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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, ADDRESSING BULLYING: A CASE STUDY INVESTIGATING SCHOOL PERSONNEL'S PERCEPTIONS OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES AT THREE PRIVATE CHRISTIAN MIDDLE SCHOOLS., by JENNIFER PINKETT SMITH, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education and Human Development, Georgia State University.

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ADDRESSING BULLYING: A CASE STUDY INVESTIGATING SCHOOL PERSONNEL'S
PERCEPTIONS OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES AT THREE PRIVATE CHRISTIAN MID-
DLE SCHOOLS

by

JENNIFER PINKETT SMITH

Under the Direction of Janice B. Fournillier, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Repeated instances of bullying plague schools and immobilize the learning environment for many students. Dissimilar views of policies related to bullying make it difficult for school personnel to consistently intervene on behalf of the victim. The purpose of this case study was to bring awareness to the diverse perceptions school personnel have concerning bullying and the constraints those perceptions place on implementing policies and practices set forth by the school. This qualitative case study examined the understanding and knowledge that school personnel had about bullying policies and practices at three private/independent middle schools in the metro Atlanta area. The research questions addressed were: What are school personnel's understandings of the bullying policies at their school? What were their perceptions of bullying within their school? How does school personnel's perception of bullying impact their efforts to intervene? Participants for the study included 3 middle school principals, two deans of students, three counselors and nine teachers. Data collected through interviews, non-participant observations, and documentation provided by each school yielded findings that clarity and awareness of bullying policies and practices were not always apparent. Additionally, varying perceptions of bullying impacted intervention efforts by school personnel. The study revealed the need for a

clear and concise definition of bullying, along with policies and practices that address the issue. Additionally, school leaders need to monitor and hold school personnel accountable to address bullying consistently within the school.

INDEX WORDS: Bullying, Perceptions of bullying by school personnel, Bullying policies, Case study research, Bullying in private schools

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in

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in

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Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA
2016

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and to my family.

Dear God, your unfailing love and favor over my life sustained me throughout this process. You are my Father, and I am your daughter. You kept me covered when I felt lost. In Your word you said, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” It was your strength and the reminder that You are always with me that kept me going. As I prayed, I heard Your voice say “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Now that I have completed this journey, I say thank you Lord for your covering. Your promises never returned to me void.

My Cornerstone

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The Enduring Eleven

You’re only as strong as your weakest link and although we had no weak links, we endured to make sure we were all accounted for in the end. I am proud of Cohort II and all that we accomplished. I am waiting in expectation of what will come.

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1 PRIVATE SCHOOL PERSONNEL'S PERCEPTION OF BULLYING POLICY

There are many ways to hurt another human being. And there are some people – students you may know – who try their best to do just that (Langan, 2004, p. 1).

This statement has unfortunately become the reality for many victims of bullying. It becomes further disheartening when the outcry of these victims goes unnoticed by school leaders. The school has long been identified as a domicile of learning, but has recently become a place that causes a bit of uncertainty when it comes to safety. Bullying has become prevalent in our society and has caused school climates to exude a negative atmosphere (National Association of School Psychologist, 2002). Students no longer feel safe and parents worry more each day about sending their kids to school. This chapter provides a review of the literature that framed and guided the case study of: (1) school personnel's perceptions of bullying; and (2) the constraints these perceptions placed on their ability to implement the schools policies and practices.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to bring awareness to the diverse perceptions school personnel have concerning bullying and the constraints those perceptions place on implementing policies and practices set forth by the school. The guiding question for this research is: What is school personnel's understanding of the bullying policies at their school? The researcher will also address how school personnel's perception of bullying impacts their efforts to implement policies in their school.

In the paper I will outline the problem as stated in the literature and then present a review of the empirical studies that dealt with the following issues relevant to the study:

- i. Historical background
- ii. The challenge of defining bullying
- iii. The presence of bullying at the various school levels and types
- iv. Overview of bullying
- v. Theoretical perspective related to bullying
- vi. Perceptions that school personnel and students have about bullying
- vii. School climate and culture and its relationship to bullying
- viii. Barriers to managing bullying

Addressing these issues provides school leaders with a comprehensive framework to attend to bullying behaviors and the need for policies and practices to be consistently implemented school-wide.

Hek and Langton (2000) recommend utilizing a systematic approach as the most useful to produce a literature review that will enlighten practice. For this study, literature from various journals, books and selected dissertations relating to bullying were used and yielded material relevant to the topic. To further evaluate reliable research, literature from fields such as: counseling, education, sociology and psychology provided additional support to address history and contextual factors of bullying, policies and practice, as well as perceptions of bullying by school personnel. Additionally literature that supported the views that students had about school personnel's attitudes toward bullying and the support provided was examined. This allowed me to identify the importance of assistance required to adequately combat bullying in the school.

Background to the problem

A young man by the name of Hamad, moved with his family from the Middle East to North America the rationale for this transition was to escape war and seek peace. Unfortunately,

this move did not bring happiness to Hamad. As a high school student, he was subjected to continuous ridicule and physical violence. He remained silent. In March of 2000, Hamad had enough. After composing a seven-page letter, in which he pardoned his parents from any possible guilt, he left his home never to return. Hamad jumped to his death without his parents ever knowing the long-suffering he endured (Mauldin, 2002).

According to Lerman (2010), “One-hundred and sixty thousand students per day stay home from school because of bullying” (p.1). Students look to administrators and teachers as a foundation for their learning and academic growth in school. To maintain a healthy relationship (between students and building leaders), and assure learning is at the forefront for students, school leaders and teachers should sustain a school climate conducive to learning. I argue that in order to create this reality, a cohesive understanding of bullying policy and practices surrounding bullying must be forged. Further insight into the perceptions of school policies relating to bullying might unveil the impact it has on school personnel’s efforts to intervene and implement policies that head offices have put in place (Harrington, Rayner, & Warren, 2012).

The problem facing most schools, in particular school personnel’s resistance to handling bullying, is policy awareness and implementation. Policy, as set by the state and implemented by the school must be recognized by school personnel, and monitored by leadership to assure intervention will take place (Lerman, 2010). Before school personnel can effectively address bullying, a common definition of the term and effects needs to be developed. If bullying continues to be suppressed, misinterpreted and confused as aggressive play, it will continue to be a broad systemic issue within our schools.

Historical Background

It is important to note that the word bully can be traced back to the 1530's (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010) and the first act of bullying dates back to 1862. Koo (2007) identified the first incidence of bullying was reported in *The Times* magazine August 6th, 1862 and covered the unfortunate death of a soldier that died as a result of continuous bullying. Even though this event was a shocking revelation, it identifies the cultural fallacy individuals had of harassment and "mean-spirited" behaviors as harmful; it was a societal norm. The poetic explanation provided by the author submits bullying is imbedded in human nature. Subsequently, the desire to "out-perform" one another has been incessant from the beginning of time. Donegan (2012) found "This survival instinct, along with a competitive atmosphere, has remained the same as the human race has evolved" (p. 34). This belief is linked to education and social status: there is no wonder students are innately driven to be aggressive. Donegan (2012) goes on to say that "This ideology has shaped a nation where bullying is unintentionally instilled as a survival tactic from a very young age" (p. 34). Research professor Dan Olweus made a momentous impact on bullying during the 1970's. Olweus created the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) in an effort to diminish acts of bullying and improve awareness (Koo, 2007). In more recent years, with the surge in technology use, bullying has progressed beyond physical acts of stalking, name calling, and taunting online (Connolly, Hussey, & Connolly, 2014). No matter the category of bullying, awareness and intervention is primary to creating safer schools for our students.

Bullying Defined. Since the late 1990's, several states passed laws mandating schools to implement policies addressing bullying. Bullying legislation in Georgia came into existence in 1999 during the Georgia General Assembly (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) provided an extensive definition of bullying and

policies that schools must adhere to when this issue arises. Legalese used in the GaDOE definition of bullying is necessary for state policy, but for the sake of this research the following definition will be used, "A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (Olweus, 1993b, p. 9). The use of this definition provides clarity and simplicity for schools to easily identify the acts of bullying and was "widely agreed upon in literature" (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton & Scheidt, 2001, p. 2095). Utilizing a consistent definition reduces confusion and misunderstandings in identifying aggression in the school setting (Ansary, Elias, Greene, & 2015; Espelage, Hong, Rao, & Thornberg, 2015).

Bullying in Private Schools

Parents typically send their kids to private schools to avoid bullying, but private schools are not exempt from this aggression. According to the Movement Against Bullying (2006) "bullying in private schools is just as much a problem as bullying in public schools" (p. 1). The movement found that "the only difference is that the private schools are not governed by the same laws as public schools" (p. 1). Nicholas Roddy, a staff writer for the School of Journalism for Michigan State University wrote a story about an eighth grade girl who attended an all-girls school in Seattle. After being harassed by another student, she was directed to "man-up" when seeking help from an advisor. Roddy goes on to report that there had been repeated name-calling and meetings in the bathroom to discuss ways to further humiliate and torment the girl. Sadly, the girl left the private school and her family later sued (Roddy, 2012). Private schools are not immune from acts of bullying and the scant literature on this subject validates the need to provide awareness to this topic (Chaux & Castellanos, 2015).

Bullying in Middle School

Even though bullying can occur at any level in the school, bullying in middle school was identified as the most prevalent (Mauldin, 2002). Milsom and Gallo (2006) found “Studies show that bullying tends to peak in late childhood/early adolescence, making prevention and intervention efforts in middle school crucial” (p. 12). This awkward transition can prove to be difficult for students both socially and academically. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2013) “Bullying behaviors are most often experienced between sixth and eighth grades, with a decline in upper grade levels” (p. 2). Although there seems to be a decrease in bullying as students enter high school, this information is not adequate because there tends to be a reduction in reporting (Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). Students in middle school are not only faced with establishing new friendships, but solidifying their social status amongst their peers (Williford, Boulton, & Jenson, 2013). This awkward transition presents several obstacles that students must learn to navigate.

Unfortunately, bullying in middle school is one of the toughest offenses a child will endure (Perkins, Perkins, & Craig, 2014). The social immaturity of students at the middle school age also tends to contribute to the often selfish and mean-spirited actions that result in bullying (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Providing leadership to students and awareness of the behaviors that are categorized as bullying will guide a culture that is not desensitized to conduct that is not hurtful to their peers. The limited amount of literature examining bullying, specifically in private schools, inspired the researcher to conduct this study. To further contribute to the cannon in this area, the researcher chose Christian schools in the metro Atlanta area as the focus. It is important to look at the history of bullying that to the general public might appear to be a new phenomenon.

Overview of Bullying

Distinguishing bullying from bothering or simple childhood conflict is important to adequately address the issues of bullying behaviors. The New York City Department of Education (2014) deemed a struggle to be “between two or more people who perceive they have incompatible goals or desires” (p. 1). Although having conflict with another individual is expected based on our natural interface with others, there is still need for understanding when the conflict crosses the line to bullying. It is this consciousness that the research study hoped to provide. Bullying experts Suellen and Fried (1996) identified six characteristics that distinguish childhood badgering from bullying: “intent to harm, intensity and duration, power of the abuser, vulnerability of the victim, lack of support and consequences” (p. 9). They argued that recognizing the behaviors and characteristics of bullying will help identify what are harmful and harmless interactions between students and what actions must be taken to mediate the situation.

Types of Bullying. Students are subjected to different types of bullying. Smith, Cousins and Stewart (2005) share the classifications as:

Direct bullying, which involves physical and verbal attacks on victims, and indirect bullying which typically involves covert activities intended to isolate and marginalize victims (e.g., spreading rumors and excluding individuals from peer groups) and are also characterized as physical, verbal, relational and reactive (p.740).

Bullies who are physical usually hit victims, verbal bullies use words through insults and teasing, relational bullies concentrate on exclusion by spreading rumors and the use of threats, and reactive bullies are both bully and victim. With the inception of computers, the internet, cell phones and social media, cyberbullying has almost become commonplace for so many students (Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012). As a matter of fact, Ybarra and Mitchell (2004)

found that “About 10% of American children age 9 to 17 have reported experiencing harassment while online” (p. 1310).

The cyberbully can capture the attention of a larger audience to initiate their attack, which leaves the victim with minimal protection and escape (Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012). Researchers Hoover and Oliver (2008) stated “Bullying is always directed by a stronger student against a weaker one” (p. 10). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2015) identified statistics relative to bullying incidents:

- One out of every four students (22%) report being bullied during the school year.
- 64 percent of children who were bullied did not report it; only 36 percent reported the bullying.
- The reasons for being bullied reported most often by students were looks (55%), body shape (37%), and race (16%). (p. 2)

These statistics further supported the need for consistency in how bullying is handled in schools and justification for creating lucidity in policies and practices that school personnel should adhere to consistently. In instances of bullying, there are at least three categories a student will identify with and assume the corresponding characteristic. Raczynski, Orpinas and Horne (2013) state:

Although it is convenient to think about a category of “bullies” and a category of “victims,” in reality, the picture is more complex. Students may take different roles in different contexts, and these roles are in part influenced by the social context of the activity (p. 417).

The majority of research on bullying targets prevention of bullying and the actions of the bully, but there are others involved in this problem (Ansary, Elias, Greene, & Green, 2015). Indeed the

bully, victim and bystander are all relevant to understanding how to best manage and ease this mean-spirited behavior.

The Bully. Bullies are usually identified as large/big individuals who have low self-esteem and are unpopular with their peers. However, these characteristics have changed over the years and Graham (2010) cited “Current research on bullying indicates bullies have inflated self-views” (p. 66). Another myth is everyone hates bullies and the unfortunate reality is bullies are popular and often well liked (Graham, 2010). As educators, we have to identify and be aware of the actions of a bully instead of our own interpretive belief about how we characterize this individual. The bully is affected by factors identified as the “five concentric circles” in which Fried and Fried (1996) stated “Each circle represents a significant element, beginning with the individual child viewed in the context of family, community, school and culture” (p. 6). The reflection of a child’s surroundings can perpetuate the behaviors a bully exhibits.

Bullies have also been found to blame the victim and conceive the bullying to be due to the victim's own character and actions. Wong, et. al. (2013) discovered “Bullies choose victims who are not likely to be defended by peers so as to minimize loss of affection and support from significant others” (p. 279). The view of bullies has changed dramatically and the self-esteem, power and influence that they hold can sometime be viewed from others as impressive and popular among their peers (Peets, Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2015), but this imposing behavior brings fear and ruin to the victims of bullying.

The Victim. The victim and the bystander are characterized as participants in this ongoing problem. The victim, particularly, is usually identified as weak and an outsider. The majority of victims believe that they are picked on because they are smaller, weaker, or for no reason at all (Boulton & Underwood, 1993). Victims have also been known to have poor grades and high

absenteeism due to fear; in fact Espelage, Hymel, Swerer and Vaillancourt (2010) discovered “Some, but not all, studies have demonstrated links between involvement in bullying and poor academic performance” (p.38). This is not true in every instance. Some victims are picked on due to being high academic achievers and can be targeted for being a “know-it-all” (Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, T., Daciuk, 2012). These contrasting views create barriers that often blur the vision of school leaders and school personnel in identifying and supporting bullying victims.

Socially, victims are often isolated and seek help from school personnel to balance and support their feelings concerning victimization from bullies. Identifying a victim can prove to be somewhat difficult. Although research has designated characteristics of a victim, they are not always accurate based on the individual or the situation (Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, Daciuk, 2012). Creating a character profile for victims is often risky at best. If there is a particular label placed on describing a victim, this could, “run the risk of implying that these traits cause or invite the bullying” (Mauldin, 2002, p. 27). Not all victims remain in that role and victims have occasionally taken on a role-reversal and become the offender of bullying (Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

Another notable group is the bully/victim. These individuals have been found to display poor social and academic outcomes worse than the bully and victim individually (Raczynski, Orpinas, & Horne, 2013). These students tend to have a harder time recovering and distinguishing the inappropriate behavior they exhibit (Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, Daciuk, 2012) not to mention “A distinguishing feature of bully-victims is that they struggle to control their emotions” (Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001, p. 1491). Uncomfortably wedged in between harassment and relief, the victim depends on the next character to be a support and ally to avert acts of bullying

(Juvonen & Graham, 2014). The bystander can provide support and relief to the victim, but occasionally they take on the role of adversary.

The Bystander. Another involved party of bullying is the bystander, classified as silent, instigator and challenger. The silent bystander is passive and keeps quiet out of fear of becoming the next victim of the bully (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). The bystander that is the instigator has been compared to the bully. This individual will often escalate acts of bullying and the challenger has unfortunately been bullied before and has learned to defend and deflect trepidation of the bully (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). Although the bystander can assume various roles, they are often stressed due to the fact they are afraid of being the next victim of the bully, but are very important in helping to prevent instances of bullying. Students who observed bullying reported “witnessing bullying was unpleasant and many reported being severely distressed by bullying” (Hoover & Oliver, 1996, p. 250). The actions and behaviors of bullying are not necessarily isolated and include the character of the bystander. Even if the bystander did not physically witness the act of bullying, they are likely to hear about it and can be a resource to school personnel in combating the actions of the bully (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Bystanders “sometimes referred to observers or disengaged others, may be the friends of the bully who laugh, encourage the fight, or act as helpers” (Raczynski, Orpinas and Horne, 2013, p. 419). This distinction can make it difficult for this individual to provide assistance when witnessing acts of bullying and mean-spirited behaviors (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013) as well as camouflage school leaders investigations related to bullying incidents.

No matter what role these individuals play in bullying, they all suffer. The Michigan Association of School Administrators (2013) determined “When bullying continues and a school does not take action, the entire school climate can be affected” (p.1). Information based on a survey

provided to students about the intervention provided at their school concerning bullying found “More than 60% of victims reported that school personnel respond poorly, “respond only sometimes or never,” or “try to put a stop to the bullying only once in a while or almost never” (Boulton & Underwood, 1993, p. 75). School personnel should never ignore bullying. This perpetual issue needs the collective attention and support from school leaders in order for change to take place (Allen, 2010). More importantly, school leaders must identify and address the source in order to address the bullying behavior.

Theoretical Perspective on Bullying. Researchers have long identified bullying as a perpetual issue in our schools (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). To fully understand the influences behind this phenomenon, a look at the theoretical perspective is necessary. The “grandfather” of bullying research, Olweus (2001), referred to this social behavior as a hierarchy. The aggressive nature linked to bullying, as well as the social struggles that students battle is embedded in much of the behavior that is displayed in schools (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). For each act of bullying committed, there is a contextual association and reason that must be identified by school personnel in order to provide solutions. Wong, Cheng and Chen (2013) discovered:

Studies have shown students initiate the act of bullying for various reasons, which include: establishing social status, obtaining material rewards, having fun, emotional release, obtaining a sense of security in school, conforming to group norms or group pressure, for revenge, and punishing deviants (p. 58).

Discussion on the issue of bullying usually identifies the individuals involved in the act and the characteristics that surround their role. Further identification of factors related to bullying is essential to adequately assist in implementation (Langan, 2004; Milsom & Gallo, 2006; Perkins, Perkins, & Craig, 2014). Researchers Lam, Law, Chan, Wong, & Zhang (2015) stated “To

develop and implement effective preventive interventions, researchers need to understand the various factors that may influence school bullying” (p. 76). Overlooking the context of bullying will lead to the same arguments and solutions that address the situation reactively versus proactively (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012; Sahin, 2010). Additionally, leadership has to be shared among school personnel. Principals and other school leaders must actively include those not necessarily recognized as leaders. Teachers and other student support can function as leaders in resolving incidents of bullying. Through the lens of distributed leadership, interactions between leaders and followers has been recognized (Harris, 2012) with a reinforced ideal that “multiple sources of influence exist in any organization” (Harris, 2012, p. 7). Having multiple sources working in concert relieves the school leaders from single-handedly attending to the social contexts related to bullying. Researchers Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, and Sadek (2010) argue, “Bullying occurs in a social context and that, without a social context, repeated aggressive acts toward others are impossible” (p. 76). Equipping students with the tools to develop positive social interaction skills will help bind the temptation to exhibit mean-spirited behavior towards their peers (Allen, 2010; Strohmeier & Noam, 2012).

The social context and its relationship to bullying are linked to the human development of students (Lam et al., 2015). These researchers found physical appearance, appearing weak or fat and having any physical or mental impairment are likely to make a student a victim of bullying. When these factors are highlighted as oddities, they become targets for bullies (Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2000). Choosing victims who are not likely to be defended by peers are actions that bullies take to minimize loss of affection and support from significant others (Peets, Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2015). Wong et al. (2013) found, “school administrators agree that external appearance and behavior are directly related to school bullying” (p. 280).

Bullying is identified as primarily occurring in the school. The role that school personnel play in responding to acts of bullying is vital to the confidence that students have in feeling supported (Olweus, 1993; Perkins, Perkins, & Craig, 2014). Cortes and Kochenderfer-Ladd (2014) further proposed a connection between students' disposition of reporting bullying being related to their ideal of the seriousness their teachers take in interceding in bullying difficulties. Students are not always convinced that they have the full support of the teachers and leadership in the school (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014; McCarthy, 2008). The differences that teachers and students have can have a lasting effect on how students feel about school and the support of the teacher (Olweus, 1993). For this reason, Craig and Pepler (1997) stated "A tendency for school staff to underestimate or downplay the severity of school bullying can have important practical implications for children who are chronically bullied and at risk for later maladjustment; bullied children face an imbalance of power" (p. 43). The need for control by the bully causes them to seek out weak and isolated students, which fill their needs and desires to be socially dominant (Langan, 2004). Further research by Wong et al. (2013) found that teachers identified contextual factors, which they felt contributed to bullying:

Bullying arises from the tolerance and apathy on the part of bystanders, lack or failure of interventions initiated by teachers, or dysfunctional family or school systems. In other words, acts of bullying do not arise solely out of the relationships between bullies and victims, according to the perspectives of teachers; instead, they believe that wider contextual factors (for example family and school systems) should also be considered when examining the reasons behind bullying (p.286)

The self-determination theory (SDT) examined highlighted the facet of teacher influence (Lam et al. 2015) which is "Teachers' involvement in their students' academic and social lives

are an influential factor that prevents bullying” (Lam et al. 2015, p. 77). The support of teachers and other school personnel, in reducing instances of bullying will be a primary focus of this research study. The SDT is important to the context of school bullying as it provides an informative perspective to the impact that bullying has on students and the support needed by school personnel (Hong, Davis, Sterzing, Yoon, Choi, & Smith, 2014; Lam, et al., 2015). Attending to the socialization in schools allows students to “grow and flourish” and “develop into more socially adjusted and pro-social individuals who are less prone to bullying or being victimized” (Lam et al., 2015, p. 77). Socially attuned students are less likely to have behaviors that incite negative relationships (Hong, Davis, Sterzing, Yoon, Choi, & Smith, 2014). It is important to realize the needs of the students, but also be aware of school personnel’s perceptions and the impact it has on this issue of bullying.

School Personnel’s Perceptions of Bullying

The problem most schools tend to face is the differing perceptions that the school personnel have when it comes to identifying issues of bullying (Harris, 2006). The perceptions of bullying can vary based on who is being asked about the issue and how they perceive bullying (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013) and “the possibility that school personnel differ substantially in their perceptions of school bullying although plausible, has seldom been the focus of empirical study” (Baker, Boughfman, Cavell, Keller, Lounsbery, Newgent, 2009, p.3). This can be disconcerting, as it plays a role in how issues, such as bullying are viewed and handled by school personnel (Baker, et al., 2009; Thapa, et al., 2013). Without question, it would be unacceptable if an adult was being bullied on their job. For that reason, the question becomes, “why is the same scurrilous behavior relegated to less important status if it occurs with children” (Mauldin, 2002, p. 5)? Whether the behavior is intentional or unintentional, school personnel

have to be deliberate in their support for student's wellbeing and safety while in school (Allen, 2010; Espelage, Hymel, Napolitano, & Vaillancourt, 2010).

Administrators. The administrators are essential in supporting and providing professional development for teachers concerning bullying (Allen, 2010; Espelage, Hymel, Napolitano, & Vaillancourt, 2010). The role of leadership is vital to creating an environment that is safe and supportive of both the teachers and students (Graham, 2010; Honig & Copland, 2010). Very little research has yielded the true perception that administrators have concerning bullying, but administrators do support the need for professional development. With this support comes implementing a view of shared/distributed leadership that collectively addresses bullying. According to Spillane (2005) "Distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures" (p. 144). This very relevant statement addresses the need for leaders to step outside their normal duties and include and affirm school personnel as leaders in addressing bullying. The use of professional development and cooperative policy implementation will support the vision to bring about change in bullying within the school.

School Counselor. School counselors play a major role in supporting students who have been victims of bullying (Hoover & Oliver, 1996). Even though most bullying takes place in the classrooms and other areas in the school, counselors' response and awareness of the emotional effects of bullying is necessary to engage positive change (Austin, Reynolds & Barnes, 2012). Most counselors identify bullying as a problem in their school, but lack support from all school personnel for preventative measures (Hoover & Oliver, 1996). Power-Elliott and Harris (2012) found:

Because of their formal education in empathic listening and relationship building, guidance counselors may view bullying in ways unique to them, and in contrast with approaches taken by their teacher and administrative colleagues. However, within a cohort of guidance counselors there may be differing amounts of training in anti-bullying, causing there to be some variation in responses to bullying within the group (p. 84).

Improving the problem of bullying is a role that school counselors take very seriously (Austin, Reynolds & Barnes, 2012). The strategies of implementation and prevention are employed to create caring environments to build positive social relationships. Adequate training for school personnel and the response to bullying hinge on programs instituted within the school, which have the ability to change the school climate (Donegan, 2012).

Teachers. Teachers have been known to perceive aggressive bullying less than students and their parents (Dahlheimer, 2004). This has been attributed to the fact that some teachers do not have an understanding of what is considered to be an adequate definition of bullying (Donegan, 2012; Espelage, Hymel, Napolitano, & Vaillancourt, 2010). Research has also ascribed the lack of concern on the part of some teachers to classroom management (Allen, 2010). Allen (2010) also found:

A number of fields suggest that several variables conspire to create environments where bullying is more likely to occur. These variables include: harsh and punitive discipline methods, lower-quality classroom instruction, disorganized classroom and school settings, and student social structures characterized by antisocial behavior (p. 1)

All of these factors are closely tied to the school or classroom climate and the knowledge that teachers have about bullying (Espelage, et al., 2010). Not only does a student perceive a teach-

er's lack of control, but there is also the lack of care, which is connected to the school climate (Allen, 2010).

Kennedy, Russom and Kevorkian (2012) highlight the threat that bullying has on the school setting and the need for teacher training and professional development. Forging a relationship with students should be a primary responsibility of the leaders in the building (Allen, 2010). The solution offered in this article was increased training for educators and collaborative input from teachers on what that training should be (Kennedy, et al., 2012). The Georgia Department of Education (2001) has clearly outlined the expectation of training and professional development for school districts. It states:

Local school districts shall provide professional development and training opportunities for school staff on how to respond appropriately to students who commit an offense of bullying, students who are victims of bullying and bystanders who report bullying (p.8).

Teachers found the cause of bullying to come from different sources (Graham, 2010). These sources include, "socio-economic status of the students' families, the students' relationships with their parents, and the influence of media and the internet" (Sahin, 2010, p. 127). Identifying and bringing clarity to these varied views is important in educational practice to bring stability and understanding to reducing bullying behavior (Dedousis-Wallace, Shute, Varlow, Murrhly, & Kidman, 2014).

Student's Perception of Bullying

Students are the central focus of acts of bullying in the school and their voice needs to be heard (Harrington, Rayner, & Warren, 2012). If students cannot trust the adults in the building and find relief and support from the school personnel, they feel they speak in vain (Espelage, Hong, Rao, & Thornberg, 2015). Unfortunately, only 20 to 30 percent of students who are bul-

lied tell adults or authorities about their situations (The Movement Against Bullying, 2015). Without accurate reporting, it is difficult to change the patterns of bullying and abuse that persist in the United States (Ansary, Elias, Greene, & Green, 2015). Equally important, Mauldin (2002) cited “Students rarely report being bullied because they feel that adults cannot do anything to solve the issue and the intervention they provide is infrequent and ineffective” (p.76). This unfortunate view of hopelessness means more and more students will continue to operate in fear in school instead of anticipated academic and social success (Harrington, et al., 2012). Many children do not wish to involve adults when they have been bullied, often because of fear of retaliation from the bully. Schools must create an open environment in which students feel safe enough to tell an adult about being victimized (McNamee & Mercurio, 2008).

Researchers Davis and Nixon (2010) presented the following intervention statistics through the eyes of the student aimed at revealing how they felt about what they see as helpful or harmful in combating bullying behaviors:

- Actions aimed at changing the behavior of the bullying youth (fighting, getting back at them, telling them to stop, etc.) were rated as more likely to make things worse.
- Students reported that the most helpful things teachers can do are: listen to the student, check in with them afterwards to see if the bullying stopped, and give the student advice.
- Students reported that the most harmful things teachers can do are: tell the student to solve the problem themselves, tell the student that the bullying wouldn't happen if they acted differently, ignored what was going on, or tell the student to stop tattling.
- As reported by students who have been bullied, the self-actions that had some of the most negative impacts (telling the person to stop/how I feel, walking away, and pretending it doesn't bother me) are often used by youth and often recommended to youth (p. 1).

School climate and culture

Bullying has been known to cause depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and high levels of stress (Espelage, Hong, Rao, & Thornberg, 2015) which impacts school climate as well (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Straim (2012) expressed "The best way to prevent bullying is to create a positive school climate where students respect each other and do not support bullying" (p. 1). If there is a healthy school climate, it usually creates positive relationships among students (Thapa, et al., 2013). School climate is identified as the quality and character of school life, which includes learning and teaching. The National School Climate Council (2007) defines school climate as, "norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe" (p. 4). Schools may identify climate and culture in many different ways (Thapa, et al., 2013). When this is the case, there is not a cohesive expectation of what should happen when students and teachers enter the building (The National School Climate Council, 2007). Although variations exist in defining school climate "it is consistently described as the character and quality of the school culture or overall ethos of the environment" (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009, p. 2). Multiple levels encompass creating a school climate and culture that will breed the positive results the school community desires. Cohen et. al., (2009) further state "A positive social school climate includes norms that support safety and respect for all members of the school and includes teacher and staff that model pro-social behaviors for their students" (p. 182). In addition, these researchers conceptualized the school climate as having different dimensions; safety (i.e., clarity and consistency with rules), teaching/instruction, relationships, and physical environment/resources. Further, if students perceive school climate as positive, the likelihood of forceful behavior being exhibited will be re-

duced (Espelage et al., 2000; Goldweber et al., 2013; Totura et al., 2009). This is a necessary practice that schools must adhere to for successfully curbing acts of bullying.

Connecting School Climate and Culture to Bullying

Effectively disarming bullying in schools should be coupled with improving overall school climate (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). School climate and school culture are terms that are frequently inter-changeable (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Thapa, et al., 2013). School climate and culture relates to the behavior of teachers and students in the school environment (Cohen, et al., 2009; Tableman, 2004). Tableman (2004) described it this way:

School culture reflects the shared ideas – assumptions, values, and beliefs – that give an organization its identity and standard for expected behaviors and school climate reflects the physical and psychological aspects of the school that are more susceptible to change and that provide the preconditions necessary for teaching and learning to take place (p. 1).

Bullying can take place in several settings (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Donegan, 2012). It happens at school, online (cyber bullying), and through alienation (Connolly, Hussey, & Connolly, 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Most commonly, it takes place “in areas with less adult supervision – hallways, locker rooms, restrooms, cafeterias, bus stops, etc. – the classroom is not immune to incidents of bullying” (Ahmed, Hussain, Ahmed, Ahmed, & Tabassum, 2012, p.18). For schools to gain a better understanding of the effects of bullying on school climate there should not be a separation in identifying a solution (Koo, 2007; Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012). Cohen and Freiberg (2013) stated “If the focus of bullying prevention programs and strategies are separate and apart or different from school climate improvement ef-

forts, then it is not surprising that mean-spirited behaviors including but not limited to bullying and harassment continue” (p. 2).

The continued divergence between students and school personnel, in regards to school climate, is another gage that awareness of the severity of bullying is not identified (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013; Donegan, 2012; Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012). When teachers are not aware of the problem, they are less likely to intervene (Espelage, Low, & Jimer-son, 2014). According to the National School Climate Center (2007), “although there is no uni-versally agreed upon set of core domains or features, we have identified five elements of school climate”: (1) *safety* (e.g., rules and norms, physical security, social-emotional security); (2) *teaching and learning* (e.g., support for learning, social and civic learning); (3) *interpersonal re-lationships* (e.g., respect for diversity, social support from adults, social support from peers); (4) *institutional environment* (e.g., school connectedness, engagement, physical surroundings); and (5) *staff relationships* (e.g., leadership, professional relationships) (p. 1). A similar study by the U.S. Department of Education’s Safe and Supportive Schools modeled an Aspect of School Cli-mate. The three-domain figure featured *student engagement, safety, and school environment* (U.S. Department of Education 2002).

Clearly school climate is important to creating an environment where students feel safe and supported (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013). Schools with favorable school climate have been linked to higher student academic motivation and commitment and raised psychological well-being (Bradshaw & O’Brennan, 2013). Assuring these measures with-in the school leads to the promotion of engaged learning and fewer student absences (Gottfred-son et al., 2005). In addition, a positive school climate can create a barrier for behavior issues, which yields promising favorable achievement and a positive academic outcome. The review of

literature by writers Thapa et al. (2013) found “schools with positive climates tend to have less student discipline problems” (p. 1).

A positive school climate not only helps students, but teachers also benefit from a supportive environment (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Researchers Singh and Billingsley (1998) found “that when educators feel supported by their administration, they report higher levels of commitment and more collegiality (p.229). A workplace where teachers have constructive peer relationships, with open communication, and resilient student-teacher associations, see better student achievement and strong classroom management (Brown & Medway, 2007). When this is missing, it impedes the trust that students have for the adults in building and the support desired (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013).

Barriers to Preventing School Bullying

Since educators are the gatekeepers of what goes on in classrooms and are instrumental in cultivating a positive (or negative) school culture, it is critical that schools actively educate parents and students about bullying in order to deter and minimize the prevalence of the incidents (Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2012). Oftentimes schools devalue the effect minor disrespect and mean behavior has on students and treats it as a *rite of passage* (Austin, Reynolds, & Barnes, 2012). Most often it is identified as *boys being boys* or *girls being catty* (Mauldin, 2002, p. 2). *Teachers’ Perceived Barriers to Effective Bullying Intervention* is a dissertation written by Megan L. Marshall, a Georgia State University graduate. This dissertation identified barriers teachers face in effectively handling bullying. In order for successful prevention or reduction to take place, bullying behaviors must be recognized and intervention must take place (Marshall, 2012, p. 3). The study further discussed the role teachers' play in the lives of students and how they can bring about a change in behavior to provide a safe environment for students who are bullied.

Training and intervention techniques for the teachers and leaders in the building are important in creating a climate and culture that will dismiss bullying behavior. If the adults do not intervene and give the necessary attention to bullying or are unresponsive, the students feel at risk for continued torment by bullies which lead to poor academics, mental health and school avoidance (Marshall, 2012, p. 65). School personnel can make a significant difference in the level of bullying just by being present and aware. More importantly, leaders will have to surrender some of their authority, and transpose their leadership from absolute to one “concerned with brokering, facilitating and supporting others in leading innovation and change” (Harris, 2012, p. 8). Leaders cannot do it all on their own. There has to be a conscious effort to recognize and support other school personnel and charge them with managing and addressing bullying reliably. This may be inclusive of receiving ideas about policies and practices that should be implemented and a consistent definition.

Understanding the barriers of helping students deal with bullying and finding the interventions that are right are critical to creating a trust between students and adults (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Dahlheimer, 2004). The study by Marshall (2012) utilizes the qualitative structure of interviewing teachers and understanding the relationships that these teachers have with their students. Marshall (2012) found, “eliminating the multifaceted obstacles teachers described in this study is a critical step in enhancing teachers’ efforts to reduce, or optimally, prevent school-based bullying” (p. 109). An essential aspect of school violence prevention is the identification and implementation of interventions and strategies designed to prevent or reduce bullying in schools (Marshall, 2012). In addition, school policies are important for encouraging the right kind of behavior for both educators and students.

Policies and Practice. Researchers claim that schools must have clear educational policies to prevent, intervene, and address bullying behaviors (Kennedy, Russom, & Kevorkian, 2012). In addition, The Department of Education (2010) calls for schools to protect students from the physical and emotional harm associated with bullying; however, most school policies reflect a focus only on codes of conduct and behavior management rather than teaching students preventative measures specifically related to bullying (Walton, 2010). Bullying policies have to remain up-to-date to reflect the changes that accompany our society. Specifically, the inception of social media and cyberbullying should not be void of the policies created and implemented (McCarthy, 2008; Strohmeier & Noam, 2012). Clear and consistent policies will assist in successful prevention programs (Milsom & Gallo, 2006).

Currently, only 15 states passed laws addressing bullying and 9 of them developed a defined scope of the behaviors that constitute bullying (Limber & Small, 2003, p. 446). Furthermore, the laws vary from state to state and do not necessarily cover all possible aspects of bullying (Limber & Small, 2003). Without a clear definition provided, a vague assumption on how bullying is defined and handled is left up to the school (Thomas, Connor, & Scott, 2015). At the same time, Limber and Small (2003) noted “Those laws that do define bullying are somewhat inconsistent with each other and with commonly accepted definitions of bullying from the research community” (p. 446-447) and the definitions continue to vary from state to state (Thomas, et al., 2015). For example, the National Association of School Psychologist (2002) found “Connecticut statute defines bullying as “*any overt acts* [italics added] by a student or a group of students directed against another student with the intent to ridicule, humiliate or intimidate the other student” (p. 1) whereas “Colorado legislators define bullying as “any *written or verbal expression, or physical act or gesture*, or a pattern thereof, that is intended to cause distress upon one or

more students” (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, & Simons-Morton, 2001, p. 2095). The aforementioned laws along with others fail to include any indirect forms of bullying such as cyber bullying, teasing or isolation (Limber & Small, 2003, p. 447). In contrast, the California Assembly Bill 746 and Assembly Bill 1156 expanded its definition of bullying to include cyberbullying (Cejnar, n.d.). If there continues to be no clear policies, variations of how bullying is handled will plague our schools.

Ewing (2000) stated “Zero tolerance policies assume that removing students who engage in disruptive behavior will deter others from disruption and create an improved climate for those students who remain” (p. 852). These policies have been found to be excessive in creating a positive school climate and reducing bullying. With these types of programs, removing the disruptions does not help to address the problem of bullying or help change the behavior (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014). The school is charged with providing a safe and disciplined learning environment for students. The policy has to be reviewed before it is put in place to assure it fits the needs of the school (Ansary, Elias, Greene, & Green, 2015). The policies should be realistic and involve students, teachers and the community (Austin, Reynolds, & Barnes, 2012; Baker, Boughfman, Cavell, Keller, Lounsbery, & Newgent, 2009). Hakes (2013) asserted, “Zero tolerance policies don’t always work. It is not enough for schools to declare zero tolerance; they must also engage their students in wide-ranging discussions on bullying and its impact on the victims” (p. 1). Preventative measures to addressing bullying will benefit all parties involved and begin to remedy the acts that lead to persistent negative behaviors. The use of zero tolerance can sometimes isolate and magnify the issue of bullying and the issue still remains unresolved (Austin, et al., 2012; Baker, et al., 2009).

The Importance of Conducting the Study

Contributory. Victims of bullying continue to suffer significantly and the outcries to school personnel frequently go unnoticed and damage the trust in the student/teacher relationship. The delay in intervention begins with understanding policies and practices set by the school, but researchers Bradshaw, Waasdorp and O’Brennan (2013) suggested, “Perceptions of bullying and school-based prevention vary depending on the respondent, which makes it a challenge for researchers and educators to fully understand the prevalence and significance of bullying (p. 281). The ideal that bullying intervention is not attended to as a result of perception, further supports the need for developing, reviewing and updating bullying policies.

Significance of Examining This Study. Creating prevention practices for instances of bullying begins with understanding how school personnel understand the policies and practices put in place by the school. This study will identify what perceptions school personnel have about policies and practice and what obstructs their ability to intervene. It will also provide educational leaders with evidence of necessary changes needed for training and professional development for school personnel.

Conclusion

Addressing bullying early is critical to prevention (Hoover & Oliver, 1996). To that end, Strohmeier and Noam (2012) stated “Research shows the best strategy to prevent bullying in the long run is to apply whole-school approach evidence-based programs” (p. 10). For personnel, responding to bullying according to policies and practices set by the school provides consistency in identifying and addressing the issue. On the contrary, even when there are policies in place to deal with negative behavior, it does not mean that educators know what to do when faced with a problem. School leaders are expected to not only provide clarity in school policies, but provide

the proper training through professional development. Shattering the assumption that educators do not care about and attend to this issue is vital in regaining students' trust. Creating a safe environment is paramount to young people becoming increasingly willing to confide in the adults in the building (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014). This review of literature is important to identify the various perceptions of bullying and theoretical relationship between bullying and social contextual factors.

Examining the relationship between bullying and the self-determination theory will support the need to understand the social context related to bullying. According to Wong et al. (2013) there is a need for, "clarification of how individuals in different roles perceive the victims and causes of bullying are of great importance to educational practice" (p. 280). Understanding this variance is beneficial to school leaders and might inform their role in intervention in an effort to create stronger relationships with students to help prevent bullying. School personnel have to be responsible for modeling behavior on how to treat one another. An essential part of reducing bullying is raising awareness and consistency in policies and practices related to bullying intervention and policy implementation. The use of distributed leadership "is clearly being advocated and endorsed in educational policy around the world" (Harris, 2012, p. 9). As far back as 1954, when researcher C.A. Gibb referenced leadership, it was identified that distributed leadership was best regarded as a group quality, which best operates, "when carried out by the group" (Bolden, 2011, p. 252). School leaders, along with teachers, deans of students and counselors should operate as a group to successfully contain bullying. Sustaining a culture that repeals mean-spirited behavior, must be purposeful and planned by empowering school personnel to be leaders in their classroom and sharing ideas to reduce bullying. This will positively impact change and create a culture of safety and support for students.

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2 ADDRESSING BULLYING: A CASE STUDY INVESTIGATING SCHOOL PERSONNEL'S PERCEPTIONS OF THREE PRIVATE SCHOOLS' POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. This well-known comeback phrase is typically used to fend off mean words from someone that either seeks to tease or hurt others. Although words are just spoken, the fact remains that words can actually hurt. As a child, I often found myself with a group of kids that were friendly and well liked. Despite being in such a fun circle of kids, I occasionally became the “butt” of a few jokes and choice names. I remember specifically being called “high booty” and “butt on your back.” While laughing it off with the other students became a normal practice, I took to heart the name and tried to purposely dress myself in clothes that would not bring attention to the extension of my legs that showed the disproportion of my body.

As a young adult, I sometimes found myself feeling a bit self-conscious about having a short torso and extra-long legs. To my advantage, having long legs brought a mass of compliments as a cheerleader for my superb jumps and athleticism. As a middle school dean of students, I am privy to the ills of students who also find themselves subjected to torment through name-calling and occasional physical contact. I am now charged with the task of nurturing an environment that is conducive to learning and protecting the ideals of academic learning. At the same time, having been a victim of ridicule and working with students who are also victims, it was my goal to explore school personnel’s perception of school policies and practices about bullying.

The guiding question for this research was: What are school personnel’s understandings of the bullying policy at their school?

- a. What were their perceptions of bullying within their school?
- b. How does school personnel's perception of bullying impact their efforts to intervene?

The literature clearly showed educators must avail themselves to active awareness of the issue of bullying within the schools. If students do not feel they are safe, and can rely on the adults in the building, the interventions sought will be in vain. Cohn and Canter (2003) found “twenty-five percent of teachers see nothing wrong with bullying or putdowns and consequently intervene in only 4 percent of bullying incidents” (p. 1). Additionally, bullying continues to be a widespread issue in our schools. Some students live in fear and even committed suicide from the odious behavior of bullies (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). As educational leaders, it is our responsibility to address this epidemic through policies and practices set by the federal, state, and local levels of our school. Understanding our role, in addition to actively implementing necessary policies, may help eliminate schism developed from our own perceptions and hesitation to intervene by bringing awareness to the situation.

School leadership is charged with providing students with a safe environment for learning (Mooij & Fettelaar, 2013; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). According to Quinn (2013), “the message that bullying is never acceptable, that it is wrong, that it is not a normal part of growing up needs to be upheld” (p. 75).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

There is an ongoing need for school personnel to become aware of the increased problem of bullying in schools. The perception that administrators, teachers and counselors have about bullying has a monumental impact on their probability to intervene. According to Olweus (1993), “a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students” (p. 1173). If school personnel do

not completely understand the bullying policies framed at the state level by the GADOE and implemented at the local level, it will not be effectively implemented. For private/independent schools, this definition is a starter for creating policies that are fashioned to their school environment (Cornell & Limber, 2015).

The purpose of this case study was to investigate three private middle schools in the metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia area and perceptions school personnel have about policies and practices relating to bullying. Further, this research identified how those perceptions impact intervention. Additionally the researcher solicited their understanding and awareness of policies and practices in place for bullying at their school and inquired whether the understanding of said policies impacted how they intervene in situations of bullying. The remainder of this chapter will include the importance of conducting of this study, theoretical framework, qualitative research methodology, data analysis, results, discussion, limitations, and conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework, “has implications for every step made in the research process,” (Mertens, 1998, p.3) and is important in exploratory studies where you want to learn more about the issues being addressed. Mason (2002) identified the social phenomena of qualitative research as “the intellectual puzzle”, which requires intense involvement to understand and explain what is being researched (p. 12). This proposed design allowed the researcher to understand school personnel's perceptions about bullying and identify the impact the level of understanding has on developing and implementing intervention strategies. In addition, researchers Craig and Pepler (1997) discovered “Observing the practices of teachers and school leaders’ response to bullying, and how that sets the tone for how students perceive it helps to identify the needs and changes that must take place” (p. 2). If there was a clear message sent that this behavior was not

tolerated, it will assist in the trust that students have in the adults in the building and begin to create stronger relationships (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014). Epistemology, an approach used to validate knowledge, was used to inform this study (Yin, 1994).

Epistemology

For this research, a constructivist position was assumed to explore the, “empirical inquiry of a case study” (Yin, 1994, p. 13). Crotty (1998) explained that “Constructivism is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). Constructivism focuses on the social interaction and is hinged on the principle of problem-based learning. If students, especially victims were not supported they “were less likely to come forward if they believed their school tolerates bullying” (Unnever & Cornell, 2004, p. 384). When students felt teachers would do very little to stop or prevent the bullying behaviors and in many cases make it worse. If there was no incentive to reporting bullying, victims will not ask for help (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Understanding and being aware of policies to handle bullying within the school was vital to intervention (Cornell & Limber, 2015).

Ultimately, the problem of bullying must be clearly defined and understood so that schools can begin creating climates that promote positive and safe learning (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Crotty, (1998) stated, “constructivism does not allow meaning to be discovered; meaning is instead constructed and that “different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon” (p. 9). Identifying the varying perceptions the adults in the building have about bullying will create clarity on what consistencies are necessary to build a strong school climate and culture.

Theoretical Perspective

In order to support and acknowledge the social reality of bullying, and my views on the research, I had to identify a theoretical perspective. According to Crotty, “The theoretical perspective relates to the underlying philosophical assumption about the researcher’s view of the human world and the social life within that world” (p. 174). Emerging evidence of school personnel’s perception of bullying policies and intervention probability brought clarity to an existing bullying problem that our schools face (Cornell & Limber, 2015). To further pinpoint school personnel’s perceptions of bullying and understanding of policies related, it was important to identify a theoretical perspective that would justify and align the research. In this case “Symbolic interactionism, for its part, is a *theoretical perspective* that informs a range of methodologies, including some forms of ethnography” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). This theoretical perspective was proposed to examine school personnel's perspectives about bullying policies and interventions. Morrison (2012) stated “A symbolic interactionist approach presents life as an unfolding process in which individuals interpret their environment and act upon it on the basis of that interpretation” (p. 21).

To gain an understanding of the perceptions teachers have about bullying policies within their school, and its connection to their intervention efforts, symbolic interactionism provided insight to the interpretive assumptions that personnel have formed. There were a number of assumptions included in the methodology. As the theoretical perspective was identified, these assumptions became clear in the research. Blumer (1986) identified three beliefs, which are closely tied to symbolic interactionism: 1) individuals act towards things based on the significance that the thing has for them, 2) the meaning of things originates from collective interaction with colleagues and, 3) meanings are managed and amended through interpretive processes. These be-

liefs informed this study because educators' actions are dictated by policies and expectations. For example, how teachers responded to bullying behaviors could be attributed to personal or professional priorities and mandates, how school personnel perceived bullying policies and interventions were informed by their colleagues and developed through interpretive processes.

Qualitative Research Methodology

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) defined qualitative research as, “multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter” (p. 1). A paradigm is an approach used by the researcher with the ideal that it will generate a viewpoint on the proposed inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Weaver and Olson (2006) penned paradigm as, “sets of beliefs and practices, shared by communities of researchers, which regulate inquiry within disciplines” (p. 459). This belief echoes the values of the researcher that influenced the work for the methodology. Schwandt identified methodology as “a particular social scientific discourse (a way of acting, thinking, and speaking) that occupies a middle ground between discussions of method and discussions of issues in the philosophy of social sciences” (p. 161). The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine school personnel’s perceptions as it relates to bullying. A case study approach was used for this research to position the focus on the perceptions and understanding school personnel have about policies and practices as they relate to bullying and how it impacts intervention efforts. For this chapter, the researcher discussed the reasoning for utilizing the case study methodology and how it aided in the design, implementation, and representation of findings. Along with the methods used the theoretical framework, which according to Crotty (1998) is:

Scaffolding which aims to provide researchers with a sense of stability and direction as they go on to do their own building; that is as they move towards understanding and ex-

pounding the research process after their own fashion in forms that suit their particular research process (p. 2).

The researcher selected the qualitative approach for this study because it addressed a gap in the literature and provided insight into school personnel's perceptions; numerical data could limit the ability to fully tackle the topic (the number of bullying infractions reported cannot explain how school personnel perceive the incidents); in order to understand the topic, the researcher needed to hear school personnel's reactions and read the policies; and the research question is not *testable* in the traditional or quantitative sense of research (Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2014).

Research Design

According to Yin (2003), "a case study design should be considered when: (a) the focus of study is to answer "how" and "why" questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study and (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon and context" (p. 13). The guiding question for this study, what are school personnel's understandings of the bullying policy at their school, was well suited for the case study method. It sought to determine why school personnel developed certain perceptions about bullying in their schools and how those perceptions impact their efforts to intervene when bullying behaviors are reported or witnessed. The researcher observed and interviewed participants for this study, but did not manipulate any behaviors during the data collection or analysis process. Bullying was a relevant phenomenon to study, particularly in the context of private schools.

According to Yin (2014), "a case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 2). To truly identify the ongoing phenomenon of bullying,

one must first distinguish the differing perceptions that the school personnel have and how that impacts their efforts to intervene (Dedousis-Wallace, Shute, Varlow, Murrphy, & Kidman, 2014). Furthermore, policies should be targeted and clear at disarming this issue in schools. Deliberate attention must be placed on attending to the concerns of students so they are comfortable reporting instances of bullying (Espelage, Low, & Jimerson, 2014).

The use of the case study methodology allowed the researcher to observe various cases for comparison (Yin, 2003). The private schools for this research and the different level of school personnel provided insight to the perceptions each of the participants had on the policies in their respective schools. It also helped to identify the discrepancies that result in varied response to incidents of bullying and expectations for managing the behavior.

This case study involved the use of interviews, non-participant observations and documentation provided by the schools. Yin writes (2004), “the case study method helps you to make direct observations and collect data in natural settings, compared to relying on derived data” (p. 2). Obtaining various sources was critical to the case study methodology and acquiring multiple sources of evidence was advantageous (Cronin, 2014). The questions in case study research were usually targeted to a limited number of events or conditions and their interrelationship (Radley & Chamberlain, 2012; Yin, 2004). The research questions in this case study targeted the areas discussed in both the literature review and the focus for this dissertation; they supported the relationship of policies and practices of bullying within the school setting.

For this research, a descriptive case study, defined as, “a study whose purpose is to describe a phenomenon (the case) in its real-world context” (Yin, 2003, p. 238) was utilized to identify the perceptions and understanding school personnel have relating to bullying. Descriptive case studies answered questions on theory. Case studies were used to conduct multi-

perspectival analyses. Essentially, the researcher considered the voice and perspective of the actors and those of the relevant groups of actors and the interaction between them (Cronin, 2014; Radley & Chamberlain, 2012).

Binding the Case

Binding the case was another important facet of case study research (Ying, 2003). Baxter and Jack (2008) stated, “one of the common pitfalls associated with case study is that there is a tendency for researchers to attempt to answer a question that is too broad or a topic that has too many objectives for one study” (p. 546). Researchers Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) recommend putting confines on the case to avoid an indulgence of broad data. For this research, the case was bounded by specific school personnel, private/independent school affiliation, time, and context following the recommendations of Baxter and Jack (2009), “binding the case will ensure that your study remains reasonable in scope” (p. 546). This case was bound by the criteria of private Christian schools located in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. The middle school level was also identified as a boundary for its relevance to the issue of bullying and enrollment of at least 300 students in the middle school rounded out the case study boundaries.

Case studies are designed to bring out the details from the viewpoint of the participants by using multiple sources of data (Tellis, 1997). Yin (2014), states, “case study evidence may come from six sources: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts” (p. 70). For this research project, data sources included participant interviews, non-participant observations and documents provided by the school’s participants. The use of multiple data sources allowed the researcher to develop a stronger understanding of the topic and allowed for richer analysis of the data.

Researcher's Role in the Design Process

In qualitative research, the researcher was the instrument or the tool for designing, collecting, and analyzing data. Throughout this research, I take both a professional and personal identity. As an educator (professional), I observed the behavior of students being purposely mean and unpleasant to one another. I witnessed the hurt of those on the receiving end of this cruel behavior identified as bullying. As a parent (personnel), it creates an awareness of the suffering that could possibly infringe on our children's lives.

While speaking to the participants of this study, I wanted to create an atmosphere that would allow them to feel comfortable in sharing their thoughts about the environment in which they teach and educate children. In order to acquire authentic thoughts and feelings from the participants, the researcher presented material with a noncritical view towards the beliefs and opinions of the participants. This manner of delivery sets the tone for more open dialogue during interviews and while being observed (Tellis, 1997; Yin, 2014).

Participants

Gaining access to the participants began with approval through Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) which Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) share, "has become a standard part of doing any research involving human subjects" (p. 62). [Three out of forty private Christian schools in the metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia area were selected for inclusion in the case study research.](#) The U.S. Department of Education (2009) identified, "most private or nonpublic schools in the U.S. are religious, and many are affiliated with a religious faith, denomination, or local church. Many nonpublic schools without a religious identity or affiliation are private schools designed to prepare students for college" (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

The school personnel were valuable to the research based on their responsibility to support a safe and caring environment for students. Interviews were conducted in the participants' school in a location designated by each contributor. Participant recruitment for this research was based on their role in the school (obvious identification of the principal and counselor were made by job title and description). To proceed to the next level of identifying teacher participants, snowball sampling, "snowball sampling is arguably the most widely employed method of sampling in qualitative research," (Noy, 2007, p. 330) was utilized. This method helped create connections for the researcher to solicit participation from other teachers. Interviews with the principal and counselor for each school provided preliminary access to information concerning the research. Additionally, the Dean of Students, were interviewed due to their role as the disciplinarian in the schools. Three teachers from each school participated in interviews to gain further understanding and identify the perceptions surrounding bullying within their schools. Principals were instrumental in adhering to the criteria of identifying teachers that had been at the schools for three years or more and strategically enlisted a balance of males and females to enhance the study perceptions.

School personnel play a major role in establishing school climate and culture, which generates a sense of trust for students and promotes learning (Honig & Copland, 2010). The participants for this research were middle school personnel who included: principals, dean of students (if applicable), counselors and teachers from three private/independent schools in the metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia area. Purposive sampling was used to allow for intentional selection of participants. Researchers Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest, Namey (2005) asserted purposive sampling was, "one of the most common sampling strategies, which groups participants according to preselected criteria relevant to a particular research question" (p. 5). Participants were

principals, dean of students (if applicable), counselors and teachers employed at their current schools' for at least three years. This group was selected in order to obtain the view of those on the “front-line” with students; those who were privy to the behaviors that could lend itself to the issue of bullying.

The independence of a private school created flexibility in policy creation and implementation. Following approval from the IRB, initial contact was made with each school's headmaster to gain access and approval to complete the research. I initiated contact with the leaders with a recruitment email (see Appendix A). Once approval was given, the identified school personnel (principal, counselor, dean of students, and three teachers) were interviewed at each school.

Table 1

School Profiles

Name of School	Demographics and Enrollment	Number of Staff	Middle school model
Barton Academy - K-12 Est. 1963	383 students	28	5 th – 8 th
Godwin Academy – K-12 Est. 1972	300 students	22	5 th – 8 th
Roland Academy – K-12 Est. 1986	325 students	26	6 th – 8 th

I began by speaking with the school principals first, who then identified the teachers who would participate in the study. Counselor and deans of student participants were identifiable by their titles. Once each participant was identified, a time was scheduled to meet with each individual that would guard their academic time and allow for uninterrupted conversations.

Ethical Considerations

Following the guidelines set by Georgia State Institutional Review Board (IRB), a letter of Informed Consent (see Appendix B) was provided to each participant and the school which outlined: the purpose of the research, expectations during the research, confidentiality, and contact information of the principal and student investigator (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Lichtman (2012) contended, “any individual participating in a research study has a reasonable expectation that information provided to the researcher will be treated in a confidential manner” (p. 5). To ensure confidentiality, the school and its participants were given pseudonyms in order to remain anonymous (Yin, 2014). Each school leader and participant gave me the power to select their pseudonyms to be used for the research.

Data Collection

A key asset of the case study research method involves the use of multiple sources and methods in the data collecting process. Joubish, Khurram, Ahmed, Fatima and Haider, (2011) stated, “qualitative data analysis consists of identifying, coding and categorizing patterns found in the data” (p. 2084). The data can be extensive inquiries using unstructured data collection methods (Joubish, Khurram, Ahmed, Fatima and Haider, 2011). The method of collection data included an hour long interview, and transcribed notes, with each school personnel participant [principal, assistant principal or dean of students (if available) counselor and teachers], three thirty minute observations were done at three different times of the day on varying days (morning,

lunchtime and dismissal), research journal, and artifacts which included documents. Even though the interview process proved to be extensive, as evident in the data collection chart (see Appendix C), it was rewarding to personally engage with the data. An Interview Protocol (see Appendix D) was created to allow for, “guided conversations rather than structured queries” (Yin, 2014, p. 110). The protocol served as a guide to provide fluidity, comfort and trust (Yin, 2014).

A key strength of the case study method involves using multiple sources and techniques in the data gathering process (Soy, 1997). Interviews were recorded (with notes kept in a labeled journal) and transcribed with permission from each participant. To assure credibility, it required, “demonstrating, in one or more ways, that the research was designed to maximize the accuracy of identifying and describing whatever is being studied” (Brown, 2005, p. 32). Using multiple sources of data was designed to bring about clarity to the interpretation that school personnel have about bullying and what barriers impede intervention (Joubish, Khurram, Ahmed, Fatima, & Haider, 2011).

Interviews. Yin (2014) stated, “Interviews are an essential source of case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs and action” (p. 113). For case study research, the use of a protocol, “is a major way of increasing the *reliability* of case study research and intended to guide the researcher in carrying out the data collection” (Yin, 2014, p. 84). The interviews contained dialogue that allowed the participants to freely discuss the issue of bullying in their respective schools. Each participant had an hour long interview scheduled. Interviews were set at times that were convenient to the participants. All interviews were recorded with the permission of each participant.

The semi-structured questions I created for this research were clear and direct to address the topic of bullying and bullying policies and practices. This allowed for free flowing dialogue

between the researcher and participants. Utilizing interviews was necessary to uncover things not visible through observations. Patton (1990) stated:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective (p. 426).

My intent was to treat each participant as an expert in the understanding the relationships between the students they observed in school each day. Transcribing the interviews was the next step. Themes were identified based on participants' responses.

Non-Participant Observations. In addition to interviewing participants and collecting documents, I also conducted non-participant interviews at each school. Given stated (2008)

Researchers may engage in nonparticipant observations for a number of reasons: (1) The researcher may have limited or no access to a particular group and therefore may not have the opportunity to engage in participant observations, (2) the researcher setting might be one in which participant observation would be dangerous or difficult, (3) the researcher may be interested less in the subjectivity experienced dimensions of social action and more in reified patterns that emerge from such action (p. 561).

The non-participant interviews were conducted at three different times during the school day: morning transition, lunchtime and dismissal (see Appendix E). The non-participant observation was occasionally scrutinized due to the behavior participants take on during the observation

process (Marshall, 2016). Non-participant observations were also identified as overt and covert.

Liu and Maitlis (2010) identify this style as

nonparticipant observation may be overt or covert. When overt, participants understand that the observer is there for research purposes...when observation is overt – either by hidden cameras or by an observer pretending not to study the setting – participants are unaware that they are being studied (p. 610).

During my observations, I was able to remain unobtrusive and witness student activities as they interacted with each other, teachers and other school personnel.

Data Analysis

Method of Analysis

As recommended by Wolcott (1990), the three aspects of data analysis should be: description, analysis, and interpretation of the culture-sharing group. The questions were sorted to highlight the areas of perception of bullying by the administrators, teachers and counselors and interpretation of school policies. Methods for analysis include:

(1) In the first process, the analyst codes all data and then systematically analyzes these codes to verify or prove a given proposition. (2) In the second process, the analyst does not engage in coding data per se but merely inspects the data for properties of categories, uses memos to track the analysis, and develops theoretical ideas (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 548).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) further recommended that a *hybrid approach* to analysis, “one that combines, by an analytic procedure of constant comparison, the explicit coding procedure of the first approach and the style of theory development of the second” (p. 102). To identify themes, Ryan and Bernard (2003) found, “analyzing text involves several tasks: 1) discovering

themes and subthemes, 2) winnowing themes to a manageable few (i.e. deciding which themes are important in any project), 3) building hierarchies of themes or code books, and (4) linking themes into theoretical models” (p. 85).

The analysis was inclusive of interviews, non-participant observations, and documents. Initial analysis included open coding to tag any unit of data that might be relevant to the study (Wolcott, 1990) which means “data are broken down, compared, and then placed in a category” (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 549). Once open coding was complete, axial coding began in order to relate categories and properties to one another; refining category schemes during the process. This was done to make comparisons between the data (Wolcott, 1990). Finally, the core category, selective coding was used to capture recurring patterns in the data (Walker & Myrick, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1998) identified this process as, “the process of integrating and refining the theory” (p. 1) likewise, data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions of a study (Yin, 1994). The qualitative computer program Dedoose assisted in creating themes and subthemes for each category identified in the research. Interviews were transcribed prior to downloading files in Dedoose, to ease the data manipulation process. Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggested, “for those who tape their interviews, the process of identifying themes probably begins with the act of transcribing the tapes” (p. 89). To further identify themes, several thematic techniques were utilized (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first technique I utilized was pawing. This technique suggests proofreading the material (in this case it was transcriptions) and underlining or identifying key phrases with different colors (Wolcott, 1990). Ryan and Bernard (2003) identified this as “the ocular scan method, otherwise known as *eyeballing*. In this method, you get a feel for the text by handling your data multiple times (p. 88). Next, the technique identified as cutting and sorting

was utilized. “Cutting and sorting is a more formal way of pawing” and it is used “for identifying subthemes” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 94). Although this technique refers to the actual cutting and sorting, I used the computer to cut, paste and sort data. I identified important quotes and repeated phrases from each interviewee. This became the theme: subthemes were developed for repetition within themes (see Table 2).

Table 2

Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Bullying Policies	Awareness of bullying policies
Perceptions of bullying in the school	Climate and culture
Bullying	Defined, Locations, Types
Intervening in bullying	Individual efforts to intervene, School initiatives

Yin (1994) suggested every investigation should have a general analytic strategy, so as to guide the decision regarding what will be analyzed and for what reason. He presented some possible analytic techniques: *pattern-matching*, *explanation-building*, and *time-series analysis*. In general, the analysis will rely on the theoretical propositions that led to the case study. To gain full exposure of the data, confirmability will look at all interpretations by which the documentation is made available (Brown, 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985) found, “confirmability is enhanced by *audit trails*” (p. 134) while Denzin (1994) stated, “confirmability builds on audit trails

and involves several methods of data sources (p. 513). Upon request, participants were allowed to view the data for truthfulness based on their responses in their interviews.

Credibility and Validity

Presenting research that is accurate and/or correct can be difficult. In reality researchers have to depend on the participants to present reasonably accurate data. Trochim (2006) determined “The credibility criterion involves establishing that the results of qualitative research are credible or believable from the perspective of the participant in the research” (p. 1). Credibility for this research included several pieces of documentation (multiple data sources enhance credibility in research) which, provided assurance for a credible analysis. Yin (1994) suggested using multiple sources of evidence as the way to ensure construct validity.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of this feedback was important to evaluating the worth of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) connect trustworthiness to establishing credibility, dependability and confirmability in research. Case studies include several strategies that promote data credibility or “truth value” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 556) and to gain trustworthiness, it should ensure, “purposeful sampling is done, data are collected and managed systematically and data are analyzed correctly” (Russell, Gregory, Ploeg, DiCenso and Guyatt, 2005, p.125). Member checking, “also called member or respondent validation” is the response provided from the participants concerning the research (Schwandt, 2001, p. 49). This qualitative method creates verification of research findings to ensure validity (Yin, 2014).

Crystallization. Seeking truth does not come through crystallization, but truth can present themselves through various forms of inquiry (Ellingson, 2009). Crystallization has been described as “an in-depth process that goes beyond traditional qualitative methodology” (Cugno &

Thomas, 2012, p. 113). Once all data were collected, the crystallization method was employed to look at data from several different lenses. Crystallization was a combination of several forms of analysis and a genre depicted in lucid and interrelated text (Ellingson, 2009). It allowed for the meaning of text to be analyzed from various angles with the goal to increase understanding and enrich findings in the research. According to Ellingson (2009), crystallization

enables significant freedom to indulge in showing the “same” experience in the form of a poem, a live performance, an analytic commentary, and so on; covering the same ground from different angles illuminates a topic. As our goal in conducting qualitative research generally involves increasing understanding in order to improve dialogue among individuals and groups and to effect positive change in the world (p. 15).

The crystallization method brought clarity to a single data set and provided various ways to look at that data. For this research, the use of transcribed interview data, non-participant observations and documents provided by the school created the clarity essential to adequately support the findings.

Results

Yin (2014) suggested “Sharing the conclusions from a case study, whether in writing or orally, means bringing its results and findings to closure” (p. 176). The findings for this research will culminate in the analysis and reporting sections of this dissertation. The findings from this study were connected to the problem that was presented which, examined school personnel’s perception of policies and practice as it related to school bullying. Spindler and Spindler (1987), “emphasize that the most important requirement for an ethnographic approach is to explain behavior from the “native’s point of view” (p. 20). In this case, the natives were those participating in the research. The findings were summarized and presented to propose attainable solutions to

the problem of bullying in the middle school. These findings were shared with leadership and teachers to help understand this pervasive problem and work on solutions.

Whether one would be willing to admit it or not, at some point bullying has had an impact or played a role in their life: as the victim, the bystander or the bully (Thornberg, 2015). Understanding these roles and further identifying how bullying is defined creates consistency and support for the students (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Research already suggests perceptions between students and teachers differ (Buckman, 2011), but when school personnel are not fully aware of how the school manages bullying, it further unravels (Espelage, Low, & Jimerson, 2014).

Buckman (2011) goes on to explain, “although research investigating such differences has been scarce, there is some support that the occurrence, common locations, and prevention practices regarding bullying are viewed consistently between students and teachers (p. 1). The school personnel interviewed candidly disclosed their thoughts and feelings as they pertained to bullying in their school, how it varied amongst staff, parents and students. The leadership also provided documents they felt would bring support to how their respective schools addressed the issue. The accounts offered in the findings based on my analysis of the data assist in understanding: 1) Perceptions that school personnel have about bullying in their school, 2) their understanding of the policy as it relates to bullying, and 3) what interventions are available and how they respond.

Bullying Policies

Policies are created to bring cohesiveness and alignment to an organization to assure all parties involved have an understanding of the expectations that should be followed within the organization (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2014). According to the Merriam-Webster diction-

ary, policy is defined as, “a definite course of method of action selected from among alternatives and in light of given conditions to guide and determine present and future decisions” (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, 2015). School personnel are presented with the policies and are expected to follow the guidelines set forth. The bullying policies created by each of these schools were not always easily identified. When speaking with the school personnel about the bullying policy, it became evident that everyone was not always aware of the policy itself or where they could find it.

Awareness and practice of school policies. Discussing the policy with school personnel often resulted in momentary silence in order to recall familiarity with the policies. Whether there was an awareness or not, inconsistencies in what, if any policy, reinforced bullying. Mr. Gray, the Dean of Students, and Mr. Jones, the counselor, at Barton Academy (Barton) both agreed the bullying policy “is something we are working on.” During the interview Mrs. Swanson, principal at Barton, had a difficult time trying to find the policy. When asked about the policies on bullying stated, “that’s actually a good question. A lot of that has to do with being able to put my hands on it”. Reviewing their handbook revealed the presence of a harassment policy, which, was inclusive of bullying, harassment, discrimination and retaliation but did not specifically address bullying. Subsequently, being conscious of the bullying policy was not always apparent which, could suggest putting it into practice was void. Mr. Wright, a teacher at Barton Academy, admitted his classroom management may look different from his colleagues, which means his awareness and reaction will differ. In essence, those who were not aware of the policy had some insight on what was expected if an incident of bullying took place. Mr. Cooper, a science teacher at Godwin Academy (Godwin), stated, “I think some teachers (and I would lump myself in this category) from time to time try to handle it right then and there; nip it in the bud. This has been

addressed; let's move on." He was aware that this did not mean the situation was over and felt, "there should be some kind of uniform policy." It was not always consistent, within each school. Mrs. Duncan and Mr. Oliver, two other teachers at Godwin Academy, acknowledged the bullying policy and also knew the steps to take to handle it. Mr. Cooper felt once the incident left the teachers, there was not always feedback provided as to how the situation turned out.

Mr. Jack, principal at Roland Academy, immediately responded yes, to the fact their school had a bullying policy and recalled the page on which it could be found in the handbook. After reviewing the document, I saw a very detailed bullying policy. Two of the three teachers at Roland Academy were also aware of the bullying policy. Mr. Wade stated, "I don't know if there is an official written something, but I can tell you how we in the middle school handle it." Even though he was not aware, he was able to tell me how they handled bullying in the middle school. He identified that across the board teachers are the frontline and will take the lead.

Observations. During my observations, I witnessed a phone conversation between Mr. Gray, Dean of Students, and Mr. Jones the counselor at Barton Academy. Mr. Gray inquired about the location of the bullying policy because he did not know where it was. In response to a comment made by the counselor, Mr. Gray said, "where is our definition of bullying? It's not in the handbook; I know I've seen things, but I'm like where is it?" From this conversation, I inferred the void of an active bullying policy.

Perceptions of bullying in the school

Perceptions of bullying were expressed based on the experience each school personnel encountered when they were in school, or their own belief and definition of bullying. The responses provided had strong connections to the environment in which they taught and supported their ideal of unintentional imperfections, but a constant push for improvement. Within each

school, the personnel interviewed would identify a situation that mirrored what they thought bullying to look like in their teaching environment. For instance, Mrs. Rand, a History teacher at Roland Academy, described students are oftentimes so comfortable with one another they will unintentionally do something and not mean it. She mentioned, “they've been together for a long time and they tend to treat each other like brother and sister which sometimes is an issue only because they don't think about what they're doing.” Mrs. Carter, a Language Arts teacher at Roland Academy, went on to say,

I think we would be naive to say that some kids don't make fun of others in a certain way (because you said bullying so I'm trying to focus with that). But I do think we as teachers address that really quickly and it depends of course on the severity of it.

These obvious variations are evident within the same school and support perceptions differ from teacher to teacher and based on the specific circumstances. Mr. David, the principal at Godwin Academy, revealed his perception of bullying this way:

It's an issue in a sense that it's something that's always to be aware of. There's a lot of it, there's always (so many issues). I don't think it's tipping the scale as a glowing issue. I think at this age level though, it's just the nature of middle school age. They're trying to figure out who they are, they're trying to figure out their social ranking and they're social dynamics and even how they just get along and make friends and be cool and all that (That atmosphere of insecurity and not sure). It's just going to be a part of it. If it's like a dash board, you got a gauge about bullying and keep an eye on it.

Even the leadership in schools was not insensible to bullying, but perceives it in connection to the nature of the middle school student and the behaviors that are commonly associated with this group. Upon review of the handbook provided by Barton Academy, it was evident the percep-

tions were varied based on the lack of clarity in the document. The handbook provided a harassment policy that only identified bullying in word, but with no context as to how it was defined. This ambiguity left room for individual attempts to deal with bullying rather than a collective effort on behalf the school.

Dean of Students at both Barton Academy and Godwin Academy felt bullying was something their schools dealt with from time to time. Mr. Gray, Dean at Barton, said, “Most of the kids felt that bullying was not a problem, and most of the teachers felt it was not a problem, but we kinda did.” He felt as the main disciplinarian, it was something he sees more often. Teachers from his school identified it as an issue, although not “a huge issue” according to Mrs. Hall, but definitely exist. Mrs. Powell, Dean at Godwin said, “We’re not immune. I don’t think any school is immune.” These feelings were shared by other school personnel in the school, with the thought they were very aware and prepared if an issue of bullying were to arise.

The counselors at each of the schools agreed that assuming bullying does not take place would be misleading. When asked about perceptions of bullying at Roland Academy, Mrs. Gloster stated, “I’d love to say no, I’d love to say that I don’t think it is, but I think that probably there are some things we are not aware of” while Mrs. Sharp at Godwin Academy, said, “Do I on a daily basis deal with kids that I just think have had this ongoing intent to really make someone’s life difficult, minimal of that.” Undoubtedly, all participants of the study were aware bullying was present and should be handled.

Climate and culture. Climate and culture have been identified as important aspects of managing bullying (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2014). When discussing climate and culture with the school personnel, community seemed to be the consistent description of the climate in the building. There seemed to be a winning spirit at each of the schools. Climate and culture

were identified as friendly, fun and family like. At Roland Academy, it was agreed that the principal, Mr. Jack did a phenomenal job at setting the tone for the middle school. Mr. Wade, sixth grade Bible teacher at Roland Academy, described the climate and culture of the middle school as a, “direct reflection of our middle school head; Mr. Jack.” He went on to say it was a warm and loving place. Mrs. Rand supported that same feeling by stating, “We call ourselves a family and we act like it.” The veteran teacher in this school, Mrs. Carter, revealed there were, “cliques and sometimes groups and divides”, but the climate is overall “very warm and friendly.”

At Barton Academy, it seemed to be positive as well, but a bit more forced compared to the description provided by school personnel. Mr. Jones describes Barton Academy as an, “overall pretty nurturing community” while Mrs. Jones; science teacher at Barton Academy, described the climate as “rigorous.” School principal Mrs. Swanson, identified the varied ages of teachers presents diverse styles to the climate and, “some of it looks warmer if you want to use that word, but we all really love the kids and really invest a lot in the kids.”

Observations. During my observations, it was apparent the students and staff at Roland Academy functioned as a family. The students were extremely excited to see the principal, Mr. Jack, when he walked through the halls. They embraced him as if he was their grandfather and he beamed with pride. Observing the climate at Barton Academy revealed misconceptions in how teachers collectively interpret the environment. This did not always complement what was observed. Students moved through the halls as normal, but it was not always nurturing and friendly.

Bullying

Bullying was identified as an issue, but nothing out of control, at each school. The view on its interpretation was apparent by the variation of definitions given on the topic. Although

students and parents were not interviewed for this research, it was noted that their perceptions generally differed relative to the involvement a student had in an incident. It was also revealed this same insight was true for parents depending on the role their child played in a bullying situation. Schools were cautious about using the word bullying to describe the behaviors of some students. One school in particular, Godwin Academy, does not describe or use the word bullying. They, in turn, try to keep the word “at bay” to prevent creating a problem school personnel felt does not typically exist.

As for the location and types of bullying in the schools, there was resounding unity for each of these categories with a rare outlier. For the principals of Godwin and Roland Academy, they were almost sure there would be a majority of consistency, whereas the principal at Barton felt the variations of definitions would be apparent. According to Mrs. Carter from Roland Academy, bullying has become a societal issue. She stated, “I think somehow social media has escalated it.”

Defined. As I asked each school personnel their definition of bullying with the exception of Mr. Jack and Mrs. Powell, it brought on careful and focused response, but yielded various definitions. The one constant in the definitions was the word “repeated.” Each individual felt the behaviors had to be repetitive in order to be categorized as bullying. After reviewing the handbooks of each school, only two provided a somewhat clear definition of bullying. Roland Academy had the most detailed which, outlined the specifics about bullying behaviors and how it was addressed. Godwin Academy categorized the different types of bullying to include, but not limited to: physical, verbal, social and cyberbullying. It continued by identifying direct physical contact (hitting and shoving), verbal assaults, and the use of electronic devices to harass as unacceptable behavior. This type of detail supports the consistency that was necessary to limit these

behaviors and create unity in identifying bullying. Unfortunately, Barton Academy did not have clear bullying policies. As stated previously, there was mention of bullying under the heading of the harassment policy, but nothing specifically identifying or defining bullying.

All teachers made reference to excessive, repetitive and intentional behaviors; with a few making direct references to cyberbullying. Mr. Wright, teacher at Barton Academy defined it as “Bullying is really doing anything to demean another person or make them feel less than in any way I guess.” Prior to speaking with teachers about how they defined bullying, I asked if they were familiar with the school’s definition of bullying. Some were aware, but did not know what it said, while others did not even know for sure if the school had a written/printed definition. Additionally, the Deans of Students at each school felt the behavior had to be persistent: their definitions varied compared to the school and other personnel.

The principals at each of the schools were not sure how familiar their staff would be with the school’s definition of bullying. Mr. Jones, school counselor at Barton Academy, provided documentation of a definition he used when he discusses the topic of bullying with students in their class, and when they come to his office. “I have a definition that I use in my class. I would say that (bullying) is a word that is loaded.” He went on to discuss it being overused in, “media and by parents and students.” Additionally, Student Handbooks from Godwin Academy and Roland Academy (provided by the principals) not only mentioned bullying, but also defined it. Barton Academy’s Student Handbook mentioned bullying without providing a definition.

Location. Bullying has not only taken on a new meaning, but where it can take place has changed as well (Connolly, Hussey, & Connolly, 2014; Donegan, 2012). The common areas repeatedly identified were areas with little to no adult supervision. These areas included: crowded hallways during transitions, locker rooms, lunchroom tables and afterschool events. All school

personnel agreed these were susceptible to bullying and harassment. Mrs. Lowe, eighth grade English teacher at Barton Academy, and Mrs. Carter, eighth grade English teacher at Roland Academy, both felt the hallways were areas susceptible to bullying. Due to crowding, Mrs. Lowe stated, “teachers while we’re at doorways, we’re not in the hall” while Mrs. Carter said, “I have to say probably it could happen within the hallways during breaks or in between classes. Comments can be made, things can be said.” Unstructured time was another opportunity students took to bully others. Mrs. Rand recalled, “where we see it the most is the unstructured, hallway break time and in the lunchroom where the teachers in a room with 300 in the dining hall at one time.” Mrs. Duncan identified the hallway, cafeteria and recess time as “hotbeds,” of bullying behaviors. This was the time where groups were formed and exclusion took place: sly behaviors go unnoticed. Another location that attracted bullying was the locker rooms. These were areas where teachers were not present because students were changing. Mr. Jones shared

With boys is where we see it most in the locker room; classic place. It’s a difficult thing with P.E. when they’re changing we don’t necessarily want to have a teacher in there hovering. We have a teacher outside the door.

During this brief interlude, students displayed verbal and physical behaviors that can result in hurt feelings. In addition to the areas identified within the school, it was revealed online has become the prime place for bullying behavior (Connolly, Hussey, & Connolly, 2014; Donegan, 2012). Social media reared its head and opened the door for anonymous bullying (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013). Mrs. Sharp, counselor at Godwin Academy noted that this behavior is more difficult to police. She also stated sporting events create another layer of difficulty. “They go in groups and they are friends with kids from other schools on social media” and trying to sort out the fallout becomes challenging.

Observations. During my observations, I noticed there were occasions where no teacher was present in the hallways while students transitioned between classes. There was freedom for students to transition to and from lunch which; revealed more unsupervised time for students. I also observed, on occasion, during lunch that a student had to beat a retreat to find a seat or be left alone. Several times I witnessed students reserving seats and turning others away who would ask to join.

Types. The use of technology and social media was the major identifier to the newest category of bullying; cyberbullying (Connolly, Hussey, & Connolly, 2014; Donegan, 2012). This was also the type of bullying that seemed to be the most difficult to manage in each of the schools. Even though there were technology policies in place at each of these schools, it did not deter the behavior once they left school. Additionally, the remnants and fallout found its way back on campus. It was agreed cyberbullying was a difficult issue and one that created the most work in the school when dealing with bullying. Dean of Students, Mrs. Powell, mentioned cyberbullying created difficulty, “because it’s anonymous, you can be real brave when you don’t have to put your name or face to it.” Dean of Students, Mr. Gray, highlighted the addition of new social media outlets such as: Ask.fm and Snapchat as a major menace to the teenage student. Mrs. Swanson felt it easier to deal with the physical fight. She said, “I see it’s between this student and that student, I discipline them and move on.” Another major type of bullying was relational (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Relational bullying is usually associated with girls who often intentionally bring damage to another’s reputation, as well as destroy relationships they may have with other peers (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). This type of bullying was recently coined “mean girls.” Mr. Jack, the principal at Roland Academy, despised this type of bullying. He could not fathom the reasoning behind a student intentionally targeting another student and

be mean. “The mean girl syndrome is the thing that I have the most trouble with; I’m not good with mean girl syndrome.” He deferred this behavior to the counselor, Mrs. Gloster, because he knew, “when girls are involved, and it’s ugly, she needs to be there because I’ll go straight for the jugular.” Her philosophy to deal with this behavior was to have patience with the mean girls and use a gentle approach.

Lastly, exclusion was brought up as another type of bullying, but prefaced as something that was thought to not always be intentional (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012). Most felt when a student saved a seat for a certain group of friends, or only invites those they are most familiar with or closet to for a party or participating in a game, they did not realize leaving others out was exclusionary. Most teachers who witnessed this behavior found if they brought it to the attention of the student, this behavior would usually come as a surprise to the student. Although students could be unintentional, school personnel found exclusion and intimidation the most time consuming. Developing and managing relationships at this age was difficult but each gender tends to display different behaviors. Mrs. Duncan noted boys with older brothers “are tough and their mean spirited sometimes with one another which is how they relate to one another. It’s not intended to hurt, but if you get that sensitive boy it hurts.” She added most of the behaviors she witnesses were not intentional.

Intervening in bullying

Intervening in bullying was a very important part of creating a climate and culture that exudes trust and support for their students and their wellbeing (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013). Unfortunately, this looked different based on the perceptions and individual definitions of bullying. Students relied on school leaders and teachers to support and protect them from the actions of a bully. There were also students that witnessed bullying behav-

iors and became fearful of being the next target. If intervening in acts of bullying seemed frivolous and stalled, students would no longer trust and rely on school personnel for help.

Individual efforts to intervene. When asked how one decided to intervene in situations of bullying, the responses varied based on the school's identified or assumed policies. For Godwin Academy, each of the school personnel I spoke to referred to a flowchart, created by school principal, Mr. David, that outlined the roles and responsibilities based on the behavior. Mr. Cooper also referenced the flowchart, but admitted he would occasionally handle a situation based on the action or the individual student. He mentioned the fact, as a male and wrestling coach, he may be drawn a lot farther than other teachers. That was also the case for Mr. Wright, teacher at Barton Academy. He felt that as a male he may view things a little differently from his colleagues, but definitely intervened in all acts of bullying. Principals, deans, counselors and teachers all felt as soon as they either heard about or witnessed what seemed to be bullying, they immediately addressed it and provided the adequate support necessary for all students involved.

School initiatives. Identifying school initiatives that were directed at bullying were always deferred to the counselor. Most teachers were not aware of what their school did to bring awareness to bullying. A few were able to recall events, speakers and curriculum, but that was the minority. Mrs. Sharp, counselor at Godwin Academy, had strong alliances with outside resources that bring their expertise on the topic of bullying to the school. She stated, "we have had various folks who do a ton of research on bullying (from a nearby county) who have written curriculum on bullying that some of the schools' in the state of Georgia are using." Mrs. Sharp also discussed linking character development as a way to be proactive in combating bullying. At Roland Academy, Mrs. Gloster, maintained getting into the classroom with the students was important, but only having herself and the principal available for major issues, reduced the time and

opportunities for program implementation. Mr. Jones, counselor at Barton Academy, also used outside sources to discuss bullying. He stated, “Last year it centered around social media and bullying.” He found social media and cyberbullying have become “primary” and required more attention.

Although the counselors were identified as experts on the area of school initiatives, the teachers at Godwin Academy seemed to be aware of a program called “Erase Meanness Day.” They were able to describe what this day entailed and how well it was received by the students. Mr. Oliver described it as, “an entire hour committed to talking about how to end meanness and replace meanness with kindness and the different ways to react to bullying.” The school personnel at the other two schools, vaguely remembered doing activities, but admitted they could not recall what, if anything, being done recently. Each counselor admitted they would like to do more and provide activities that would be a resource to proactively address bullying rather than being reactive.

Discussion

In this study, school personnel’s perceptions related to bullying, along with their understanding and awareness of bullying policies were examined. The following questions were the focal point for this research and framed the direction for study.

What are school personnel’s understandings of the bullying policies at their school?

- a. What are their perceptions of bullying within their school?
- b. How does school personnel’s perception of bullying impact their efforts to intervene?

School personnel’s understanding of bullying policies

After carefully combing through the data from interviews, documents and observations, I discovered either the teachers were not aware of the school policies as they related to bullying or

if there was one present, they could not recall the policy. For the schools with policies and definitions specifically identifying bullying, there was a level of comfort and clarity on how bullying was addressed within their school. Contrary to this revelation, the school without a clear policy, which directly addressed bullying, exposed an apparent disconnect on how bullying should be addressed. Although teachers felt there were policies in place they had no definite understanding of what it was or where it was located. School personnel at Godwin and Roland Academies could not readily recall the wording of the policy, but were familiar with its existence and knew there was one in place. It was also evident that a standard protocol was established at each school. The supporting documentation confirmed these schools directly addressed the issue of bullying with specific identification of bullying behavior.

The need for bullying policies was directly linked to teachers' responsiveness to handling incidents of bullying. A study done by Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler and Wiener (2005) focused on teachers' understanding of bullying. This qualitative study looked at four public schools with varied community factors which, included income, family composition and recent immigrant percentages. While this study investigated public institutions, which ranged from low to high income, its content and aim loosely resembled this study. The three private middle schools where my study took place consisted of primarily higher income families, interspersed with middle-income families. It is often believed that little to no bullying occurs in a private school. Unfortunately, that is far from the truth (Chaux & Castellanos, 2015; Juvonen & Graham, 2014). In the research by Mishna et. al. (2005), "a teacher in a school with a reputation of being nice was concerned that the myth of the nice school decreased teachers' and parents' vigilance" (p. 727). This fallacy oftentimes creates a sense of comfort and inconsistencies when addressing bullying (Mishna et. al., 2005).

Policy awareness and accountability were also essential to creating consistency in handling bullying. After speaking with school personnel, it was eye opening for them to note what the policy was for their school and what language was included in the policy. A strong bullying policy not only identified bullying, but defined it and was inclusive of the manner in which it can be carried out. Findings from Mishna, et. al. (2005) identified, “teachers contrasted the existence of school policies dealing with direct bullying and the absence of guidelines addressing indirect bullying. In addition, the majority of teachers stated that they did not know how to deal with indirect bullying” (p. 728). Consistent with this finding, there were school personnel who were unaware of the school policy, which allowed them to create their own perspectives on what bullying looked like in their school and how it was handled. Those teachers that stated they had a bullying policy, but after they reviewed the handbook, it only identified bullying in a harassment policy.

Perceptions of bullying

Research addressing teachers and other school personnel’s perspective on bullying is scarce (Ttofi & Ferrington, 2012). At best, research reported obvious forms of bullying behaviors. Research found teachers were usually unaware of bullying problems in their school (Gorsek & Cunningham, 2014). The perceptions that school personnel had were related to their own experiences with bullying, their relationships with the students (how well they knew the student and family) and how they perceived bullying (Espelage, Low, & Jimerson, 2014). All personnel agreed that the nonaggressive bullying was more prevalent than the physical/aggressive bullying. This was directly linked to technology and social media being so prevalent in society today. Principals’ at all three schools felt perceptions would be different, as it relates to bullying, based on the nature of individuals' and how they viewed certain situations. The leaders of Godwin and

Roland Academies felt very strongly about the consistency in which bullying was handled in their middle school, while the principal of Barton Academy could not assuredly confirm the same.

All school personnel indicated bullying existed in their schools. It was noted that bullying has become an issue nationally and has gained more ground through social media and cyber bullying (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Connolly, Hussey, & Connolly, 2014; Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). Although no one felt it was a major problem, it was definitely something needing additional attention. Without thinking, cyberbullying was named as the leading category of bullying. It was also identified as the most difficult to police. This perception was also true for relational bullying which included the dreaded “mean girl” behavior. This behavior flooded the culture with behaviors that include exclusion, isolation and intimidation. The hardest part of squelching this behavior was identifying the source and those that are willing to speak up.

Defining bullying. The definitions of bullying were varied amongst all school personnel, but consistently identified it as a repeated behavior. Gorsek and Cunningham (2014) identified this as an ongoing problem and stated, “Another particularly challenging aspect in recognizing bullying in schools is that no universal definition for bullying exists” (p. 3). School personnel found bringing attention to bullying when it was not an issue could cause undue concern. Nevertheless, along with the repetition, they also included both direct and indirect bullying. Several participants mentioned cyberbullying was the prevalent. With the inception of technology and social media, it was important to support and remain current of the changes in behaviors. Mishna et. al. (2005) uncovered the shift in how teachers identified and defined bullying. Their research showed some teachers disassociated non-physical behavior as bullying, while others found it to be more serious (Mishna et al., 2005). In contrast to this perspective, this study found

the school personnel in the three private middle schools recognized non-physical behavior (e.g., cyberbullying, exclusion and relational) was the leading bullying behavior.

Each of the school personnel interviewed had their own definition and could not recall if the school had a printed definition of bullying. The principal at Godwin Academy was the only one who was familiar with his school's definition and how his own definition only slightly differed. Some of the personnel admitted the variation in definitions directly affected how others (including themselves occasionally) intervened in bullying situations. They reported slower action if they felt the behavior was associated with typical middle school students, but took immediate action when physical or social harm was noticed or reported. If schools did not endorse a mutual definition, there will continue to be disjointed perceptions about how bullying is recognized and what warrants immediate attention (Gorsek & Cunningham, 2014; Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

Efforts to intervene in bullying

Intervening in acts of bullying is essential (Olweus, 2013). Mauldin (2002) stated, "In fact, the single most effective factor in reducing bullying is adult intervention" (p. 3). Intervention in bullying was often connected to teachers' own perception of what bullying looks like. If teachers had their own perception and definition of bullying, they would often identify their lag in response time being attributed to normal "middle school" behavior. Most of the school personnel were more than willing to intervene in incidents of bullying when it occurred. The issue was what they identified as serious bullying incident. Mishna et. al. (2005) found, "many teachers contrasted the existence of school policies dealing with direct bullying and the absence of guidelines addressing indirect bullying" (p. 728). It was important that teachers were fully aware and supportive in addressing bullying (Olweus, 2013). I found that although all three of the

schools did not have a definitive bullying policy, all school personnel always intended to intervene in bullying. The issue presented itself when there were variations in how the participants responded to what intervention would look like in their school.

Teachers spoke well of the relationships that existed between them and their students. The environment was identified as one that exudes community, family and a strong support. These characteristics were important when tackling the issue of bullying (Olweus, 2013; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Teachers who conveyed empathy were more likely to intervene in bullying (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). This was positive for the three schools included in this research. Their strong sense of love, compassion and passion for their students' success was revealed during the interviews.

Implications for Educational Leaders and Policy Makers

In order for students to feel safe and for change to take place, incidents of bullying must be taken serious by school leaders, teachers and the community as a whole. According to Batsche and Knoff (1994), “the response of school personnel to bullying is, at best, disappointing” (p. 4). Stephenson and Smith (1998) reported, “25% of teachers feel that it is sometimes helpful to ignore the problem” (pp. 45-57). Unquestionably, these findings were alarming and unacceptable. If this type of behavior from teachers continues, students will no longer have trust in the support they need when bullying occurs. Moreover, the problem will expand beyond minor incidence and lead to behaviors that cannot be controlled (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). School personnel should model a behavior of respect, and leaders should reinforce the standards of conduct in the school. It is not enough for teachers to be able to articulate a definition of bullying, but fall short of being consistent to intervene in bullying situations (Olweus, 2013).

Educational leaders and policy makers have to be intentional and highly responsive to the needs of their schools to formulate successful interventions (Honig & Copland, 2010). Milsom and Gallo (2006) stated, “middle school principals are encouraged to assess the unique needs of their schools and work collaboratively to design and implement programs that will help create and reinforce safe environments for all students” (p. 19). For years, central office staff members had a hands-off approach in assisting schools with improvement ventures. Honig and Copland (2010) stated, “what’s required is that offices shed their identity as overseers of buses, budgets and buildings, and adopt the role of service centers for better teaching and learning” (p. 120). In order to make this improvement happen, transformation must take place with a focus on teaching and learning and less on policies. This will require both central office and school leaders working together and assuring that the students remain as the focus (Honig & Copland, 2010).

Change is not always easy, but in order to see improvement, it has to be done collectively. If students do not feel that they are safe, and can rely on the adults in the building, the interventions that are sought will be in vain (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015; Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012). Cohn and Canter (2003) stated, “twenty-five percent of teachers see nothing wrong with bullying or putdowns and consequently intervene in only 4 percent of bullying incidents” (p. 1). Subsequently, failure to be intentional and timely with intervention to bullying, vague awareness and attention to policy will result in students suffering with inaudible fear (Honig & Copland, 2010).

Recommendation for School Policy

If there continues to be no clear policies, variations of how bullying is handled will plague schools (Honig & Copland, 2010). Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009), argued that state departments have not responded to the findings that school climate has a positive im-

pact on students and risk intervention. Additional research stated only 15 states passed laws addressing bullying and only 9 of them defined the scope of behaviors that constitute bullying (Limber & Small, 2003, p. 446). Further, the laws varied from state to state and did not necessarily cover all possible aspects of bullying. According to Limber and Small (2003), “those laws that do define bullying are somewhat inconsistent with each other and with commonly accepted definitions of bullying from the research community” (p. 446-447). The definitions continued to vary from state to state, but were more staggering from school to school within the same district. Central office leaders have to give attention to these inconsistencies and monitor how bullying intervention and prevention efforts are handled in the school. Former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan disseminated a memo to state leaders outlining key components of strong state bullying laws and policies (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The Georgia Department of Education (2011) mandated:

School policy for the state of Georgia, Pursuant to O.C.G.A. 20-2-751.4 requires each board to adopt policy that prohibits bullying and should be incorporated in the student code of conduct, the board should also have systems in place to communicate to the parent/guardian of a bully or victim and notification of consequences shall be visible at each school and printed in both the student and parent handbook (p. 8).

Additional research by Olweus and Limber (2010) focused on creating bullying prevention programs that support multiple levels within the school. These multi-leveled programs address everyone involved in the success of the student which presents unity within the school. The suggestions Olweus and Limber (2010) presented were:

First, at the community level, the school should develop a school community partnership to support the anti-bullying programs. At the school level, it is recommended that anti-

bullying policies are in place, and that all school personnel review and refine the rules along the side of the administrative staff. At the classroom level, bullying prevention information should be included in the curriculum for students. Lastly, at the individual level, teachers should hold meetings with the involved students – bullies and victims – and their family when bullying behavior continues and becomes more severe (p. 2).

A school has to address bullying based on the needs of their environment (Ttofi & Farrington, 2012). Each of these steps provided might not be necessary for every school, but is a starting point to adequately manage and reduce instances of bullying as they occur.

Implications for Future Research

As noted in the introduction, students have developed a fear and even committed suicide over incidents of bullying. Policies and practices relating to bullying must be put in place and strict adherence should be mandated by each school. Coupled with understanding the perceptions of school personnel, research on student's perceptions of bullying within the same schools would help school leaders support the need for intervention that best fits their school climate and culture. It would also provide a comparison of how bullying is viewed within the school amongst the entire community for solution based prevention.

Additionally, building on the case study methodology used in this research, additional questions such as: Are school personnel included in creating policies as they relate to bullying and what professional development would help school personnel effectively recognize various types of bullying? Adding more schools to the research would expand on the variations of perceptions, reliability and existence of bullying policies particularly in the private school. **Like-wise, including elementary schools would** Finally, a comparison between public and private

middle schools would help private school personnel validate if what they are currently doing effective in reducing instances of bullying.

Further research can also be done to identify how effective anti-bullying programs are for schools. Atlas and Pepler (1998) stated, “the most successful school-based prevention programs do more than reach out to the individual child; they also seek to change the culture and climate of the school” (p. 172). One of the keys to doing this is developing a strong prevention program. Smith and Schneider (2004) noted, “one advantage of the whole-school approach is that it avoids the potentially problematic stigmatization of either bullies or victims” (p. 548). In fact, the whole-school approach involved the entire community working together and drew attention away from the bully and the victim.

Some of the most successful programs have been known to include students in developing the program (Smith & Smith, 2014). Students' perceptions about bullying are vital to understanding what is going on in the school. Also, the perceptions of the adults and the children in the school are very different (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O’Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2013). Communication can sometimes be flawed due to the misunderstanding of what is perceived as bullying (Cornell & Limber, 2015). McMurrer-Shank (2010) recommended “all faculty, staff, and students must learn what bullying is, how to prevent it and what to do when they witness a bullying incident” (p. 30). The issue of bullying has progressed from a “*rite of passage*” to a more serious issue. Students no longer have a sense of safety and connectedness to school (McCarthy, 2008). This loss is detrimental to the wellbeing of character and, “creates a barrier for young people to develop into well-adjusted adults” (Harris, 2006, p. 50).

Furthermore, constructing a manual with guidelines on how to specifically identify, address and handle instances of bullying would be beneficial to the school. This creates consistency on expectations and supports engagement between personnel and students.

Limitations

Limitations exist with every study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) and are out of the scope of what the researcher expects to happen. The planned research only examined three private middle schools, which could not encompass all schools in the category of independent schools or those with different grade levels. Case studies presented allusive findings of similar organizations and therefore are limited. “A case study involves the behavior of one person, group, or organization. The behavior of this one unit of analysis may or may not reflect the behavior of similar entities” (Simon & Goes, 2013, p. 2). Respondents provided their perception and interpretation of policies as it related to bullying and its impact on intervention. In addition, my role as a middle school Dean of Students contributed to my personal biases about how instances of bullying should be handled.

Another limitation was the time allotted to complete the study. Once all interviews and observations were complete, I was tasked with the job of personally transcribing 17 interviews and identifying themes. This process required a lot of time, which impacted my ability to include more school personnel as participants. The lack of prior research on this topic was also a limitation. There was little research addressing bullying in the private schools. Most research was based on bullying in the public school setting.

Conclusion

Not only is it important to have policies that address bullying, but there should be clarity in how it is defined. Benitex, Garcia-Berben, and Fernandez-Cabezas (2009) found, “when a

common definition is used, teachers and other school personnel have reported greater confidence in managing bullying situations (p. 194). Additionally, school personnel should be trained in recognizing incidents of bullying versus normal conflict. Helping teachers identify bullying through professional development is a key strategy that schools must adopt (Dedousis-Wallace, Shute, Varlow, Murrihy, & Kidman, 2014). Bauman and Del Rio (2005) reported, “school personnel have a difficult time distinguishing between school bullying and peer conflict” (p. 430). Initial training in identifying bullying must start with a common definition (Dedousis-Wallace, Shute, Varlow, Murrihy, & Kidman, 2014). This will help unify intervention efforts. The unfortunate reality is that bullying is a part of our society, and as educators we must assure that it does not infest our schools to the point that students are not able to learn and have to fear coming to school. Although there are variations in how it is addressed in a private school versus a public school, it is still an issue that cannot be ignored. Knowledge and effective intervention will prove to be rewarding in the end.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Recruitment Email

Email to potential participants

Dear <insert name>

I am writing to request your assistance and participation in my research study. I am working on my doctoral degree at Georgia State University. My research will investigate the perceptions that school personnel have about bullying and how it impacts their efforts to intervene.

For my research, I will need to talk with the middle school principal, the assistant principal or dean of students (if either of these positions are available) the school counselor and three teachers. I want to ask them questions about bullying in the school and the policy. Participation is voluntary and creates no more risk than daily living activities. If your school decides to participate, each participant will participate in at least two 60 minute interviews and one 60 member checking meeting (to assure information received is accurate). In addition, non-participant observations will take place at three different times of the day to observe interactions between students and teachers. The observations will take place during the morning transition, during the lunch transition, and during dismissal.

Should you have any questions regarding this project, please feel free to contact me at jpinkett-smith@whitefieldacademy.com. I look forward to speaking with you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Pinkett Smith
Doctoral Student
Educational Policy Studies
Georgia State University

Email to potential participants who agreed to participate

Dear <insert name>

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research for my doctoral dissertation. Per our communication, I will like to begin face to face communication once I have received approval from the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Until that time, I will need a letter of agreement on your school's letterhead agreeing to participate in this research study. After approval is received, a meeting will be scheduled, participants identified and I will provide an informed consent document that further explains the research procedures. We will go over this document before the interview. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you might have.

I look forward to speaking with you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Pinkett Smith
Doctoral Student
Educational Policy Studies
Georgia State University

Appendix B

Participant Profiles

Name, title and position	Educational Experience	Professional Character Traits
Mrs. Swanson Principal Barton Academy	33 years in education Administrator and French teacher	Very well connected to the student body
Mr. Gray Dean of Students Barton Academy	12 years in education 5 years in the classroom and 7 as an administrator	Very charismatic and felt the middle school community was strong
Mr. David Principal Godwin Academy	14 years in education 8 years in the classroom 6 year as an administrator	Young administrator; Very innovative Very involved in the school and community
Mrs. Powell Dean of Students Godwin Academy	25 years in education Capacity of Dean of Students for 4 years and 8 th grade English Has held various teaching positions from K-5	She is able to love and discipline a student simultaneously Seeks growth out of every student she is in contact with
Mr. Jack Principal Roland Academy	45 years total in education 37 years as an administrator 8 years teaching Retiring	Instrumental in creating a positive culture and climate in the middle school Very personable with faculty and students and well loved

Name, title and position	Educational Experience	Professional Character Traits
Mr. Jones Counselor Barton Academy	School counselor for 14 years. Prior counselor for a mission's organization Counselor and life skills teacher	Feels he has a good pulse on the middle school Empathetic and understanding to the needs of the students
Mrs. Sharp Counselor Godwin Academy	Approximately 27 years as a counselor to include: private practice as a licensed psychologist	Very resourceful Completely engaged in her job and the needs of the students and teachers
Mrs. Gloster Counselor Roland Academy	Educator for 46 years; primarily as a counselor Retiring	Enjoys her job Loves to connect with students Creates programs related to the needs of the school
Mrs. Lowe Teacher Barton Academy	Teaching over 20 years Director of the Faculty Fellow Program	Excited about teaching and developing new teachers Passionate about seeing students Succeed
Mrs. Hall Teacher Barton Academy	Educator for 9 years	Reserved and somewhat subdued Feels that the rigor of the school makes it busy, but encouraging

Name, title and position	Educational Experience	Professional Character Traits
Mr. Wright Teacher Barton Academy	Educator for 15 years	He loves to connect with the students Charismatic personality
Mrs. Duncan Teacher Godwin Academy	Started formally teaching in 2006	She is very connected to her school
Mr. Cooper Teacher Godwin Academy	Educator for 10 years Holds a doctorate in Jurisprudence	Views discipline differently from other teachers
Mr. Oliver Teacher Godwin Academy	Educator for 6 years	Young teacher Feels there are strong relationships in the school
Ms. Rand Teacher Roland Academy	Educator for 16 years	Very involved in her school Has great relationships with students and their learning styles
Mrs. Carter Teacher Roland Academy	Educator for 25 years	Very poised and elegant Warm spirit and very welcoming
Mr. Wade Teacher Roland Academy	Educator for 3 years	Has complete trust in the principal of the school

Appendix C

Data Collection Chart

Pseudonym	School Pseudonym	Date/time	# of minutes
Mrs. Swanson	Barton Academy	8/3/15 8:04 a.m.	54:08
Mr. Gray	Barton Academy	9/9/15 8:17 a.m.	31:52
Mr. Jones	Barton Academy	9/9/15 8:57 a.m.	16:46
Mrs. Lowe	Barton Academy	9/9/15 2:29 p.m.	22:02
Mrs. Hall	Barton Academy	9/9/15 12:19 p.m.	8:32
Mr. Wright	Barton Academy	9/9/15 11:11 a.m.	11:05
Mr. David	Godwin Academy	8/18/15 11:12 a.m.	34:20
Mrs. Powell	Godwin Academy	8/18/15 11:59 a.m.	34:54
Mrs. Sharp	Godwin Academy	8/18/15 12:47 p.m.	24:40
Mrs. Duncan	Godwin Academy	8/18/15 8:38 a.m.	25:20
Mr. Cooper	Godwin Academy	8/18/15 1:39 p.m.	24:51
Mr. Oliver	Godwin Academy	8/18/15 9:47 a.m.	10:34
Mr. Jack	Roland Academy	8/31/15 1:41 p.m.	34:58
Mrs. Gloster	Roland Academy	8/31/15 2:39 p.m.	26:04
Ms. Rand	Roland Academy	9/22/15 10:14 a.m.	31:28
Mrs. Carter	Roland Academy	9/22/15 12:05 p.m.	17:15
Mr. Wade	Roland Academy	9/22/15 9:17 a.m.	22:36
	Total		7:11:25

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Bullying in Middle Schools:
A Case Study Investigating School Personnel's Perception of Bullying

Principal Investigator

Janice Fournillier, Ph.D.

Student Investigator

Jennifer Pinkett Smith

School Affiliation

Georgia State University

Summary

The purpose of this descriptive case study is to investigate three private/independent middle schools in the metro Atlanta area and perceptions that school personnel have about policy and practices relating to bullying. Further, this research will identify how those perceptions impact intervention. Five to six school personnel will be interviewed at each school. There will be a total of three one hour meetings for: an interview, possible follow-up, and member checking by the interviewee.

Research Questions

Central Question: What are school personnel's perceptions of policies and procedures as they relate to bullying?

Sub Question: How does school personnel's perception of bullying impact their efforts to intervene?

Interview Guide with Teachers

Organization of the Interview Guide

This interview will address the research questions through specific categories. These categories will be covered in a manner that allows for a natural flow in conversation and open-ended questions. All categories will be covered in a single interview; therefore, all categories will be addressed over the duration of the time allotted.

Instructions

My name is Jennifer Pinkett Smith, and I want to thank you for agreeing to serve as a participant for my dissertation research: *A Case Study Investigating School Personnel's Perception of Bullying*. The interview process will involve three parts: the interview, possible follow-up and member checking (your opportunity to review interview responses). I seek to identify if varying perceptions of bullying impact school personnel's efforts to intervene in incidents of bullying.

Each part of the interview process will last approximately 60 minutes.

Teacher Background

- ❖ What is your highest level of education?
- ❖ How long have you been in education?
- ❖ How long have you been teaching?
 - At your current school
- ❖ Briefly describe your role at this school?
 - Your capacity
- ❖ Are you involved in other roles at this school?
 - Roles
 - Duties

School Community

- ❖ How would you describe the school environment?
 - Climate
 - Culture
- ❖ Describe the relationships/interactions in the school.
 - Between the students
 - Between the teachers and students
 - Between teachers and administrators
 - Between teachers and parents
 - Between administrators and students
 - Between administrators and parents

Perceptions

- ❖ Bullying defined
 - Teacher definition
 - Knowledge of school's definition
 - Consistency in definitions
- ❖ Do you feel there are varying definitions or interpretations of bullying?
 - Amongst teachers
 - Amongst counselors
 - Amongst administrators
 - Amongst students
 - Amongst parents
- ❖ Do you feel that bullying is an issue in your school?
 - Types of bullying
 - Occurrences of bullying behavior
 - Particular location of bullying
- ❖ Impact of bullying on the school

Policy and Procedures

- ❖ Identify the school's policy on bullying
 - Written or spoken
- ❖ Identify the school's procedures for handling incidents bullying
 - Written or spoken
- ❖ Do you feel there is consistency in the interpretation of bullying policies and procedures?
- ❖ Is there resistance to adhering to the school's bullying policies? Bullying procedures?

Actions and Interventions

- ❖ Do you intervene in every incident that a student identifies as bullying?
 - If not, what impedes your intervention?
- ❖ Identify, if any, professional development available to deal with bullying in your school
- ❖ Discuss interventions or programs implemented to handle or manage bullying in your school.
- ❖ Is there adequate support in place to handle bullying issues?
- ❖ Post Interview Comments and/or Observations

Interview Guide with Counselors

Organization of the Interview Guide

This interview will address the research questions through specific categories. These categories will be covered in a manner that allows for a natural flow in conversation and open-ended questions. All categories will be covered in a single interview; therefore, all categories will be addressed over the duration of the time allotted.

Instructions

My name is Jennifer Pinkett Smith, and I want to thank you for agreeing to serve as a participant for my dissertation research: *A Case Study Investigating School Personnel's Perception of Bullying*. The interview process will involve three parts: the interview, possible follow-up and member checking (your opportunity to review interview responses). I seek to identify if varying perceptions of bullying impact school personnel's efforts to intervene in incidents of bullying.

Each part of the interview process will last approximately 60 minutes.

School Counselor Background

- ❖ What is your highest level of education?
- ❖ How long have you been in education?
- ❖ How long have you been a counselor?
 - At your current school
- ❖ Briefly describe your role at this school?
 - Your capacity
- ❖ Are you involved in other roles at this school?
 - Roles
 - Duties

School Community

- ❖ How would you describe the school environment?
 - Climate
 - Culture
- ❖ Describe the relationships/interactions in the school.
 - Between the students
 - Between the teachers and students
 - Between teachers and administrators
 - Between teachers and parents
 - Between administrators and students
 - Between administrators and parents

Perceptions

- ❖ Bullying defined
 - Counselor definition
 - Knowledge of school's definition
 - Consistency in definitions
- ❖ Do you feel there are varying definitions or interpretations of bullying?
 - Amongst teachers
 - Amongst counselors
 - Amongst administrators
 - Amongst students
 - Amongst parents
- ❖ Do you feel that bullying is an issue in your school?
 - Types of bullying
 - Occurrences of bullying behavior
 - Particular location of bullying
- ❖ Impact of bullying on the school

Policy and Procedures

- ❖ Identify the school's policy on bullying
 - Written or spoken
- ❖ Identify the school's procedures for handling incidents bullying
 - Written or spoken
- ❖ Do you feel there is consistency in the interpretation of bullying policies and procedures?
- ❖ Is there resistance to adhering to the school's bullying policies? Bullying procedures?

Actions and Interventions

- ❖ Do you intervene in every incident that a student identifies as bullying?
 - If not, what impedes your intervention?
- ❖ Identify, if any, professional development available to deal with bullying in your school
- ❖ Discuss interventions or programs implemented to handle or manage bullying in your school
- ❖ Identify programs that have been created to address issues of bullying within your school.
- ❖ Is there adequate support in place to handle bullying issues?

- ❖ Post Interview Comments and/or Observations

Interview Guide with Administrators

Organization of the Interview Guide

This interview will address the research questions through specific categories. These categories will be covered in a manner that allows for a natural flow in conversation and open-ended questions. All categories will be covered in a single interview; therefore, all categories will be addressed over the duration of the time allotted.

Instructions

My name is Jennifer Pinkett Smith, and I want to thank you for agreeing to serve as a participant for my dissertation research: *A Case Study Investigating School Personnel's Perception of Bullying*. The interview process will involve three parts: the interview, possible follow-up and member checking (your opportunity to review interview responses). I seek to identify if varying perceptions of bullying impact school personnel's efforts to intervene in incidents of bullying.

Each part of the interview process will last approximately 60 minutes.

School Administrators Background

- ❖ What is your highest level of education?
- ❖ How long have you been in education?
- ❖ How long have you been an administrator?
 - At your current school
- ❖ Briefly describe your role at this school?
 - Your capacity
- ❖ Are you involved in other roles at this school?
 - Roles
 - Duties

School Community

- ❖ How would you describe the school environment?
 - Climate
 - Culture
- ❖ Describe the relationships/interactions in the school.
 - Between the students
 - Between the teachers and students
 - Between teachers and administrators
 - Between teachers and parents
 - Between administrators and students
 - Between administrators and parents

Perceptions

- ❖ Bullying defined
 - Administrators definition
 - Knowledge of school's definition
 - Consistency in definitions
- ❖ Do you feel there are varying definitions or interpretations of bullying?
 - Amongst teachers
 - Amongst counselors
 - Amongst administrators
 - Amongst students
 - Amongst parents
- ❖ Do you feel that bullying is an issue in your school?
 - Types of bullying
 - Occurrences of bullying behavior
 - Particular location of bullying
- ❖ Impact of bullying on the school

Policy and Procedures

- ❖ Identify the school's policy on bullying
 - Written or spoken
- ❖ Identify the school's procedures for handling incidents bullying
 - Written or spoken
- ❖ Do you feel there is consistency in the interpretation of bullying policies and procedures?
- ❖ Is there resistance to adhering to the school's bullying policies? Bullying procedures?
- ❖ Address the monitoring and accountability for school personnel following policies and procedures as they apply to handling bullying in your school

Actions and Interventions

- ❖ Do you intervene in every incident that a student identifies as bullying?
 - If not, what impedes your intervention?
- ❖ Identify, if any, professional development available to deal with bullying in your school
- ❖ Discuss interventions or programs implemented to handle or manage bullying in your school
- ❖ Identify programs that have been created to address issues of bullying within your school.
- ❖ Is there adequate support in place to handle bullying issues?

- ❖ Post Interview Comments and/or Observations

Appendix E

Non-Participant Observation Protocol

Non-Participant Observation Protocol

Bullying in Middle Schools:
A Case Study Investigating School Personnel's Perception of Bullying

Principal Investigator

Janice Fournillier, Ph.D.

Student Investigator

Jennifer Pinkett Smith

School Affiliation

Georgia State University

Summary

The non-participant observation will provide invaluable information to assist in determining climate, culture and relationships within the school environment. The researcher hopes to observe interactions between students in addition to students and other school personnel. Observations of body language and communication can help the researcher gauge an overall idea of relational connections that students make with one another, as well as interactions that school personnel have with students.

There will be three 60 minute observations in the school, one will occur in the morning, one during lunch and the final observation during dismissal at each school site. All activities observed will be kept confidential. During these observations, there will be no interaction between the researcher and those being observed.

Date: _____			
Time: _____			
Length of activity: _____ minutes			
Site: _____			
Participants: _____			
<i>Descriptive Notes</i>			<i>Reflective Notes</i>
Physical setting: visual layout Auditory layout			(Reflective comments: questions to self, observations of nonverbal interactions, my interpretations)
Description of Participants	Communication	Body Language	
Description of observed activities			
Interactions between students			
Interactions between students and school personnel			

Observation category	Observer response
Event/Activity of observation:	
Site location:	
Observer:	
Date and time of observation:	
Length of observation:	
Place of observation:	
Reflection:	