

*Preservice Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs Towards Different Types of  
Bullying and The Likelihood They Will Intervene*

Jennifer R. Banas, MPH, MEd, EdD

Assistant Professor

Northeastern Illinois University

5500 N. St. Louis Ave

HPERA Department

5500 North St. Louis

Chicago, IL 60625

[j-banas@neiu.edu](mailto:j-banas@neiu.edu)

## **Preservice Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs Towards Different Types of Bullying and The Likelihood They Will Intervene**

### **Abstract**

To increase the likelihood a preservice teacher would intervene into a bullying situation, it is necessary to understand their attitudes towards and beliefs about different types of bullying. Results from this study indicate preservice teachers respond to different types of bullying in different ways. They are more likely to rate bullying directed towards one's sexual orientation as serious and important in which to intervene; however, compared to other types, they are more likely to intervene into physical bullying. The attitudes and beliefs that most greatly predicted the likelihood of intervention included empathy towards the victim, believing it was important to intervene, and having the self-efficacy to do so. Suggestions for how professional preparation programs can use this information to design learning experiences that better prepare preservice teachers' and increase the likelihood they would intervene into bullying are shared.

Keywords: preservice teachers, bullying, bullying intervention and prevention, attitudes and beliefs

## **Introduction**

Bullying is an unfortunate occurrence in schools nationwide. A survey of 5,064 teachers and educational support staff revealed 62% witnessed bullying two or more times in the last month and 41% at least twice per week (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2011). Other surveys revealed 20% percent of high school students and 37% of sixth grader students were bullied within the last 12 months (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Robers, Kemp, Truman, & Snyder, 2013). Also, 26% of elementary school students heard others make homophobic bullying remarks (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012).

Bullying is not without consequences. Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel (2010) cite short- and long-term complications for bullies and victims including academic problems, psychological issues, and social relational problems. Victimization is linked to illness, school avoidance, poor academic performance, suicide ideation, and long-term difficulties with self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (McDougall, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2009). Being a witness to bullying is associated with damaged relationships, social mistrust, and anxiety (Carney, Jacob, & Hazler, 2011).

Making an impact on bullying requires making an impact on future teachers. In the current study, I investigated preservice teachers' attitudes towards and beliefs about different types of bullying situations and the likelihood they would intervene. I also studied the relationship between attitudes and beliefs with likelihood of intervention. As a teacher educator, my hope is this research will help professional preparation programs design learning experiences that influence the likelihood a preservice teacher would intervene into or work towards the prevention of bullying in a future school setting.

## **Literature Review**

### **Bullying Defined**

Bullying is “any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated” (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014, p. 7). Direct bullying is aggressive behavior that occurs in the presence of the target. Conversely, indirect bullying is directed at a target not present. Types of bullying include physical, verbal, and relational. Physical bullying includes behaviors such as punching, pushing, tripping, and spitting. Verbal bullying includes communication such as threats, taunting, name-calling, offensive hand gestures, or degrading notes and electronic messages. Relational bullying includes behaviors intended to harm relationships or reputation by way of ignoring, isolating, or exclusion from activities (Gladden et al., 2014).

### **Teachers intervening into bullying**

Teachers play a pivotal role in the prevention of bullying (Bauman & DelRio, 2005). Frey, Jones, Hirschstein, and Edstrom (2011) found direct links between teachers’ empathy and assertiveness behaviors and students’ responses to bullying. When teachers intervened, students were less likely to endorse the bullying. Teachers who quickly respond to bullying send a message that bullying is unacceptable, thus creating an anti-bullying environment (Doll, Song, Champion, & Jones, 2011). When teachers take the perspective that bullying is just “kids being kids,” higher levels of bullying exist (Holt, Keyes, & Koenig, 2011).

Not all teachers intervene into or work towards the prevention of bullying. Although most school staff are willing to intervene, less than 40% are involved in its prevention (Bradshaw et. al, 2011) and reasons why vary widely (Yoon, Bauman, Choi, & Hutchinson, 2011). Gender (Hirdes, 2010), perceived severity of the situation, empathy towards the victim, efficacy to respond (Boulton, 1997; Yoon, 2004), type of bullying (Yoon & Kerber, 2003), knowledge and skills (Milburn & Palladino, 2012), and lack of administrative support (Meyer, 2008) have been linked to teachers' response.

### **Preservice teachers' knowledge about, attitudes towards, and beliefs about bullying**

Preservice teachers' responses to bullying also vary. Moreover, Bauman and DelRio (2005) contend preservice teachers' lack of knowledge about bullying may result in ineffective and even harmful interventions. Bauman and Del Rio (2006) and Craig, Henderson, and Murphy (2000) found more preservice teachers took action when bullying was physical as compared to verbal or relational. Also, Craig, Bell, and Leschied (2011) found preservice teachers rated physical bullying more serious than homophobic, relational, or cyber-bullying. Finally, Boulton, Hardcastle, Down, Fowles, and Simmonds (2014), found perceived seriousness, ability to cope, and empathy towards the victim predicted preservice teachers' likelihood of intervention.

### **Research Questions**

Given the literature, there is value in studying one's own preservice teachers' attitudes and beliefs to conduct better matched professional preparation. To that end, my research questions were:

RQ1: Do preservice teachers' attitudes towards, beliefs about, and intentions to intervene into a bullying situation vary depending on the type of bullying?

RQ2: Do preservice teachers' attitudes towards and beliefs about a bullying situation predict the likelihood they will intervene? Which attitudes and beliefs predict?

## **Methods**

### **Participants and Recruitment**

With Institutional Review Board approval, participants were a sample of convenience as they were students recruited from one of my courses for three semesters between 2011-2012. The course, *Organization and Administration of School Health Programs*, is required for preservice teachers working towards their health education endorsement. Participation was voluntary; all participated.

### **Study Design and Procedures**

I administered the survey during the second week of the course. To avoid bias, my colleague provided participants with the survey link while I was out of the room. To maintain confidentiality, participants did not provide names.

### **Measures**

The assessment contained 28 items. Two questions were demographics (age and gender); 24 were the same six questions presented after four different scenarios. In the scenarios, a power imbalance exists between two students and the victims are left feeling angry, miserable, and/or isolated. Each scenario presented a different type of bullying: verbal, verbal but directed towards sexual orientation, relational, and physical. Scenario 1 is identical to one appearing in Bauman, Rigby, and Hoppa (2008); the others were patterned off the first. The scenarios are as follows:

1. A student is being repeatedly teased and called names by another, more

powerful student. The more powerful student has successfully persuaded other students to do the same as much as possible. (Verbal bullying.)

2. A student is being repeatedly teased and called slang names referring to *sexual orientation* by another, more powerful student. The more powerful student has successfully persuaded other students to do the same as much as possible. (Verbal bullying – sexual orientation focus.)

3. A student repeatedly excludes certain other students from both play and classwork group activities. This student, who appears to be perceived as popular, also has successfully persuaded other students to do the same as much as possible. (Relational bullying.)

4. A student, who appears to have a powerful social influence, repeatedly pushes and trips another student. Sometimes the student threatens to beat up the other student. (Physical bullying.)

After reading each scenario, participants rated their agreement, on a scale of 1 to 7, with attitudinal and belief statements. Questions related to the seriousness of the situation, importance of intervening (i.e. duty), empathy towards the victim, efficacy of intervening, self-efficacy to intervene, and likelihood of intervening (See Appendix). Respectively, the questions made up these six variables: seriousness, duty, empathy, intervention efficacy, self-efficacy, and intervene.

## **Results**

### **Data Analysis**

I used Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 20 to analyze the data. Reliability analysis revealed a Cronbach alpha value of .87 for the attitude, beliefs,

and likelihood of intervention questions as a whole. Alpha values for the seriousness, duty, empathy, intervention efficacy, and self-efficacy variables across the four scenarios were .54, .52, .74, .68, and .84, respectively. The alpha value for the likelihood of intervention was .74.

### **Participants**

There were 67 participants. Ages were grouped in 5-year segments. The majority (92.5%) fell into the 18-22 years old (35.8%), 23-27 years old (41.8%), and 28-32 years old (14.9%) brackets. Gender was split fairly even; 56.1% (n=37) were male, 43.3% (n=29) were female, and .6% (n=1) did not indicate. Education levels were high school (38.8%), associate's (37.3%), bachelor's (16.4%), master's (4.5%), and no reply (3%).

### **Attitudes, Beliefs, and Likelihood of Intervening into Different Situations**

I used a one-way, repeated measures (or within subjects) analysis of variance (ANOVA) to explore differences in attitudes, beliefs, and intentions for the different scenarios. There was a significant effect for the type of bullying on *seriousness*, Wilks' Lambda = .54,  $F(3, 64) = 17.90, p < .0005$ ; *duty*, Wilks' Lambda = .77,  $F(3, 64) = 6.30, p < .001$ ; *empathy*, Wilks' Lambda = .68,  $F(3, 64) = 10.28, p < .0005$ ; *intervention efficacy*, Wilks' Lambda = .48,  $F(3, 64) = 23.10, p < .0005$ ; and *intervene*, Wilks' Lambda = .88,  $F(3, 64) = 2.70, p = .05$ . Partial eta-squared values were .46, .28, .33, .52, and .11 respectively. See Table 1 for descriptives.

Using guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988) (.01 = small, .06 = moderate, and .14 = large effect), these results suggest large effect sizes. There was not a significant effect for the type of bullying on self-efficacy. These results suggest the type of bullying did not have an effect on most of the preservice teachers' attitudes towards, beliefs about, and

intentions to intervene into a bullying situation. Because there were statistically significant differences, paired samples t-tests were used to make post hoc comparisons between the scenarios, using the Bonferonni test, for five of the six variables.

**Seriousness.** I found significant differences between scenario 1 (verbal) and 2 (verbal – sexual orientation focus), scenario 1 and 3 (relational), and scenario 1 and 4 (physical). A scan of mean scores in Table 1 reveals participants rated scenario 2 as more serious than any of the others. This means participants perceived bullying directed towards sexual orientation as the most serious. General verbal bullying was rated lowest.

**Duty.** I found significant differences between scenario 2 and 3, and scenario 2 and 4. Table 1 reveals participants rated scenario 2 more serious than any other scenario. Relational bullying was rated lowest. This means participants believed it was more important to intervene into bullying that was sexual orientation in nature, compared to relational.

**Empathy.** I found significant differences between scenario 1 and 4, scenario 3 and 4, and scenario 2 and 3. Table 1 reveals participants rated scenario 4 as the highest and scenario 3 the lowest. This means they would more likely have empathy towards a victim of physical versus relational bullying.

**Intervention efficacy.** I found significant differences between scenario 1 and 4, scenario 2 and 4, and scenario 3 and 4. Table 1 reveals participants rated scenario 4 as the highest and scenario 1 the lowest. This means participants believed intervening into physical bullying, compared to verbal, would more likely resolve the situation.

**Intervene.** I found significant differences between scenario 2 and 3, and scenario 3 and 4. Table 1 reveals participants rated scenario 4 the highest and scenario 3 the

lowest. This means participants would more likely intervene into physical versus verbal bullying.

### **Ability of Attitudes and Beliefs to Predict Likelihood of Intervention**

I averaged participant responses for each variable across the four scenarios to investigate whether attitudes and beliefs, in general, predicted intentions to intervene. A multiple regression analysis, via the enter method, was conducted. Performing a multiple regression analysis assumes lack of multicollinearity. Multicollinearity exists when more than two predictors correlate very strongly. When this happens, it creates biased estimates between variables. Collinearity diagnostics were performed and did not reveal violations. In accordance with Pallant (2010), tolerance values were high (above .10) and variance inflation factor (VIF) values were low (below 10), both suggesting the likelihood of multicollinearity (and biased estimates) was low. Moreover, bivariate correlation values were below .70, therefore omission of variables was not considered (Pallant, 2010). Correlations appear in Table 2; tolerance and VIF values appear in Table 3.

The regression analysis revealed participants' attitudes towards and beliefs about different types of bullying situations predicted the likelihood they would intervene. The total variance explained by the model was 56.1%,  $F(5, 61) = 15.57, p < .001$ . Duty (beta = .30,  $p < .01$ ), empathy (beta = .38,  $p = .001$ ), and self-efficacy (beta = .31,  $p = .001$ ) predicted significantly. Seriousness and intervention efficacy did not predict. (See Figure 1 and Table 4) This means participants' belief that it was important to intervene (i.e. duty), empathy towards the victim, and self-efficacy to intervene influenced whether or not they would intervene. Given the high correlations between these factors, this finding is no surprise. The findings also mean whether intervening will resolve the

situation or the seriousness of the situation is not important,

## **Discussion**

### **Attitudes, Beliefs, and Likelihood of Intervening into Different Situations**

Results indicate the preservice teachers reacted differently to different types of bullying. Specifically, they judged it was important to intervene (i.e. their duty) or it was serious when the bullying was verbally directed towards sexual orientation. Conversely, they held empathy towards the victim, believed intervening would make a difference (i.e. intervention efficacy), and indicated they would intervene when bullying was physical.

Findings regarding sexual orientation bullying contrast with previous literature. Perez, Schanding Jr., and Dao (2013) found teachers rated physical bullying related to sexual orientation or gender identity as less serious. Also, teachers were less empathetic towards the victim and less likely to intervene. Similarly, Craig et al. (2011) found preservice teachers rated homophobic bullying less serious compared to physical. Reasons why the current study participants rated this type of bullying as more serious and important in which to intervene were not investigated. Reasons could relate to the diversity of the participant's university or its urban surroundings. A popular media source recognized the university as one of the most ethnically diverse in the nation. Also, its urban setting might have provided a more supportive environment. Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006) indicate lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth in urban communities face less hostile school climates because of the wider array of social niches to which students may belong.

Regarding empathy, intervention efficacy, and likelihood of intervening, participants rated physical bullying the highest. Similarly, Craig et al. (2000) and Duy

(2013) found teachers' indicated greater likelihood to intervene into physical bullying compared to verbal or relational bullying. Likewise, Bauman and DelRio (2006) and Yoon and Kerber (2003) found preservice teachers had less empathy for relational bullying victims and were less likely to intervene into such incidents. These latter results, however, might not reflect the increase in public acceptance, tolerance, in the years since the studies were published.

### **Ability of Attitudes and Beliefs to Predict Likelihood of Intervention**

Results indicate participants' attitudes towards and beliefs about bullying predict whether or not they are likely to intervene. Of the five variables studied, empathy towards the victim, importance of intervening (i.e. duty), and self-efficacy predicted likelihood to intervene. Seriousness of the situation and intervention efficacy did not predict. Similarly, Yoon (2004) found efficacy and empathy towards the victim predicted teachers' likelihood to intervene. Also, Craig et al. (2000) found preservice teachers' empathy predicted likelihood of intervention, a finding that reflects Mehrabian and Epstein's (1972) seminal research on empathetic tendencies and helping behavior.

### **Limitations**

There are at least three major limitations to the findings in this study. First and foremost, the situations presented in the scenarios were hypothetical; therefore, there may be discrepancies between how a preservice teacher would respond in a real situation. Exposing preservice teachers to real bullying situations via video could be a way to gather data that more closely resembles how they would respond. Second, the participants in this study attend a diverse university in an urban setting. Additional research should compare responses of preservice teachers from different types of settings. Third, the

sample size was modest. A larger sample size could potentially reveal different or more accurate results. Despite these limitations, results from the current study reinforce findings in the literature and point to areas in need of attention.

### **Research into Practice**

Previous research and the current study can point professional preparation programs in the right direction when it comes to educating preservice teachers about bullying. Differences in attitudes, beliefs, and likelihood of intervention based on type of bullying, indicate a need for instruction on the damaging effects of bullying, particularly relational bullying, which can be equally or even more damaging (Kawabata, Crick, & Hamaguchi, 2013). Findings also suggest preservice teachers need learning experiences that foster empathy towards individuals involved in bullying, promote the importance of intervening, and develop their self-efficacy to intervene. Specific ways to carry out these experiences are describe next.

#### **Developing empathy.**

According to Barrett-Lennard (1959), there are at least four components of empathy: 1) understanding another person's actions and feelings, 2) wanting to understand another person, 3) being able to communicate that understanding, 4) experiencing what another person feels. Cultivating these components could serve as training goals with preservice teachers.

To develop an understanding of another person and the desire to understand, mentoring-based learning experiences could help. Fresko and Wertheim (2006) found appointing preservice teachers as mentors to at-risk children increased sensitivity towards this population. Professional preparation programs could replicate this training via

service learning projects matching preservice teachers with children who are both similar and dissimilar to them and who have been involved in bullying. A similar impact could be made via guest speakers, reading young adult literature in which the character(s) have been bullied (Pytash, 2013), and video game avatars (Chen et al., 2012; Shrier, 2012).

To develop empathy-related communication skills, professional preparation programs could incorporate peer counseling using bullying case scenarios with students from different backgrounds. Among preservice teachers, Lasseigne and Martins (1979) found peer counseling improved empathy and expression of empathy. Arizaga, Bauman, Waldo, and Castellanos (2005) multicultural sensitivity and interpersonal skills training lead to an improvement in empathetic listening skills.

Developing the ability to experience someone's feelings, the last of the four empathy components, is complicated. In a meta-analysis, Lam, Kolomitro, and Alamparambil, (2011) concluded empathetic behaviors could be expressed with or without the feeling. Also, they were uncertain whether empathy developed in trainings extends to the natural environment. This does not mean empathy training is pointless, but training expectations should be realistic and focus on empathy skills that can be observed.

### **Cultivating a belief that intervening is important.**

To cultivate the belief that intervening into a bullying situation is important, professional preparation must provide a basic overview of bullying. They should also discuss professional and legal obligations to advocate for students' safety. A basic introduction would cover the definition of bullying, causes, short and long-term consequences, and methods of prevention linked to research. Recognized training programs such as *Bully Busters* (Horne, Bartolomucci, & Newman-Carlson, 2003), *Bully*

*Proofing Your School* (Bonds & Stoker, 2000), or the Olweus school-based bullying intervention program (Olweus, 1978) can help. Instruction related to legal obligations should include child protection laws and opportunities to practice processes for reporting abuse (Weimer, 2012).

### **Cultivating self-efficacy to intervene.**

Self-efficacy is influenced by four main sources: 1) mastery experiences, 2) vicarious experiences provided by social models, 3) social persuasion, and 4) somatic and emotional states (Bandura, 1992). This means preservice teachers need opportunities to practice bullying intervention skills, to observe others successfully intervening, to be exposed to positive messages about prevention, and to redirect stress in a positive direction. Benitez, Garcia-Berben, and Fernandez-Cabezas (2009) and Newgent, Higgins, Lounsbery, Behrend, and Keller (2011) found significant improvements in preservice teachers' self-efficacy, knowledge and skills to confront bullying after receiving intervention strategy training. In my own research, I found authentic learning exercises rooted in professional standards lead to an increase in preservice teachers' self-efficacy to perform bullying prevention activities Banas (2014). Activities included reviewing and revising bullying policies, designing bullying-related faculty trainings, and planning for an anti-bullying school health council. In all of these studies, role-playing, case studies, and self-reflection were a regular instructional strategy.

### **Conclusion**

Results from this study indicate preservice teachers respond to different types of bullying in different ways. They are more likely to rate a bullying situation directed towards one's sexual orientation as serious and important in which to intervene; however,

they are more likely to intervene into a physical bullying situation. Overall, the attitudes and beliefs that most greatly predicted the likelihood of intervention included empathy towards the victim, believing it was important to intervene, and having the self-efficacy to do so.

Professional preparation programs can play a pivotal role in the reduction of bullying. Findings from this study highlight opportunities for professional preparation programs to positively influence preservice teachers attitudes towards and beliefs about bullying. In end, the goal should be to foster appropriate attitudes and beliefs and to empower preservice teachers to make bullying intervention related decisions based on sufficient, reliable, relevant, and valid information.

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Table 1

*Descriptives for Attitudes, Beliefs, and Likelihood of Intervening for Different Situations*

Variable	n	M	SD
1 – Seriousness	67	6.25	.86
2 - Seriousness	67	6.73	.59
3 - Seriousness	67	5.67	1.42
4 - Seriousness	67	6.49	.90
1 – Duty	67	6.40	.97
2 – Duty	67	6.58	.80
3 – Duty	67	6.04	1.24
4 – Duty	67	6.07	1.25
1 – Empathy	67	6.36	.93
2 – Empathy	67	6.55	.82
3 – Empathy	67	6.01	1.22
4 – Empathy	67	6.82	.49
1 – Intervention efficacy	67	4.78	1.46
2 – Intervention efficacy	67	5.13	1.55
3 – Intervention efficacy	67	5.30	1.40
4 – Intervention efficacy	67	6.22	1.06
1 – Self-efficacy	67	5.64	1.32
2 – Self-efficacy	67	5.46	1.39
3 – Self-efficacy	67	5.79	1.26
4 – Self-efficacy	67	5.81	1.29
1 - Intervene	67	6.34	.93
2 - Intervene	67	6.39	.83
3 - Intervene	67	5.99	1.31
4 - Intervene	67	6.48	.96

Table note:

1 = verbal bullying scenario

2 = verbal bullying scenario with a sexual orientation focus

3 = relational bullying scenario

4 = physical bullying scenario

Table 2

*Correlations*

	Seriousness	Duty	Empathy	Intervention efficacy	Self- efficacy	Intervene
Seriousness	1.00	.54**	.55**	.15	.26**	.52**
Duty	.54**	1.00	.45**	.33**	.27*	.58**
Empathy	.56**	.45**	1.00	.20	.10	.58**
Intervention efficacy	.15	.33**	.20	1.00	.25*	.24*
Self-efficacy	.26*	.27*	.10	.25*	1.00	.45**
Intervene	.52**	.58**	.58**	.24*	.45**	1.00

\*  $p < .05$ .\*\* $p < .001$  level.

Table 3

*Linear Regression Results and Collinearity Diagnostics*

	<i>B</i>	SE( <i>B</i> )	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Tolerance	VIF
Seriousness	.08	.14	.07	.60	.55	.56	1.77
Duty	.33	.12	.30	2.77	.01	.61	1.64
Empathy	.42	.12	.38	3.56	.00	.65	1.54
Intervention efficacy	.01	.07	.02	.19	.85	.85	1.18
Self-efficacy	.22	.06	.31	3.41	.00	.87	1.15

## Appendix

### Bullying belief and attitude questions

1. How serious is this bullying situation?

not serious : \_\_ 1 \_\_ : \_\_ 2 \_\_ : \_\_ 3 \_\_ : \_\_ 4 \_\_ : \_\_ 5 \_\_ : \_\_ 6 \_\_ : \_\_ 7 \_\_ : very serious

2. How empathetic do you feel towards the victim?

not empathetic : \_\_ 1 \_\_ : \_\_ 2 \_\_ : \_\_ 3 \_\_ : \_\_ 4 \_\_ : \_\_ 5 \_\_ : \_\_ 6 \_\_ : \_\_ 7 \_\_ : very

empathetic

3. Intervening in this situation will resolve the bullying problem.

not likely : \_\_ 1 \_\_ : \_\_ 2 \_\_ : \_\_ 3 \_\_ : \_\_ 4 \_\_ : \_\_ 5 \_\_ : \_\_ 6 \_\_ : \_\_ 7 \_\_ : very likely

4. Intervening in this situation is

not important : \_\_ 1 \_\_ : \_\_ 2 \_\_ : \_\_ 3 \_\_ : \_\_ 4 \_\_ : \_\_ 5 \_\_ : \_\_ 6 \_\_ : \_\_ 7 \_\_ : very important

5. I have the skills to intervene in this bullying situation.

strongly disagree: \_\_ 1 \_\_ : \_\_ 2 \_\_ : \_\_ 3 \_\_ : \_\_ 4 \_\_ : \_\_ 5 \_\_ : \_\_ 6 \_\_ : \_\_ 7 \_\_ : strongly

agree

6. How likely are you to intervene into this bullying situation?

not likely : \_\_ 1 \_\_ : \_\_ 2 \_\_ : \_\_ 3 \_\_ : \_\_ 4 \_\_ : \_\_ 5 \_\_ : \_\_ 6 \_\_ : \_\_ 7 \_\_ : very likely