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School Social Workers' Perceptions on Bullying in Elementary Schools

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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MSW, University of South Carolina, 1999

BA, University of South Carolina, 1996

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

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Abstract

The social problem of bullying in schools has been an area of study among researchers, but there is a gap on how school social workers can help. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore elementary school social workers' perceptions on bullying, contributing factors of bullying, and organizational culture on bullying. Sociocultural theory aided in interpretation of results and understanding the social problem of bullying. Nine elementary school social workers participated in semi structured telephone interviews. The phone interviews were analyzed using open coding methods, in vivo codes and phrases, categories, and themes. The study's findings revealed that most elementary South Texas Region school social workers perceived bullying to be a problem in their schools including aggressive, repetitive acts that infringe on the rights of others and is harmful to the victim, psychologically, emotionally, socially, academically, and at times physically. Additionally, the findings showed that social workers perceived those children who have special needs, autism, medical or psychological diagnoses, perceived as different, or who were from lower socioeconomic statutes were more likely to be targets of bullying. Moreover, school social workers perceived that the problem of bullying can be either perpetuated or decreased based on the organizational climate of the school. This study supports the need for positive social change through increased use of social workers and their skill set to respond to school bullying; social worker involvement may help decrease bullying and impact social changes for schools and society at large.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to many people along the way. First, to my husband, Jarod Clum, who has always encouraged me to pursue my education and dreams. Thank you for taking over caring for our son, while I worked on my doctorate, cooking dinner for me, and doing everything in your power to help our home and family run smoothly. Jarod, without you I do not know where I would be. I would also like to thank my sweet son, Corey Clum, who has always been understanding of my time spent studying and researching. Corey Clum you are my inspiration to change the world regarding bullying. This research project is for you and all the other children who are or have been bullied, in hopes of affecting positive social change.

Second, I would like to express my gratitude to my parents, Richard Gustafson and Judy Gustafson, for supporting me throughout my doctoral journey as well. To my dad, who pushed me to work hard and continue through all the challenges, I am forever grateful. To my mom, Judy Gustafson, thank you for the support in my endeavors and dreams. Third, to my late sister, Carmen Mitzy Haddock who was like a mother to me. Mitzy, it is because of you that I took the path of helping others and trying to make the world a better place. To my nephew, Jerome Haddock, your constant uplifting spirit has provided me with great support throughout my doctorate journey.

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education. To my mentor, and high school teacher, Jan Johnson, you saw potential in me, had faith in me to run the school newspaper as Editor-in-Chief, giving me confidence to pursue my goals. To Coach Gotthardt Johnson, you taught me perseverance, a strong work ethic and to push past obstacles, giving a hundred and ten percent and most importantly to never quit. Finally, I would like to thank my dear friend, Maria E. Miranda Gutierrez. I will never forget how you came up to me after my work presentation, saying that I should teach college. Teaching college as an adjunct-faculty was a great love of mine, and an almost forgotten dream. Thank you, Maria, for planting the seed for me to return to school to earn my doctorate. It has been the most spectacular journey!

I humbly thank you all for your support, love, inspiration, concern, life lessons, and for being part of my journey throughout this wonderful life and doctorate journey!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Introduction

Bullying is prevalent in the United States, with one in five high school students bullied in the last year and 33% of middle school students being bullied ("#StopBullying", 2020). Examples of bullying include physical violence, such as hitting, tripping, pushing, in addition to verbal abuse, including teasing and name calling ("#StopBullying", 2020). Indirect bullying entails social exclusion, spreading rumors or untruths about the person, and intentional efforts for others to dislike the victim (Harger, 2019). The effects of bullying on the victim include physical, psychological, emotional, and social consequences (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019). Bullying can lead to suicide of the victim who has been bullied (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019). Moreover, in mass school shootings that occurred, the victims of bullying were the perpetrators (Kelly, 2016).

Due to the ramifications and continued prevalence of bullying in our society today, more research is needed to better understand the phenomena of bullying. I explored how school social workers perceive bullying in South Central Texas. Additionally, I explored what factors social workers feel are contributors to bullying. School social workers play a vital role in the school, not only with the students, but engaging with the staff, administration, outside agencies, and also other social work colleagues. Elementary social worker's role is a unique one which could be beneficial in the first steps of exploring the problem. The findings could reveal a new direction in researching best methods of intervention, prevention, and identification of those who are

most at risk. Minimizing bullying in schools can have a positive impact not only on the child who is suffering the effects of being bullied but for the mezzo level school system, and macro level, society at large.

The overall organization of this section will be as follows: problem statement, purpose statement and research questions, nature of the doctoral project, theoretical/conceptual framework, values and ethics, literature review, and summary. The problem statement will cover the scope and ramifications of the problem of bullying. The purpose statement will provide what the purpose of my qualitative research is regarding the problem of bullying in South Texas Region elementary schools. Additionally, the theoretical framework, sociocultural theory, will be discussed in that section. Values and ethics play an integral role in conducting any research. Therefore, each aspect of how the research is conducted ethically and by IRB standards will be addressed in that section as well. The literature review section entails a thorough review of the literature on the topic of bullying. The literature review is organized and informs the reader of what has been done thus far regarding bullying research, who the pioneers were in the field, the gap in the literature, and future areas for research exploration.

Problem Statement

Bullying can be defined as intentional and repeated acts by an aggressor against a weaker target (Lehman, 2019). Concepts like dominance, being in charge, and winning are all prominent features in American youth culture today (Boyatzis & Junn, 2016). Bullying impacts children showing short-term deleterious effects on the victims, such as

psychological, emotional, somatic, and social issues (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019).

Effects of bullying on children to include somatic problems, such as headaches, stomach

aches, and insomnia (Taruna & Yada, 2017). These children can also suffer absenteeism,

lower grades, and overall low self-esteem (Taruna & Yada, 2017). Further, these effects

from being bullied can lead the children to suicide or outward aggression and violence,

such as the mass shooting incidents in schools (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019). Children

who have been bullied at school have even committed suicide in front of their bullying

classmates (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

2014; Gaffney, 2019; Harger, 2019; Taruna & Yada, 2017; Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019).

These are the most severe realities of bullying, and the most vulnerable populations are at

risk for bullying (Taruna & Yada, 2017).

Exploring the social problem of bullying is critical in the prevention of bullying.

As I researched the topic of bullying, the role school social workers play and their

perceptions regarding bullying in their schools, contributing factors leading to bullying,

and organizational culture influences were lacking. The literature reveals a gap in the role

school social workers play in the prevention of bullying in schools. School social workers

can provide insight into bullying (Bent-Goodley, 2018). I explored how elementary

school social workers perceive bullying in addition to exploring their ideas on what

contributing factors may lead to bullying and the role of organizational culture and

bullying.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand how school social workers perceive bullying in South Central Texas. Additionally, I explored what factors school social workers feel are contributors to bullying. Last, I queried how school social workers perceive organizational climate as a contributor toward bullying in schools. The study was unique in that exploration of school social workers, who play a vital role in the school systems, have not been viewed as a primary means to prevent bullying. Gathering knowledge from elementary school social workers who work with children in elementary schools (i.e., kindergarten through sixth grade) offered more understanding into the problem of bullying. The following questions helped address this purpose:

Research Question 1: How do elementary school social workers in South Central Texas school districts perceive bullying?

Research Question 2: What factors do elementary school social workers in South Central Texas school districts feel contribute to bullying?

Research Question 3: How do elementary school social workers in South Central Texas perceive organizational climate as a contributor towards bullying in schools?

Nature of the Doctoral Project

The nature of the study was a basic qualitative research design. I chose a basic qualitative research design due to several benefits as it is applied to my exploration of the topic of bullying in schools. Qualitative data is both analytic and descriptive, providing

the researcher an ability to describe, understand, and explore a problem via participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

I used purposeful snowball sampling methods to recruit key informants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Purposeful sampling methods offer a component of experience from key informants who have worked in the field with knowledge and experience (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I recruited in South Central Texas school districts elementary schools. School social workers in South Texas region schools have knowledge and influence on the topic, providing insight into the problem of school bullying.

I used interview questions focusing on alignment with my research questions to explore the questions with school social workers who would like to participate. The interviews took place over the telephone due to issues relating to the pandemic. The interviews were semi structured, audio recorded, and then sent for transcription. All informed consent, and the use of pseudonyms, were employed as well.

Throughout the research process, I used analytic memos, which can aid in reducing researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used in vivo coding derived from the participants' exact words and phrases. I focused on noticing patterns to reveal categories and themes from phone interview transcripts. The process is called thematic analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used the explorative qualitative research to interpret the data and wrote my results. By exploring the phenomenon through the perspectives of elementary school social workers, I was able to gather in-depth information from the social workers interviewed about their perspectives on the social problem of bullying in

schools and how they view organization responses to such. I created a new project in NVivo coding software. I uploaded all nine transcripts from the phone interviews into the project. The CAQDAS software enabled me to go through line by line and code each interview, then synthesize the data from the interview transcripts into nodes or categories and ultimately themes.

Sources of Data

Sources of data in my qualitative study design included school social workers in South Central Texas elementary schools as participants. My sample size goal range was eight to twelve participants, and I was able to recruit nine participants for the study. I created a list of qualitative interview questions that established rapport before moving to more in-depth questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Therefore, I used main questions to provide scaffolding of the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For example, I asked "How long have you worked as a school social worker at the district?" as an orienting question and moved on to "What does it mean to bully someone from your perspective?" Additionally, I had a few follow-up questions to further explore the interviewee's responses (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

I took notes during the process in addition to recording the interviews with participants' permission, transcribing them via the Temi smartphone application, which is a secure transcription service and following all informed consent processes and ethics per Walden University requirements. The Covid-19 pandemic caused some problems with face-to-face interactions, so I used telephone interviewing to conduct my semistructured

telephone interviews with the participants. I offered a 20 dollar gift card to thank the participants for their time.

Data from the semi structured phone interviews were analyzed by using an open coding method (Saldana, 2016). I used in vivo codes that the participants stated directly (Saldana, 2016), and NVivo coding software or computer-assisted qualitative analysis programs (CAQDAS) helped organize the transcript data from the nine participants (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I began to notice patterns of in vivo codes and phrases. I then categorized the codes into categories. Ultimately, those categories were identified as patterns and themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldana, 2016). I used the themes to create several thematic analyses graphs and a word cloud via NVivo software (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Significance of the Study

Due to bullying, cyberbullying, indirect methods of bullying and a submissive audience to the bullying (those who do nothing), bullying has many negative effects on the victim (Taruna & Yada, 2017). Some of those effects include social, psychological, and academic effects on the victims. Victims of bullying suffer somatic symptoms as well such as headaches, insomnia, and stomach aches (Taruna & Yada, 2017). Bullying is not a childhood developmental process, as some adults view the problem. The short- and long-term effects of bullying on the child and micro system are life changing. Therefore, it was important to explore how social workers perceive bullying in elementary schools as well as how the social workers view the organizational culture of the school as it

relates to bullying. This study assisted in learning more about how school social workers view the children who have been victims of bullying. Social workers have the unique role of engaging with teaching staff, administration, peers, and the children in schools. School social workers not only help students, staff, and administration, but they also engage with the family system (Bent-Goodley, 2019), making them critical in helping prevent school bullying. The social workers knowledge was shown to be critical in exploring and understanding more about the social problem of bullying.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework for this qualitative study was sociocultural theory. The lens of sociocultural theory helped explore bullying via the lens of social groups and how people interact within them (Maunder & Crafter, 2018). Not only is behavior directed by sociocultural theory and values, but the paradigm provides an indicator for social interactions (Vakil, 2021). Sociocultural theory posits that when individuals are a part of a group, natural group processes begin to emerge. These processes may be positive prosocial behaviors or negative behaviors, such as bullying (Maunder & Crafter, 2018). A strong in-group/out-group mentality forms to make the group more valuable. Further, the group begins to see themselves as similar and those outside of the group as different, leading to bullying. Viewing the problem of bullying on the micro, mezzo, and macro level provided an understanding of how these systems either contribute or, conversely, discourage bullying. Further, the sociocultural theoretical perspective helped explain how peer groups learn, interact, and how each group forms their own social norms (Maunder

& Crafter, 2018). For example, in peer groups that value aggression and competition, bullying will be more prominent as a social norm (Maunder & Crafter, 2018).

Further, the educational system must identify the current sociocultural values so that behavioral changes and direction of youth can occur (Vakil, 2021). The organizational climate regarding bullying is an important aspect of the sociocultural values in that system (Vakil, 2021). For example, when applying sociocultural theory to the social problem of bullying, the sociocultural theory of the elementary school meso-system will affect how bullying is viewed by that culture. Moreover, in small groups of children, sociocultural theoretical framework can be applied to explain how bullying is encouraged.

Values and Ethics

The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics (2021) core principles and values are unique to the field of social work. The NASW (2021) values include service, social justice, dignity and self-worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. These values are tied into the ethical principles of the field of social work. For example, social workers strive for social justice for all and advocate against social injustice, such as prejudice, discrimination, and institutionalized systemic forms of perpetuating cycles of inequity in society.

Bullying is a social problem in which the dignity and worth of a person is not at the core. Bullying is defined as aggressive behaviors towards a perceived different or weaker individual by another the perpetrator (Akay, 2019). Deleterious effects of

bullying can include psychological, social, emotional, and academic on the victim (Taruna & Yada, 2017). That is why this research topic area serves to further the field of social work's goals for social justice and dignity and worth of the person. If more answers can be learned about the problem of bullying via how school social workers perceptions of the social problem and what organizational factors may be at play, solutions toward prevention efforts can help alleviate and better inform understanding about bullying in schools and service needs from the perspective of school social workers.

The NASW Code of Ethics (2021) guides the values of social research in many ways. First, the goal is to conduct research that helps to establish social justice and equity for all individuals. Second, the NASW code states that social workers must promote and facilitate evaluation and research that will contribute to the field's knowledge base (NASW, 2021, sect 5.042 (b)). Researching a social problem not only advances the field of social work's knowledge base, but the research aids in providing solutions to social problems, promoting social change. Third, social workers in doing research must always consider possible consequences that may occur from performing the research with participants. In so doing, guidelines by IRB (institutional review boards) are critical in the development, alignment, and methods in collecting data. I used an informed consent form, full disclosure of how findings would be used and published, and cloaked participants for privacy in addition to the recruitment sites where participants for this study were drawn. These, as well as many other safeguards, were considered and used

throughout the research process. Finally, I anticipated that my qualitative study on bullying will help advance understanding in the field of social work in order to "expand choice and opportunity for all people, with special regards for vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people and groups" (NASW, 2021, sect 6.04 (b)). The findings of my basic qualitative study supported the anticipated results of advancing knowledge in the field of social work and promoting social work ethics and values.

<div align="center">**Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**</div>

Literature Review Processes

I began the literature review formally after researching the topic of bullying for at least 6 months. I noticed a gap in the literature regarding social workers' perceptions of school bullying and their thoughts on what factors may contribute to bullying in schools. I began the process by creating a literature review chart, documenting search terms, databases, results, and summary of each peer-reviewed journal article. I searched Thoreau, SocIndex, ERIC, PscyhInfo, APA PsycArticles, and Google Scholar. Due to a gap in the literature on my specific topic, I began to branch out into the education arena, such as ERIC. Examples of searches included *bullying in schools*, *bullying in schools* AND *the United States*, *social work** OR *attitudes, bullying*, *social work* AND/OR *bullying in schools*, and, finally, *truncation methods* to further yield results. Though a wealth of information was found on bullying in general, the exhaustive literature review showed a gap in my study area of social worker perceptions on bullying in schools.

Introduction

Bullying is usually defined as repeated, intentional acts which involve a power imbalance between the target and the perpetrator to cause psychological or physical harm to the target (Hall & Chapman, 2016; Limber et al., 2018). Bullying can also be defined as unwanted aggressive behaviors by another youth or group of youths repeated multiple times (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2019); these behaviors may be physical, verbal, and/or relational.

Bullying is a social problem occurring not only globally, but especially in the culture of the United States (Boyatzis & Junn, 2016). According to statistics derived from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services site (www.stopbullying.gov), one in four students Grades 6 through 12 reports being bullied at school (Midgett et al., 2016). However, the estimates of bullying are likely much higher, estimated at 36% due to underreporting (Midgett et al., 2016). Bullying is considered a chronic stressor that can have long-lasting effects of trauma on the victim (Yang et al., 2018).

Bullying is not only pervasive in American culture but also in the school system, as competition, dominance, and winning are valued concepts in American society (Kelly, 2016). Bullying is the most common form of violence on school campuses and is associated with negative outcomes for both the perpetrator and the victim (Yang et al., 2018). Organizational cultures of each school system can also play a factor in whether bullying is tolerated or unacceptable. But there is a lack of using school personnel at all levels to combat bullying (Evan & Smokowski, 2016). Therefore, it is not only important

to explore more about the topic of bullying but to also explain the history of bullying research.

History of Bullying Research

The earliest research in the field of bullying research began in the 1970s in Scandinavia (Limber et al., 2018). Olweus was a pioneer in the field of bullying research, defining the term and researching the social problem (Limber et al., 2018). Further, in 1983, the Norwegian Ministry of Education began a campaign to address the issue in schools, after the suicides of three teenagers who had suffered from severe bullying (Limber et al., 2018). Similarly, at about the same time, suicides occurred in the Western hemisphere due to bullying, which spurred research as well (Gaffney et al., 2019). Japan began to have similar incidents, defining the term as "ijime" (Gaffney et al., 2019). The first national study on bullying in the United States was conducted by Tonja R. Nansel et al. in 1998 (Kowalski, 2019). Despite this research bullying continues to be a significant social problem today not only globally but in the United States as well. One event that brought forth the issue of bullying is the Columbine High School mass shootings in Colorado, in which two male students who killed 13 students and a teacher were identified as victims of bullying (Marsh, 2018). This event served as an impetus to research bullying and aggression.

Historically in the United States, the focus of bullying was peer-to-peer bullying, examining ages 8 years and up (Monks & Coyne, 2011). As the study of bullying progressed, younger children were also included, such as pre-school aged children.

Though the focus of my study is bullying in schools, bullying research over the years has expanded to various populations and environments, such as workplaces, communities, and domestic relationships (Monks & Coyne, 2011). As the problem of bullying among children in schools in the United States increased, the research began to address the problem of bullying in schools. Today, bullying is a common experience among American youth with at least one in five children aged 12 through 18 years of age being bullied (Edgerton, et al., 2016). The problem has become so prominent that in 2001 the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) recognized bullying as a public health issue and collaborated with the U.S. Departments of Education, Defense, and Justice (Edgerton, et al., 2016). However, the social problem of bullying has worsened due to the introduction and popularity of social media, creating cyberbullying which can be as damaging as other forms of bullying to the victims (Kowalski, 2019).

Predictors of Bullying

The possible predictors of bullying have shown a pattern in who may become a victim of bullying. For example, children and adolescents having a medical condition requiring special health care needs, those with speech language diagnoses, autism diagnoses, and finally youth with untreated mental health issues (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2019). Similarly, those who demonstrate poor social and emotional skills can become victims of bullying (Taruna & Yadav, 2017). Children in physical education classes who are different in appearance, have a disability, or gender expression such as LGBTQ, are more likely to be bullied as well (Jimenez-Barbero et al., 2020). Often children who are

perceived as different may have difficulties in making friends and building a support system at school, thereby leaving them more vulnerable to being bullied. Research has indicated that empathy was not associated with non-physical bullying, perspective-taking did not decrease bullying, and a positive attitude toward bullying positively correlated with increased bullying perpetration (Espelage et al., 2018).

Other studies have used quantitative study design data to analyze how factors such as gender, school security measures, and extracurricular activities impact bullying victimization (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019). Findings showed no effect on gender, a positive effect on school security measures in decreasing bullying, and social bond theory decreased bullying perpetration (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019). Conversely, a study conducted with females ages 15 to 16 years of age showed that bullying can affect females health and mental health, or at least their perceptions of health (Zhang et al., 2019). Lastly, when examining ethnicity and bullying, results are complex (Barlett & Wright, 2018).

Consequences of Bullying

Upon understanding more about the predictors of who is likely to be bullied, the importance of exploring and researching becomes clear. It is imperative that prevention programs be created to decrease bullying. The emergency department can also begin screening questions to identify those who have been injured due to bullying incidents (Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2020).

Various short- and long-term effects occur from being a victim of bullying. Victims can suffer many somatic symptoms and psychological symptoms: headaches, stomach aches, insomnia, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and academic problems (Taruna & Yada, 2017). Other effects of bullying include eating disorders, such as anorexia, bulimia, and poor body concept, especially in girls who are bullied about their weight (de Lara, 2019). Additionally, these harmful effects of bullying can have long-standing effects into adulthood, causing adult anxiety, depression, relationship problems, self-esteem issues, body image problems, and continued eating disorders (de Lara, 2019). Further, effects of bullying include poor eating habits and sleeplessness or insomnia (Hong et al., 2019).

Though bullying causes many short- and long-term effects for the victim, there has been some research regarding buffering effects. Wright (2018) performed a study focusing on cyberbullying in 113 children with autism spectrum disorder from the ages of 12 to 17. The results were that the children who perceived parental mediation of their use of technology and had increased parental support had less deleterious effects from cyberbullying (Wright, 2018). The results emphasize how important it is for parents to be aware of their children's use of technology and social media platforms, as they can be vulnerable to bullying. When parents are more involved in children's lives and use of technology, this serves as a buffer against the effects of cyberbullying or cyber-victimization.

Regardless of potential buffering effects, suicide has been highly publicized by the media when reporting bullying events that may have been associated with suicide. Children who have been bullied have the highest risk for suicide related behavior than any group involved in bullying, such as the perpetrator or bystander (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014, para. 2). What is not known is whether suicide originates from solely being a victim of bullying or rather if other risk factors are involved (CDC, 2014). Other factors include mental illness, disease or disability, family problems, and difficulty coping as well (CDC, 2014). Though being bullied increases suicide related behaviors, more than any other group involved in bullying, it cannot be isolated as the cause.

Social Workers Addressing the Problem

Social workers have been working to address the problem of bullying. Yet, although social workers play an important role in school systems, they have been underutilized or left out of the bullying prevention process (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Karatas & Ozturk, 2019). Further, part of this disconnect between school social workers and their roles, is due to a lack of symmetry across schools (Bent-Goodley, 2018). Further, social workers who work with parents, students, administrators, staff, and teachers would be an important piece of the puzzle in preventing school violence, such as bullying aggression. Additionally, School social workers, along with other school personnel, could benefit from a standardized definition for school bullying (Evans and Smokowski; (2016). This is a weakness in the research on bullying (Evans and Smokowski; (2016). Additionally,

the study adds that when school social workers, social scientists, and researchers perform

surveys, they would benefit from multi-item measures versus a one-item bullying

measure tool (Evans & Smokowski, 2016).

Those social workers who may be in a clinical capacity may address the

symptoms or manifestations of bullying at a micro level. Although many deleterious

effects occur from being bullied, interventions may not be as focused on the actual

bullying issue as noted in this case study (Taylor & McLachlan, 2019). For instance, the

actual diagnosis for a child who is bullied may be post-traumatic stress disorder or

adjustment disorder. This issue that not only can confound how many children treated for

mental illness are the result of bullying, can also create issues in deriving a micro level

intervention to address the effects of bullying. Since trauma is often a result of bullying

for the victim, the use of Eye-Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR is

another effective micro-level treatment to address the adjustment disorder, trauma, or

long-term PTSD (Taylor & McLachlan, 2019).

However, the first-choice treatment in counseling for children with adjustment

disorder or those who have been victimized by bullying is often cognitive behavioral

therapy (Taylor & McLachlan, 2019). The second line of treatment in her case was the

use of EMDR (Eye-Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing). Eye Movement

Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a comprehensive psychotherapy approach

(Shapiro & Laliotis, 2011), which is compatible with modern theoretical paradigm

approaches to treat PTSD.

Therapeutic intervention resources in many instances is available in schools and often provided by the school social worker. A significant problem in anti-bullying prevention programs however, is that school social workers are not used as part of the efforts to intervene or aid in prevention efforts (Cuellar & Mason, 2019). Whereas school social workers have experiences with school safety and direct interaction with their students and parents, they are being overlooked as a resource in preventing school bullying (Cuellar & Mason, 2019). The research on school social workers and bullying is scant, leaving a gap in the literature that could be a key component in prevention (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Cuellar & Mason, 2019; Evans & Smokowski, 2016). In fact, perhaps if school social workers were involved in prevention, policy efforts, and interventions, students who are bullied would fare better. Another argument for the use of school social workers in bullying prevention efforts, can be noted in a study on substance abuse as it related to increased bullying perpetration. Youth who were involved in substance abuse to include alcohol, cannabis, and cigarettes were more likely to be involved in bullying others (Azevedo Da Silva and Martins; 2020). Therefore, comorbidity of substance use and bullying can be another means to identify and intervene in school social work roles. Social workers interventions in schools can lead to prevention efforts in bullying as well.

Children who are bullied also face secondary victimization. Secondary victimization often occurs when children report bullying to an adult (Shaw et al., 2019; Walters, 2020). Part of the problem is that teachers are not equipped to handle bullying reports effectively or in identifying it. School social workers with their skill set of

assessment, counseling and intervention skills, in addition to prevention program knowledge are a critically missing piece of the puzzle in preventing school bullying and helping school staff to better understand how to recognize bullying and strategies to address the issue both directly and indirectly.

Prevention Programs/Research Intervention Approaches

Notable research has been completed in the areas of anti-bullying prevention programs, which can be viewed as another strength in the field of social science and research. The literature review elicited a depth of information on several programs and their efficacy. First, a comprehensive systemic review on bullying was conducted (Gaffney et al.; 2019). The 20,000 search results were yielded, with a total of 100 were considered eligible for inclusion in their meta-analysis (Gaffney et al.; 2019). Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) was considered very effective in decreasing bullying in schools (Gaffney et al. 2019; Limber et al., 2019). Olweus being a pioneer in bullying research created a comprehensive program to prevent bullying (Limber et al., 2019). The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is one of the oldest, validated programs for prevention of bullying in schools (Limber et al., 2019). Further, the OBPP employs a holistic approach that includes the entire school, classroom, community, and the individual, thereby proving to be effective in decreasing school bullying.

Yet, Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is an established and often used prevention program. However, other research suggests that Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is lacking in emphasis on the sociostructural environment, which

either encourages bullying or discourages it (Temko, 2019). Further the Olweus Bullying

Prevention Program has been widely used in U.S. schools, it has failed to create a safe

inclusive environment, absent of bullying (Temko, 2019). This is because a need for a

sociostructural model is required since aggression is normalized via social institutions

and interactions. A missing component in bullying prevention programs, is that the focus

has been on individual cases, rather than on the structural determinants which provide the

norm that bullying is an acceptable behavior (Temko, 2019). It should be noted that

hegemonic masculinity in boys is encouraged as a social norm in the United States

amongst youth (Rosen & Nofziger, 2019). These boys' aggression is often rewarded by

peers. That is why a sociocultural perspective and school climate should play a role in

prevention programs.

Moreover, other research supports the need for a sociocultural component to be

part of any bullying prevention program. For example, micro-focused solutions create

limitations on anti-bullying programs effectiveness (Downes & Cefai, 2019). Further, the

focus should include the social organizational climate of the school or community where

the bullying occurs, such as peers and family (Downes & Cefai, 2019; Temko, 2019). In

fact, an interesting, powerful shift of thought derives from an approach called KiVa,

which applies Bandura's social learning theory (Downes & Cefai, 2019). Previous

research has primarily focused on the victim or perpetrator of bullying; however, the

KiVa approach places emphasis on the bystander role. For example, the theory advances

the concept that the bully seeks power and prestige by bullying others, therefore, if

bystanders defend the victim, the bully's goal of status and power is diminished (Downes & Cefai, 2019). This is a critical shift in prevention program mindset, in that the bystanders who were previously seen as passive, can actually diminish bullying by defending the victim and decreasing the power and status sought by the bully. Adding to the anti-bullying approach based on Bandura's work, was a study conducted in Turkey, which was a limitation to apply in the United States of America (Karatas & Ozturk, 2019).

Another bullying intervention program discussed in the research is the STAC program. This program was designed to have peers who are coached in bullying prevention step in and intervene as trained by the STAC program. The STAC program uses concepts like stealing the show, turning it over, accompanying others, and coaching (Midgett et al., 2016). The program uses intervention from trained peer bystanders to help identify bullying and act as defenders. The findings indicated that the STAC program is also an effective anti-bullying approach (Midgett et al., 2016). Further, the STAC program is found to be effective because peers are active in setting the norms against bullying, therefore it is a powerful tool (Midgett et al., 2016).

A strength of the social science research is the vast knowledge regarding organizational climate and culture as it relates to bullying. Most of the bullying research, in the past few years, has focused on school climate and culture (Farina, 2019). A quantitative study in the private school sector examining school climate as it related to bullying (Farina, 2019). The study used the School Crime Supplement to better

understand how the private school sector and climate would impact bullying

victimization (Farina, 2019). Findings confirmed the hypothesis, that the positive school

climate in the private sector schools showed lower levels of bullying than public schools

(Farina, 2019).

Similarly, School Crime Supplement, among other surveys, such as the National

Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), were used to show that bullying is a prevalent

problem in American schools (Karikari, 2020). A non-probability, purposive sample was

used to examine various stakeholders, such as principals, school social workers, staff, bus

drivers, and teachers to gain insight into bullying (Karikari, 2020). An interesting aspect

was the social worker data that revealed that social workers felt alienated and excluded

from any anti-bullying prevention programs or roles. Additionally, school social workers

did not believe the administration took bullying seriously when social workers reported

the problem to them (Karikari, 2020). This type of knowledge regarding the role of

school social workers reveals an untapped resource that could be used in bullying

prevention.

Finally, there seems to be a consensus research that a positive school climate can

have a moderating effect on bullying (Yang et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020). To be more

specific, a positive school climate includes administration, teachers, staff, and

paraprofessionals taking action against bullying. Additionally, a healthy school climate

was defined as one in which children feel welcomed and connected to their school (de

Lara; 2019). Moreover, healthy school climates involve that work toward building social

emotional competence, in which the child can put herself in the mindset of another and how their behavior may impact the other person (de Lara, 2019). At early stages, such as primary school level, schools should work toward teaching empathy for others and inclusion which would promote a healthy school climate for everyone (de Lara, 2019).

Currently, anti-bullying programs are primarily implemented by school teachers, excluding the unique skill set that social workers could provide. These programs include: Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Gaffney et al., 2019; Limber et al., 2018), the STAC program, which uses intervention from trained peer bystanders to help identify bullying and act as defenders (Midgett et al., 2016), and other specific approaches using drama skits about bullying (Goodwin, et al., 2019), and an interesting concept of showing videos to educate and prevent bullying (Yokoo, Wakuta, & Shimizu, 2018). Moreover, a study evaluated an anti-bullying approach with sixth graders, that was based on Social Cognitive Theory (Karatas & Ozturk, 2019). The program used teachers, school administrators, and students were used in the bullying prevention program based on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory; however, social workers were again absent from the program. Finally, the limitations of micro focused anti-bullying programs fail to address the social ecology or organizational climate that serves to promote and sustains bullying perpetration, such as peers and family (Downes & Cefai, 2019). One key focus that varies from most anti-bullying foci, are that within the approach named KiVa which assumes the perpetrator's behavior be viewed via Bandura's social learning theory, shifts focus to the bystanders role (Downes & Cefai, 2019). This is a critical and pinnacle shift in

mindset on bullying prevention, in that the bystanders are seen as those who reinforce the bully's behavior, helping them to achieve high status by harassing low-status victims. Lastly, if those same bystanders defend the victim, the strategy of the bully to achieve high status is diminished, hence the motivation to bully is as well.

Those that have implemented anti-bullying programs to decrease bullying and place value on all student's safety, health and well-being are part of a positive school climate. Further, most of the current research on school climate/culture reflect the need for a multi-disciplinary or multi-stakeholder approach (Baller et al., 2019; Farina, 2019; Karikari, 2020; Yang et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020). Lastly, educator and staff perspectives were studied as it related to bullying and students (Baller et al.; 2019). The weakness in the research study, however, was that social workers were not included.

Gap in the Literature

After an exhaustive review of the literature, in which saturation began to occur, I identified a gap regarding my topic on how school social workers perceive bullying and what factors may contribute to school bullying. In fact, the research is sparce regarding school social workers as related to the social problem of bullying in schools. Part of that issue, I believe, is that not all schools employ social workers, although they serve as an invaluable resource in school systems. Moreover, as indicated in the literature review, the roles of social workers lack cohesion and are generally not clearly defined (Bent-Goodley, 2018).

My qualitative research study will fill the gap by exploring the vital information that social workers can provide on the topic of bullying, in addition to school climate and organizational culture as a contributing factor possibly. Exploring in-depth knowledge via semi-structured interviews with middle school social workers in South Texas can not only reveal more about the problem of bullying, but can add to the research, leading to social change. For example, if we can understand more about bullying within the social work realm, we can create more effective prevention programs. Moreover, we can empower social workers to take a more assertive and active role in bullying prevention in schools. Although social workers play an important role in school systems, they have been underutilized or left out of the bullying prevention process (Bent-Goodley, 2018). Lastly, when social workers were included in the social science research, it was revealed that social workers felt alienated and left out of bullying prevention at their schools (Karikari, 2020). The untapped knowledge, expertise, and role of social workers is evident, leaving a gap not only in the research but in the impact social workers can make in the field to prevent bullying in our schools.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

Bullying continues to be a prevalent problem in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that one in five high school students were bullied in the last year ("#StopBullying", 2020). Moreover, middle school populations were the highest at 33% of students reporting they have been bullied. Bullying involves a power differential with those perceived as weaker being the victim. Bullying can include

violence which is physical, such as pushing, hitting, kicking, tripping ("#StopBullying", 2020). However, bullying can also be indirect, such as social exclusion, spreading lies and rumors about the victim so that others will not like the victim (Harger, 2019).

The effects of bullying can be short-term and long-term for those who have been bullied. The detrimental effects, such as physical/somatic complaints or injuries, psychological, emotional, and social consequences as well (Cecen-Celek and Keith; 2019). On the extreme end, bullying can lead to suicide and homicide (Harger, 2019).

The problem of bullying has been ongoing, since research began in the 1970's with Olweus as a key pioneer in the research. Several countries began to research in the 1980's after several suicides occurred by victims of bullying. The literature review revealed a gap in the literature regarding how social workers perceive bullying and what school social workers think are contributing factors in the school bullying specifically. Therefore, my qualitative research study will provide research to fill the gap in the social science research. The impact of researching school social workers' perceptions is great in affecting social change, by creating better prevention and anti-bullying programs.

The lack of school social workers involvement in school anti-bullying programs is a deficit and an untapped resource that could benefit schools in preventing bullying. This is another reason my research on school social worker's perception on bullying, contributing factors of bullying, and the role of the organizational climate via the lens of school social workers.

Finally, although many studies have been done regarding a multi-disciplinary approach to bullying prevention, there is a lack of social worker inclusion in these studies and in school settings. Strengths in the research focus on effective prevention programs as well as the role of school climate/culture. Another strength in the literature revealed predictors of bullying victimization. Sadly, these included having a medical condition requiring special healthcare needs, those with speech language diagnoses, autism diagnoses, and finally, youth with untreated mental health issues (Lebrun-Harris et al.;2019). These vulnerable populations are especially at risk for bullying. That is why it is imperative to explore the problem more in-depth and access the untapped resources of school social workers as part of the solution.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Introduction

The social work practice problem is the prevalent social problem of bullying in the United States. The CDC reports that one in five school-aged children have been victimized by bullying ("#StopBullying," 2020). In addition, middle school students are at more risk for being bullied, estimated at 33% ("#StopBullying", 2020). Bullying has long- and short-term effects on the victims, including psychological, emotional, physical, and social health (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019). These effects from being bullied can lead to suicide and have been claimed as a cause in mass shooting violence. Therefore, there was a need for more knowledge on how school social workers perceive bullying and what school social workers believe are contributing factors to bullying. Additionally, a gap was located in how social workers perceive bullying as it relates to the organizational culture of school system. By better understanding the phenomena of bullying, social change can occur through prevention efforts. The major sections of Section 2 are the research design, methodology, data analysis, ethical procedures, and a summary section.

Research Design

The study followed a basic qualitative research study design. Basic qualitative research design contributes to existing research theory and fundamental knowledge (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Moreover, basic qualitative research design as a goal is explorative, descriptive and provides understanding (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Basic qualitative research design was a good fit for my study in that I sought to explore the

phenomenon of bullying via the perceptions of school social workers. Basic qualitative

research design is based in social constructionism, suggesting that meaning is gathered

through people's prior experiences and interpretation is part of the research process

(Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I sought to use this design to conduct my research so the data

would be in-depth and provide insight into the social problem of bullying.

I explored the phenomenon of bullying in South Central Texas schools from an

elementary school social worker perspective. Elementary schools consisted of grades

kindergarten through sixth grades. Qualitative data has descriptive and analytic

components to describe, explore, and understand a problem via participants (Ravitch &

Carl, 2016). My research questions were as follows:

Research Question 1: How do elementary school social workers in South Central

Texas school district perceive bullying?

Research Question 2: What factors do elementary school social workers in South

Central Texas school districts feel contribute to bullying?

Research Question 3: How do elementary school social workers in South Central

Texas perceive organizational climate as a contributor towards bullying in schools?

Key Terms and Concepts

Anti-bullying programs: Anti-bullying programs are programs created to decrease

the social problem of bullying, using various methods and techniques (Downes & Cefai,

2019; Farina, 2019; Gaffney et al., 2019; Goodwin et al., 2019; Limber et al., 2019;

Midgett et al., 2016; Temko, 2019; Yang et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020).

Bullying: Defined as unwanted aggressive behavior by another person or group, asserting control and dominance over another individual, in order to maintain and assert social dominance over another individual through overt aggression, or social isolation from peers (Akay, 2019; Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2015; Midgett et al., 2016; Taruna & Yada, 2017).

Direct bullying: Bullying is repeated, aggressive behavior directed at causing pain to a person who is perceived as weaker, which includes physical acts, such as, hitting, shoving, and kicking and verbal assaults, such as name calling (Akay, 2019; Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2015; Harger, 2019; Lehman, 2019; Midgett et al., 2016; Taruna & Yada, 2017).

Indirect bullying: Indirect bullying consists of spreading rumors, negative untrue narratives about the victim, and using social exclusion, and humiliation to isolate the victim and cause others to dislike the victim (Akay, 2019; Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2015; Harger, 2019).

Organizational climate: Organizational climate is the culture of an organization, such as a school, church, business, and can be equated to the ecology of that system (Cefai, 2019; Downes & Temko, 2019).

School-based interventions: School-based interventions are interventions occurring in schools which serve to identify, intervene, and decrease bullying (Cefai, 2019; Midgett et al., 2016; Temko, 2019).

Values: Values reflect existing social norms and goals. Values reflect an individual's ideals, beliefs, principles, and worldview (Vakil, 2021).

Methodology

I employed a basic qualitative research design and methodology to explore the phenomenon of bullying in elementary schools and how school social workers intervene. I explored the problem within South Central Texas school districts. I chose a basic qualitative design as it will yield in-depth information versus a breadth of information on the topic of bullying (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I used semi structured phone interviews for data collection and analytic memos as part of the data collection process. Analytic memos are helpful in reducing researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Because the researcher serves as an instrument in qualitative research design, analyzing my positionality, social identity, and location were vital in ensuring the rigor of my study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I wrote memos throughout the various stages of my research to identify my own biases, especially regarding bullying. Analytic memos were helpful in processing the data (Saldana, 2016).

The phone interviews were guided by the list of questions I created to answer my research questions (see Appendix). These interviews provided in-depth information from key informants providing great insight into the problem (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Key informants were those who have significant knowledge or influence in a certain problem area who could offer valuable information about the problem (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used school social workers who work in South Central Texas elementary schools who

have experience in that setting, and likely with bullying in schools which is my topic of interest. Eligible participants who completed the phone interview were provided with a nominal $20 Starbucks gift card to thank them for their time. In my study, participants were school social workers in South Central Texas.

Data Collection Procedures

The method of collecting qualitative data was through semi structured, recorded interviews. I conducted telephone interviews with South Central Texas school social workers. I used effective interview strategies, such as providing clear explanations, the use of open-ended questions and probes, balancing rapport and neutrality, and being conscientious of the use of tone and other interview methods (Laureate Education, 2016). Further, I was clear when explaining protocols, voluntary recording, explaining how the data would be used, and that the recording would be transcribed via Temi smartphone application a secure transcription service. I explained that pseudonyms would be used for participant interviews to support confidentiality/privacy as well and that the participants would be provided the transcript and my interpretations to review for accuracy once the interview was transcribed. Further, an informed consent form that followed the requirements of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was used. I sent the form via email and a follow-up email to explain any questions the participants may have. These practices helped ensure credibility and trustworthiness in my qualitative study.

I conducted the semi structured telephone interviews. Semi structured interviews are scheduled interviews in which the researcher has a specific phenomenon to learn

about (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Further, semi structured interviews allow for some spontaneous conversation, versus a strict structured format (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interviews were recorded and transcribed using a smartphone application called Temi, which is a secure transcription tool.

I created simple questions first, such as "How long have you worked as a school social worker? How long have you been employed with this school district?" (See Appendix A). Further, participants were asked questions about bullying in schools, such as, "What does it mean to bully someone, from your perspective? From your observation, can you give me some examples of bullying?" (See Appendix A). These questions are examples of orientating questions with scaffolding that lead to tour questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The interview questions developed targeted issues of anti-bullying practices and policies from the perspectives of school social workers, along with what social workers perceive as contributing factors to being bullied or bullying others, as well. When developing the interview questions, I followed qualitative interviewing methods by Rubin and Rubin (2012).

The telephone interviews were anticipated to last between twenty and thirty minutes. At the conclusion, I thanked participants for their participation in the study and also provided an opportunity for any final questions that they may have had. I explained to the participants that I would reach out to them with a copy of the transcript of the interview and my interpretations, so that they may check it for accuracy and give any feedback. Participants contacted me via email to offer any clarification or other feedback

regarding the transcript and my interpretation. Participants were contacted for analysis

confirmability, a form of the member checking process.

Possible Compromises to Data Collection

Qualitative research can offer much in-depth knowledge on a phenomenon of

interest. There are some limitations to qualitative data, which may play a role in my

study. First, the small sample was not generalizable to larger populations. Second,

another limitation which can affect data collection and interpretation is researcher bias

(Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In order to offset researcher bias, I used analytic memos to

reduce researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Lastly, a variable that was unpredictable

involving my research was the global pandemic of Covid-19. Schools were closing to

teach remotely in South Texas at the onset of my research process.

Participants

The participants were school social workers in the South Central Texas region. I

focused on primary school social workers working with grades Kindergarten through

sixth grade. I used a referral, purposeful snowball sampling of those with knowledge of

bullying in schools, such as school social workers (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I posted a

social media post online as well (see Appendix C). These online platforms included

Facebook, NASW Texas Chapter, Walden University Online Social Work and Human

Services Degree Programs, Social Workers Life, and the Network for MSW, LMSW,

LCSW & SW page. I recruited nine participants for my qualitative study. I interviewed

until saturation occurred, and repeated data was being revealed. This enabled me to capture a good sample during the pandemic.

I used key informants which are those with credible, expert knowledge of the topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), in this instance, school social workers. I recruited nine participants for my qualitative study. I interviewed until saturation occurs, and repeated data was being revealed.

The use of school social workers aligned well with the research topic, in that bullying occurs most frequently in school settings. School social workers can play a critical role in bullying prevention programs (Bent-Goodley; 2018). One problem discovered in the research is that social workers in school settings are often underutilized or feel undervalued (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Karikari, 2020). Therefore, learning more from those who work with children who have been bullied may reveal critical information about their perceptions on bullying and what factors do they feel contribute to bullying, to include the organizational climate of the school. Those three research questions guided me through the study process. The telephone interview were recorded with the participants' permission. I then used the Temi smartphone transcription application. Temi is a secure transcription application.

I started with a process of open coding. In order to describe the data analysis process, I will expound on the process of open coding. First, a code is a qualitative inquiry, often a short phrase or a word (Saldana, 2016). I used InVivo codes that the participants stated directly (Saldana, 2016). I began to notice patterns in the InVivo codes

and phrases. I then categorizes the codes into categories. Ultimately, those categories were identified as patterns and themes (Delve, n.d.; Saldana, 2016). I used computer-assisted qualitative analysis programs (CAQDAS) to organize the transcripts for coding the responses from participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). NVIVO Coding is the specific program I plan to use to achieve accurate coding. I developed themes from the categories and created a thematic analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I created several figures regarding the coded data and a word cloud using NVIVO software. The data, once transcribed using the smartphone application, Temi, was entered into a project in the NVIVO software. I then used an inductive coding process called open coding. I applied an open coding process initially, which is used in qualitative research design and allows the research to place tentative labels on groups of data, representing them as themes (de Lara, 2019). I displayed the themes into a graphic representation to add meaning to the data as a visual. For example, using a visual aid, such as a thematic analysis figure will aid the reader in understanding the data. One diagram box had the actual number of individual repeated words/phrases that were used in the interviews, then the second revealed categories originating from the coded words/phrases. Lastly, the last box showed the themes that emerged in the data.

Finally, I used analytic memos throughout the research process to minimize researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I was able to gain rich and in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon of bullying in schools with these tools, while offsetting my own researcher bias, by using analytic memos (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Ensuring Rigor of the Study

First, validity, also known as trustworthiness, in qualitative research design must

be considered and conducted throughout the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Specific strategies I used to increase trustworthiness/validity were many to include,

member checking, also known as participant validation, and methods to reduce researcher

bias, such as analytic memos (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldana, 2016). In order to ensure

validity in qualitative research, I used concepts such as, credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability. To make these methods clear, I have provided

definitions of each below:

- Credibility-refers to the researcher taking all of the complexities that are present

  in a study and being able to handle patterns that are not easily explained (Ravitch

  & Carl, 2016).

- Transferability-is often thought of as the quantitative version of generalizability;

  however the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize to a larger population,

  but rather to be able to apply findings to a similar contextual setting (Ravitch &

  Carl, 2016).

- Dependability-refers to the stability of the data and is similar to the quantitative

  version of reliability. Alignment of data collection methods play a key role in

  dependability in qualitative research design (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

- Confirmability-is a qualitative concept with the goal of having relative neutrality and minimum researcher bias. It is often the quantitative version equivalent of objectivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

First, I incorporated member checking to ensure credibility. During qualitative research processes, researcher bias can pose a threat to reliability of a study (Birt, et al., 2016). Conversely, researcher bias may be reduced by using member checking, which actively involves the participant in the research by checking and confirming the results (Birt, et al., 2016). Member checking is critical to help increase trustworthiness and reliability in a qualitative study (Brit, et al.; 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For example in my research, once transcripts were completed, I had the participants review them and my interpretations for accuracy, a process called member checking. Second, to support transferability, my data analysis process allowed me to provide the reader with enough context to apply the findings to a similar contextual setting. Perhaps, the reader can apply the findings to another elementary school setting with similar issues of bullying in school. Third, dependability refers to the stability of the data. I have provided a reasoned argument for selecting qualitative basic research design in order to explore the problem of bullying in schools via the perceptions of school social workers. I was able to gather in-depth, fresh knowledge from those who work in primary school settings to get a good understanding of their perceptions and experiences relating to my topic. Lastly, confirmability in qualitative data is critical in point that the researcher makes reasonable efforts for neutrality and reduction of researcher biases. I achieved this by acknowledging

my own researcher bias. I have a child who has special needs, who has been bullied in school and in my community. I realize this bias and underwent a dynamic process, constantly performing self-assessment to increase my own insights on bullying. Second, I wrote analytic memos throughout the research process. An analytic memo is similar to researcher journal entries or blogs (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldana, 2016). Memos are considered part of the data, often the memos are dated and freely written by the researcher throughout the research process. I found much insight, throughout this study, as I researched and wrote about the social and health problem of bullying. I believe this aided in achieving confirmability in my study and decreasing researcher bias, via insight and self-assessment.

Ethical Procedures

My study followed all Institutional Review Board, National Association of Social Workers code of ethics and confidentiality requirements. First, the National Association of Social Workers code of ethics guides how social workers conduct research. For example, social workers must obtain informed consent from the participant in appropriate, clear and understandable language (NASW, 20021). Further, the National Association of Social Workers code of ethics (2021), states that social workers should consider possible consequences to the participants when conducting research. Social workers should also inform the participants that their participation is voluntary, and they can withdraw at any time. I ensured that participant-recruitment was done in a noncoercive manner.

Additionally, all IRB requirements were followed. I applied to the IRB to obtain permission to do this qualitative study before any recruitment was done. I used pseudonyms in the study. The study's data was confidential. It could not be anonymous according to the IRB due to the fact that the researcher was aware of who the participants were. I masked the schools, names, and any identifying information in the study. I interviewed until saturation occurred as well. The IRB approval number is # 02-08-22-0645229. The IRB approval number will expire on February 7, 2023 or when my student status ends whichever comes first.

Data storage protections were put into place for my study. First any paper surveys and notes were stored in a locked file cabinet at my home, that only I have access to. Electronic files were fully password-protected on smart phone, computer, and any cloud drives used. The data will be stored for five years. After that time, the files will be securely destroyed, such as shredded, or deleted and removed from any electronic files. I ensured that all the participant identities will not be disclosed either indirectly or directly by using a pseudonym. While I was contemplating the process of assigning pseudonyms, I began to research how other qualitative researchers do so. Some have used baby name generators, especially when there are more participants in the study due to focus groups ("Qualitative research: pseudonyms or no pseudonyms?", 2021). Others, with smaller samples for interviews, similar to my study assign random common pseudonyms that have the same first letter as the participants. For example, Marisela, may be Marie or Mary. Additionally, each phone interview was assigned an alpha-numeric number.

Summary

In summary, various methods took place to ethically ensure that the study followed all IRB requirements, NASW code of ethics guidelines, and ensure confidentiality to the participants. As I have stated, I applied for permission to perform the study from the IRB and was approved to conduct my study. Moreover, I made certain that the participants were recruited in a non-coercive manner, provided full informed consent via a form and verbal explanations or email communications. Moreover, I informed the participants that they may discontinue their participation at any time. I secured the data, by having password-protections on all electronic files and devices, in addition to using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Lastly, I secured all paper data in a locked file cabinet in my home and follow protocols of keeping the data for five years, then destroying it via protocols as well.

Regarding the rigor of my study, I took steps to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I included member checking/participant validation to be certain that the transcripts from the semi-structured phone interviews are correct. This helped in my ability to know that I have interpreted the data from participants accurately. Further, by using a basic qualitative design I was able to have in-depth, rich data from the lens of the participants' perceptions on my topic of bullying in schools. I have stated rationales for selecting a basic qualitative research design in my research, which aids in dependability. And although my study was not generalizable, it provided the reader the ability to apply the findings to a similar contextual setting, aiding in transferability.

Lastly, confirmability was enhanced by decreasing researcher biases. I have stated that I do have researcher bias regarding bullying, as my child who has special needs has experienced bullying. I minimized my bias by constant self-assessment, using analytic memos throughout the study and research to help process and identify researcher biases that I may have and reduce them.

Section three of my proposal will include the purpose of my research questions, how my data was collected, recruitment processes and response rates, ways to ensure rigor, such as member checking, analytic memos, and self-assessment; data analysis will be included, summary of findings, discussion of the results, and limitations of my study.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore elementary school social workers'

perceptions on bullying, contributing factors of bullying, and organizational culture on

bullying. I explored the organizational climate as a contributing factor via the perspective

of elementary school social workers. By understanding more about these phenomena,

social workers can not only play an effective role in bullying prevention efforts but also

help advocate for a pro-social organizational climate in schools. In order to query the

topic, my research questions were as follows:

- Research Question 1: How do elementary school social workers in South

  Central Texas school districts perceive bullying?

- Research Question 2: What factors do elementary school social workers in

  South Central Texas school districts feel contribute to bullying?

- Research Question 3: How do elementary school social workers in South

  Central Texas perceive organizational climate as a contributor towards

  bullying in schools?

Data were collected through semi structured, recorded interviews with South

Central Texas school social workers. I followed a list of nine telephone interview

questions, allowing for open-ended questions and answers. Before interviews, I was clear

when explaining protocols, voluntary recording, explaining how the data would be used,

and that the recording will be transcribed via Temi smartphone application a secure

transcription service. I also obtained consent from the participants. These various data

collection practices helped ensure credibility and trustworthiness in my qualitative study.

In Section 3, I will discuss data analysis techniques to include the time frame for

data collection and actual recruitment and response rates. I will also cover data analysis

procedures used in the study, describe validation procedures, and limitations of the study.

I will report the findings, statistical analysis findings organized by my research questions,

and display results using figures and NVivo CAQDAS software word cloud. I will

discuss unexpected findings as well. Finally, Section 3 will conclude with a summary

section and a transition to Section 4.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data Collection

My data collection time frame began on February 15, 2022 and lasted to March 9,

2022 after receiving full IRB approval on February 8, 2022 (IRB approval # 02-08-22-

0645229). I began two methods of recruitment on February 15, 2022. First, I began

posting the online post on social media, using forums such as Facebook, NASW Texas

Chapter, Walden University Online Social Work and Human Services Degree Programs,

Social Workers Life, and the Network for MSW, LMSW, LCSW & SW page. Social

media did not produce as much interest as I anticipated, but I did receive four queries

from these platforms. Three met criteria for my study and participated and one did not

meet criteria because this person only supervised school social workers but did not work

as one in a school setting. One person recruited from an online platform provided a name of another school social worker who may be a knowledgeable participant.

I also used a purposive snowball sampling method to recruit possible participants using professional networks. The process began with reaching out to one person in my professional network who agreed to participate in the study. Each participant was emailed the email invitation and the consent form. After the first interview, the participant provided two more referrals who were school social workers who met criteria and also participated. Two of those participants gave referrals to possible knowledgeable school social workers in the region of focus, who also met criteria. Additionally, participants who were recruited online gave referrals as well. These combined methods of online recruitment and purposive snowball sampling gave me nine participants who completed the interviews and member checking procedures. My range for participant recruitment was eight to 12. Stagnation on new interested parties occurred within a week.

I was able to schedule and conduct all of my interviews by Wednesday, March 9, 2022. I recorded the interviews using the secure Temi smartphone application and immediately afterward sent the interview recordings for transcription. I provided an emailed Starbucks gift card for 20 dollars for the participant's time.

Data Analysis Procedures

I analyzed data from nine semi structured phone interviews using an open coding method (Saldana, 2016). I took in vivo codes that the participants stated directly (Saldana, 2016) and began to notice patterns. After I immersed myself in the data

transcripts, I then categorized the codes into categories and ultimately themes (Saldana, 2016: Rubin & Rubin, 2012.). I used NVivo coding software or computer-assisted qualitative analysis programs (CAQDAS) to help organize the transcript data from participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). After transcripts were completed, I created a new project in NVivo coding software. I uploaded all nine transcripts from the phone interviews into the project. The CAQDAS software enabled me to go through line by line and code each interview, then synthesize the data from the interview transcripts into nodes or categories. I later began to see patterns, leading to categories and themes.

At the final stages of coding, I merged the nodes by aggregate coding to the parent node, creating children nodes. As I opened the parent nodes, I saw sub-categories of my data in the child nodes. I used NVivo to query the number of times certain codes appeared in the interview transcripts during this process. These queries can be used to create word clouds, which I did for Research Question 1. The word cloud illustrates the higher frequency that a code was used via a larger font size. Tables of the data analysis were created to aid the reader in understanding the data by using a visual.

Validation Procedures

I ensured that processes were in place in all aspects of this study to increase validity. Validity, also known as trustworthiness, in qualitative research design must be considered and conducted throughout the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Specific strategies to increase trustworthiness/validity are many to include member checking (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldana, 2016). In order to ensure validity in qualitative

research, include concepts such as, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. As I kept validity in mind, I conducted member checking. Member checking decreases researcher bias by involving the participant in checking and confirming results and interpretations of the researcher (Birt et al., 2016). Therefore, I returned transcripts to all nine participants via email, along with the interpretations I made from each interview. I asked the participants to check the transcripts and my interpretations for accuracy. I also asked the participants to clarify any part that may need altering or adjustment. None of the participants had changes or adjustments upon completion of member checking.

Study Limitations

Overall, my qualitative study went smoothly. A limitation or problem I encountered was as follows: In one instance, the participant's interview was at the end of the school day at her school on the phone. This caused noise from the children being released home. I had to politely pause the interview recording so those voices would not be included in the Temi recording and transcript. The participant was not upset by the short pause, and the interview resumed after a few minutes without a problem.

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Study Findings

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My study used a basic qualitative research design. Qualitative data are both descriptive and analytic, providing the researcher a way to explore a phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I explored the perceptions of South Central Texas elementary school social workers regarding bullying in schools. The criteria to participate in my

study was that participants work as elementary school social workers in South Central

Texas and voluntarily participate. I was seeking eight to 12 participants, and I recruited

nine for my study. The nine participants were all females, ranging in age from 24–49

years old. Race/ethnicity consisted of the following: one African-American, three

Caucasian-Americans, and five Latina-Americans. All nine participants were employed

as school social workers in South Central Texas elementary schools.

Research Question 1

The findings of my qualitative study on bullying in South Central Texas

elementary schools provided knowledge based on my research questions. First, I will

discuss the results of participant data regarding RQ1, which was designed to capture

knowledge on how elementary school social workers view bullying in their schools and

as a whole. I analyzed the qualitative data from my semi structured interviews by using a

descriptive coding method. A descriptive code is a one-word code that summarizes the

primary topic in an interview segment (Saldana, 2016). After line-by-line coding of each

interviews, I began to notice patterns or repetitive occurrences in the data (Saldana,

2016). Synthesis combines the codes and patterns into a new whole, or category (Ravitch

& Carl, 2016). Finally, I was able to conduct a process called theming the data that

involved capturing a thought or phrase that encompassed the codes/categories into a

theme (Saldana, 2016). These research processes were applied to each research question.

The following themes emerged in relation to my first research question. First, the

theme mixed view of bullying problem emerged. Second, subthemes emerged under

mixed view of bullying problem, such as social worker involvement, leadership, views include direct and indirect bullying, and power and status as bullying motivation. These themes and subthemes will be discussed in-depth next.

Theme 1: Mixed View of Bullying Problem

Research Question 1 explored how elementary school social workers in South Central Texas school districts perceive bullying. The findings revealed a theme of mixed view of bullying problem as illustrated in Table 1. For example, three participants did not believe that bullying was a problem at their school, and six participants believed that bullying is a problem in their schools. For example, Participant 8 stated, "Yes, I don't see a lot of physical bullying, but verbal, social bullying is what they report." Participant 5 stated, "bullying is in every school in the district." Finally, Participant 2 stated that bullying was not a problem in school because the principal had meetings with school social workers to handle how to follow-up and document the bullying incident. These findings partially contrast with the literature review, which showed that bullying is prevalent in schools.

Table 1

Mixed View of Bullying Problem

Codes	Categories	Theme
-yes, definitely a problem -problem in most schools -cases of bullying across different schools	Category 1: Bullying is a problem at school	Mixed view of bullying problem
-at least one child is being bullied -No, not a problem -No -I, don't, to be honest very good social emotional team	Category 2: Do not perceive bullying as a problem in their school	

Subtheme 1: Social Worker Involvement

Those who did not believe bullying was a problem at their schools attributed this to social worker involvement in multi-disciplinary weekly staff meetings and being part of the process of screening for bullying. For example, Participant 6 stated, "No, because of the social/emotional team." Participant 6 went on further to say that each campus has administrators, behavioral counselor, social workers to identify and support the victims of bullying and the bullies. In fact, Participant 6 stated that these multi-disciplinary staff professionals include the school social workers and are called "behavioral units." Social worker involvement was key for another participant who said that bullying was not a problem at the district. Participant 1 stated that social workers work with guidance counselors to assess bullying and intervene using small groups. Last, Participant 4 who said bullying is not a problem at the school attributed that to "social workers are the first line of intervention once an incident is determined to be bullying." These findings supported the current literature that indicates social workers who are part of the anti-bullying efforts in schools feel more empowered (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Downes & Cefai, 2019).

Subtheme 2: Leadership

The sub-theme Leadership emerged as a factor for not viewing school bullying as a problem in their schools. In fact, those leaders who valued social work skill sets encouraged school social workers to be a part of handling bullying incidents at their schools. Leaders in schools such as the principal and assistant principals can serve as a

protective factor against bullying in schools. For example, participant 6 named a very

extensive group of administrative behavioral specialists, behavioral counselors, and

social workers comprising the behavioral unit at their school district. Further, this team

can involve parents of those with special needs children by working with the department

of disability services. Finally, a point was made by Participant 3 who stated that punitive

policies implemented by leadership do not aid in bullying prevention. Participant 3

further stated, "Staff is pulled in so many directions or [bullying] is brushed under the rug

or everybody gets punishment even the victims." These perceptions from participants

emphasize that leadership can aid in helping the problem of bullying or conversely, add

to the problem of bullying in schools. The participants' perceptions that they are not

involved in anti-bullying efforts is supported by the literature. For example, current

literature shows that school social workers often feel alienated and excluded from those

efforts in schools and school social workers are underutilized in anti-bullying programs in

schools (Karikari; 2020).

Subtheme 3: Views Include Direct and Indirect Bullying

In further exploration of research question one, How do elementary school social

workers in South Central Texas school districts perceive bullying, social workers showed

a clear understanding of bullying concepts. Participants in my qualitative study all

showed an extensive understanding of bullying to include overt methods of bullying such

as physical aggression, verbal bullying, cyberbullying, and indirect methods of bullying. I

arrived at the theme, Views Include Direct and Indirect Bullying, after the participants

described those aspects of bullying showing accurate perceptions of what bullying behaviors are. For example, elementary school social workers perceived bullying as infringing on the rights and boundaries of another person, repeated, reoccurring, and continued aggression. Bullying data exploring elementary school social workers perceptions on bullying included: intentionally hurting feelings of other children, physically harming other children, excluding other children, inflicting pain on other children, to belittle and harm other children, and to cyberbully other children. According to the participants, cyberbullying referred to social media bullying, using texting, personal messaging, and other electronic methods to embarrass or humiliate the victim. Additionally, indirect bullying methods were provided by participants as well. The participants reported methods of indirect bullying, such as excluding the victims, spreading rumors and untruths about the victim as indirect bullying. Indirect bullying entails social exclusion, spreading rumors or untruths about the person, and intentional efforts for others to dislike the victim(Akay, 2019; Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2015; Harger, 2019).

Direct bullying is repeated, aggressive behavior directed at causing pain to a person who is perceived as weaker, which includes physical acts, such as, hitting, shoving, and kicking and verbal assaults, such as name calling (Akay, 2019; Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2015; Harger, 2019; Lehman, 2019; Midgett, et al., 2016; Taruna & Yada, 2017).

Subtheme 4: Power and Status as Bullying Motivation

Finally, in exploration of research question one, How do elementary school social workers in South Central Texas school districts perceive bullying, aspects on the perpetrators of bullying became apparent as a theme. Perpetrators of bullying according to the participants gained power and social status from bullying those who were seen as different or weak. For example, Participant 5 stated, "that power over another person" contributes to the bully's motivation. See Figure 1 Bullying word cloud for an illustration. These social worker perceptions were supported by the literature positing that power and status are a motivator for perpetrators to bullying others (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019; Downes & Cefai, 2019; Midgett et al., 2016).

Figure 1

Bullying Word Cloud

In summary, various themes and sub-themes emerged when analyzing the qualitative data regarding research question one, How do elementary school social

workers in South Central Texas school districts perceive bullying? The first theme that

emerged was school social workers had a mixed view of the bullying problem. For

example, six participants believed that bullying was a problem in their schools, while

three participants did not believe that bullying was a problem in their schools. These

mixed views led to sub-themes to include: social worker involvement, leadership, views

include direct and indirect bullying, and power and status as bullying motivation.

Specifically, social workers who reported being involved in anti-bullying

preventions/interventions believed that bullying was not a problem in their schools.

Conversely, those social workers who were not involved in anti-bullying

preventions/interventions reported bullying as problem in their schools and districts.

A second sub-theme that emerged under the theme mixed view of bullying

problem was leadership. Leadership played a role in that those participants who reported

leaders who valued social work skill sets and encouraged social work involvement in

bullying prevention, felt that bullying was not a problem. In essence, social workers

under positive pro-social worker leaders felt more empowered to handle or prevent

bullying in schools. Conversely, school social workers whose leadership enforced more

punitive policies and less social worker involvement in bullying efforts perceived

bullying as problem in their schools.

Third, the third sub-theme of views include direct and indirect bullying emerged

under Mixed View of the Bullying Problem. The participants described bullying as both

direct forms of bullying, such as repeated aggressive, physical, verbal, intentionally

inflicting pain on another person perceived as weaker. Additionally, school social workers were able to discuss indirect forms of bullying, such as excluding others, spreading lies or rumors about the victim to make others dislike them. These social worker perceptions were supported by the literature that direct bullying is repeated, aggressive behaviors that cause pain to a person who is perceived as weaker, which includes physical acts, such as, hitting, shoving, and kicking and verbal assaults, such as name calling (Akay, 2019; Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2015; Harger, 2019; Lehman, 2019; Midgett, et al., 2016; Taruna & Yada, 2017). Further, social workers perceptions of indirect bullying was also supported by the current literature to include spreading rumors or untruths, social exclusion, and intentional efforts to cause others to dislike them (Harger, 2019). Lastly, this sub-theme revealed that cyberbullying and technology via social media played a strong role in indirect bullying methods.

Finally, sub-theme four emerged under the theme mixed view of bullying problem. Sub-theme four, power and status as bullying motivation, was revealed as I analyzed the data from participants. According to the data, perpetrators gained social status and power from bullying those peers who were perceived as weak or different, thereby serving as a motivator to bully others. The current literature supports that finding and will be discussed in-depth in the next section more fully emerging under research question two, What factors do elementary school social workers in South Central Texas school districts feel contribute to bullying?

Research Question 2

Research question two queried What factors do elementary school social workers in South Central Texas school districts feel contribute to bullying? The question was designed to learn what factors school social workers' believe contribute to being bullied. The findings regarding research question two are as follows: elementary school social workers reported that disabilities, autism, special needs, medical problems, such as tics, those with lower socio-economic status, and those who were perceived as different were contributing factors to becoming a victim or target of bullying. Those who were perceived as different or vulnerable because of mental health issues, medical disabilities and lower socio-economic status were reported to contribute to being bullied. The theme I derived from the In vivo codes and categories was Disabilities, Vulnerabilities and Perceived Differences. This theme will be discussed next.

Theme 1: Disabilities, Vulnerabilities and Perceived Differences

Research question two study's findings support the literature regarding those who are often victims of bullying (see Table 2). Several health conditions emerged as being a predicting factor for being bullied. Those factors included: children and adolescents having a medical condition diagnoses, autism, those with special needs, and finally youth with mental health issues (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2019). Additionally, research supports that children who were different in appearance or had a disability were more likely to be bullied as well (Jimenez-Barbero, et al.; (2020). Lastly, children who are perceived as

different may have limited support systems at school, thereby leaving them more

vulnerable to being bullied (Taruna and Yadav; 2017).

Table 2

Disabilities, Vulnerabilities, and Perceived Differences

Codes	Categories	Theme
-disabilities -autism -special needs -tics/medical problems -different -lower socio-economic status	Social workers feel these factors contribute to being a victim of bullying	Disabilities, vulnerabilities and perceived differences

Research Question 3

Finally, research question three queried How do elementary school social workers

in South Central Texas perceive organizational climate as a contributor towards bullying

in schools? The findings suggested that organizational climate plays a vital role in either

perpetuating the problem of bullying or helping to alleviate the problem of bullying.

Theme 1: Organizational Climate Resistance

For example, as previously discussed in the section regarding research question

one, the school social workers who had leadership that involved the social workers in

bullying prevention did not perceive bullying to be a problem in their schools.

Conversely, six of the nine participants who believed bullying is a problem in their

schools, cited lack of support in their schools, resistance to social worker bullying

interventions, and lack of buy-in at their schools regarding perceiving bullying as

problem. Some examples were when social workers attempted to teach anti-bullying

lessons in class there was resistance from the teachers who did not want interruptions.

See Table 3 Organizational climate resistance. Further, not only did teachers often resist,

some "rolled their eyes about bullying," to the school social worker. Lastly, school social

workers generally were not involved in anti-bullying interventions or prevention

practices. These organizational culture issues were part of perpetuating the problem of

bullying in schools, according to the participants. The literature supports the

organizational climate plays a role in either decreasing or, conversely, increasing bullying

in schools. For example, overall, the research suggests that a positive school climate can

have a moderating effect on bullying (Yang et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020). Conversely,

the research shows that an organizational culture that supports bullying can have a

detrimental effect on bullying prevention (Downes & Cefia, 2019; Karikari, 2020).

Table 3

Organizational Climate Resistance

Codes	Categories	Theme
-teachers don't want interruptions (by social worker) -social worker can't do bullying lessons -teacher rolls their eyes about bullying	Resistance to social worker bullying intervention	Organizational climate resistance

Summary

My findings for the qualitative study regarding bullying in South Central Texas

elementary schools via social workers' perceptions revealed in-depth information about

bullying. Upon exploration of research question one, How do elementary school social

workers in South Central Texas school districts perceive bullying, I found many themes emerged to answer this question. The question was designed to capture knowledge on how elementary school social workers in the South Texas Region perceived bullying in their schools and as a whole.

First, most school social workers viewed bullying as a problem in their schools. Those social worker participants who did not view bullying as a problem in their schools were involved in multi-disciplinary staff meetings on bullying, participated in bullying prevention or intervention efforts, and had supportive leadership in their schools.

Second, school social workers viewed bullying as both direct and indirect methods of bullying. For example, participants stated that bullying is intentionally infringing on the rights and boundaries of another person as repeated aggression. Elementary school social workers perceptions on bullying included: intentionally hurting feelings or physically hurting other children. Social exclusion, spreading rumors and untruths were also named as a part of indirect bullying methods as well. Humiliating or embarrassing the victim was part of a goal to increase social status by the perpetrator over who they perceived as weak. The participants also cited cyberbullying as part of the bullying problem, which included using social media, texting, personal messaging, or other electronic platforms to humiliate the victim.

Third, contributing factors via the elementary school social workers' perspectives revealed that children who were perceived as different, had medical problems, psychological problems, autism, tics, special needs, and low socioeconomic status were

often targets of bullying in schools. The theme that emerged in the data was those children perceived to have disabilities, vulnerabilities, or differences were at risk of being bullied. These findings support the literature regarding risk factors for being bullied.

Finally, the study seemed to support the strong role that organizational climate plays in perpetuating bullying or decreasing bullying in schools. Lack of support by teachers, school leadership, and buy-in that bullying is a problem in schools were cited as issues in the school culture that would need to change in order to alleviate or impact bullying as a social problem. The organizational culture when bullying was minimized as a social problem was reported as perpetuating bullying by six of the nine participants.

The findings of this qualitative study on bullying in South Central Texas elementary schools revealed in-depth information from the unique perspective of the school social worker. Exploring elementary school social workers' perceptions on how school social workers perceive bullying, what factors do elementary school social workers feel contribute to school bullying, and how organizational climate contributes to bullying, lends itself not only to answers but also towards the clinical social worker role of solutions. Chapter four will begin with an introduction of these findings, a section on applying social worker practice ethics to aid in the problem, recommendations for social work practice to include implications for social change, and finally a summary regarding the micro, mezzo, and macro potential for impact in the field of social work.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore bullying in schools from the perspective of South Central Texas elementary school social workers in addition to their perspectives on contributing factors of bullying and organizational culture influencing bullying. Upon conducting an extensive literature review regarding the negative effects of bullying, I knew that more research was needed to be able to better understand the phenomena of bullying and how clinical social workers could help in prevention and intervention efforts. Additionally, school social workers can help advocate for a pro-social organizational climate in schools, if needed. The school setting was chosen because that is the environment in which most children spend their time. Minimizing bullying in schools can have a positive impact not only on the child who is suffering the effects of being bullied, but for the mezzo level school system, and macro level, society at large.

Key Findings

Research Question 1

My first research question was "How do elementary school social workers in South Central Texas school districts perceive bullying?" My qualitative study revealed several key findings applicable to the field of social work as it relates to this question. The theme mixed view of bullying problem was identified, as six out of nine South Central Texas school social workers viewed school bullying as a problem in their

schools, and three school social workers did not view bullying as a problem in their

schools. After subthemes emerged, the rationale for these mixed perceptions made sense.

The first subtheme was social worker involvement. Participants who were

involved in anti-bullying processes did not perceive bullying as a problem in their

schools because of their involvement, feeling more empowered. These findings supported

the current literature that social workers who are part of the anti-bullying efforts in

schools feel more empowered (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Downes & Cefai, 2019).

Conversely, school social workers in my study who reported not being involved in anti-

bullying programs perceived bullying as a problem. The social workers who were not

involved support research that posits that school social workers often feel alienated and

excluded from those efforts in schools and school social workers are underutilized in

anti-bullying programs in schools (Karikari, 2020).

A second subtheme that emerged was leadership. The data revealed that those

school social workers who had supportive leadership who valued the social work skill set,

perceived bullying as less of a problem. Conversely, school social workers who did not

have supportive leadership and were not involved in anti-bullying programs felt that

bullying was a problem in their schools. Therefore, leadership could either mitigate

bullying or increase bullying in the schools according to the results of my study. A third

subtheme was views include direct and indirect bullying. This subtheme was identified

when the participants reported a clear understanding of both direct and indirect bullying

methods. Finally, the fourth subtheme revealed that power and status are motivators for

perpetrators of bullying. The results of the study are supported by current literature positing that power and status are at the root of bullying (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019; Downes & Cefai, 2019; Midgett et al., 2016). Hence, the three social workers who did not believe school bullying was a problem in their schools reported feeling this way because of their involvement in prevention and intervention efforts and had supportive leadership in their schools.

The research suggests that when it comes to bullying, social workers in school environments who are part of anti-bullying programs feel more empowered and see bullying as less of a problem in their schools. Moreover, school social workers who had supportive leadership believed bullying was not a problem because of leaders who valued social workers unique skill set. Lastly, social workers perceptions were aligned with current research defining types of bullying such as direct and indirect bullying (Akay, 2019; Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2015; Harger, 2019; Lehman, 2019; Midgett, et al., 2016; Taruna & Yada, 2017).

Research Question 2

The second research question posed for this study was "What factors do elementary school social workers in South Central Texas school districts feel contribute to bullying?" The theme disabilities, vulnerabilities, and perceived differences emerged in the data. School social workers reported several mental and physical health diagnoses emerged as being a predicting factor for being bullied including medical diagnoses, mental health diagnoses, autism, and disabilities. Additionally, the participants reported

that lower socioeconomic status children were also at risk for bullying. The research supports that children who have a disability were more likely to be bullied (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2019; Jimenez-Barbero, et al., 2020). Research also supports the participants assertions that being of a lower socioeconomic status can be a risk factor in getting bullied (Malecki et al.; 2020).

Research Question 3

Research question three queried How do elementary school social workers in South Central Texas perceive organizational climate as a contributor towards bullying in schools? A major theme identified was Organizational Climate Resistance. My study findings suggested that organizational climate plays a vital role in either perpetuating the problem of bullying or helping to alleviate the problem of bullying. In other words, when social workers did not have a supportive environment, such as resistance to social worker intervention regarding bullying, bullying was perceived as a problem. My study's findings support literature that organizational climate is vital in either decreasing or, conversely, increasing bullying in schools. Additionally, the participants in my study perceived positive organizational climate to mitigate the problem of bullying in schools. The research suggests that a positive school climate can have a moderating effect on bullying (Yang et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020). Additionally, the research posits that an organizational culture that supports bullying can have a detrimental effect on bullying prevention (Downes & Cefai, 2019; Karikari, 2020).

Findings Extend Knowledge in The Field of Social Work

The findings extend knowledge to the field of social work by aiding in learning how social worker perceptions impact the problem of bullying in schools and what school social workers believe encompasses bullying. Understanding what bullying is increases awareness in the field of social work. Social workers serve as educators to their clients and colleagues, thereby helping increase awareness of what bullying actually entails. The findings of my study also extend knowledge regarding who is at risk for being bullied. These populations included vulnerable populations, such as those with special needs, medical diagnoses, mental health diagnoses, those who are perceived as weak or different, and those children from lower socioeconomic statuses. It is critical for social workers to be aware of those children most at risk so that early intervention may occur. Lastly, social workers can play an important role in improving the organizational climate in elementary schools. Advocating for pro-social behaviors and support from staff, such as teachers, along with buy-in from administration and parents can be key to social change. The following section will focus on recommended solutions for the field of social work regarding bullying solutions, professional ethics, information dissemination, and implications for social change.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics (2021) core principles and values are unique to the field of social work. The NASW (2021) values, include service, social justice, dignity and self-worth of the person, importance of

human relationships, integrity, and competence. These values are tied into the ethical

principles of the field of social work. Specifically, the NASW (2021) value of social

justice is applicable to the social problem of bullying. The ethical principle guiding this

value is that social workers challenge social injustice (NASW, 2021). Children who are

being targeted for their disabilities, medical diagnoses, mental health diagnoses, or being

viewed as different or weaker is unjust. For example, my study revealed that elementary

school social workers perceived those with disabilities, special needs, lower socio-

economic status, medical and mental health diagnoses, such as tics and autism were at

higher risk for being victims of bullying. The current research on bullying supported this

study's findings. The literature revealed that children and adolescents who have medical

diagnoses, autism, special needs, and finally mental health issues are at risk to become

victims of bullying (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2019). Thus, it is critical for these risk factors to

be identified in an effort to prevent or intervene in bullying, tying into the NASW code of

ethics (2021) values, of social justice, dignity and self-worth of the person, importance of

human relationships, integrity, and competence.

Further, according to the NASW Code of Ethics social workers should act to

expand choice and opportunity for all people, with special regard for vulnerable,

disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people and groups" (NASW, 2021, sect 6.04

(b)). These children who are at increased risk of becoming targets of bullying are

considered vulnerable populations. It is our ethical obligation professionally and

personally to advocate for these children who are being bullied. Further, the NASW

(2021) code of ethics guides social workers to advocate for changes to social policy at the

mezzo level and macro level such as legislation to improve social condition to promote

social justice (NASW, 2021, sect. 6.04 (a)).

Social work advocacy was considered in the last question of the telephone

interview, asking "How can the field of social work advocate for those who have been

victims of bullying to affect social change?" Elementary school social worker

participants began to consider ways that they could affect social change via advocacy.

Participants codes included advocating to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the

agency that governs public schools for changes in bullying policy, advocating though

legislative laws and federal laws, and advocating at the school level for better bullying

policies. One participant (5) also reported that laws that categorize school social workers

as essential personnel would require that school social workers be employed in every

school in Texas. Finally, I believe that elementary school social workers should be

involved in anti-bullying prevention, intervention, and change in Texas.

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Recommendations for Social Work Practice

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Two Action Steps

Based on the findings of my study on bullying in South Central Texas elementary

schools via the school social worker perspective, I recommend two action steps for social

work practitioners in this area. First, school social workers should become more involved

with internal practices and policies on bullying in their schools or school districts.

Although school social workers have direct interaction with their students, staff, and

parents, they are being overlooked as a resource in preventing school bullying (Cuellar & Mason, 2019). The research on school social workers and bullying is scant, leaving a gap in the literature that could be a key component in prevention (Cuellar & Mason, 2019; Bent-Goodley, 2018; Evans & Smokowski, 2016). In fact, this qualitative study found that when school social workers were involved in prevention, policy efforts, and interventions, the participants perceived bullying as diminished because of intervention. Several participants emphasized that effective ways to intervene were to help facilitate multi-disciplinary staff meetings that include administrators, teachers, special education teachers, and transportation supervisors to focus on bullying. The current research supported these same findings from my research study. For example, each discipline can offer a unique perspective on bullying that happens in the schools and offer solutions (Karikari, 2020).

In contrast, the school social workers who were not part of anti-bullying practices perceived bullying as a problem in their schools and districts. Examples in this study include social workers finding organizational climate resistance to their intervention efforts. In one case, a participant reported teachers rolled their eyes about bullying. These concepts support research that found school social workers often feel alienated from bullying or intervention programs (Karikari, 2020). Thus, multi-disciplinary meetings could serve to connect school social workers to work towards bullying prevention efforts collaboratively. The social worker role should be key because social workers have a unique skill set, working not only with the children, but with parents, teachers, guidance

counselors, administrators and the community. Further, Karikari (2020) posited that

school social workers are an untapped resource that could be used in bullying prevention.

The second action step that I recommend is that school social workers become

active and informed in the legislative process, not only at the state level but also at the

Federal level. This may begin in a step as simple as joining their local chapter of the

NASW and becoming active on their ongoing forum and newsletters. Promoting social

change that challenges social injustice is vital in promoting pro-social policies and

legislation.

Findings' Impact on My Own Practice

The findings of my study will impact my own social work practices in many

ways. I plan to create materials to conduct workshops in schools, whether it be in

classroom, teacher in-service days, with administrators, the school board, or any other

party in the community or schools, education can serve to alleviate bullying as a social

problem. Research on bullying in schools reveals that children who are vulnerable, have

disabilities, or special needs are at risk for becoming victims of bullying. Ortiz-Bush and

Lee (2018) argue that students with disabilities are at risk for bullying in schools. Further,

that special education teachers would benefit from bullying prevention workshops to help

them with readiness and confidence in dealing with bullying and intervention strategies

(Ortiz-Bush & Lee, 2018). Workshops can help teachers be prepared with bullying

prevention strategies and interventions. Not only would special education teachers benefit

from training but all school personnel, paraprofessionals and support staff should be involved in trainings and workshops (Ortiz-Bush & Lee, 2018).

Transferability

My basic qualitative design study on bullying in elementary schools: School social workers' perceptions on bullying within the South Central Texas provides in-depth, rich knowledge about the social problem of bullying. The transferability of the findings are limited based on the geographic area focus (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Usefulness of Findings

The study's findings can provide knowledge to similar school systems facing bullying in their primary or elementary schools. The study can also apply to the broader field of social work practice by inspiring other social workers in the field to enhance policies and laws related to bullying via advocacy. The findings suggest that social worker involvement could help address the problem of bullying, in addition to social workers playing a role in bullying prevention and intervention efforts. According to Karikari (2020), social workers are an untapped resource in the school systems' bullying prevention efforts.

Lastly, social workers may find it helpful to engage in multi-disciplinary meetings to help work as teams towards alleviating bullying in schools and communities. School climate/culture reflect the need for a multi-disciplinary or multi-stakeholder approach in bullying prevention efforts (Baller et al., 2019; Farina, 2019; Karikari, 2020; Yang et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020).

Limitations

Limitations of my qualitative study are that the study was focused on a limited geographic area and elementary schools, grades Kindergarten through sixth grade. And although my study fulfilled the considerations of transferability by using several methods of research that increase credibility, it cannot be generalized or applied to a larger context population. The goal of qualitative research is not to generalize to a larger population, but rather to be able to apply findings to a similar contextual setting (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), yet lack of generalizability is one limitation of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Therefore, recommendations for future research grounded in the strengths of my study are for social work researchers and practitioners to learn more about bullying. Perhaps, mixed-methodology or quantitative studies could enable more understanding of bullying to the broader context. Additionally, more qualitative studies that focus on specific solutions and steps to decrease bullying would be a beneficial next step in researching the topic.

Two Ways to Disseminate Findings

Two methods that my study's information could be disseminated is by submitting the project to several local school boards of education and via publishing the study for others to explore and gain knowledge about bullying in South Central Texas Region.

Implications for Social Change

Social workers can affect change on micro, mezzo, and macro levels. First, positive impact towards social change at the micro level could include more detailed interventions or therapeutic methods in addressing the symptoms of bullying. One idea is adding criteria to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders that would include criteria for a diagnosis associated specifically with bullying. Currently, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders does not have diagnostic categories for either bullying perpetration or victimization. Instead, other psychiatric disorders that may result from bullying, such as anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and substance use disorders are used to diagnose outcomes from being bullied (Woo, et al., 2019).

Second, mezzo level interventions include social workers engaging not only in schools, but also communities, and with parents about solutions for bullying. Overall, the participants in this study believed that they could impact the problem of bullying by being more involved with anti-bullying prevention in the schools/districts. The research supports the premise that school social workers are often excluded from anti-bullying prevention programs (Karikari, 2020). For example, anti-bullying programs are generally implemented by school teachers, who are not equipped with the unique skill set that social workers have. Examples of anti-bullying programs that are led by those other than social workers include: Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Gaffney et al., 2019; Limber et al., 2018), the STAC program (Midgett et al., 2016) that uses peer leaders to

prevent bullying. The research supports that school social workers are an untapped resource, and social workers in my study often felt excluded from the processes to prevent bullying in schools. Thus, more school social worker involvement in anti-bullying prevention programs at the mezzo level is a needed. The research supports that social workers often feel alienated from anti-bullying efforts in primary schools (Karikari, 2020). This type of knowledge regarding the role of school social workers reveals an untapped resource that could be used in bullying prevention.

Lastly, school social workers could affect change on the macro level by becoming more involved in the legislative process. For instance, although anti-bullying laws exist in 49 of the 50 states in the United States, these laws are often not enforced and are not uniform (Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2015). The participants in this research study all perceived a need for legislation on bullying and that policies are not always followed in the districts. In support of the school social workers' perceptions in my study is the finding that states are not enforcing the anti-bullying policies and legislation consistently (Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2015; Kelly, 2017). Additionally, the state of Texas could improve anti-bullying legislation by distinguishing between bullying and cyberbullying (Kelly, 2017). Cyberbullying is prevalent because of social media platforms and was cited by the participants in my study as well, supporting the literature. As social workers strive to become more involved in legislative processes, school social workers should be guided by the NASW code of ethics to challenge policies that are unjust, emphasizing the dignity and worth of all people (NASW, 2021).

Summary

Bullying is considered a type of violence amongst youth. Bullying includes physical violence, such as hitting, tripping, pushing, in addition to verbal abuse, including teasing and name calling ("#StopBullying", 2020). Indirect bullying entails social exclusion, spreading rumors or untruths about the person, and intentional efforts for others to dislike the victim (Harger, 2019). Bullying research suggests that there are both short-term and long-term effects from being bullied to include: physical injuries, psychological, social consequences, and emotional impact on the victims (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019). Cyberbullying is another form of bullying using technology formats to bully children, such as social media, text messages, personal messages, and emails. Further, these effects can result in the suicidality, attempts, and completed suicides in those children who have been bullied (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 201). Kelly (2016) cites examples of the mass school shootings that occurred, with the victims of bullying plotting mass violence. Bullying is not going away without changes in culture on a micro, mezzo and macro level. The field of social work has an ethical and societal obligation to work towards affecting positive social change for those who are victims (NASW, 20021). Research, advocacy, interventions, policy and legislative changes are all needed to affect social change for the children who are undergoing bullying. That is one of the many reasons, I conducted this qualitative study to explore more about the phenomena of bullying in schools. The study is merely one of many other steps and methods towards social change and decreasing bullying in society.

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Appendix: Telephone Interview Questions

1. Is your title school social worker? What level of education do you have and in what discipline?

2. How long have you worked as a school social worker? How long have you been employed with this school district? How many years have you worked as a social worker in general? Describe your role as the social worker in your school. What are your responsibilities/what do you do? Do you have other roles beyond those of a school social worker? If so, what are your responsibilities?

3. What does it mean to bully someone, from your perspective? From your observations, can you give some examples of bullying?

4. Do you believe that bullying is a problem at your school? If so, what are some contributing factors to being bullied or bullying others?

5. Does your school district have policies against bullying in place? If so, are the policies implemented when a bullying incident occurs?

6. How is bullying handled by school social workers? Are school social workers part of any anti-bullying programs or practice? If not, who is involved in anti-bullying practices?

7. How could school social workers help prevent bullying in schools?

8. What are your thoughts on bullying in schools as a social justice issue; and what anti-bullying or bullying prevention strategies would you recommend that might bring about some type of social change?

*Note these questions are all for elementary school social workers who are the intended participants but for brevity have been called school social workers