated with cyberbullying that allows perpetrators to remain hidden, recognising the difficulty in sanctioning punishment for such behaviours:

*“cyberbullying itself is so anonymous almost and there is so many different ways of doing it. I think that people who [...] who do cyberbully almost don't see themselves as bullying in the same sort of way. Bullying is this sort of image of being so hands on and now cyber bullying you can do it behind a computer and it's just the odd word in the wrong group chat or it's just a [...] venting” (P3, focus group 1)*

This raises implications for sanctioning punishment for cyberbullying due to its anonymous nature. It is possible teachers find it difficult to recognise intent from cyberbullying as it is depersonalised. While this can impact on teachers' ability to respond to the incident, schools should reassure teachers all incidents merit investigation to determine appropriate consequences. PSTs identified that perpetrators can use the anonymity of cyberbullying to direct unwanted attention:

*“they can shine the light somewhere else. Make themselves feel better, they're not the talking point, somebody else is and they can control that, that it's not going to come back on them” (P3, focus group 2)*

This implies vulnerable people receiving unwanted attention target other individuals to increase self-esteem. Schools should acknowledge and support more vulnerable groups and individuals address this. Participants discussed how the vulnerability in peer-groups can lead to cyber perpetration:

*“they’re impressionable, they’re young and they want to do that themselves and again when it comes to the popularity race at schools perhaps they want to establish themselves higher up the food chain” (P3, focus group 2)*

The participants recognise a definite dominance hierarchy where the bully is seen as the most dominant individual with control and power. This triggers further perpetration as young people try to ascertain power in the group. Schools should encourage young people to be more reflective concerning the impact cyberbullying has on those targeted. This is a noteworthy recommendation as PSTs discussed the lack of knowledge young people have regarding this issue:

*“I think students don’t marry up [...] what they’re doing, the actions, they don’t fully consider the consequences of their actions. Perhaps they’re going to act in this certain way, just because it’s a bit of fun, amuses them, but don’t actually think about them in a long-term view. Whereas we as teachers need to [...] put that into their head to say this will kill somebody if you continue and it’s not acceptable” (P3, focus group 2)*

Implications here suggest teachers should incorporate cyberbullying education and awareness in their curriculum to highlight negative experiences for those victimised, in the hope to reduce perpetration motives.

### *Victimisation*

PSTs discussed the role of victimisation and consequences associated with cyberbullying behaviours. Participants identified how cyberbullying impacts those involved:

*“the fact that you can't escape it [...] means that it's going to wear on their mind almost all the time, which all of a sudden they're not going to be as engaged in your lessons because they're fearing for their safety” (P3, focus group 1)*

PSTs recognised the accessibility to target victims is going to have an incessant reminder to those targeted leading to consequences in the school environment. Schools should provide e-safety education, specifically about cyberbullying to provide those that are victimised the capabilities and knowledge to take measures to reduce prolonged exposure. Participants discussed how the role of publicity can impact on those that are victimised:

*“if it's really public, obviously that can be really horrific for, for an individual to feel like they're surrounded and up against it because the whole world seems to be watching” (P3, focus group 1)*

While PSTs recognised that public forms of cyberbullying can lead to increased consequences to those that are targeted, attributed to a wider audience, they also recognised public incidents can prompt peer support:

*“on a public thing, you get more chance of another child possibly sticking up for them, when its private, that child has no back up, that child has no, nobody who could possibly step in” (P1, focus group 2)*

So while participants recognise public incidents to be more severe due to the increased consequences for the victim, it is possible victims receive more support compared to an on-going private incident. In which case, schools should provide training for teachers so



they understand the role of publicity, and provide adequate support to the victim irrespective of publicity due to different levels of resilience:

*“some students are quiet, they can take it on the chin but others might not” (P3, focus group 2)*

Therefore schools should provide strategies to allow young people to build their resilience. In particular, schools should encourage those that are victimised to disclose their cyber victimisation. However, participants also recognised that victims of cyberbullying may choose not to seek help:

*“to get help is sort of like a double-edged sword in a way, there's that whole confidence level admitting you need help and there's another side admitting you have done something wrong at the same time” (P3, focus group 2)*

Victims of cyberbullying struggle to seek support for their victimisation as they could be to blame for the instigation of the cyberbullying incident. In this case, schools should continue to reassure young people and take a proactive rather than a reactive approach to managing cyberbullying to allow young people to learn from their mistakes.

### ***(c) Management of cyberbullying***

This theme comprised of four sub-themes: responsibility, response, strategies in tackling bullying and training. The participants discussed the responsibility to address cyberbullying across at the school level, individual level and parents. Participants discussed their response to cyberbullying, considering the publicity and severity of cyberbullying.

Participants discussed the effectiveness of different strategies including policies, education and discussions. The PSTs reflected on the extent their ITT course prepared them to manage cyberbullying as prospective teachers.

### *Responsibility*

The participants discussed the responsibility to address cyberbullying at the teacher and school level. They perceived staff should be aware and up to date on current cyberbullying related issues:

*“I think definitely there needs to be some consistency amongst all the staff, they all need to be on the same page” (P3, focus group 2)*

As argued by P3 schools should provide additional training for all members of staff to allow any member of staff to manage a cyberbullying incident. The additional training will help staff identify and respond to cyberbullying through appropriate channels. PSTs did recognise as prospective teachers they have a responsibility to address the issue:

*“we are privy to this information, so we have a responsibility to, to act on it and duty of care” (P2, focus group 1)*

These new perspectives are interesting because they suggest PSTs understand their responsibility to educate young people on the appropriate use of digital technologies and to combat cyberbullying. Despite this argument, some participants recognised students should be able to make informed choices:

*“it’s not up to [teachers] to keep an eye on them and it’s not up to the teachers’ ability to erm [...] recognise when something is getting dangerous, it’s up to the students to make those informed intelligent decisions” (P3, focus group 1)*

It could be that young people need to take more responsibility for their actions, allowing them to learn and reflect on their choices. The school and staff have a responsibility to educate and manage emotional and social issues in the school, so should be encouraged to have stronger beliefs in the schools' commitment to address the issue.

#### *Response*

When responding to cyberbullying incidents, the participants recognised the importance of urgency in addressing the situation, to avoid opportunities for the perpetrator to continue their behaviour:

*“it needs to be addressed seriously, because it if comes to you as a teacher, if you don’t address that first instance that it happened, you’re now giving the bully, the opportunity to continue doing it, because [the bully] will now see it as a good thing to start bullying others” (P1, focus group 1)*

This illustrates the need for an immediate response regardless of the repetition of the incident, to set an example of inappropriate behaviour in the hope to reduce future perpetration. In terms of publicity some participants would *“give them the same level of seriousness” (P1, focus group 2)*, although the general consensus across both focus groups was that participants would have an immediate response to public acts of cyberbullying compared to private:

*“if you know its public you need to stamp it out immediately, if its private, you flag it up. I don't think you need to stamp out private the same way you can public, because public, public domains, you can get it taken down. If its private you can't necessarily get it taken down in the same manner” (P3, focus group 2)*

The participants perceived public incidents of cyberbullying merit immediate response due to the dissemination and audience online. For example, in public incidents, the participants perceived *“other people might jump on a bandwagon” (P3, focus group 2)*, which highlights the severity of public acts of cyberbullying:

*“the public one is [...] always more serious, because it's a [...] wider audience for it and [...] it spreads a lot quicker. It's like which is worst, a match or a fire” (P3, focus group 2)*

#### *Strategies in tackling bullying*

Participants discussed the importance of policies in the school environment to manage the issue. The participants recognised a need for all schools to have a cyberbullying specific policy, to highlight appropriate use of online tools and digital technologies:

*“policy in place about cyberbullying, that it is not acceptable, at least in that environment [...], the right policy, and taking action according to the policy will definitely help, in the school environment” (P1, focus group 1)*

The participants talked about the effectiveness of education as a preventive strategy for cyberbullying. In this strategy, participants perceived educating young people on the

positive uses of digital technology would be beneficial. Further, participants recognised the need to create “*a positive safe learning environment*” (P3, focus group 1), by educating young people at an early age on the consequences of cyberbullying involvement, to highlight their awareness and understanding:

*“it’s really important you make sure educations there, so it’s a preventive measure rather than a responsive one” (P3, focus group 1)*

The participants acknowledged the prominence to educate young people on the rules with technology use. Participants recognised the role of parents in tackling bullying, although agreed the responsibility of the school to help educate parents:

*“parents, should be enlightened, like in parents evening, when parents come to school. They should also be told about how they could also help their children from home” (P1, focus group 1)*

While there is debate concerning who is ultimately responsible addressing cyberbullying and protecting young people, PSTs argue schools need to take the educating role to help parents better understand cyberbullying, in order to address the issue in the home environment.

### *Training*

Reflecting on completing their ITT course, the participants recognised the ITT course did not prepare them to manage cyberbullying as prospective teachers:

P1: *"I don't think I have learnt anything about cyberbullying from this course" (P1, focus group 2)*

P5: *"I've just done an e-safety module in year seven and it doesn't talk about cyberbullying" (P5, focus group 2)*

So, while some participants had some training on e-safety in their ITT course, none of the participants had any training on cyberbullying. Discussing how ITT courses can improve their delivery and implementation of cyberbullying awareness and preparation, the participants recognised that real life experiences and stories from victims and/or perpetrators would be effective:

*"somebody come in, a teenager come in who's experienced it [...] because that's when you start to engage with them fully, I think there's that disconnect that exists between a lot of theory that's delivered" (P3, focus group 2)*

Having young people with prior experience of victimisation and/or perpetration will allow PSTs to appreciate and empathise with the implementation of awareness strategies. Participants lacked the confidence to address and manage incidences of cyberbullying. As a result, the participants perceived that experience was key to learning and developing awareness and understanding to manage cyberbullying:

*"I think the greatest tool to, to, learning how to respond to cyberbullying is, is, you know, actually experiencing it" (P2, focus group 1)*

## Discussion

Three themes were identified across the two focus groups: (a) evolving nature of bullying; (b) involvement in cyberbullying and (c) management of cyberbullying.

In the evolving nature of bullying theme, PSTs showed an awareness concerning the repetitive and intent to inflict harm features associated with both traditional and cyberbullying incidents. During the PSTs' focus groups, there was no discussion regarding the imbalance of power element, a recognised feature of bullying. As noted by Smith (2015), the power imbalance between the perpetrator and victim can be difficult to define in cyberbullying incidences, and as such, the traditional feature of bullying may not extend to its cyber form. This can account for PSTs' lack of knowledge regarding the power imbalance element. However, others have argued the unique facet of anonymity with cyberbullying causes a discrepancy in power between the victim and perpetrator (Thomas, Connor, & Scott, 2015). While PSTs recognised the repetitive element of cyberbullying, debate surrounded the number of instances required for intervention. Scholars have recognised the public nature of cyberbullying can challenge the traditional feature of repetition in that a single incident of cyberbullying through a public form (i.e., wider audience), merits immediate intervention (Slonje, Smith, & Frisé, 2013; Smith, 2015). Due to these definitional issues extending traditional features of repetition to cyberbullying (Slonje, Smith, & Frisé, 2013), inconsistencies in reported prevalence have been reported. For example, prevalence reports for cyberbullying involvement are approximately 20% for one-off occurrences and 5% for repeated incidences (Smith, 2015). Therefore, ITT courses and schools need to provide consistency across school staff and PSTs on definitional criteria associated with cyberbullying.

The PSTs showed a good awareness and understanding of the anonymity and accessibility elements, unique to cyberbullying. They perceived the anonymous nature of

online communication (Slonje & Smith, 2008) and accessibility to a variety of mediums to offend in cyberbullying (Devine & Lloyd, 2012), would increase the occurrence and severity of cyberbullying, and as such consequences on the victim. Therefore, prospective and current teachers should address cyberbullying with further concern due to its unique facets. PSTs recognised the nature of cyberbullying is evolving and becoming socially acceptable due to difficulties interpreting acceptable behaviour across young people. The implications of this suggest the prevalence of cyberbullying and the numerous mediums available to young people to bully online will escalate. This means younger people will be susceptible to cyberbullying involvement, placing increased pressure on teachers and schools on the identification and management of the issue. PSTs perceived the dynamics of bullying were evolving, which affected their confidence to address these incidents in the school environment. Prevalence will likely increase due to a high internet use, but this will be met by teachers who lack the confidence to address the issue which they believe has potential to escalate in ways they cannot control.

In the involvement of cyberbullying theme, PSTs perceived the anonymity of online actions motivated perpetration intentions. They perceived anonymity provided additional control online, with a disconnect between young peoples 'real world' and 'online' intentions. For example, from a theoretical perspective, the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) (Suler, 2004) argues the online environment reduces self-monitoring behaviour and social norms compared to the 'real world' environment. This is reflected in the PSTs' accounts. Similarly, in-service teachers perceived young people have reduced self-regulation and norms when communicating online (Betts & Spenser, 2015). The ODE can account for these perceptions as through the anonymity and asynchronicity, young people feel hidden from their online actions, and as a result, perceive they have no immediate consequences (Suler, 2004). While some PSTs recognised perpetration motives revolved around dominance and status within the



peer-group, some participants recognised perpetrators were unaware the impact their actions had on their target. ITT should provide strategies to prospective teachers on how to address the impact of cyberbullying, in the hope to reduce cyberbullying involvement across the school and wider setting. As PSTs perceived educating pupils on the consequences associated with cyberbullying would be an effective strategy, ITT courses should provide resources to facilitate this education.

Concerning victimisation, PSTs were aware of the detrimental consequences for victims associated with cyberbullying involvement, including the impact on academic achievement and attainment. This reflects established findings in the literature (Devine & Lloyd, 2012; Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Marsh, McGee, Nada-Raja & Williams, 2010). PSTs perceived a typology behind victimisation, in that victims are targeted due to their 'difference'. Boulton (2013) examined young adults perceived self-blame for their childhood victimisation and found that previous victims of bullying would self-blame their victimisation (i.e., 'If I was bullied, it would be because I deserved it'). This self-blame could lead to increased detrimental consequences for the victim and prolonged victimisation. This is an interesting finding and one that could be applicable to cyber victimisation. However, PSTs did note that some victims have a degree of resilience that would act as coping strategies, and as a result, ITT courses should provide strategies to prospective teachers to build resilience at the classroom level.

In the management of cyberbullying theme, PSTs identified that the responsibility to address cyberbullying is across teachers, pupils and parents. However, they recognised a lack of understanding and awareness on the parents' behalf, and as a result, schools should provide additional support to provide consistency in knowledge with staff and parents. PSTs perceived reported incidences of cyberbullying merits an immediate response. However, they also recognised that their management of the issue is influenced by the publicity and severity

of each incident. For example, some PSTs argued public acts of cyberbullying are more severe than private incidents due to the increased audience, and therefore merit immediate intervention. While previous research has shown adolescents view public acts as more severe (Sticca & Perren, 2013), PSTs did recognise that positive bystander support is greater in public incidents compared to private ones. The anonymity and autonomy online allow bystanders to control how they provide positive support (Wong-Lo & Bullock, 2014). However, others have argued the lack of authority figures and regulations online, mean bystanders are more likely to ignore the incident (Patterson, Allan, & Cross, 2016). PSTs did highlight the immediate transition of publicity acts (i.e., from private to public), and therefore ITT courses need to demonstrate all forms of cyberbullying, irrespective of publicity, merits immediate intervention. Further, ITT courses and schools can promote positive bystander awareness through e-safety sessions, to help young people take more responsibility to address the issue. For example, ITT courses should review the curriculum to ensure they provide cyberbullying awareness education to allow PSTs to become competent on the issue.

PSTs discussed the need to implement cyberbullying specific policies in the school environment, as this would reinforce appropriate behaviour and positive uses of technology. A previous content analysis in the UK found only 8.5% of schools addressing cyberbullying in their bullying policies (Smith, Smith, Osborn, & Samara, 2008). As policies are important to reinforce acceptable behaviour in the school (Von Marées & Petermann, 2012), it is encouraging ITT courses are promoting these beliefs across PSTs. In addition, PSTs perceived educating pupils on the consequences associated with cyberbullying and appropriate use of technology would be an effective strategy to manage cyberbullying. As prospective teachers, they can encourage schools to implement e-safety sessions with a particular focus on technology use and cyberbullying behaviours.

Reflecting on the ITT course, PSTs perceived the course had provided no preparation or guidance on how to address cyberbullying. As cyberbullying can occur at any time, it is important teachers are equipped with the appropriate intervention strategies to address the issue (Snakenborg, Van Acker, & Gable, 2011). While PSTs do not feel prepared or confident to address cyberbullying, young people perceive this form of bullying to be more severe than its traditional counterpart (Sticca & Perren, 2013; Sobba, Paez & Bensele, 2017). In addition to providing explicit e-safety training, ITT courses need to provide structured experiences to allow PSTs to engage with the identification and management of cyberbullying. ITT education should encourage dialogue with PSTs about cyberbullying, to emphasise the extent of cyberbullying and appropriate strategies to address the issue.

This sample was a self-selecting group and so their views on cyberbullying will differ to other PSTs in the same ITT course. Despite this, those involved in the focus group discussions are interested and engaged in the topic area. This may have encouraged other PSTs in the group to engage through active reflection and discussion. This is the first known study to solicit PSTs' perceptions from a qualitative approach, and therefore offers a unique contribution to the limited research in this area. These research findings should be used to provide a new angle developing a survey tool to test for PSTs perspectives on a larger scale, based on insightful qualitative responses. For example, future research can work to develop a survey tool to test how cyberbullying evolves longitudinally and how teachers keep up with the speed of development. The current findings offer opportunities for future research to guide and inform quantitative investigations, rationalised from the qualitative responses. For example, longitudinal research can examine PSTs management of cyberbullying in the first few years of teaching.

In conclusion, this study offers an important contribution to the literature to address PSTs perceptions from a qualitative approach, that is currently underrepresented. The

findings showed that PSTs perceived the nature of cyberbullying is evolving and becoming socially acceptable for young people. PSTs showed a good awareness of perpetration motives and victim consequences associated with involvement, which impacted on disclosure intentions. The PSTs discussed a number of issues responding to cyberbullying but held some positive suggestions to manage the issue in the school environment. These new perspectives from PSTs offer an interesting and unique contribution on prospective teachers' perceptions and responses towards cyberbullying, which can help guide ITT courses and schools provide the adequate training to increase their ability to act against cyberbullying.

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Table 1: Summary of the themes and associated sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Example
Evolving nature of bullying	Understanding of bullying	<i>"feeling isolated, feeling like they've got no one to talk to because the whole world of social media is on them" (P4, focus group 1)</i>
	Dynamics of a changing online environment	<i>"I think there's a fine line with what's acceptable and what's not, and for a child it might be difficult to distinguish between the two" (P5, focus group 2)</i>
Involvement in cyberbullying	Perpetration	<i>"Some of them think it's probably just a bit of humour, just a bit of fun" (P4, focus group 1)</i>
	Victimisation	<i>"it's going to affect attendance, if your feel like you're being targeted, and erm [...] you might feel alone, isolated" (P2, focus group 1)</i>
Management of cyberbullying	Responsibility	<i>"I think it's important that schools make teachers aware for the ones who don't" (P1, focus group 2)</i>
	Response	<i>"you're challenging the behaviour as opposed to the impact on that one particular learner I think" (P2, focus group 1)</i>
	Strategies in tackling bullying	<i>"stop it from beginning in the first place, trying to educate around [...] that digital side, you know, that digital literacy, to get that message out as soon as you can" (P3, focus group 2)</i>
	Training	<i>"we get a lot of, be safe online, don't talk to strangers [...] in PSHE, but there's nothing on cyberbullying" (P1, focus group 2)</i>