

2018

# Teacher's Perceptions of Bullying in a Rural School District

Rutha Mae Jackson  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Rutha Mae Jackson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Timothy Lafferty, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. Mary Lou Morton, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Dr. Andrea Wilson, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer

Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University

2018

Abstract

Teachers' Perceptions of Bullying in a Rural School District

by

Rutha Mae Jackson

MA, Interdenominational Theological Seminary, 2006

BS, Fort Valley State University, 1993

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

July 2018

## Abstract

Bullying is a serious problem that can interfere with children's developmental and learning processes but can be difficult to manage and diffuse. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine teachers' perceptions and experiences with managing student bullying in a middle school in central Georgia. Olweus's effective classroom management model served as the conceptual framework to guide this study. The research questions focused on teachers' perceptions of their current practices of diffusing bullying situations and their experiences with bullying occurrences. A case study design was used to capture the insights of 10 middle school teachers through interviews, and purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. The participants were middle school teachers with 1 or more years of teaching experience who have experienced student bullying. Emergent themes were identified through an open coding process, and the findings were developed and checked for trustworthiness through member checking, rich descriptions, and researcher reflexivity. The findings revealed that teachers manage student bullying in independent ways based on their own experiences, that teachers should identify and share a unified definition of bullying, and that teachers would benefit from professional development to help them better manage student behavior consistently within the school. This study may influence positive social change by providing teachers and administrators with crucial information needed to implement an organized, systematic approach to reduce student bullying occurrences and to provide students with a safe learning environment.

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## Dedication

First, I want to give honor to God for allowing my dream to come true. I believed that this honor bestowed upon me was already ordained in heaven. The Grace of God has kept me through it all. Through it all the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit kept me. I have finished my course and ran with patience, the race set before me. Thank you, Lord, for the reward.

Secondly, I dedicate this dissertation to my husband Clarence Jackson, who encouraged and sacrificed his resources, so I could finish what I started almost nine years ago. Amid his own illness, he was patient and praying for me to succeed. On June 1, 2018, it was finished for us. Joy unspeakable joy flooded with my husband, daughters Nikesha, Michelle, and son-in-law Antonio Sr. My grandsons, Antonio Jr. 13, Christopher Mikal 10, who said, “hang on Nana, you can do this”, also thanked God for victory.

Lastly, I cannot say enough about my daughter Dr. Kimbria Jackson who stuck by my side even when the next day was dawning upon us. She helped me to be relentless in my pursuit, striving till the end. Her love lifted, held me up, and helped to carry me through the dark places of my journey; truly I am grateful. Thank you all for unconditional love.

## Acknowledgement

My sincere gratitude goes to my committee, Dr. Timothy Lafferty and Dr. Mary Lou Morton. Without your guidance, assistance, encouragement, and knowledge, I would not have attained my goal. You both made this challenging journey much easier because you cared. Your quick response and support enabled me to meet unusual goals in a short period of time. Thank you. I would be remised if I did not thank Dr. Andrea Wilson, URR. She was very supportive throughout this entire process. Without her watching over me, I would not have reached my goal. What you all have shared and suggested to me will be passed on to others. Truly, I am grateful and thankful to God for placing each of you at the last leg of my doctoral journey. What a great team you were and may you all be richly renewed. Thank you.

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## Section 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Over the last decade, bullying has become recognized as a major educational, health, and social justice problem facing the U.S. (Espelage & Swearer, 2011). Bullying was traditionally considered child's play, but that is no longer the case (National Education Association, 2014). Bullying inflicts irreversible injury on children and takes a toll on overall school communities (Espelage & Swearer, 2011). Data on bullying depict seriousness of bullying in public schools. Researchers at the National Center of Education Statistics (2015) found that approximately 22% of all students between the ages of 12 and 18 reported being victims of bullying. These students were teased, hit, threatened, or forced to commit acts against their will. Among students who had been hit, 21% sustained serious physical injuries. In addition, 4% of students indicated that bullies had alienated them from school activities, and 2% reported they had property destroyed.

As of 2014, all states had enacted laws to manage bullying and 39 states had developed antibullying policies, but large differences exist in how they administer their laws and policies (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2014). Developing workable plans at the federal level has proven difficult because states have different ideas about what constitutes bullying and the steps that should be taken to eliminate it from school environments. Five states have no sanctions for students identified as bullies whereas 12 states have criminal consequences written into the language of their laws (Clark, 2013). Some states have adopted antibullying laws but

have not been effective in reducing the number of bullying incidents in public schools (Clark, 2013).

Bullying is a multifaceted concept. Bullying consists of physical aggression, such as hitting, grabbing, or making another do something he or she does not want to do (Yerger & Gehret, 2011). Relational bullying includes teasing, spreading rumors, emotional abuse, and social isolation (Child Trends Databank, 2014). Cyberbullying occurs on the Internet and is where children use various forms of technology to belittle, harass, and spread rumors about other children via social media platforms (Sbarbaro & Smith, 2011). Bullying in cyberspace has taken the bullying problem to a new level of intensity in public education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

School bullying presents a major challenge for middle school students (Sbarbaro & Smith, 2011). Nearly 27% of middle school students have been victims of bullying (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011a). Middle school students are more likely to be physically injured than high school students (Bullying Statistics, n.d.).

Many researchers have linked bullying to absenteeism, poor health, social withdrawal, and death (Langan, 2011; Murray et al., 2012; Olweus & Limber, 2007; Pergolizzi et al., 2009; Tamutiene, 2008). Bullying can present a problem to students' social and emotional well-being (Ehiorobo, 2012). Bullying can reduce safety factors and reduce learning time (Georgia Department of Education, 2015). Because of the potential implications of bullying, teachers must have proper interventions in place that can be carried out strategically to prevent these acts from affecting the school climate (Murray et al., 2012; Pergolizzi et al., 2009).

Bullying is an aggressive and unacceptable behavior that interferes with the learning environment (Davis & Nixon, 2011). Although many school districts have implemented antibullying policies (Goryl, Neilsen-Hewett, & Sweller, 2013), it is not clear whether teachers enforce these policies because of lack of knowledge or misperceptions of the phenomenon (Yerger & Gehret, 2011). Ihnat and Smith (2013) found that many teachers are not adequately trained to identify and address bully-related behaviors. Teachers cannot effectively address bullying if they do not know bullying is occurring (Graham, 2011; Haeseler, 2010). Furthermore, some teachers often ignore bullying in middle schools, whereas other teachers perceive the offense as a rite of passage (Hunt, 2011). The ongoing investigation of bullying continues to show that bullies interfere with the rights of other children to learn in a safe and orderly environment (Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011). Therefore, teacher misperceptions and lack of training may intensify a negative situation and cause further damage (Gomba & Tsai, 2012).

In May 2010, the Georgia State Senate passed Georgia Senate Bill 250 to define and describe what constitutes bullying and the actions school districts should take to discipline students found guilty of committing the offense. The state legislature noted that school districts' failure to respond to bullying could make them liable and result in a loss of state funds for the district (Goldammer, 2011). In Georgia, schools document a growing number of bullying incidents partly because reporting is mandatory under the law and partly because there is a greater public awareness of student bullying

(Goldammer, 2011). Bullying continues to be a growing epidemic and health concern in schools throughout the United States.

Examining teachers' perceptions of bullying is important because teachers are often caught unprepared by bullying situations, and they are unsure how to manage them (Marshall, Graybill, Meyers, Skoczylas, & Varjas, 2009; Maunder, Harrop, & Tattersall, 2010). Locally, teachers have raised serious concerns regarding their training on bullying and discerning what bullying is and what it is not. District officials and school administrators want to help teachers improve their understanding of bullying. By investigating teachers' perceptions of student bullying, I identified opportunities for teachers to engage in reflection and self-assessment of their skills, which may lead to the development of improved teacher-intervention strategies. Ultimately, these strategies may enable teachers to successfully manage bullying situations.

The problem statement further develops and defines the local problem. In the remainders of this section, I present the problem and its significance, the nature of the study, a purpose statement, research questions, key definitions, assumptions and limitations, and application to the local problem. These components provide greater insight into the focus of the study.

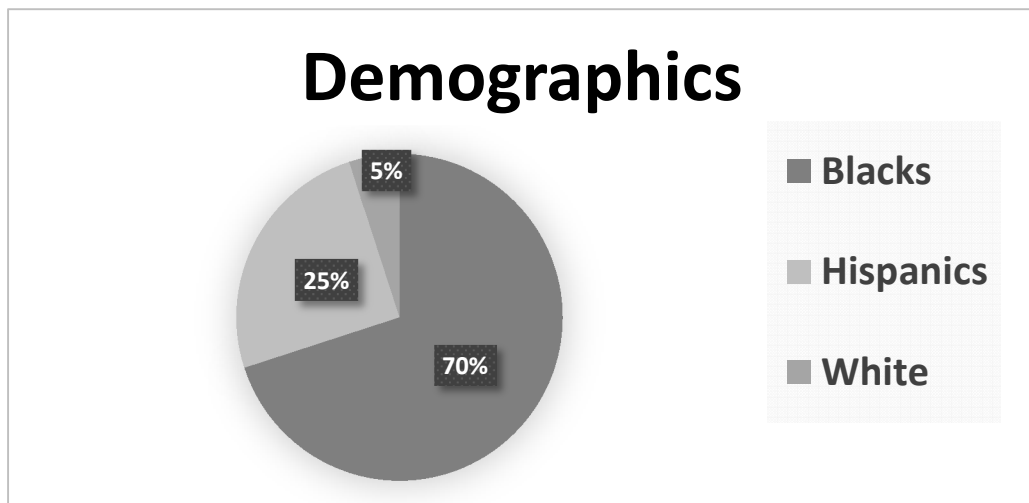
### **Problem Statement**

The problem that prompted this study was that teachers in a local school were having difficulty managing and diffusing bullying situations among students. Furthermore, teachers expressed a desire for assistance in developing and implementing strategies to manage and intervene in such circumstances. School RHJ, a pseudonym, is a



rural, Title I school, located in the middle of Georgia, and services students in Grades 6 through 8. The school population consisted of approximately 70 teachers, 20 support staff, two assistant principals, one principal, and 550 students, of whom 65 students have special needs. More details regarding the demographic descriptions of the school personnel and students are in Section 3.

Of the 70 teachers at the school at the time of the study, 60% were African American and 40% were European American; the teaching staff consisted of 45 female teachers and 25 male teachers. Most male teachers taught in the following disciplines: physical education, health, social studies, in-school suspension, and other elective courses. During this study, the ethnic composition of the student population in this rural school was 70% Black, 25% Hispanics, and 5% White (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Demographics of the student population in school RHJ.

Before the study, RHJ had experienced bullying cases, and the teachers were having trouble implementing the school's antibullying policies and procedures. At school

RHJ, some teachers shared major concerns regarding incidents they encountered. Ms. C., was on recess duty and witnessed a bullying incident. She described a situation that exemplifies the concerns of most teachers:

I noticed a few seventh grade boys taunting another student. I asked the student who was bullied if he was okay, and then I sent him to go play somewhere else. I took the other boys to the assistant principal and explained what had occurred.

The assistant principal said that he would handle the situation. However, I saw the boys doing the same thing again during recess the next day. Now I question whether I handled the situation correctly. I see these things happen all the time.

Most times I am on duty with limited help, so it is very difficult to address every situation (Mr. D., personal communication, 2015).

Schools with limited supervision during duty time or break time, and when teachers and students ignore bullying behavior, are subjected to a larger number of bullying occurrences (Murray et al., 2012). As Ms. C. notes in the quote above, teachers at RHJ are assigned to supervisory duties during student lunch and break periods, and there is limited adult supervision.

According to staff at RHJ, the middle school teachers have participated in several professional-development presentations on bullying (Mr. S., personal communication, 2015). However, teachers at RHJ were often uncertain of how to diffuse bullying altercations. During a faculty meeting at RHJ, an administrator indicated that school bullying had increased by 30% over the past 2 years and that teachers needed to enhance their knowledge and skills of bullying to provide a safer learning climate. A gap existed

in teachers' practices of identifying and diffusing bullying incidents, which required teachers to address any incidents of bullying. Furthermore, several studies in urban districts have brought this topic to light but research in urban districts exists as a gap in the research and further examination is warranted (Rigby & Smith, 2011; Sbarbaro & Smith, 2011; Scheithauer, Hess, Schultze-Krumbholz, & Bull, 2012; Strohmeier, & Noam, 2012). I explored teachers' perceptions of bullying and investigated strategies teachers use to manage bullying occurrences.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study was qualitative in nature, and I used a case study design. The case study design was the most appropriate format because in-depth data from interviews were used to explore a real-life phenomenon (Yin, 2014). I used semistructured rather than closed-ended questions to collect data during interviews and to conduct the case study. Semistructured questions provided opportunities for participants to expand on their ideas and provide valuable information that cannot be quantified (Monroe, 2013). Semistructured questions were valuable because they helped provide demographic information related to participants' years of teaching experience, professional development (PD), and educational background (Monroe, 2013). Data were collected from 10 individual interviews with volunteer participants of RHJ middle school teachers. I analyzed data and developed themes to explain the results. Finally, this study added to the body of knowledge by providing in-depth insight into teachers' experiences with bullying in middle school. I provided further explanation of the research design and methodology used for this study in Section 3.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions (RQ) guided the study.

RQ 1: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of their current practices in diffusing school bullying incidents?

RQ 2: What are middle school teachers' experiences when attempting to manage bullying situations?

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study explored teachers' perceptions of bullying and investigated strategies teachers use to manage bullying occurrences. Teachers from school RHJ participated in this study. All teacher participants answered questions about their perceptions and experiences with student bullying. The study provided an opportunity for teachers to share their experiences and ideas about managing bullying situations and creating a productive learning environment.

## **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework “explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, concepts, or variables—and the presumed relationships among them” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 18). The conceptual framework for this research study relied on the concepts of effective classroom management strategies derived from Olweus's Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP, 2007). This conceptual framework supported the research questions for this study by providing a structure that supports the problem of the study.

Olweus's (2007) effective management strategies aim to provide teachers with approaches to diminish bullying occurrences, to prevent new bullying occurrences, and to build positive relationships among students. The problem at the local school was that teachers were having difficulty managing and diffusing bullying. Exploring teachers' perceptions about bullying may lead to information about strategies or professional development needed to manage and diffuse bullying. The goals of OBPP include reducing current bullying problems among students, preventing new occurrences of bullying, and gaining better peer relationships at school (Olweus, 2007).

OBPP has been foundational in providing schools and school districts with effective classroom management strategies that can be used to intervene and manage bullying. The program has been successful in reducing bullying occurrences by 15% in the 13 high schools that participated in a case study conducted in Pennsylvania (Olweus & Limber (2007). OBPP focuses on a school-wide approach to help with managing and reducing bullying because for this to be effective, the climate of the entire school must change (Hazel den Foundation, 2016; Olweus & Limber 2007). The effective management strategies that are central to the OBPP program defined and made sense of the data that flowed from the research questions.

I examined teacher perceptions and explored the approaches teachers used to manage bullying occurrences through the conceptual framework of Olweus's effective classroom management strategies. This conceptual framework provided a critical lens to define and analyze data that flowed from the research questions. Effective classroom management anchored this study, providing a framework for teachers to examine,

understand, and consider their responses to student bullying behaviors. This conceptual framework served as a tool for research and reflection to better understand teachers' classroom management strategies and their experiences with bullying. This framework supported my project study because it emphasizes approaches to manage and address bullying behaviors.

### **Operational Definitions**

The following terms are relevant to the study:

*Bully*: A student who repeatedly inflicts harm on another student who is powerless in defending himself or herself (Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011).

*Bully victim*: A bully victim is a person who is repeatedly subjected to abuse or exploitation from another individual. Bully victims experience a pattern of behavior directed against them by a perpetrator who views them as vulnerable (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012).

*Bullying*: Any repeated, deliberate, aggressive, or ill-intentioned behavior by a student toward another student who has difficulty defending himself or herself (Olweus & Limber, 2012).

*Bystanders*: Students who observe bullying in the school (Thornberg et al., 2012).

### **Assumptions**

A major assumption in this study was that teachers selected to participate provided honest responses to interview questions. Furthermore, I assumed the participants had formed personal opinions about bullying and about how they should address bullying situations.

### **Limitations**

The small sample size of 10 teachers may have limited the extent to which generalizations can be made from the collected data. Studies with larger sample sizes may yield different results on the topic. Moreover, this study was limited to teachers in a rural middle school setting. Teachers in urban and suburban school districts may observe different bullying behaviors among the children they teach.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

A delimitation of the study was that only middle school teachers assigned to RHJ participated in the study. Moreover, a sample size of 10 participants enabled me to gather rich, detailed information that qualitative studies are designed to garner. Each participant in the school of study was asked to share perceptions and knowledge about bullying in this school based on his or her lived experiences.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study is that it adds to the growing body of knowledge of teachers' perceptions of bullying. Findings from this study provided opportunities for middle school educators to evaluate their knowledge and skills about bullying and may have enabled them to develop more effective antibullying interventions (Battey & Ebbeck, 2013). It is important that, as advocates for children, teachers, administrators, and school-support personnel work to alleviate obstacles that prevent students from learning. O'Connor (2012) indicated that when teachers fail to recognize signs of bullying, the victims of bullying suffer most.

The shared themes from this study may challenge teachers to consider different approaches to classroom and playground management. In this way, this study could benefit teachers and students in the local school, as the findings may help teachers to organize and plan student activities in engaging ways that will keep students engrossed and focused on learning activities. Results may also benefit the community because students may graduate ready to enter the workforce, with the ability to collaborate and partner with colleagues. The themes and recommendations of this study may provide these positive social changes for students, parents, and community members.

### **Summary**

School bullying has become a major social problem in public education (Espelage & Swearer, 2011) that impacts students emotionally and physically, and can cause injuries that last throughout adulthood (Ehiorobo, 2012). Teachers perceive bullying in various ways; these differences can sometimes contribute to the bullying problem (Graham, 2011; Haeseler, 2010; Hunt, 2011). Teachers' perceptions of bullying relate to their past experiences with the phenomenon (Allen, 2010). This case study added to the body of knowledge by providing in-depth insight into teachers' experiences with and perceptions of bullying in middle schools.

Section 2 provides a review of literature on bullying. Opening with a discussion of the conceptual framework, I then present relevant literature about bullying as it relates to the study. Along with research on other teachers' perceptions on bullying, I also explore the effects bullying has on school climate and the impact it has on students' emotional, physical, and academic growth. Because teachers spend a tremendous amount



of time with students daily, it is necessary to support teachers with preventive strategies and antibullying programs to educate students on this issue. Finally, Section 2 explains how this study proposes to acknowledge the gaps in teacher practice on bullying.

Section 3 includes the research method and design of the study. In this section, I described the participants, research questions, instrumentation, data-collection methods, and analysis of the data. In Section 4, I discussed the findings from the data, developing and presenting common themes from participants' responses to interview questions. Lastly, Section 5 concludes the study comprehensively with a discussion, conclusions, and recommendations for future research and action.

## Section 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

In this section, I explore the professional literature related to the problem, the RQs, and the conceptual framework. The literature review was based on the foundation of the conceptual framework, which indicated that effective classroom management strategies provide structures that may help teachers to manage bullying within the learning environment. I begin with an overview of bullying, followed by anti-bullying policies and laws, along with exploring Georgia's antibullying laws. To support the conceptual framework, I also include the following topics: teacher's management of bullying incidents; prevention and intervention strategies; and prevention and intervention programs. I will provide implications and a summary of the key elements.

To explore literature regarding the RQs, I investigated resources relevant to the topics of bullying, bullying policies and laws, teachers' management of bullying incidents, and prevention and intervention strategies. Using a variety of search engines, I searched for the following terms: *bullying*, *bully victim*, *classroom management*, *classroom management programs*, *bullying prevention and intervention*, *bully prevention programs*, and *bully intervention programs*. I used Walden University databases such as ERIC, Education: A Safe Full-Text Collection, Education Research Complete, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, and government data websites.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Overview of Bullying**

The phenomenon of bullying is broad in its definition. One of the foundational definitions of school bullying is from Olweus, who was one of the first education researchers who studied bullying over 20 years. Olweus (1993) proclaimed that bullying is continuous unwanted attention given to another that threatens one's safety. Bullying is defined as power to control through insults and fear; and has been associated with suicidal deaths (Goldweber, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2013; Olweus, 2013; Wong, Cheng, & Chen, 2013). Even though much has been shared about bullying, more can be understood concerning the characteristics of bullying (Bradshaw, 2015; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Lopez, Perez, Gonzalo, & Ruiz, 2008). Several researchers declared that bullying is an antagonistic and destructive act committed by someone who seeks to do harm, humiliate, or aggravate another person (Cornell, Huang, & Fan, 2013; Wang, Ianotti, & Nansel, 2009).

Bullying can connect to two concepts: vicious intent and struggle for power between the bully and the victim (Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong, & Karas, 2013). In addition, bullying with vicious intent is entrenched with covert and overt behavior that could lead to criminal convictions (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014; Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong, & Kras, 2013). Overt behavior is observable physical aggression towards another (Cornell & Limber, 2015; Olweus, 2013). Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong, and Kras (2013) showed that overt physical behaviors, such as hitting, kicking, teasing, pushing, threatening, stealing, and destroying property are

undesirable actions often found among middle school bullies. Other researchers noted that middle school bullying victims suffered physical injuries (Peyton, Ranasinghe, & Jacobsen, 2017). Approximately 40% of the students in a recent study indicated that they were bullied within a 1 month time frame (Peyton et al., 2017) .

Researchers have concluded that bullying behavior is often a covert activity, where the aggression is partially hidden. Vicious intent in overt bullying is implemented through isolation, peer groups, coercion, terrorization and social media (Acker, 2012). Wachs (2012) suggested that overt bullying is seen more in social media and can be more damaging to a student. Physical bullying has anchored itself more in elementary schools than upper grade schools, especially, with disabled populations (Kennedy, Kevorkian, & Russom, 2012). Other researchers suggested a different pattern; Jansen and Tiemeier (2012) and Wong et al. (2013) stated that bullying starts in elementary school, spikes in middle school, and changes significantly among high school age students.

The bully and the bully victim continuously struggle for power (Goldweber et al., 2013). Similarly, the bully and the bully victim at some point were traumatized emotionally, mimicking examples of bullying from home (Shetgiri, Avila, Flores, & Lin, 2012). Therefore, researchers have concluded that treating not only the bully victim but also the bully as victims has been a way to address the emotional component of bullying and to get rid of the behavior (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013; Espelage & Swearer, 2011). The victim's emotional display may become aggressive in the learning environment. The imbalance of power is felt as an entitlement for the bully and entrapment for the victim (Shetgiri et al., 2012). Therefore, the victim's emotional

rejection may become aggressive in the learning environment (Blake et al., 2012; Shetgiri et al., 2012). Thus, the teacher must know how to apply or interacts with the behavior of the bully and the victim (Olweus & Limber, 2013). Researchers concluded that the role of the teacher remains key in all bullying occurrences (Olweus et al., 2013; Shetgiri et al., 2012; Waasdorp et al., 2013).

Consequently, understanding the meaning of bullying and the impact it has on the bully, the bully victim, and the teacher may aid in teacher's perceptions of bullying occurrences. Moreover, background knowledge on the various ways bullying occurs may allow teachers to effectively handle bullying occurrences and lend support to the bully and bully victim (Baly, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2014; Finkelhor, Turner, & Hamby, 2012).

**Bullying characteristics.** Bullies possess personal characteristics such as arrogance and narcissistic tendencies; these are traits that bullies use to camouflage their own self-esteem issues (Sei-Hill & Telleen, 2017). Fake bullies are people who have been emotionally traumatized in an environment where coercion was used, and, as a defense mechanism, they portray themselves as agreeing with aggressive behavior just to fit in (Olweus, 2013). A fake bully may prefer accidental bullying.

Accidental bullying is a term used to identify students who have bullied another and are rarely labeled as bullies (Good, McIntosh & Gietz, 2011). Accidental bullying is often viewed as perpetuated by individuals who are in denial of their own aggressive behavior (Visconti, Kocheniderfer-Ladd, & Sechler, 2013). This behavior may be changed through counseling (Copeland et al., 2013). Accidental bullying is like

impulsive bullying because each is prompted by emotional surroundings that perpetuates continuous bullying behavior (Good, McIntosh, & Gietz, 2011; Wong et al., 2013).

In contrast, an impulsive bully has unsystematic behavior typified by little restraint and no fear of punishment (Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012). Therefore, researchers have concluded that impulsive bullying indicates a lack of social skills (Espelage et al., 2012; Rose, Espelage & Monda-Amaya, 2012).

Most students want to connect to a group and have a sense of belonging with the group (Swearer et al., 2012; Olweus, 2012). Further study on peer popularity showed that non-participant peer middle school students are more likely to support bullying behavior (Espelage & Holt, 2013). Consequently, peers share bullying approval and peers empower bullies through silence (Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011).

Having knowledge of bullying characteristics allows the teacher to know when a bullying occurrence is happening. The ability to identify these characteristics may enable the teacher to become the first responder when a bullying situation occurs (Olweus, 2013; Recchia & Beck, 2014). Bullies possess personal characteristics such as arrogance  
Bullies possess personal characteristics such as arrogance and narcissistic tendencies; these are traits that bullies use to camouflage their own self-esteem issues (Sei-Hill, & Telleen, 2017).

**Bullying victim.** The results of bullying can have lifetime negative effects on the bullies, victims, and bystanders (Copeland et al., 2013). Each group accentuates the social force that lends itself to bullying and victimization in primary, secondary, and high school age students (Lacey & Cornell, 2013). Usually students who isolate themselves

are prey to a bully (Swearer et al., 2012). Being isolated is viewed as having low self-esteem (Olweus et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2013). Nevertheless, elementary and middle school students report bullying to school authorities in greater numbers than high school students (Bradshaw, 2015; Visconti, et.al., 2013). Ongoing studies suggest high school bully victims who have a decrease in academic performance due to threats of being bullied, often leave school before graduating (Kowalski & Limber, 2013). Furthermore, researchers suggested, that students in grades 5 to 12 did not feel attached and safe when reporting bullying occurrences (Gan et al., 2013; Huang & Chou, 2013; Kennedy, Russom, & Kevorkian, 2012; Olweus et al., 2013). Other researchers found that a bully victim in the learning environment can have a destructive influence on students' performance and safety (Kljakovic & Jose, 2015). Additionally, Turner et al.; (2014) found that peer victimization in those aged 6 to 17 increased because the victim did not trust leaders in their environment.

In conclusion, a bully victim seldom relinquishes the thoughts of being bullied long after incidences have occurred (Cornell & Limber, 2013). Continuous negative aggression can impact a victim's ability to learn (Olweus, 2007; Visconti, et.al., 2013). Thus, the bully victim continues in isolation and develops a lack of trust in adults (Turner et al., 2014). Teacher's responses to a bullying situation may make a lifetime of difference for victim recovery (Kennedy, et.al., 2012).

**Innocent bystanders.** Bullies often have an emotional impact on bystanders. Bystanders are those who observe negative behavior distributed by bullies towards those who are intimidated and very seldom see the bullies punished for the behavior (Van

Cleemput, Vandebosch, & Pabian, 2014). Those who witness bullying are more likely afraid of being the next victim. In other words, students who often witness bullying at school or in any environment become insecure (Kennedy, et.al., 2012; Lam, Law, Chan, Wong, & Zhang, 2015). However, innocent bystanders may have different reactions when witnessing bullying. Some bystanders respond differently due to their previous experiences as the victims (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2018). Since bystanders play a vital role in combatting bullying, how they interact with bullying may lead to additional bullying incidents (Gregus et al., 2017). Gender can also play an important factor in how an innocent bystander responds to a bullying incident (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2018).

Innocent bystanders can also be teachers who are inadequately prepared to manage bullying occurrences. Teachers perceive school incidents through personal filters based on individual past experiences (Kahn, Jones, & Weiland, 2012). Different teachers may perceive similar bullying incidents in different ways; some may perceive an incident as serious, whereas others may perceive the incident as inconsequential because of their skill levels and experiences (Obermann, 2011; Recchia & Beck, 2014). Additionally, many bullying victims often keep silent about their experiences and may passively give permission for the bullying to continue (Kennedy et. al., 2012; Van Cleemput et al., 2014).

Moreover, this act of non-response could lead to the perpetuation of others being bullied or the bystander becoming a bully (Kahn et al., 2012). Kennedy et. al. (2012), demonstrated that bystanders tend to appreciate bullies in hopes of not becoming the victim. Doing nothing when others are being bullied can have a profound effect on



victims (Hinrichs, Hinrichs, Wang, & Romero, 2012; Skinner, Babinski, & Gifford, 2014). Being a silent bystander is an uncomfortable position; nevertheless, may be the safest place (Kennedy et al., 2012; Swearer et al., 2012).

Georgia's policies call for teachers and staff members, students, and parents or caretakers to report bullying occurrences either anonymously or in person (USDHHS, 2014). However, Goldammer (2013) conducted a study in Georgia that focused on the associations between demographic characteristics, school climate, psychosocial factors, and willingness to intervene in a high school bullying occurrence. The data shows that some are still uncomfortable confronting bullying and intervening when bullying occurs.

**Cyberbullying.** The literature links cyber bullying to traditional bullying. Those who struggle for power over others initiate bullying through direct contact or indirect encounters (Olweus, 2013; Peleg-Oren, Cardenas, Comerford, & Galea, 2012). Researchers have found that similar groups participate in cyber bullying occurrences as do in bullying occurrences: bully, victim, and bystander (Langevin & Prasad, 2012). Cyberbullying is the unpleasantness of negative text, degrading photographs, and verbiage that hurts a person's character (Wachs, 2012; Wagonner, 2016). Cyber bullying is a cowardly way for the bullies to feel empowered by saying things that ordinarily would not be expressed face-to-face (Ackers, 2012). According to Ackers (2012) more than 54% of adolescents are using phones and are on the internet constantly sharing and soliciting others' approval. Cell phones and internet usage are breeding ground for bullies who want to remain anonymous and exercise negative behavior towards others without fear of consequences (Kowalski, Morgan, & Limber, 2012; National Center for

Education Statistics, 2012; Strom, Strom, Wingate, Kraska, & Becker, 2012).

Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) affirmed that cell phones are most used in cyber bullying. Cyberbullies target high school students who isolate themselves and are academically low performing; these students are in jeopardy of becoming victims to cyberbullying (Brighi, Guarini, Meloti, Gallie, & Genta, 2012; Gan et al., 2013; Schneider, O' Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). However, in a study examining middle school students' views on text bullying, it was discovered that victims of text bullying reported bullying to their parents (Semerci, 2015). In this study, 8<sup>th</sup> grade students were more likely to be the bully to 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students initiated by internet use. Other researchers declared, those who struggle for power over others initiate bullying through direct contact or indirect encounters (Olweus, 2013; Peleg-Oren et al., 2012). Cyberbullying has developed because of the increased influence of technology.

Altogether, the Cyber Bullying Research Center estimates 20% of student's report cyberbullying in their generation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012). Ongoing research showed that cyber bullying has become more threatening due to the victim's assailant not being punished, and more than 54% of middle school students have been victimized through cyber bullying (Acker, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2012; Mark & Ratcliffe, 2011; Waggoner, 2016). It is important for administrators and teachers to understand the impact that by cyberbullying can have on school bullying. In a study that investigated over 5,000 middle and high school students about cyber versus school bullying, discovered that cyber bullying and school bullying overlapped and over 7% of students were victims of both school and cyberbullying (Baldry, Ferrington, & Sorrentino, 2016).

Therefore, teachers must become more vigilant when students are using technology in the classroom, which may contribute to the perpetuation of cyber bullying (Berkowitz & Benbenishty, 2012; Kennedy et al., 2012)

### **Antibullying Policies and Laws**

Bullying is a phenomenon divided into two forms; direct bullying and indirect bullying (Silva & Costa, 2016). Olweus and Limber (2007) defined as recurring negative practices towards classmates and others that may also exhibit physical or psychological behaviors. The main concepts of bullying are intentional aggression, power inequality, and repetitive aggressive behavior (Cornell & Limber, 2015). These preceding concepts lead to a violation of civil rights, which has a direct correlation to bullying; therefore, it is important to explore antibullying policies and laws.

Despite enormous attention given to bullying in public schools, legislation and judicial outcomes have been inconsistent and fragmented at best (Bradshaw, 2015; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Although the federal government has never implemented antibullying laws, bullying is considered a civil rights violation. Lack of antibullying policies, inept training of teachers, and poorly reported incidents are reasons why bullying cannot adequately be addressed (Sei-Hill & Telleen, 2017). Laws most often violated include the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 (Titles IV and VI), Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the American Disability Act (Titles II and III), and the Individuals with Disability Act (USDHHS, 2014). For instance, Idaho, Louisiana, and North Carolina consider student harassment, intimidation, and cyber bullying to be new encounters that schools are

expected to address at the local school. However, Georgia, in contrast, modified an existing law that makes it illegal for students identified as bullies to interfere with the operation of public schools (Sacco, Silbaugh, Corredor, Casey, & Doherty, 2012).

In 2012, only 48 U.S. states required school systems to develop antibully policies. However, as of 2015, 11 states had bullying laws and 43 states had bullying laws and policies (USDHHS, 2014). Some states have provisions that either modify or create new policies aimed at bullying (Sacco et al., 2012). Another important component of all antibullying policy is the requirement of a school employee to intervene or take appropriate action to stop bullying from occurring. Most state laws require staff to report incidents of bullying and require school district to create procedure to investigate bullying. (Cornell & Limber, 2015). Hence, antibullying policies in school districts include language about prohibited bullying behaviors, consequences of bullying, and procedures for reporting bullying.

Bullying is not a new problem in public education. However, in the last 2 decades, bullying incidents have had such a devastating impact on children that many child-welfare advocates consider bullying abhorrent in any form (Haeseler, 2010; Olweus, 2013; Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). Two events in education led to the recognition of school bullying as a major problem impacting children in public education. The 1999 revenge by victims of bullying. In which 17 students and one teacher were murdered. Researchers and educators considered the Columbine massacre an example of how bullying can threaten the safety and well-being of an entire school, if steps are not taken to address the problem (Cornell & Limber, 2015).

Another 1999 incident that focused U.S. attention on the bullying problem was *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1997). The results of this case established that schools could be held liable for failing to address sexual harassment among students. *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1997) addressed student–student physiological and mental behavior that threatened the safety and well-being of another student. The Supreme Court decided that any school receiving funds from the federal government, which allowed another’s personal space to be invaded without consent and to be taunted, would have committed an intolerable act under Title IX. The leaders of the school, including teachers, would be subject to punishment. Punishment would be exercised if students reported the incident and nothing was done to remove the student from the hazardous environment. Because of this incident, laws that protect student-to-student occurrences were established and practiced throughout boards of education.

The outcome of *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1997) was significant because it led to additional lawsuits accusing schools of not doing enough to stop reported cases of bullying (Cornell & Limber, 2015). In contrast, in the case of *Scruggs v. Meriden Board of Education* (2005), the legislature decided that no student, regardless of the type of service provided through federal monies for education, would be thought any less of and would have the same rights and privileges as any regular student. The decision further singled out special-needs students who often are bullied and feel the only way to safety is suicide. If a teacher observes or is told of a bullying act, the teacher and school principal are legally liable. Established bullying policies support the school, principal, teachers, and students when there is a reported case. In the aftermath of these

cases, the Supreme Court initiated guidelines for schools to follow to protect the school and those working or studying inside it.

**Criminalization of bullying.** Some states have interest in criminalizing bullying. However, criminalizing bullying can negatively impact all parties involved from further restricting publicizing of bullying occurrences to heightening the school-to-prison conduit (Child Trends Databank, 2014). All states have laws that may be enforced in cases where bullying occurs through assault, robbery, or threat (Cornell & Limber, 2015). Seven state bullying laws encouraged criminal reprimands for bullying by mandating procedures for school personnel to report bullying that may violate criminal law (Wayne, 2013).

Bullying laws leaning more toward criminalization mandate teachers to report bullying incidents (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). For example, Missouri's bullying law focuses on school staff reporting incidences. If the incidents are not reported, Missouri's school staff members will be sanctioned (Mo. Rev. Stat §167.117.1; Cornell & Limber, 2015). In other states, such as North Carolina (N.C.G.S.A. §14-458.1) and Idaho (I.C. §18-917A), bullying laws have a more specific focus. In North Carolina, coding systems target juveniles who are deemed bullies and receives a level of punishment to fit the crime (Cornell & Limber, 2015; USDHHS, 2014). In contrast, Idaho lists specific citations for bullying that leads to criminal punishment (Cornell & Limber, 2015).

Much of teachers' confusion about bullying may accrue from an interpretation of bullying and ways to address it that differ by state. Sherer and Nickerson (2010) defined

bullying as repeated acts of force or coercion that violate the rights of others. Similarly, Olweus (2013) defined bullying as aggressive and unwanted behaviors that threaten the health and well-being of other children. Examples of school-related bullying include spreading rumors, alienating, hitting, systematically ignoring, harassing, and using the Internet to belittle another student (Luxenberg, Limber & Olweus, 2013; Olweus, 2013),

However, different states define bullying, reporting bullying, and the consequences for the bullies differently and presently no consensus exists. For example, Arizona requires every school district to develop policies and procedures to prohibit bullying and to enforce these policies and procedures, but the state leaves it up to the individual school system to determine what constitutes bullying (Sacco et al., 2012). Similarly, Connecticut indicates that to be considered bullying, the act must be committed in the school system both students attend and must cause physical or emotional harm, fear, or must create a hostile learning environment. In Illinois, bullying is an act that causes fear or has a detrimental mental or physical impact on the victim that ultimately results in negative academic outcomes (Sacco et al., 2012). Anti-bullying laws have been implemented in 43 states in the U.S. and proposed various consequences for perpetrating bullying, demonstrating that bullying is a nationwide issue.

**Georgia antibullying law.** The State of Georgia defines bullying as a threatening action intended to injure another student, inflicting fear on another student that they will suffer bodily harm, and the use of words verbal and written or a physical act that may be deemed as bullying by an accountable individual who would view the act as threatening, harassing, or scaring (Georgia Department of Education, 2015; USDHHS, 2014). Georgia

was the first state to pass antibullying laws (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Georgia law requires local school districts to have policies in place for schools regarding bullying. This law prohibits bullying of any sort on school grounds, on school buses, at bus stops, and any other areas related to the academic setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). However, each school is charged by law to implement procedures pertaining to bullying situations (USDHHS, 2014).

Thus, all schools may not have the same procedures to handle bullying situations. It is imperative for all stakeholders to know and understand the procedures put in place to learn how bullying occurrences can be handled (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Parental involvement is a key factor to diffusing bullying. Georgia has aligned its policies, so parents can understand how schools will implement antibullying policies when an incident occurs (USDHHS, 2014).

Although Georgia and many other states have antibullying laws and policies in place, it is still up to each school district to decide how policies and procedures are administered in bullying situations. Georgia has set out the requirements for school districts to use when making antibullying policies. All school districts must implement the policies and procedures to manage bullying. Hence, all teachers and staff members must report bullying to the school leadership in the school where bullying has occurred.

However, although bullying is often reported, no standards or common guidelines exist on how bullying and perpetrators should be addressed. Therefore, the United States mandated approximately 75% of the school systems to discipline students who display bullying behavior; however, vast differences in what is deemed appropriate discipline for



students (Sacco et al., 2012). Additionally, a study conducted by Sacco et al. (2012) mentioned that most state laws include very broad language around disciplinary action. Some states, including Georgia, do provide explicit language around what type of discipline is age appropriate when pertaining to bullying. The study acknowledges the importance of establishing antibullying laws and procedures for schools. The enactment of these laws efficiently and equitably describes that each bullying occurrence, will require ongoing professional development for teachers.

### **Teachers' Management of Bullying Incidents**

Many teachers are unaware of bullying occurrences in their schools (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2013; Gorsek & Cunningham, 2014). As advocates to combat school bullying, teachers must be well equipped to analyze and arbitrate when bullying incidents occur. Many obstacles have been categorized on teachers' perceptions of bullying. First, teachers have varying views of what constitutes bullying (Isom, 2014; Lee, 2006; Waters & Mashburn, 2017). Varying views of bullying can occur because of a lack of commonality in defining and recognizing bullying (Gorsek & Cunningham, 2014). Teachers are less likely to respond to acts of bullying if they themselves do not deem the act to be a serious act of bullying (Isom, 2014; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Conflict among teachers about what defines an act of bullying, in addition to their different interpretations of which bullying acts require intervention, make addressing bullying incidents an extremely complex issue (Isom, 2014; Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005).

Many teachers have revealed they were victims of bullying and address bullying occurrences based on their personal experiences (Kennedy et al., 2012; Mishna et al., 2005). To add to this confusion, many students consider teachers as a factor in bullying. In other words, when teachers fail to intervene, teachers are contributing to the problem and are not part of the resolution (Isom, 2014; Olweus, 1993). Teachers' beliefs about education and their cultural experiences can possibly determine how teachers manage bullying behaviors (Murphy, Turbitt, & Norman, 2018). Teachers who are from middle – high socioeconomic backgrounds may not be able to empathize with students from a lower background which could impact how they handle bullying. Teachers who demonstrate low levels of empathy, view bullying behaviors as minor or insignificant issues (Murphy et al., 2018). Furthermore, feeble interventions by teachers lead to students not believing in teachers' abilities effectively to involve themselves and use effective strategies to prevent bullying (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Isom, 2014). It is critical that students witness teachers intervening in bullying occurrences to have faith that if they report bullying it will be considered and that actions necessary will be taken to assure a positive school environment (Murphy et al., 2018).

The effectiveness of an antibullying policy or program relates to what teachers perceive as an act of bullying (Gorsek & Cunningham, 2014; Isom, 2014). If teachers believe the act is unimportant, they are likely not to employ antibullying strategies. In contrast, if teachers see themselves as an essential resource in the fight against bullying and feel their efforts can truly make an impact, they are more likely to execute intervention strategies (Isom, 2014; Murphy et al., 2018). However, teachers will only

intervene if they share a common definition and have proper training on how to manage bullying behaviors (Gorsek & Cunningham, 2014). Teachers must take ownership in the battle against bullying and consider themselves change agents when implementing components of an antibullying policy or program (Gorsek & Cunningham, 2014; Isom, 2014; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003).

Although some teachers themselves have experienced bullying in several capacities, teachers are not addressing situational bullying appropriately when proper procedures and trainings have not been exercised in the school climate. Rigby (2012) suggested that novice teachers have a different understanding of bullying compared to experienced teachers. Maynes and Mottonen (2017) conducted a study with 183 pre-service teachers who were enrolled in a degree program while working in a preschool setting. Maynes and Mottonen indicated that teachers who were concurrently enrolled in the program had low confidence in handling a bullying situation. As a result, they concluded that teachers would benefit from training on handling a bullying occurrence based on their level of experience (Maynes & Mottonen, 2017). Many teachers lack the ability to implement a response other than issuing consequences determined by school policy in a bullying situation. Training should be made a priority for all school educators (Luxenberg et al., 2014; Olweus, 2013).

Teachers' awareness of bullying interventions may diminish the chance for bullying, and they should use this awareness to align implementation of bullying interventions to classroom routines (Lacey & Cornell, 2013; Kahn et al., 2012; Waters & Mashburn, 2017). Teachers using direct behavioral lessons and engaging students in

developing their own classrooms, seem to have greater success in implementing interventions against bullying and promoting social change (Richard, Schneider & Mallet, 2012). Moreover, teachers believe the most effective approaches are to immediately address the bullying incident and to individually counsel all students involved in an incident (Murphy et al., 2018; Richard et al., 2012).

In contrast, teachers in a bullying situation relate to what is common and practical because of their own perceptions and lack of sensitivity to bullying (Misha et al., 2005; Murphy et al., 2018; Salmivalli, Sainio, & Hodges, 2013). Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of bullying interventions and prevention can be catalysts for more incidents to occur (Luxenberg et al., 2014; Olweus, 2013).

### **Prevention and Intervention Strategies**

The seriousness of bullying incidents and the negative effect they have on students' well-being are reasons for schools to seek programmatic responses to improve school cultures by examining bullying prevention and intervention programs. School districts and local schools develop prevention programs to comply with mandates from state governments that require policies to be implemented to manage bullying (USDHHS, 2014). Such programs are a proactive means to inhibit bullying occurrences. Concomitantly, intervention programs are designed for educators to intercede effectively when bullying acts occur. Hence, the next two sections discuss bullying prevention and intervention programs identified as effective approaches to help teachers prevent or manage bullying.

**Prevention programs.** It is important for educators to understand and to gain skills to prevent bullying from occurring. Prevention programs include systemic approaches of whole school-based programs to classroom and curriculum focused programs (Johnson, 2011). Several programs successfully address bullying in public schools. OBPP, a whole-school-based program, for instance, was the first antibullying program to be developed (Limber, 2011). The purpose of the program was to reduce bullying and victimizing (Limber, 2011; Pannell, 2014). The OBPP is a multi-component approach that relies on the input of the school and community. OBPP components consist of adults showing warmth and interest in students, setting substantial limitations to unfavorable behaviors, using nonphysical, sympathetic consequences for violating the rules, and being positive authoritarians and role models for students (Limber, 2011). The structure of this program is designed to decrease bullying occurrences through a school-wide approach. Students are provided a questionnaire regarding bullying at the beginning of the program. The entire staff is trained on the program to ensure that all components are effectively implemented. Teachers post and enforce school-wide rules against bullying, hold weekly classes to discuss bullying and related topics, meet with parents, and conduct conference with students who are victims of bullying along with others who may be involved in bullying (Jansen et al., 2012; Limber, 2011). This program also calls for community involvement. Schools develop partnerships with the community to help spread antibullying correspondence.

Although OBPP showed substantial effectiveness in Norwegian schools, according to Olweus and Limber (2012) and Luxenberg et.al., (2014), evidence exists

that OBPP is also effective in the U. S. schools. Recent data indicate that the program has experienced measurable success. Some outcomes include a 50% or more reduction in bullying incidents, significant decreases in anti-social behaviors, and significant improvements in overall school social climate. In addition, OBPP provided support for bullies and victims of bullying (Moon Area School District, n.d.). Effective prevention programs provide schools with the structure on how to prevent bullying.

Relatedly, Brown, Low, Smith, and Haggerty (2011) conducted a randomized control trial to determine the efficacy of *Steps to Respect*, which is an antibullying program. The study was conducted in 33 California elementary schools using the *Steps to Respect* prevention program with similar demographics in one city. Some of the same components found in elementary schools studied were adopted from the OBPP. Brown et al. (2011) concluded antibullying programs have a positive impact on elementary school children. Specifically, fewer bullying incidents and more pleasant school climates.

Another example of bully prevention program is a curriculum-based approach. This approach usually involves lectures, written assignments, and discussions surrounding bullying (Johnson, 2011; Strom et al., 2012). However, most curriculum-based approaches to bullying usually involve students learning how to resolve conflict through lessons facilitated by teachers (Johnson, 2011). Teachers used the Second Step: Student Success through Prevention program, referenced to as the Second Step program, in middle schools as a curriculum-based approach to decrease bullying occurrences (Johnson, 2011). This program is an overall classroom-based curriculum designed to provide students with lessons taught weekly or semiweekly. The design of this program is

that students participate in 15 lessons in grade 6 and 13 lessons in grades 7 and 8 (Espelage, Low, Ryzin, & Polanin, 2015) According to Espelage et al. (2015) teachers deliver these lessons in the form of one 50 minutes or two 25 - minute classroom sessions, that target aggression, violence, and substance usage. The preliminary results of the Second Step program indicated a significant difference in the program's impact on bullying; no direct correlation emerged between the effectiveness of the program and incidents of bullying (Espelage et al., 2015).

Contrary to curriculum-based approaches to bullying, Van Ryzin and Roseth (2018) took a different intervention approach to bullying. Considering Olweus's approach while adding on the social aspects of bullying, Van Ryzin and Roseth established a bullying prevention program by focusing on peer relationships and peer networks through cooperative learning. Peer groups have been deemed important during adolescence due to peer influence on bullying behaviors (Taruna & Yadav, 2017). Because of this approach, teachers do not have to forgo instructional time and utilize cooperative learning in any class. Teachers are afforded the opportunity to share best practices of cooperative learning throughout the school that in turn reduce and prevent bullying occurrences (Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018).

Teachers are the conduits for prevention in the school environment. In Pennsylvania, the Center for Safe Schools (2013) declared that the teacher must be the main character bullying prevention. Research conducted by Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, and Isalva (2008) and Brown (2014) suggested that the teacher's role of maintaining laws and conventional responses should be an embedded focus of prevention programs. Teachers

and school leaders are responsible for ensuring prevention programs set by the schools are carried out with fidelity. Teachers must be well trained on how to effectively implement the programs.

**Intervention programs.** Developing antibullying programs to address the increase in bullying at the middle school level has proven a difficult task. A review of current literature indicated that teachers have different ideas about solving bullying-related problems (Bradshaw, O'Brennan, & Waasdorp, 2013; Maunder et al., 2011; Scheithauer et.al., 2012). Thus, it is not uncommon for schools to address bullying using different designs and strategies. Most contemporary intervention programs, regardless of the school or school system, focus on developing students' emotional and social competence and conflict-resolution skills (Barnes et.al., 2012; Battey & Ebbeck, 2013; Craig, Pepler, Murphy, & McCuaig-Edge, 2010). Examples of such antibullying-program strategies include the following:

- Implementing long-lasting programs
- Engaging in program evaluations to determine the value and effectiveness of interventions
- Introducing students to age-appropriate antibullying resources and literature
- Involving community constituents who are successful in working well with children
- Engaging family members to take an active and supportive role in fighting bullying (New Jersey Coalition for Bullying, 2009)



A major goal of antibullying interventions is to create positive school climates to reduce bullying (Bradshaw, 2015; Center for Safe Schools, 2013; Espelage & Holt, 2013). Goodwin (2011) recommended that schools focus their efforts on gaining the support of the entire school community. Moreover, Goodwin stressed the importance of developing positive discipline that clearly delineates consequences for children who violate rules (Pugh & Chitiyo, 2012).

A synthesis of research indicates that bullying is a problem impacting many schools, but teachers are not always knowledgeable of evidence-based practices to reduce bullying in schools. There is some disparity on whether teachers are convinced that they could manage and counter bullying occurrences (Gregus et al., 2017). Thus, students must be taught conflict resolution, empathy, and civic responsibility, all of which are needed to cope in modern classrooms. Knowledge is power, and only through effective interventions led by teachers and other adults will bullying be eliminated (Gomez, 2016; Ihnat & Smith, 2013; Kevorkian & D'Antona, 2008).

Schools use many antibullying intervention programs. The University of California led a study on an effective antibullying program called *Kiusaamista Vastaa* (KiVa), which means against bullying (Wolpert, 2016). KiVa is an intervention program for students in Grades K–8 that teaches students to develop empathy and promotes thinking of ways to decrease bullying through role play (Wolpert, 2016). The study included 77 elementary schools in Finland, where 39 schools used the program. KiVa significantly decreased depression in 4% of sixth-grade students who suffered from bullying (Wolpert, 2016). Not only did this program decrease depression in students, it

also improved students' self-esteem in 15% of sixth-grade students who were bullied a few times a month (Wolpert, 2016). Teachers in the 38 schools that did not use the KiVa program only informed their students by providing information about bullying and did not experience as much success as those in schools that implemented the KiVa program. KiVa is now the leading program for Finland's national antibullying-intervention program (Wolpert, 2016). Because of the positive implications of this intervention program, the program is being considered in other countries. In the United States, education officials in the State of Kansas have mandated the use of KiVa for bullying intervention in all publicly funded schools (Pellissier, 2016).

With the success of Finland's program, researchers have identified the importance for school leaders to understand that professional development and teacher support play a role in the effectiveness of an intervention. In a study conducted by Haataja, Ahtola, Poskiparta, and Salmivalli et.al., (2012) on the implementation of KiVa, the researchers recommended individual and interpersonal components for effective bullying programs. For example, teachers need support when implementing programs.

Ross (2012) developed an intervention: an evidence-based model for classroom management. Building our safe Schools, referenced as *BOSS*, aligns with the actions of teachers who have access to students daily. Each day requires a different approach to engaging in proper behavior in the classroom. Modeling allows educators to share ways of reminding students of the desired behavior often. This concept of classroom management works to eliminate unwanted behavior. Students acknowledge students who exemplify BOSS behavior, as the teacher asks for examples of the desired behavior.

Ross's (2012) four-step classroom-management bullying-prevention model helps build desired relationships and positive student behavior. This four-step classroom-management program adds to the plethora of interventions that enable teachers to deflate bullying and build a cohesive communal environment.

Another intervention program that may be incorporated is I DECIDE. This program was designed to target children aged 7 and older, and children at risk of failing. The program was designed to engage the student through writing. Often suppressed anxieties and frustrations lead to lashing out at others (Boulton, Hardcastle, Down, Fowles, & Simmonds, 2014). Getting students to write their feelings and emotions helps minimize their reasons for bullying and gives them a tool to control their actions. The Boulton et al. (2014) cognitive-behavioral hands-on approach has revolutionized the way educators are caring for bullies and victims. Students use this strategy to channel their thoughts and energy in a positive direction. Teachers must identify sporadic behaviors and provide interventions to address bullying situations (DeVooght et al., 2015). Using various types of preventive measures have brought about effective results. However, the best result is to use both practices in conjunction to combat all types of bullying behavior.

Bullying behavior can be counteracted through disciplinary actions, perhaps in the form of rewards and punishments. For example, teachers use unacceptable-behavior records to minimize insubordinate behavior. In other words, a student will receive a reward when their behavior is restrained, and teachers levy a punishment when it is not restrained. With this approach, the bully is punished; the problem with the victim may be ongoing as the threat may continue (Bradshaw, Gulemetova, O'Brennan, & Waasdorp,

2013; Wong, 2004). Teachers use rewards, punishments, and arbitration as ways to correct behavior. Teachers must mediate to bring about understanding and initiate strategies that could prevent bullying behavior from resurfacing.

Teachers' perceptions play a vital role in prevention and intervention-program implementation (Waters & Mashburn, 2017). The fidelity of program implementation may wane if no decrease in cognitive dissonance ensues and positive beliefs and perceptions increase. For example, teachers who perceived a prevention program as consistent with their beliefs and as effective were more apt to commit the time and effort required to plan effective implementation (Beets et al., 2008; Scheithauer et.al., 2012).

Researchers have been explored the needs and concerns of teachers and have identified various approaches to help teachers manage bullying in school environments. Waters and Mashburn (2017) conducted a study on middle school teachers' perceptions on bullying and discovered that although an anti-bullying program was in place, training was still necessary for the program to be implemented with fidelity. Barnes et al (2012) conducted a survey with 400 staff in elementary and secondary schools, to determine the need for training teachers on how to manage bullying situations. The researchers showed that 70% of their staff felt inadequate about intervening in bullying occurrences, especially covert occurrences. Chan (2015) conducted a study to explore teachers' perceptions about managing student bullying events and found that most teachers preferred reactionary interventions, confronting students and explaining and administering consequences. However, Chan (2015) explained that some teachers preferred proactive-intervention approaches, such as, prevention lessons including

student awareness of bullying, problem-solving skills, and personal growth lessons. Some teachers discovered that proactive and reactive approaches have appropriate functions in bullying interventions, and at times, using both maybe more effective than using only one approach (Chan, 2015).

The *Bullying Prevention Challenge Course Curriculum* program was developed in a research setting with teachers and students; the researchers attempted to teach participants how to view bullying for psychological and social perspectives and to develop an understanding among participants about how to recognize bullying (Battey & Ebbeck, 2013). Because of this study, teachers received a clear, hands-on experience, and both groups were provided the tools to appropriately discuss bullying. The specific curriculum that resulted from this study provided opportunities for dialogue and healing by developing trust and reconciling different perspectives (Battey & Ebbeck, 2013). For this study, understanding teachers' perception of bullying was necessary to understand the challenge teachers experienced. Despite the availability of prevention and intervention programs, school faculties should customize their approaches to provide students with consistent prevention and intervention approaches. Prevention is necessary and should be high priority (Chan, 2015). Being able to control a bullying situation could make a difference in student behavior, performance, test scores, and a learning environment (Olweus, 2013). This literature review presented information on existing programs and approaches that can provide school groups with the foundation to build localized programs.

### **Literature Related to the Methods**

The research method is contingent upon the information that may emerge during the data collection process (Creswell, 2013). A detailed observation of participants' experiences and perceptions require qualitative research, as a quantitative method does not meet those parameters (Creswell, 2012). In case study research, the researcher explores an actual case and an in-depth phenomenon through its real-life context (Hatch, 2002; Yin, 2011) and produces a precise description of the case is produced through a report to interpret specific characteristics of participants' perceptions (Willig, 2013). In this research study, I invited participants with one or more years of middle school teaching experience and who claimed to have experienced a bullying situation as a teacher. I chose this school and the teacher population because this school is the site of an increasing number of bullying incidents, and the teachers are struggling to effectively implement the school's antibullying policies and procedures.

Stake (2013) asserted that the design of a case study examines the methods and results of the case, focused on the local context and with real situations. This explanation justifies the appropriateness to study the perceptions of teachers struggling to manage bullying behaviors in an environment where such behaviors are increasing. The role of the researcher in a case study is to provide a visual picture of the case (Yin, 2014). Yin (2011) proposed that the purposes of a case study are to analyze the findings, to inquire about the context, and to organize the research. Examining effective classroom management strategies may improve the school learning environment and bring increased teacher awareness of behavior management strategies among middle school teachers.

The gap in the literature about teacher management of bullying behavior and bullying situations indicates the need for additional research on this topic (Anderson, 2016; Isom, 2014). Researching bullying management programs and best practices used in schools and investigating the practices of local teachers assisted in identifying answers to the research questions to help teachers provide appropriated and engaging strategies to manage the bullying problems (Barrows, 2013). This study may also add professional information helping to mitigate the lack of empirical research.

### **Literature Related to the Use of Differing Methodologies**

Differing methodologies can provide a variety of ways to examine effective classroom management strategies that may improve the school learning environment (Merriam, 2009). A case study is an appropriate research strategy because researchers can use a case study to investigate teacher perceptions of bullying situations and to explore behavior management strategies appropriate for middle school teachers. The analysis from this research may assist in promoting effective school-wide bullying management approaches. The descriptions and structures of other types of research strategies do not support the phenomenon of this study. Therefore, the case-study approach was, a realistic method for this research study (as suggested by Creswell, 2009).

Narrative research provides stories about the lived experiences of one or two participants. In the grounded-theory research, a researcher generates predictable experiences for participants and implies that no one theory exists for this study. Ethnographic studies focus on the shared behaviors of a cultural group and are not applicable to the perceptions of individual participants related to successful

implementation of classroom-management approaches (Dharamsi & Charles, 2011). Phenomenological study is an approach used to understand how the world appears to others related to a shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). The selection of the case study approach is appropriate because the goal was to investigate a phenomenon and study an in-depth case to create answers to the research questions seeking to understand how teachers perceive and experience bullying behaviors (Yin, 2009).

### **Summary and Implications**

Significant resources describe bullying situations, but fewer describe the effectiveness of the implementation of bullying-management approaches for teachers to use in school settings. By searching the existing empirical research on bullying prevention and intervention approaches, sufficient sources describe teacher management strategies to reduce and manage bullying events in schools. The literature review provided evidence needed to further explore prevention and intervention strategies. Therefore, I provided evidence in the literature review pertinent to further exploration of the subject. In this study, I contributed to the body of knowledge about teacher perceptions and experiences with bullying situations. Thus, the results of this research study could provide middle school teachers and administrators with effective classroom management approaches to manage bullying behavior while allowing all students to maximize their full learning potential.

The act of bullying is complex, incorporating many issues for teachers and students. Bullying affects all parties involved. Because of the sensitive nature of bullying, educators must know how to manage the act of bullying. This section provided a closer



look at the conceptual framework for this study, laws and policies surrounding bullying, and intervention and prevention bullying programs. Most importantly, the literature review revealed a gap in the literature regarding the research questions. There is minimal research describes teachers' perceptions of bullying and how to manage bullying occurrences effectively. Despite literature that provides information on prevention and intervention programs used to manage bullying, a lack of knowledge persist regarding teachers' perceptions of bullying and which program will most benefit them in their schools.

The section included an overview defining bullying, followed by anti-bullying laws and policies across states, and specifically in Georgia. The overarching components of this section stemmed from the research question regarding teachers' perceptions of bullying and the impact bullying has on teachers' practice in diffusing school bullying.

Based on various prevention and intervention programs reviewed in this section, a whole-school approach would most effectively tackle bullying in school RHJ. However, programs of these types cannot be implemented without adequate training and preparation time, allowing teachers to implement them with fidelity. Three programs middle school educators should consider are OBPP, KiVa, and BOSS. These programs require involvement of the entire school and aim to prevent bullying from occurring. Because teachers spend a great deal of time with students at school, it is imperative teachers correct bullying at its very onset; or immediately after occurrences. Thus, it is extremely important for teachers to have effective strategies to use when addressing bullying cases, assuring they are handled effectively.

Section 3 provides the overall approach to research design and data collection for this qualitative study. Although bullying has received extensive consideration in the past few years, minimal qualitative research explored teachers' perception of bullying and the effects it has on middle school students. Because teachers' participation is so critical in the battle against bullying, it is necessary to capture the thoughts of teachers to help make future antibullying policies more effective. To view bullying through the lens of the teachers and gain their perspectives on bullying occurrences, I conducted interviews. This study provided more knowledge on managing bullying and training strategies that will help eliminate bullying in the learning environment.

## Section 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

In this qualitative case study, I examined teachers' perceptions of and experiences with student bullying. The problem that prompted this study was that teachers in a local middle school were experiencing difficulties managing bullying behaviors among students and expressed a need to learn effective strategies. In this section, I will provide my reasons for choosing the case study design. I will describe my processes for data collection and analysis. I then provide the context of the study, criteria for selecting participants, and gaining access to participants.

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine teachers' perceptions of and experiences with student bullying. In this study, I sought to capture the perceptions of teachers as they reflected and provided their understandings of their experiences with bullying. The research design selected for this study was a qualitative descriptive case study that consisted of collecting data through individual interviews with the participants (Creswell, 2009). Researchers use a qualitative case study design to understand a phenomenon or process and perceptions of individuals involved (Merriam, 2014). Qualitative researchers try to make sense of phenomena to understand how people have ascribed meaning to them (Merriam, 2014). Qualitative case studies provide depth of understanding to a phenomenon or experience in a restricted system (Isom, 2014). A case study is the study of a bounded system (Hatch, 2002). In addition, the case study design

allows researchers to explore deeply an authentic and current context in rich detail (Yin, 2009). Finally, case studies focus on processes more than outcomes (Merriam, 2014).

In structuring this qualitative study, I examined several approaches prior to choosing the case study approach. Several qualitative approaches considered included ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenological research, and narrative research (Creswell, 2014). Although I considered the ethnographic approach, this study did not call for the study of a cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period (Strauss & Corbin, 1998); therefore, I elected not to use this design. Grounded theory did not serve my purpose because I was not going to develop a theory grounded in multiple stages of data collection, nor was I going to compare data from different groups.

A phenomenological research design provided an understanding of lived experiences through a phenomenological philosophy (Moustakas, 1994). The procedure requires studying a small number of participants through extensive and prolonged involvement to develop patterns in the data. Because phenomenological study focuses on lived experiences of individuals regarding a phenomenon, and this study will focus on teacher perceptions about bullying, I did not choose phenomenology. In using a narrative-research design approach, researchers study the actual lives of individuals through their lens (Creswell, 2013). Because of the nature of my study, I elected not to use the narrative-research design because the focus will be on teachers' perceptions of bullying in a rural middle school. Therefore, after much consideration, I resolved that a case study approach was the best method for this research study.

### **Research Questions**

The proposed study is about teachers' perceptions of and experiences with student bullying. I explored a contemporary phenomenon in the real-life context with teacher participants in RHJ. By using a case study design, I was able to discover emerging themes and patterns, which fostered a greater understanding of the problems teachers have with bullying, and developed suggestions for effective strategies to aid these and other teachers. The research design of this study was derived from the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of their current practices in diffusing school bullying incidents?

RQ 2: What are middle school teachers' experiences when attempting to manage bullying situations?

Answers to these research questions were based upon an analysis of data collected from individual teacher interviews but the research questions framed the design of the study. By facilitating deep and rich conversations with the participants during the individual interviews, I gathered data to provide insight on how teachers perceived student bullying, how teachers experienced bullying, and how they utilized their skills and abilities to manage bullying situations. As teachers shared their perceptions, the barriers and supports they encountered were revealed. In this way, I was able to understand the process and meaning experienced by these teachers as they interpreted their experiences (Merriam, 2009).

### **Context**

The setting of this study was a middle school located in a rural area in South Georgia. RHJ, is a rural, Title I middle school, located in Georgia servicing students in Grades 6–8. The school population is comprised of approximately 50 teachers with one or more years of experience, 20 support staff, two assistant principals, and approximately 550 students, of whom approximately 75 students have special needs. Of the students at this Southern middle school, approximately 60% were considered economically disadvantaged at the time of the study. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), the ethnic composition of the population in this rural county is 70% Black 25% Hispanic, and 5% White. The school's student body's ethnicity approximately represented the county's population based on race.

### **Criteria for Selecting Participants**

Creswell (2007) suggested that qualitative research should possess a purposeful sampling of participants who collaborated with the researcher in developing an understanding of the problem and answering the research questions. Through a purposeful sampling method, I selected 10 middle school teachers in Grades 6 through 8 based on the following self-selection criteria: (a) they have 1 year of teaching experience, (b) they have experienced at least one self-reported school bullying incident, and (c) they work at the local school at the time of data collection. A purposeful sampling approach was used to identify participants. Creswell (2013) stated that in qualitative research “the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (p. 203), which is best achieved by using purposeful sampling

strategies. A purposeful sample was selected based on the knowledge of a population and the purpose of the study. The participants were selected because of shared characteristics (Patton, 2014). I chose this population of teachers for this case study because the school in which they work was the site of a significant number of bullying incidents, and the teachers were struggling to effectively implement the school's antibullying policies and procedures.

### **Ethical Protection of the Participants**

To ensure ethics were maintained, I received final approval from the Walden IRB before I contacted potential participants or collected data. I also obtained permission from the local school board. Finally, I notified the principal of RHJ of my intentions to conduct a study on bullying after I received IRB approval.

Potential participants received the following information through a school district email that invited them to be participants in the study: (a) an overview of the research study including purpose and anticipated times for each data collection process, (b) an explanation of the risks and benefits of participating in the study, (c) an explanation of measures to ensure confidentiality, and (d) my contact information. To further ensure each participant was protected, an informed consent agreement was sent with the email, which informed of the following participants' rights: (a) participants could decide to stop participating at any point of the process without repercussions, (b) participants could decide to not answer questions without providing a reason, and (c) participants' identities would be kept confidential.

To ensure ethical protection of participants, a four digit identification number was assigned to each participant to keep their identities confidential. In the event a participant inadvertently mentioned something personal while I was recording, I backed up the recorder and erased that part of the tape. Potential participants in the study were not coerced or pressured to take a part in the study or promised incentives of any kind for participation. All personal information collected has been saved along with other data collected and placed in a locked file in a private space.

Each participant was assured that any identifying information will be available only to my doctoral committee and me. An identification number was used during all three phases of data collection that identified potential participants. All data collected was placed in a password protected thumb drive and a locked file cabinet where it will be kept for 5 years. After 5 years, paper data will be shredded, thumb-drives or hard drives will be destroyed, and audio recordings will be deleted and destroyed.

### **Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants**

Creswell (2007) indicated the importance of gaining permission from decision makers within the school district. Upon approval to conduct the study from Walden University IRB, the County Board of Education superintendent, and the school principal, I sent an email to the RHJ middle school teachers. In this email to potential participants, I provided information about the criteria for participating, the purpose of this study, the participants' roles, and the informed consent agreement. The informed consent agreement explained the following participants' rights: (a) participants could have decided to stop participating at any point of the process without repercussions; (b) participants could



have decided to not answer questions without providing a reason; (c) participants' identities were all kept confidential. Included in the email, each potential participant was informed about risks and benefits of participating. Those who were interested in participating in the study were asked to send an email reply indicating that they agreed to participate. This solidified each respondent's acknowledgement of meeting the criteria and acceptance of the informed consent agreement terms.

Although Thomson (2010) suggested 10 participants as the appropriate number of participants for a case study, Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) suggested 15 participants. Creswell (2009) suggested, on the average, 10-12 participants were sufficient to reach the point of data saturation. Therefore, 10-12 participants were sought for this study to reach saturation of data, but I was only able to obtain 10 volunteer participants. Only 10 teachers who responded affirmatively to the request and were selected for the study. The 10 that responded are diverse and respected among their peers. However, if less than 10 individuals had volunteered, I would have sent another request for more participants.

In addition, I assigned an identification number to each participant, which was used to refer to the individual participants in the study. The key to the assigned pseudonyms, which contained the real names of the participants has been placed in a locked file in my home and will be maintained for a 5-year period. In this way, I protected the confidentiality of my participants. The identification numbers were used to report the data and findings associated with the participants.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher is to concentrate on investigating and recording the ideas, experiences, and thoughts that participants share during the process (Creswell, 2013). I am a middle school teacher at RHJ School, which is the school where I conducted the study. The issue of bullying has been an issue at RHJ Middle School for the past 10 years. As a teacher, I observed bullying on a consistent basis, and the problem needed to be explored for the benefit of both students and teachers. In the role of researcher, I conducted interviews with colleagues because I do not have any supervisory responsibilities. I do have a working relationship with most of the participants. However, I maintained the distance and unbiased position of a researcher.

### **Methods of Establishing a Researcher-Participant Working Relationship**

I emailed a letter to each participant's school email address from my Walden email account and contact them by phone prior to conducting the interviews to establish a rapport with the participants. My approach to each participant was to assure them at the beginning of any data collection encounter that there were no right or wrong responses. I treated all participants with respect and civility; I collected information by remaining neutral and without judgment of their responses. I began each interview by engaging each participant in a conversation. I asked non-research related questions, which helped them to relax and helped me to get to know them.

### **Researcher's Experiences or Biases Related to the Topic**

This study was of grave interest because I teach in a school district where bullying occurs often. Learning from participants' shared experiences and perceptions provided

insights beyond my personal experiences. Because this topic was important to me, I was certain to manage my biases and to collect data as presented. To manage my biases, I maintained a personal record of any personal reactions I had during data collection. This process is known as epoché, a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment (Merriam, 2009). I conducted myself as a neutral and unbiased researcher, and I allowed participants to offer authentic information about bullying situations. I explained to the participants that my role is strictly to collect data that may inform the research problem.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection magnifies the ways in which in-depth information is acquired to inform research questions (Creswell, 2007). Yin (2014) stressed that case studies should be data rich. In addition, data collection must be an organized and thoughtful activity that allows the researcher to collect and analyze data at the same time (Merriam, 2009). Emerging data helped me to categorize and assemble the data into organized collections. This guided me to discover and identify themes and findings. The analysis, therefore, was ongoing, and I made decisions about what was important to pursue as the data were being collected.

### **Steps in the Data Collection Process**

Prior to submitting a request to collect data from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I first sought consent from the local school district and principal by presenting a letter providing the details of the research study and the data collection process and procedures. Upon receiving permission from the appropriate school personnel and the IRB, I recruited volunteers for the study. The goal was to

interview between 10 – 12 teachers, therefore I elicited support from the staff at RHJ by sending invitations to them asking if they were interested in participating in the research study. Based upon the responses, 10 participants received another invitation notifying them of a meeting about the research study and providing overview of the process.

I conducted a meeting for them that lasted approximately 45 minutes after school in RHJ conference room. During this meeting, I allowed the possible participants the opportunity to ask questions and make their decisions

After I confirmed their participation in the study with each participant, I set up dates for interviews to start, and I began conducting interviews based on participants' meeting preferences. All face-to-face interview files were saved to a password-protected file on my laptop.

### **Data Collection Tools**

**Interviews.** Interviews can be conducted in various forms, such as face-to-face, telephone, or by email (Creswell, 2014). Glesne (2011) and Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtler, (2010) suggested the best method for interviewers to gain the most comprehensive data is a face-to-face, one-on-one interview with an established interview protocol (see Appendix A) that was used with each participant. At the start of each interview, I built a rapport with participants by contacting them via school email explaining what will occur during the interview process. I explained my role to the participants so that they understood my position as the researcher and encouraged them to relax during the interview process. As another means of building a rapport with the

participants, I engaged with the participants by sharing some personal things about myself.

The interview questions were developed based on the research questions. The research questions for this qualitative case study were: (a) What are middle school teachers' perceptions of their current practices in diffusing school bullying incidents? (b) What are middle school teachers' experiences when attempting to manage bullying situations? The interview questions were carefully aligned to the research questions so that the information gained from the participants would be aligned to the overall problem and purpose of the study. Excellent interview questions are those that are typically open-ended and crafted around the topic being studied (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2014) stated that open-ended questions will provide the participants with an opportunity to give in-depth answers and not just vague responses. The questions that I designed for the study allowed participants the opportunity to relate their experiences and to discuss perceptions about bullying.

For this study, the interview tool was a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions based on specific topics of the research questions. The interview questions were developed with open-ended questions that are expected to gather the views and thoughts of the participants. The questions were asked in the same manner and in the same order to each participant. I asked questions related to teachers' perceptions and experiences with student bullying in RHJ middle school. The questions were developed and structured with guidance of the school and teacher manuals about bullying prevention and from the Olweus Program (2013). The questions were specifically aligned to collect

data to answer the research questions. Questions 1- 4 explored teachers' perceptions about how they currently manage bullying situations, and the data collected from them will be used to answer the first research question. Questions 5 - 8 were designed to obtain details about teachers' experiences with bullying situations, and the data collected from these questions will be used to answer the second research question. I notified the participants that the interviews would take between 45 to 60 minutes; however, I also let them know that they may run longer depending on the level of detail of the responses of individual participants. All face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private conference room at the school or an off-campus library. I placed a do not disturb sign on all entry doors to the conference room. I reminded participants prior to interviewing that they can stop the interview at any time for any reason. It was important for participants to know the details of the process, so they knew that their protection was relevant throughout the entire process. I reminded all participants to turn off all electronics including cell phones.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. I had two tape recorders in the event one malfunctioned. Before turning on the recorder, I spent a few minutes building rapport and allowing the participants to relax. After all my questions were answered, I spent a few minutes with the participants answering any questions and thanking them for their time (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2014). Participants were given an opportunity to review my initial findings for member checking. After the study, participants were provided with a 2-page summary document.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis included transcribing and organizing data to discover emerging themes. Qualitative data analysis is inductive nature. Hatch (2002) stated that analyzing data of a qualitative nature is a systematic approach to finding meaning. Additionally, it is a way to communicate that meaning to others. Analyzing data is ongoing process and should begin close to the time that data is being collected (Creswell, 2009). As soon as an interview was completed, I began to transcribe and analyze the data. Data should be analyzed to answer the overarching research questions. The two research questions for this qualitative case study were: (a) What are middle school teachers' perceptions of their current practices in diffusing school bullying incidents? (b) What are middle school teachers' experiences when attempting to manage bullying situations?

After I transcribed the interviews, coding the transcripts assisted me in identifying the themes and patterns of the collected data. I transcribed the interviews word for word, keeping in mind the protection of the participants. Additionally, the coding process involved selection and interpretation by me. I started by listing codes in the outside the margins of the transcripts. This process enabled the construction of a depiction of the data with themes, patterns, concepts, or similar features that resulted in a picture of the phenomenon developed from the research questions and the participants' responses. Ezzy (2013) recommended that qualitative researchers write memos when coding the data. I wrote memos during the data collection process to keep track of coding the emergent themes.

I coded the data with an open coding process. Merriam (2009) suggested that researchers should preview the data while it is being collected to avoid becoming overwhelmed with the large amounts of collected data. The key to doing this effectively is to be detailed and organized. Saldaña (2013) stated that coding should be a crucial part of the procedures when analyzing qualitative data. According to Saldaña (2013), a code in qualitative data can be a word or phrase that is developed to represent that data from interview transcripts, documents, pictures, and other data that is collected in qualitative research. Creswell (2009) described the process of coding as taking sections of the data and organizing it before defining the meaning of the collected data. Exploring the data through coding helped me focus on identifying themes, patterns, and discrepant information from the data, which then began to provide insights into my established research questions. The coding process was done by highlighting words in the transcripts from the interview questions that were aligned to the research questions. Because I wanted to capture the perceptions and ideas of the participants in rich, detailed language, I coded and reviewed the data multiple times. When I coded the information for the second and third times, I intentionally looked for patterns that identify possible emergent themes, configurations, or evidence that may provide meaning to the data. A pattern can be characterized by the following: similarities, differences, frequency, sequence, and correspondence (Saldaña, 2013).

Open coding is when the researcher takes one word to summarize the overall point of the section of the data being analyzed (Saldaña, 2013). I identified themes from the individual interviews. I searched for words related to the research questions and then



placed all the collected terms into groups organized by the research questions and identify patterns. Saldaña (2013) explained that coding is not a precise method; however, it is how the researcher interprets the information. Merriam (2009) explained that condensing and interpreting the data is a part of the process of making meaning of the data. Once I completed this part of the process, I re-organized the codes by themes. These themes were developed by the frequency of how often certain words and phrases appeared in the transcripts and how they aligned to the research questions. All responses that were aligned to my first research question were highlighted in yellow; those that corresponded to research question two were highlighted in blue. From this collated and organized data, I divided the information into categories by research question. From the categories, I developed themes, and finally, I identified the findings for the study from these themes.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Patton (2014) discussed the improvement of qualitative research. Patton concluded that methodical examination for unconventional themes was governed by a search for alternative trends, designs, and competitive reasoning to increase qualitative credibility. Patton suggested that researchers should look for other ways to obtain answers in unconventional categories instead of casting the discrepant cases aside. There may come a time in the coding and analysis of data that a discrepancy or discrepant case may arise. If a discrepant case arises it should be highlighted and discussed in the findings section of this study. Discrepant cases as they apply to this study will be

discussed further in the next section. Being open and honest during all facets of a research study is of utmost importance.

### **Trustworthiness of Findings**

Lodico et al. (2010) stated that researchers use different data collection methods to substantiate results. In addition, the accuracy and credibility of these data collection methods must be checked. I used recoding and member checking to help secure the credibility, transferability, and confirmability of my findings. The trustworthiness of a qualitative research study is determined through its credibility and transferability. To establish credibility, I captured what the participants believe, experience, and perceive through member checking. Member checking is the act of forwarding transcribed interviews, findings, or summaries to participants for their review to ensure that their responses were not prejudiced by the researcher's biases (Lodico et al., 2010). To determine transferability, I included rich descriptions and specific details about the context of the participants' responses. Confirmability was strengthened through the reflexivity of my thoughts during the coding process.

Saldaña (2008) felt that because qualitative inquires mandate painstaking thoughtfulness to participant responses and profound contemplation of evolving patterns and themes, repeated recoding is necessary. Recoding is the process of refining coding as the data and initial coding is reviewed with a new perception (Saldaña, 2008). Creswell (2012) stated that member checking was one way to certify participants' interpretation of an experience. Member checking is act of seeking participant response to the initial findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I gave each of my participants a copy of my

interview transcriptions before I began to code their responses. This gave them the opportunity to verify or correct any misunderstandings pertaining to their responses before I started to analyze, seek patterns, and identify themes. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), member checks are important because they request participants to remark on my analysis of their experiences. I also gave the participants a copy of my findings to make sure I accurately captured their perspectives of the research questions. Giving my initial findings to the participants to evaluate their accuracy and credibility is the process of member checking (Creswell, 2012). Member checking provided me with the chance to corroborate participant perspectives and help minimize inaccurate findings. Lodico et al. (2010) explained that participants' perceptions of their experiences compliment the researcher's interpretation of those same experiences, thereby producing a credible study.

Yin (2011) stated that credibility is established through the transparency of how research procedures and data are presented. Lodico et al. (2010) also stated that transferability is based on how well the narrative of the study is described. According to Morse (2015), transferability involves the inclusion of thick, rich description of data collected from an appropriate sample size. To establish my study's credibility, I included a description of interview responses and member checks. According to Lodico et al. (2010), credibility can be supported through evidence of my spending extended amounts of time with participants of the study. Participants were given an opportunity to participate in member checking by reviewing their transcripts and reviewing my initial findings. To demonstrate transferability, I reported the findings by thoroughly describing them within the context of the participants' work experiences and perceptions. I also

confirmed the objectivity of the data and the findings by presenting and explaining my code process. By exploring and interpreting the data in different ways, I enhanced the trustworthiness for the findings using various approaches (Merriam, 2014). Finally, I clarified my biases by describing how my background could shape my analysis of the data.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study used a case study design to gather data to address the problem of rural middle school teachers' perception of managing bullying. Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling. The methodology consisted of face-face interviews, which consisted of comprehensive data that I used to answer the research questions. Data analysis was accomplished through transcribing interviews, coding data, and identifying themes and patterns. I also used member checking. Trustworthiness of this study was established through processes for credibility and transferability. Section 4 provides the results of the data analysis. Section 4 also includes the findings of the study, and the study concludes with section 5, which includes a discussion of conclusions and recommendations.

## Section 4: Results

In this study, I examined teachers' perceptions about bullying and explored the strategies that teachers use to manage bullying occurrences. In this section, I describe the procedures used for collecting and analyzing the data. Through this process, I presented commonalities found within the data and draw conclusions based on the themes. Finally, I provide evidence of the study's quality.

### **Process for Collecting Data**

Prior to collecting any data, I received permission from Walden University's IRB, the school board IRB office, and the school principal. The Walden University IRB granted permission on November 29, 2017 (IRB # 11-29-17-0082893) for me to begin collecting data. Permission was granted from the school board's IRB office on October 18, 2017. I received a letter of cooperation on September 20, 2017 as consent of approval from the principal of RHJ. Upon receiving permission from the Director of Professional Learning, the principal of the local school, and Walden IRB, I sent an email to teachers explaining the details of the study requesting consideration and sharing a copy of the informed consent form. Using my district email, I explained to each potential participant that participation is voluntary and ensured them that confidentiality will be secured with the use of pseudonyms. I asked teachers who were interested to respond to my email via Walden email included in the initial email within 5 business days. Once I selected participants and they confirmed participation, I emailed each one of them to set up a date and time to conduct the one-on-one interview.

Creswell (2012) advised that at least 10-12 participants were sufficient to reach the point of data saturation. Creswell also found that the number of participants is an important part of the data collection process to investigate into information. Ten teachers accepted the invitation to participate, and they submitted emails stating their agreement to the consent form conditions. I scheduled 45 – 60-minute semistructured face-to-face interviews with each participant. I used an alphanumeric code to represent each participant.

The data collection process began with face-to-face interviews with each participant. I notified each participant by email of the time and location of their scheduled interview. The face-to-face interview consisted of 8 predetermined, open-ended questions, with some follow-up questions to gain knowledge about the participants' perceptions and experiences with bullying and to answer the research questions (Seidman, 2012). Prior to asking the first interview question, I reminded the participants that they could stop the interview at any time throughout the interview process. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were held in a private, locked, and secured conference room. A *Do Not Disturb* sign was placed on all doors leading to the conference room. Each participant was asked the same interview questions in the same order following the interview protocol (see Appendix A).

### **Process for Recording Data**

During the interviews, I used a tape recorder and iPad to record. Each participant was assigned an alphanumeric identifier to protect his or her identity. Once each interview was completed, I stopped the recorders and thanked the participant. Sufficient

time was scheduled between the interviews to ensure confidentiality of participant identities and to ensure that participants did not see each other between interviews. Before conducting subsequent interviews, I checked the recording to be sure that I captured the previous interviews. Upon completion of the interviews, I transcribed all recordings according to the participants' identifiers. The recordings and transcripts are stored in a locked file cabinet for 5 years in which only I will have access.. Each interview was transcribed word for word. Recordings and transcripts were uploaded and saved in a password-protected file on my personal laptop.

### **System for Keeping Track of Data and Emerging Understandings**

Upon completion of each interview, I transcribed the interview data and removed the recording from each recorder. Each file was labeled according to the participant's identifier. There were no names used in the transcripts or the recordings. To be certain the recording was transcribed efficiently, I listened to the recording as I read the completed transcript to ensure that all responses were exactly what the participants stated in the interview. Member checking was used, and I provided each participant with the transcript and a 1-2-page document of the preliminary findings to be reviewed. Each participant was given the opportunity to discuss the transcript and the preliminary findings with me. I emailed each participant to schedule a meeting time and location to complete the member checking process.

While reading through the participants' transcripts, I wrote myself memos to track emergent themes, paying special attention to and noting those that directly related to the research questions. The memos were personal notes to myself about possible codes and

similarities and differences between interview data. I coded the data using the open coding process. I took the data and looked for words or phrases that were similar and would help answer the research questions. I annotated transcripts and identified key words and phrases. The responses that went with each research question were color-coded. The responses that were pertinent to Research Question 1 was highlighted in yellow and the responses that were pertinent to Research Question 2 were highlighted in blue.

The findings were developed by the frequency of how often certain words and phrases appeared and how they aligned to the research questions. From this collated and organized data, I placed the information into categories and organized by themes. Based on the formed categories, I then developed and identified the findings for the study.

The data was reviewed thoroughly to determine the emergent findings. Stake (2013) indicated that during the qualitative data analysis process, the researcher's purpose is to examine the data by identifying themes. I used the participants' interviews and developed themes based on the research questions. I determined key words that were repeated and related to answering the research questions to generate the themes. After organizing and categorizing the data, I developed the findings. During this process, I identified 7 themes.

Last, to be certain that categories were aligned, I reviewed each of the findings with the research questions for consistency and flow. I took into consideration that the interview questions were aligned with each research question, and the findings flowed from the collected data (see Table 1).



Table 1.

*Research Questions and Themes*

Research Questions	Themes
RQ1: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of their current practices in diffusing school bullying incidents?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teachers have varied definitions, but most agree that bullying is aggressive, repeated verbal and physical behavior</li> <li>2. Teachers try to resolve bullying problems, but they usually refer the problem to counselors or administrators</li> <li>3. Teachers build relationships with victims to increase their self-esteem</li> <li>4. Teachers model and promote positive, collaborative behaviors</li> </ol>
RQ2: What are middle school teachers' experiences when attempting to manage bullying situations?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Teachers immediately intercede in bullying situations</li> <li>6. Teachers have different ways in which they resolve and address bullying situations</li> <li>7. Teachers eventually refer the students to a school administrator</li> </ol>

**Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine teachers' perceptions about bullying and to explore the strategies that teachers used to manage bullying occurrences. The results of this study provided teachers' perceptions of bullying and managing bullying that may lead to increased bullying awareness and prevention at RHJ. There are seven themes which are reported as findings that resulted from the data: (a) teachers have varied definitions but most agree that bullying is aggressive, repeated verbal and physical behavior; (b) teachers try to resolve bullying problems, but they usually refer the problem to counselors or administrators; (c) teachers build relationships with victims to increase their self-esteem; (d) teachers model and promote positive, collaborative behaviors; (e) teachers immediately intercede in bullying situations; (f) teachers have different ways in which they resolve and address bullying; and (g) teachers eventually refer the students to a school administrator. Participants will be referenced

using their coded identifiers throughout this section. The problem that initiated this study was that teachers in a local school were having difficulty managing and diffusing bullying situations among students. Data were collected to answer the research questions through face-to-face interview questions with 10 participants. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ 1: What were middle school teachers' perceptions of their current practices in diffusing school bullying incidents?

RQ 2: What were middle school teachers' experiences when attempting to manage bullying situations?

**Theme 1: Teachers have varied definitions, but most agreed that bullying is aggressive, repeated verbal and physical behavior.**

This theme aligns with RQ1 and focuses on how the participants perceive bullying in definition and practice. During the face-to-face interviews, the participants conveyed their perceptions of the definition of bullying. The most commonly used words during the individual interviews to define bullying were common words such as threats, negative, verbal abuse, and name-calling. Participant 006E defined bullying in the following way, "Bullying behaviors vary from one experience to the next. Some examples of bullying behavior include a consistent negative stimulus that leaves the victim feeling helpless." Participants 006G, 006M, 006T, and 007T all had similar responses to defining bullying. Participant 006G defined bullying as "taunting others, constant name-calling, confrontations with peers, hitting, intimidating, and belittling the victim. It is someone taking away a person's personal space or even self-will to learn in

a learning environment.” Similarly, participant 006M mentioned that “saying negative comments such as, ‘you can’t read’, ‘that’s a stupid question’, or ‘you are fat’” are forms of bullying. Participant 006T stated “bullying at the middle school level can be anything from just picking on someone because of their clothing and their race to someone bullying them just because they want to.”

While definitions varied, they were similar in some cases, demonstrating that bullying at RHJ School has yet to be clearly defined. Participant 007T defined bullying somewhat along the lines of the other participants but decided to expound upon the meaning of bullying more. Participant 007T stated, “I consider bullying to be name-calling, making threats to someone, and trying to intimidate them. What I have found is that students often try to make other students feel bad through exclusion.”

Often, participants categorized bullying behaviors from teasing to physical or verbal abuse. Participant 007F declared bullying to be “excessive teasing, leaving students out of events, or any types of verbal or physical abuse among peers”. Similarly, participant 007P responded, “I believe bullying is an act of a person using their power and physical strength to continuously harm a person in the forms of threats, hitting, or verbal abuse such as name calling and teasing.”

Most commonly, bullying has been defined as verbal abuse which encompasses teasing and using inappropriate comments to make students feel uncomfortable. Sometimes it may include physical abuse which may result in unwarranted physical harm to another. Although the participants possessed their own beliefs of the definition of bullying, a clear definition was recommended for use among the school teachers and

administrators to ensure fair, equal and consistent treatment of students and responses of staff members. Having a common definition can help teachers and staff members combat bullying at the onset.

**Theme 2: Teachers try to resolve bullying problems, but they usually refer the problem to counselors or administrators.**

Theme 2 aligns with RQ1 and identifies current practices at the school site in managing bullying among students. This theme demonstrates the lack of consistency of defining bullying among teachers, but it also is evidence of the inconsistency of teachers' practices and responses. Many teachers often tried to resolve bullying problems but a few regularly practiced referring the problems to counselors or administrators. One participant deemed current practices as a means of how bullying is defined. For example, Participant 006E stated, "my current practice requires that victims experience bullying more than once by the same individual to be labeled a situation". On the other hand, another participant felt that it is not the teacher's responsibility to manage bullying. Participant 006G said,

It is not my job as a teacher to get into the incident. To diffuse a bullying situation, I stop the behaviors immediately and send the students to the office. As a teacher, I was told to remove students by sending them to the office and let them handle it. At this point, my role in the situation is no longer; the counselor or administrators conclude the situation.

Similarly, Participant 008H stated, “I refer the situation to an administrator.” Some participants used bullying occurrences as teachable moments. Several participants used the counseling approach while trying to manage the situation. Participant 006T shared,

If a student makes known a situation of bullying, I will discuss with the student who is offending someone what bullying is. We discuss the difference between “messaging around” and “being mean.” I will then notify all parents of the students involved. If this does not put an end to the situation, a report is made to an administrator.

Participant 007P stated, “to diffuse bullying in my class, I vigilantly supervise students. I also thoroughly review classroom rules and procedures with the students at the beginning of the year.” Although Participants 006T and 007P used incidents of bullying as counseling and teachable moments, Participant 007T simply stated that teachers are to “report all instances that we are made aware of and try to encourage the bullied child.” Additionally, Participant 008P took a more empathetic approach; they shared the following:

I pull the student in and reinforce a positive interaction. I try to find areas that are positive to discourage any bullying that may take place. I work one-on-one with students to see if there are issues. I talk it out and try to find solutions. When I gather information from students, I use it as a teachable moment. I try to educate the students involved, and then I try to help them find some resolve.

Overall, almost every participant had a different approach in managing bullying. Some chose to send the bullying situations directly to the counselors and administrators, and

some chose to try to resolve situations in their own unique ways. Some teachers engaged in other practices to address bullying right away.

Several teachers felt the need to try to manage the bullying occurrence first before sending the students to administration. For example, participant 007D stated,

If I witness bullying, I separate the individuals. At that point, I try to make sure that the bullied students feel safe and protected. It is important for me to make sure that the student who was bullied is safe, because I know that being bullied can be a very frightening for students. Once I have made sure that the bullied student is calm and safe, I then address the bully. I let the bullies know that their behaviors are unacceptable. I then write up the report to get the administrators involved. If I feel it necessary to involve the counselors for the bullied students, I make sure that they are paired up. I know that at the beginning of the school year we were told to review a PowerPoint with students on bullying but that's about it.

It is apparent that some teachers at RHJ did not immediately report bullying to administrators; they charge themselves to be the first line of defense in diffusing bullying situations. One of the participants decided to take a very different approach at the onset of managing bullying. Participant 006M stated, "The current practice is to remind all students of the consequences of bullying other students. I further tell my students to stop saying negative or disparaging remarks to each other. I separate the students and try to talk to them before having to send to the office. The school policy is zero tolerance.

While there are some participants who felt it was not the teachers' responsibility to manage bullying, it appeared that teachers were forced to take direct action because

they are witnessing the bullying occurrence or because a student may have reported it to them. With this analysis, while teachers varied in managing bullying, they all eventually referred the incident and students to the administration. Thus, there seemed to be no clear path as to what the expectations are when teachers first encounter bullying. Most participants indicated that this leaves them unsure about how to proceed in managing the situation.

**Theme 3: Teachers build relationships with victims to increase their self-esteem.**

While teachers did refer bullying situations to school administrators, some teachers felt it necessary to build relationships with the victims of bullying to increase their self-esteem. Based upon the data from the interviews, most of the teacher-participants built relationships with the student victims of bullying. When they were asked the question, “How would you help those students whom you perceive are victims or potential victims of bullies”, the participants indicated that they were willing to support the students, but they did not establish that they follow a specific protocol or antibullying program. Participant 007P stated, “I will support the student in any way I can.” Supporting students in bullying situations varied amongst teachers. Participant 006T believed “the victim of bullying needs to be valued as a person. I try to show them, through my interaction with them, how special they are, how important their opinions are and how much they are needed within our classroom structure.” In the same fashion, Participant 008P’s stated, “Whenever I encounter bullying types of situations, I talk to them one-on-one and refer them to the counselors and social workers to give them additional help. I want students to feel safe.”

Some of the participants seemed to be concerned with the victims of bullying. Teachers seemed to want to ensure that the bully victim's self-esteem is considered. One participant made sure to speak with the victim to encourage them. For example, Participant 008H said, "In this type of incidence, I always like to talk to the victim especially. I would help that student realize how special they are and attempt to instill or restore their self-confidence." Another participant emphasized that students do not accept the abuse, and as a result, they focus on the student's feelings of safety at school. It was important for the school community that students are not accepting of bullying behaviors and that they felt safe at school; such behavior can lead to more students reporting bullying occurrences. To support students with coming forward to report bullying, Participant 007D stated "I take the liberty to help students who have been victims to bullying. When I encounter students who have been victims, I talk to them about not accepting the abuse."

Student safety appeared to be the top priority of a few of the participants. As teachers continue to diffuse bullying, it is essential that students feel comfortable enough to report all incidents and to identify that the behaviors are inappropriate and will not be accepted.

Building relationships with students is critical when teachers deal with bullying; however, most participants also indicated that it is equally important to build relationships with the bully. Participant 008H focused more on providing support for the bully victim. The participant stated:



Well, mainly for the victim. I want the victim to know that they should have self-confidence and that bullying behaviors are not tolerated. I want to reassure the student that he or she is awesome, and no matter what anyone else says about them, they are great. No one should be bullied, and I want him or her to know this is simply unacceptable. I just try to encourage the students and reassure them of the awesome young person they are.

Participant 007T said, “I meet with children who were bullied and try to encourage them and protect them, as needed. I try to encourage them to take up for themselves and to report bullying anytime they feel that they are being bullied, but I often find that this is hard for students to do.” Participant 006G strove to support students through building self-esteem by engaging them more in the learning environment. This participant stated:

Encourage them to talk about the incident with parents or counselors. When the student who has been bullied returns to my room, I help them with self-esteem issues by initiating more activities that focus on helping, supporting, and sharing with others. I let students know that I am listening whenever they want to talk to someone other than the counselors.

It was not evident that a protocol was in place at school RHJ on how teachers should support students in building their self-esteem when trying to manage bullying.

While teachers were not ultimately responsible for addressing bullying as they were instructed to report these issues and incidents to school administrators, teachers still took the responsibility to ensure that they built a relationship with students to increase their self-esteem through using encouraging words and making sure students felt safe and

were comfortable with their level of self-confidence. Students needed to clearly understand that bullying is not tolerated, and they needed to feel a sense of comfort about reporting occurrences to adults. Teachers and school leaders should also ensure that there are some things in place to support students with their self-esteem and how they can deal with bullying.

**Theme 4: Teachers model and promote positive, collaborative behaviors.**

Modeling desired behaviors for students is critical when managing bullying. The participants' perceptions of this concept were displayed in the way they conduct their classroom environments. Participant 007F stated, "I feel that teachers should model appropriate behaviors for students. I also feel that teachers should conduct class meetings and have consistent discussions around bullying." Reinforcing positive behaviors with students must be demonstrated in interactions with students. For example, Participant 008P stated, "I noticed that when I increased positive reinforcement for good behaviors, bullying behaviors decreased."

During our interview session, Participant 006G claimed, "The strategies that worked are the ones that my team developed to ensure that victims will have positive support upon returning to the classroom." Participant 006M also utilized writing exercises during the learning experience to help students develop positive behaviors. The participant stated, "I have them write about situations that they have seen or know of and how it made them feel." Teachers must model behaviors and engage students in effective strategies to demonstrate positive behaviors and less bullying behaviors.

The collected interview data also revealed that some teachers promoted and discussed good behavior and created an antibullying learning environment. Some participants elected to establish the system at the beginning of the school year so that expectations are clear to students. Monitoring students' behavior consistently throughout the learning experience is extremely critical to managing bullying occurring in the classroom. Participant 008P said:

I like to organize my activities that are scheduled within each group strategically. I try to keep students busy so that there is less time for that type of stuff to occur. I also like to consider students who work well together in small groups, and I group them accordingly. It is important to take that into consideration because you'd hate to place students together to work knowing they have a conflict. During less structured time, I always try to observe and monitor between classes or other areas if I am serving on duty.

Understanding the importance of having a system in place during the instructional time is essential to managing bullying. When procedures and expectations were set at the beginning of the school year and constantly communicated, students were provided with supports to promote antibullying. Participant 008H shared in this sentiment as well. The participant stated:

Establishing an environment of mutual respect and understanding on day one eliminates a lot of that. It is important that students feel comfortable expressing themselves in class without fear of reprisal from their classmates. During less

structured time, I feel that more adults must be visible and vigilant. Greater adult supervision has helped to reduce bullying occurrences.

Establishing a learning environment which encourages students to be respectful to each other is important, and this should be commonly practiced by every teacher.

Participant 006E promoted specific procedures and classroom practices that differed from Participant 008H. Participant 006E focused on classroom management more distinctly.

The participant stated:

Instructional practices that I utilize to avoid potential opportunities of bullying within my classroom are set in place on the first day of school. Students are reminded of appropriate behaviors before any class wide interactive activities. I reinforce an environment that promotes learning, collaborating, and developing.

While Participant 006E appeared to promote a healthy classroom environment, later comments acknowledged that the participant may limit student opportunities. Participant 006E later stated, "When there is less structured time, everyone cannot be watched. Interactive activities are limited, and unstructured time is kept to a minimum. I must have less unstructured time to prevent potential bullying from happening."

A clearly defined definition of bullying and consistent procedures is needed to support a positive learning environment. Creating classroom environments that encourage mutual respect and that are antibullying are critical steps to offering students positive learning environments. An important piece to creating such environments is having a classroom management system in place that can be used as a deterrent to bullying behaviors. Teachers need clear processes and procedures to ensure that they can tackle

bullying and promote a positive learning environment. If there is a school-wide, antibullying program utilized that would also help in providing consistency throughout the school so that students will know that the expectations are the same.

**Theme 5: Teachers immediately intercede in bullying situations.**

Teachers intervened immediately when they experience bullying situations, but they often managed the situation by eventually getting administrators involved. It appeared to be common practice amongst some teachers to intercede in bullying situations. Some teachers were committed to directly handling the situation before they refer the students to the administrators. Teachers intercede when they feel bullying is occurring or when bullying is brought to their attention. When the participants encountered bullying, they interceded by acknowledging the negative behavior by using their reward system, seek information from each student involved in the bullying incident, counseling and consoling those involved. One participant described their use of positive reinforcement to intercede bullying and prevent it from occurring in the classroom which has proven to be an effective practice. Participant 008P described the following situation:

I reward students for their behaviors. I have noticed that when I increase positive reinforcement bullying behaviors decrease. I have regularly called parents of all students and shared positive comments. I use my blue cards system to rewards where I reward students with candy based on their behaviors. I have noticed that focusing on the positive behaviors has decreased negative behaviors.

Another participant believed that interceding with direct intervention is often necessary.

Participant 008H mentioned the following:

I have had to intervene immediately because I witnessed the bullying first hand; I have had bullying situations reported to me; and I have consoled crying children with shattered self-esteem. I have even reminded students suspected of bullying of our zero-tolerance policy at our school and of the consequences they may face once administrators gets involved.

Student victims of bullying should be taught and encouraged to speak up about it.

Teachers who interceded when they encounter bullying situations were educating students about bullying and how situations should be handled. One of the participants encouraged students who have been bullied to speak up about this type of behavior.

Participant 007D stated:

I immediately intervene when I notice bullying occurring. When I see stuff like this happening, I express to the victim just how important it is to speak up and report these types of incidents. After speaking with the victim, I then send the bully to the counselor to address the problem. I recently had a situation where a young lady was being bullied by another young lady. I needed her to feel safe, so I intervened immediately and sought out the counselor to help with the situation.

Another participant took a similar approach to Participant 007D, by speaking with both victim and the bully. In some instances, only the bullying victim is addressed and encouraged to speak out against this type of behavior, but the bully doesn't receive a similar response. However, one of the participants had a slightly different approach when

encountering bullying. Participant 006G shared, “Usually the bullying situation starts at home or on the bus and escalates at school. When I inherit a situation, I conference with both students and try to figure out what took place prior to me writing the incident up for the front office.” Although teachers may feel reluctant to immediately get involved when they encounter bullying, it may be beneficial to help in diffusing the situation prior to sending them to the administrators. Like Participant 006G, another participant deemed it necessary to address both the victim and the bully. Participant 006T said:

I do my best to handle these situations by talking to the students. If I feel that I need to involve an administrator, I do, but most times, I just conference with the students, prompt them to be respectful of one another, and remind them about consequences to their behaviors.

The data revealed that there were a few participants who took either a different approach or referred the students to administration immediately. Participant 007F did not necessarily intercede by attempting to counsel students involved in a bullying incident. However, the participant stated, “I’ve had several experiences where I had to report students to administrators and have those who pose the complaint write statements. The bullying usually stops at that point.”

It appears that overall teachers intercede in bullying occurrences in different ways. There seemed to be no specific process for how teachers are to proceed when they occur a bullying situation. However, most participants intervened in a bullying situation prior to referring the students to administration. Teachers felt it necessary to diffuse the situations prior to sending students to the administrators.

**Theme 6: Teachers have different ways in which they resolve and address bullying.**

This finding developed due to the various ways in which teachers resolved and addressed bullying. Some teachers found it necessary to have follow-up conferences with students after the bullying incident occurred and attempt to resolve bullying without getting administration involved by collaborating with colleagues, conferencing with students and parents, as well as counselors. Follow-up meetings have been a part of practice amongst some participants through resolving and addressing bullying.

Participant 008P mentioned, “I usually talk to the students and counsel when I meet with them. I want to provide any assistance that I can at that point to help the student to heal and feel safe.” Teachers have considered their own measures of how they would like to mend relationships and help students move on after an incident has occurred. Another participant has somewhat of a similar approach as Participant 008P. Participant 008H shared, “I try to engage with students accordingly when the incident first occurs. I would say that all my follow-ups are very informal and mainly to check on the student who was bullied.”

Following up with the victims can help move students forward in a positive direction when reaching a resolve or addressing the occurrence. It is also good to check-in with the victims to continue to encourage them and combat further bullying incidents. However, there may also be times to get parents involved in follow-up meetings with students. During the interview with Participant 007D, the following was stated “I follow up with the victim. I make sure the bully as well as the victim had received counseling”. At times engaging parents in the process of bullying add to the healing process of



bullying. Participant 007D shared, “In one instance, we discussed the issue with the parent to assure her that it was handled, and it was reported. Parents usually feel better when they know this situation has been handled.” Providing a safe learning environment is critical. Students need to feel safe and parents need to feel a sense of comfort knowing their child is safe at school. Teachers felt that following up with students and getting a pulse check is an opportunity to encourage them and to see if anything else has occurred. Follow-up meetings do not necessarily have to be formal meetings with victims.

Participant 007T stated:

There was an incident that occurred, and I reported it to the admin. However, we are supposed to formally report the incident without using the term “bullying.” I feel that my follow up with students is more informal, like I just want to check on them and see if they are okay or find out what the outcome is since the administration doesn’t tell you what the outcome is. They do give some sort of punishment to students like, ISS (in school suspension) or detention but that’s pretty much it.

Teachers felt a need to check in with students even though it is not mandatory. One of the participants felt that they check in with the bully victim to see if the bullying behaviors have stopped. Participant 006M shared an opinion on the reason for their follow up. The participant shared the following, “I formally report each incident I am advised of.” I will check informally with the victim if the incident has ceased. I go to in school suspension (ISS). I will make a 2<sup>nd</sup> formal report if behavior continues to create a paper trail of the situation. Some instances called for different measures on how teachers addressed

bullying. Some have follow-up meetings by checking in with students, and some use other procedures to resolve bullying. Participant 006T has incorporated another layer when having follow-up meetings with students. For example, the participant mentioned:

I have students complete a packet on respecting others when I follow up. They also must write out a reflection as they focus on what brought them to this point and what needs to be done now. I do report all incidents to administration.

Not all participants attempted to resolve bullying or addressed bullying through follow-up meetings. Participant 007F chose not to deal with bullying and to wait for direction from administrators on how to handle situations in their classroom. Participant 007F stated, “I do not deal with incidents of bullying. It is handled in the office. I reported all situations, and the office advised me how to handle the situation.” Along the same lines, Participant 007P stated, “First, I report incident because administrators and counselors ask us to do so. If I do not receive feedback, I go to the administrator or counselor to find out the outcome.”

Some teachers felt that bullying occurrences are automatically taken from them, and they often find themselves waiting on the counselor or administrator for the next steps. Participant 006M said, “First, I report incidents because administrators ask us to. After reporting, I want feedback. If I do not receive feedback, I go to the administrators and find out the outcome, so I am aware.” Participant 006G felt the same as Participant 006M about waiting for direction from the administration. Participant 006M shared, “After the incident, I usually write students up in the system and the administrators handle it. There is usually no follow up because it is usually handled in the office.”

Teachers overall felt a need to follow-up with students and gather information about the next steps for students from the counselor or administrators. Although some participants shared common practices around following up with students, it was done in their own way. There appeared to be no clear processes and procedures of how teachers interject themselves after administration has gotten involved. Hence, there is a need to be sure that there is a consistent practice so that all students are addressed, and proper protocols are being followed.

**Theme 7: Teachers often refer the students to a school administrator**

While this is school policy, it also appears an attempt to manage bullying as well as provide support to the teachers. Most teachers handled bullying incidents by intervening and then reported students to administrators. Some sent students directly to administrators. It is desired by administration that bullying incidents are reported, and they should be involved in the process. Participant 008H expounded upon this process by stating the following, “I think what has worked for me is following the protocol set by the school and trying to support victims when they come to me. I try not to manage the situations, because I feel that it is the job of the administrator.”

Another teacher echoed the same sentiments as Participant 008H by directing all situations to the school administrators and counselors. Participant 007P stated, “Bullying does not take place in my presence. If I am informed of a bullying incidence, I inform administrators and counselors.”

Also, Participant 006E shared comments that demonstrated that while addressing bullying appears to be the responsibility of the school administrators and counselors,

there still needs to be some involvement of teachers. Teachers felt that they need to be able to manage bullying in an effective manner. By doing so, bullying situations can be mitigated prior to reaching the counselor or an administrator. Participant 006E identified their beliefs in the following statement:

My effectiveness hinges on how fast I can contact the office when an incident occurs.... The option to sit in on school conferences and share my observations of students involved would help me to manage better a bullying situation. Teachers should help facilitate any meeting that administrators have set in place. Being in the meeting will help facilitate the outcome of my effectiveness when managing bullying.

School administrators are ultimately responsible for bullying, but teachers believe they need to be involved at different levels. When teachers encounter bullying incidents, they are to report those incidents to the administration. However, it was evident throughout the data analysis that teachers intervened at some point prior to reporting students to administration. Teachers felt a need to take the liberty to try to support students as effectively as they could prior to reporting them to administration. Participant 006T explained the desire to support students prior to getting leaders involved. The participant stated,

I feel that the relationship between the student and myself has helped me be effective at dealing with bullying. What has been ineffective for me has been writing up a student so that the administrators can deal with the situation. I

believe it is better to deal with situations within our team and resolve things that way.

The following participant used the classroom to promote expectations of positive behaviors in their interaction with other students. This participant found value in being visible and setting clear expectations of what behaviors are desired. It is important for students to demonstrate the same positive behaviors both inside and outside of the classroom. Participant 008P mentioned:

We discuss this in my classes quite often. The main reason why I have the reward system in place so that we can acknowledge the positive behaviors and other students can learn from it. I really don't know of a strategy that is less effective because the reward system I use has been so effective. I would think it's less effective to immediately involve the administration. I just don't feel like they are needed always.

While the following participant believed that they should contact school administrators and counselors for bullying incidents, this participant also believed that teachers could provide immediate support before the students are able to talk with administrators. Teachers felt empowered to utilize whatever strategies they have prior to involving the administrator to support students. At times, collaborating as a team to support bully victims and working with a team of teachers tend to be more effective than immediately reporting student to the administration which is what is desired. Participant 007T shared that most teachers are effective at managing bullying situations prior to involving administration. The participant stated:

By talking to the bullied child and being encouraging to help support the kid during this time, I believe I have helped students. I feel that students walk away feeling a bit better about themselves and a little more empowered. What I have found to be less effective at times was immediately involving the administration even though we are told to do.

While many teachers relied on the administration for these incidents, they also believed they should take some sort of action in addition to directly addressing bullying. Professional development on managing bullying is necessary to ensure that there is consistency building-wide so that teachers will all follow the same protocol. Teachers need to be supported with effective strategies to manage bullying effectively and not directly involve the administrators. This could be managed if the school was proactive by effectively implementing an antibullying program. Since some teachers were eager to manage bullying incidents themselves, they should be equipped with effective strategies to help them do so. Therefore, when bullying incidents occur, teachers have a clear understanding of the protocols and procedures that should be followed with fidelity.

### **Discrepant Cases**

In this qualitative case study, the data were collected from one-on-one interviews about teachers' perceptions of bullying in a rural school setting. Teachers provided their perceptions of student bullying, of their roles in managing bullying, and of their beliefs about effective strategies. Discrepant cases were not evident due to the positive and extended responses received during the data collection and the member checking processes. However, during the interviews, several teachers stated that they do not get

involved in bullying incidents. Those teachers immediately referred the students and situation to administrators and counselors. These data were included and analyzed as vital information related to the perceptions of teachers about engagement with bullying situations.

### **Evidence of Quality**

To address the evidence of the quality of the findings, all data were collected and analyzed according to the plan approved by Walden IRB. No data were collected until I received IRB approval and a signed letter of cooperation from the site in which the research was conducted. Participants were contacted via email regarding their participation in this study. Each participant received and signed a participant consent letter. Any questions participants had was addressed at that time in the meeting prior to the research being conducted as well at the time of the interviews. Only the participants who signed a consent letter were interviewed in this study.

First, I conducted one on one interviews with each participant in a secured room located at the research site. I gave each participant sufficient time to answer each question. If needed, I used follow-up questions during the interviews. All interviews were conducted using the same protocol. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and stored in a password protected Microsoft Word document labeled using each participant's code to protect their identities.

The data were collected, and I analyzed the transcripts from the interviews, for specific data that related to the research questions guiding this study. As I examined each participant's transcript, I wrote personal notes and annotated the transcripts, by

identifying frequent keywords, ideas, and themes. I collated and organized the data and based upon the categories formed, themes were developed to address each research question.

When participants consented to participate in this study, I explained to them that I would be using member checking. Member checking was completed to provide the participants with an opportunity to review the transcripts and themes to verify the accuracy of their input. I scheduled meetings with each participant to review the findings to confirm the accuracy or to offer suggestions to the themes. All participants agreed with the findings and had no suggestions on revisions. Member checking provided credibility of the findings and interpretations.

Trustworthiness was maintained through interviewing 10 middle school teachers and gathering various perceptions on my research questions. Member checking served as a purpose of validating the transcripts and themes. By using the process of member checking, I made every effort to ensure that the themes captured the perceptions of middle school teachers regarding bullying.

### **Conclusion**

By exploring the perceptions of middle school teachers about bullying in a rural middle school, I addressed two research questions. The research questions were related to the participants' perceptions and experiences with bullying in a rural middle school setting. In Section 4, I explored the themes from the data. The themes are aligned with the research questions:



RQ 1: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of their current practices in diffusing school bullying incidents?

RQ 2: What are middle school teachers' experiences when attempting to manage bullying situations?

These themes reflect the thoughts and experiences of middle school teachers about bullying. This data collection method gave an opportunity for middle school teachers to share the perceptions of bullying. Teachers were active in addressing bullying even if be it that required them to address it at the very onset or report the situation directly to administrators.

Although the teachers' approaches to manage bullying varied, situations always resulted in getting administrators involved. Some teachers integrated some form of antibullying components into their curriculum and assignments. This required some students to review policies and procedures on bullying and appropriate behaviors, to even writing a reflection about their experience with bullying. Teachers informed students that bullying is not allowed and found ways to support students. Supporting students varied across the participants in this study from conferencing with students and building self-esteem to meeting with a team of teachers to determine which supports can be put in place to help students be successful in the classroom.

These themes reflected the concerns and the ideas of middle school teachers about bullying situations within a rural school environment. The data collection methods gave a voice to concerns of the middle school teachers.

## Section 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

This qualitative case study examined teachers' perceptions about bullying and explored the strategies that teachers use to manage bullying occurrences. The problem that directly influenced this study was that teachers in a local middle school were having difficulty managing and diffusing bullying situations among students. I used a case study approach in which I collected data by interviewing teachers at the schools, and this proved best in answering the research questions because the data included specific details, experiences, and perceptions from the participants that enabled me to answer the research questions.

The themes included the following: (a) teachers have varied definitions but most agree that bullying is aggressive, repeated verbal and physical behavior; (b) teachers try to resolve bullying problems, but they eventually refer the problem to counselors or administrators; (c) teachers build relationships with victims to increase their self-esteem; (d) teachers model and promote positive, collaborative behaviors; (e) teachers immediately intercede in bullying situations; (f) teachers have different ways in which they resolve and address bullying; and (g) teachers eventually refer the students to a school administrator. Teachers emphasized throughout the interviews that bullying is not tolerated, and that they do not support student bullies. The reflected the concerns of the teachers while acknowledging their ideas about managing bullying occurrences within a rural school setting.

Through analyzing the data, I discovered that middle school teachers view bullying as a very serious issue among students. Often intervening when bullying occurred, teachers did their best to manage bullying at its onset through various methods, and eventually reported incidents to the school administration. Most teacher participants addressed bullying when it occurred, and integrated concepts of anti-bullying and respect into their classroom culture and pedagogy; however, some teachers believed that they did not have the necessary skillsets or strategies needed to manage bullying more effectively. The data from the face-to-face interviews indicated that most teachers used some form of anti-bullying strategies and directly addressed incidents of bullying, but this was not consistent as some teachers reported staying uninvolved and immediately reporting bullying incidents to the school administration.

The themes above address the study's research questions. The following RQs guided the study.

RQ 1: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of their current practices in diffusing school bullying incidents?

RQ 2: What are middle school teachers' experiences when attempting to manage bullying situations?

In Section 5, I present my interpretation of findings, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, and provide an overall summary of the study.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine teachers' perceptions about bullying and to explore the strategies that teachers use to manage bullying occurrences. Guided by the conceptual framework derived from Olweus's Bullying Prevention Program (2007), I analyzed the data about teachers' perceptions of bullying and the strategies they used to manage bullying occurrences.

The conceptual framework, based on Olweus's Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is an organizing feature that offers teachers approaches to diminish bullying occurrences, to prevent new bullying occurrences, and to build positive relationships among students. OBPP is known to be the underpinning for schools and school districts with effective classroom management strategies that can be used to combat bullying (Hazel den Foundation, 2016; Olweus, 2007). Additionally, Olweus's (2007) management strategies, which is the conceptual framework for this study, considers providing teachers with the effective management strategies to not only prevent bullying but build positive relationships. The interpretation of the findings is coordinated around the two research questions while addressing the perceptions of teachers' management of bullying.

Olweus (2013) defined bullying as aggressive and undesired actions that endangers the health and well-being of other people. Researchers have defined bullying as constant undesired attention that not only threatens ones' safety, but also is used to inflict fear and insults to control (Goldweber, et.al., 2013; Olweus, 2013; Wong, et.al., 2013). The State of Georgia defines bullying as intimidating actions causing bodily harm,

verbal and or physical abuse that may be considered as bullying by a liable person who would deem the act as threatening, harassing, or scaring (Georgia Department of Education, 2015; USDHHS, 2014). However, the teachers did not report a common definition of bullying in this study. Researchers have suggested that teachers' perceptions are important in bullying occurrences at school because their perceptions have an impact on how bullying is defined (Isom, 2014).

In this study, the results indicate that the teacher participants defined bullying as “taunting others, constant name-calling, confrontations with peers, hitting, intimidating, and belittling the victim,” Some participants defined bullying as physical or verbal abuse, while a few others defined bullying a consistent negative behavior towards other students. Luxenburg et al. (2014) suggested that spreading rumors, isolating someone, physical abuse, and using the Internet as a place to criticize someone are all forms of bullying. One of the participants shared that name calling, hitting, negative comments are inappropriate and are considered bullying. Physical abuse was a common term shared amongst participants. According to Yerger and Gehret (2011) bullying is considered a multifaceted concept that is composed of physical abuse and forcing a person to engage in a manner that is against their will. This shows that perhaps a specific part of professional development on bullying should first define bullying. Clearly defining bullying can address misconceptions of bullying and provides a clearer path in which teachers can combat bullying. If teachers do not deem acts of bullying as such, then they will be likely to respond to bullying occurrences (Isom, 2014; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003;

Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Thus, by sharing a clear definition of bullying may assist in bully prevention being carried out with consistently and with fidelity.

Additionally, teachers will need professional development on bullying so that they will know what is considered bullying and the proper measures to intervene. Gorsek and Cunningham (2014) mentioned that teachers would only intervene in bullying situations if they share in their definition of bullying and has the appropriate training to manage bullying. Varying definitions of bullying can lead to teachers' poorly managing bullying (Gorsek & Cunningham, 2014). Although the participants did not explicitly state that they need professional development on how bullying is defined, it was interpreted that professional development on bullying is necessary and having a common definition of bullying is the first step needed.

Richard et al. (2012) suggested that teachers feel an effective way to manage bullying is through immediately addressing bullying the moment it happens and provide counseling to the students involved. Most of the teachers interviewed intervened in bullying immediately. They also built respect and anti-bullying into their curriculum and classroom practices. Based upon the themes, most teachers immediately addressed bullying and tried to provide support to students who were victimized by bullying. Participants added their form of anti-bullying in various ways. Some participants try building relationships with students while encouraging them to report bullying incidents immediately.

Similar literature suggested that teachers' knowledge of bullying interventions should be aligned with classroom rituals and routines (Lacey & Cornell, 2013; Kahn et

al., 2012). The concept from previous literature regarding establishing rituals and routines that encompasses bullying intervention was also highlighted by a few of the participants. Particularly, one participant reviews the PowerPoint that is shared with students at the beginning of the year about bullying and expectations. Another participant shared how they remind students that bullying is not tolerated and refers them to the routines and expectations posted around the classroom to promote positive behavior. Expectations regarding bullying behaviors must be imbedded in the classroom daily activities to combat bullying.

Ross' (2012) intervention program referenced as *BOSS*, was designed as a classroom management program that helps teachers build positive behaviors amongst students. Providing support to students involved in bullying is essential. The results from this study demonstrate that teachers feel a need to be directly involved in intervening in bullying incidents. Having bullying prevention strategies part of the classroom management system can have a tremendous impact on bullying. If students consistently demonstrate positive behaviors and teachers consistently reinforce positive behaviors and make this practice mandatory, bullying incidents will decline. The learning environment must be a safe place for learning to take place (Johnson, 2011). Bullying prevention programs call for teachers to implement certain practices in their lessons (Olweus, 2013). Teachers building relationships with victims of bullying to increase their self-esteem is necessary in combatting bullying. Olweus (2007) deemed building positive relationships among students as an effective strategy to lessen bullying occurrences.

Also using an effective antibullying intervention program can improve students' self-esteem when being victimized by bullying (Wolpert, 2016). Most participants in this study seemed to make this connection and some even specifically spoke about these connections. For example, many of the participants decided to take it upon themselves to build students' self-esteem. The teacher participants met with students and tried to give them encouraging words and make them feel safe. At times, parents and counselors were involved and teachers have made themselves available to victims if they wanted to talk about bullying. In a study conducted by The University of California, KiVa's intervention program resulted in decreasing depression in students but also improving students' self-esteem in 15% of the sixth-grade students who were victims of bullying (Wolpert, 2016). Also, bullying has been known to make students feel devalued, so effective management strategies are needed to prevent bullying occurrences (Olweus, 2007). It seems that teacher participants understand this and intervene when bullying occurs to address this.

Modeling positive behaviors in the classroom environment is essential when effectively managing bullying. The participants in this study tend to model or promote positive behaviors in their learning experience by having students reflect on bullying occurrences, using positive reinforcement for good behaviors, and establishing a classroom environment of mutual respect to name a few. The intervention program *BOSS* signifies the importance of modeling from educators and promoting positive behaviors of students (Ross, 2012). The teacher models the desired behaviors and the students acknowledges students who demonstrate that behavior.



Teachers find themselves immediately interceding when bullying happens to occur. According to Olweus and Recchi (2013), teachers should be first in line to intercede in bullying situations. Teachers are essential for preventing bullying in the school setting. In the themes it was discovered that most of the participants interceded when bullying occurred. However, intercession happened in various ways. Conferencing with the students seem to be the most consistent amongst the participants. Teachers conference to follow up with them once bullying has occurred to make sure that the students feel safe and are able to feel comfortable again. Conferencing is not the only practice that stood out amongst the data. Some participants took a different approach by writing statements and posting these in their classrooms or reminding students of consequences if bullying occurs. However, conferencing can be an effective practice. Teachers believe effective approaches to addressing bullying include immediately conferencing and counseling students involved in bullying (Richard et al., 2012). Conferences should not only be held with the victim, but with the bully as well (Jansen et al., 2012; Limber, 2011). Although it is important for teachers to intervene in a bullying situation, teachers must be mindful not to downplay bullying situations due to their perceptions of bullying (Misha et al., 2005; Salmivalli et al., 2013). It is important for teachers to intercede in bullying situations because failing to do so contributes to the problem and not the resolution (Isom, 2014; Olweus, 1993).

Although most participants intercede in bullying situations, they took various approaches in which they resolve or address bullying situations. Teachers using direct behavioral lessons and engaging students in developing their own classrooms, seem to

have greater success in implementing interventions against bullying and promoting social change (Richard et al., 2012). Teachers used their perceptions of bullying to determine how they intercede. As discovered in the data, some participants took liberty to engage with students at the very onset of bullying, conduct follow-up meetings with the students involved, and follow up with the administration and counselors on the outcomes of bullying. In most cases, the participants followed up with their students after bullying has been reported formally. However, there was a participant who tried to resolve bullying themselves instead of getting the administration involved immediately.

Teachers often referred students to a school administrator when bullying occurred. However, most participants felt empowered to intervene prior to doing so. According to Cornell and Limber (2015), most state laws require all staff to report bullying and requires the school district to create a procedure for an investigation to take place. In the themes, it was uncovered that one of the participants felt that administrators should manage bullying. Some other participants felt that they were more capable to manage bullying effectively because of relationships they have built with their students . One participant felt that passing the referral over to the administration is ineffective and that individual counsel with a team of teachers to deal with bullying situations. Although the protocol is to report the students to the administrators, teachers sought ways to handle the matter themselves prior to doing so.

## Conclusions

The themes addressed the research questions. Based on the collected data and the themes stated above, there are two conclusions that address the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of their current practices in diffusing school bullying incidents?

RQ 2: What are middle school teachers' experiences when attempting to manage bullying situations?

The following are the key conclusions to this study: (a) teachers need a common definition of bullying, and they need to coordinate their responsive actions to create consistent expectations within the school; (b) teachers need professional development about managing student bullying. These conclusions are based on the responses of teachers and their clear desire to find more consistent practices that produce the desired result of successfully managing bullying situations, so they can transition back to a controlled academic environment.

**Teachers need a common definition of bullying.** Teachers provided a variety of definitions with similar meanings, but none of them were the same. They used different terms which they derived from their different perspectives and experiences with bullying incidents. Teachers also indicated various methods of responding to bullying incidents when they occurred. The data revealed a lack of consistency in how they addressed bullying. Administrators and teachers within each school need to work together to develop common definitions of bullying. This may produce a more united front among

the educators within a school to combat bullying and to ideally lessen the occurrences of bullying behavior within each school.

**Teachers need professional development about managing student bullying.**

The participants in this study always responded to bullying situations; they each addressed the problems in their own way. Without a guiding definition or a unified approach to effectively address bullying, a need exists for professional development to create a common definition of problems, unified approaches to management of problems, and confidence in the decisions that are being made. Providing teacher with professional development workshops about managing student bullying could perhaps help teachers and administrators develop collaborative protocols.

Teachers indicated their needs for specific classroom management strategies and consistent practices. These conclusions are interrelated and address both research questions. I distinguished between teacher perceptions and teacher practices; however, the teacher participants did not make distinctions between perceptions and practices. More specifically, teacher perceptions centered on their own practices, and individual teachers shared common practices unbeknownst to each other. Most teacher participants believed that they had to directly intervene when witnessing bullying incidents between students. There were a few teachers who did not intervene directly and who referred the students directly to administrators and counselors. All teachers eventually referred students involved in bullying incidents to administrators and counselors. Additionally, most teacher participants also integrated anti-bullying curriculum into their classroom practices and cultures. Overall, while most teachers actively participated in addressing

and teaching anti-bullying in their classrooms, the teachers as a group and as a school unit, did not discuss their different strategies and perceptions.

Olweus's (2007) effective management strategies to address bullying included the following: to diminish bullying occurrences, to prevent new bullying occurrences, and to build positive relationships among students. Teachers' descriptions of their interventions in bullying situations spoke to addressing bullying as it occurred. Again, there is no schoolwide policy around specific practices and/or steps that teacher should take to address bullying. Along these same lines, all teachers at the school site did not meet to specifically discuss bullying. Teachers worked in silos to address or not address bullying at this school site. Lastly, because there is no schoolwide data or discussion regarding bullying, it is hard to speak to Olweus's framework. In Chapter 1, I presented the study problem as that teachers lacked the skills to effectively manage bullying occurrences. However, considering the findings, I would conclude that most teachers possessed the skills to manage bullying but that these skills were individual.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The implications for social change from this research study could potentially impact teachers and how they deal with bullying. Acknowledging teachers' perceptions of bullying in an urban middle school helps inform pertinent decisions for anti-bullying programs and strategies to prevent bullying. School leaders may address the gap in practice of teachers' management of bullying by placing an effective anti-bullying program in schools and provide teachers with appropriate professional development to ensure effective implementation.

In Chapter 1, I stated that many researchers linked bullying to absenteeism, poor health, social withdrawal, and death (Langan, 2011; Murray et al., 2012; Olweus & Limber, 2007; Pergolizzi et al., 2009; Tamutiene, 2008). The findings from this study confirmed that teachers do deal with bullying directly and consistently. Positive social changes for students, teachers, and community members can result from a reduction in student bullying occurrences. With an organized, systematic approach that provides teachers with the tools to identify and manage student bullying occurrences, there may be improved school climates where teachers can teach, and learners can learn with fewer interruptions. Reduced bullying may also potentially improve students' sense of self and help students manage fearfulness.

Bullying is considered an aggressive behavior that interferes with the learning environment (Davis & Nixon, 2011). If teachers have been trained to intervene effectively, they can lessen bullying incidents and have a positive impact on the learning environment.

Many teachers are not adequately trained to identify and address bully-related behaviors (Graham, 2011; Haesler, 2010). A potential positive impact in terms of social change is that when teachers are trained to effectively deal with bullying, they can influence students' overall academic achievement, social and emotional well-being, health, and school attendance. The collective impact of these positive outcomes could spark the needed positive social change.

The findings and conclusions from this study may help cultivate a culture of consistency amongst teachers with managing and preventing bullying. Additionally, the

data collected can provide an opportunity for the school leaders to collaborate and discuss appropriate anti-bullying programs and strategies necessary for schools. Possible larger scale social changes can take place once anti-bullying programs and prevention strategies are in place and students and teachers use these strategies in their own lives outside of school. Positive anti-bullying changes at one school may influence others school communities to adopt proceed along similar paths.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Based on the findings in this case study there are two recommendations for action. The recommendations are based on teachers practice in managing bullying based upon their perceptions of bullying.

Recommendation 1: School administrators and teachers should clearly define bullying and clearly communicate this definition to students and parents so that everyone understands bullying. Since bullying can affect students' social and emotional well-being, reduce safety factors, and reduce learning time, it is important that bullying is clearly defined and managed immediately (Georgia Department of Education, 2017).

Recommendation 2: Determine which anti-bullying program is most appropriate for teachers at this school so that they can share common practices and procedures in managing bullying occurrences using professional learning communities (PLC). The school administrators should either engage the existing PLCs or assemble a new committee to explore effective programs and best practices about managing bullying behaviors. With the recommendation of the teams or committee, the school should pilot a program, evaluate the results, and make modifications to customize the program to

address the needs at the RHJ school. The findings of this study showed that some teachers used some form of anti-bullying strategies when bullying incidents occurred however, there is a lack of consistency across the board on how teachers and students should handle bullying at school RHJ. Discussions in the literature related to antibullying programs suggested that teachers have appropriate interventions in place to carry out effectively to prevent acts of bullying from impacting the school environment (Murray et al., 2012; Pergolizzi et al., 2009).

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study opens the door for further research about bullying, teachers' perceptions of bullying, and strategies to manage bullying effectively. During the interview process, I discovered that there was no specific anti-bullying program in place for the school. Hence, one area of future research that could be considered is repeating the study once there has been an effective anti-bullying and prevention program implemented at school RHJ. One participant mentioned that in their class, positive behaviors are modeled, and positive reinforcement is used to create an atmosphere in which bullying is prohibited.

I suggest that additional studies can examine bullying by grade level at school RHJ to see if bullying occurrences grow or decline as students move from one grade level to another. This would a longitudinal study that follows students from grades 6 to 8; this would allow leaders to examine the influence of a consistently applied program on the same group of students over a 3-year period. It may be beneficial for researchers to



determine if there are gaps in the new program that need to be addressed to diffuse continued bullying.

I also suggest that further study can explore students' perceptions of bullying and how they perceive bullying being managed in their school. Looking at bullying through the lens of students' perceptions may give leaders an opportunity to identify programs to meet students' needs. Students' safety is most important in the school setting and students should feel safe in their learning environment. This topic may not only provide leaders with insight from the students' perception but also may lead to schoolwide and district wide initiatives to manage bullying.

Finally, I suggest future studies may be conducted to determine if the implementation of a new, unified program creates greater awareness, reduces bullying, and increases student reporting. A new program should produce more than a consistent program; it should create a school climate in which students feel safe and able to report bullying behaviors.

### **Summary**

This experience allowed me the opportunity to channel my focus as an educator. During this process, I was afforded the opportunity to gain the perceptions of a group of teachers about bullying and how they approached and managed bullying problems. Their thoughts about bullying have now positioned me to reflect on my practice and increase my own awareness of the influences of bullying within school environments. I learned that educators who work together within a school need clear, effective, and consistent procedures to manage bullying.

It is extremely important that bullying is clearly defined; every school population should have a common definition that is understood by both students and educators. Lack of a common definition can open a gateway for teachers to be determine their actions when managing bullying on preconceived notions and past experiences. To ensure that bullying is being managed appropriately, commonalities in definitions and practice related to bullying must be considered. Teachers need to understand that they are the vital piece to diffusing bullying situations.

Students need to feel safe in their learning environment. It is essential that students share with all staff members if they feel that they have been bullied. When bullying is addressed, it is important to understand that both the victim and the bully should be counseled. Often, the bully is left out of conversation when reconciling a problem. Students must be encouraged to find their voices and to be strong and courageous when facing bullying.

This research study provided me with an opportunity to reevaluate my thoughts about bullying as a teacher, grade-level leader, and future administrator. In this research study, I evaluated the findings, recognized the benefits of this study, and acknowledged myself as an agent for change toward more effective practices in schools. The future of our students and their well-being should be the focus of every educator. It is the responsibility of every educator to promote positive behaviors and to create safe, engaging learning environments.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol and Questions

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Finish Time: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Interviewer Notes**

#### **1. Overview**

- a. Tape-record the interviews if permission is granted
- b. Interviews held in a private conference room at the school or an off-campus library.
- c. Each interview will last 45 to 60 minutes

#### **2. Interview Methodology**

- a. In this qualitative study, the implementation of interviews with a customized approach may include an in-depth investigation.
- b. Follow-up questions will stimulate the interviewee memory. I will use a semistructured question design. Interview contains the following:
  - i. A predetermined set of 8 questions
  - ii. All predetermined questions are the same for participants



## Process

### 1. Components of the Interview

- a. Introduction (5-10 minutes)
- b. Review consent form.
- c. Create a relaxed environment
- d. Dialogue

### 2. Explain the purpose of the interview

The purpose of this interview is to explore factors that influence your decisions about managing bullying. During this time, I will ask questions to try to get an understanding of your experiences and observations pertinent to understanding bullying.

#### a. Ask permission to record interview

With your authorization, I would like to tape-record our discussion to get an inclusive record of what is said, since the notes I take will not be as comprehensive as I will require. No one else will listen to this recording. Only I will have access to the recording. The research study results will describe what you and others have said about your perceptions and experiences with bullying. During the data collection, no responses will be ascribed to you by name, only by a pseudonym.

- b. The intention of the open-ended questions is to obtain your personal experience and perceptions. The interview may take about 45 to 60 minutes. Thank you for agreeing to volunteer and participate in the project study process.

- Would you give me permission to tape the interview?
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

**RQ 1: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of their current practices in diffusing school bullying incidents?**

1. Describe what you believe to be bullying behaviors by students.
2. How do you describe your current practices when you are trying to diffuse school bullying incidents?
3. How would you help those students whom you perceive are victims or potential victims of bullies?
4. What instructional practices might reduce or eliminate the possibilities of bullying occurring within the classroom? ...during less structured time?

**RQ 2: What are middle school teachers' experiences when attempting to manage bullying situations?**

5. What have your experiences been in attempting to manage bullying occurrences at your school?
6. Have you ever received administrator or peer support to manage a bully situation? If you did, please describe the type of support you received.
7. Describe your effectiveness at managing bullying situations? What strategies worked for you? What strategies were less effective?
8. Please discuss your follow up practices after a bullying situation. Did you conduct any follow up meetings? Did you formally report the incident? .