MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' RESPONSES TO BULLYING: COMPARING

SCHOOL BULLYING INCIDENTS AND THEIR PERCEIVED SERIOUSNESS

by

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As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Cynthia T. Hurley entitled *Middle School Principals' Responses to Bullying: Comparing School Bullying Incidents and Their Perceived Seriousness* and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education.

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The principals who participated in my study were such passionate educators and reinforced that there are many wonderful principals who are dedicated to our children not only academically but emotionally. They believed bullying was unacceptable behavior and that all students deserve to feel safe and comfortable at school. My hope is that one day bullying behavior will not be tolerated in any school in the United States.

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ABSTRACT

Research on principals' perceptions and responses to school bullying is scarce. This study investigated the perceptions of seven middle school principals and their responses to six hypothetical vignettes depicting incidents of physical, verbal, or relational bullying. During interviews, respondents were asked to rate the seriousness of each incident and describe how they would respond. Respondents rated all the incidents, regardless of the form of bullying, as moderately serious, serious, or very serious. When asked to describe how they would respond to incidents, all responded they would take action (e.g., consequences for the instigator, interventions to change the behavior of the instigator, support for the target). State statute on bullying, school anti-bullying policies, past experience with bullying, and a belief that students deserve to feel safe were key to guiding their responses. The principals recognized that bullying occurred on their campuses but indicated that incidents were minimized as a result of their strong school anti-bullying polices and a belief that no form of bullying was to be tolerated on their campuses.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background and General Description of the Problem

> Junior high was rough. I tried to fit in, but I always felt as if a force field
> like the ones in those old 1950s science-fiction movies separated me from my
> peers. Each time I tried to penetrate the invisible wall between us, it repelled me,
> hurling me backward. I longed to be a part of the group. But the more I reached
> out to my classmates, the more they excluded me. (Blanco, 2003, p.6)

This quote aptly describes the torment some children experience as a result of

school bullying. Bullying can lead to long-term physical and psychological damage,

which is not limited to only the victim (Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008). Bullying

behavior can lead to a lifetime of problems for the perpetrator as well (Hazler, Miller,

Carney, & Green, 2001). If left unchecked, bullying behaviors can lead to more serious

forms of violence (Whitted & Dupper, 2005).

Bullying is viewed as a subset of aggressive behaviors that causes either physical

and/or psychological harm to the victim (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999). The

definition of bullying that seems to be universally accepted throughout the literature on

bullying includes three key elements that differentiate it from other forms of aggression:

unequal balance of power, intent to harm, and repeated acts over time. These elements

are apparent from the following definition, which is adapted from Hazler's (1996)

original definition:

> Bullying can be . . . defined as repeatedly (not just once or twice)
> harming others. This can be done by physical attack or by hurting
> others' feelings through words, actions, or social exclusion. Bullying
> may be done by one person or by a group. It is an unfair match since the
> bully is physically, verbally and/or socially stronger than the victim.
> (Carney & Merrel, 2001, p. 365)

A fundamental difference between bullying and typical developmentally aggressive behavior is that bullying is an abuse of power with the intention of hurting or humiliating another individual (Seale, 2004). Bullying behavior is **not** an accident. A student who bullies another is purposely trying to hurt his or her victim in some way.

Bullying behaviors can be categorized as either overt or covert aggression as shown in Figure 1. Overt bullying includes physical (pushing, kicking, shoving, destruction of student's property, and threats) and verbal (name calling, taunting, and teasing) forms of aggression. Covert bullying characterized by such aggressive behaviors as spreading rumors, intimidation, and excluding others from peer groups is often referred to as *relational bullying* (Banks, 1997; Dukes, Stein, & Zane, 2009).

Relational bullying is now emerging as an educational concern (Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008) because it is insidious and has been shown to have long-term negative effects on attitudes and behaviors of both bullies and their targets (Dukes et al., 2009). Physical bullying tends to decrease with age, but relational bullying does not (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Relational aggression negatively contributes to the social, emotional, and psychological climate of schools. Hawker and Boulton (2000) concluded that social exclusion was a stronger predictor of childhood depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and loneliness than verbal put-downs or physical aggression.

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                          │    Bullying     │
                          │    Behaviors    │
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     ┌─────────────────┐                    ┌─────────────────┐
     │  Overt Bullying │                    │  Covert Bullying│
     └─────────────────┘                    └─────────────────┘
      ┌──────┴──────┐                               │
┌───────────┐ ┌───────────┐               ┌───────────────────┐
│  Physical │ │   Verbal  │               │  Relational Forms │
│   Forms   │ │   Forms   │               │                   │
│           │ │           │               │ Spreading Rumors  │
│  Pushing  │ │  Threats  │               │   Intimidation    │
│  Kicking  │ │Name Calling│              │  Peer Exclusion   │
│Pulling Hair│ │  Teasing │               └───────────────────┘
│Destruction │ │  Insults  │
│of Property │ └───────────┘
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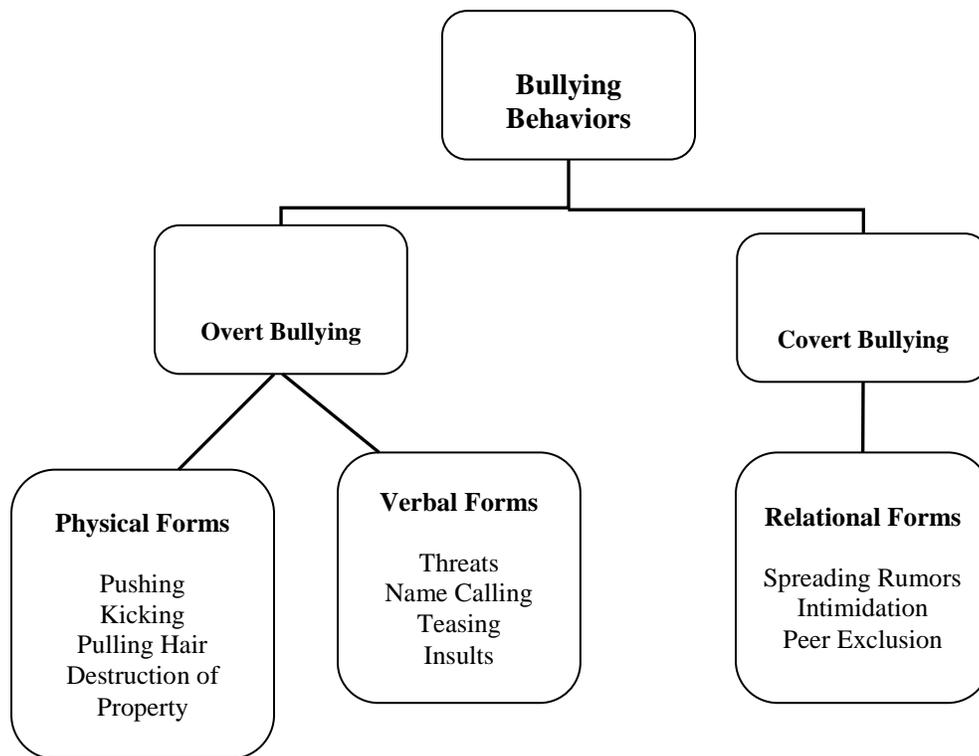
Figure 1. Forms of bullying behavior

Pervasiveness of school bullying is well documented. Research by Sampson (2002) indicated that school bullying was widespread and was the most underreported safety problem in American schools. Bullying tends to peak in early adolescence during the middle school years (Pellegrini, 2002). From their analysis of 454 responses to the Peer Relations Questionnaire (PRQ; Rigby & Slee, 1995), Seals and Young (2003) found that in grades seven and eight, 24% of the students reported either bullying or being bullied. Seven percent of eighth-graders stayed home at least once per week because of bullying behaviors (Banks, 1997). Middle school students, compared to high school students, reported being both overtly and relationally victimized more often (Goldstein et al., 2008). Their data confirm bullying can be problematic during middle school.

Some research strongly suggested that boys tended to be more directly aggressive than girls (Oliver, Pakaaslahti & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2000) with boys typically being more physical and girls generally engaging in more psychological forms of bullying (Siann & Callaghan, 1993). However, the inclination to view bullying in terms of gender needs to be resisted. Not all aggressive girls are relationally aggressive nor are all aggressive boys physically aggressive (Espelage, Mebane, & Swearer, 2004). Merrell, Buchanan, and Tran (2006) indicated that relationally aggressive behaviors occurred with both genders, and there were serious psychological effects for those who endure relational aggression

Due to its more covert nature, relational bullying is more difficult to study, and thus there are fewer data available on this form of bullying. Werner and Hill (2010) indicated that the transition to middle school was marked with increased acceptance of

relational aggression and that students in peer groups highly supportive of relational

aggression tend to become increasingly aggressive. Students who were relationally

aggressive were often viewed as more popular by their peers (Rose, Swenson, & Waller,

2004).

Dysfunctional correlates of relational bullying have been shown to parallel those

that have been found for more physical bullying (Dukes et al., 2009; Galen &

Underwood, 1997; Smokowski & Kopsaz, 2005). Students victimized by relational

bullying encountered relatively negative overall social experiences at school. They often

coped by withdrawing from friendships and school activities. Victims of bullying were

more apt to suffer from common physical problems such as colds, sore throats, lack of

appetite, and sleeping problems (Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2001).

Prolonged exposure to relational bullying can influence school violence; it has been

established that in 13 of 15 school shootings between 1995 and 2001, shooters had

experienced relational bullying, especially chronic rejection by their peers (Leary,

Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003).

The perceptual difference between students and school personnel on bullying

suggests that school personnel do not always recognize the extent of school bullying that

students often face. Skiba and Fontanini (2000) found that in schools, adults identified

less than 10% of bullying incidents. Often school personnel felt that bullying

was harmless and was a natural part of growing up. They suggest bullying is best

ignored unless verbal and psychological intimidation crossed the line into physical abuse

(Banks, 1997; Barone, 1997). Even in schools where bullying behaviors were prevalent,

some school staff members did not view it a serious problem and considered it to be a natural part of growing up (Pellegrini, 2002; Smith & Brain, 2000).

Failure by the school to address incidents of bullying cultivates a school climate that condones aggressive-submissive interactions and is associated with higher rates of school bullying (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). Moore (1998), in researching leadership behavior, school climate, and school violence, concluded that the leadership behavior of principals was related to school climate and school violence. *Bullying in Schools*, a guide summarizing how bullying can be addressed in schools, suggested that when schools with high and low bullying rates are compared, a principal's commitment to preventing and controlling bullying was a major factor that contributed to lower rates (Sampson, 2002).

Research investigating teachers' responses to reducing bullying as well as their perceived roles related to bullying is scant at best (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). However there is an even wider gap on principals' perspectives of school bullying. One of the few studies on principals' perceptions of school bullying (Harris & Hathorn, 2006) suggested that principals in Texas reported their schools to be safe when students in these schools reported they did not feel safe or supported. The researchers pointed out that chronic acts of bullying can be devastating, and middle school years can be especially problematic for students.

Statement of the Problem

Violence is about more than carrying guns; it is on a continuum ranging from bullying and verbal abuse, to fighting and homicide (Dusenbury, Falco, Lake, Brannigan, & Bosworth, 1997). At the school level, most people are concerned with bullying,

general intimidation, and physical fighting. Bullying behaviors, such as teasing, name-calling, and exclusion, are significantly related to school connectedness and academic achievement; those who dislike school tend to suffer more mistreatment (Craig et al., 2000; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003). Examining perceptions of bullying behavior in middle school is important because issues associated with aggression and interpersonal violence tend to escalate in severity during this time of adolescence (Parault, Davis, & Pellegrini, 2007). Students in sixth and seventh grades reported the highest percentage of bullying incidents (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009).

There is a plethora of literature on children's perceptions of bullying, and a limited amount on teachers' perceptions, but research on the school administrator's perceptions is almost nonexistent. Yet, the administrator's leadership and level of commitment, coupled with the attitudes and beliefs of teachers and parents, can be significant in the reduction of bullying (Rigby, 1996).

Physical bullying, due to the overt nature of the behaviors involved, appears to garner more attention from school personnel and is addressed more readily. However, nonphysical, covert forms of bullying, especially relational bullying are not so obvious, and thus fewer interventions are evident. Relational bullying is harmful as well and can be more strongly related to emotional distress, which ultimately can lead to social and psychological maladjustment in adulthood (Crick, 1996; Dukes et al., 2009). Middle school students perceive that their teachers and administrators do nothing to stop bullying (Bosworth et al., 1999).

Whether an incident is perceived as bullying influences how an adult responds (Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2006). Adult responses not only depend on their definitions of bullying but also on whether they interpret the episodes as "normal" (O'Moore, 2000). The middle school years are ripe for incidents of bullying; therefore it is important to learn more about principals' perceptions of bullying. What factors influence middle school principals' decisions about whether to respond to incidents of bullying? Do they respond differently to different forms of bullying?

Importance of the Problem

Too often, nonphysical aggression among students is normalized and minimized. As one principal shared, it is the physical incidents of bullying that are typically brought to his attention (Mishna et al., 2006). Often adults in the school setting use a hierarchy of behaviors to categorize bullying, thus influencing which incidences are worthy of response. Because peer relationships can be problematic during the middle school years and chronic bullying can have devastating effects on a child, a better understanding of middle school principals' perceptions and practices is important because principals, as leaders of their school, are responsible for creating a climate that is supportive and safe (Harris & Hathorn, 2006) and discourages bullying.

Relational bullying as well as principal perceptions to it are critically understudied components in the bullying literature. Research has focused on teachers' and school counselors' strategies for handling school bullying, revealing a considerable

divergence of views on how to respond to bullying incidents (Bauman, Rigby, & Hoppa, 2008). There is not adequate research to determine if a similar divergence exists among principals.

Significance of the Study

The literature is replete with evidence that a number of factors contribute to the complexity of bullying and influence both how adults and children respond to a particular incident. Most research focuses on overt bullying behaviors because these behaviors are more visible and easier to measure. Relational bullying, less frequently studied, has begun to garner more interest following findings that indicated that relationally aggressive children experience significant health and social maladjustment issues (Crick, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Dukes et al., 2009). The damage from chronic relational bullying can last a lifetime.

A disturbing finding in the literature is that school professionals might contribute either directly or indirectly to incidents of bullying based on their perceptions of bullying behaviors (Pellegrini, 2002). Research specifically addressing teachers' roles related to discipline, particularly with bullying is scarce (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Espelage & Swearer, 2003); however research on principals' perceptions is even scarcer. The emphasis in the literature has been on teachers' perceptions because they are the adults who spend the greatest amount of time with students; however, the leadership role of a principal in intervening or tolerating bullying behaviors cannot be underestimated. Further investigation into principal perceptions and experiences with bullying will close

the gap in research and ultimately help to identify effective approaches that principals can take to decrease bullying on their campuses.

In the United States, many studies have been conducted with elementary-age children, with a recent increase in the examination of bullying behaviors in middle school settings. This current study provides insights into middle school principals' perceptions and responses to bullying behaviors in middle school. School administrators are rarely included in bullying research yet are key in providing information on school culture and attitudes.

Programs and interventions need to address all forms of bullying, not just the overt behaviors which have until recently been the focus of intervention, because each form is detrimental to the health and well being of students. Understanding how principals respond to the various forms of bullying will help to shape and reinforce effective intervention processes. This information will help educators to address special issues related to relational bullying, which because of its covert nature is more difficult to detect, in addition to the interventions and programs that exist for physical and verbal bullying.

Overview of Methodology

Research Questions

The following questions will guide the current study:

1. How do middle school principals respond to incidents of school bullying, and how do these responses vary by form of bullying?

2. How do principals perceive the severity of each form of bullying?

3. What strategies do principals use when responding to bullying incidents?

4. How do middle school principals describe their decision-making process for selecting a response to school bullying incidents?

According to Poulou (2001), the use of vignettes was the most appropriate method for understanding teachers' cognitive and affective responses to specific incidents. One could assume the same held true for principals, so this study used six vignettes depicting three forms of bullying: physical, verbal, and relational. The vignettes did not indicate in any way that these scenarios reflected bullying situations. Prior to reading the vignettes, the participants were told they were responding to various discipline scenarios that had been brought to their attention by the students' parents. In this way, the results were not influenced by the complexity of the definition of bullying.

Participants in this study met the following criteria: experience as a middle school principal in Arizona for a minimum of three years and demonstrated leadership in their fields. Officers and Regional Representatives from the Middle Level Division of the Arizona School Administrators Association were invited to participate is this study because they met the eligibility criteria, and they represented a variety of districts across the state. The target number of participants was 10 or until saturation was achieved. They were recruited by e-mail with a follow-up e-mail and phone call if needed to solicit their interest. Participation was voluntary, and principals who agreed to participate were interviewed at a location and time convenient for them.

The data from this study were gathered during one-on-one interviews with the middle school principals. They were presented with six hypothetical vignettes depicting

different incidents of bullying behavior. Following each vignette, the principal was asked to respond to a series of questions that were used to assess principals' perceived seriousness of each vignette and gain insight into how they would respond to various bullying incidents.

This study used a qualitative strategy of inquiry because of the nature of the research questions and perceptions of middle school principals needing to be explored. In qualitative research, research questions often start with *how* and *what* and the topic needs to be *explored* (Creswell, 1998). This researcher was not testing hypotheses developed from previous theories but instead was generating themes based on data collected in an attempt to interpret the phenomenon of school bullying.

With phenomenology the researcher "describes the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 104). A phenomenological approach lent itself best to this study, because data were collected through interviews with open-ended questions. Responses from interviews were coded and clusters of meanings and themes tied together with general descriptions of the interviewee's experiences with school bullying. Narrative text was utilized to illuminate how middle school principals viewed different bullying incidents and what factors determined how they handled these incidents.

Underlying Assumptions

Four assumptions were made in this study. The initial assumption was that all participants interviewed would respond honestly rather than according to what might be perceived as socially desirable. A second assumption was that the vignettes were realistic

and depicted accurate examples of the concepts being portrayed. Another assumption was that middle school principals were extremely busy individuals, and by self-selecting to participate in the study, they expressed their professional desire to contribute to the field of educational leadership. The final assumption was that because the principals were not informed that the vignettes were about situations involving *bullying* behaviors but rather about *discipline incidents* that might occur at a middle school level, their answers would be less influenced by the media coverage that bullying now receives.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations highlighted the boundaries of this study and may have affected the ability to generalize to other settings and other populations.

1. Only middle school principals in a small geographic area of the Southwest were interviewed

2. A small number of participants were included in the study.

3. Self-reported responses to hypothetical situations and the response to an actual situation may not be the same.

4. The sample pool is one of convenience and not random.

5. Participants may have provided socially desirable responses.

6. Only two vignettes represented each the three forms of bullying being studied: physical, verbal, and relational.

Definition of Key Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions applied.

Bullying. "The repeated (not just once) harming of another through words or physical attack on the school grounds or on the way to or from school. The act of bullying is unfair, because the bully is either physically stronger or more verbally or socially skilled than the target(s). An individual or group may carry these actions out" (Hazler et al., 2001, p. 134).

Overt Bullying.   Aggressive behavior that is usually easily observable. Overt behaviors are usually Can be physical (pushing, kicking, shoving, destruction of student's property, and threats) or verbal (name calling, taunting, and teasing) forms of aggression.

Covert Bullying. Aggressive behavior that is not usually directly observable. Covert bullying is characterized by such aggressive behaviors as spreading rumors, intimidation, and excluding others from peer groups and is often referred to as relational bullying (Banks, 1997; Dukes et al., 2009).

Relational Bullying. Bullying that "harms others through purposeful manipulation or damage to their peer relationships" (Crick, 1996, p. 2317). It includes social exclusion, spreading rumors, or withholding friendships (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006).

Middle Schools. Schools that house any combination of sixth, seventh, or eighth grade students.

Middle School Principals. Principals whose student population is made up of any combination of sixth, seventh, or eighth grade students.

School Climate. Defined as the "quality and frequency of interactions among adults and students" (Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, & Konold, 2009, p. 339).

School Safety. Perceptions about whether school is an environment where students are likely to feel free from victimization and harassment (Goldstein et al., 2008).

Violence. Aggressive behavior that is on a continuum ranging from bullying and verbal abuse, to fighting and homicide (Dusenbury et al., 1997).

Summary of Introduction

Principals as the leaders of their schools are responsible for creating a climate that is supportive and safe. Even though school principals are viewed as playing a vital role in the prevention of bullying they are rarely included in research on bullying, . If, as Yoon & Kerber (2003) profess, teachers' mishandling and lack of involvement in bullying incidents can be interpreted as setting a tone that bullying is tolerated and allowed, then principals very likely participate in setting this tone as well.

Overt aggression is not the only form of aggression that presents a concern. Findings have suggested that relational aggression has unique implications for students' perceptions of school safety and school-based experiences as well. Like overt bullying, relational bullying is associated with maladjustment risks for both boys and girls (Crick,

1996). This study proposes to examine an understudied component in bullying literature: the perceptions of principals and their responses to physical, verbal, and relational forms of bullying with a focus on middle school, a time that all three forms of bullying tend to peak.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research reports on the prevalence of bullying vary, but the implication from most studies is that bullying is a pervasive problem that has reached a critical level of importance and appears to be a significant problem in our nation's schools (Schoen & Schoen, 2010; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Nationally, an average of 160,000 students stay home each day to avoid being a victim of bullying (Nansel,Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001). Not only does school bullying scar the lives of children, but it also reveals a serious flaw in our educational system (Oliver & Candappa, 2003).

Scholarly interest in the phenomenon of bullying was first raised in Scandinavia by the pioneering research of Dan Olweus (1978) who initiated the world's first systematic research on bullying. Bullying became recognized as a social issue around 1982 (Berger, 2007; Espelage & Swearer, 2003) with the publicized suicide of three targets of bullying in Norway helping to fuel the spread of research throughout other countries such as Norway, England, Spain, and Japan. Until the early 1990s, the topic of bullying in the United States had received little professional attention (Hoover and Hazler, 1991). However, the Columbine tragedy along with subsequent school shootings (Dake, Price, & Telljohan, 2003; Espelage & Swearer, 2004) seemed to be a wake-up call for the United States, leading to a plethora of research in the years that followed.

Physical and verbal behaviors are more visible forms of bullying and easier to identify, so they garnered most of the attention in the early research and the majority of

studies on bullying focused on physical and verbal abuse (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006;

Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006). However as the body of research grew (e.g., Card,

Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Gropeter, 1995),

evidence indicated that in actuality, bullying often manifested itself in a less visible but

very damaging form known as relational bullying, and more recent research provided

compelling evidence for the existence of relational bullying (Prinstein, Boergers, &

Vernberg, 2001). Further research with a direct focus on middle school was warranted

because this was a time period in students' lives when all three forms of bullying tend to

peak (Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992; Pellegrini, 2002).

A conclusion that could be drawn from the limited literature on how teachers,

counselors, and other support staff perceived bullying was that adults in school played a

role in either inhibiting or contributing to bullying (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Pellegrini,

2002). If school professionals chose not to deal with the recognized widespread

phenomenon of bullying by ignoring, underplaying, or tolerating incidences of bullying,

they were conveying a symbolic demeaning message of a student's worth (Hoover &

Hazler, 1991). However, the role of the school principal, a key adult in school, continued

to be an unexplored area of study.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight and discuss the pertinent research on

bullying in the United States, forms of bullying, effects of bullying, and adults' roles in

school bullying. This review provides a context for understanding the focus and rationale

of this study. Following is an explanation of how the literature search was conducted.

How Review Was Conducted

Literature in this chapter was drawn primarily from research on the topic of bullying but also from other literature on aggression, victimization, and violence because these terms can be relative. Decades of empirical investigations have focused on aggression in early childhood and adolescence. Building upon the original definition posited by Dan Olweus (1978), much of the research on bullying (e.g. Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Nansel et al., 2001; Rigby, 2004) defined the term *bullying* as a form or subset of aggression.

Whitted and Dupper (2005) on the other hand categorized bullying as the most prevalent form of low-level violence which, left unchecked, could lead to higher-level forms of violence such as assault or murder. Violence is more than about carrying guns; it is a continuum ranging from bullying and verbal abuse, to fighting and homicide (Dusenbury, et al., 1997). Bullying in schools is categorized as a form of youth violence (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005), and many studies were found when searching the key words, *school violence*.

 Other scholars have used *peer victimization* interchangeably with being bullied because both terms expressed the experience of children being targets of victimization by aggressive behavior (Berger, 2007; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Leff, Power, Costigan, & Manz, 2003; Seals, & Young, 2003). Studies on childhood aggression, victimization, school violence, and bullying were included in the review when they included some measurement of the experience of being a target of others' aggressive behavior.

The following topics are discussed:

- *Definition of bullying*. Noted researchers in the field have come to a general consensus of the key elements that determine whether specific behaviors can be classified as bullying. Those elements are shared in this section as well as the definition of bullying that is used for the purposes of this research.

- *Historical review of research on bullying*. A brief historical review describes how research on the topic of bullying first appeared in other countries but received little professional attention in the United States during the early years of research (Hoover & Hazler, 1991). However, in the past two decades bullying has garnered more interest as an area of research in the United States.

- *Pervasiveness of bullying*. Evidence (Sampson, 2002) indicated that bullying in schools is widespread and is the most underreported safety problem in American schools. The pervasiveness of bullying is discussed in this section.

- *Forms of bullying*. A discussion of how bullying behaviors can be categorized and where relational bullying fits into these categories appear in this section. Whether an incident is viewed as bullying influences how an individual reacts to it (Mishna et al., 2006).

- *Effects of physical, verbal, and relational bullying*. Exposure to most forms of bullying, including relational bullying, can have detrimental long-term effects on its targets (Seals & Young, 2003). The short-term as well as long-term effects are explored in this section.

- *Relational bullying during middle school.* The present study focused on bullying during sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. This is a period of time in adolescence that is characterized as being stressful and is marked by increased peer approval of relational aggression (Werner & Hill, 2010).

- *Adult perceptions of physical, verbal and relational bullying.* Middle school students believe that teachers and administrators do very little to stop bullying (Bosworth et al., 1999). In this section, research on teachers' and principals' perceptions is reviewed.

- *Role of the principal in school climate.* The quality of life for all students and school professionals is reduced when school bullying creates a climate of fear (Tremlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2001). The principal, as the leader of the school, plays a key role in school climate. His/her role as it relates to school climate is examined in this section

Because there is some question of how well international findings can generalize to the culture of American schools, this review focused predominately on American research; however, because international scholars have often guided relevant research, some international studies are also reviewed. Findings of empirical studies support the topics presented in each section. Chapter 2 culminates with a final summary that provides the rationale and hypothesis of the study.

Definition of Bullying

Three elements help to differentiate bullying from other forms of aggression. First, bullying inflicts intentional physical, verbal, and/or relational harm on the target.

Second, the actions against the target are repeated; it is not a one-time occurrence. Third,

there is usually an imbalance of power between the target and the bully. The bully might

be older, stronger, and/or more verbally skilled (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Olweus,

1994). The presence of all three elements causes more long-term consequences than if

just one of these components were present (Hazler et al., 2001). These elements can be

seen in the following definition, which was adapted from Hazler's (as cited in Carney &

Merrell, 2001) original definition.

> Bullying can be…defined as repeatedly (not just once or twice) harming
> others. This can be done by physical attack or by hurting others' feelings
> through words, actions, or social exclusion. Bullying may be done by one
> person or by a group. It is an unfair match since the bully is physically,
> verbally and/or socially stronger than the victim (p. 365).

Though definitions can vary slightly, there seems to be consensus that the elements

referenced in the above definition are commonly accepted. Definitions can be imprecise

depending on the interpretation of words used, so it is critical to clearly define the

construct of bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006).

In the literature, behaviors that were considered playful bullying, for example, a

one-time incident or what appeared to be good-natured teasing among friends, were

excluded from most definitions (Berger, 2007). A key difference between bullying and

normal peer conflict was that normal peer conflict reflected equal power or friends,

happened occasionally, and was usually accidental (Seale, 2004). On the other hand,

bullying behavior is not an accident. A student who bullies another is purposely trying to

hurt his or her target in some way. As a result of an imbalance of power, the target has

difficulty defending him/herself (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). For the purposes of this

study, bullying was viewed as behavior that was mean spirited, intentional, repetitive, and reflected an imbalance in power.

Section Summary

Throughout the literature there are varying definitions of bullying. There appears to be consensus among key scientists on the core elements of what should be included in a definition of bullying: intent to harm, repetition, and imbalance of power. Definitions can appear fuzzy due to interpretation of these elements (Smith, 2004) as well as semantics (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). However, a concern inherent in the research on bullying should be on how individual studies address each of three elements to allow for comparability of studies and meaningful results. Smith suggested that in spite of limitations that might occur in trying to define bullying, as the knowledge on bullying expanded, it was important that further research be informed by any new insights gained and that definitions be tweaked to reflect what was learned.

A definition of bullying is only one small part of understanding the complexity the phenomenon. In the past 20 years, scholars have shifted to a "fascination regarding bullies" (Berger, 2007, p. 92). The following historical overview of research on bullying provides a foundation for the continued growth of research on this topic.

Historical Review of Research on Bullying

Bullying is not a new phenomenon; as children have been bullied for countless generations. Over 30 years ago bullying was deemed as a serious threat to child development and a potential cause of school violence (Olweus, 1978). For many, the view has been that bullying was a natural course of events that occurred during childhood

and that it was a *rite of passage*. Barone (1997) surveyed 847 eighth graders and 110 school professionals to bring light to the question of why bullying continued to be a problem in schools, even though it was not necessarily being tolerated. His conclusion was, that due to the difference in perceptions between students and school staff regarding the prevalence of bullying, "Bullying just does not seem to be that 'big a problem' to the staff" (p. 80).

How we view this phenomenon of bullying has been changing. Rigby (1996) believed that we were beginning to see that bullying among school-age children had become quite an intolerable social evil with consequences that were much greater than had ever been imagined. It was not a phenomenon found only in special settings. It is now viewed as a near-universal phenomenon found in most cultures of the world and crossing all ethnic and socioeconomic lines. Berger (2007), in her summary of publication history and review of what has been learned about bullying over the years, argued for continued bullying research because it "is surprisingly common, affecting almost every child worldwide, harming them not only at the moment but sometimes for years to come" (p. 93).

Olweus (1973) took the lead in studying bullying and as a result is often referred to as the pioneer in examining bullying behaviors. He began a large-scale project, which is generally regarded as the first scientific study of bully/victim problems in the world. It was published in the United States in 1978 under the title *Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys* (Berger, 2007). Later, in the early 1980s when three 14-year old-boys in Norway committed suicide as a result of being targeted by bullies, Olweus

began conducting intervention studies on bullying looking for keys to effective interventions. These studies eventually led to a popular intervention program, The Olweus Bully Prevention Program (Olweus, 1993) is used in schools world-wide today. In later years, first slowly, and then at an accelerating rate, studies on bullying were conducted in other industrialized countries other than Norway: Britain, Canada, Holland, Italy, Spain, Japan, and Australia (Berger, 2007).

During the 1980s and 1990s, extensive research from these countries indicated that between 8% and 38% of students are bullied with some regularity and that between 5 % and 9% of students bullied others with some regularity (Rigby, 1996).   As a result of international findings such as these, research on this topic increased significantly. From 1900-1990, there were 62 citations in PsycINFO, growing to 289 in the 1990s and finally to 562 from the years 2000-2004 (Berger, 2007).

American researchers, though slow to get on board in this research, made significant advances in understanding the complexities of bullying. The focus on bullying seemed to accelerate during the late 1990s as a result of highly publicized student suicides and school shootings. Chronic victimization may have been a significant motivating force behind the shootings at Columbine High School, Red Lake High School, and Virginia Tech (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003; Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008).

Important studies have attempted to define and explore terminology (Crick, 1995; Hazler, et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993, 1994; Sampson, 2002; Smith & Brain, 2000), to evaluate the prevalence of bullying on school campuses (Hoover, et al., 1992; Nansel et

al., 2001; Seals & Young, 2003; Swearer & Cary, 2003), to investigate the difference

between adult and student perceptions (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Charach,

Pepler, & Zielger, 1995; Hazler, et al., 2001; Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson, & Power,

1999), to determine consequences and causes (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Dake, Price, &

Telljohann, 2003; Espelage, et al., 2000; Rigby, 2003), and to assess prevention efforts in

schools (Astor, Benbenishy, & Meyers, 2005; Leff, Power, & Goldstein, 2004; Olweus,

1996). Numerous findings over the past ten years have provided insights that paved the

way for the current study. An overview of some of the critical findings follows.

Though exact numbers are difficult to generate because definitions and measures

vary across studies (Espelage & Swearer, 2003), one key finding is that bullying is

common and pervasive. Nansel et al. (2001), a frequently referenced study on bullying

prevalence, in a national study of 15,686 students in Grades 6 through 10, found that

29.9% of students reported involvement in either moderate or frequent bullying which

translates to a national estimate of 5,736, 417 youth. On a global perspective, Nansel,

Craig, Overpeck, Saluja, & Ruan (2004) analyzed data from students in 25 different

countries. They found that involvement in bullying ranged from 9% to 54%. No country

indicated zero involvement. The implication from most studies was that bullying was an

insidious problem that had reached a critical level of importance and needed to be

addressed so schools could provide a safe and secure environment where teachers could

teach and students could learn.

Secondly, though adults and students in general agreed that bullying existed on

school campuses, there was a definite divide between how students and school staff

perceived it. Teachers tended to underestimate the number of students being bullied compared to what students report (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Holt & Keyes, 2004). Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, and Charach (1994) found that 84% of teachers (78 teachers from four schools) felt they intervened "always" or "often" in incidents of bullying, whereas only 35% of the students felt teachers intervened. These data supported evidence of a disconnect between teacher and student perceptions. Differences in teachers' beliefs about bullying tended to influence whether and how they responded to it (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008).

Early research primarily concentrated on physical and verbal bullying (Goldstein et al., 2008; Prinstein et al., 2001) because these were easier to identify and assess and were more commonly recognized as forms of bullying. Due in part to multiple studies conducted by Crick and her colleagues, another domain of bullying is now recognized – relational bullying. These studies (Crick 1996; Crick & Bigbee, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, 1996; Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006) among others contribute to another crucial finding: physical and verbal bullying were not the only forms of bullying that presented a concern for students' well-being at school. Relational bullying was insidious and could have long-term effects on attitudes and behaviors of both bullies and victims (Dukes et al., 2009).

A great deal about the phenomenon of bullying has been learned and major insights gained. Although much of the early literature was dominated by international research, over the past decade research from the United States has added to the growing body of knowledge on bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). It appears the more that bullying

behaviors are studied, the more concerns and questions arise. There are still many

dynamics of bullying that need further investigation to help guide American schools to

effectively address bullying prevention and intervention.

Section Summary

Due to the efforts of school officials in Norway in 1982 (Berger, 2007) in

addressing the concerns of bullying behavior and the research of Daniel Olweus (1973,

1978, 1984), worldwide attention focused on the concerns of bullying. Indeed, over the

past 30 years, other countries, including the United States, recognized bullying as a

serious problem and contributed many findings to inform and influence others. However,

American researchers cannot rely on findings from international studies alone; these

findings raised issues about the transportability of international findings to the

culture of the United States (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). There are still many

unanswered questions (e.g., how gender factors into bullying, the long term effects of

relational bullying, effective interventions) behooves researchers in the United States to

continue the momentum on bullying research that Olweus (1973) began 30 years ago.

Clearly, findings from the research vary, depending on the definition of bullying,

the age group, the country studied, and other demographic variables. Whatever the

statistic for the extent of being bullied or bullying others, there seems to be consensus

supporting the view that bullying is widespread and insidious in schools in every country

that has studied the problem (Sampson, 2002). Worldwide bullying appears to be

widespread but how prevalent is it in the United States?

Pervasiveness of Bullying in the United States

Up until the early 1990s, the topic of bullying in the United States had received little professional attention (Hoover & Hazler, 1991). In the aftermath of horrific shootings like those at Columbine High School in 1999 (Espelage & Swearer, 2004) our nation seems to have gone on alert to take the issues of bullying more seriously. Nearly 40 students since 1996 have been killed with dozens more injured in school shootings (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). Research on bullying in the United States is critical to our understanding, because studies from other countries may not generalize to the U.S. due to language variations, cultural context, and a lack of common operational definitions (Berger, 2007; Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

Incidence rates in the United States have been reported to be higher than in any other country (Duncan, 1999; Hoover et al., 1992; Sampson, 2002). Though there is a lack of extensive large-scale school research on bullying, there is enough evidence to indicate that school bullying is widespread in American schools (Sampson, 2002). The findings from Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel (2009), a large national study of 7,182 adolescents, indicated high prevalence rates of having bullied others or having been bullied at school at least once in the past two months: 20.8% physically, 53.6% verbally, and 51.4% relationally.

Results from a South Carolina study (Limber, Flerx, Nation, & Melton, 1998) of more than 6,000 students, grades four to six, revealed that 23% of these students had been bullied by other students several times over a three-month period and that 20 % of students bullied others with some regularity Other studies from across the country

confirmed high levels of bullying behaviors, with 10% to 29% of students reporting that they were either bullies or had been bullied (Sampson, 2002).

One of the most frequently referenced studies (Nansel et al., 2001) was a large national survey of 15,686 students in grades six through ten that further substantiated the prevalence of bullying in American schools. In this sample, 10.6% of the students reported having bullied others "sometimes," and 8.8% reported that they had bullied others "once a week or more." A larger percentage, 29.9%, reported having been involved in "moderate" to "frequent" bullying, and 13% had been a target of bullying. In all, over 28% of the students reported having being involved in bullying as a victim, a bully, or both.

Haynie, Nansel, Eitel, Crump, Saylor, Yu, and Simons-Morton, (2003) focused on a narrower range of students in grades six through eight from one suburban Maryland school district. Of the 4,263 students from seven different middle schools who completed the survey, the results showed that during the previous school year:

- 978 (24.1%) reported bullying someone at least once.
- 677 (16.7%) reported bullying someone one or two times.
- 301 (7.4%) reported bullying three or more times.
- 1,815 (44.6%) reported being victimized at least once.
- 558 (13.7%) reported being victimized one or two times.
- 1,257 (30.9%) reported being victimized three or more times.

The results of this study confirmed a common theme: the prevalence of victimization is greater than the prevalence of bullying. These results substantiated what

was learned from previous studies across the United States: involvement in bullying, whether as a perpetrator and/or a target, continues to occur in our schools and factored quite significantly in the area of adolescent peer relationships (Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003).

Indicators of School Crime and Safety (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009), published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), presented the most recent data available on school crime and safety. An array of data sources from 2007 was compiled and organized around 21 indicators of school crime and safety. Indicator 7, *Discipline Problems Reported by Public Schools,* delineated student bullying as a discipline concern. Twenty-five percent of the public schools (any combination of Grades K-12) surveyed across the nation reported that student bullying occurred on a daily or weekly basis. Middle school reported a higher percentage of bullying than primary schools (44% vs. 21%) or high schools (44% vs. 22%).

Indicator 11, *Bullying at School and Cyber-bullying Anywhere* (NCES/BJS, 2009), was based on a survey of students ages 12-18 to find out whether they had been bullied at school during the school year. The results showed that 32% of the students had been bullied. Sixty-three percent reported being bullied once or twice during the year, 21% once or twice a month, 10% once or twice a week, and 7% reported being bullied almost daily. Based on the findings in this report, schools in the United States were experiencing levels of bullying that remained a cause for concern for our schools.

Section Summary

Describing bullying in school as a serious widespread social problem is not an overstatement (Ma, Stewin, & Mah, 2001). Bullying impacts the targets and the perpetrators as well as witnesses. Estimates of the prevalence of school bullying vary, depending on the methodology used, the definition of bullying and the time frame used for measurement. Nansel et al. (2001), one of the largest cross national studies reported that 30% of students surveyed in grades 6 through 10 had been involved in bullying. None of the literature indicated a prevalence of zero.

Research on bullying began in Scandinavia in the 1980s (Berger, 2007; Carney & Merrell, 2001, Hoover & Hazler 1992) and is now conducted worldwide with a significant increase in activity occurring in the United States in the past 20 years. Though international research on bullying provided a valuable knowledge base, there were questions associated with how transferable the results from these studies are due to culture and language variations. Another possible limitation in comparability of studies is in terms of defining bullying and its components. The common elements of what is classified as bullying behavior are delineated in the next section.

Forms of Bullying

Bullying manifests in a variety of forms, with each form being distinct from the others; however these forms may also interrelate and create meaningful clusters of bullying. (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). Bullying constitutes a spectrum of behaviors that is often viewed as either overt or covert (see Figure 1). Overt bullying is further categorized into physical and verbal forms of bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006;

Boulton & Underwood, 1992), whereas covert bullying is often distinguished as social

bullying and referred to as relational bullying (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Goldstein et al.,

2008; Herrenkohl, McMorris, Catalano, Abbott, Hemphill, & Toumbourou, 2007; Smith,

Rose, & Schwartz-Mette, 2010).

Physical bullying includes but is not limited to pushing, hitting, and kicking and

because of its overt nature is more easily "seen" by others. This is considered the least

sophisticated form of bullying due to ease in identifying the perpetrators of these actions

(Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Verbal bulling such as teasing, calling names, or laughing

at targets often occurs in face-to-face confrontations (Espelage & Swearer, 2003) so is

overt in nature and thus is also in the category of overt bullying. Verbal bullying is not

always as discernable as physical bullying because these behaviors can occur quickly and

out of the view.

Because physical and verbal bullying are usually easier to measure, because they

are overt and more often observable, earlier studies (e.g., Boulton & Underwood, 1992;

Callaghan & Joseph, 1995; Olweus, 1978; Slee, 1995) on bullying focused mostly on

overt bullying limiting our understanding of other bullying behaviors that are

characteristic of early adolescents (Espelage et al., 2000). Studies on physical and verbal

bullying generally measure bullying by eliciting student responses to surveys asking how

frequently they experience examples of these forms of bullying.

An important extension to the literature on bullying revealed that overt bullying is

not the only area of concern. Nicki Crick, who published at least 35 articles (e.g., Crick,

1995, 1996; Crick & Bibee, 1998; Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002; Crick & Grotpeter,

1995, 1996; Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006) with a focus on relational bullying, was among the first researchers in the United States to distinguish a third form of bullying, commonly referred to as *relational* and to recognize it as a distinct form of aggression. She and her colleagues were a major influence in identifying and defining relational bullying.

This form of bullying is referred to as relational because it disrupts the social relationships between the perpetrator and the target (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational bullying, usually covert, includes social exclusion, spreading rumors, and withholding friendships (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Bullying that targets student relationships and peer standings is equally damaging, if not more so, and appears to have implications for school-related problems that can extend into adulthood (Goldstein et al., 2008).

One of the first studies on relational bullying, conducted by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), provided initial evidence of the validity of a relational form of aggression, its definite distinction from overt aggression, and its significance to social-psychological maladjustment. A peer nomination instrument was used to assess relational aggression with 491 third- through sixth-grade students from four public schools in a Midwestern town. This study provided evidence that the degree of aggression exhibited by girls had been underestimated because prior studies assessed mostly physical and verbal bullying. These results along with others during this time period (e.g., Crick, 1995, 1996; Crick & Werner, 1998) helped to fuel further research that developed a deeper understanding of the correlates, antecedents, and impact of relational aggression.

Because aggressive boys had received much of the attention in earlier research, and research was lacking on aggression that was salient to girls, a decade later Crick, et al. (2006) attempted to fill this void in the literature. Their longitudinal study spanned 12 months following 224 children (111 boys, 113 girls) from third grade to fourth grade. Their findings indicated that, similar to physical aggression, relational aggression was also associated with maladjustment. Their study highlighted the need to expand research on aggression to include both genders as well as overt and covert aggression. Only then could researchers fully understand the true risk status of aggressive children.

Section Summary

To understand the complexities of bullying, it is not enough to provide only a conceptual definition of bullying, because bullying takes on many forms. The constructs must also be clearly defined. Researchers have posited at least three forms of bullying: physical, verbal, and relational. Physical and verbal behaviors such as teasing, name calling, hitting, and shoving are overt actions, and past research primarily focused on such overt behaviors (Espelage et al., 2000). Less understood is relational bullying such as rumor spreading, withdrawing friendship, and excluding from peer groups, which is usually more covert in nature and has become a popular topic of study in the literature (Bauman, 2008; Swearer, 2004; Wang et al., 2009; Yoon, Barton, & Taiairol, 2004).

As noted previously, forms of bullying studied in earlier research were generally verbal and physical, but more recent research is incorporating all three constructs: verbal, physical, and relational (Card, et al., 2008; Crick et al., 2005; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Considering a more inclusive range of aggressive behaviors, physical, verbal, as well as

relational, researchers are able to examine the correlations between various forms of bullying and assess whether there are meaningful gender differences (Card et al., 2008).

Distinctions in types of bullying were created to organize data meaningfully and as such need to be used cautiously because these categories sometimes overlap. For example, intimidation, a behavior seen in relational bullying, though often done covertly may also be exhibited as an overt verbal behavior if executed aloud directly to the target. With these overlaps in mind, for the purposes of this study, physical and verbal bullying are considered overt with relational bullying being covert.

Though physical, verbal, and relational bullying have been reviewed and discussed in this section, a closer look at the literature specifically as it relates to relational bullying during middle school will be addressed next. Research suggests that relational bullying negatively contributes to the social, emotional, and psychological climate of schools, especially in middle school (Goldstein et al., 2008; Unnever & Cornell, 2003).

Relational Bullying in Middle School

According to Espelage and Asidao (2001) empirical literature on bullying conducted in the United States primarily examined bullying among elementary school children, with a clear gap in literature on bullying that was relevant during the middle school years. In their meta-analytic review of 20 years of research on peer victimization, also referred to as bullying, Hawker and Boulton (2000) found that most of the participants in the studies were between 8-13 years of age, which included some of the middle school years, but their review was not specific to studies from the United States

(e.g., Boulton & Smith, 1994; Olweus, 1978; Rigby & Slee, 1992) nor to studies focusing only on middle school grades.   Though more limited in number, a review of literature uncovered American studies (e.g., Bosworth et al., 1999; Espelage et al., 2000; Hoover et al., 1992; Oliver & Hoover, 1994) that contributed to the initial knowledge base of middle school bullying.

A review of post 2001 literature indicated that researchers have heeded Espelage and Asidao's (2001) recommendation and the gap of research on middle school bullying has been closing (e.g., Bauman & Summers, 2009; Dukes et al., 2009; Pellegrini, 2002; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Not only were there more studies focusing on middle school, but studies have become more inclusive of the different forms of bullying as well as investigating in more depth the role relational bullying has played during middle school. Following are examples of current American studies and their contributions to existing research on bullying during the middle school years.

Unnever and Cornell (2003) conducted a large-scale study of over 2400 students in Virginia from six different middle schools investigating how a school climate can support bullying. Based on the research of Cowie and Olafsson (2000), these researchers hypothesized that a culture of bullying exists when a school climate supports bullying behaviors and they found that among middle school students a culture of bullying behavior is a pervasive phenomenon, and this culture was shared among all six middle schools, regardless of demographics. Also interesting, they reported that upper grade level students more likely identified with the culture of bullying, even though they were not more likely to bully. Due to the relatively large data set, their study is significant;

unlike previous research conducted outside of the United States, it was not limited by sample size or student diversity.

The U.S. Department of Education and Justice Indicators of School Crime and Safety (DeVoe, Peter, Noonan, Snyder & Baum, 2005) reported that sixth and seventh grades were the highest risk years for being targeted by bullies. Other researchers suggested that bullying incidents tended to peak in middle school (Hoover et al., 1992; Pelligrini, 2002; Smith & Gross, 2006; Varjas, Henrich, & Meyers, 2009). Studies that focused on bullying during middle school have added to the general knowledge base of school bullying and the effects from exposure to it during middle school, but did not tease out relational bullying as part of a broader measure.

Relational bullying garnered the attention of Werner and Hill (2010) whose findings suggested that the transition into middle school was marked with increased approval of relational bullying. Participants in their study were drawn from a three-year longitudinal study, which allowed for measuring the developmental changes in 245 third-through eighth-grade students (49% female, 51% male) from one year to the next. The study tested whether classroom norms predict relational aggression 1 year later.

Participants rated the acceptance of aggression on a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores were associated with greater approval of aggression. Students, who reported greater approval of relational aggression, were found to be more relationally aggressive a year later with increases in levels of relational aggression higher for middle school than elementary. An additional finding was consistent with the growing literature that gender differences in relational aggression were relatively small.

Findings from Werner and Hill (2010) were consistent with Goldstein et al. (2008). Goldstein et al. (2008) studied 1,335 adolescents (52% female, 48% male) from seventh- through twelfth-grades who were asked about their experiences of being victimized both overtly and relationally. Data were collected from an online survey measuring victimization, witnessing aggression, perceptions of school safety and school social climate and weapon carrying. With the victimization measure, respondents were asked how often in the previous month they experienced being victimized by relational and overt aggression. Middle school students reported victimization more often, both overtly and relationally than high-school students. When students reported high levels of exposure to relational aggression, they perceived their schools were less safe.

These two studies (Goldstein et al., 2008; Werner & Hill, 2010) suggested that as students progress from elementary to middle school, relational bullying increased in acceptability as well as in the degree it was exhibited, and started to decline again in the transition to high school. Students during this age group appeared to be at greater risk for encountering relational aggression and the potential negative social experiences associated with it. "Relational aggression might not leave physical bumps or bruises, but it nonetheless contributes to a hostile and potentially dangerous school environment" (Goldstein et al., 2008, p. 653).

The conclusion that relational bullying was quite relevant in the lives of middle school students and that bullying could be a deliberate tactic to achieve peer status was supported in other research. Seals and Young (2003), in their study of 454 seventh- and eighth-grade students, found that 32.1% perceived that relational bullying occurred either

sometimes or *often*. Middle school students, who were relationally aggressive, were often perceived as being *cool* by their peers (Rose et al., 2004), which suggested that perpetrators used relational bullying to establish or maintain peer status. Pellegrini (2002) argued that research is desperately needed on the developmental and contextual factors that contribute to the increase and acceptance of bullying. He suggested "adolescents exploration of new social roles and their quest for status among peers are factors motivating aggression, especially as students make the transition from primary to middle school" (p. 151).

Because boys are generally thought to be more overtly and physically aggressive (Crick, Werner, Casas, O'Brien, Nelson, & Gropeter 1999; Smith Rose, Schwartz-Mette, 2009), much of the early research on bullying tended to focus only on boys. Conversely, since girls were thought to be more socially aggressive, they had been the sample studied when it comes to relational bullying (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Bullying studies that were single gender based provided interesting findings but provided conflicting reports about how gender impacted the frequency of relational aggression and tended to help fuel the misconception that relational aggression was predicted by gender. If teachers and administrators believed it was inherent for boys to be physical and girls to be relational in the form of bullying they engaged, then they might have discounted some bullying situations because of a belief that it was normal for boys to be physical and girls to be relational (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). In order for schools to mitigate problems associated with bullying, adults need to consider both overt and covert bullying behaviors (Dukes, Stein, & Zane, 2010).

To bring greater clarity to gender differences that may or may not exist in relational bullying, researchers have broadened their scope of study to include subjects from both genders. For example, Smith et al. (2010) used a sample of 607 students from Grades 3, 5, 7, and 9 with a fairly equal distribution of boys and girls to study the role of gender in relational aggression and the associations of relational aggression with peer acceptance. The students were assessed with a peer-report measure assessing aggression and peer acceptance. Their findings suggested that gender differences in relational aggression are more likely to surface during adolescence. Girls were more likely to engage in relational aggression when overt aggression was controlled; however boys were as likely as girls to engage in high levels of both relational and overt aggression. This study was unique because it compared gender differences in relational aggression with and without controlling for overt aggression. This was not considered in the research of Archer (2004) or Card et al. (2008), possibly accounting for the mixed findings.

Werner and Hill (2010) presented evidence that gender differences existed with overt aggression, not an uncommon finding in aggression research, because historically boys have been shown to be more physically aggressive; however, gender differences were unrelated to relational aggression. This latter finding is consistent with a growing body of literature showing that gender difference is small in regard to relational aggression (Card et al., 2008; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Prinstein et al., 2001; Rose et al., 2004). Findings that both boys and girls engaged in relational bullying were a departure from the research that had found that aggressive girls were the ones who tended

to engage in relational bullying (Archer, 2004; Craig & Pepler, 1997; Crick, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Mixed findings on gender difference in bullying presented a challenge to researchers who questioned the validity of previous studies on bullying due to two common limitations found in bullying literature: the focus on studying boys while also focusing only on physical bullying (Pelligrini, 2002). Also, mixed findings on relational bullying emerged when overt bullying was controlled (Smith et al., 2009). Perhaps the gender differences that have been noted are due more to methodology. As Swearer (2008) suggested, disparities in relational bullying have quite possibly been oversimplified, meaning that relational aggression is no more a "female" form of aggression than physical aggression is a "male" form of aggression.

Section Summary

Though research has focused primarily on overt physical and verbal bullying, great strides have been taken to include relational bullying in research. There were mixed views as to the gender differences in relational bullying but current research supported the view that both girls and boys engage in varying degrees in this form of bullying. Regardless of whether girls who bully were more relational than physical or boys who bully were mostly physical, neither gender was excluded totally from one form over another.

Research aimed at investigating whether there were increases over time in relational bullying have been emerging. There was corroborating literature to support that as students moved from elementary school to middle there was an increase in

bullying, especially relational; it tapered off as students entered high school. The literature indicated that middle school was a time in students' lives that was ripe for the increase in relational bullying and tended to peak during this time.

There were studies refuting the perception that bullying was differentiated in terms of gender. Not all aggressive girls were relationally aggressive nor were all aggressive boys physically aggressive. The greater need has been to assess school bullying in a multidimensional manner (Espelage et al., 2004).

Collectively, findings indicated that researchers needed to continue to explore relational bullying in light of research showing that experiences from relational bullying could be predictive of future social-psychological adjustment problems for its targets (Crick et al., 2006). These adjustment problems as well as other consequences for those targeted by relational bullying will be explored in the following section.

<div align="center">**Effects of Bullying**</div>

Effects of Bullying as an Inclusive Term

There is agreement among researchers that there were concurrent behavioral and emotional difficulties associated with bullying, as well as potential long-term negative effects for children (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Nansel et al., 2001; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Often research describing the effects of bullying has not differentiated between physical, verbal, or relational forms of bullying so in such studies the term *bullying* was inclusive of all forms. According to Rigby (2003) in an article written for the *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, "It is not known what forms of bullying are most likely to produce deterioration in the well-being and health of those

who are targeted" (p. 589). He went on to say that damage might likely come as a result of the cumulative effects of different forms of bullying. It was necessary to keep these qualifiers in mind when reviewing the findings on the effects of bullying.

In their meta-analysis of 11 observational studies, Gini and Pozzoli, (2009) indicated that an association exists between bullying and psychosomatic problems (e.g., headaches, backaches, abdominal pain and sleeping problems). The results showed that students between the ages of 7 and 16 involved in bullying, as a perpetrator, target, or bystander, had a significantly higher risk for psychosomatic problems compared to their uninvolved peers. This problem was just one of many that these three groups involved in bullying face.

Quality of life was impacted for all those involved with bullying: the target, the perpetrator, and the bystanders. For the target, there were negative lifelong consequences that led to low self-esteem, emotional distress, depression, and to such tragic consequences as suicide and killings (Boulton & Underwood, 1993). There were substantial number of cases cited where targets, after years of having internalized the abuse of bullying, instead of carrying out acts of retribution on others, had taken their own lives (Carney & Merrell, 2001). Less severe, but destructive to the physical, social and psychological development nonetheless, was the feeling of isolation that victims experienced long into adulthood (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997). Though the impact on academics was less well known, there was evidence that supported that those who bullied or were directly impacted by bullying experienced a drop in grades (Batsche & Knoff,

1994). "Continual emotional distress can create deficits in a child's intellectual abilities

crippling the capacity to learn" (Goleman, 1995, p. 27).

The perpetrators of bullying also experience negative consequences due to their

behavior. As they approach high school, bullies tend to have fewer friends and turn

toward more deviant behaviors including alcohol and drug abuse (Ballard, Argus, &

Remley, 1999). Olweus (1993) found that 60% of those students identified as

perpetrators at six to nine years of age had been arrested at least once, and 35 to 40% had

been arrested three or more times by the time they were 24 years old. Other findings also

indicated that youth who bullied when they were young were prone to becoming more

violent over time and often continued to bully others in adulthood through workplace

violence, verbal abuse, and spousal abuse (Garbarino & DeLara, 2002).

The third group, the bystanders, is often caught in the middle. They

unintentionally add to the problem by standing by and doing nothing to stop the

perpetrator or to help the victim. When bystanders do not speak up or report incidences of

bullying, they inadvertently encourage bullying behavior through their silence. As a

result there might be guilt feelings later when bullies or victims

ended up in tragic consequences (Shore, 2005). Bystanders have been found to suffer

from feelings of helplessness and powerlessness and thus could develop poor coping and

problem-solving skills (Nansel et al., 2001).

Not only did the victims, bullies, and bystanders feel the negative consequences

of chronic bullying behaviors, but society suffers financial costs due to increase in

violence, mental health issues, and alcohol and drug abuse. Schools suffer financial costs

associated with the loss of revenue through reduction in State aid formulas based on attendance.

Effects Specific to Relational Bullying

Compared to other literature on bullying, relatively little information has been generated on relational bullying as a single construct, especially from a longitudinal perspective. However, what has emerged is that like overt bullying, relational bullying parallels dysfunctional correlates of physical bullying and is associated with social adjustment risk for both girls and boys (Crick, 1996; Dukes et al. 2009), especially when the bullying is prolonged. After having conducted a meta-analysis on 20 years of cross-sectional studies that explored bullying and psychosocial maladjustment (e.g., depression, loneliness, low self-esteem and anxiety), Hawker and Boulton (2000) concluded that those involved in bullying suffered a variety of psychosocial distress. However, social forms of bullying such as relational bullying were often viewed as the most distressing.

Other studies of the social-psychological correlates of relational bullying indicate that relational bullying was associated with loneliness and depression for both girls and boys. A study by Prinstein et al. (2001) with a sample of 566 9th to 12th grade students (55% girls, 45% boys) from a small city in southern New England, indicated that after controlling for overt aggression, peers regardless of sex, who were subjected to relational bullying reported higher levels of internalizing symptoms: depression, loneliness, and lower self-worth. Participants were assessed with a nine-item questionnaire that indicated how often they engaged in certain behaviors as either a perpetrator or a target. Because of its ethnically diverse sample (21.8% Caucasian, 60.3% Hispanic, 10.6% African-

American, and 7.3% other or mixed ethnicity), not always present in relational bullying research, this research substantially contributed to the knowledge base in this area of study.

Targets of relational bullying are not the only group of children to experience maladjustment issues; research also shows that children who engage in relational aggression experience negative effects. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) assessed the social-psychological adjustment of children who engaged in relationally aggressive behaviors (i.e., relational bullying). A peer nomination instrument was administered to 491 third-through sixth-grade students (235 girls and 256 boys) from four public schools in a Midwestern town. Results demonstrated that relationally aggressive children were significantly more disliked than others, leading to feelings of social anxiety and rejection.

There is evidence to support that targets of relational bullying, like perpetrators of relational bullying, experience social anxiety and rejection. Findings from Putallaz, Grimes, Foster, Kupersmidt, Coie, and Dearing (2007) indicated that targets of relational bullying experienced sadness, depression, and loneliness. The data were gathered from a comprehensive study of 1,397 students (913 girls and 915 boys) in 78 fourth-grade classrooms in a midsized southeastern city. Unlike much of the earlier literature that measured the effects of bullying only from an overt behavior perspective, this study was a comparative examination of both overt and relational aggression, which allowed for a stronger case for results. Negative outcomes were associated with both overt and relational bullying.

Current findings provided support for an association between relational bullying and substance abuse among young adolescents. Tharp-Taylor, Haviland, and D'Amico (2009) collected data from 926 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders who participated in a survey in southern California. The survey was administered both in the fall and spring of the school year and assessed the association between two types of bullying victimization: physical and mental. Mental victimization is another term used to refer to relational victimization. Children who experienced each type of bullying, relational and physical, separately or in combination, were more likely to report use of each of the substances: alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and inhalants.

Studies (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Seals & Young, 2003) have shown a positive association between targets of bullying and depression, and this association was further supported by Luk, Wang, and Simons-Morton (2010) who obtained data from the 2005-2006 U.S. Health Behavior in School-Aged Children survey. Their cross-sectional study examined data from 1,495 10th grade students with results showing a significant relationship between being targeted by bullying and substance abuse, but also that depression was a mediating factor, especially for girls. One could extrapolate from this research as well as others (Card et al., 2008; Wiens, Haden, Dean, & Sivinski, (2010); Williams, Fredland, Han, Campbell, & Kub, 2009) that relational bullying could be a predictor of substance abuse.

Another externalizing behavior, which has been linked to relational bullying for both genders, is weapon carrying. Dukes et al. (2010) examined physical and relational bullying as predictors of adolescent injury and weapon carrying amongst 1,300 girls and

1,362 boys in Grades 7-12 in a Colorado school district. Students responded to a 112-item questionnaire about issues confronting young people, including physical and relational bullying as well as injury and weapon carrying. They found an increase in involvement in relational bullying resulted in greater frequency in weapon carrying. This externalizing behavior affected not only the targets of relational bullying, but the perpetrator and bystanders as well.

Often, those targeted by relational bullying cope with it by withdrawing from friendships and activities; when prolonged, this may result in the target having long-term personal problems including suicide ideation (Barone, 1997; Carney, 2000; Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003; Rigby, 2003). Reports from shootings and ensuing suicides from tragedies, like Columbine and Virginia Tech, have highlighted the need to continue investigating relational bullying among children and adolescents. Evidence indicated that prior to the shootings; the perpetrators had experienced prolonged bullying from their peers (Crawford, Kleinfield, & Rook as cited in Dukes et al., 2009). Leary et al. (2003) examined the role of social rejection in school violence through case studies of 15 school shootings between 1995 and 2001 and found that acute or chronic social rejection was present in all but two of the cases. This study suggested that relational bullying might be a contributor to school violence.

Some students, when bullied, do not act out their rage on others but take their own lives. An article in the *St. Louis Examiner* titled "Bullying: Teen Suicides on the Rise "listed the names of 12 students who either lost their lives due to suicide or survived a suicide attempt during the year (Seth, 2010). They ranged in age from 13-18. These

deaths were linked together due to a suicide-bullying connection, which begs further academic research on the contributing role relational bullying might have in school-related suicides.

Taking into account the effects of combined forms of bullying along with what has been learned about relational bullying exclusively, one could suggest that exposure to relational bullying has both short and long-term consequences for internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Based on the research of Hawker and Boulton (2000) and Baldry (2004), covert bullying such as relational bullying is a stronger predictor of children's anxiety, depression, low self-worth, and somatic illness than is overt bullying. Such psychiatric and social correlates of bullying could carry over into adulthood (Vaughn, Fu, Bender, DeLisi, Beaver, Perron, & Howard, 2010).

Section summary. Compared to earlier literature on bullying, relational bullying as a unique construct has drawn increased attention in the research due to findings linking it to both internal and external maladaptive outcomes. Overt forms of bullying have been well studied with the overall conclusion that overt bullying was associated with maladjustment (Card et al., 2008). Now researchers have recognized that not only was there a link to maladjustment with overt bullying behaviors, but also with more covert forms like relational bullying.

Studies (e.g., Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002; Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006; Williams, Fredland, Han Campbell, & Kub, 2009) have shown that the effects of relational bullying are both short and long-term. These effects are experienced by not only by the target but also by bystanders and bullies as well. Besides adverse health

symptoms for those targeted, there are also social and psychological maladjustment issues, which could carry over into adulthood. Targets of relational bullying tend to avoid and withdraw from their peers, causing great anxiety for them. They suffer from chronic absenteeism, loneliness and depression. Though longitudinal studies have been limited in scope in this area, there is indication that the effects of relational bullying can last a lifetime.

From the literature reviewed in the above section, it is clear that relational bullying, like overt forms of bullying, has negative health and maladjustment outcomes for those who involved. Effects include feelings of social anxiety and rejection, poor self-esteem, depression, loneliness, substance abuse, suicide ideation, and weapon carrying.

Relational bullying is still a relatively new area of study with limited published research on adult perceptions of relational bullying. Since school is where children spend a lot of their time, how do teachers and principals perceive relational bullying? Do their perceptions and resulting responses possibly contribute to problem of relational bullying? This is the next area of focus in the discussion.

Adult Perceptions of Physical, Verbal, and Relational Bullying

There are contradicting results on students and adult perceptions of how school professionals handle the issues of overt and covert bullying. Although school professionals do not appear to view relational bullying as severe as physical bullying (Hazler et al., 2001), there is evidence to indicate the serious effects that result from relational bullying. Pellegrini (2002), based on years of research on bullying and the factors that contributed to its increase during the middle school years, presented an

argument for further research on how school professionals potentially contribute to physical, verbal and relational aggression that occurred in schools. He felt this need was supported by a disturbing finding that school professionals either directly or indirectly have contributed to prevalence of school bullying due to a lack of understanding of developmental and school contextual factors that influence the increase and acceptance of bullying during middle school.

Existing American research on school professionals has been limited to the perceptions and attitudes of preservice teachers, teachers, counselors, and other support staff (e.g., Bauman, 2008; Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Bradshaw et al., 2007; Hazler, Miller, & Carney, 2001; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, (2006). Principals' perceptions were underrepresented in research with only a few studies being located. Some of the existing studies on school professional attitudes are reviewed next.

Teachers' Perceptions

As mentioned previously, most of the scant research on school adults' perceptions was on how teachers perceived bullying; those studies pointed to the fact that there were discrepancies between teachers' perceptions of the frequency of bullying occurrences as well as where the bullying occurred and what was done to stop it. One of the largest studies to date in the United States collected data on the prevalence of bullying from 15,185 students in Grades 4-12 and from 1,547 school staff members and teachers (Bradshaw et al., 2007). Students and school staff completed an anonymous Web-based survey on their perceptual differences on the three forms: physical, verbal, and relational. Perceived prevalence varied by school level. In middle school, 40% of staff estimated

that 10% or fewer students were bullied, whereas the students reported prevalence was 32.7%.

An earlier study by Barone (1997) also supported this discrepancy. The 110 counselors, teachers, and administrators surveyed believed that 16% of the students had been bullied while in middle school compared to the 847 ninth-grade students whose estimation was 58.8%. In the review of literature, few studies were found that contradicted the discrepancies between adult and student perceptions. The larger question is why this discrepancy exists. Part of the answer for this discrepancy may result from the differences in how school professionals and students define bullying and perceive its seriousness.

Teachers differ in what they believe constitutes bullying as well as what forms of bullying they perceive to be serious. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2006) reported that differences in how teachers perceived bullying influenced teachers' responses to victimization. Data were gathered from 34 elementary teachers and 363 ethnically diverse elementary students in a Southwestern school district. Teachers' beliefs and management strategies were measured using questionnaires on which respondents indicated how much they agreed with statements about victimization, and how often they would use a given strategy to manage a problem situation.

Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pellettier (2008) found that teachers were not likely to intervene if they viewed the bullying incidents as normative behavior. For example, they viewed peer bullying as normative behavior for boys and as a result did not intervene. The researchers suggested that this can possibly be explained by the fact that overt

bullying was more likely brought to the attention of teachers because it was more visible and disruptive in nature. Thus teachers may have concluded that boys were just being boys and this was normal behavior and intervention was not necessary. Relational bullying, on the other hand, was not brought as frequently to their attention because of its covert nature, perhaps resulting in a perception that it was not serious enough for intervention.

Two other studies, Bauman and Del Rio (2006) and Yoon and Kerber (2003) highlighted the discrepancy in perception of seriousness across three forms of bullying: physical, verbal, and relational. Yoon and Kerber measured 94 elementary teachers' attitudes towards physical, verbal, and relational bullying and found that teachers viewed relational bullying less seriously than other forms and were less likely to intervene. Similar results were found when Bauman and Del Rio examined 82 preservice teachers' responses to six vignettes that described the same forms of bullying as Yoon and Kerber. As predicted, preservice teachers found relational bullying to be a less serious form of bullying than the overt ones. Results such as these indicated that the damaging effects of relational bullying have not been fully understood by school personnel.

The perceived seriousness of bullying behaviors that influenced teachers' responses were further illuminated in a study (Maunder, Harrop, & Tattersall, 2010) conducted in North West England. The sample was drawn from students aged 12-13 and 15-16 along with teachers and support staff from four urban schools. In total there were 1,302 participants. The participants responded to scenarios describing physical, verbal, and relational bullying as well as some ambiguous behaviors. The results showed that

relational bullying was less likely to be defined as bullying and perceived as less serious

by all three participant groups: students, teachers and support staff. This study indicated

that students, like teachers, often did not appear to rate relational bullying as serious as

other forms of bullying. If students do not see it as serious, they most likely do not report

it. If students do not report this behavior and teachers do not observe it due to its covert

nature or due to a lack of awareness, then the cycle continues and relational bullying

continued to be viewed as a non-serious form of bullying.

There are other possible explanations for teacher lack of awareness. Findings

suggested that school adults tended to overlook some incidents of bullying because of the

misconception that it was an inevitable and a harmless aspect of childhood (Barone,

1997). This misconception may have been the message they learned from the adults in

their lives while they were growing up or perhaps they did not experience serious levels

of bullying during their childhood so were not able to relate to the harm that it could

cause.

Though misconceptions of the effect of bullying existed among adults, Bradshaw

et al. (2007) found that personal experience with childhood victimization played an

important role in predicting the likelihood of intervening in incidents of bullying. Over

53% of the staff surveyed indicated that they had been bullied as a child. Those who

reported being bullied as a child were more likely to view bullying as a more serious

problem than others.

Another hindrance to teacher identification of bullying is the tendency for

teachers to more readily recognize overt forms of bullying compared to covert forms

(Hazler et al., 2001). This could be a particular problem for middle school teachers since relational bullying is more common with this age group. Not only is relational bullying not easy to see occur, it is often done out of view. Students often fail to report this behavior to authorities, resulting in the perception that teachers do little about it. According to Unnever and Cornell (2004), in an anonymous survey of 2,437 middle school students from Virginia, 898 students were identified as being bullied. Sixty-two percent were targets of physical bullying, 89% of verbal bullying, and 75% of relational bullying, yet 40% of these had not told an adult. Why do students choose not to report bullying? Unnever and Cornell suggest that a possible distal factor associated with reporting is school climate. If students perceive their school climate to support a culture of bullying, they might be reluctant to report.

School climate, according to Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, and Konold (2009) has particular relevance to bullying. This conclusion was based on their study of 2,111 middle school students in Virginia who took the School Climate Bullying Survey (Cornell & Sheras, 2003) a hybrid of a bullying questionnaire and a school climate survey. The study focused on three climate scales that addressed the prevalence of bullying. Their findings demonstrated a correlational relationship between school climate and measures of school disorder, like bullying.

Teachers' perceptions about the seriousness of individual forms of bullying differed from those of students. At what point teachers choose to intervene in bullying incidents depends partially on how they perceive the incident of bullying and its

seriousness. Do principals perceive bullying similar to teachers? Literature on how principals perceive bullying is addressed in this next section.

Principals' Perceptions

Research specifically addressing teachers' roles related to bullying was limited (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Espelage & Swearer, 2003); however, research on principal perceptions was even more sparse.   The emphasis in the literature has been on teachers' perceptions because they are the adults who spend the greatest amount of time with students. However, the leadership role of a principal in intervening or tolerating bully behaviors cannot be underestimated.

A thorough review of literature focused specifically on principals' perceptions of bullying in the United States revealed only three studies. The smallest study collected questionnaire data from 49 Alabama elementary school principals (Flynt & Morton, 2008). The focus of this study was to gain a better understanding of how principals perceived bullying as it related to students with disabilities. When principals were asked how much of a problem bullying was in their school, 88% identified bullying as a minor problem, 10% replied that bullying was significant, and no principal replied that it was a major problem. Principals were also asked to respond to a question about the form of bullying students with disabilities experienced. Eighty-eight percent felt the majority of incidents were verbal bullying, there were no incidents of physical bullying, and 12% felt the incidents were relational bullying.

In summary, these 49 principals largely viewed bullying as a minor, mostly verbal problem. Because the questions about bullying were related only to students with

disabilities and there were no data on what percentage of the school population was made up of students with disabilities, it was difficult to generalize the results. Would these principals' responses be different if the students did not have disabilities? Due to its limitations in scope, Flynt and Morton's (2008) study provided little insight into principals' perceptions.

A second study (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2008), more extensive in scope examined 1,580 K-12 public school principals nationally. They were surveyed to gather data about their perceptions of school-safety, bullying, and harassment. Half of all the K-12 principals deemed bullying a serious problem at their schools, whereas three-quarters of middle school principals and less than half of elementary principals did so..

Principals were also asked to indicate the percentage of bullying incidents at school that are reported to them and how they most commonly handle these incidents. Sixty-six percent of principals (K-12) believed that only 50% or fewer of bullying incidents came to their attention. In regard to how these principals responded to incidents that were reported to them, 94 % said that the most common response was to speak to the student perpetrator followed by 90% speaking to the victim (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2008).

The combined results confirmed what is already known about how teachers and other support staff respond to bullying. Although this study did extend previous knowledge about school professionals, it showed that principals perceived and

responded to bullying much the same way teachers did. It did not differentiate

how principals responded to individual forms of bullying (GLSEN & Harris Interactive,

2008).

The third and final study was the only one that pertained to middle school

principals as a discrete group (Harris & Hathorn, 2006). Fifty-nine middle-school Texas

principals were surveyed about their perceptions of bullying on their campus. They were

asked what types of bullying they perceived occurring on their campus. Spreading

rumors, which is associated with relational bullying, was the most frequently reported

form of bullying. The principal responses were: 57.6 % noticed it "sometimes" and

32.2 % noticed it "often." Being left out on purpose, which is another behavior strongly

associated with relational bullying, was perceived "rarely" by 50.8% of the principals and

"sometimes" by 35.6 % of the principals.

In general, the principals in this study reported occurrences of bullying as either

"sometimes" or "somewhat less." Like other research on adult perceptions, this study

showed that how adults viewed bullying differed from students. Prior research showed

that "as many as 75% of students reported that bullying occurred on their campuses at

least "sometimes" (Harris & Hathorn, 2006, p. 66). Nearly all the principals considered

their school safe in relation to bullying. Their perceptions of school safety may not

reflect reality since 160,000 students skip school daily because they do not feel safe and

fear being bullied (Fried & Fried, 1996).

A conclusion that can be drawn from these three studies on principal perceptions

is that the results do not vary widely from those obtained from research on perceptions

held by teachers. Principals, like teachers, view the issues of bullying (i.e., frequency, behaviors constituting bullying) differently from students. Principals appear to be less aware than students of the prevalence. For whatever reason, teachers, who are with students the majority of the school day, did not accurately assess the extent of bullying that occurs in schools (Marshall, Varjas, Meyers, Graybill, & Skoczylas, 2009), so it is quite possible that principals who have less contact with students than teachers might also assess the extent of bullying inaccurately.

More recent research on bullying seems to recognize that when gathering data on perceptions of bullying, the term *bullying* needs to be all encompassing – it must include all three forms discussed in previous sections: physical, verbal, and relational. Often when adults acknowledge that bullying exists on their campuses, they are referring mostly to the more physical and overt forms since they are more readily observable and brought to their attention. Future research needs to be dedicated to exploring principals' perceptions as it relates to relational bullying because principal support is emphasized as important in reducing bullying at school (Will & Neufeld, 2002). Harris (2004) found that 24% of students did not feel administrators were interested in stopping bullying. Students reported feeling less supported by administrators than administrators might have believed students felt.

Section summary. Increasing understanding of children's and adult's views on bullying is key to understanding the scope of bullying and helping schools to better manage it. The majority of research on bullying has been focused on students' perceptions, with most studies occurring at the elementary level with some at high school. The perceptions

of middle school students are underrepresented, yet it is well documented that the middle school years can be problematic for students and their peer relationships (Espelage & Asidao, 2001; Harris & Petrie, 2002; Harris & Hathorn, 2006; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Relational aggression in middle school can be particularly salient as social status and acceptance in peer groups becomes more important (Yoon & Kerber, 2003).

Also underrepresented in the literature are the views on bullying by school professionals. What literature was located indicates that almost universally, there is a definite gap in the way teachers and students perceive the frequency of bullying, and the type of incidents that constitute bullying. Adult views on relational bullying are also missing from the literature, as most adult perceptions address bullying in more general terms or focus on more overt types.

Locating only three studies on principals' perceptions of bullying indicates that current literature on this topic is limited. The three studies reviewed from suggested that principal and student views vary significantly, just as they do for teachers and students. Unlike earlier research, the three principal studies recognized the significance of addressing not only the overt forms of bullying, but also addressing the perceptions of relational bullying. Though the extent that bullying was perceived to be a serious problem varied in the three principal studies, there appeared to be an awareness of the different forms of bullying and no school principal reported that bullying did not exist.

Because research on principals' perceptions about bullying is scarce, there might be a tendency to assume that principals' perceptions are similar to those of teachers. Such assumptions are dangerous because principals bring their own set of values and

perspectives to the school. These values and perspective can impact the school climate, either condoning or inhibiting school bullying. A discussion on the importance of the principal's role in school climate follows.

Role of Principal in School Climate

A principal's leadership contributes to school climate. Based on Emmons (1993), Bandyopadhyay et al. (2009) defined school climate "as the quality and frequency of interactions among adults and students" (p. 339). These interactions contribute to students' perceptions of fairness, strictness, the quality of student-adult relationships. From findings of an exploratory study on how 56 Flemish principals perceived their role as school leaders, Devos and Bouckenooghe (2009) concluded that the principal fulfills a key role in shaping the school climate as well as undergoing the effect of school climate since he/she is immersed in it. They noted, "That what principals think determines what they do could be considered simplistic reductionism" (p. 192). If principal leadership impacts school climate and school climate contributes to bullying, then why are principals' perceptions on bullying so underrepresented in bullying literature?

The presence of just one student who bullies can have an effect in a school that can create a climate of fear and intimidation for the victim as well as their peers (Bosworth et al., 1999; Olweus & Limber, 2000). Leff, Power, Costigan, and Manz, (2003) and Nansel et al., 2001 helped to define the role of school climate in bullying. Their studies indicated that school climate played a role in inhibiting or promoting bullying. This finding was extended by Bandyopadhyay et al., (2009) in their study of 2,111 students from four middle schools in central Virginia. Using The School Climate

Bullying Survey (Cornell & Sheras, 2003) a 45-item self-report instrument, they measured the extent and nature of bullying problems in middle school. Their results strongly suggested students who condoned aggressive behaviors, even found them socially desirable, were more likely to bully others and encouraged bullying among their peers. These researchers suggest that if students condone this behavior, it is possible that principals and teachers condone it as well.

Research comparing schools with high and low bullying rates, has suggested that a principal's commitment to preventing and controlling bullying was a major contributing factor to low rates (Sampson, 2002). Principals and school staff who did not address the pervasiveness of bullying were functionally condoning it (Carney & Merrell, 2001) and as a result were conveying a symbolic demeaning message of a student's worth (Hoover & Hazler, 1991). Because schools are in the business of developing the social as well as the academic needs of students, Carney and Merrell believe that this is not a message they would want to convey, especially given the knowledge that these messages could remain with individuals a lifetime.

Nearly all principals believe their schools to be safe, yet students do not always feel safe or feel they had the support of teachers and principals. In order for schools to be a safe haven, they must be a safe haven for *all* students (Harris & Hathorn, 2006). Relational bullying "contributes to a hostile and potentially dangerous school environment" (Goldstein et al., 2008, p. 653). Harris and Hathorn recommended that principals promote a school climate that allows children to learn in an environment where they feel safe. They can only promote this type of environment if they believe that

relational bullying is serious and fully understand the detrimental effects of ongoing relational bullying.

If a school tolerates a climate of bullying, it is the principal that can initiate the changes that lead to minimizing bullying in the school. But as research on teacher attitudes has shown, adults often have normative beliefs about bullying which impacts how they respond to it. Research thus far has not extensively included principals in adult perceptions of school bullying, so what principals truly perceive bullying comprises and how serious they perceive each form to be remains to be understood. This area of study is still uncharted territory and needs to be addressed to aid in the understanding of how principals contribute to and or prevent a school environment that condones any and all forms of bullying.

Section Summary

Indications are that principals can positively impact the school climate. When students are victimized and have a negative perception of their school environments, it is the responsibility of the principal to ensure that the myths that allow bullying are unacceptable (Ballard, Argus & Remley, Jr., 1999). They need to believe that bullying is not a normal part of development.

<div align="center">**Summary of Literature Review**</div>

Though bullying research began in Norway and expanded to other European countries before capturing the attention of American researchers, the review of literature selected was primarily from the United States. Given how relatively new this research is, there are now a plethora of studies on bullying as well on aggressive behaviors of which

bullying is considered a subset. There appears to be agreement on how to define bullying; both the conceptual definitions as well as the classifications of behaviors that are associated with bullying are well-known.

No studies reviewed suggested that bullying did not exist or that it was harmless. Research indicated that bullying is a complex phenomenon and is far more prevalent than most people, including school leaders, thought (Dake, Price, Tellijohann, & Funk, 2003). Although there are some contradictory findings, most of the literature pointed to bullying being salient in the lives of middle school students (Espelage & Asidao, 2001). Though middle school students experience all three forms of bullying (physical, verbal, and relational), relational bullying seems to take on new meaning during this period of time, most likely due to the increasing pressure of peer acceptance (Parault, Davis, & Pellegrini, 2007).

One area in which research findings were inconsistent was how gender related with relational bullying. Some findings suggested that girls tended to be more relational whereas boys used verbal and physical forms of bullying more often. Other findings indicated little if any gender difference existed. These inconsistencies and limited studies on relational bullying in middle school beg for more thorough research in this area.

The literature on consequences of the most prevalent forms of bullying was pretty straightforward. There was general consensus that all participants (the bully, the target, and the bystanders) who experience bullying behavior were impacted adversely to varying degrees. The physical, emotional, and educational costs of bullying cannot be underestimated (Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008); there are both short and long-term

costs. In terms of relational bullying, its consequences mirror those of physical and verbal bullying. However, there was strong evidence to suggest that there was a link with chronic relational-bullying and high-level violence such as gun shootings at school and adolescent suicide. These acts of high-level violence have been grabbing attention in headlines, increasing the need for more research, especial longitudinal, in order to more accurately measure the role of chronic bullying as a possible antecedent to these tragic acts.

Not all bullying leads to such drastic measures, but if pervasive in a school, it appears to negatively impact the school climate. Students became fearful and school enjoyment suffers if students felt they attend a school that tolerates these types of behaviors. School climate has been shown to have particular relevance for the prevention of bullying (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2009).

Research on adult perceptions clearly showed a discrepancy between students and adults. Students in general feel that adults did not do enough to stop bullying. If they do step in, it is usually because it is an easier form of bullying to detect, such as hitting and pushing. Relational bullying, being subtler to observe, is often overlooked. An attitude that often prevails in schools is that relational bullying is "normal behavior," especially for middle school students. Low-level violence such as bullying is a prevalent yet understudied form of school violence (Meyer-Adam & Conner, 2008). Pellegrini (2002) argued that research is desperately needed on bullying in middle school due to the apparent increase in bullying during this time period. Since much of the focus to date has been more on overt aggression, more attention is needed on relational bullying.

In the review of literature, there were very few studies with a focus on principal perceptions of bullying. In the search, three studies from the United States were found and reviewed. Literature emphasized that as school leaders, principals played a key role in creating and maintaining a healthy school climate where all constituents felt safe. Teachers' perceptions were represented in the literature, but principals' perceptions were sorely underrepresented. A broader base of knowledge is needed in this area. Do principals, like many teachers, have the misconception that bullying is inevitable and a fairly harmless aspect of growing up? Like other adults at the school, do principals tolerate or contribute to the problem of bullying? What forms of bullying do principals believe are serious? These are still unanswered questions in the literature.

The current study explored three of the constructs underrepresented in bully research: relational bullying, bullying in middle school, and principal perceptions of bullying. Because middle school years can be problematic for students and their peer relationships and prolonged acts of relational bullying can have devastating effects, it is vital to gain more knowledge so principals will have a clearer understanding of their role in inhibiting

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research methodology, data collection, and data analysis employed in the current study. How principals responded to different incidents of bullying, particularly to incidents of relational bullying, was the focus of this research. The research questions that guided this research were

1. How do middle school principals respond to incidents of school bullying and how do these responses vary by form of bullying?

2. How do principals perceive the severity of each form of bullying?

3. What strategies do principals use when responding to bullying incidents?

4. How do middle school principals describe their decision making process for selecting a response to school bullying incidents?

Research Methods

Research has shown that school adults' perceptions vary about which situations actually constitute bullying as well as the severity of bullying (Hazler et al., 2001; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). The majority of these studies on teacher and school staff attitudes primarily used quantitative data collection and analysis (e.g., Bradshaw et al, 2007; Dake et al., 2003; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). As Maunder, Harrop, & Tattersall (2010) pointed out, differences obtained in perceptions

can be a function of methodology rather than functions of differing perceptions. To complement the quantitative research that exists, a qualitative method was used in this study.

Understanding differing perspectives is a key characteristic of a qualitative paradigm. In the case of this study, the goal was to understand the principals' perspectives about bullying and how they perceived the severity of relational bullying. One way to accomplish this was through the principals' lived experience. "Human actions cannot be understood unless the meaning that humans assign to them is understood" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 53). Interviews and the use of vignettes were used to gain principals' perspectives.

Creswell (2003) stated in using qualitative methods the "researcher collects open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data" (p. 18). The current study gathered data from interviews with middle school principals; therefore, the use of a qualitative design to identify common themes was further warranted. Creswell (2003) argued that if a concept needed to be understood more fully, a qualitative approach was merited. As stated previously, principals' views on bullying, in particular relational bullying, have thus far been unchartered territory in the research.

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested some recurring features of qualitative research. Two features in particular that aligned to the current study stood out. One was that the researcher attempts to "capture data on the perceptions of local actors" (p. 6), which in the current study are the perceptions of middle school principals. The second

feature proposed that the main task of the research was to explain, "the ways people in a particular setting come to understand, account for, take action and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations" (p. 7). The *people* in this study were the middle school principals and their actions were their responses to the bullying situations with which they were confronted.

Because qualitative research espouses a naturalistic approach, the research questions posed in the current study seemed to be best addressed in a natural setting – a setting that principals might face in any given day. Marshall and Rossman (2006) justified the use of qualitative research by stating, "Human actions cannot be understood unless the meaning that humans assign to them is understood" (p. 53). Deeper perspectives, a feature of qualitative research, can best be captured through face-to-face interaction.

For the reasons stated above, a qualitative approach was the best fit for a study on middle school principals' responses to bullying incidents at school. The strengths of a qualitative methodology include, but are not limited to, research that is exploratory, that addresses the importance of context, and that values the participants' frames of reference. Because the research questions for this study were framed by "how" and "what," a qualitative approach best suited this type of open-ended question and provided a depth of meaning that could not necessarily be achieved through quantitative methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Participants

Much qualitative research examines "small samples of people nested in their context and studied in-depth" and "tend to be purposive rather than random" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27) which describes the sample used in the current study. The criteria used for participant selection were: must be a middle school principal in an Arizona public school, must have been a middle school principal for at least three years, and must have demonstrated experience in leadership. Members of the Middle Level Division of the Arizona School Administrators (ASA) for 2010-2011 who were either officers or regional representatives were recruited for participation in this study because they all met the above criteria. This criterion approach is useful for quality assurance (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

There were fourteen officers and regional representatives in the Middle Level Division representing schools from across the state. Due to driving distances and time constraints, ten of the fourteen members were targeted for the sample. However, saturation was reached with seven participants so they comprised the sample in this study. Table 1 shows the names of the participants (pseudonyms were used) with some background information on their experience and their schools.

Table 1

Biographical Data on Principal and School Demographics

_____

Principal	Gender	Years Middle School Principal	School Size	% Hispanic	% Anglo	School Classification[*]	School Performance 2010
Elsa L.	Female	7	673	20%	74%	Town	Excelling
Victor D.	Male	3	540	98%	2%	Rural	Performing Plus
Fred J.	Male	6	400	93%	7%	Rural	Performing Plus
Sylvia M.	Female	5	765	35%	43%	Town	Performing Plus
Carlo K.	Male	8	450	20%	65%	Town	Excelling
Frank R.	Male	4	325	50%	50%	Rural	Performing Plus
Stella K.	Female	13	457	52%	40%	Rural	Performing Plus

[*]Note: City, Town, Suburb, Rural (2010-11 Census)

Their experience as a middle school principal ranged from three to 13 years, with additional years of experience as a middle school teacher and/or an assistant principal. The schools they represented were all located in rural or small towns in southern Arizona with student populations that were no fewer than 325 and upwards to 765. Hispanics represented the highest number of minorities in each school. Academically their schools were labeled either Performing Plus or Excelling.

In their interview discussions, the principals provided evidence that they were experienced leaders, which was also reflected through their leadership roles in the Middle Level Division of the Arizona School Administrator's organization. Following is a brief introduction to the seven participants: Elsa, Victor, Fred, Sylvia, Carlo, Frank, and Stella.

Elsa

At the time Elsa was interviewed, she was in her seventh year as a middle school principal with five years experience as an elementary principal in the school that feeds into her current middle school. She apologized for being a few minutes late, was welcoming, professional, and gave the researcher her complete attention without interruption. Her school is the second largest of the seven, with 673 students and the lowest Hispanic population, 20% and highest Anglo population, 74%. She presented herself as confident and gave her responses without hesitation. When asked the most common discipline issues she faced at her school, she included three issues: profanity, defiance, and bullying and "that bullying is such a prevalent issue for middle school administrators." A poster in the office communicated that in Elsa's school district they:

Are respectful and trustworthy, Care about each other, and Take responsibility (ACT), and it was obvious from Elsa and her office staff that they walk this talk.

Elsa made it clear that she felt it was important when handling bullying issues to figure out which students are most empathetic and build on that. For example, she stated that it was important for students to think about the personal side of their actions because "middle school kids are so self-centered and egocentric that they don't have that experience of what if it was me," had they been the target of bullying. Elsa had a good grasp of how middle school students think and act.

Victor

The principal with the least years of experience as a middle school principal was Victor, with three years of experience. His school enrollment was 540 with the highest Hispanic population (98%) and the lowest Anglo population (2%) of the seven schools. Victor was soft spoken yet spoke with great conviction when talking about bullying. His knowledge about state and district policy regarding bullying was clearly articulated and referenced throughout his interview. Though he made it clear that bullying would not be tolerated because of legal mandates, he also expressed a strong personal belief that bullying was unacceptable. When talking about student safety, he expressed, "We want them to feel safe to come to school; it is important because if they don't feel safe they are not going to learn and be successful."

Victor's responses reflected that he was very active and visible in his school. Even though he could not participate as often as he would like, he took it upon himself to help monitor the lunchroom and hallways, as these were times to get to know the

students. He elaborated by saying, "It is a good time to interact with the students in a friendly way basis, not so much as the principal, and it gives me time to talk with the students." He saw himself as the principal but also a role model for both his students and teachers. It was clear why Victor believed his school had "a very good reputation, as far as taking care of issues." His responses showed he was compassionate with students, but also proactive with a zero tolerance for bullying.

Fred

Fred had been a middle school principal for six years, with three prior years of experience as an assistant principal in a middle school. His school had an enrollment of around 400 students of which 93% were Hispanic and 7% Anglo. He was extremely welcoming and excitedly jumped into the interview. His energetic nature was present throughout the interview. He often interjected personal stories about experiences he had had as a child with bullying which helped to shape how passionate he was about the topic of bullying.

At one point, he twirled his chair around to his computer screen to bring up a picture of a man who had been incarcerated and said, "Let me show you something; this is what I talk to students about," and he went on to share, "this guy right here, used to affect the way I walked to school every day." This 'guy' he referred to was once a middle school student who had bullied him and Fred had never forgotten him. He used examples like this to show how he personalizes how harmful bullying is.

Fred was one principal who frequently referred to a student's psyche being attacked in the some of the vignettes. As Fred said, "There is not going to be a lot of nice

guy in me; I always try to be empathetic because I like kids," but it was clear that he would not tolerate physical bullying, but equally so he would not tolerate any bullying that affects a student's psyche. His friendly, humorous manner was evident, but so was his no-nonsense attitude about students who participate in bullying.

Sylvia

Sylvia was principal of the largest school, 765 students, with 43% Anglo and 35% Hispanics. She had started her career as a middle school teacher, then became a middle school assistant principal for four years and at the time of the interview was in her fifth year as a middle school principal. Her experience with this age group might help to explain her confidence in handling the vignettes. Her skill in understanding middle school students was evident but she also appeared to be a visionary. She talked about streamlining the process for discipline at her school because when they were first a new school, they were "operating from two different backgrounds as far as discipline." They were in a year of refining their process and moving forward to the next level of consistency in their process. She believed as a school they needed to operate from the same place when tackling bullying.

At the time of the interview with Sylvia, her staff had just returned to school for the start of the school year. In the midst of getting ready for the school year, talking with parents and teachers, she graciously took an hour and half of her time for the interview. She elaborated with great detail on each vignette and expressed how much she had enjoyed the interview. As busy as she was, she made it clear, that I had her undivided

attention. As she explained, one of the school rules is to be respectful and that was demonstrated throughout her interview.

Carlo

Carlo was principal of a school with 450 middle school students of which 65% were Anglo and 20% were Hispanic. He had been a middle school principal for eight years and like the others became engaged in the vignettes presented to him. He seemed to enjoy the vignettes and shared, "You've got some great scenarios here." He responded to each one methodically and was the principal who mentioned parent contact and collaboration the most. Within the first minutes of his interview he made his feeling clear about parents by saying, "The parent will always hear back from me without fail; they want answers and don't want to have to wait for two days for an answer, so I honor that and make sure they are informed. He repeated that similar pledge with each vignette indicating that parent perception of how he handled the situations was very important to him.

Interestingly, Carlo was the only principal to not rate or rank the vignettes will equal seriousness. He apologized for being so boring with his response on the seriousness of each vignette. He saw them all as equally serious and felt they differed mostly by their level of complexity. In Carlo's opinion, the level of seriousness would increase when drugs, alcohol, ad weapons are involved. Regardless of how he perceived the level of seriousness, he did not find any of the bullying behaviors depicted in the vignettes to be acceptable behavior and like all the other principals, referred to a discipline matrix for consequences.

Carlo talked with ease about his responses to the vignettes and interjected his mantras as well as other thoughts regarding his role as an administrator and dealing with discipline. He did not always stay focused on issues of bullying, and seemed to like taking the opportunity to share his thoughts on leadership and leadership skills. He ended his interview talking about Stephen Covey and highly effective people.

Frank

Frank's middle school was the smallest of the seven, with an enrollment of 325 with an equal balance of 50% Anglos and 50% Hispanics. He was starting his fourth year as a middle school principal. He shared that he had spent many years working in Special Education which seemed fitting because he was a man that expressed great empathy and compassion for children especially those less fortunate. Though school was in session at the time of the interview, Frank made a point to have his calls held so he could give his undivided attention. After reading a vignette, he often responded with concern because of the empathy he felt for the target. He shared that his boss even tells him that sometimes you can't save them all [kids] and that really bothers him. It appeared that he reacted to the vignettes as though they were true events as opposed to hypothetical situations.

Frank's passion for making his school safe and a place where students feel connected came across strongly in his responses. Though he had clear ideas of how he would handle bullying situations, he also made it clear that he is always learning and trying new things. As he put it, "I just think we can definitely get a whole lot better at what we are doing; we are going to try things and fail and try other things and fight for

them." Frank appeared to be a man that was not satisfied with status quo and was always open for ideas to help students build relationships.

Stella

The principal with the most years of experience as a middle school principal was Stella with 13 years of combined experience from two different middle schools. Her current school had an enrollment of 457 middle school students comprised of 40% Anglos and 52% Hispanics. She was very dynamic and it was apparent why she had received a national principal of the year award during her tenure. She was easy to talk with and openly shared many examples of her eclectic approach to leadership and handling discipline. This statement from her sums up her philosophy about education: "I don't believe in one approach; I believe you pull everything you like from each of them and you find what fits the need."

When asked what her most prevalent discipline issue was, she answered with "We didn't have a lot, but I would say the thing that I had the most trouble conquering was bullying." Although she adhered to state mandates on bullying, she is the only principal who did not have a detailed bullying policy because she believes that bullying is situational. If a student is receiving physical harm then that is spelled out but other forms of bullying are not. Though she recognizes that verbal and relational forms of bullying are also harmful, "it is harder and stickier to fix sometimes." She believed in consequences, but more importantly the form of discipline has to change the person, change the behavior. She determines what to do based on talking to the student. After

deciding how she will respond to the incident, she looks to see if it is working and if not, then she goes a different direction.

Though Stella was not as structured in her responses, she articulated specific strategies for each incident with detail and examples. Her ability to network and draw in her community for support was evident with numerous examples of various people she would bring in to mentor and help her students. Like Fred, Stella had personal experiences with bullying as a child which she shared with her students as a way to show that bullying hurts and that hurt can be remembered even as an adult 50 years later. One of her goals is to build empathy skills with her students. Stella seemed came across as a confident educator with great people skills.

Data Collection and Instruments

After approval from the University of Arizona Institutional Review Board was received, initial contact was made with the President and Past President of the Middle Level Division of ASA who provided permission for use of their names in helping to seek participation in the research. E-mails were sent to eight other members describing the purpose of the study and inviting them to participate. Aside from the President and Past President, five principals returned e-mails expressing their interest in participating. Phone calls were then made to set up an interview time at a place convenient for them.

The primary strategy for data collection was face-to-face interviews (see Appendix A). Interviews utilized open-ended questions, which allowed for individual variations and allowed the researcher to gain understanding of a person's perspective. In this case the knowledge to be gained was the perspective of a middle school principal on

bullying behaviors. Patton (1990) identified three types of interviews: informal, conversational interviews, semi-structured interviews, and standardized, open-ended interviews. This research was best suited for the semi-structured format to ensure the same type of information was provided from each participant, but the interviewer was also free to probe and explore within the predetermined inquiry areas of interest.

To allow for good use of limited interview time and a more systematic interview, an interview guide was used. A written interview protocol was established which was followed in each interview. This tool was for the researcher only and was a plan that detailed the topics and questions to be explored with each principal. The interview protocol was generated from the research questions guiding this study.

Human Subjects policy and procedures were followed throughout the research process. Participants were assured of confidentiality and that there were no known risks. Interview responses, audiotapes, transcripts, and demographic information were assigned code names. The interview schedule and format were adhered to with all participants to maintain focused interactions and Human Subjects protocol.

An integral part of the interview process (see Appendix A) included the use of six hypothetical vignettes (see Appendix B) depicting various incidents of bullying behavior that mirrored real-life situations. The use of vignettes as an instrument provided "an opportunity to engage study participants actively in producing, reflecting on, and learning from the data" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 80). Bauman and Del Rio (2006) pointed out there are unresolved questions on the external validity of using vignettes but there are merits of their use which include that they approximate real life decision making events,

they help mitigate social desirability effects, they help to eliminate potential observer effects, and allow for measuring effects that cannot always be obtained through empirical study.

Along with the merits described above, a strong rationale for using vignettes in this study is the methodological difficulties that can arise in studying values and attitudes. Interview methods have been criticized for their possible elicitation of misleading information. One solution has been "to present respondents with a more concrete and unambiguous stimulant to refer to" (Poulou, 2001, p. 52). The use of vignettes in this study along with the follow-up questions provided a contextual framework that was consistent and therefore allowed for better comparability of responses.

The bullying incidents used in the vignettes were examples of physical, verbal, and relational bullying. There were two vignettes for each form of bullying. When tested with three professors who had experience with bullying, there was 100% agreement that each incident portrayed the form of bullying that was intended. The names used were gender neutral (e.g., Sandy, Alex, Pat) so as not to bias responses. The principals were told at the beginning of the interview that the vignettes being presented were examples of discipline incidents that might take place in a middle school. A student's parent had asked to meet with the principal to share his or her concern over the incident. *Bullying* was not used in reference to these vignettes so as not to possibly invite a bias.

Procedures

Upon receiving permission to conduct this study from the University of Arizona's Human Subjects Review Board, pilot interviews were conducted with three peers who were doctoral students and experienced principals. Through this process, issues in both the vignette and the interview process were identified. Based on the feedback, changes were made to help refine the questions. The pilot helped eliminate barriers that could arise from mistrust of the researcher's agenda or resistance to audiotaping (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) as well as helping the researcher practice pacing, pausing, and probing.

Next, principals from the Middle Level Division of the ASA were sent an e-mail (see Appendix C) inviting them to participate in the study. Those who agreed to participate were contacted with a phone call (see Appendix D) to schedule a time and place to conduct the interview. A copy of the Consent Form was sent to each participant prior to the interview date. Before all interviews commenced, a master list of participants and code names were created.

The researcher traveled to each participant's school for the interview. On the day of the interview, the principal signed the Consent Form, which included permission for the use of audiotaping. The purpose of the study and interview were explained and any questions and concerns addressed. The formal part of the interview began with demographic questions about the school, about his/her years of experience as a middle school teacher, and professional background training with discipline issues.

Next the principal was asked to silently read each of six hypothetical incidents that were examples of discipline issues, which were being presented by a concerned

parent of a student. After each vignette was read, the principal was asked to respond to a five-point Likert Scale describing the seriousness of each incident (ranging from not at all serious to very serious). Then the principal was asked a series of open-ended questions that would provide insight into the perception of middle school principals and how they responded to incidents of bullying. The final part of the interview asked the participant to rank order the vignettes in order of seriousness from least to most. Notes were taken on the interview protocol sheet along with the audiotaping. Clarification and probing were utilized when warranted. All participants followed this interview procedure.

Within a few hours of completing each interview, the interview notes were reviewed and reflective comments and thoughts noted. The interviews were then transcribed and transcriptions were compared to the notes taken during the interview and further notes and thoughts added. Upon completion of transcriptions and notes, data analysis was conducted and appropriate tables and graphs created.

Data Analysis

The current research was not testing hypotheses developed from previous theories, but categorizing the data collected from interview and bringing meaning to the data and phenomenon of bullying. The analysis is inductive since the researcher begins bylooking at the data, categorizing the data, looking for themes, and then makes generalizations based on these themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal was to "identify the salient, grounded categories of meaning held by participants" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p.159) about how they view incidents of bullying and what determines how they handled bullying incidents.

The first step in analyzing the data from the transcripts and notes was naming similar concepts about the principals' perspective on bullying behaviors. This type of coding known as open coding is the first step of a constant comparative method (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). The next step was to group the named concepts into categories, axial coding, which is then followed by selective coding where the emerging themes are fleshed out and developed (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Throughout the process of coding and categorizing, codes and categories were sorted, compared, and contrasted until no further codes or categories were developed (Heppner & Heppner, 2004).

Because the analysis was largely inductive, it could be argued that it was influenced by the researcher's perspective. Careful analysis was critical to ensuring trust. The researcher constantly reflected on whether the analysis was being conducted carefully, thoughtfully, and correctly in terms of reasonable standards (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Satisfied that trustworthiness had been meet, the researcher sorted and compared the data to uncover the emerging themes. The final step was to relate the themes discovered to the four questions posed in this research.

Summary of Methodology

The qualitative design used in this study was a phenomenological approach, wherein the researcher collected data, organized it, broke it down into manageable units, synthesized it, and searched for patterns that resulted in the emergence of critical themes. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions centered on six vignettes was the primary strategy of data collection. The participants were all middle school principals in

Arizona and active members of the Middle Level Division of the Arizona School

Administrators.

A qualitative approach was utilized in this study because of its strength in

exploring real-life behavior and allowing for the participants to speak for themselves.

The answers to the research questions were best answered through qualitative inquiry to

best capture the middle school principals' point of view. These views could then be

compared and contrasted with the goal of giving meaning to the principals' responses.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Bullying is a common discipline problem that principals face, yet research has not extensively included principals' perceptions on school bullying. Further exploration of their perceptions is important since principal support is emphasized as important in reducing school bullying (Will & Neufeld, 2002). Schools that are characterized as safe are customarily led by principals who foster a school climate based on caring and belonging among students, staff, and parents (Harris & Petrie, 2003). As the school leader, the principal can communicate the importance of eliminating acts of bullying on their campuses and help other educators understand the negative effects of bullying. The purpose of the current study was to investigate how middle school principals responded to incidents of bullying and whether they responded differently to different forms of bullying.

An incident was perceived as bullying when there was unequal balance of power, intent to harm, and repeated acts over time. During their interviews, middle school principals were presented with six vignettes that represented three forms of bullying: physical, verbal, and relational. The physical bullying incidents were either kicking or destruction of property. Verbal bullying incidents depicted name-calling or teasing and relational bullying incidents were about rumor spreading and peer exclusion.

<div style="text-align: center">Vignettes</div>

As part of the interview protocol, each principal was given a vignette (Appendix B) to read silently and then respond to a series of questions about the vignette. A brief description of the participant's responses to each vignette follows.

Vignette 1.

"Pat was in the cafeteria when another student intentionally kicked Pat in the shin while trying to cut in the lunch line. The monitor did not see this. This is the third time Pat has come home with bruises caused by this student."

Because Pat was a student who had been physically harmed, the principals reacted with a zero tolerance for this behavior. Though there was a 2.0 variance in the seriousness rating for Pat's incident, which ranged from a 3.0 to 5.0, the principals responded that because there was physical assault involved, they were required to document and report the incident to a School Resource Officer (SRO) officer or other type of law enforcement. As Sylvia mentioned, there was also the potential that Pat's parents could press charges, so immediate action needed to be taken.

This bullying incident generated many responses that referenced the need to respond quickly due to the new more stringent state laws regarding bullying. They also relied on the discipline matrix for their school to determine the consequence for the perpetrator. In most cases the severity of the discipline would be determined by past behavior. Victor felt it could be a one to three day suspension.

Even though a consequence would be given to the perpetrator, most of the principals indicated they would want to find out if there were some underlying issues and

then find supports to help either the perpetrator and/or the target. Three of the principals

also suggested that since the incident occurred in the lunchroom, they would need to

follow-up with the lunchroom monitors to determine if more eyes, or different kind of

monitoring was needed. When asked how often this type of bullying occurs on their

campus, they answered it occurred as infrequently as two to three times a year and as

often as once every two or three weeks.

Vignette 2

   "Alex was in the school library when another student came up and

called Alex a Kiss Ass and kept writing it on Alex's papers. For the past month this

student has been calling Alex names and now other students are starting to call Alex bad

names too."

   Because of the type of inflammatory language used in the verbal bullying

incident towards Alex, the principals were closely aligned in how serious they believed

this incident to be. Except for Carlo, who rated this incident as *moderately serious* (3.5),

the other six principals felt the incident was *serious* (4) or *very serious (*5). They agreed a

consequence was necessary for the perpetrator because it broke their school policy of

being respectful to others and as Frank said, "It is a violation of Alex's personal space."

Most of the principals mentioned they wanted Alex to feel safe and comfortable at

school, so they provide support to such as having a counselor talk to Alex and provide

anti-bullying lessons in the classroom.

   A concern that surfaced in this incident was the lack of empathy the principals felt

the perpetrator had, so their hope was that the perpetrator not only learn that name-calling

is inappropriate and hurtful, but the perpetrator develop empathy. Stella went a step further and proposed that she would hope that Alex and the perpetrator could become friends because " bullies prey on people they don't know" so she would encourage activities for the two of them so they would get to know each other. Her belief is that "It's hard to bully someone that you have become friends with."   Though Sylvia says she is seeing more of the name-calling that Alex experienced at her school, the other principals felt this type of incident occurred perhaps anywhere from once a week to once a month.

Vignette 3

"Robin told a group of classmates to stop making fun of a student in their class who stutters – that they were being unkind. The group turned on Robin and spread a rumor that other kids should stay away from Robin because we were drug dealers and that Robin had gotten in trouble at his previous school for doing drugs."

In this incident Robin was standing up to a group of students who were teasing a student who stutters when the group turned on Robin and started spreading rumors about Robin. The principals viewed Robin as doing the right thing by standing up to the perpetrators, so they were very concerned about the relational bullying that was taking place. Each principal noted in some fashion that this incident could incur further repercussions because unlike some of the other incidents, it was not just a one-on-one person incident. There was more than one perpetrator and thus the incident had the potential to escalate into a bigger problem, which could impact the climate of the school.

Like Pat's situation, the seriousness of this incident ranged from a 3.0 to 5.0 indicating

that relational bullying was viewed as serious as physical bullying was.

Most of the principals stated they would build up Robin for doing the right thing,

and that the perpetrators needed to understand how rumor spreading feels and learn to be

more empathetic. Like the other incidents, they all responded with consequences for the

perpetrator but five of them mentioned bringing in a counselor to support Robin and to

talk to the class as well about how harmful rumor spreading can be.

As Elsa stated, "Yea, I can see middle school kids doing this." Fred felt this type

of behavior occurred more often than is reported. The other five principals shared that

rumor spreading occurred anywhere from once a week to 10 times a year at their schools.

Vignette 4

"I am sure you know that Sydney was invited to perform with the local

pops orchestra and that the newspaper did an article on Sydney. Right after that a student

in Sydney's music class took Sydney's backpack and threw dirt in it and then poured a

coke inside – ruining the books and papers inside. Last week Sydney's sweatshirt had

been written all over with black marker!"

The vignette involving Sydney was an example of physical bullying with

destruction of property. Five of the principals agreed that the incident was *moderately*

serious (3.0-3.5) whereas; the other two principals rated it as *very serious* (5). This was

the one vignette that was rated either with a 3 or 5, and no principal rated it as *serious* (4).

The principals seemed to take the same approach in handling this incident. They

shared that they were greatly concerned with the damage that was done to Sydney's

property and along with a discipline consequence for the perpetrator, that there should be restitution made to Sydney. As with the other incidents, the principals felt it was important to find out what caused the perpetrator to take such action, and provide mentoring for both the perpetrator and target.

Fred believed of all the incidents, this incident would lend itself as the best opportunity to eventually bring the perpetrator and target together. He stated, "In the end, we might be able to bring these people together and have this person, first apologize, and then let the other person know why they did it." Stella's thought was similar, "In some cases it is possible to build a relationship and forgiveness." All the principals felt that it was important to get to the bottom of why the perpetrator acted so meanly, in their opinion they believed there were other underlying issues that might have caused this behavior.

The principals' responses for how often this type of incident occurred at their school showed that the physical bullying depicted in this vignette was not experienced as often as some of the kinds of bullying. Elsa and Stella answered that they do not experience destruction of property to the degree it was depicted in the vignette. The other principals said they experienced it maybe once every two to four weeks and as little as once a year.

Vignette 5

"I know Terry is overweight and can't keep up with the other students in class easily but that does not make it ok for the kids to exclude Terry. Two kids warned the other kids in a clique to stay away from Terry and that if they ate lunch or

invited Terry to their houses; they would no longer be part of the group. She eats alone all the time!"

Of all the vignettes, the one about Terry, who experienced relational bullying by being excluded by her peers, seemed to garner the most empathy from the principals. Two principals rated this vignette as *moderately serious* (3.0), four of them as *serious* (4.0), and one of them *very serious* (5.0). Elsa said she takes this type of incident very seriously because kids in middle school find being excluded as the most detrimental thing that can happen. Victor and Fred believe that this type of bullying attacks a person's psyche and thus hurts their self-esteem. As Carlo stated, "This is every parent's worst nightmare, being alone every day at lunch, and then at recess…it's the longest 40 minutes of that kid's day!"

An outcome all principals wanted was for Terry not to be isolated. Though the perpetrators would receive a discipline consequence for threatening and intimidating other students who tried to befriend Terry, they were particularly concerned with helping to build Terry's self-esteem. Suggestions such as starting a friend's group with Terry in it, involve the counselor to help Terry establish relationships, and building on leadership opportunities with students to stand up to those who exclude others were just some of the suggestions made by the principals.

All the principals agreed that relational bullying that included excluding others, was a form of bullying that they do see sometimes on their campuses with this age group.

Two of the principals reported seeing this type of behavior only once to three times a year, and the others reported it once a week or once or twice a month. Carlo felt that it probably happens every day, but only brought to his attention, once a month.

Vignette 6

"Sandy is experiencing relentless teasing! The kids in biology class are snickering at Sandy because Sandy asked to be excused from dissecting a pig. Sandy's lab partner says things like 'you suck, you want me to cut you some bacon, or would you like to a pork chop for lunch?' The teasing has now gone beyond the biology classroom to other classes and the hallways!"

This incident which involved Sandy being verbally teased in class as well as in the hallways, was the only incident that did not receive a 5 (*very serious*) rating by any principal. The principals rated Sandy's situation from a 3.0 (*moderately serious*) to 4.0 (*serious*), which was the smallest rating range of any of the incidents. Even though this type of bullying is does not result in a physical hurt, the principals all recognized that this type of bullying is hurtful emotionally and needs to stop.

Elsa said that the typical middle school response to this type of bullying from students is that the kids feel they are just joking around. However, she stated, "The reality is that you are hurting someone's feelings, and that hopefully they would have one of those 'ah-ha' moments and realize that what they are saying is hurtful. Victor, like several other principals was concerned that this incident had occurred in the classroom, so he would want to know what the teacher hadn't dealt with it. This incident was also

one where several of the principals said they would ask the counselor to do some lessons in the classroom about bullying and teasing.

The principals' responses to how often the bullying that Sandy experienced occurred at their schools was quite varied. Carlo and Stella stated it occurred once or twice a week, while Sylvia, Frank, and Elsa said anywhere from once to three times a month, and Victor and Fred thought perhaps once to a few times a year. Overall the principals felt that because of their schools' anti-bullying efforts, most incidents of teasing were handled at the classroom level, so they were not as aware of how often it might occur

Research Questions

Interviews were coded, sorted, and clustered by themes. The results are organized around the themes that emerged from each research question as seen in Table 2. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do middle school principals respond to incidents of school bullying, and how do these responses vary by form of bullying?

2. How do middle school principals perceive the severity of each form of bullying?

3. What strategies do middle school principals use when responding to bullying incidents?

4. How do middle school principals describe their decision making process for selecting a response to school bullying incidents?

Table 2

Research Questions and Emergent Themes

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Research Question	Themes
1a. How do middle school principals respond to incidents of school bullying?	• Incidents of bullying need to be addressed. • Bullying is against the laws so a school policy is needed. • Bullying behaviors need to be stopped. • Students need to feel safe at school.
1b. And how do these responses vary by form of bullying?	• Principals responded to each form of bullying.
2. How do middle school principals perceive the severity of each form of bullying?	• Based on the mean ratings for each vignette, all the vignettes were viewed as "moderately serious," "serious," or "very serious."
3. What strategies do middle school principals use when responding to bullying incidents?	• Investigate and fact-finding. • Investigate one-on-one. • Counselor involvement is sometimes needed. • Law enforcement involvement is sometimes needed. • Communicate with teachers. • Communicate with parents. • Targets need to know there are people at school to talk to.
4. How do middle school principals describe their decision-making process for selecting a response to school bullying incidents	• Solve the problem, not just the symptom. • What you do sets the tone for your school. • Look at the law first, then expectations of the school. • Follow the discipline matrix. • Check instigator's history of behavior. • Both the target and instigator need support systems. • Principal's prior experience influences decision-making.

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The results for each research question along with the emergent themes are discussed below. The first research question is addressed in two parts as Research Question 1a and 1b because this question contains two questions within the one. Each research question concludes with a summary of the results.

Research Question 1a

Incidents of bullying need to be addressed. All the principals felt each of the vignettes presented were serious situations and needed to be addressed. Even though the situations were hypothetical ones described by a concerned parent, all of the principals felt that they would address the issues presented regardless of who brought it to their attention. Similar to other responses by the principals, Fred responded, "One of my pet peeves is bullying and harassment." Victor stated that he communicated to his students, "You don't have to like each other, but you don't get to harass and spread rumors."

Principals felt that the incidents presented all needed some kind of action. Sylvia stated, "I don't want to have an environment where it is perceived as okay for students to threaten and intimidate other students to get what they want." Elsa addressed bullying issues because " This is plain mean and I don't like mean." Of the seven principals, all felt the vignettes were at least moderately serious, and thus each warranted a response and action.

Bullying is against the law so a school policy is needed. A universal theme that emerged from the interview data was that every principal interviewed was highly trained and versed in the state laws and district guidelines regarding bullying. Beside their own personal beliefs that bullying needs to be addressed in schools, these principals were well

versed on state statute as well as their district policies on bullying. Sylvia was representative of what the other principals stated on the "laws" regarding bullying. In response to the incident of kicking, she states, "It is reported to the SRO (School Resource Officer) and they have paperwork we fill out, and this is something that we have to do, it's actually law." Victor also references the law when he said, "I would find out who is harassing the student, especially with the new law this year regarding bullying and harassment."

School policy also played a factor in the principals' responses to the bullying vignettes. Elsa mentions several times throughout her interview that school policy also guides her decision to respond. After one vignette she stated, "We switched our policy, probably five years ago, so that in the first instance of bullying, it is an automatic day of suspension, in school suspension." Six of the principals referred to specific school policies about bullying that they felt were clear to students, staffs and parents. Their policies were included in each school's handbook and included a discipline matrix, which spelled out the consequences for those who were perpetrators of bullying. Though Stella was the only principal who reported there was no set anti-bullying policy like the other principals had, she said that her policy was "there will not be any bullying."

Bullying behaviors need to be stopped. Whether the behavior was physical, verbal, or relational, the seven principals felt that the behavior depicted in the scenarios was not appropriate and needed to stop. With regard to the vignette about Terry, a student being excluded by his/her peers, Frank stated, "Obviously that this isolation of Terry stops." He felt that students who were being isolated was not be tolerated and that

Terry needs to feel connected to the school and know that people care. When presented with Sandy's situation, a student who was teased in science lab, which resulted in relentless teasing, Carlo "wants the behavior to stop." Sylvia supported this theme as well when presented with the vignette about Robin who is the target of rumors and as a result was excluded from the peer group. She commented, "Obviously, I would want to make sure that Robin was not having rumors spread about her, so that stopped." Both genders responded similarly to wanting the bullying behaviors to stop.

Students need to feel safe at school. Principals said they respond to bullying in part because they feel students have the right to feel safe at school. Fred's comments clearly supported this theme. When asked what he hoped would be the outcome of Alex's situation, Fred stated, "Number one, that Alex comes to school and feels that he is in a safe environment." Stella reiterated this feeling in her comment about Sydney's situation: "The outcome I would hope for is that Sydney and other students feel safe." All seven principals brought up in their interviews numerous times the concept of wanting their students to feel safe at school.

Summary of research question 1a. Middle school principals respond to incidents of school bullying, by taking them seriously and not believing that any type of bullying behavior is acceptable behavior. Because of anti-bullying laws, principals created school policies that addressed bullying and promoted an anti-bullying environment in their schools. They had a firm belief that students deserve to feel safe at school and when students participate in bullying, their behaviors must be addressed. An outcome they often repeated was that the bullying behaviors must be stopped.

Research Question 1b

As discussed above, the seven principals all felt the need to respond in some way to each of the bullying incidents. Did the form of bullying seem to influence whether they decided to respond?

Principals responded to each form of bullying.

Each principal felt it was necessary and critical to respond to each type of bullying. They felt each vignette was serious and needed to be addressed. Physical bullying was not tolerated by any of the principals. Victor's response to physical bullying was typical. He stated, "That's why we try to limit the confrontations, because we don't tolerate it." Stella responded, "And I would hope the other students would learn that this is not acceptable behavior."

Like physical bullying, the vignettes depicting verbal bullying elicited responses that indicated this form of bullying was not acceptable or to be tolerated either. As Carlo stated in the scenario on Alex, which involved verbal teasing, "I have very low tolerance when I hear 'fag' and 'nigger' pop up. In society this is not tolerated, and we don't tolerate it here as well." Stella pointed out that that even though physical bullying crosses the line; verbal bullying "hurts even more." Victor summed up the general feeling of the principals towards verbal bullying in response to one of the verbal bullying situations, "We don't tolerate any of this type of behavior at all, and obviously it doesn't happen by accident."

The seven principals were also intolerant of relational bullying. Fred, like most of the other principals, responded to the relational bullying incident with Terry, who was

being excluded, and rumors being spread about Robin, with great concern. Fred believed that relational bullying incidents as described in the two vignettes "attack a person's psyche." Victor also concurred that these types of incidents can upset a student's self-esteem.

Summary of research question 1 b. All seven principals felt it critical to respond to all six vignettes and there appeared to be minimal difference in response to the form of bullying. Each form of bullying seemed to carry some type of importance. The incident was important because it physically hurt someone, a student's psyche was damaged, or words could be emotionally damaging. One statement that Fred made summed up the importance he and the other principals felt when responding to the bullying behaviors presented in the vignettes, "This is not only against the school rules but against the law." The principals did not tolerate bullying behaviors due to their belief that bullying was wrong; state statutes on bullying also seemed to factor into their not tolerating this behavior.

Research Question 2

After reading about the incident that occurred in each vignette, the principals were asked to rate on a Likert Scale of 1 (not at all serious) to 5 (very serious) how serious they perceived each vignette to be. The principal ratings were tabulated for each vignette and then tabulated according to gender response as well as by form of bullying.

Seriousness rating of each vignette. Table 3 shows the rating each principal assigned to each of the vignettes. No vignette was rated as 1 or 2, indicating that no principal viewed any of the incidents as *not at all serious* (1) or *not very serious* (2).

Based on the mean ratings, for each vignette, all the vignettes were viewed as 3 (*moderately serious*), 4 (*serious*), or 5 (*very serious*). The mean ratings ranged from 3.7 to 4.4, indicating that the incidents were at least *moderately serious* (3) or *serious* (4).

The vignette with the highest rating was Alex (verbal bullying/name calling) with a mean of 4.4. Though Carlo assigned this vignette the lowest rating (3.5) compared to the ratings of his peers, he rated no vignette higher than a 3.5 because in he felt "They are all equally serious." According to him, they only differed in "terms of their level of complexity." Except for Carlo, the principals agreed that verbal bullying by name-calling was a *serious* or *very serious* form of bullying.

Though Alex's incident was perceived as the most serious incident of bullying, the mean ranking was only .3 to .7 higher in seriousness than the mean ranking of the other five vignettes. The six vignettes were perceived as similarly serious.

Seriousness rating by form of bullying. In this section, the data were analyzed according to each of the three forms of bullying the vignette represented as shown in Table 4. The mean rating of seriousness for physical bullying (Pat and Sydney) was 3.9, for verbal bullying (Alex and Sandy) was 4.0, and for relational bullying (Robin and Terry) was 4.0. There is only a .1 difference between the lowest and highest mean rating for each form of bullying. When looking at how gender factors into the mean ratings for form of bullying, then more variance was evident.

Table 3

Principal Rating of Seriousness of Individual Vignettes

Vignette	Form of bullying	Elsa	Victor	Fred	Sylvia	Carlo	Frank	Stella	Total rating	Mean rating
Pat	Physical/ Kicking	5.0	4.0	3.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	29.0	4.1
Alex	Verbal/ Name Calling	5.0	4.0	4.5	4.5	3.5	5.0	4.0	30.5	4.4
Sydney	Physical/ Destruction	3.0	3.0	3.5	3.5	3.5	5.0	5.0	26.5	3.8
Robin	Relational/ Rumors	5.0	3.0	4.0	4.5	3.5	4.0	5.0	29.0	4.1
Sandy	Verbal/ Teasing	3.0	3.0	4.5	4.0	3.5	4.0	4.0	26.0	3.7
Terry	Relational/ Exclusion	5.0	3.0	4.0	4.0	3.5	4.0	4.0	27.5	3.9

Table 4

Principal Mean Rating of Seriousness by Form of Bullying

Form of bullying	Elsa	Victor	Fred	Sylvia	Carlo	Frank	Stella	Total rating	Mean rating
Physical/ Kicking	5.0	4.0	3.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	29.0	
									3.9
Physical/ Destruction	3.0	3.0	3.5	3.5	3.5	5.0	5.0	26.5	
Verbal/ Name Calling	5.0	4.0	4.5	4.5	3.5	5.0	4.0	30.5	
									4.0
Verbal/ Teasing	3.0	3.0	4.5	4.0	3.5	4.0	4.0	26.0	
Relational/ Rumors	5.0	3.0	4.0	4.5	3.5	4.0	5.0	29.0	
									4.0
Relational/ Exclusion	5.0	3.0	4.0	4.0	3.5	4.0	4.0	27.5	

Seriousness rating of vignettes by gender. Seriousness ratings of vignettes were also analyzed by organizing the data by gender to determine if there were differences in how males and females rated the vignettes. Table 5 shows that female principals rated the vignettes as more serious than the male principals. The mean rating for the seriousness of the vignettes ranged from 3.7 to 5, whereas the mean rating for the seriousness of the vignettes for males was 3.5 to 4.3. The highest mean rating for males was 4.3 for Alex and for females was a 5.0 for Pat. There was more variance in the mean rating range for the females (1.3) then the males (.8). The male mean ratings were more closely aligned with each other.

When analyzing the mean ratings by both form of bullying and gender, the female mean ratings were higher than the males for each form of bullying (see Table 5). Female mean ratings for the three forms of bullying ranged from 4.1 to 4.6. In order of seriousness, females rated relational the most serious (4.6), then physical (4.4), followed lastly by verbal bullying. However, the difference from the most serious to the least serious for females is only .5.

Table 5

Rating of Individual Vignettes by Gender Mean

Vignette	Form of Bullying	Behavior	Mean Female Rating	Mean Male Rating
Pat	Physical	Kicking	5.0	3.5
Alex	Verbal	Name Calling	4.5	4.3
Sydney	Physical	Destruction	3.8	3.8
Robin	Relational	Rumors	4.8	3.6
Sandy	Verbal	Teasing	3.7	3.8
Terry	Relational	Exclusion	4.3	3.6

Likert Scale of 1–5 (1 = not at all serious, 5 = very serious)

Table 6 shows the mean ratings for each form of bullying disaggregated by gender. The mean female ratings (4.1-4.6) for each form of bullying were higher than the male mean ratings (3.6 - 4.0) for the three forms. Females rated relational bullying as the most serious (4.6) form while males perceived verbal bullying as the most serious (4.0) form. If gender is not factored into the results and only the mean rating for each form of bullying is analyzed, the mean ratings are equal (4.0), indicating that the participants perceived each form of bullying to be equally serious.

Table 6

Mean Ratings by form of Bullying and Gender

Form	Female	Male	Both Genders
Physical	4.4	3.6	4.0
Verbal	4.1	4.0	4.0
Relational	4.6	3.6	4.0

Seriousness ranking of vignettes. As a final activity in responding to each vignette, the principals were to rank order the six vignettes in terms of their seriousness, with 1 being the least serious and 6 being the most serious (see Table 7). Carlo was the only principal who stated he could not rank order them because he felt they were equal in seriousness, so his ranking score is shown as (0). He explained that, "Yea, in terms of the seriousness of this, I really do think they are equally serious; in terms of their level of complexity it's a little different in the one-on-one thing I think, because you have just one person and it's isolated. But in the other ones it's happening in the classroom, in P. E., on Facebook; there are just more variables."

Even though the other six principals were able to rank the vignettes, they stated they had difficulty ranking them because, they believed all were serious. The amount of time and energy required to resolve the situation, and\or potential impact on school culture is what they used to determine the ranking of the vignettes. In some cases, a vignette which was given a 4.0 (serious) 5.0 rating (very serious), ranked as less serious than other vignettes because the principals believed the incidents were easier to handle. The mental process the principals used for rating and ranking the vignettes were different.

Even though Elsa rated the vignette about Sydney (physical bullying) as moderately serious (3), she ranked it the least serious (1) because she felt it was 'easier ' with which to deal. She explained, "I put Pat first (1, least serious) because it's one kid and one kid; it's not a group. It is not spreading to other people and it's a relatively easy one to work on and would not take a whole lot of time to deal with this." On the other hand, Stella chose the vignette about Sydney (physical bulling) as least serious (1). For

her rationale, she stated, "I think this is the easiest one to fix because it's in writing, you have evidence. You could bring the kids together and try to fix it."

Elsa and Stella each had one of the physical bullying incidents as least serious (1), however, Victor, Sylvia, and Frank had the vignette about Pat (physical bullying) ranked as 6 (most serious) because as Frank explained "the physical element requires a higher level of concern." Sylvia added, "I picked Pat most because there is physical harm, and it's risen to the point of having to report and involve law enforcement."

Some of the principals used the rationale that when an incident had the potential to impact the culture of a school, they assigned a higher, more serious ranking to that incident. Elsa explained that the vignette about Robin (relational bullying), "could disrupt the school quickly" because rumors are "detrimental to one's character and because of the electronic technology, it spreads so fast." For this same vignette, Fred explained, "Robin", has the most potential to turn the entire culture of a school around."

All principals agreed that the vignettes were serious, but how they chose to rank them depended largely on what would be required to resolve the situation. Some principals felt that when law enforcement needed to be brought in or if fewer students appeared to be involved, the situation was easier to resolve and thus could have been considered less serious to handle. However, others when law enforcement was involved ranked it more seriously because the law mandates that bullying incidents must be addressed. For example, Sylvia stated because Pat was bruised from being kicked, she would need to report it to law enforcement. She further explained, "We are in-serviced each year by the district on what to report and what not to report."

Table 7

Principal Ranking of Seriousness of the Six Vignettes

Vignette	Form of Bullying	Behavior	Elsa Rank	Victor Rank	Fred Rank	Sylvia Rank	Carlo Rank	Frank Rank	Stella Rank	Total Ranking
1-Pat	Physical	Kicking	5	6	1	6	0	6	1	25
2-Alex	Verbal	Name Calling	6	5	3	3	0	4	2	23
3-Sydney	Physical	Destruction	1	2	2	2	0	5	6	18
4-Robin	Relational	Rumors	3	3	6	5	0	2	4	23
5-Sandy	Verbal	Teasing	2	4	4	1	0	1	3	15
6-Terry	Relational	Exclusion	4	1	5	4	0	3	5	22

Situations that appeared to involve more than two students and had the potential to escalate could impact the culture of the school were often viewed as more time-consuming and therefore more serious. Fred's response to the rumors being spread about Robin illustrates this point: "This right here could have a huge impact on the climate and culture of the grade level, possibly the school."

Inter-rater reliability. It should be noted that the inter-rater reliability for the seriousness rating and ranking of the vignettes did not reveal a high level of consistency across the participants. The inter-rater reliability was measured by the intra-class correlation coefficients. Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951) was computed and resulted in a value of .152 for principal ratings and -.121 for the principal rankings. Both values are lower than the generally accepted .70 or higher needed for reliability. These results indicated a low correlation among the participants; however the value of alpha could have been affected by the small sample size. A larger sample would be needed to stabilize to a true value.

Summary of research question 2. As Table 3 illustrates, all the principals rated the vignettes as *moderately serious*, *serious*, or *very serious*. No one rated any of the vignettes as *not at all serious* or not *very serious*. The mean ratings for each form of bullying ranged from 3.9 (physical bullyng) – 4.0 (verbal and relational bullying) indicating the seriousness of the bulling was not necessarily determined by what type of bullying it was. When looking at the seriousness by gender, there was a slight difference between males and females. Females rated all forms slightly higher than males: females

rating ranged from 4.1 – 4.6 and males 3.6-4.0. When it came to ranking the seriousness of the vignettes, principals' rankings were often different from each other, not because they saw incidents as more or less serious; it depended more on how easy or difficult they viewed the incidents were to handle. The more students involved, the more damaging to the school culture, and the more time and energy to resolve issues were among the rationales they used for ranking order.

Research Question 3

The seven middle school principals were asked to describe how they would handle the incidents that occurred in the vignettes. Insight was gained on the strategies they would use when confronted with various bullying situations. From their answers emerged the following themes.

Investigation and fact-finding. The principals all agreed that the first step in handling a bullying situation is to investigate the situation thoroughly. Investigation meant calling in all parties involved, witnesses to the incident, as well as the students' teachers; then conduct fact-finding and get feedback. Not one principal made a decision based only on what the parent in the scenario shared. The commonality in their answers showed that the first step to dealing with bullying was to gather information in order to make an informed decision. Sylvia's response was typical of the others:

> Making sure that I am starting with fact gathering. It's always interesting to get the parent's perspective and then find out the other side of the story, and then make sure that with whatever information I have gathered, I need to feel comfortable. It's just making sure that I am operating from a basis of knowledge.

Even though investigations could end up being time consuming, principals felt

that it was time worth spending as is illustrated by Fred's response: "Then I would follow

the line, wherever the paper trail led me." Fred, like several other principals would have

all students involved, either as participants or witnesses, put in writing their version of the

events that occurred.

Investigate one-on-one. Each principal made it clear that when investigating the

situation, it was important to talk with each individual involved on a one–on-one basis.

They agreed that by investigating one-on-one, it allows for different nuances to emerge,

which helps to guide what the next steps should be. Elsa stated, "So I find that if I talk to

kids individually, because they are so different, I can figure out which of those kids is the

most empathetic and start building on that." Fred's comment reflected a concern about

intimidation if students are brought together: "What I would have them do is they would

be separate; you have to be careful because if they are together, there could be an

intimidation factor." Elsa further corroborated the need for one-on-one investigation,

"The other thing I don't do is bring the two kids in together, ever." Victor decided

whether the investigation should be one-on-one based on how far the situation had

escalated. When asked if he brought in all parties involved together, he answered, "It

depends, because I don't want it to be a very big confrontation.

Counselor involvement is sometimes needed. Each principal referred to

involving the school counselor as one of the strategies used in handling the bullying

situation. As part of his or her staff, each principal had either a part-time of full-time

counselor on campus. There 19 references in the principals' responses where they stated a

school counselor should be involved in the handling of the incident. Sometimes it was the responsibility of the counselor to teach anti-bullying lessons to entire classrooms or the counselor would facilitate group lessons during lunch or after school. They would also be involved with the fact finding and advising the principal on suggestions for dealing with a particular behavior. Counselors were used to work with the perpetrator to change the behavior and with the targets to help rebuild self-esteem. Carlo stated, "I would often involve the school counselor not only on the fact finding, but about strategies about dealing with this type of behavior." Stella said she would involve the counselor on fact finding as well, and in the case of Terry who experienced isolation from peers, "those students involved would have to attend a lunch-time bullying group facilitated by the counselor, or go home."

The vignette about Robin, who was being excluded and rumors were being spread, is the one vignette in which each principal would have involved a counselor as part of their strategy plan. Frank's explanation of how he would use the counselor to help Robin was representative of how they all felt:

> Ideally for me Robin would get an opportunity to work through some of this in a couple of ways. My counselor would most likely have this conversation with the parents in we want to invite your child to one of 'the soaring groups'. That's what we would want to get Robin involved in or just to kind of build that esteem and I would also think that we would probably have the counselor show up in class and have a lesson.

Law enforcement involvement is sometimes needed. After a thorough investigation was completed, all but one of the principals responded they would involve either a School Resource Officer (SRO) or other type of local law enforcement in. The six who mentioned law enforcement stated that it was required in some types of bullying

situations because of state bully laws requiring incidents to be reported to. Even if not required, law enforcement was used at sometimes as a scare tactic with students to make them aware that if some behaviors escalated, it could result in law enforcement becoming involved. Carlo was the only principal who did not mention using any type of law enforcement or having an SRO; however, it was not certain that he did not have an SRO as the researcher did not probe as to his having one.

When bullying became physical, such as in the vignette about Pat, who had been kicked and bruised, the principals noted that they would have to report the incident to an SRO officer as a non-accident injury. One principal also noted that in cases where a parent has the right to press charges, even if the parent has not decided to do so, she must report this to law enforcement. When referring to what she would do with Pat's situation, Sylvia said, "It is reported to the SRO and they have paperwork that we fill out, and this is something that we have to do, it's actually the law." Victor mentioned that he would bring in the SRO with Pat but also with Robin. He explains, "In cases like that where they might be saying things about other students, we bring our SRO in and let him talk about some of those decisions." He went on further to state, "We also just have him there, just his presence makes a statement, and it could start to become more serious."

Stella would bring in law enforcement with both Sydney and Robin more from the point of scare tactics. She grew up in the community where she is a principal and personally knew many of the law enforcement officers, so she said she had resources she could tap into for support. She would bring in these officers as a tool for communicating the seriousness of what the student had done or what could happen if the situation

escalated. She stated, "Basically I would involve the police in this because what they did could have gotten the other child in a lot of trouble, and they need to know it is against the law to make false accusations."

When Fred did not feel the need to involve law enforcement, he chose sometimes to use law enforcement. In response to Terry who was being excluded from peers, he stated, "Once again I warn them that if I haven't already called the sheriff, that if it continues, it could be considered harassment and at that point I would call the sheriff." As a strategy, the principals' use of law enforcement was two-fold: it was used when the law required law enforcement be involved or it was used as a way to put fear into students who were bullying, to show them bullying can have serious legal consequences.

Communicate with teachers. Six principals made a point to involve the teachers with the fact-finding and to get their input on what they perceived might be going on. They also stated that in the incidents that occurred inside the classrooms prompted them to have conversations with their teachers reminding them of his/her expectations about bullying. They expressed concern that if these incidents were occurring in the classroom, that the teacher may not be aware of it or perhaps had not handled it effectively. For example, in the vignette where Sandy was being teased in her science class, Frank said he would make sure that the teacher was aware of the situation in her class and "would ask the teacher to address the whole class" about the teasing. In dealing with Sydney's destruction of personal property, Carlo also felt it was important communicate with teachers: "Tell the teachers in class what I am hearing and asking if they have seen any interactions between the kids, and for them to be aware and keep an eye."

Fred was the only principal who did not specifically address the role of teachers in their responses to the different bullying incidents. During his interview, Fred discussed what he would personally do to handle the situation and what he viewed his role was as the principal. It cannot be assumed that he would not involve teachers.

Elsa responded similarly on two vignettes when she talked about teacher involvement. She emphatically stated, "The other thing I would do is I would go back and talk to the teacher, give them the low down on what bullying is and what our expectations are about bullying and that I would have expected in them as a classroom teacher to stop that." Victor had a similar response to Sandy's situation. He said, "since this is happening in the classroom, I would want to know why the teacher hasn't dealt with it, so I would go to the teacher of the students to find out why this is happening and make sure they understand." The principals said they would involve teachers to help them with investigating the bullying incident or to make the teachers aware of the incident if they did not know about it, and to discuss further expectations of the teacher with the reported incident as well as expectations of teachers when bullying occurred.

Communicate with parents. Even though a parent is the person who brought the issue described in each vignette to the principal's attention, all seven principals felt they needed to communicate with all the parents of students (targets as well as perpetrators) who were ultimately involved in the incident. In response to Pat's scenario, Fred described how he would involve the parents: "Call them in and let them know what the behavior is, let them know it's inappropriate, and ask them how we can help, and actually provide the counseling services." He went on to say, that even though "this is a lengthy

process," he would definitely call the aggressor's parents as well as any other students who might have been involved even if only one time; "We let them know that their son was involved."

Stella involved the parent by talking or meeting with them, but in certain situations takes another step that puts responsibility on the student that is illustrated in this example:

> The other thing is they are using a bad word, *ass*. And with negative name-calling or foul language, I have a rule: Don't say anything you wouldn't say to your mother. So, this person would literally have to call their parent and on the phone, say, Hi, Mom, you're a kiss ass. Then I'd take the phone say, I'm really sorry that you had to hear that but that is what your son is not only calling somebody, but writing on their papers, and that is not acceptable.

Carlo also felt passionate about communicating with the students' parents, but he expressed that he did not stop at just communicating with them at the time of responding to the incident. He believed follow-up was critical. He expressed this belief in the following statement: "I haven't mentioned this, but the follow-up on my calendar, I would actually put it on there a week later, check-in with so and so, check in with the other child, then check-in with the parent and I would do the same for both parents."

Targets need to know there are people at school to talk to. A concern that surfaced in all the interviews was the fact that a parent had to come share the incident, instead of the student reporting it to an adult at the school. It bothered them that the student did not seem to feel he or she could talk to someone at the school and share what was happening.   Fred expressed this comment which was similar to what the other principals stated throughout their interviews: that one of the outcomes they would hope for the targets is that they "know there is an open door policy and if something happens

they need to come in and talk to somebody, whether it is the counselor, the teacher, or myself." Elsa would handle her concern by talking to the student who was targeted and "try to make sure that he felt and knows he has people to talk to on campus, and that my office is a safe place and my assistant principal's office is a safe place."

Summary of research question 3. The common strategies that principals used to handle the bullying incidents were to investigate the incident, to involve a counselor or law enforcement when appropriate, to communicate with teachers and parents, and to remind students that there are people at the school who they can come talk to and who care about them. There were times when principals had no choice but to bring in law enforcement because of state mandate and district policy. Though the principal would be active in handling the situation, other school resources would be used when possible. They felt it important to make sure teachers were aware and involved with how the incident would be handled and that parents need to be kept in loop at all times.

Research Question 4

In the previous section, the strategies the middle school principals would use in handling the hypothetical situations were presented. They all agreed they would first investigate the situation thoroughly and gather all the necessary facts possible. Once they had a knowledge base to work from, what was the process these principals used to decide the course of action they would take? Several common themes emerged about their decision-making process.

Solve the problem, not just the symptom. Every principal made reference to not only addressing the specific behaviors in the situations (e.g., kicking, name-calling,

destructing property, etc.) but also hoping for outcomes where the targets will feel

connected to the school. As Elsa explained, she looked at the behavior as a symptom and

then tries to see "what is going on underneath the situation so we can solve the problem,

not just the symptom." In the incident with Sydney, four principals felt there should be

restitution for Sydney's clothing that was damaged, but more importantly they all felt

they needed to figure out the cause for this behavior and then give the instigator the help

needed to change the behavior. Stella's feelings were similar to the others: "You try to

figure out what would cause a child to do this, and what is it going to take so it doesn't

happen again."

Aside from setting up supports to correct the behavior of the instigator, all

principals felt it important to also have resources to support the target and help build

relationships. As Carlo stated he would involve the counselor to help the target with

"strategies about dealing with this type of behavior." Fred put it another way; "I would

want to transfer the power from the aggressor to the victim." It was important to all the

principals that the target be reassured that there are people to talk to on campus.

What you do sets the tone for your school. Five of the seven principals

specifically noted that in some of the situations the decisions they made on how to handle

them would help to set the tone of the school. Sylvia said, "I don't want to have an

environment where it is perceived as okay for students to threaten and intimidate other

students" and indicated that there would be definite consequences for these types of

behaviors. Fred responded to the incident about Robin by saying, "This is one of those

things that could have a huge impact on the entire climate, if it is handled correctly."

Stella summed up her thoughts: "The suspension lets people know that behavior is not acceptable; word gets around. So what you do determines and sets the tone for your school."

The two principals, Frank and Carlo, who did not make a specific reference to school tone or climate, certainly suggested it by their answers in regards to the importance of students understanding there are consequences to inappropriate behavior and that students should feel safe and valued. For example, when talking about Alex's situation, Frank wanted Alex to feel comfortable going to school and for him to believe that an adult thought there was value in his story. It started with a bully, there were consequences, and "Their peers know that if I do something like that, I'm going to have the same consequences."

Look at the law first, then expectations of the school. The laws about bullying factored into many of the decisions that were made. When the incidents were viewed as bullying, each principal referred to the "law" when discussing how they would decide how to handle the situation. Fred's comment is reflective of the other principals' comments in reference to following the law: "This to me is definitely bullying. The law was just passed, and we talked about it yesterday in the administrative meeting, that if there is a bullying situation, and if the teacher sees it, they have to report it to us in writing."

Victor said, "I understand why some of the bullying laws are now becoming more stringent, because of all the things that have happened." He went on to say, "We always look at the law first, what our expectations are at the site, and then the safety and

welfare of the students." Sylvia talked about having to report bullying because it is a district policy and when it rises to a physical level then it needs to be reported to law enforcement. Elsa also stated that bullying needed to be reported because it is school policy: "But I also really try to train my teachers because bullying is supposed to be recorded to administration."

Though it is not clear how much or what types of professional training each principal had with anti-bullying prevention, each principal listed a variety of training in which they had participated and often mentioned participating annually in workshops on bullying offered through their organization of the Arizona School Administrators Association. Three of the principals cited having participated in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) training through partnerships with the university. Frank, Elsa, and Sylvia shared that PBIS was used as a framework for their school expectations. A school-wide approach of PBIS "offers schools, families, and communities a promising approach that enables the adoption and sustained use of effective academic and behavior practices" (Sugai & Horner, 2002, pp. 130-131). Elsa stated that along with her staff they have had training in PBIS (Postitive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) and are a PBIS school.

Fred and Victor talked about behavior expectations, which were centered on the "Character Counts!" philosophy based on the *Six Pillars of Character*: Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, and Citizenship. "It is assumed that the character education initiative upon which it is based is intended to foster the development of those same six virtues in students" (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 202). Two other

trainings referenced were Fred Jones and Restorative Practice. It appears that these principals incorporate elements from some of their anti-bulling trainings into their own prevention efforts on campus.

Follow the discipline matrix. All principals, with the exception of Stella had some type of discipline matrix that detailed the unacceptable behaviors and provided the consequence guidelines. Stella shared that her school had a discipline policy for physical bullying, but not for other behaviors, "We don't spell it out because I believe it is situational." She explained that inside of referring to a discipline matrix, she would look at the non-physical behaviors case by case and determine from her investigation the appropriate consequence. When explaining how they would handle a particular situation, the other six principals clearly stated that they had a discipline matrix that they would reference in making their decisions. This matrix was detailed in their school handbooks.

Though this matrix often was used as the basis for what consequence the instigator(s) received, there were areas of gray as Carlo explained, "I try as much as possible to stick to the matrix, but that being said, the matrix is not black and white, there are definite shades of gray. Frank stated it a bit differently, "There would be the similar out of school suspension of three days, and frankly depending on their receptiveness, I may or may not waive it." The other five principals also shared that the discipline matrix was used as a guide but depending on some of the variables, there was room to adjust the consequence especially if law enforcement was not involved and the principals were able to detect remorse from the instigators.

Check instigator's history of behavior. Though the discipline matrix for each school played a role with the principals for handling the various situations, the principals made it clear that the instigator's behavior history also was a factor in their decision-making process. For instance, Victor stated that when behavior was repetitive and the previous consequences were not effective, then often he would draw up a contract for what he called his "frequent flyers." Then every Friday, the teacher would write down the grade and behavior of the student and he would meet personally with the student to go over that week's progress.

Elsa stated the consequences would be significant for students involved in repeated bullying. She "would up the ante in terms of discipline." Put another way, Stella said, "It would depend on the history, the remorse, what is it going to take for this child to change their behavior." When asked how she would handle the instigator in Robin's scenario, Sylvia said there would be consequences "depending on if it was an ongoing issue, had that student been talked to before; the discipline is progressive."

Both the target and instigator need support systems. Even though each principal felt there were consequences needed for inappropriate behavior, they also all felt that support systems needed to be put in place for the target as well as the instigator. Though punitive measures often needed to be given to the instigator per school policy, punishment was not necessarily the answer to changing behavior. As Fred put it, "On all these situations not only do you educate the victim, but the aggressor." An outcome that was often mentioned was the hope that these students who are involved in bullying

conflicts learn to coexist with each other. To help with this, counselors would be asked to

follow-up with some of these incidents by conducting bullying lessons in the classrooms.

In another example, where another child was kicking Pat, Sylvia stated,

> I think that both of them have some social skills that they are lacking, so perhaps making sure that we are giving them some instruction in some form or fashion so they are better able to cope with conflict when it did arise, and that would help them as far as life skills.

Elsa said that she would spend time with the instigators and figure out which of

them is the most empathetic and start building on that, eventually building their

leadership skills. She also states that for the target, she "has had to provide extra supports

like on the playground, to have more eyes out there watching." Carlo made a similar

point: "Again any time like this, you want the behavior to stop, and for those who were

victims, help them deal with that and for those who are doing these things hopefully

develop some empathy as well."

Frank, like the other principals, emphasized helping students who were either

targets or instigators to build relationships. He did this through inviting students to

participate in "soaring groups" to hang out after school and participate in activities.

Unbeknownst to the students, they worked on building self-esteem through various

activities. He felt that both Terry and Robin, targets of relational bullying would benefit

from these groups. Terry, who was overweight, would be an ideal candidate for the

wellness and health group, which was facilitated by other students. They learned about

exercise and making healthy food choices. The principals made it quite clear, as Victor

shared, that feeling safe, secure, and being able to make friends were also part of school,

"It's not just academics; if you don't feel good about being at your school, you are not going to do well academically."

Though the principals used strategies to handle the instigator, they also shared strategies for handling the targets and in some cases entire classrooms. Whatever strategies they used, their goal was to change the behavior of the instigator and deal with the underlying cause for the behavior, as well as to make sure that the target had the supports needed to feel safe again at school. As one respondent stated, the outcome she would hope for with incidents of bullying was that "Number one, students feel safe, and number two the person who did it, we find out why and get them the help that they need."

Principal experience influences decision-making. Beside bullying and harassment laws, district policies and school codes of conduct, these middle school principals mentioned that they also relied on their past experiences in dealing with students to help them in their decision-making process. Bullying laws and school policy often dictated consequences for the instigator, but further action for the instigator and ways to deal with the target, were often decided by prior experience with similar situations. In the case where Pat was being kicked and had bruises, which required law enforcement, several principals added that consequences were not the only action they would take in this situation. Fred's comment was an example of going beyond the consequence:

> There has to be some kind of consequence for that inappropriate behavior, but on the other hand, there has to be someone who can take a look at what is going on; what are some of the underlying issues there.

When Stella was asked how she decided how to handle Sandy's situation of verbal bullying, she answered, "I would say most of it is from experience." Elsa shared in deciding how to handle one of the verbal bullying situations that she had had a similar incident on her campus three years earlier involving a large group of students. She learned when name-calling starts, it can mushroom, and "All of a sudden everyone is in on it and it becomes huge." This experience helped shape how she decided to handle Alex and the instigators.

Fred and Stella were the only two principals who revealed that they had personally experienced bullying as children. Both admitted that those early experiences stayed with them their entire lives and contributed to why they took issues of bullying so seriously. Stella shared, that in talking with the perpetrators who teased Sandy, she would tell them her own experience. She felt that Sandy might pretend that it doesn't bother her, but Stella shared that she had been teased a lot as a kid because of her hair. They used to run around and say things like they would rather be dead then have her hair. She went on to say, "I pretended that it was all fun and games, but 50 years later it still hurts." Stella's experience with teasing still impacted her today, so she would use this example as a way to show the perpetrators they needed to become more empathetic to their targets.

Principals relied on their school policy and state statute for consequences for bullying, but experience factored into their decision-making when they were deciding on the actions to be taken beyond the consequence. Consequences needed to be in place and followed, but more importantly principals seemed to feel that educating the students

about bullying and building empathy and relationships was also important to their success in school.

Summary of research question 4. When describing the decision making process for determining how they would handle the bullying incidents, the principals always referred to their school policies on bullying and their discipline matrix as the main guide. There was no doubt that the perpetrator would receive a consequence, which was based in part on the student's prior history of behavior. Though a consequence was inevitable, they made it clear, that students need to learn from their behaviors. Both the target and perpetrators needed to have a support system available to them. Even though there were school guidelines for handling bullying incidents, situations were not always black or white. Often principals felt they responded certain ways because of past experience in dealing with a similar incident.

<div align="center">**Summary of Data Analysis**</div>

The open-ended interviews with the middle school principals provided data for answering the research questions regarding how middle school principals to incidents of physical, verbal, and relational bullying. There were many common themes that emerged from the data. A major theme was that regardless of the form of bullying, the principals felt that all the incidents were at a minimum moderately serious. Any incident of physical, verbal, or relational bullying was not acceptable and warranted attention from the principal as well as other adults at the school. Though there was no statistical analysis, the mean ratings for the seriousness of the vignettes indicated that females rated

all forms of bullying slightly higher than males did, with relational bullying receiving the highest mean rating by females.

The principals indicated that each incident needed to be addressed and dealt with to avoid further escalation. There were many similarities among them in the strategies they would use to handle these bullying situations. The first step for all of them was to conduct a thorough investigation, which would provide the basis of knowledge they needed in order to determine what steps needed to be taken to resolve the issues. Actions that were taken included consequences for the instigator, counseling for both instigator and target, anti-bullying lessons for small groups and classrooms, and providing support for the target to help rebuild self-esteem or build relationships.

The processes the principals used in their decision-making were also very similar and included following the law for bullying and harassment, following the discipline matrix for their schools, finding out the student's behavior history, and following their own instincts from past experiences. It is unclear the type or extent of professional development training these principals received in anti-bullying prevention, but they all mentioned participating in some type of training. It is likely that training and knowledge of the stricter anti-bullying laws may also have partially shaped their responses because they frequently made references to them.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As of January 2012, 48 states had passed some type of anti-bullying legislation, with Georgia being the first state to enact legislation in 1999 (Sacco, Silbaugh, Corredor, Casey, & Doherty, 2012). Some of the toughest state legislation requires school administrators and teachers respond to any incidents of bullying reported to them or witnessed by them. Teachers must report any bullying incidents they witness to their administrators. There has also been a heightened awareness in the media on bullying due to highly publicized cases of injury or death as a result of bullying. As a result of state legislation and media coverage on bullying, bullying has become a serious issue worthy of reasonable attention, awareness and action.

Results from studies on adult perceptions and reactions to bullying conducted in the past ten years may differ from earlier research because of this state legislation that has been enacted on school bullying mandating that schools take action. There has been a growing awareness of issues surrounding bullying that may not have existed when earlier literature was written. It is difficult to identify the role that this historical context of bullying plays on the perceptions of the principals in this current study. The fact that the principals in this study were knowledgeable, proactive and skillful in responding to bullying incidents shows promise if they can use their influence to promote their approaches to bullying behavior and incidents to other principals who lack the awareness, skills, and are less connected.

Scholarly literature on adult perceptions of school bullying is limited to the perceptions of preservice teachers, teachers, counselors, and other support staff. Missing in the literature are the views of principals. The principals play a vital role in the prevention of bullying, "Yet there is little research on principal perspectives of bullying on the school campus" (Harris & Hathorn, 2006, p. 50). This current study was designed to investigate how principals perceived and responded to middle school incidents of bullying and whether they felt some forms of bullying were more serious than others. Of special interest were their beliefs about relational bullying. Some studies (Yoon & Kerber, 2003; Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Maunder et al., 2010), indicated that relational bullying is not perceived by some educators as serious as other forms however in this study, the principals believed all three forms were serious and required some kind of action. The results provided an enhanced understanding of the factors that influenced how principals understood, and responded to bullying incidents.

The purpose of this chapter is to share the findings and discuss them in relation to previous research. Following the findings is a discussion on implications for educators and future research, methodological implications and limitations to the study. The chapter concludes with a summary and conclusions that can be drawn from the study.

Main Findings

Results of this study yielded specific findings about adult perceptions and responses to bullying that differ from previous bullying literature (e.g., Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Mishna et al., 2006; Yoon, 2004; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Most of the literature on adult perceptions of bullying come from teachers, preservice teachers and

counselors so contrasting their responses to the principal responses in this present study has to be done cautiously. How teachers respond may not generalize to how principals respond.

In a study of 34 teacher's views and beliefs about bullying, Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2008), found that teachers differ in what constitutes bullying as well as what forms of bullying are perceived to be serious. Not all bullying is perceived as serious and needing attention. Teachers were not likely to intervene in an incident of bullying if they viewed that behavior as being normative for children. Unlike the adults in other research, the principals in this study expressed great concern with all the incidents of bullying presented in the vignettes. They felt that bullying, regardless of form, was serious and needed adult attention and action. Each vignette received at least a moderately serious rating by all the principals. One respondent (Sylvia) gave a response that was similar to the others when she said she always responds to bullying, "It is not tolerated and it's always addressed."

The difference between what principals perceive as bullying compared to other school adults may be due to several factors. Principals may have had more professional development in the area of bullying and are more aware of anti-bullying legislation, the negative effects of bullying on their school climate and culture, or as the leader of their schools they have the added responsibility for the safety of their students. Teachers on the other hand are responsible for the students in their classrooms only and maybe more myopic in their views.

All the principals in the current study, when asked about their professional development experiences in how to deal with discipline, mentioned having participated in anti-bullying trainings over the past few years. The training and experience in handling bullying might have contributed to the confidence they portrayed in identifying the bullying as well as knowing which type of intervention to select when responding to the incidents.

Interestingly, even though the principals were told the vignettes were about a "discipline" issue, they regarded the incidents as some form of bullying. Because they identified the incidents as bullying, which they in fact were, indicated they understood what constitutes bullying and how harmful bullying can be to individuals as well as to an entire school. Not once did a principal indicate that he or she would not know how to handle a bullying situation. These principals clearly had had prior experiences in dealing with bullying because they often referred to how they handled similar incidents that had occurred at their schools. Bullying was not an unknown phenomenon to them.

Atlas and Pepler (1998) suggested that teachers might do little to intervene even when they are aware of bullying, partially because they do not know how to respond. This study was prior to state legislation on anti-bullying and the heightened awareness that now exists. Years later, Yoon's (2004) findings indicated that "Increasing teachers' awareness of negative outcomes associated with bullying behaviors may change teachers' appraisal of bullying, thus increase their likelihood of intervention" (p. 42). The principals 'responses in this current study indicated they would not hesitate to intervene. Perhaps the fact these principals responded to bullying incidents, is due in part to the

increasing awareness of bullying and its negative effects that has occurred since Atlas and Pepler conducted their research.

Similar to other research on adult perceptions of bullying, Hazler et al. (2001) found that physical harm was considered more severe than either verbal or social/emotional harm. Yoon and Kerber (2003) and Bauman and Del Rio (2006) also confirmed that teachers consider physical bullying as more important than other forms of bullying and relational bullying as less important. In another study, school counselors also rated relational bullying as the least serious of the three forms (Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007).

This finding, however, was not replicated with the middle school principals in this study. These principals reported the same level of severity for all three forms of bullying (physical, verbal, and relational). On a scale of 1(not serious) to 5 (very serious), physical bullying received a 3.9 mean rating whereas verbal and relational each received a 4.0 mean rating for seriousness. Relational bullying was rated slightly higher than physical bullying and as serious as physical bullying so it appears these principals' awareness level of the seriousness of relational bullying was greater than is typically found with teachers. Hazler et al. (2001) found, in their study of adult recognition of school bullying with 251 teachers and counselors that "People are less likely to show concern, attempt to prevent or act to intervene in situations involving potential social/emotional or verbal harm, while they are more likely to overact in situations involving potential physical harm" (p. 142).

The view of the principals in the current study was that each form of bullying was serious but for different reasons. For example, physical bullying is a form of assault that may result in injury. Verbal and relational bullying do not physically harm students but each can hurt feelings and damage a student's psyche. As Victor stated, "We want them to feel safe to come to school; it's important because if they don't feel safe they are not going to learn and feel successful." Each principal's rationale for the rating or the ranking they gave each vignette was based on their interpretation of what the term *serious* meant since no definition was provided. Sometimes a vignette was serious because of what was dictated by law or district policy and other times it was dictated how many people were impacted by the incident, or the amount of time it would take to resolve the issue.

Bauman and Del Rio (2006) discussed the need for teacher training that included knowledge, awareness, and skills for addressing bullying. The need is urgent for relational bullying because teachers often view it as less serious than other forms of bullying. Even though there was some state legislation enacted by 2006, it was not as widespread as it is currently, so teachers in 2011 might have a different awareness level and might have responded differently.

Based on how the principals in this study approached bullying, they did not lack the skills or training to handle bullying that the literature suggested. However, this study only interviewed principals who were active in their statewide professional organization. Principals with less involvement at the state level might not have a similar awareness

level. Also these principals were leaders in high-performing schools, which might have an influence on principals' perceptions.

Several researchers, who have studied bullying, reported that adults sometimes viewed bullying as normative behavior (Barone, 1997; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Vernberg & Gamm, 2003). Some adults believed it is inherent for boys to be physically aggressive and for girls to be relationally aggressive and thus are less likely to intervene since they view these behaviors as a part of life that one has to go through (Clarke & Kiselca, 1997; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2006; Mishna et al. 2006). The middle school principals in this study did not hold this view. Principals intervened regardless of the form of bullying and even though some of these behaviors were viewed as typical of middle school students, these behaviors were not acceptable. As one respondent stated, "Of course they are middle school kids so these things happen," but he went on to say, "I would want the behavior to stop, that's the main thing."

Even though bullying behavior tends to peak in middle school (Pelligrini, 2002; Smith & Gross, 2006; Varjas, Henrich, & Meyers, 2009), this group of principals likely did not appear to view bullying as normative due to their awareness of the negative consequences of bullying for the targets, perpetrators, bystanders and school climate in general. The potential impact on school climate is evident from another respondent when he stated, "This right here could have a huge impact on the climate and culture of the grade level, possibly the school." Again this awareness was probably heightened through their anti-bullying training, years of experience in middle school and increased media attention and societal pressures.

Principals in this study used a variety of interventions to handle the bullying, but the first step for each of them was to talk to each student involved in the bully incident to gather the pertinent facts in order to make an informed decision of how to respond to the bullying. Several principals added that sometimes during an investigation they are able to do direct instruction, which they feel, can be very valuable. They not only talked to the perpetrator(s) and the target but also to anyone who witnessed or had knowledge about the incident. Studies on teacher responses to bullying indicated that some teachers also use the strategy of talking with the students involved in the incidents. For example, Marshall et al. (2009) found one of the responses reported by teachers was "pulling students aside and talking with them about the bullying incident" (p. 145).   Teachers would directly address the students involved in the bullying in a way that was constructive, supportive and educative for students. Principals, as well as teachers, seem to agree that talking with students is a valuable first step. During the investigation, principals used the talks as a time to educate and provide support.

However, according to research, one strategy used by some teachers in response to incidents of bullying is to "ignore the bullying." Yoon and Kerber (2003) and Bauman and Del Rio (2006) found that the sample of teachers in their studies sometimes selected "ignoring" as a response to bullying, especially in response to incidents of relational bullying. On the contrary, the present study revealed that these principals did not choose to ignore the bullying, whether it was physical, verbal, or relational bullying. Every response given by the principals involved some action in handling the bullying incident; no one stated they would ignore the bullying. It was evident that they would not want

their teachers to use this strategy either because each school had a bully policy with clear

expectations in place that were articulated to school staff, students, and parents. Victor's

response confirmed this expectation.

> Since the situation [Sandy being teased during science class] is happening in the classroom, I would want to know why the teacher hasn't dealt with it, so I would go to the teacher of the student to find out why this is happening in the class and make sure they understand. If they are saying things like this, obviously it is visible, and we don't tolerate any of the type of behavior at all, and obviously it doesn't happen by accident. How you respond to it is more important. This year, I discussed with my staff their responsibility, because this is bullying, so they would have to fill out a report.

As mentioned in the literature review, research on educator perceptions has been

conducted mostly with teachers, so this is the research upon which adult perceptions of

bullying are based. The principals in the current study appear to have a greater awareness

of bullying than previous research with teachers. However, since the Yoon and Kerber

(2003) and Bauman and Del Rio (2006) studies, there has been an increase in media

coverage on teen suicides where bullying appeared to play a large part. Along with a

heightened awareness of the negative consequences of bullying as a result of the news

along with some states revising their statutes regarding school bullying so they are even

stricter, it is quite possible teachers are becoming more sensitive to bullying and realize

they need to address it so they may not ignore some of the incidents they would have in

the past.

The principals in this study had kept current with changes in the laws and also

came from districts whose bullying policies reflected these changes so they knew they

could not ignore the bullying, even if only because of state statute. Sylvia's response was

a good example of how the law played into responding to bullying: "I attended the

Principal's Institute, which is done through the Department of Education, specific to legal issues surrounding bullying and identifying at-risk students who might go down a path of violence and how to set up programs."

It is noteworthy that there was very little variability among the principals in this study in terms of their attitudes, perceptions, and responses to bullying. Attitudes and perceptions can influence how adults respond to bullying (Hazler et al., 2001). These principals perceived that bullying is serious and harmful to a student's psyche and self-esteem. As Fred shared, "Someone is making a person feel unwanted or unsafe, it can affect a person to where they don't want to come to school and that's the last thing I want." The principals' attitudes reflected their intolerance of bullying. The following sample statements from the principals reflect their attitudes:

- I think that is just plain mean, and I don't like mean.

- Watch for this and do not tolerate this; the minute this happens it needs to be my office.

- There is nothing that is too little, because if you don't stop it, if you let this go they'll do that and take it to the next step.

- This one right here . . . one of my pet peeves is bullying and harassment.

- This bugs me; I mean it's the specificity of it and the fact that we are aware that it's being said to the child and being written on the papers.

Even though the principals acknowledged that the laws on bullying sometimes guided their decisions, they made it clear that bullying, laws or no laws, was not acceptable behavior to them and there would be consequences. Frank's response to one

vignette was a typical of the other principals' responses: "I would be very assertive." The perpetrator would receive some type of discipline consequence, even on a first occurrence in some schools. For example, Elsa shared that "In the first instance of bullying, it is an automatic day of suspension, an in-school suspension."

Principals felt that besides receiving a consequence for inappropriate behavior, perpetrators also needed supports to change their behaviors and to work with the underlying issues. Targets were also in need of special supports to help empower them and help them to feel safe at school. As one respondent stated, "I would want to transfer the power from the aggressor to the victim." Ultimately the resolution they hoped for was that the inappropriate behavior stops, students feel safe and know they have been heard. Students feeling safe and connected to their school were outcomes that all the principals verbalized as being important.

Though research on adult responses to bullying is limited, Yoon (2004) felt that "Clearly there is a range of teacher responses to bullying, with some not sufficiently intervening, and others responding in threatening manners themselves" (p. 38). This range did not exist with the principals. They were each very specific on the strategies they would use with the perpetrator, the victim, and at times with entire classrooms. For example, in response to the vignette about Sandy who was being verbally teased, Sylvia stated, "So that it's not targeted at Sandy, the bullying classes would be done in our classes because if it is happening here, it's happening a lot." The principals' responses were not threatening either; however the principals stood firm that there would be consequences for bullying behavior. Their concern was for the inappropriate behavior to

stop, but also that the instigator learns how to change the behavior and become more empathetic. As Stella said, "Well my number one goal is to change the behavior and my number two goal is to protect the victim; you know prevent further victims."

A possible explanation for why these principals had similar responses to how they would handle each incident was their anti-bullying training. Not only did they all participate in some type of training, but also mentioned having participated in workshops held by the same professional organization of which they were all members and current or past officers. Their leadership role in this organization suggests their commitment to education and staying current with issues about bullying and effective interventions.

During the interview, the principals were asked how often incidents similar to the vignettes occurred at their schools. Their accounts indicated that similar incidents did occur but not very often, no more than once or twice a week and in many instances no more than four to five times a year. They indicated that the number of incidents were low, not because bullying did not exist on their campuses but because of the clear expectations they had about bullying and that when bullying occurred, it was dealt with immediately. Because consequences were given, students were very aware that it would not be tolerated.

The principals were also proactive about bullying which they felt helped to keep the incidents of bullying down to a minimum. They talked about how lessons on bullying were often presented in classrooms, how counselors worked with groups of students on bullying issues, how most schools had 'bully boxes' where students could anonymously report bullying, and how they had expectations of their teachers to be responsive to

bullying. Every principal mentioned some type of school handbook, given to all students and families at the start of the school year, where bullying and its consequences were explained. One respondent described how he informs the students about bullying: "We have some safeguards put in place to make sure our students are aware in the first week of school, and we go through the handbook."

Based on the principals' perceptions, bullying did not appear to be a serious problem at any of their schools. Further research is suggested to determine whether teachers as well as the students at these schools reported that bullying was as infrequent as their principals reported. If this were the case, then the principals' responses to bullying incidents along with their prevention efforts would appear to be effective in helping their schools keep bullying to a minimum.

Limitations

The results from the present study were encouraging because these principals, unlike some educators studied in previous literature, believed all forms of bullying were serious and needed to be addressed. They appeared confident and knowledgeable about which strategies to use in handling the incidents. However, the potential limitations of this study must be taken into consideration when interpreting these results.

Due to the small size of the sample and the purposive sampling of a group of principals who were recruited from the Middle Level Division Officers of the Arizona School Administrators Association, the results should be interpreted with some caution, as they may not generalize to other settings. Though the sample included both males and females, it was not diverse ethnically.

However, the fact that the participants in this study were limited to a very select group may be perceived as both a plus and a minus. The sample was not random or unbiased, as these principals were officers of their organization suggesting that they were highly regarded by their peers and demonstrated strong leadership among the other middle school principals within the organization. Conducting further research with a broader range of principals would help validate how representative these principals are to other middle school principals.

Vignettes were used as part of the methodology to gather data because they helped to "standardize the social stimulus across respondents and at the same time make the decision-making situation more real" (Alexander & Becker, 1978, p. 103). That being said the use of vignettes is not without limitations. There is the possibility that the principals may not actually respond as they indicated, since they cannot take into account the possible environmental and personal variables that may actually influence them at the time of the incidents. The way principals react to reading vignettes may not disclose how they actually might think and feel at the time of an incident. Though the principals were asked if the fact a parent had brought the incident to their attention had influenced their answers, they all felt it had not influenced their responses. However, it is possible that when presented in a real-life situation with a similar bullying incident, they might respond differently to a parent than if a student or teacher presented the information.

Rating scales are often used in qualitative research but their use be controversial because numbers in rating scales have meaning, but that meaning isn't very precise. They are not like quantities. With a quantity (such as dollars), the difference between $1 and $2

is exactly the same as between $2 and $3, but with a rating scale, that isn't really the case. The difference between rating a vignette a 3 (*moderately serious*) and a 4 (*serious*) is left to interpretation what that by the rater. Comparing the differences between ratings are not as precise as comparing the differences between quantities. Subjectivity can play into ratings.

The timing of the interviews might have been a limitation because a month prior to the interviews, state bullying laws had become more stringent and each of the principals referred to the 'new bully laws.' Information about the new laws may have heightened the principals' awareness of bullying and reinforced that schools were mandated to take action on bullying incidents. Would these principals have responded the same way if they had been interviewed two months prior, or a year later?

Also, careful thought was given to making the names of the students as gender neutral as possible; however, if these principals knew the gender of the bully or the target, would they have responded similarly? One principal brought up the point that he noticed the names were gender neutral, and when probed if it would make a difference to know the gender, he stated, "I would like to say it shouldn't . . . you wonder, obviously if I default to structure or policy, but I think I am growing away from that it may affect my reaction sometimes." Though they were gender neutral, there were times when some of the principals referred to the target as either 'he' or 'she", so without necessarily realizing it, they gendered the student in the incident which might possibly have influenced how they responded.

The primary tool used for data collection was face-to-face interviews with open-ended questioning, which allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the principals' perspectives on how they would respond to bullying incidents. However, due to social pressures that might exist from face-to-face interviews, principals may have provided answers that are considered socially acceptable. In real-life situations, they may respond in ways that may not be socially acceptable. Including other methods of data collection, such as surveys and observations, along with the interviews, may provide a more accurate understanding.

Another possible limitation for consideration is that all the principals had participated in some type of anti-bullying training and six of them had districts who supported a strong policy on bullying, which might reflect a general increase in principal awareness of the negative effects of bullying as a result of media attention and societal pressures. This sample of principals was already sensitive to the issues of bullying which is not reflected in earlier research with adult attitudes towards bullying. Additional research with a larger sample and less biased group of principals, would confirm to what extent the principals in this study compare to other middle school principals in their perceptions and responses to bullying.

Implications for Practice and Further Research

Educators need to understand and recognize the negative effects of bullying on individual students as well as on the entire school climate. They also need support in how to intervene when bullying occurs. Most of the literature on educator perceptions of bullying is limited to teachers, counselor, and other support staff. Since principals can

play a vital role in the prevention of bullying as a result of their leadership and level of commitment to reducing bullying (Harris & Petrie, 2003), further research is warranted in this critically understudied component of bullying.

The principals in this study certainly expressed their commitment to reducing bullying on their campuses. They felt confident in responding to the three forms of bullying: physical, verbal, and relational. They were aware that all three forms were serious forms of bullying and could have negative effects to the individual students as well as to the entire school. Their interviews revealed that they all had received a fair amount of training in bullying and were well versed with state statute on bullying as well as their district policies. The thoroughness of their answers and willingness to share their thoughts so freely, was an indication of how deeply committed they were to helping their schools to become "bully free."

Middle school is a time when bullying tends to peak (Hoover, et al., 1992; Pelligrini, 2002; Smith and Gross, 2006; Varjas et al., 2009), and even though the principals in this study recognized that bullying does occur on their campuses, they did not report high incidence of any form of bullying. Follow-up research with the staff and students of each of the schools represented in this study would help to confirm if bullying were as minimal as reported by the principals. If the teachers and students also felt that bullying was not tolerated and is handled effectively, then the principal responses and strategies have more credibility as being effective strategies that should be considered by other principals.

This current study, one of the few studies on principal perceptions and responses to bullying, shed some light on how middle school principals viewed bullying and what strategies they used for interventions. Their responses reflected confidence in handling the incidents presented to them. But given some limitations in this study, future research could benefit from investigating principal perceptions and responses in other settings (e.g., other school locations in the country, urban school district) and with a larger sample size of principals. Also using a mixed-methods approach might yield a more accurate view of principal responses to bullying.

An extension to this study would be to interview the teachers at these principals' schools to find out their awareness of what constituted bullying and how they would intervene in the incidents of bullying that were presented to the principals. Would they respond similarly to the principals? It is quite possible they were on the same page because each of the principals said that they started the school year by talking to teachers as well as students about bullying and often had assemblies, presented class lessons, and implemented programs such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (Sugai, Horner, & Gresham, 2002). Perhaps schools with principals, who participate in bullying prevention training, could help to shape their teachers' perceptions about bullying by providing similar training for their teachers along with sharing their own beliefs and attitudes about bullying.

The anti-bullying training they had received, their awareness level of the seriousness of bullying, as well as knowledge of effective interventions may have influenced how they chose to respond to the incidents. The principals had a clear and

specific plan of what they needed to do to resolve the issues and help to minimize

bullying on their campuses. The types of anti-bullying training the principals received

were not the scope of this study; it was clear that what they had received had helped them

to feel confident in how to respond. Further research is needed to understand the types of

bully training that are effective for principals, as well as their staff, to help in developing

effective prevention-intervention efforts.

The principals all came from schools that had received school labels of either

Performing Plus or Excelling. It would be interesting to conduct further study on

whether a designated school label is a mediating factor in perceptions about bullying.

Were the high performing labels partially achieved because of the principals' anti-

bullying attitudes or vice versa, were these principals' perceptions about bullying

influenced by their school's high achievement? Students who feel safe and connected to

school tend to do better academically (Goldstein et al., 2007; Nakamoto & Schwartz,

2009).

There are many factors to consider in creating a school climate where bullying is

minimized. The findings from this study indicate there are some common elements

which these principals shared and are worth considering when creating a bully

free school. The common elements include:

- Participate in bullying prevention training

- Stay current with state bullying laws and involve law enforcement when

  mandated.

- Provide clear expectations to teachers and staff about their role in bullying prevention.

- Be involved in educating the students and parents about bullying at the beginning of the year and follow-up when needed.

- Create a method where students can confidentially report bullying incidents without fear of reprisal.

- Develop clear and concise policies when dealing with bullying and assure that students and parents are aware of these policies.

- Provide clear consequences for perpetrators, but also include interventions for changing the bullying behavior.

- Inform students that there are adults they can come talk to who will listen to and respect them.

- Teach perpetrators, targets, and bystanders how to positively interact with each other and to be sensitive and supportive of children who are ethnically, socially, economically, or physically different.

- Involve parents, from the beginning, when bullying occurs.

- Involve counselors, School Resource Officers (SRO), and law-enforcement when deemed appropriate.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate how middle school principals responded to bullying incidents and whether they responded differently to different forms. Of special interest was how they responded to situations of relational bullying

which until recently had received less attention in research on bullying. This study showed that the middle school principals found all the incidents of bullying to be serious and that they viewed relational bullying as serious as the other forms. Each form of bullying was serious because it physically hurt someone, emotionally hurt someone and potentially could impact the climate of the school if incidents were not dealt with effectively. Their strategies for responding to the various situations were similar to each other and were based on their years of experience in working with middle school students, interventions learned through training, along with well-defined district and school policies.

A great deal has been learned about the bullying phenomenon in the past thirty years, but there is still more to be learned about adult perceptions and responses to school bullying. "The principal of the school plays a vital role in the prevention of bullying" (Harris & Hathorn, 2006, p. 50). As this study showed, there are principals who understand the consequences of bullying if left unchecked and who believe that physical, verbal, and relational bullying are all inappropriate, unhealthy, and are should not tolerated on their campuses. This may have been an exceptional group of principals, but hopefully principals who have an awareness of bullying and its consequences and are leaders in their state like these principals, can use their leadership positions to educate others so bullying can be minimized on our campuses.

APPENDIX A

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Demographic Questions

1. How many years have you been a middle school principal?
2. What are the most common discipline issues you have had in the past year or so?
3. What kinds of professional development have you had with school discipline for administrators?
4. What is size and ethnic background of your school?

Follow-up Questions to Each Vignette

5. How serious do you feel this situation is?
   1 not at all serious
   2 not very serious
   3 moderately serious
   4 serious
   5 very serious

6. How would you respond to this situation?
7. What is the outcome you would like to see in this situation?
8. How do you decide what to do in this situation?
9. How often is an incident like this reported to you?

Follow-up Questions at the Conclusion of the Six Vignettes

10. Rank order each vignette from 1 to 6
11. Explain why you ranked them they way you did.

Vignettes

The six vignettes were the focus of the interview around which all questions centered. Though the vignettes reflected bullying behaviors, the term *bullying* was not used; instead the participants were told the scenarios involved hypothetical discipline issues that were brought to their attention. The use of the word *bullying* was not being used to avoid a possible bias with responses if the principal were told the discipline issue was bullying.

APPENDIX B

VIGNETTES

Background Told To Each Participant

In each vignette, a student's parent has requested to meet with you because he/she is very concerned because the child does not want to come to school any more. The child has been the target of similar repeated acts. The child and parent have previously sought the help of the classroom teacher. Here is each parent's story:

Please read each scenario and I will ask you some questions after each one.

1. "Pat was in the cafeteria when another student intentionally kicked Pat in the shin while trying to cut in the lunch line. The monitor did not see this. This is the third time Pat has come home with bruises caused by this student."

2. "Alex was in the school library when another student came up and called Alex a Kiss Ass and kept writing it on Alex's papers. For the past month this student has been calling Alex names and now other students are starting to call Alex bad names too."

3. "Robin told a group of classmates to stop making fun of a student in their class who stutters – that they were being unkind. The group turned on Robin and spread a rumor that other kids should stay away from Robin because we were drug dealers and that Robin had gotten in trouble at his previous school for doing drugs."

4. "I am sure you know that Sydney was invited to perform with the local pops orchestra and that the newspaper did an article on Sydney. Right after that a student in Sydney's music class took Sydney's backpack and threw dirt in it and then poured a coke inside – ruining the books and papers inside. Last week Sydney's sweatshirt had been written all over with black marker!"

5. "I know Terry is overweight and can't keep up with the other students in class easily but that does not make it ok for the kids to exclude Terry. Two kids warned the other kids in a clique to stay away from Terry and that if they ate lunch or invited Terry to their houses; they would no longer be part of the group. She eats alone all the time!"

6. "Sandy is experiencing relentless teasing! The kids in biology class are snickering at Sandy because Sandy asked to be excused from dissecting a pig. Sandy's lab partner says things like 'you suck, you want me to cut you some bacon, or would you like to a pork chop for lunch?' The teasing has now gone beyond the biology classroom to other classes and the hallways!"

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

The following script will be used in an email to recruit members of the Middle Level Division of the Arizona School Administrators (ASA) to the principals:

Hi (<u>Principal Name</u>)

I am a doctoral student in Educational Policy Studies and Practices at the University of Arizona and am doing a research study on middle school principals' responses to discipline incidents and their perceived seriousness. I am seeking experienced middle school principals to participate in this study.

I have spoken with both this year's President and Past President to seek their support in reaching out to the Officers and Regional Representatives of the Middle Level Division. Since you are either an Officer or a Regional Representative of the Middle Level Division of the ASA, I am inviting you to voluntarily participate in the research study. There are no known risks or costs to this study.

Your participation would require about an hour of your time and place and time that is convenient for you. If you would be willing to participate, please reply back to me of your interest and provide the best phone number for me to call so that we can set up a time to meet and I can answer any questions that you might have.

Thank you for you time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Cindy Hurley

APPENDIX D

PHONE SCRIPT

Hi (<u>Principal Name</u>)

I am Cindy Hurley the Doctoral Candidate from the University of Arizona who wrote you to invite you to participate in a research study on discipline issues that a middle school principal might encounter.

Thank you so much for replying to my email. Do you have any questions that you would like to ask me at this time?   (PI will answer questions.)

I want to remind you that your responses during the interview will be kept confidential and that if at any time you have a concern we can stop the interview, address the concern and either continue or if you feel you need to stop the interview, then you have that option.

It is important to me that the interview is done at a place and time that fits best with your schedule? The interview should take about an hour of your time. What days and time might work best for you in the next two weeks? (Discuss days and times) Where would be most convenient place for you to meet?

Great! Well, then I will see you at (<u>place</u>) on (<u>date and time</u>). If something should come up or you have any further questions, you can reach me on my cell, (520-603-2494).

Thank you so much and I look forwarding to meeting with you.

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