MIDDLE SCHOOL STAFFS' PERCEPTIONS OF

BULLYING AND TRAUMATIZATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

STUDENTS IN AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL SETTING

By

Marlene Williams

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APPROVED BY:

Daniel Marston, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Fred A. Milacci, D.Ed., Committee Member

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study is to know and understand teachers' perceptions of bullying, teachers' perceptions of special education students, and what influences their decision to intervene and assist when observing special education students being victimized through bullying. The theory guiding this study is Aaron Beck's Cognitive Behavioral Theory's Cognitive Triangle that suggests that thought influences emotions and emotions influences behaviors, as well in reverse. The data collection process includes individual interviews with eight classroom teachers who work in alternative middle schools. Due to COVID-19, in-person observations were omitted, and the individual interviews were conducted using Zoom platform with semi-structured questions as well as sub-questions for additional information not obtained through the semi-structured questions. Data was analyzed using Hermeneutic content analysis. Findings from this study reveal that teachers see themselves as protective of students, intolerant of bullying and motivated to intervene in situations where students are bullied. However, what these findings also showed is that definitions of bullying and perceptions of what is designated as bullying vary considerably. Participants in this study showed that each was responding to their own definitions of bullying. This indicates strongly that future research on bullying and interventions designed to address bullying need to be specific on how bullying is defined. Allowing individuals to rely on their own definitions of bullying likely increases the variability on how situations are addressed and even whether they are addressed at all.

Keywords: bullying behaviors, bullying incidences, special education, teacher perceptions, victimization, survivors

Dedication

My children and my grandchildren are my world. I have always encouraged my children to do better than I and to go further than I do. Therefore, I have pushed through doctoral education to set a standard for my children to follow, and I plan to instill that same mindset in my grandchildren. I have completed this dissertation in my mid-fifties, which shows them that it is never too late and that if I could do it, certainly they can too. I do not expect them to take the path in life that I have taken, but I pray that their take-away is that they can accomplish whatever goal they set in life. My children motivated me and continuously reminded me that I got this, that I could do it, and to not be concerned with family issues, but to trust that I have taught them to handle any issues, and to just focus on becoming Dr. Williams. Therefore, I dedicate this dissertation to my cheerleaders, my four biological children: Katrina Williams, James Williams Jr., Jerrell Williams, and Jamell Williams; my grafted-in son: Ronald Clay; my daughters by marriage: Otani Williams, Marlotte Williams, DaRayl Clay, and Lynasia Williams; and my four beautiful grandchildren: Trinity Rouse, Kaiden Williams, Skylar Williams, and Kira Williams. Then, I must include all others who call me mother: Krystal Jones, Dominique Harris, Brandon Crump, James Lynn, Jr., Krashauna Williams, Shavaris Williams. Also included are a host of siblings, nieces, and nephews who supported my journey.

Then, I have another world consisting of every special education or exceptional child that I have ever had the esteemed pleasure to service. My previous, present, and future students contributed to my motivation and drive to complete my dissertation. Being in a better position to service that population, to be a support for students and families, makes all the hard work worth it. In the shadows, without their knowledge, the students have shown me that challenges are real but so is tenacity. Hurt and fears are real but so are abilities to overcome, and that

failures are real but so are successes. I have learned that each of them has a story to tell if we would just listen to them. They simply want to be heard, believed, cared for, considered, and loved. They want to be someone's priority, so I made them my priority. From them, I have gained understanding, knowledge, and insight beyond what academic books could teach me. Therefore, I also dedicate this dissertation to them.

Last, but not least, I am grateful to God for putting me in a place physically, emotionally, and mentally to complete such a task. He has a plan for me that only He could orchestrate and assure my completion. He remained with me when it was difficult, and He gave me a song that has not been written to encourage me and to remind me to keep moving forward. Without God, I am certain that this dissertation, including the completed coursework, would have been impossible. Therefore, move forward according to His Spirit to accomplish whatever He has planned next for me. Thus, I dedicate this work to Him. To God be all glory, praise, and honor.

Acknowledgements

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit: I know I would not have made it this far without God starting the process, taking me through the process, and bringing me to completion. Thank you, Father.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord,

plans to prosper you and not to harm you,

plans to give you hope and a future.

—Jeremiah 29:11

In Him I live, move, and have my being.

—Acts 17:28

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Alternative Middle School (AMS)

American Educational Research Association (AERA)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Behavior-Focused Alternative Schools (BFAS)

Education School Professionals (ESP)

Emotional Disability (ED)

Hermeneutic Content Analysis (HCA)

National Statistics for Education Statistics (NSES)

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP)

Professional Developments (PDs)

Serious Emotional Disability (SED)

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

Special Education (SpEd)

Research Question (RQ)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

School staff, consisting of teachers and administrators, have an obligation to respond to and intervene during bullying activities, but many choose not to intervene, even when the bullied survivor is part of the special education population. There are many reported and observed cases of teachers not responding to or not intervening during bullying activities (Yoon et al., 2016), including when the students are special needs. However, this research is not centered on bullying, bullies, or bullied survivors but teachers' perceptions. The focus of this hermeneutic phenomenological research is to understand teachers' perceptions of bullying and their decisions to intervene or to not intervene when special education students are bullied within alternative middle schools. A secondary focus is to determine whether teachers' perceptions about bulling or special education students being bullied influence their emotions and decision to intervene. According to Bradshaw et al., (2013), at that time, little research was conducted on teachers' perceptions of bullying special education students and other vulnerable groups. This research is not intended to implicate school staff of irresponsible behavior nor to direct blame towards staff. Understanding teachers' perception may help guide school boards and districts with ideas and tools to encourage teachers to enhance perception and respond to bullying activities. Teachers may have valuable information to share to enlighten management of their perceptions of bullying and reasons for not intervening. Therefore, it is time to focus on helping teachers to be motivated to react and stop bullying behaviors. School teachers are viewed as human beings with true emotions, thoughts, and choices who struggle daily with students and personal issues.

Herein lies my justification to focus on teachers' perceptions. Much research exists focusing on bullies, survivors, and their environment, yet bullying is still prevalent in schools throughout the world. Thus, shifting focus on teachers' perception may lead to understanding and motivation to intervene. In short, research results may assist school district superintendents with tools to help bullied students by understanding teachers' perceptions and the impact of the cognitive triangle, and making changes accordingly. Changes may possibly consist of smaller class sizes, additional teacher aides to assist, more effective training in teacher intervention and bullying prevention, or implementing new, effective anti-bullying policies and strategies to motivate intervening during bullying behaviors. Afterall, Yell et al., (2016) insist that teachers, counselors, and all school staff are involved in constructing bullying prevention and anti-bullying policies.

Currently, there are anti-bullying programs and zero tolerance of bullying policies to eliminate, or at least lessen, bullying activities and negative consequences. Yet, due to staff non-commitment and lack of implementation of these policies, there is little impact on traditional middle schools (Ybarra et al., 2019). One can expect these policies to be even less impactful in alternative middle school settings for students with behavioral issues. Moreover, research showing efficacy of anti-bullying and prevention programs are scarce (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Therefore, consequences, seen and unseen, continue to surface. Consequences affect all areas of a students' life including academic success, emotional stability, psychological and mental health, somatic health, and physical appearance and well-being (Baier et al., 2013; Holt et al., 2013; Nickerson et al., 2019; Paul et al., 2018; Yoon et al., 2016). Additionally, bullying contributes to financial instability as doctor visits copayments, health

insurance, and institutional admittance, become necessary. Maladaptive behaviors, school drop-out, and criminal activities are also consequences of bullying.

In summary, this study looks at: (a) teachers' perceptions of bullying and decisions to intervene or not to intervene when bullying is directed at special education students, (b) the influence of the Cognitive Triangle on teachers' decisions of intervening, which focuses on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors impacting each other, (c) teachers' perceptions of the effects of bullying special education students, and (d) the alternative middle school settings', school climate, influence on teachers' perceptions of bullying and bullying survivors and their decisions to intervene. The research will also consider if pre-conceived notions of students' attitudes and behaviors in alternative school settings influence teachers' perceptions and willingness to intervene, which would be linked to the concept of the Cognitive Triangle.

Background

Teachers in alternative middle schools are tasked with the responsibility of providing safe academic environments conducive to learning, regardless of the settings, but they sometimes fail to complete the task. In general, alternative schools are alternate placements for students suspended long-term from traditional public schools. According to Free (2017), traditional school placement changes to alternative school settings due to suspension and expulsion, as well as excessive unexcused absences and being at-risk of failing.

Long-term suspension could range from a semester to the remainder of the school year, whereas traditional school suspensions may range from a day to two weeks. Suspension from traditional schools result from behaviors, such as fighting peers, assaulting on staff, bringing illegal substances on school property, possession of weapons on school property, and verbal threats of mass harm or destruction. Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al (2016) note that students

eliciting such behaviors are at risk of suspension and expulsion. According to Perzigian et al.,

(2017), behavior-focused alternative schools (BFAS) are remedies to rescue students with

behavior issues from school expulsion and serve as educational settings for youth expelled from

traditional schools for zero tolerance behaviors, such as bringing weapons or drugs on school

property. Though expelled for the duration of the school year, the authors highlight that if

behavior modification in BFAS is successful, students can reintegrate into their assigned

traditional school, or home school. Such reintegration occurs as a fresh start during the next

school year.

Teachers are trained to verbally de-escalate aggression and to physically restrain

students to avoid harm to others or the aggressive student. The atmosphere is often loud and

stressful to some students and to some staff. I have witnessed teachers appearing to be on the

verge of a nervous breakdown and students telling me that they fear the environment. It is the

responsibility of the local educational agency to assure that the student successfully matriculates

through the alternative schools' programs. However, Wilkerson et al, (2016) state that

alternative school staff are responsible for student safety and for responding to bullying

behaviors. The environment also presents a lot of responsibility on teachers to instruct, manage

classrooms, combat aggression, and to de-escalate students to prevent physical and verbal

aggressions and altercations. Furthermore, students are not required to receive therapy before

entering alternative schools because they are still entitled to education. Therefore, students'

violent and maladaptive behaviors and aggressions often present in the behavioral-focused

alternative schools and can get out of control, so teachers struggle with preventing and

intervening during violent behaviors and bullying activities that victimize or traumatize special

education students. Still, inflated expectations and responsibilities remain.

For clarity, Wilkerson et al., highlight that there are three types of alternative schools: 1) those designed to influence advanced academics, 2) those for students with maladaptive behaviors at risk of unsuccessfully progressing academically, and 3) those lacking the required credits for their grade levels. Perzigian et al., (2017) respectively identify the three types of alternative schools as innovative schools of choice, behavioral-focused alternative schools (BFAS), and academic remediation-focused. Alternative schools in this study relate to behavioral-focused alternative schools. Many students in BFAS are diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders. Wilkerson et al., (2016) acknowledge that there are provisions to prevent emotionally and behaviorally disturbed students from suspension and expulsion from behaviors associated with their disability, students are still suspended, expelled, and assigned to alternative schools. These authors also highlight that there are no differences in students' academic success between alternative schools and traditional schools.

There are clear differences between alternative middle school and traditional middle schools. Brunetti (2020) supports that there are differences such as flexibility of academic instructions and curriculum. Due to the impact of behavior on academic success, BFAS are less restrictive with teaching practices and in what they teach. Phillips (2013) purports that at-risk students perform better in small alternative school settings when school staff value student input and perceptions of learning, whereas teachers are better able to understand students' insight of learning and are therefore able to structure progressive instruction around students' insight.

Other significant differences of alternative middle schools are centered on structure, transition, protocol, and tolerance of negative behaviors. To begin with, alternative middle school students are not free to roam whereas sections of the school are locked, including restrooms, classrooms, and hallway doors leading to other areas of the school. Also, students

are escorted to different locations and only one student at a time is permitted in restrooms. In

traditional schools, multiple students are allowed in restrooms and students may move

throughout the school, such as to the restroom, office, or cafeteria, without staff escorts. In

traditional schools, school enrollment is determined by residential zones or parents and

guardians. On the other hand, Perzigian et al., (2017) note that officials, such as judges,

probation officers, and social workers have authority to confine students to BFAS.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams comprised of local education agency

representatives, parents, general education teachers, special education teachers, and school

counselors or school psychologists make such decisions for special education students. In

traditional schools, the threatening and maladaptive behaviors exist but are less tolerated by

teachers and administration. Classroom teachers are more apt to remove students from their

classrooms for threats of verbally aggressive behaviors and physically aggressive behaviors.

Yet, in alternative schools, teachers often must tolerate these behaviors while continuing to

instruct, and often cannot put students out of the class for threats of verbal and physical

aggression unless aggression is unpreventable or occurred previously. However, some teachers

who participated in Free's 2017 study commented that school administration encourages

teachers to keep misbehaved students in the classroom, instead of sending them to this office for

discipline. Therefore, teachers voiced a concern that the alternative school fosters danger to

physical safety and well-being with little consequences. One staffer shared that collectively

putting all the negative behaviors in one setting creates hierarchies of strong students who

dominate and harm weaker students. According to Long et al., (2018), teachers have difficulty

managing behaviors in alternative school settings. Traditional schools usually have a larger

population of staff and students are in abundance, whereas alternative schools have smaller

populations of staff and students, according to Bascia & Maton (2016), which limits overpopulation of aggressive behaviors in one location. Both types of schools have student resource officers to assist with behaviors and both have inclusive general education classes and separate classes for students who elicit more frequent aggressive behaviors.

According to students, both types of schools have bullying activities that are ignored by teachers. Students have reported to me that their suspension from traditional middle school was the result of retaliating to bullying behaviors after teachers ignored them experiencing bullying for an extended time. Other students shared that their suspension from traditional middle school resulted from experiencing bullying peers with excessive fighting behaviors or from experiencing bullying teachers through verbal or physical aggression. Some teachers in Free's (2017) study noted that some students are emotionally more comfortable and feel safer in alternative schools than in larger traditional schools. For this reason, some students misbehave yearly in traditional schools to return to the small setting and safety of alternative schools. However, Bascia & Maton (2016) hint that traditional schools use alternative schools to avoid responsibilities of meeting students' needs.

The sites for this research are alternative middle schools where teachers encounter bullying, aggressive, and maladaptive behaviors in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia. Five different locations are represented in this study and are connected to a behavior-focused organization. Each school has general education and special education students, but in separate classrooms with different programs for the differing groups. At the beginning of the school year prior to students arriving, teachers have multiple staff meetings, professional development training (PDs), and the opportunity to prepare their classrooms and hallways for the students'

arrival. These alternative middle schools begin the school on the same schedule of traditional public schools.

The organization has individual alternative school facilities as well as locations within some public schools, all of which are behavioral-focused. To begin with, the individual locations may have students ranging from kindergarten to high school. Admission into some of the programs require diagnosis of a disability or disorder, and to be identified as special education; while the general education classrooms requires no diagnosis. The general education students are located in different areas of the building as a divide between students with disabilities. Most students in those settings receive special education services, while a small number of general education students do not receive services. Some students have comorbid diagnoses, such as emotional disability, autism spectrum disorder, depression, anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and bipolar disorder. Some students are physically disabled and struggle with mobility. Disability diagnosis is not required for the general education students. The general education students are in these settings due to displaying maladaptive behaviors in traditional public schools that caused long term suspension. Three such independent locations are included in this study. The two other settings are located within traditional public schools and have a separate section as a divide from the traditional school students.

There is an array of experience and a broad range of age difference among the teachers. Some are licensed in special education who work with the special education students, while others are licensed in specific subjects, such as math and science who work with the general education students. Each classroom has two teachers, a lead teacher and an assistant teacher, who work as a team. Additionally, most classrooms are paired with a female and a male teacher to mimic parental and family classroom structure.

Students in these alternative middle school settings have been suspended from traditional public schools for severe behaviors or threats and for repeated behaviors that resulted in long term suspensions or expulsion from public schools . Teachers are trained and/or recertified yearly in de-escalation and physical restraint of students in danger of harming themselves or others. Small class sizes help teachers manage behaviors, but behaviors are visible. Also, many students struggle academically. Alternative schools are for students with low academic and maladaptive behaviors, according to Farkas et al., (2012), but there are students in this setting easily progressing academically. Students wear uniforms for cohesiveness and to lessen the opportunity for bullying due to clothes and shoes.

Situation to Self

My motivation for conducting this research is seeing the need for struggling teachers in alternative middle schools to find motivation and heart-felt desires to intervene when witnessing special education students bullied by other students. I am challenged to know and to understand how they can observe such a vulnerable population threatened, picked on, and hurt, yet look the other way and allow bullying to continue. Over the years, I have seen teachers ignore bullying activities as if bullying is not a concern nor put students at risk of harm or death.

In addition, the special education population suffers in ways which they should not be exposed. I have witnessed student meltdowns, fears, refusal to ride school buses home because their bully rode the same bus, and social withdrawal. Youth holds a place in my heart but working with the special education population for almost 16 years sparked concern and care for their well-being. I plan to advocate for their well-being and rights in the future. As for now, knowing how to equip teachers with motivation to monitor their surroundings, identify and

acknowledge bullying, and intervene during bullying activities is more pressing in the here and now.

From observation, bullying of this population appears to have increased in intensity, cruelty, and frequency. Special education students still experience hopelessness, especially when they know teachers observe bullying activities and do not intervene. While struggling with their disabilities, they are also struggling to survive bullying. In the traditional high schools and the alternative middle school, students have shared with me how they want to die, how they hate school, how they feel hated and unsafe in school, and how they feel that school staff does not care for them. Some have reported bullying to teachers and administration, but staff did not respond. Even I have encountered an assistant principal's response of "boys will be boys" as I reported a bullying incident.

Heartbreakingly, I witnessed a student having a mental meltdown after surviving bullying almost an entire school year, refusing to tell me because teachers and administration were aware and did nothing. What prompted the meltdown was seven bullies surrounding that student threatening to beat him simultaneously on the school bus; even the bus driver refused to intervene. The student went into fight and flight mode, wrestling the sheriff attempting to run away from school, all while screaming, "they're not going to do anything" (referring to staff). It took several hours allowing the student to deescalate apart from other students before he could verbalize what happened and what he endured throughout the school year. First, he typed and emailed his story to me before he could verbalize it. With disbelief, I could not understand how the principal, assistant principal, and teachers were aware of the bullying incidents all school year and did not intervene to protect the student. They witnessed the bullied survivor's nervousness, trembling hands, lowered academic performance from passing grades to failing

grades, sleeping in class, quick-temper, and growing disrespect for teachers. Therefore, I wondered, through what lens were they perceiving and processing bullying incidents and that student? What kept them from intervening?

Hence, my philosophical assumption of subjectivist epistemology guides this research. Epistemology is the study of knowledge and evolves around beliefs, justification, and rationality. As noted by Hepner et al., (2016), reality is known (p. 364). Gall et al., (2007) adds to the definition that epistemology also looks at how knowledge is validated. Laverty (2013) states that epistemology links the knower to what is known. In this study, participants' perceptions and experiences of the phenomenon are the realities and what is known. Feast and Melles (2010) state that Crotty views epistemology as determining the legitimacy of knowledge and what can be known. Objectively, actions receive judgment of morality, ethics, validity, and logic. Subjectively, actions are justified and rationalized. Subjectivity references an individual, or subject, being consciously aware and able to mentally process a phenomenon. Combining the two, Feast notes that with subjectivist epistemology, perception is believed to be the reality. Note that bullying is a phenomenon, however the phenomenon studied in this writing is school staffs' lack of intervention while observing special education students' distress or trauma resulting from bullying. Has perception desensitized emotions? Has bullying become perceived as normalized, justified, and rationalized whereas it is not necessary to intervene? Researchers have deemed that bullying is not normal (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). To summarize, this dissertation seeks to understand the subjectivist epistemology of school staffs' knowledge and perception of bullying, their beliefs, justification, and logic of not intervening to protect special education students in alternative middle school settings, and their perception and knowledge of trauma.

In summary, to know and understand teachers' perceptions of bullying and perceptions of bullied special education students is of utmost importance. My experiences and observations of bullying and teachers' reactions have not tainted my ability to ethically conduct this research. Risking interjecting my biases and skewing the findings of this research risks not gaining insight that may benefit teachers in intervening; hence, prolonging continued bullying behaviors and further damaging special education youth, as well as youth in general. Therefore, I relinquish assumptions, judgment, and pre-determined findings. This research is not based on what I want to hear but is about what teachers share about their perceptions, but is about answering the research questions, and is about understanding and finding meaning of their language.

Problem Statement

The problem that exists includes special education students consistently bullied in alternative middle schools and teachers' perceptions are influencing whether to intervene. Presently, little research exists seeking to understand staffs' perception and knowledge of bullying and staffs' explanations for not intervening (Yoon et al., 2016). Another piece of the puzzle is whether current anti-bullying policies are known and acknowledged. Currently, little research exists seeking to understand school staffs' knowledge of, and faith in, current anti-bullying policies. To explain, when special education students with serious emotional disability (SED), emotional disturbances from other disabilities or disorders, and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are bullied, it is often ongoing which repeats traumatization within students that are likely overly stimulated with trauma. Ashburner et al., (2019) highlight that the parents in their study were very concerned about their children with ASD's emotional states due to encountering face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying. Hwang et al., (2018) adds that youth

with ASD are more likely to be bullied than non-disabled students and are likely to have difficulty regulating emotions. Such victimization and re-victimization lead to various negative consequences, of which are suicidal ideations and suicide completion. Students experience helplessness, loneliness, and even hopelessness when teachers do not intervene. Moreover, it negatively impacts life outside of school as well as life inside school.

Additionally, recent research of teachers' perceptions and knowledge of bullying have identified teachers' lack of knowledge and understanding of the differing forms of bullying. However, Shamsi et al., (2020) conducted a study of 188 teachers and found that 81% of teacher correctly identified bullying, yet they did not correctly identify the differing types of bullying. Inability to identify types of bullying means that unidentified bullying will go unreported. The importance of such research increases the propensity of school staff to learn identifying bullying, addressing bullying, intervening during bullying, and reporting bullying. Moreover, if teachers do not believe in current anti-bullying policies then bullying will continue, staff will continue to ignore bullying incidents, and cases will continue to go unreported. Likewise, students who do not have faith in teacher support nor anti-bullying programs are less likely to report bullying incidences and continue to suffer in silence.

In summary, according to research, teachers can benefit from education in defining bullying, identifying bullying, and acknowledging bullying. Teachers can also benefit from acknowledging insight into their perceptions of bullying, and from appropriate anti-bullying and prevention programs. As noted by Shamsi et al., (2020), teachers need the ability to recognize bullying, know how to prevent bullying, and to know how to intervene when it occurs. Perhaps, teachers may also benefit from school administration teams and departments of education having

knowledge of teachers' subjective epistemology of individual perceptions of bullying. Collaboration among educators is a valued commodity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to discover and understand school staffs' perceptions and knowledge of student-to-student bullying of special education students in an alternative middle school setting and to understand staffs' decisions and epistemic justifications not to intervene. Student bullying is defined as repeated, differing acts of violence, exclusion, and ignoring towards individuals perceived as weaker than the bully, such as peers, or individuals unable to retaliate, such as teachers. For clarity, the special education students related to this study includes students diagnosed with ASD, SED, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Anxiety Disorder, and Specific Learning Disability (SLD). Perception will generally be defined as experiencing and interpreting sensory. The theory guiding this study is Aaron Beck's Cognitive Behavior approach highlighting the cognitive triangle, also known as the cognitive triad and self-awareness of perceptions. The concept of the cognitive triangle focuses on the interactions between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Triangular interactions consist of cognition determining affect, affect determining behaviors, and behaviors determining thoughts.

As previously stated, participants for this study are selected from five alternative middle schools located in Hampton Roads, Virginia. Differing locations will provide differing perceptions and insights, as well as differences in influencers to intervene or not intervene. Data from these participants will be analyzed by two researchers to assure validity, accuracy, and unbiased results. Still, these five schools are not representative of every area or region

throughout the country; thus, data is limited to those regions. However, replicating this study in different regions could possibly provide different insight, data, and results.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is the epistemological subjectivism of revealing and understanding school staffs' perception of bullying and the decisions not to intervene in hopes of moving forward to assist teachers and, if needed, to develop workable, effective anti-bullying policies. Relying on policies based on outdated research is not effective in current schools. Bradshaw et al., (2013) note that 40% of teachers will not report bullying, even though they perceive to have adequate training. Bullying activities, methods of bullying, violent tendencies of students, and teachers' attitudes concerning bullying and interventions are different than the past. Students have become more aggressive, violent, and disrespectful to staff and peers, and teachers have become either more defensive by yelling and holding grudges against students or more passive by ignoring maladaptive behaviors. Therefore, modes of addressing bullies, considering school staff perceptions and input, and writing policies all warrant change. It may prove beneficial to focus on classroom teachers, those who can possibly share significant insight into bullying and prevention, who can explain why current policies, programs, and prevention strategies are ineffective, and who can suggest what may be effective (Wachs et al., 2019). The possibility, and hope, of this study is to gain pertinent information from interviewing school staff, to learn their reality so that differing school boards and educational institutions can apply their reality to developing successful anti-bullying policies, programs, and prevention strategies.

Possible Future Studies

Additionally, the significance of this study is that it could possibly provide the opportunity for researchers to repeat the study nationwide and internationally, to discover staffs' perceptions in varying localities, and to promote positive systemic changes in developing anti-bullying policies, programs, and prevention strategies. Due to the small sample size, qualitative method, and limited research referencing teachers' perceptions of bullying and intervening, the study may possibly increase the chances of future quantitative or theory-driven studies (Heppner et al, 2016, p. 197). Uniform, citywide, statewide, or districtwide policies are not effective with a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, bullying in inner city schools differ from bullying in suburban schools. Likewise, bullying in small schools differs from bullying in larger schools. Therefore, future research could possibly be applied to individual localities. Lastly, bullying differs between elementary, middle, and high schools. Since this study will be centered on alternative middle school, future research could possibly study bullying special education students in alternative high school settings. The hope is to produce open-mindedness whereas policy makers and all stakeholders involved would consider the ineffectiveness of current blanket policies, programs, and prevention strategies, adhere to research, and embrace individualized efforts in all secondary settings. Moreover, this study may introduce the opportunity for future studies addressing and closing existing gaps, such as researching school staffs' perceptions of bullying special education students in alternative high schools, school staffs' perception of bullying special education students in traditional secondary schools, and school staff perception of bullying general education students in all grade levels of academic settings. Lastly, research could possibly seek to further understand the influence of the

Cognitive Triangle on teachers' decisions to intervene in settings other than alternative middle school settings.

Cognitive Behavior Theory – Cognitive Triangle

Completion of this research could possibly support connections between thought, affect, and behavior, the constructs of Aaron Beck's Cognitive Triangle rooted in Cognitive Behavior Theory. Cognitive Triangle states that persons' thoughts influence feelings, that feelings influence behavior, and that behavior influences thoughts. In this study, perception is placed in the middle of the triangle and influences all three constructs. In relation to school staffs' perceptions, the study shows whether or how staffs' thoughts are generated by perceptions of bullying. Next, the research examines whether or how the thoughts of bullying incidents elicit negative or positive feelings. Lastly, the study determines whether or how negative feelings drive inactive behaviors to intervening with bullying activities. Since each person experiences phenomenon differently, the study elicits insight on how individual school staff experiences bullying behaviors and what specific affect is attached to individual experiences. Therefore, departments of education and individualized schools can focus on improving areas of staffs' concern, possibly improving school climate and staff support, and fostering student-centered thoughts of safety and bullying prevention. Consequently, if the areas of concern are improved and thoughts of safety and prevention emerge, school officials can track positive affect reported by staff and observe or track if school staff increase intervening during bullying activities. Knowledge of the impact of the constructs of the Cognitive Triangle may lead to varying school officials gaining direction into eliminating or lessening bullying incidents.

Figure 1: Cognitive Triangle
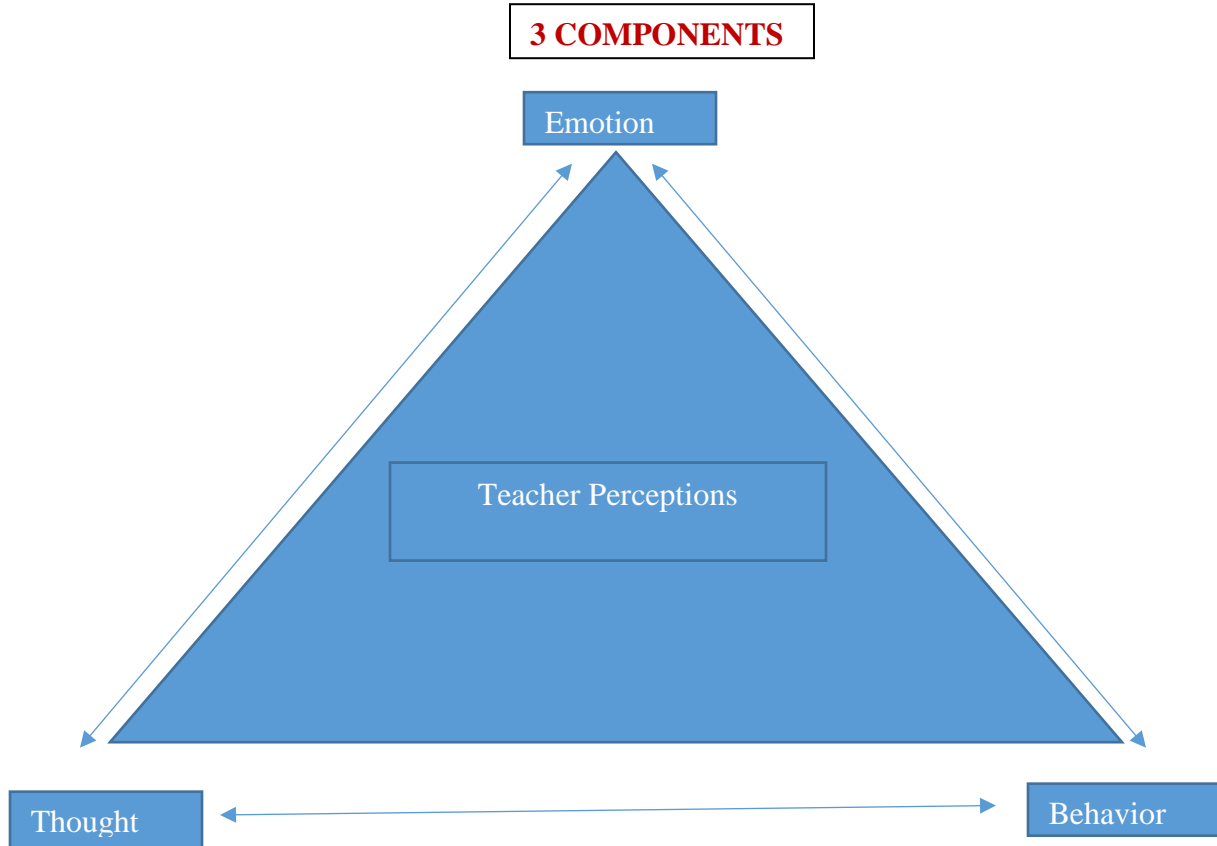
3 COMPONENTS

Emotion

Teacher Perceptions

Thought

Behavior

The components of the cognitive triangle connect in either direction.

Emotions to Thoughts to Behaviors; Behaviors to Thoughts to Emotions; the

individual may not perceive experiencing all three components, such as

Behavior to Thought.

Safe, Supportive Institutions

Ultimately, the significance of this study is that knowledge of staffs' perception and whether or how the Cognitive Triangle influence staffs' decision to intervene, improvement of staff concerns, and possible implementation of effective programs, policies, and prevention strategies, as well as future studies, will likely, at the least, decrease bullying activities and encourage safe learning environments for special education and general education students. However, classroom teachers are also deserving of non-threatening, non-violent, supportive, student-focused academic work environments. The possibility of this study leading to such positive outcomes drives this research.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study seeks to know and understand alternative middle school teachers' perceptions of bullying and from where do teachers derive their decisions whether to intervene. There are two research questions that I will seek to answer through this research.

1. What are teachers' thoughts, perceptions, and reactions when witnessing special education students bullied in alternative middle school settings?

Patanella (2018) explains Beck's Cognitive Triangle as the way individuals think about or perceive people or activities influences emotional and behavioral responses. Those emotional responses influence how or whether an individual responds to the emotional processes and how they think. Then, the individual's behaviors connect back to thought process and emotions. Therefore, the Cognitive Triangle consists of influences between thought, emotions, and behaviors. When teachers witness special education students being bullied their initial thoughts may lead to determining whether they intervene with the bullying activities.

Kennedy et al., (2012) suggest that teacher perception impacts decisions to intervene during bullying activities.

   2. *What factors contribute to teachers' decisions to intervene or to not intervene during bullying activities toward special education students in alternative middle school settings?*

Previous studies have examined differing factors that contribute to bullying activities, such as individual definitions of what is deemed as bullying, according to Rosen et al., (2017). School climate, teachers' perception on severity of bullying activity, according to VanZoeren and Weisz (2018), teachers' reliance on students' abilities to handle the bully, according to Sokol et al, (2016) are factors. Shamsi et al., (2019) highlight that recognition of bullying is also a factor. The participants in this study had opportunity to personally give voice to what factors contribute to their decisions to intervene during bullying activities. Since some studies show that teachers sometimes do not respond to bullying, this information can be valuable in understanding that there are possibly justifications for their actions, or lack of actions.

Research Plan

The research will be based on the qualitative design using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and integration of the influence of cognitive behavioral theory's cognitive triangle. Qualitative research methodology branches from sociology and anthropology, and it entails gaining insight of participants' social experience of phenomenon while accruing knowledge of participants' perspective (Heppner et al, 2016). Qualitative research requires collecting data and sorting it, or organizing it, into key points to consider (Erlinggson & Briesiewicz, 2017). Collecting data may include observations, interviews, and/or using existing materials (Heppner et al, 2016). However, this study includes individual

interviews only. Due to COVID-19 and limited access to teachers, classroom observations were eliminated. Qualitative design begins with the researcher's self-introspection of worldview, self-awareness, and multicultural status. It is important that the researcher's worldview and values not determine nor guide the research to assure that the participants' true experiences and perspectives, 'to the things themselves' as quoted by Husserl (Kikkori, 2010), determines the findings of the study. Findings of this qualitative study reveal the participants' perceptions and deciding factors to intervene with bullying activities through analyzation and evaluation of data collection of the participants' experiences.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Cognitive Triangle

Phenomenological technique seeks to identify and thoroughly describe the commonality of phenomenon and explores the meaning and understanding of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 432). The founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, insisted that phenomenology is to describe the phenomena and to group commonalities of participants' perceptions for a generalized description (Neubauer et al., 2017). According to Kakkori (2010), phenomenological qualitative studies became popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Ho et al., (2017) describe the participants of a hermeneutic phenomenological study as using the logic of language to express their perception of the world whereas the researchers decipher the language behind the veil.

Hermeneutic approach, applied to this study, is a type of phenomenology developed by Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl. Kakkori (2010) explains that hermeneutics stems from philosophy, but Max van Manen was first to introduce this philosophy into a research method. Hermeneutics consists of reading text, isolating themes, rewriting the themes, and interpreting the lived experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Kakkori posits that there is a hermeneutic circle,

the domain wherein the researcher's goal is to understand the participants' mental processes, which is the basis of this study. As understanding of participants' perceptions and mental processes evolve, integration of the Cognitive Triangle connects the influence, or interconnectedness, of such mental processes on emotions and behaviors, which moves full circle to interpreting participants' stagnation in intervening (behaviors) during bullying behaviors.

Cognitive Triangle is a construct of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, founded by Aaron Beck in the 1960s, and is used to understand the influence of one's thoughts on emotions and emotions on behaviors. Positive thoughts influence positive emotions and behaviors; likewise, negative thoughts influence negative emotions and behaviors (Patanella, 2018). Cognitive Triangle was first introduced by Beck in 1976. The connection between hermeneutic phenomenology and cognitive triangle within this study links the participants' perceptions of phenomenon and their surroundings to the influence on thoughts about the phenomenon and their surroundings on the participants' emotions and behaviors.

Ultimately, combining hermeneutic phenomenology and cognitive triangle results in understanding how the participants are perceiving and mentally processing bullying behavior, and how their mental processing drives their emotions and actions to intervene or refrain from intervening during bullying activities. Therefore, a more thorough investigation of the participants' thoughts, without researcher presumptions, is documented, analyzed, and evaluated. Lastly, the overall subjective views will be transformed to the overall objective picture that will be broken into objective parts for clear understanding and meaning.

Definitions

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder – "a common developmental syndrome that confers

elevated risk of school failure, substance use disorders, delinquency, underemployment,

depression, accidental death, suicide, and physical health problems" (Nigg et al., 2012)

Autism Spectrum Disorder – "an etiological and clinically heterogeneous group of disorders,

diagnosed solely by the complex behavioral phenotype" (Miles, 2011)

Bullying – "intentional, repeated, negative (unpleasant or hurtful) behavior by one or more

persons directed against a person who has difficulty defending himself or herself"

(Olweus and Limber, 2010, p. 125)

Cognitive Behavior Theory – "focuses on thoughts and emotions, and proposes that thoughts

precede emotions" (MacGill, 2017)

Cognitive Triangle – used to understand the influence of one's thoughts on emotions and

emotions on behaviors. Positive thoughts influence positive emotions and behaviors;

likewise, negative thoughts influence negative emotions and behaviors (Patanella, 2018)

Epistemology – determining the legitimacy of knowledge and what can be known (Feast &

Melles, 2010)

Hermeneutic Phenomenology – Hermeneutics consists of reading text, isolating themes,

rewriting the themes, and interpreting the lived experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014)

Perception – "the process by which we construct a representation of external reality in the

mind" (Gantman & Bavel, 2015).

School Climate – an atmosphere of embracing individual differences, clearly defined rules,

reporting incidents of bullying, and getting assistance with bullying (Aldridge et al., 2018)

Summary

This chapter reflects the explanation of this study. The chapter includes the background which explains demographics of the setting within the alternative middle school. The *situation to self* describes a personalized view of the author's passion and reason for choosing to research the topics of this study. The *problem statement* lists the gaps within previous research that relates to this research, as well as the present challenges and needs of the participants of this research. The *purpose statement* briefly describes the methodology, the theoretical framework, and the purpose according to the research questions. The *purpose statement* covers how participants' phenomenologically experience and perceive bullying and whether staff intervenes in bullying behaviors. The *significance of the study* highlights the theoretical concept applied to the research and how it applies to the participants. The section also describes how participants are negatively affected by the phenomenon of bullying, describes the participants' setting, and it highlights possible positive outcomes of the research. Two research questions were constructed to understand participants' perceptions of bullying, influencers of their decisions to intervene, and the impact of the cognitive triangle. Lastly, the research outline was constructed.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Before conducting research, it is wise to first review the literature to learn what other researchers have found about the topic. This is done by taking note of the type or research methods they used, their research questions, and the outcomes of their research. Throughout their research, one may see or hear where more research is needed to help guide ones' own study. In this research, I found gaps in referencing alternative schools during bullying, bulling special education students, the influence of climate in the alternative school setting, and teachers' perceptions and use of current anti-bullying and anti-prevention laws. All are addressed in this chapter.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this research is Aaron Beck's Cognitive Behavioral, specifically the Cognitive Triangle. Cognitive Triangle is a construct of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, founded by Aaron Beck in the 1960s, and is used to understand the influence of one's thoughts on emotions and emotions on behaviors. Positive thoughts influence positive emotions and behaviors; likewise, negative thoughts influence negative emotions and behaviors (Patanella, 2018). Cognitive Triangle was first introduced by Beck in 1976. The connection between hermeneutic phenomenology and cognitive triangle within this study links the participants' perceptions of phenomenon and their surroundings to the influence on thoughts about the phenomenon and their surroundings on the participants' emotions and behaviors.

Related Literature

Presumably, middle school teachers of special education students in alternative middle school settings are trained to manage violent and maladaptive behaviors, such as physical and verbal aggression and student to student bullying, however bullying behaviors in this setting occur daily and is rarely intervened by school staff. Kennedy et al. (2012) highlight that articles such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as well as others, deem that school staff are to keep minorities and special education students safe and protected from discrimination. In reality, school staff has a responsibility to provide a safe environment to all students (Mendez et al., 2012). However, these researchers highlight that schools are failing to uphold legalities. Though there are laws protecting special education students, only 42 states have anti-bullying laws to protect the student general population (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012), and only some of them use evidence-based programs.

In this study, bullying is defined as repeated and intentional taunting, threatening, physical and verbal altercations or aggression, and stares toward peers considered weaker or towards staff who are banned from retaliation, as Longobardo et al., (2018) similarly name repetitive, aggressive, and aimed at less powerful individuals. The most common definition found in research is quoted by Olweus and Limber (2010) as "intentional, repeated, negative (unpleasant or hurtful) behavior by one or more persons directed against a person who has difficulty defending himself or herself" (p. 125). Many researchers abbreviated bullying as aggressive, repetitive, and intentional (Maïano et al., 2016; Paul et al., 2018; Salmon et al., 2018; Shamsi et al., 2020) and highlights that the behaviors cause either physical or emotional

harm (Maïano et al., 2016; Shamsi et al., 2020). Humphrey and Hebron (2014) subscribe to this definition and add that bullying is unprovoked and occurs in social settings.

However, Maunder and Crafter (2018) cleverly suggest that there is no clear, concise, definition of bullying due to differing sociocultural factors and societal changes. Dytham (2018) states that the definition of bullying is situational or according to the circumstances. Bullying varies across school types and sizes, cities and counties, states, and countries and needs to be better defined according to the type of bullying, since bullying activities range from verbal teasing to physical aggression (Paul et al., 2018). Also consider that what is deemed as bullying in one location, may not be viewed as bullying in another location. Even when both locations consider the actions as bullying behaviors, still the activities may vary and look differently.

Moreover, school bullying is not contained in the school building. Also considered school bullying is bullying that exists anywhere outside on school property, at school stops, on the school bus, online or through text or phone call (Swearer et al., 2012) if the bully or the survivor is at a school location, and in some states or districts at neighborhood school bus stops. Therefore, all school staff, including school bus drivers, nurses, social workers, teacher assistants, hall monitors, and office staff, should be trained in what constitutes bullying, trained in bullying prevention strategies, and trained in anti-bullying policies and programs. Kennedy et al. (2012) boldly states that school staff in every capacity should be trained to intervene during bullying activities.

Types of Bullying

Bullying is represented through many vehicles. While the typical forms of bullying are physical and name calling, other types of bullying are relational bullying, such as intentional

withholding attention from a peer and exclusion from activities, as well as electronic bullying—which includes text messages, social media, and email—also known as cyberbullying (Waseem et al., 2017). Cowie (2018) adds that youths' easy access to cell phones and other electronics contribute to the increase of cyberbullying. The three common types of bullying are physical, verbal, and relational bullying (Baier et al., 2019; Boulton et al., 2014). This team of researchers includes spitting on, biting, and inappropriate touch as forms of physical bullying, and includes spreading rumors as verbal bullying. Due to youths' easy access to technology, mental health has become most compromised by psychological cyberbullying (Baier et al., 2019). Cyberbullying can lead to suicide ideation and suicide. LaRoe and Corrales (2019) highlight a case study of a principals' decision after a student committed suicide resulting from cyberbullying. In conclusion, the researchers suggested that all school staff are trained to recognize bullying, to recognize depression, and to respond appropriately.

Some special education students may experience xenophobic bullying. Xenophobic is a different type of bullying and is defined as bullying activities specifically geared towards persons from other countries, as Islamophobic bullying is bullying activities geared towards persons of or who appears to be from Islamic background (Bajaj et al., 2016). From a sociocultural perspective, any activity described as bullying applies to this group. Bajaj (2016) conducted a study on xenophobic bullying whereas they identified the behaviors and noted that the bullying activities extended beyond school. The researchers identified the five major areas of victimization as: verbal, physical, religious, physical damage to property, and teasing about their body scent, cultural food, cultural attire, and appearance. When collecting data from middle school students asking what made students targets, one of the responses was students who look different or strange (Ybarra et al., 2019). Xenophobic bullying is not exclusive to general

education students and does include students of special education, which may magnify the impact of bullying. Bullying can be construed as culturally motivated (Wigelsworth et al., 2015). Racial bullying was researched using a small sample of Mexican immigrants bullied by Mexican American students in a secondary school (Mendez et al., 2012). Due to differing cultures, though both groups were of the same heritage, the researchers report that the Mexican American students felt superior as the Mexican immigrants were the minority.

Prevalence

Statistics cannot accurately account for the frequency of acts of bullying and bullying victimization and trauma, but the frequency shared is astounding. Swearer et al., (2012) note that prevalence will vary according to researchers' sample sizes, whereas smaller samples show greater prevalence. Two other possible reasons for the inaccurate frequency of reporting are students are selective in choosing to report bullying activities, therefore many students choose not to report, and many parents and teachers do not report bullying incidences. In addressing student selectiveness of reporting, some students deem the bullying activity not worth reporting or the student decides to endure with hopes that the bully will soon select another victim. Many students do not report bullying due to the fear of bullying activities increasing or the risk of being taunted by peers for 'telling', due to embarrassment, or due to thoughts that no one will intervene. Unfortunately, for some students, bullying is their normal, but it is far from normal behavior. Prevalence varies among gender. According to Kennedy et al., (2012), males are more prone to bullying behaviors and are more likely to retaliate or defend against bullying. Yet, the researchers report that females, on the other hand, are more likely to report bullying activities than males.

Since many cases are unreported, there are signs that may indicate a youth is being bullied. Students skipping school or attempting to avoid school, constant loss of personal items, withdrawing from peers, poor academics, eating and sleeping more or less than usual, ripped clothing showing signs of physical altercations, changes in friendships, and general unhappiness are red flags of bullying activities (Waseem et al., 2017). However, Hale et al. (2017) report that many parents who have reported bullying had encountered difficulty receiving assistance as their complaint was not addressed properly.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics and National Center of Education Statistics Institute of Education Sciences report that 28% of students between the ages of 12 and 18 were bullied in 2013. Similarly, the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) tracks reported cases of bullying and stated that 20.2% of students were bullied in school in 2017. Though 20.2% is 8% less reported incidences from 2013 to 2017, the 2017 study included a total of 24, 650,000 students. Therefore, approximately 20.2% of 24,650,000 students is equivalent to approximately 4,930,000 students bullied nationwide in 2017. Not only are previously bullied youth at risk of revictimization, but 41% of the 4,930,000 bullying survivors mentally struggle with the expectation that bullying will continue. Recall, this data is according to reported cases, therefore the reality of bullying victimization is overwhelmingly elevated.

Bullying Special Education

Almost 50% of the special education population are subjected to bullying (Forrest et al., 2020). Note that there are limited articles specifically presenting or highlighting bullying the special education population. More research is needed in this area. Special education youth, among other vulnerable populations, comprise a higher number of bullying cases (Schrooten et al., 2018; Waseem et al., 2016). Swearer et al., (2012) report that students with visible

symptoms of special education are at greater risk of becoming a victim of bullying than non-disabled peers. The researchers also found that students with Emotional Disability were bullied less frequently. With students with disabilities heightened difficulty of learning and focusing during school, compiling bullying with their disabilities poses an extra challenge to surviving school.

Previously bullied special education students comprise another group of vulnerable populations. Not only are previously bullied youth at risk of re-victimization, as previously stated, 41% of 4,930,000, or about 2,021,300, bullied survivors expect bullying to continue, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019). For special education youth, as well as non-disabled students, ongoing bullying risks traumatization, as well as other negative consequences. Teacher support is a significant factor to assist special education students during bullying activities (Rose et al., 2015). These researchers conducted a study on the socio-ecological factors of middle school students with Specific Learning Disabilities. They suggest that teachers rely less on special education students depending on them for support to bullying and be more watchful and mindful of bullying activities and be ready to intervene without appearing to intervene, therefore the student still appears independent.

Moreover, while some students are aware of bullying behaviors when they are being bullied, not all students can identify bullying, even when they are the victim. Some youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) sometimes are not aware that they are being bullied due to aspects of their disorder (Fisher & Taylor, 2016; Forrest et al., 2020; Hebron et al., 2015). Liu et al. (2018), as well as Cappadocia et al., (2012) add that youth with ASD are considered a high-risk population to bullying. Following results of their research, these researchers believe that improving communication with high functioning ASD youth may lessen bullying activities.

Schrooten et al., (2018) highlight that students with ASD are more challenged and disadvantaged when dealing with bullying behaviors.

There may be legal ramifications for school staff ignoring bullying of special education students. Yell et al., (2016) report that there have been such court cases due to bullying. As a result of their research, they shared a six-step protocol for dealing with bullying issues. The researchers suggest the school staff: (a) "Develop, publicize, and implement school district policy for preventing and addressing bullying," (b) "Adopt a research-based bullying program," (c) "Provide professional development on bullying," (d) be mindful of bullying behaviors, (e) respond quickly, (f) "Document all investigations and district responses and keep all parties informed of investigations and responses to incidences to bullying."

Victimization & Consequences

Bullying is a form of victimization that results in negativity in every human aspect and may have overwhelming consequences. Usual consequences often mentioned are emotional distress, anxiety, depression, withdrawal, psychological issues, low self-esteem, suicide ideation (Sampasa-Kanyingam et al., 2014), and suicide (Baier et al, 2019; Holt et al., 2013; Nickerson, 2019; Paul et al., 2018; and Yoon et al., 2016). Schoeler et al., (2018) include many of the same consequences with different descriptions, such as, emotional dysregulation and altered stress response. Rose et al., (2016) highlight that bullied special education students show higher levels of low self-esteem. These researchers also note that students with emotional and behavior disabilities are often reactive to bullying and may benefit from skill development and emotional regulation to counter negative reactions such as hostility.

However, consequences of bullying delve into territories that are not often considered. Espelage et al., (2015) inform that bullying coupled with homophobic verbal abuse has the

potential to result in sexual harassment. Additionally, Espelage et al., (2012) highlight the likelihood of bullying progressing to sexual harassment as early as middle school. Many youths elicit symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (Paul et al., 2918), however more assessments are needed for diagnosis (Nielsen et al., 2015), which leads to the consideration of medical and financial consequences. Many youths need counseling services as a result of bullying, which may require co-payments. Due to physical complaints and issues, visits to medical doctors and hospitals also accrue financial expenses. Anticipation of continued bullying causes stress, depression, anxiety, behavioral issues, and psychological issues (Baier et al., 2019). Baier's research yielded interesting results while examining differing effects on mental health. The study yielded that cyberbullying had a greater impact on male and female youths' mental health, psychological bullying had the second greatest impact, and physical bullying had the lowest impact. Guimond et al., (2015) showed that continued revictimization risks triggering predispositions, such as anxiety. Yan et al., (2019) report that 'Left Behind Youth' in China are prone to psychological issues, social limitations, and decreased educational growth. With parents working in distant areas, these youth endure continued bullying and psychological issues that result from bullying and anticipation of bullying. Clearly, due to prevalence and the variety of consequences, bullying is deemed as a public health issue (Espelage et al., 2012). Olweus and Limber (2010) collectively confirm all of aforementioned consequences, except cyberbullying, and add that bullying prevention is not only to protect the victim, or survivor, but is also to prevent the perpetrator from delving into more serious assaults and criminal activities. Lacey and Cornell (2016) report that bullying behaviors are intrusive whereas survivors' ability to pass state exams may be negatively affected. This is significant because passing state exams

are necessary for promotion to the next grade level. These researchers report that 49 states have anti-bullying laws.

Pandemic

Bullying presents as a global pandemic as its prevalence wreaks havoc in schools all over the world (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014; Kennedy et al., 2012). According to these researchers, where there are school institutions with youth, there is bullying, even if not noticeable, recognized, or acknowledged by school staff. For example, here are just a few studies conducted in different countries. Holt et al., (2013) conducted a study in Singapore on the effects of bullying of students. Yoon et al., (2016) researched teachers' responsibility during bullying in Australia. Forsberg et al., (2014) focused their research on students and teachers serving as bystanders, their reactions, and their mindsets to explain their reactions. In China, Yan et al., (2019) researched bullying of youth referred to as 'Left Behind Children' whose parents left them in the care of others while pursuing work in distant areas. These researchers reported high prevalence of bullying towards the population of left behind youth. Kaufman et al., (2018) researched the effectiveness of overall bullying prevention and anti-bullying strategies and possible explanations of continued bullying victimization in Finland. Paul et al., (2018) examined the prevalence of bullied students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in France. Shamsi et al. (2020) conducted a study in Malaysia on how much teachers know about bullying.

Staff Perception

Self-efficacy plays a significant role in school staffs' decisions to intervene (Kennedy et al., 2012; Yoon et al., 2016). In this writing, self-efficacy is linked to perception and how

individual thought about a situation influences affect and behaviors. VanZoeren and Weisz (2018) also note that teachers' individual traits impact decisions to intervene. Yoon et al., (2016) highlight that teachers' comfortability with intervening, severity of bullying, teachers' stress level, coping skills, bully survivor's gender, childhood experiences, and teachers' perceptions of responsibility for protecting students' mental well-being are factors in decisions to intervene in bullying activities. These researchers found that teachers who experienced childhood bullying are more apt to discipline bullies, but less likely to respond to bullied survivors. Additionally, a high percentage of teachers reported being apt to discipline bullies for physical and verbal bullying than for relational bullying. Interestingly, teachers were more likely to discipline bullies who shared their genders, but less likely to discipline bullies of different ethnicity.

Rosen et al., (2016) sought to find out how teachers perceived student to student bullying by using a focus group of 35 teachers from primary and secondary schools. In this study, the teachers identified student responses to bullying that they deemed as effective and ineffective. Apparently, teachers of this study perceive that bullies are the products of family issues. The most interesting find of this study is that teachers place much responsibility on victimized students for being victimized instead of placing responsibility on the bully. Furthermore, teachers insinuate that bullying survivors are to respond appropriately to bullying. However, there is much confusion over what is appropriate or inappropriate, and what is effective or ineffective for staff and students. As the researchers note, staff has difficulty knowing the appropriate response to bullying. Therefore, putting that responsibility on students is premature until training, interventions, and policies are implemented.

Bradshaw et al., (2013) conducted research using information from the National Education Association to examine staff perception of bullying and their need for prevention training and policies. The study compared responses and perceptions between teachers and education school professionals (ESPs), and found that teachers are more comfortable with intervening with bullying activities than ESPs. However, ESPs believed that they were more knowledgable of strategies for intervening. Of the two, ESPs felt more strongly that more training is needed. Most interesting about this study is the suggestion that school-wide assessments are conducted to determine policies and programs needed per subgroups versus an overall program.

Kennedy et al. (2012) also researched teachers and administrators' perceptions on desiring more training to feel comfortable intervening in bullying. Of 193 participants, 93% of teachers and administrators perceived that more training for intervening is needed. These researchers also found that approximately 90% of school staff prefers to have bullying prevention included in school curriculum. An important revelation of their study is that though a significant number of teachers and administrators agreed that more training is needed, more teachers than administrators felt it necessary to receive more training. Therefore, Kennedy et al., (2012) note from participants of their study, teachers and administrators, were reluctant to intervene in bullying due to feeling unprepared and perceiving the need for more training in bullying prevention.

Shamsi et al., (2019) conducted a study to examine if teachers could define bullying and identify bullying activities. While 81% of teachers correctly defined bullying, fewer correctly identified bullying behaviors. The researchers highlighted that very few identified mimicking and spreading rumors as bullying, which means these acts of bullying will not be addressed nor

reported by teachers. Teachers' perception of the seriousness of bullying activities contribute to their decision to intervene in bullying behaviors (VanZoeren & Weisz, 2018). These researchers suggest educating teachers on the serious nature and consequences of bullying to motivate intervention. In another light, Sokol et al., (2016) studied teachers' perspectives of how students should respond when bullied, which may explain teachers' responses to bullying. The insight yielded is that teachers advise students to ignore bullying when it is relational or verbal in hopes that the bully will stop and select another topic. Teachers feel that students strong enough to not show emotions from bullying are likely to escape repeated bullying. Likewise, they believe that students who display sadness or anger are more apt to be re-victimized. If teachers believe students should ignore bullying in hopes of it ceasing it explains teachers' decisions to ignore bullying. In a different study by the same researchers, to understand how bullied survivors react to bullying affected how teachers view bullying. This study found that survivors who showed confidence or anger as a reaction to bullying were perceived as less seriously bullied. Students who cried or showed emotional disturbance received empathy from staff, whereas the staff deemed the bullying activities as serious. In other words, staffs' perceptions and responses to bullying were based on students' reactions to bullying.

What are teacher's perceptions of intervening with bullying behaviors when it is specifically directed at another vulnerable population, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community? Greytak and Kosciw (2014), conducted a study using 726 teachers in secondary schools across the United States. An important finding is that teachers admit not intervening with bullying behaviors unless they know someone within the LGBT community and is familiar and accepting. Thus, awareness and training are key to teachers deciding to

intervene during bullying. The researchers suggest that teachers are introduced to awareness and are specifically trained in recognizing bullying activities geared towards individuals of the LGBT community. After all, more youth openly identify, acknowledge, and embrace their identity. Nappa et al., (2018) researched secondary teachers' homophobic attitudes in Rome and shared the same findings listed here as Greytak.

Hall and Chapman (2018) conducted a study on the implementation of an anti-bullying state policy in North Carolina schools to protect vulnerable populations. According to the article, the policy, the School Violence Protection Act (SVPA), was initiated in 2009, and schools were instructed to construct individual programs specific for their locations but using precepts from the state policy. Of 634 school staff who participated in the study, the researchers found that ¼ of the staff did not know reporting procedures, and the researcher expressed concerns that the policy was not truly implemented.

Another perspective worthy of considering is parental perspectives. Sawyer et al., (2011) sought knowledge of parents' understanding of the definition of bullying and activities that constitute bullying. The importance of this study is that it gives insight to parental involvement when there is bullying according to parents' perceptions of bullying. As the researchers stressed, if parents do not consider the acts as bullying, they will ignore and dismiss responding, which may further cause their child to feel anguished and victimized. The findings showed that almost all of the 20 parents correctly defined bullying, but many of them missed identifying some non-physical bullying activities. According to the findings, some parents thought that their child was shielded from bullying because of having a significant number of friends, which is a misconception. For me, the most disturbing finding was that some parents felt that childhood bullying was normal and just a part of growing up. This is disturbing

because no bullying activities will be relevant for parents with that perception, which harshly handicaps a child's support system. Bullying is never normal, bullying hurts.

Staff perception of current programs and the need for updated programs is another consideration for intervening during bullying activities. Kennedy et al. (2012) note that middle school staff in their study are in support of including bullying prevention in school curriculum. These researchers suggest that policy makers consider gender when comprising new bullying prevention and intervention programs. Another study conducted in a middle school by Smith and Smith (2014) revealed that school staff initially was not aware of bullying activities and perceived their school as safe until a student conducted a study. However, during the survey, 74% of the 55 staff recounted how often they observed bullying activities.

Perceptions Bullying Special Education

There are vulnerable populations that are more prone to becoming victims of bullying, one of which is the special education population (Swearer et al., 2012). Almost 50% of the special education population are subjected to bullying (Forrest et al., 2020). Special education youth, among other vulnerable populations, comprise a higher number of bullying cases than non-disabled youth (Waseem et al., 2016). Zablotsky et al., (2012) conducted a study of more than 1,200 parents of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in primary and secondary schools to examine parental school involvement and perception of school climate in relation to bullying. Two major questions inquired about the frequency of their child being bullied and if their child has bullied others. The study found parents of bullied children negatively viewed school climate. The researchers also state that involved parents perceived school climate in a positive manner, whereas less involved parents had a negative perception of school climate.

Paul et al., (2018) also conducted a study to identify the frequency of bullying victimization and poly-victimization, which is more than one type of victimization, in relation to youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The researchers also sought to determine if socio-demographics or lacking in social skills contributed to targeting the youth as bullying victims. The study results indicate that 23.1% of ASD youths were survivors of poly-victimization of home and school, of which 75.5 % were at the school setting. Moreover 71.8% had encountered victimization at least once within the previous year. However, a staggering 87.2% of the 39 ASD children had experienced peer victimization at least once within their lifetime.

Climate

Possible reasons for allowing bullying are teachers' perception of bullying activities as well as school climate (Aldridge et al., 2017; Hebron et al., 2015; Waasdorp et al., 2012; Zablosky et al., 2012). For this study, school climate entails school building atmosphere, supportive environment, violent or physically aggressive behaviors, respect between students and staff, conversations between students and staff, student to student conversations, physical activities between students, loud or calm tone and volume, fearful or relaxed setting, and administrative support of teachers and students. Other studies refer to school climate as an atmosphere of embracing individual differences, clearly defined rules, reporting incidents of bullying, and getting assistance with bullying (Aldridge et al., 2018). Support in this article is deemed as being present physically and emotionally to assist others, intervening to resolve issues, listening to each other, helping with challenges, giving advice or suggestions, helping each other to cope, and comforting each other when needed during distress. DeLuca et al., (2019) agree that interactions between staff, and administrator support, enhances job satisfaction. Job satisfaction increases positive school/classroom climate. Yet, though schools

that foster positive climate may give the impression of safety, chances are there are bullying activities that staff is not aware of (Smith & Smith, 2014). I believe that bullying on some level exists in every school.

Teachers play a significant role in establishing a positive school climate (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). Researchers noted that teacher-student relationships enhance school climate and allows students the freedom to report bullying (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014; DiStasio et al., 2015). They also purport that students reporting bullying reflect that teachers take bullying seriously and have successfully established a positive climate throughout the school. Hektner and Swensen (2012) highlight that teachers' beliefs about bullying coupled with empathy are contributing factors of positive school climate, which trickles down to students' positive perceptions and decreased bullying activities. Evidently, students' perceptions of their surroundings encourage or discourage peer interventions during bullying (Espelage et al., 2012; Mulvey et al., 2019). Involved teachers foster positive school climates and reduced bullying. Norwalk et al., (2015) noted that teachers attunement to bullying victimization was lacking even though students were enduring victimization and revictimization, which negatively affects social climate. Hebron et al., (2015) conducted a study to examine vulnerability of bullying with ASD students in Britain. The researchers used a small sample of five students and included the parents and teachers' perceptions. All students had close relationships with the teachers and did not experience harsh acts of bullying. Innocently, some of the students could not quite understand the concept of bullying. As a result, the school's zero tolerance to bullying and bonded relationships among parents, teachers, and students decreased vulnerability to bullying.

Interestingly, VanZoeren and Weisz (2018) conducted a study on how likely teachers are to intervene in bullying activities as they included school climate, or institutional environments, as a possible determinant. Surprisingly, the study concluded that school climate did not influence their decisions to intervene in bullying. However, the study also concluded that educating teachers on properly intervening, as well as establishing a protocol for reporting positively influenced teachers' decisions to intervene in bullying activities.

Recent studies show correlation between student bullying and school climate. Aldridge et al, (2018) note that positive school climates produce positive student behaviors and positive staff reactions to bullying. Likewise, negative school climates have higher incidences of bullying and less staff motivation to intervene. Therefore, negative school climates inhibit student learning and development (Aldridge et al., 2018). The most significant finding of these authors' study is that teacher support is the biggest influence on bullying behaviors. Yet, the researchers acknowledge that still few schools consider school climate as a contributor to improve interactions, supports, and behaviors. In the same realm of school climate is school culture. Cowie (2018), in a postscript written related to the original article in 2011, states that school culture is what policy makers should focus on to counter bullying. School culture could be considered for future studies.

Policies, Programs, Interventions

Currently, many school districts have anti-bullying programs, policies, and prevention strategies, but bullying continues to persist (Kaufman et al., 2018). Are anti-bullying and bullying prevention programs implemented by staff, and are they effective? Kennedy et al. (2012) believes that school staff are not implementing current policies. Clearly, written policies and programs not implemented by staff are just written policies and programs (Hall, 2017).

Interestingly, Søndergaard (2012) purports that staff consider social inclusion, abjection to understand bullying behaviors, and thinking technology, changing the way one thinks about the behavior. Overall, the United States Department of Education expects school staff to provide a safe environment void of bullying (Kennedy et al., (2012). Thus, it is necessary for all staff to receive training for bullying prevention (Bradshaw et al., 2013). VanZoeren and Weisz (2018) emphasize the importance of including educating teachers on bullying when constructing anti-bullying and prevention policies. Humphrey and Hebron (2014), in their study of bullying youth with autism spectrum disorder, listed several factors to be considered for constructing bullying interventions, such as social skills and resources. Kaufman et al., (2018) highlighted several anti-bullying programs that failed to reduce bullying incidents of Dutch students. This study examined the effectiveness of group-based interventions and possible causes of continued bullying post interventions. The researchers found that group-based interventions decreased bullying activities, however students with the tendency to be rejected were exposed to continuous bullying. Most important to this study, the researchers found that universal anti-bullying programs are not effective for all students due to individual characteristics and social relationships, poor parent-child relationships, and students with low esteem. Farrell et al., (2018) suggest that interventions are constructed collectively for the entire student body, as well as according to individual risk levels.

Kennedy et al., (2014) suggests that more training is needed for school staff to appropriately handle bullying cases and to have comfortability intervening during bullying behaviors. These authors state that many educators' lack of intervening demonstrates the discomfort to implement anti-bullying policies. Therefore, these researchers distributed the Bullying Perception Survey to 139 school staff. As a result, more than 90% of school staff

agreed that they would benefit from professional development in bullying prevention, and more than 90% of middle school staff favored including bullying prevention in curriculum.

Effectiveness can only be measured if school staff implement the programs, adhere to policies, and practice and teach prevention strategies. Unfortunately, it is challenging for school staff to adhere to policies that are not respected or taken seriously. Berlowitz et al., (2017) conducted a study to examine the efficacy of the school district's zero tolerance bullying program. The program's strict guidelines warranted that bullies would be suspended or expelled from school. Staff were not pleased with the approach and nicknamed the program "the school to prison pipeline," concerned that students banned from public schools were likely to delve into criminal behaviors. School administrators were concerned that classroom teachers were not equipped to manage issues driving bullying behaviors. Administrators and teachers' disapproval of the program and suggestions for a new program shows the importance of gathering school staffs' input and suggestions for developing anti-bullying policies.

However, Kennedy et al., (2014) take considerations a step further and suggest that increasing staff communication with bully's parents, as well as bullied survivors and bystanders, may encourage development of effective anti-bullying procedures and policies. The focus was to gather more input and perceptions from involved persons to assure that policies are not only from Department of Education personnel who may not fully understand bullying in their location and are guessing at what may work across the state. Again, one set of strategies is not guaranteed to be effective in all settings. Therefore, unless employed in the environment, unless connected to involved parties, such as bullies or survivors, or unless gathering information from staff, outside personnel risk developing ineffective policies and programs.

Some school districts apply Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) programs. PBIS programs are geared towards providing safe school environments and positive learning atmospheres. This program has been applied to all grade levels, but it is more effective in elementary schools than secondary schools. The program includes intervening with bullying activities, reporting bullying activities and applying consequences, mediating with rivaling students, using restorative justice practices to resolve the issue and to suggest more effective ways to handle disagreements, and it requires supportive school staff. Waasdorp et al., (2012) conducted research on the effectiveness of school-wide positive behavior intervention supports (SWPBIS) on upper-level elementary school students to examine the deterrence of bullying in middle school. These researchers considered that implementing supports prior to middle school would lessen bulling activities of those youth during middle school. The results suggested that the SWPBIS program in elementary schools was effective in lessening middle school bullying. Though effective with elementary school students, secondary school staff may perceive the program not age-appropriate for middle school students and issues; hence, less likely to implement the program.

It is important to note that often, bullying does not begin in middle school but is continuing behavior from primary school. Kennedy et al., (2012) state that primary school bullies later struggle with impulse control and are likely to befriend antisocial peers. Rock and Baird (2012) reference bullying during elementary school and purport that elementary school students' decisions to report bullying is situational, such as during physical bullying activities.

Olweus and Limber (2010) evaluated the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) that was first implemented in Norway after three youth committed suicide following bullying activities in 1983. This was the first nationwide bullying prevention program (Ttofi &

Farrington, 2011). According to Olweus, the program is an evidence-based, statewide program for primary and secondary grade levels where one of its purposes is to lessen bullying activities. The researchers reveal that some schools in the United Stated (4%) have adopted the OBPP in hopes of seeing positive reductions in bullying. Three motivations the researchers used to reduce bullying within the program are: weaken opportunities for bullying to occur; initiate rewards for positive behaviors, and establish positive school climate by fostering a sense of community among staff and students. The researchers report that there have continued to be positive results of evaluations conducted over the years showing efficacy of the program with reduced bullying activities.

Farrell et al., (2018) conducted an evaluation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in an urban school in the United States. The school's student population was mostly African American youth. The researchers found differing reports of efficacy between staff and student reports. The teachers noted less victimization among students across the years of study, whereas the students noted otherwise. The study also yielded that physical altercations remain the same, but there were positive results for relational and verbal bullying. In summary, the OBPP was evaluated to be more effective in Norway. Hence, anti-bullying and bullying prevention policies may be more effective if designed according to individual institutional needs.

Ttofi and Farrington (2011) conducted a meta-analysis study of 53 programs to determine effectiveness. The important suggestion that resulted from their study of effective programs is that schools should implement evidence-based programs yet adopt and change portions of the programs according to what will and will not be effective for individual locations. The researchers also suggest that new policies are clearly written and detailed to reveal if the basis of

the outcome reflects procedural intervention or assessment of the policy. Two other important suggestions are to assure that the entire school implements the program and that there are clear disciplinary actions set for bullies.

Gaps

Currently, there is a plethora of research on bullying, and there are some articles concerning teachers' perceptions of bullying. However, little research exists on teachers' perceptions on bullying special education students in an alternative school setting. My research is significant to address those gaps because not all states have laws to protect all students from bullying, but there are federal laws to protect special education students from bullying. The special education population are a vulnerable group and teachers need to be aware that they are protected, and to request training and effective programs to advocate for special education students, and hopefully general education students. Lastly, knowing if the alternative school setting influences teachers' decisions not to intervene opens the door to other modes of assistance for the teachers, such as improved school climate and counseling.

Summary

This chapter shows extensive research on the teachers' perceptions of bullying special education students in an alternative middle school setting and their decisions to intervene in the bullying activities. The sections are organized to first understand how bullying is defined similarly, yet differently, through research (Humphrey & Hebron, 2014; Maïano et al., 2016; Olweus & Limber, 2010; Paul et al., 2018; Shamsi et al., 2020), and to highlight that different definitions of bullying reside in different regions and are situational (Dytham, 2018). The next few sections focus on the overall prevalence of bullying (Swearer et al., 2012) and specifically

bullying special education students and how it may be perceived with more difficulty as they also deal with symptoms of their disabilities. Following those sections, it was feasible to highlight the consequences of bullying, which shows that the lives of youth, survivors and perpetrators, are disrupted in every aspect. This section was necessary to educate on short-term and long-term effects that result from bullying, including suicide ideation and suicide completion. The next section highlights that several researchers agree that bullying is a pandemic (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014; Kennedy et al., 2012) because of its global existence and the extensive health implications throughout the world. All the above sections serve to explain the importance and need for effective changes in anti-bullying and bullying prevention programs. Several researchers agree that all staff need training on intervening practices.

The last four sections are in direct relation to the purpose of the article by first researching staffs' perception of bullying and staff's perceptions of bullying special education students. The chapter then focuses on school climates' influence on teachers' perceptions to intervene and perpetrators' decisions to bully. Lastly, I researched previously implemented policies, programs, and interventions and their efficacy. I also researched if the teachers found it worthwhile to implement the policies, if they were motivated to implement them at all, or if they implemented them appropriately. I found that many teachers do not implement anti-bullying strategies, some teachers do not intervene due to perceived self-efficacy, and some teachers do not intervene because of bias against certain groups such as LGBT. In reviewing previous studies, I am informed on areas where my research fills gaps and opens the pathway for future research. Since little research has been conducted on teachers' perceptions on

bullying special education youth (Bradshaw et al., 2013) in alternative middle school settings,

this chapter is deemed the educational section of research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to examine alternative middle school teachers' perceptions of bullying and the impact of the Cognitive Triangle in determining to intervene in an alternative middle school setting. This chapter explains the research design selected and the importance of the design. The chapter also describes the setting and why the participants from that setting were selected. The chapter describes the procedures used, data collection process, and the tool for analysis and type of data analysis. The role that the researcher plays is included, as well as the validity and credibility of the research.

Design

The methodology selected for this research is qualitative with hermeneutic phenomenology as the design method. Qualitative studies focus on subjectivity and collects data through first-hand accounts of participants through interviews, surveys, and questionnaires. Therefore, qualitative is selected for this study to gain first-hand accounts of experiences by using interview questions. According to Sloan and Bowe (2014), phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals experience phenomenon. Therefore, phenomenology was selected as most appropriate for this research because this study will seek to understand how individuals perceive and experience the phenomenon of bullying. The participants give personal descriptions of individual experiences and what influences decisions to intervene or not intervene during bullying experiences. The author also highlights hermeneutics as understanding the language and meaning of words. Hermeneutic is selected for this study

because the approach entails organizing, coding, categorizing themes, interpreting the experiences to understand the language and meaning of words, and reflecting my understanding to the participants. In short, hermeneutic phenomenology expresses language and meaning for lived experiences.

The overall process requires several steps to completion. I first conducted individual interview sessions with each participant. Two interview questions and thirteen sub-questions are formulated for the interview sessions. A group session was scheduled on three different occasions but did not manifest due to participants' inability to attend. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and read thoroughly several times. I then proceeded with organizing and coding terms and phrases, and isolating and categorizing themes between the participants' responses. I repeated this process until having clear understanding and insight into the participants' thoughts and perceptions. The data was written to verbalize, assign language and meaning to, their experiences.

Research Questions

The research questions are designed to gain insight and understanding of teachers' perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

1. What are teachers' thoughts, perceptions, and reactions when witnessing special education students bullied in alternative middle school settings?

2. What factors contribute to teachers' decisions to intervene or to not intervene during bullying activities toward special education students in alternative middle school settings?

Sites

Five research sites in four different Virginia cities are represented in this study. These alternative middle schools are identified with pseudonyms according to their cities. They are labeled as School 1, School 2, School 3, School 4, and School 5. Three of the research sites, School 1, School 3, and School 5, are stand-alone alternative schools that educate differing grade levels, including middle schoolers. Another similarity between these schools is the settings are majority special education students with some general education students in separate parts of the buildings. The students are enrolled at these schools due to various displays of severe behaviors in public schools. The remaining two schools are located inside traditional schools located in a separate area of the school. These two centers, School 2 and School 4 are smaller settings surrounded by majority general education classrooms throughout the school.

Participants

The participants in this study are eight classroom teachers who educate special education students. As Twining et al., (2017) highlight, qualitative studies require considerably less participants than quantitative studies. The participants are employed in alternative middle schools located in Virginia. Since these teachers directly experience the phenomenon of this research, this is a typical group (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 436). The teachers instruct in one or all core subjects of math, English, science, and social studies, as well as life skills courses. The population will be heterogeneous with gender, age, and teaching experience. According to Heppner et al., (2016), a heterogeneous population increases application of generalization. The participants are licensed and trained to work with special education students.

Criteria for participants include being teachers or teacher assistants, employed in alternative middle schools, having observed bullying, older than eighteen years old, and having taught one of more years in the alternative middle school setting. All participants met all requirements except one who has taught in the alternative middle school setting for five months. However, she was interview and considered a participant due to the knowledge and insight shared. Three other school staff returned consent forms to participate but did not meet criteria because they were not alternative middle school teachers. One was an alternative high school teacher, and the other two were school support staff. The school support staff was interviewed but not considered as a participant, and their information was not analyzed with the participants' data. The participants' years of experience ranged from 5 months to 31 years. The participants consisted of two males and six females.

Procedures

After obtaining permission to conduct research from the school board and IRB, school staff was contact by email. Due to their type of settings and the type of students they serve, the organization's representative preferred not to disclose their email addresses and chose to email the recruitment form and the consent form to all employees in the organization. Therefore, their email addresses remained confidential until the participant contacted me through email with consent forms to voluntarily participate in the study. I contacted the participants by email and scheduled interviews. Interviews were conducted individually with each participant. At the beginning of the interviews, criteria was established, and the decision was made whether to proceed with the interviews. Due to COVID-19, the individual interviews were conducted through Zoom because the teachers were familiar with Zoom, but I was prepared to use WebEx. WebEx is a Web-based conferencing tool that, as noted by Chalil and Greenstein (2017), allows

all parties to collaborate in real time, both visually and verbally. Facilitator and participants may conduct activities, such as displaying documents or slides (Klein et al., (2011), viewing videos, sharing music, and typing in chat for those preferring nonverbal communication while in distant locations. Zoom and WebEx have like capabilities as Google Meet, which would have been a back-up that teachers are also familiar with if teachers would have preferred it over Zoom. With Google Meet, Gillis (2020) notes that parties may participate through different electronic devices, such as computers, cellphones, or IPADS. Google Documents, known as Google Docs, is a cloud-based component of Google Drive that allows multiple persons to share interactive documents, whereas all parties can access the same document to write on, draw on, or edit simultaneously, according to Ambrose and Palpanathan (2018). Documents are automatically saved and retrievable before, during, and after completion. However, Zoom was the preferred platform that the participants were most familiar with.

Before recording the interviews, I explained to each participant that the interview would be video recorded to extend the option to opt out and proceed with audio recording only. Thus, each individual session was video recorded, and the recordings were automatically saved in an audio recording file and a video recording file. The files were retrieved and renamed using the participants' real name, saved on a thumb drive, and are kept in a safe place. Each participant shared a wealth of information and was very polite and open during the interviews. Then, I transcribed each interview recording manually. Following transcriptions, the data was analyzed. All transcriptions and data analysis were shared with a peer researcher to confirm accuracy, validity, and unbiased work. The work was confirmed and validated by the peer researcher, who noted that the analysis was very thorough.

The Researcher's Role

Every contact and communication with staff was conducted with utmost professionalism. My role is to remain unbiased and to assure that all questions do not lead or sway participants' responses. As suggested by Heppner et al. (2016), bracketing will be used to filter any biases (p. 379). As a behavior interventionist and special education teacher who worked and observed bullying incidents ignored by staff, I readily accepted staffs' responses without judgement and without asking them if they are certain of their responses. Participants shared many responses different from what I have observed, yet I remained professional and did not verbally object to their responses nor verbalized disagreement. Even my facial expressions must remain professional and neutral, empathic neutrality (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 428). My job was to accept responses with an open mind and consider that they may not have perceived incidences as I perceived them, or they could have legitimately not seen some incidences. Professionally, my mindset remained set on true research, not my opinion. In short, it is my responsibility to provide accurate information and report accurate findings (Heppner et al., 2016, p. 53).

When transcribing recordings, integrity and verbatim transcriptions were priority. For professionalism, verbatim transcriptions will eliminate unnecessary verbiage and fillers (Heppner et al., 2016, p. 399). Recordings are maintained and kept discrete. Integrity will rule in the process of coding or chunking information and understanding meaning of the responses. Additionally, a peer researcher collected all data for comparison of accuracy, ruled out bias, and to strengthened validity. As I proceeded through the interviews, I conducted check-ins with the participants to confirm accuracy, clarity, and understanding to assure that I captured the essence of their responses without my personal interpretation. Additionally, when documenting the

findings of the research, my responsibility is to proceed with non-maleficence, beneficence, and honesty (Heppner et al., 2016, p. 55).

Data Collection

The participants of this study consisted of eight special education teachers employed in alternative middle school settings who work directly with special education students. I explained the data collection process to the teachers. For comfortability, I stressed that the purpose is to acquire usable information to help, not to spotlight negligence of handling or reporting of bullying. I explained confidentiality and assurance that their collected data will not be disclosed to the administrators; therefore, participants had no concerns for job security. The participants entered the agreement willingly, without coercion, and data collection began.

The form of data collection employed in this study is individual interviewing. Regretfully, due to the pandemic, COVID-19, classroom observations are no longer available due to risk of viral spread, and participants were not available for a group forum during three attempts. The interviewing process consisted of video recorded sessions; however, audio sessions were available for the participants had they preferred to not be video recorded. Video recordings were transcribed verbatim upon completion of interviews. After transcribing, the researcher clustered common words and phrases to assign understanding and meaning, known as coding (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 436).

Interviews

As a result of the COVID-19 virus and social distancing, interviewing of participants was conducted through Zoom. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted where the questions are the same with each interviewee, but I used varying sub-questions if additional

information was needed. This segment was video recorded live to observe nonverbal responses (Heppner et al., 2016, p. 373), such as facial expressions and body language. If an interviewee would have preferred not to be video recorded, I would have offered to use audio recording, but no participants objected to video recording. There were two open-ended questions for the participants.

Interview questions began with demographics and proceeded to semi-structured research questions. Under the main semi-structured questions, I will have sub-questions to delve into details if necessary. Demographic questions are as follows: What is your full name, job title, school site, position, and years teaching in alternative middle school settings? Some participants were asked demographic questions before recording began and some after recording began.

Interview Questions

The interview questions consisted of two semi-structured questions and thirteen sub-questions, if needed for more details and clarity. Semi-structured questions avoids yes/no responses and extract more details and data. However, the thirteen sub-questions were available to gain additional details and data if needed. The two interview questions were administered during individual interviews. Each interview question addresses one of the concerns listed.

The first interview question addresses school staffs' perceptions of bullying, perceptions of special education students, and perceptions of the alternative middle school setting and climate and its influence on teachers' decisions to intervene. It reads: What is your perception of bullying, special education students, and the alternative middle school setting? Staff perceptions of bullying includes examining staffs' definition of bullying, identification of bullying, familiarity and knowledge of bullying interventions and protocol, knowledge of

reporting responsibility, expectations after intervening and reporting, and perceived effectiveness of intervening and reporting. Perception of special education students being bullied entails students' ability to defend self, whether staff perceives harm or threat of harm to students, and thoughts of bullied survivors reaping from their own maladaptive behaviors. The atmosphere of alternative middle school settings stems from school climate and misbehaved and violent youth who were expelled or suspended long-term from traditional public school. This is the most important interview question upon which the remaining interview questions are built as it satisfies the qualitative aspect of the research.

The second interview question satisfies the Cognitive Triangle theoretical framework as the questions are centered on thoughts, feelings, and actions while observing bullying activities. It reads: What thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have been activated while observing bullying of special education students? This question seeks to understand teachers' personal experiences of bullying and experiences with special education students. Generally, the question references staffs' thoughts and emotions when observing special education students encountering bullying activities from student peers. Responses to how teachers experienced bullying incidents, how bullying was perceived, and how teachers responded emotionally determined use of sub-questions for clarification of active or inactive behaviors to intervene. The sub-questions also sought to understand staffs' perceptions of what is considered mild, moderate, and extreme bullying incidents to warrant intervening.

Interview Questions & Sub-Questions

Interview Question 1: What is your perception of bullying, special education students, and the alternative middle school setting?

Interview Question 2:

What thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have been activated while observing bullying of special education students?

Sub-Questions: (if needed)

1. What is your definition of bullying?

2. Describe the mildest bullying incident you have observed and the outcome.

3. Describe the most extreme bullying incident you have observed and the outcome.

4. What are some of the survivors' responses to bullying that you have observed?

5. What bullying activities qualify as worth interrupting your lesson to intervene in bullying activities?

6. Out of 100% of bullying activities, what percentage have you intervened?

7. Out of 100% of bullying activities, what percentage have you reported and what was the result?

8. What are signs of student trauma that you have perceived or observed from bullying activities?

9. Recall the mild case of bullying described earlier. What were your thoughts? How did you feel? What was your response?

10. Recall the extreme case of bullying described earlier. What were your thoughts? How did you feel? What was your response?

11. Describe the school setting (general education students, special education students, approximate number of teachers, administration, office staff, and overall school climate).

12. What input would you give to construct an effective anti-bullying and prevention program considering your school only?

13. How effective is the program?

Group Forum

The group forum would have been conducted with the same interviewees to again observe nonverbal responses to compare if the verbal and nonverbal responses are the same as during individual interviews. However, the participants were not available during three attempts.

Data Analysis

Due to the research method, qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological, hermeneutic content analysis (HCA) is the method of analysis. Hermeneutic content analysis combines hermeneutic and qualitative content analysis to include hermeneutic analysis's circular movement, qualitative analysis's categorization and coding of data, and both hermeneutic and qualitative analysis's component of understanding of text, and interpretation of text (Vieira & de Queiroz, 2017). These researchers recognize six steps of hermeneutic process: "systemization, coding, categorization, interpretation, understand, and reflection," (p. 8). The circular movement, known as the hermeneutic circle, implies that interpreting data as a whole requires interpreting the meaning of the parts, and interpreting the meaning of the parts interprets the whole; therefore, the process does not end (Gall et al., 2007, p. 521). Therefore, Vieira and de Queiroz (2017) states that interpretation is yielded from subjective and objective viewpoints. All information gathered was transcribed verbatim, taken through the reduction process, rewritten with the relevant data, and coded and categorized by similarities and consistencies to comprise constructs for analyzation. After organizing the data into smaller constructs, I sought to understand, reflect, and interpret the data within each section. Though determined to eliminate bias and presumptions, reflexivity will be applied within this study. Reflexivity is employed during the data analysis and interpretation process by applying empathy

or previous knowledge and experience to assist with the data analysis process (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

Hermeneutic Content Analysis Process

      Systemization – I read and reread all collected and transcribed data and extract and document details that stand out according to the research questions (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017). I focused on gaining understanding of teachers' perceptions by identifying parts of the whole through highlighting and breaking down the parts until they are meaningful units.

      Code – Combing through each transcript line-by-line, I used color coding to construct a coding frame by labeling commonality of phrases or meaningful units between the participants. Codes state what the phrases reflect. For example, if the phrase is 'I felt helpless because no one came to help', the code may be 'felt helpless.' Thus, any statements from all participants resembling feeling helpless will be listed under that column. I looked for patterns in the codes to move toward creating categories and naming themes.

      Categorization – After coding and labeling all participants' phrases, I read through all codes to identify commonalities to group together into categories using a table to separate and label themes. For example, codes under 'felt helpless' and "lack of support" can be grouped and categorized as 'lack of support'. The hermeneutic circle requires repeating the reductions meaningful units, coding units, and categorizing themes. Therefore, I continued to determine if the codes remained appropriate or if new codes were needed, and if category names were still accurately applied. For this process, I assured that the parts continued to represent the whole and the whole continued to represent the parts. The process repeated until exhausted.

Interpretation – During this process, I looked at all extracted and reduced categories as well as the themes and interpreted their meaning. Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017 suggest giving attention to and documenting my intuition during this process.

Understand – Here, I will clarified interpretations with participants to assure that I have accurately reached the highest level of narrowing down data. At this point of accurate interpretations and understanding, I also assured that my pre-understandings had no influence, according to Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017). Then, I implemented reflection by collectively assigning meaning to text according to accurately proceeding through the hermeneutic process and according to participants' verifications.

During interpretation, I note understanding of the influence of Cognitive Triangle on the participants' perceptions and ability to drive one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Westmorland (2017) approaches the idea of the cognitive scientist working with the acquired information attained from the qualitative study. Connecting the Cognitive Triangle is crucial to determine what the participant is experiencing and the serious effects of neglecting to appropriately implement requirements of safe school climate due to the influence of maladaptive thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. In other words, the Cognitive Triangle shows that the effects of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors go beyond participants' perceptions and impact students as well.

Reflect – This stage consists of thoroughly examining and critiquing the themes for accuracy, acknowledging the possibility of differing themes and meanings according to Ajjawi & Higgs (2007), and assuring that the process was narrowed down as much as possible to prepare for documenting results. Once certain that the research was analyzed ethically and as

accurately as possible, I began documenting the findings through listing and summarizing each theme.

Trustworthiness

Conducting this study through the qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the participants' perspectives are key for establishing validity. Therefore, to increase confidence in eliciting honest responses, I informed the participants that their data will be safely kept with the researcher and not viewed by administrators. The importance of accuracy, honesty, and validity was also stressed. Also, prior to data collection, I explained the purpose of the study to administrators to prevent them from discouraging staff participation. I withheld biases and presumptions that may skew data and interpretation and prevent misrepresentation of participants' meaning.

Credibility

Credibility was established by member checking participants and varying methods of data collection. I collected data individually through interviews. During data analysis, the researcher maintained in contact with participants through email to assure that the writing remained true and reflected the essence of their responses (Kafle, 2011). Participants had the opportunity to clarify and correct any errors on my part. Participants' input assisted in assuring that the writing is unbiased from the writer's perspective, which increases transferability. Transferability is also established through reflexivity and content rich descriptions.

Dependability and Confirmability

Investigation of the phenomenon included credible sources to confirm the results. Data was collected with individual participants, which is the key source used in this study. All text was read multiple times and studied for consistency, and no text was omitted or deleted.

Transferability

Within this research, I was transparent in describing the role as the researcher and in revealing the context in which the research was conducted and coded. To indicate the results as transferable, the results include concise steps taken, including data analysis, to arrive at the results (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 438). Likewise, the results were broken down to describe the commonality of phrases chunked for coding and data analysis. Interpretation was written using content rich language and meaning. Lastly, the scholarly committee will view and determine transferability.

Ethical Conditions

Firstly, I obtained proper permission for research through the IRB and the Virginia school district before proceeding with research. During this study, the researcher first proceeded without bias and with neutrality to not influence the participants in their responses. Heppner et al. (2016), suggest that understanding the target population lessens the chance of biases (p. 56). During interviewing, there was a neutral facial expression.

Secondly, I assured that autonomy, non-maleficence and beneficence are practiced. Autonomy gives the participants right to choose to participate; non-maleficence is to not harm participants; and beneficence is assuring the research benefits the participants (Heppner et al., 2016, p. 51 & 52). In adhering to autonomy, the participants were asked to participate in the

research and were not coerced or made to feel obligated. After explaining the research and the possible benefits, each participant made an informed decision. Next, to highlight non-maleficence, participants understood that no part of the study will reflect them as rebelling against current policies, administration, or the school board to risk job security. As for beneficence, the researcher stated that the study may possibly benefit their environment, support, culture, and climate. Likewise, the researcher was cognizant that the study's results must be recorded with non-maleficence, beneficence, and honesty, as suggested by Heppner (p. 54).

Thirdly, I remained true to the purpose of understanding teachers' perceptions and behaviors to increase knowledge (Heppner et al., 2016, p. 53), not for the purpose of assigning blame or revealing faults. Likewise, it is pertinent to address if participation risks job security. Therefore, questions are worded to understand perception and influences to behaviors, not focusing on administration or negatively speaking on school board. In comparing risks and benefits as suggested by Heppner, the only risk is teachers being penalized for sharing their true perceptions, emotions, and insights. There is no risk of school principals reading data during or after collection due to confidentiality to protect the participants (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 436). Fraenkel stresses the importance of securing collected data and avoiding use of participants' names.

Lastly, the researcher credited sources of other writers with integrity to prevent plagiarism. Intentional plagiarism was avoided by carefully citing others' works as I document them. As Heppner et al. (2016) state, there is the possibility of unintentional plagiarism by forgetting to cite or by genuinely thinking the information is originally one's own (p. 61). Every

effort has been made to avoid such an act. However, while I cannot guarantee that no such errors exist in this paper, I meticulously attempted to avoid such occurrences.

Summary

Since this research was focused on understanding teachers' perceptions, the hermeneutic phenomenological content analysis is appropriately selected. The goal is to follow the steps of hermeneutic phenomenological content analysis while applying member checking during the process. The participant thoroughly understood the purpose and process of the research and was treated with respect and fidelity. Confidentiality will be respected, and professionalism and ethical considerations will guide the process.

The purpose of the semi-structured questions is to not lead the participants in what I expect to hear, and to practice reflexivity to monitor my preconceived notions and expectations. The sub-questions are constructed as stand-by questions in case the participant did not open up during the semi-structured questions. Consideration was given to participants' nervousness by being prepared to audio record, as another back-up procedure, for any participants who preferred not to be video recorded. All data was processed with fidelity and the findings of the data was accurately documented and reported. Lastly, I will confer with my chair as needed to assure that the entire process is conducted accurately, professionally, and ethically.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The primary purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to know alternative middle school teachers' perceptions of bullying and to know what motivates them to intervene or not intervene during incidents of bullying. The secondary purpose for this study is to know if the Cognitive Triangle is active during those observations of bullying and to know if it is a factor that motivates intervening. The end result is to document their descriptions of several different themes related to perceptions, intervening, and the Cognitive Triangle, and to analyze the data to gain insight into knowing and interpreting participants' words and language for meaning. Whether there is a connection between the teachers' perception and the Cognitive Triangle is also noted. Qualitative data was collected through individual interviews. A group forum was attempted three times, but participants did not attend. The hermeneutic circle was employed to analyze data, create codes and themes, and to determine answers to the research questions. Pseudo-names are assigned to protect each participants' identity. Pseudonyms are also assigned as non-disclosures of the participants' five different work sites.

Research Questions

There were two research questions to be answered during this study whereas eight headings were used to house several different themes to answer the research questions. I learned that some of the initial interview questions did not provide data to answer the research questions and were deleted. Also, there was information unexpectedly learned that contributed data relatable to respond to the research questions. That information concerned teachers' hearts for and relationships with their students. The research questions (RQ) are as follows:

RQ1: What are teachers' thoughts, perceptions, and reactions when witnessing special education students bullied in alternative middle school settings?

RQ2: What factors contribute to teachers' decisions to intervene or to not intervene during bullying activities toward special education students in alternative middle school settings?

The Process

Permission to conduct research was submitted to two school districts in North Carolina and two school districts in Virginia. Both districts in North Carolina declined responding, as did one district in Virginia. Therefore, research data was collected within one Virginia school district. Following permission to conduct research, Liberty University's IRB granted permission to conduct research. The approved school district was careful with privacy of staff and requested to distribute the recruitment letters and consent letters. Participants contacted me through email to volunteer to participate. All participants returned completed consent letters by email, including three other staff in the school district that did not fit the criteria of middle school teachers, though they worked in alternative schools. One who did not meet the criteria, Trinity, was an alternative high school teacher, and the other two, Ron and Andre, occupied support positions. Though Ron and Andre did not meet all the criteria as participants, but do work in alternative middle schools and have observed bullying, I interviewed them to gain insight of their perceptions and motivations to intervene. However, they are not participants, and their input is not included in this study as data.

Research Sites Accessed

Each Virginia school is identified by the city in which it resides and an assigned pseudonym. However, the cities are not revealed to assure nondisclosure of the institutions. School 1 accommodates one of the participants, Katrina. School 2 employs three participants, Marlotte, Dominique, and Krystal. School 3 yields 2 participants, Krashauna and Jerrell. School 4, houses one participant, Otani. Lastly, School 5 employs one participant, Jamell. Schools 1, 3, and 5 are independent facilities where the majority of students are identified as special education. A small section of the schools are designated to general education students. Schools 2 and 4 are located in traditional middle schools that are mostly occupied with general education students. Only a small section of those schools, a small hallway or a few classrooms, accommodates the alternative schools. Additionally, Schools 2 and 4 work with students with lower intellectual functioning more than the other locations.

Participant Interview Process

Participant Jamell was the first to return the consent form and to interview. The order of the other participants interviewed are Marlotte, Otani, Katrina, Dominique, Krystal, Krashauna, and Jerrell. Each participant was interviewed individually with recorded sessions through Zoom over a span of two months. Before recording began, each participant confirmed meeting the established participant criteria. Each interview lasted between 15 and 25 minutes. After interviewing, each interview was transcribed manually, then the hermeneutic circle process began. Upon completing all individual interviews, a group forum was unsuccessfully attempted on three different occasions.

Demographics of Participants

The participants are located in differing cities of Virginia and work in five differing alternative middle schools. Participants are all older than age 21 and are either teachers or teacher assistants. All participants have observed bullying within their schools and have made decisions to intervene and/or not to intervene. The similarity among all participants is their outspoken personalities as they responded to the interview questions and their openness to share their experiences and perspectives. It appeared that they did not focus on being careful how they responded and simply said what came to mind, which offered authenticity to their responses.

Table 1: Description of Participants

Participants' Name	Gender	General/Special Ed Teacher	Student Population	School Code	Total Years At Alternative Schools
Dominique	Female	Special Education	Autism Spectrum Disorder	School 2	4 Years
Jamell	Male	Special Education	Emotional Disability	School 5	31 Years
Jerrell	Male	Special Education	Emotional Disability	School 3	20 Years
Katrina	Female	Special Education	Emotional Disability	School 1	3 Years
Krashauna	Female	Special Education	Emotional Disability	School 3	5 Years
Krystal	Female	Special Education	Autism Spectrum Disorder	School 2	5 Years
Marlotte	Female	Special Education	Autism Spectrum Disorder	School 2	10 Years
Otani	Female	Special Education	Emotional Disability	School 4	5 Months

Table 1 depicts the participants' pseudo-names, descriptions, work sites, and years employed in alternative schools.

Data Analysis

Data was collected through a series of video recorded interviews with eight participants. During this pre-analysis phase, each participants' interview was transcribed manually by me, the researcher, including extra words, such as um, and laughter to fully grasp the meanings of their words. After transcribing each interview, I reviewed each audio recording again to verify accuracy of transcriptions. Participants did not attend any of the three group forums. Therefore, the group forum was removed as a source of data collection. Since the participants did not attend the group forum, it was assumed they were too busy for further contact. Therefore, I did not attempt to contact further to discuss the meanings of their words, which would have been conducted after transcribing the group forum. However, I emailed their transcripts and their individual summaries for them to read and verify without verbal contact but by simply typing 'I agree' or 'I do not agree'.

Next, data analysis began with the process of rereading the transcripts and replaying the audio recording to catch key words and phrases of individuals and that resonated among any participants. Initially during this process, particular sections of interest within the transcripts were bolded to revisit. These bolded sections, or meaning units, were copied and pasted from the transcript to a separate document to organize the data. Highlighted colors were then assigned to each participant—for example, Krystal's color was teal blue, and Jerrell's color was red, to identify which phrases or words belonged to each participant to assure similarity between participants before combining data. As similar key terms and phrases were captured, they were highlighted according to which participant stated the word or phrase. For example: "Um, I believe, my perception is it shouldn't happen. And I don't think it's acceptable on any grounds, anywhere, um, and, um, personally I don't like it" was highlighted in teal, and "bullying is one of

those things that's very unfortunate in public education right now. Um, it appears to be something that um, is very… to deter students from doing" was highlighted in red.

The next step of the process involved assigning codes to the highlighted words and phrases of individual participants. Sutton & Austin (2015) explain that either marginal notes or highlighting is accepted during coding. This entire process was conducted on the computer with bolded text and highlighted colors versus using paper. After bolding each participants' meaningful data, all codes, still color coded according to participants, were collectively transferred to a separate document. At this point, I dropped the colors that represented participants and applied colors to represent codes and categories. As the codes were constructed, I began placing them under categories. For example: codes such as "make them feel less than" and "they feel not good enough" were categorized along with other codes as perceptions and were themed 'lower self-esteem'. As I combed through all of the meaning units, new codes surfaced, some codes were condensed by combining them, and some were unnecessary to keep and ultimately discarded. As codes and categories were condensed and eliminated, I ensured that the parts still reflected the whole of the participants' statements as noted by Erlingsson & Brysiewicz (2017). During this process, colors were removed from codes and applied to themes. The themes were placed under specific headings relatable to some of the interview questions and pertinent to responding to the research questions. Due to the hermeneutic circle continually repeating this process, it was realized that some codes were not necessary information to answer the research questions and were eliminated. Some themes were combined and still some themes and headings were narrowed down through elimination due to repetition. As this researcher further condensed data, some themes were also found not conducive or non-relatable to responding to the research question and were considered unnecessary information. Such data

was eliminated to narrow excessive data with no potential of answering the research questions. Data was further condensed and some of it eliminated even during documentation of findings because it was irrelevant.

To note, two other staff members were interviewed with video and audio recording and were transcribed, but the information was not analyzed as data collection along with the eight participants' data. However, their insight was appreciated.

Headings and Themes

Explanation:

To begin with, there are eight headings, each with several themes, displayed in this study. The headings are bolded and are parts of some of the interview questions. Each heading and list of themes is organized by a visual to show the researcher's codes that determined the themes. Following the visuals are my interpretations and each participant's verbatim comments from which the codes derived. Teachers' comments for sections 4A and 4B are combined as 'When and How Teachers Intervene' and are written under 4B. Lastly is each participants' 'Response' to each heading which are verbatim responses transcribed from the interviews.

1. **Perceptions of Bullying Themes: Lower Self-Esteem   Targeting   Unacceptable**

Lower Self Esteem	Targeting	Unacceptable
Make them feel less than	Singled out	Feel uncomfortable
Demeaning words	Separate certain people	Negativity
They feel not good enough	Subtle cues	It shouldn't happen
Using style and physical difference	One student picking on another	Unacceptable all together
Learned behavior	Ostracize them	Personally don't like it

1. **Their perception of bullying is similar to their definitions and thoughts of bullying.**
2. **They acknowledge that it makes students feel inferior, separated from others and unwanted.**
3. **Staff finds the behavior unacceptable, and it makes staff feel uncomfortable with the negativity in their settings.**
4. **Teachers do not like it and wish it to cease. One teacher feels it is learned behavior.**

Dominique - Perception of Bullying Theme: Lower Self Esteem; Targeting; Unacceptable

Response: Yeah, so for me, bullying is definitely something that is used as a negative thing obviously, um, it is something that I feel like is used, like, how to separate certain people, you know ostracize them, make them feel like they're not good enough, kind of pick on them a little bit, um, make them feel like whatever they're going through, whatever they have or don't have is something to not celebrate. So, it's definitely something that can be looked at as a negative thing. And, I think that we're coming to a place where bullying is not just calling you a name. It's definitely like cyberbullying. We have those little subtle cues that you do, not including people, you know like doing those little things. So, um, I definitely think bullying has grown, unfortunately, into different realms. And, it's not as obvious as it used to be. Um, it's very subtle. A lot of people miss that, um, especially in the school setting.

Jamell - Perception of Bullying Theme: To Lower Self Esteem

Response: Again, my opinion and my feeling is that a lot of our kids in alternative setting experience bullying at home or in their early years in the public school system. And what the bullying they experience it at home and in the community, they bring it to the alternative setting, and they tend to tend to bully other kids who don't look like them or kids from different communities, kids with physical discrepancies.

Jerrell - Perception of Bullying Theme: Unacceptable

Response: Umm, bullying is one of those things that's very unfortunate in public education right now. Um, it appears to be something that um, is very… to deter students from doing.

Katrina - Perception of Bullying Theme: Unacceptable

Response: Um, I think it happens pretty often where I work. It's sad, and I think it does impact our students. Um, pretty much.

Krashauna - Perception of Bullying Theme: Lower Self Esteem

Response: My perception of bullying is when um one student is picking on another student, um, whether it's his clothing, his appearance, and things of that nature.

Krystal - Perception of Bullying Theme: Unacceptable

Response: Um, I believe, my perception is it shouldn't happen. And I don't think it's acceptable on any grounds, anywhere, um, and, um, personally I don't like it.

Marlotte - Perception of Bullying Theme: Targeting

Response: Um, currently, in my placement, I can't say that I witness a lot of bullying. When I do witness the bullying um between the students, um, it's very discreet. They're not outright about it. When they bully our special ed kids, like some of the other programs, maybe, it's like they know in a way it bothers them, and they want to mess with that kid that day; and they're sitting in math class, and the kid goes to the board to do a problem, they'll sit in their seat and do that, and um, I'm like you know, I did have to go talk to that teacher that runs that room cause like that kind, like you realize that that is like bullying too because they're not outright calling them names; but, they are purposely doing this to get a specific reaction out of them, to bother them. So, it's more like a discreet, like you know they don't like when you click your tongue, so

the kid is walking by to sharpen their pencil going (*she made the tongue clicking noise). So, it's a different kind of bullying.

Otani - Perception of Bullying Theme: Targeting; Lower Self Esteem; Uncomfortable

Response: My perception of bullying is um when you single out someone and you pretty much, um, target them in any shape, form, or fashion. And by means of sexual, making them feel less than, saying demeaning things to them; making them feel uncomfortable; any form of umm, um, unacceptable behavior towards the other person, making them feel uncomfortable, is a form of bullying.

2. **Perception of Bullying Special Education Students Themes:** (SpEd=Education)

SpEd to SpEd Bullying   SpEd Cannot Recognize Bullying   Non-SpEd to SpEd

Verbal Taunting

SpEd to SpEd Bullying	SpEd Cannot Recognizing Bullying	Non-SpEd to SpEd	Verbal Taunting
Lot of bullying among each other	Some SpEd students don't know they're being bullied	Non-SpEd sees SpEd as different from them	Made to feel dumb
It is frustrating to observe			

1. **The concern is both general education students bullying special education students, as well as special education students bullying special education students.**
2. **Due to certain disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Intellectual Disability – Mild (IDMD), some students are not aware that they are being bullied.**
3. **Sometimes, verbal taunting of special education students make them feel less intelligent by loudly bragging to answer a question that another student could not answer.**

Dominique - Perception of Bullying Special Education Students Theme: Non SpEd to SpEd; Taunting

Response: Um, like I said before, it's very subtle from what I've seen in particular with my students. Um, they don't go out very much, outside of my classroom. I did have students before that that went out a little bit more, and it's not just the straight up calling names or pointing fingers. It's very much like everybody pick the team, and the student didn't get picked. Or, um, very much like everybody kind of stares or, you know, they're kind of scared of them in a way. Um, instead of just asking their name, or you know… I'm not going to necessarily take it all the way to bullying, but it, my students notice. And, it is a negative impact, and we have to sit there and explain things to them, but it does have a very negative view. Um, and it just makes not only the other student, but my students not want to interact with each other because they have negative feelings towards it. But, um, what I've noticed is more just like clicks, and you know like, I'm not talking to the person, um, very much like laughing a little bit, um, or when a student needs help or they are not understanding. Um, and these are things that don't really get noticed because it's not outwardly, like, doing an outburst or doing something in particular. It's very much like if you're not paying attention to it, you're not going to notice it, but the student knows it, notices it, which is the bad thing.

Jamell - Perception of Bullying Special Education Students Theme: SpEd to SpEd Bullying

Response: It frustrates me and makes me mad because I was bullied when I was in junior high and I feel like how he feels that he has no one to turn to. And I just, you know I want to step in; I step-in in a positive way and not put my hands on him; try to use it as a teachable moment.

Jerrell - Perception of Bullying Special Education Students Theme: SpEd to SpEd

Response: Um, our population is a bit different at um, SECEP, um, because our whole population is special ed. So, the kind of bullying that special ed do against other special ed students is um, it's kinda like, um, them bullying someone else, um the same way that that person bullied him. So, they'll talk about their disability and they have the same disability.

Katrina - Perception of Bullying Special Education Students Theme: SpEd to SpEd; Non SpEd to SpEd

Response: Uh, that happens a lot more often. Uh, I feel like they're not really accepted here at the alternative school. Even with each other. Amongst each other, I mean, there's a lot of bullying amongst each other. Um, I mean it happens almost daily; I mean it's like constantly, all day every single day.

Krashauna - Perception of Bullying Special Education Students Theme: Taunting

Response: For one, I see it happening a lot. Um, one particular student, he doesn't have… well he just told me recently that his washer and dryer is not working. So, when he comes in, he's pretty much wrinkled. His… he kinda smells, so the students, you know, always jokes on him. He puts his head down, and I have to tell them, please leave him alone. So, you know, he doesn't entertain it. He ignores it. So, it can be challenging for him when it comes to being picked on, and they don't seem to get it. He doesn't have the latest fashion with the shoes and things like that, so. It's very hurtful, and it hurts me to see him feel the way that he feels. And, I tell him everyone is not as fortunate as he is. Everyone is not rich. You guys are not rich; I'm not rich so.

Krystal - Perception of Bullying Special Education Students Theme: Non SpEd to SpEd; Taunting

Response: Um, I think, that, it um… I think that part of it is it happens because some kids don't understand. And, with things that some people don't understand, they pick on because it's not considered their normal. So, instead of trying to understand their, the difference between them and the people they hang out with, um, versus someone that they, um, think is different than them. Um, I think that because they don't try to understand it, they just actually joke on it as well.

Marlotte - Perception of Bullying Special Education Students Theme: Non SpEd to SpEd

Response: Um, I will say that where I am right now because my classroom is not one that's… I'm at a center; I'm not at a um, I'm not in the position where they are like integrated. We have different programs on our wing, but we're not integrated with our regular ed peers on the other side of the building. So, you know, it's like I described with the program… if they cross paths because maybe they go out for a math class with that; um, but it's very few students who go out you know. It's kinda like the program that keeps them to themselves for the most part. These instances are rare. It's kinda like buses or if they're taking you know an SOL class they get together sometimes. But, it doesn't happen very often…so

Otani - Perception of Bullying Special Education Students Theme: SpEd to SpEd; Non SpEd to SpEd

Response: My perception of bulling of um special education students, again it's very similar to that regular, normal setting education students. However, special education students are a little because a lot of them cannot, to some degree, defend themselves. Where you have regular ed that can defend themselves, You have special ed that sometimes do not know how to respond or

react in a very appropriate way. Um, and sometimes they do not know how to defend

themselves appropriately. Soo, especially when you have a behavioral type of setting. Um, if

you have a behavioral type of setting, sometimes the only response they know is to have a

behavior. And, if that is the case, if that is the case, then you have someone who is trying to,

someone who is targeting to make themselves feel better because they're having an identity

crisis; or they don't really know who they are.

3. **Perceptions of Alternative Middle School Setting Themes: Types of Students
    Effective or Not   Setting Challenges   Setting Structure**

Types of Students	Effective or Not	Setting Challenges	Setting Structure
Emotional disability	Can make things better or worse	Very challenging student behaviors	Not integrated with regular education in classes; but shares cafeteria
	Determined by students' emotion and communication	90-minute classes	Walk on one side of hallway
	Pros and cons	Different programs	Not allowed to pile up
	Easier to make friendships		More efficient than traditional
	60% good; 40% not good		Little 1:1 with students
	Will recommend due to teamwork		Fully staffed and trained

1. **There are different programs that are geared to certain disabilities. For example, one program is geared towards students with Emotional Disability. These students are not integrated with general education students sharing the traditional school building.**
2. **The setting is not 100% effective and has its pros and cons. One teacher feels that having students leave her classroom to attend another's course is challenging because her students are exposed to bullying. Sharing the cafeteria with non-disabled peers also exposes her students to bullying. She feels that the other general education teacher allows the bullying to occur.**
3. **For some teachers, their students elicit behaviors intimidating to other students, including general education students.**

4. **For students with their levels of disabilities, 90 minute classes can be too much.**
5. **Staying to one side of the hallway during transitions and space between students prevent students from negative interactions. Staff feel that it is more efficient than crowded hallways in traditional schools.**
6. **Since teachers are required to remain in the classroom the majority of the school day, one teacher feels that it eliminates the opportunity to have 1:1 time with students as needed.**
7. **Due to small classroom sizes and overall small setting, students easily bond and become friends.**
8. **Teamwork is spoken of highly. Staff support staff and is always ready to aid and assist. Therefore, one staff stated that the setting is recommended.**

Dominique - Perception of Alternative Middle School Setting Theme: Effective; Setting Structure

Response: Um, it definitely has its pros and cons. Um, I would say for me it's a lot easier when we do find a good group of students to help with my students. You know, we do have kids who really want to help and really wanna be in it. And, it just helps for a smoother transition because they're already in the environment; they're already friends, you know, and it's easier to facilitate friendships, I mean, when you're already in that type of school. Um, but as far as like the cons, it's a lot of audience. You don't have a lot of one on one time with students, so you're always, you know, like talking to them in public, or you know, they see the behaviors, they see the conflict, and they see the struggle that we're trying to get through. So, I feel like that kind of contributes to the other students not really wanting to participate with them, um, unfortunately. But, you still have those great students that wanna come up and be like, hey, you know like, I wanna help. I wanna be their friend, and I want to be that, which makes it a lot better, and it makes it a lot easier. So, I would say 60% good; 40% not good; like a sixty forty, um, but I would still recommend it because you have a team there. I feel like as a whole with bullying, and I'm not the only classroom there so we all kinda help each other. And, we kinda look out for each other.

Jamell - Perception of Alternative Middle School Setting Theme: Setting Structure

Response: Okay, the building I'm in is three floors, was built in 1947, it's an older building. We have about 70 staff, roughly 6-8 kids per classroom. We have a lot of kids coming in LPR cars now, so uh buses are not as packed as they were in the past. We have about 10-12 LPR cars to bring on student per car. Uh, the staff, we've been taught crisis intervention now, and it's, we only goes hands on when there is imminent danger. So this allows the staff to do more talking, trying to de-escalate the student or de-escalate the situation. So I think that's better; we do less hands on whereas 25/30 years ago, we were hands on quickly.

Jerrell - Perception of Alternative Middle School Setting Theme: Setting Challenges; Type of Student

Response: Alternative middle school… that's my warehouse. I've been there in alternative middle for 20 years, so.

Yeah. I always been with middle school… I always been with alternative ed since I first started… um, so I can work with overage 9th graders my first year. That was the only year I wasn't in middle school, so. But, I taught them 8th grade math, so. Middle school is definitely a different animal because get them to learn themselves and get through puberty. They also start to become aware of their environment. And some of the influences in that environment may have caused their disabilities. So, middle school is very intriguing and uh, an intriguing age group to work with. They also start to become aware of their environment. And some of the influences in that environment may have caused their disabilities. So, middle school is very intriguing and an intriguing age group to work with.

Katrina - Perception of Alternative Middle School Setting Theme: Types of Students; Site Challenges

Response: Um, my setting is like emotional disorders type of alternative school setting. We have special needs kids and (inaudible) in our alternative school setting.

Krashauna - Perception of Alternative Middle School Setting Theme: Setting Challenges

Response: Um, for me, I could be very challenging, um, to get them to be engaged fully in the lesson. Um, they can come in; they could be very tired; up all night; um, they want to be up on the computer playing the games, so I have the take the Chromebooks from them. Yeah, so it's just… to keep them fully engaged. So, our class is 90 minutes, and that is a very long time to be engaged in the content area, so. I teach World History 1. So, to be honest, I started out teaching 9th graders. Then, it merged with the 8th graders because we lost a teacher. So, now I have 8th graders and 9th graders at once. So, 50 minute class turned to 90 minutes, so it's very challenging.

Krystal - Perception of Alternative Middle School Setting Theme: Effective or Not

Response: I think, uh, that… it depends I think it depends on why they're there. I think it can make a situation better; I think it can also make a situation not worse, but for lack of better words, not, maintain it whatever get going on. Um, I just think about who… how open you are… how open and receptive they are to communicate their feelings and their emotions with someone to try to work through whatever reason they are there for.

Marlotte - Perception of Alternative Middle School Setting Theme: Setting Structure

Response: Um, I think one of the biggest things that I've noticed from being here as opposed to other places, is, um, staffing-wise, at the alternative base we're much, we're much more structured. We have more staff to facilitate everything. There's a lot more eyes on, so I feel like

it occurs less. And it all, you know what I mean? When you're at the regular and I was like the only class in the building, it wasn't a lot of bullying my specific special ed students I ever witnessed when I was there. But, again it was cause we had a very high staff-to-student ratio. So, most of the time, kids, even if you know, they're, they're in an integrated class with them, they're not going to say anything cause there is so much staff there. We have different programs on our wing, but we're not integrated with our regular ed peers on the other side of the building. …like, you have to walk on one side of the hallway and walk back on the other. You're not allowed to like pile up or, you know? And, that was like before COVID; it was just, it was more efficient you know, but, it also kept from some of those other problem times or areas from occurring.

Otani - Perception of Alternative Middle School Setting Theme: Setting Structure

Response: The alternative school setting, I think that we play a very vital role with bullying because we are the providing services in an aspect where we are the hands on. And where we can actually, make you know, interject and/or be that positive role model to that child And you know, help them to, you know, feel a little, provide some type of guide where they may not be given at home, you know, or on another different kind of scale where they may, you know, they may be dealing with some type of crisis or something at home, or they may not be getting that type of attention or that love, or whatever they need at home. We are, you know, that, maybe the only love or attention that they may be able to get. So, I think that we are the only hands on that, and that's a vital role that we play in helping them feel better about themselves. Um, that's the way I look at it, the role that I play in the alternative setting is I don't look at it as a job, I look at it as ministry. It is not just a job. It is ministry. Um, so for me, um, I like to interject every day to my students that um you hold the key to your success.

4a. How Staff Intervene Themes: Remove Student   Verbally   Accountability Subtle; Separately

Remove Student	Verbally	Accountability	Subtle; Separately
I normally remove a student	You need to cut it out	Responsibility for them to stop bullying	Talk with student away from others
Remove the bully	Gentle; Not put hands on	Bullied student has to say something	
Pulled students out in twos	Talking and offering options	Withhold attention	
Remove the bully	Say this is a no no no	Mirroring analogy	
	Verbal prompts	No action if attention seeking	

1. **Most staff intervened by removing students from the room. Sometimes the bullied student was removed for the opportunity to walk and collect their thoughts and de-escalate.**
2. **Some sites are able to verbally intervene by verbal prompts such a saying, no, no, no or cut it out. They have also intervened by letting the bully know that the behavior is unacceptable and not tolerated, talking to the bully away from the peers, and by offering options to comply or not.**
3. **Two staffs intervene by making the bully aware of their behavior, explaining why it is wrong, and leaving it to the bully to make the right decision; thus, holding himself accountable. Another staff does the opposite and holds the bullied student accountable to at least express his disapproval to bullying. Meanwhile, another teacher intervenes by using the mirroring analogy to show the bully how bad bullying looks on him and allows him to respond to what if he was in the peer's shoes and being bullied.**
4. **A few staff stated that they will not intervene if the bullying is attention seeking.**

4b. When Does Staff Intervene Themes: Immediately   Escalation   To Keep Others Engaged   For Safety

Immediately	Escalation	To Keep Others Engaged	For Safety
As soon as bullying is identified	Items thrown; physical or verbal altercation	If it draws attention	Safety risk
As seen or heard	Picking on a student		
Almost immediately	Emotionally disturbing		

1. **Some teachers intervene as soon as the bullying begins. However, a few teachers will not intervene if it is attention seeking, even though a student is the recipient of the bullying.**
2. **Depending on the site, teachers intervene when items start flying across the classroom; during a verbal altercation; during a physical altercation; if the bullied student appears to be emotionally disturbed; and, picking on a student.**
3. **One teacher stated that they intervene when it will pull other students off task and join in bullying. He also stated intervening when there is a safety concern.**

Dominique - When and How Staff Intervenes Theme: Subtle/Separate; Immediately

Response: (during verbal bullying)… Um, that's something I would like immediately stop and address because my students are very aware, and I don't want them to think what they said to this person or what they're doing to this person is okay. So, that's when I would stop the lesson. And, if it's subtle I would go up the person afterwards and talk him through. Um, but if it is drawing attention at that particular time, I'm going to address it at that particular time.

Um, I do intervene, but it's more subtle like, doing it separately. I don't cause a scene. I kinda separate them a little bit, and I talk to my student and see how they're doing. Then, I'll go and talk to the other student if it's appropriate.

Jamell - When and How Staff Intervenes Theme: Immediately; Verbally; Remove Student

Response: I normally remove; in my class I normally remove a student, and the student doing he bullying have them leave the room; take them to the uh, we have a quiet room now; it's not a (inaudible); we have a quiet room; take them to the break room or the quiet room, let them get themselves together because they're initiating the bullying. And I have the other student, they like to step outside also just to get themself together. Um, as soon as they're identified as bullying; the sooner the better. Because the longer it goes on, the worse it gets. So, when I identify that one student is bullying another student, remove the bully - get him out of the room

because the longer it takes place, it's going to get worse so you end up with a fight or you know a person being bullied can grab something and throw it at the person. So, the sooner I hear it or see it, break it up. Get the bully out the room.

Jerrell - When and How Staff Intervenes Theme: Remove Student; Verbal; Safety; Engage

Response: Well, anything where safety is being involved, um, for sure. Um, anything causing emotional instability for sure. Um, pretty much with the small numbers we have, given that previous example, we're gonna stop the show for all cases pretty much. Oh, you know, we try to pull it to the side, we try to do some type of counseling, some type of mediation immediately because, like I previously stated, you know, a lot of the times it's you getting on a kid for the same disability you got. (in another situation)… I just started pulling them out in groups of two to get them (inaudible) so they couldn't be intimated by, um, kind of remove them from the stimulus, and um.

Katrina - When and How Staff Intervenes Theme: Verbally; Remove Student; Immediately

Response: Um, most of the time I will intervene and not just because I don't like it to interrupt their day. They're here to learn. I don't want what other kids are saying to disrupt their day. Um, after I prompt a few times; You know, I'll stop intervening because sometimes it's mainly for attention. So, if you stop intervening, then it'll kinda go away. I mean most of the time I'll intervene almost immediately. And, if it gets like increasingly worse, then I'll try to remove one of the students from the situation so that they're not in that situation anymore. Um, to not intervene I would just feel fed up. Like, I would just be annoyed. I mean, I would still want to say something, but I'd be pretty annoyed.

Krashauna - When and How Staff Intervenes Theme: Verbally; Accountability

Response: (following an incident) So, when I took her out of the classroom to de-escalate the situation, I didn't say anything for maybe like 5 to 10 seconds We were just walking. And I said, hey, what made you do that. (mimicking the female student) "I was just joking." You cannot joke like that. First of all, this is your first day here in person, this is your first day here in person. You do not know him; he does not know you. So, I had to… I switched out with the two students, and I talked to him. And, he is autistic, so, you know, he doesn't see… all he sees is black and white. He doesn't understand. So, I told him, I said hey, please try to disregard her behavior. Like, keep your eye on the prize; you're trying to get back to public school. It's hard for him to let things go, so it's, it's a challenge, it's a challenge.

Krystal - When and How Staff Intervenes Theme: Verbally; Immediately; Remove

Response: Um, it makes me up, like mad. It makes me furious inside, but I can't, well I can act on it, but I have to act professionally on it. Sooo, (laughter) I have to take a minute to take a breath. What is it, smell the flower, blow out the candle (laughter) before I start talking about whatever I'm observing at the moment. And, um, I try to remove, like, I think there's been a situation where I've tried to, where I have removed the student, like the student considered a special needs student, I'll remove him from the situation first before I start talking to the kid that is, um, bullying. Cause you gotta make them understand, like, although they're a little bit different, it doesn't mean that you can pick on them like that, and still, I try to give them something to self-reflect on. So, like, you don't, like, even though you're not in their shoes, it could be you; it could be someone in your, one of your family members. Like, do you want

someone to treat your family members like that just because they're, quote, different than what your perception of normal is?

Marlotte - When and How Staff Intervenes Theme: Verbally; Immediately

Response: It's having to address it with teachers outside of the program because I have to explain why this is a problem. Why this, you know what I mean, there's a lot of, and that can be very um, I don't know, I guess it can get me a little irritated. Moreso, more angry than irritated when it happens. When you have to keep, when you have to break this down so somebody, it's like you're in the same position that I am; how am I having to make you be empathetic to this. Like you should understand that this is problem.

Otani - When and How Staff Intervenes Theme: Verbal; Immediately

Response: (after an incident) Would you like anybody ripping your work up? If, when you get upset, would you like anybody walking pass your work just tearing it off the wall? Would you like that done to you? And, I like, I use the mirror analogy a lot, and I like to mirror the situation because I like for people to see themselves. Um, when I see it, um, I pretty much, um, when I see it coming on. Um, I pretty much know when it's attention-seeking. If it's attention-seeking, I don't, I don't, I don't give it my attention.

And, even down to, um, even down to, um, just telling the person, this, no, no, no. That behavior is inappropriate. You need to stop it right now. That is not respectful; you don't need to say that. Okay. Um, that's unacceptable.

5. Frequency of Intervening Theme: Percentages

80-90%	Maybe 25%	90%	About 75%	Indicates Every time	90%	More than not; Most	Indirect response

1. **Seven of eight teachers gave a percentage of how often they intervene. The majority stated intervening most of the time. One teacher intervenes about 25% of the time and another about 75% of the time.**

Dominique - Frequency that Staff Intervenes Theme: Percentages

Response: Out of 100%? I would say about 75. Um, it kinda went back to the functioning level of the student and them understanding if it's bullying or not because a lot of the time, unfortunately, my students are not cognitively that aware in some of the bullying situations. Um, I would sometimes address it with the other student but sometimes it just wouldn't be appropriate, um it would be something that I would be aware of kinda be like intervene to like turn the situation around or be like you're not to have that opportunity anymore. So, a lot of that 25% is more like, if I did address it, would everybody in the situation understand?

Jamell - Frequency that Staff Intervenes Theme: Percentages

Response: Because 80 and 90% because you don't want to lose your classroom

Jerrell - Frequency that Staff Intervenes Theme: Percentage

Response: At 90

Katrina - Frequency that Staff Intervenes Theme: Percentages

Response: 90

Krashauna - Frequency that Staff Intervenes Theme: No percentage provided

Response: Just the other day, um. Well, we have a virtual student that is two days a week, and after Spring break, she will be in fulltime, so. Just out of the blue, she got up, got out of her area and went to another student. He had his headphones on at his computer, and snatched his earphones on. Out of the blue, he got up and proceeded and charged at her; ran around my desk you know; another male partner got in front of him, and you know, I assisted with her just to

separate. Like, that is unacceptable, out of nowhere. So, when I took her out of the classroom to de-escalate the situation, I didn't say anything for maybe like 5 to 10 seconds… we were just walking. And I said, hey, what made you do that. (mimicking the female student) "I was just joking." You cannot joke like that. First of all, this is your first day here in person, this is your first day here in person. You do not know him; he does not know you

Krystal - Frequency that Staff Intervenes Theme: No percentage provided

Response: Um… I would say more often than not. (laughter). So, I mean, every time I see it happens. Either, if it's not me intervening, I am telling the person that I know it is their place to say something. Like, hey, this just happened; I observed it, um, you know. I don't feel like it's my place to speak to the person, but I feel like you know if you have a chance, maybe give them some words, not, some kind words, you know, help them understand that that's not cool.

Marlotte - Frequency that Staff Intervenes Theme: Percentages

Response: Um, with my kids, I think it would, it's kinda the, kinda the degree, um, maybe 25%. Only because um, most of it does occur with one particular student.

Otani - Frequency that Staff Intervenes Theme: No percentage provided

Response: When perceived and observed 100%

6. **Cognitive Triangle Themes: Staff Emotions   Staff Thoughts   Staff Behaviors**

| Staff Emotions	Staff Thoughts	Staff Behaviors
Frustrates me; makes me mad	I was bullied in junior high	Will not intervene if fed up or too annoyed
More angry than irritated	It was difficult to watch and deal with	Talk to other teachers to collaborate

Makes me upset	Maybe a little defensive	Intervene when others will not
Feel sorry for them	Be humble; do not look down on others	Momma bear protection
Anger	It can happen to you	Go with students who move to other classes
Empathetic	How would you feel if it was you or a family member	I speak on it; cannot ignore it
Makes me sad	Can relate and thinks the bullied student feel he has no one to talk to	Response is not emotionally driven
Sad and frustrated		Pay attention else you'll miss bullying
Heartbreaking		
Felt powerless		

1. **Emotionally, four teachers experience some form of anger. A few teachers experience frustration and sadness. One teacher expressed empathy from his own experiences of childhood bullying. Another teacher expressed feeling sorry for them.**
2. **A teacher who expressed deep care for her students stated that it is heartbreaking seeing students bullied, especially when they are misunderstood.**
3. **One teacher experienced feeling powerless during an incident that involved the entire class and the teachers being collectively bullied by one student.**
4. **In summary for emotions, all experience some type of emotion, but not all responses were emotionally driven.**
5. **As for thoughts, one teacher thinks about his childhood being bullied and thinks the bullied student might feel as he did and has no one with whom to talk. Cognitively, he believes he can relate to the student. Another staff's thoughts consist of thinking that the student needs to be humble, not feel better than, and to remember that he could be in the peer's shoes. Another staff thinks to protect her students, and she becomes defensive.**
6. **Staff behaviors range from addressing other teachers about their students bullying her students, which causes more emotions as the teacher became frustrated having to explain that to a teacher who should know better; to another teacher refraining from intervening if her emotions are too intense (too fed up/too annoyed).**
7. **As for the Cognitive Triangle, it is clear that their emotions determined their thoughts. For example, the teacher who genuinely loves her students gets angry (emotion) and thinks to not leave the student with the other teacher (thought) and prefers to sit with her students or keep them in her classroom (behavior). Another example, the teacher who feels sorry for the student (emotion) and empathizes (emotion) thinking the student feels that he has no one to talk to, recalls how he felt**

being bullied as a child (thought), and quickly intervenes (behavior). Another example, when the entire class was bullied, the teacher felt sorry for the students (emotion) and felt powerless (emotion), thought of how to help the students (thought) because he could not stop the bully, and started taking his students out of the class two at a time (behavior) to reward them and give them a break from the bully. One teacher becomes frustrated (emotion), thinks the bully feels he is superior (thought), and intervenes verbally (behavior) reminding him that it could be him or a family in the peer's situation and being bullied.

Evidence of the Cognitive Triangle

Part of this study was to find whether the proponents of the Cognitive Triangle influences the participants' decisions to intervene with bullying. Does emotions influence thought and behavior? Does thought influence emotions and behaviors? Does behavior influence emotions and thoughts? See the Table 2: Cognitive Triangle in the following pages..

Figure 2: Cognitive Triangle
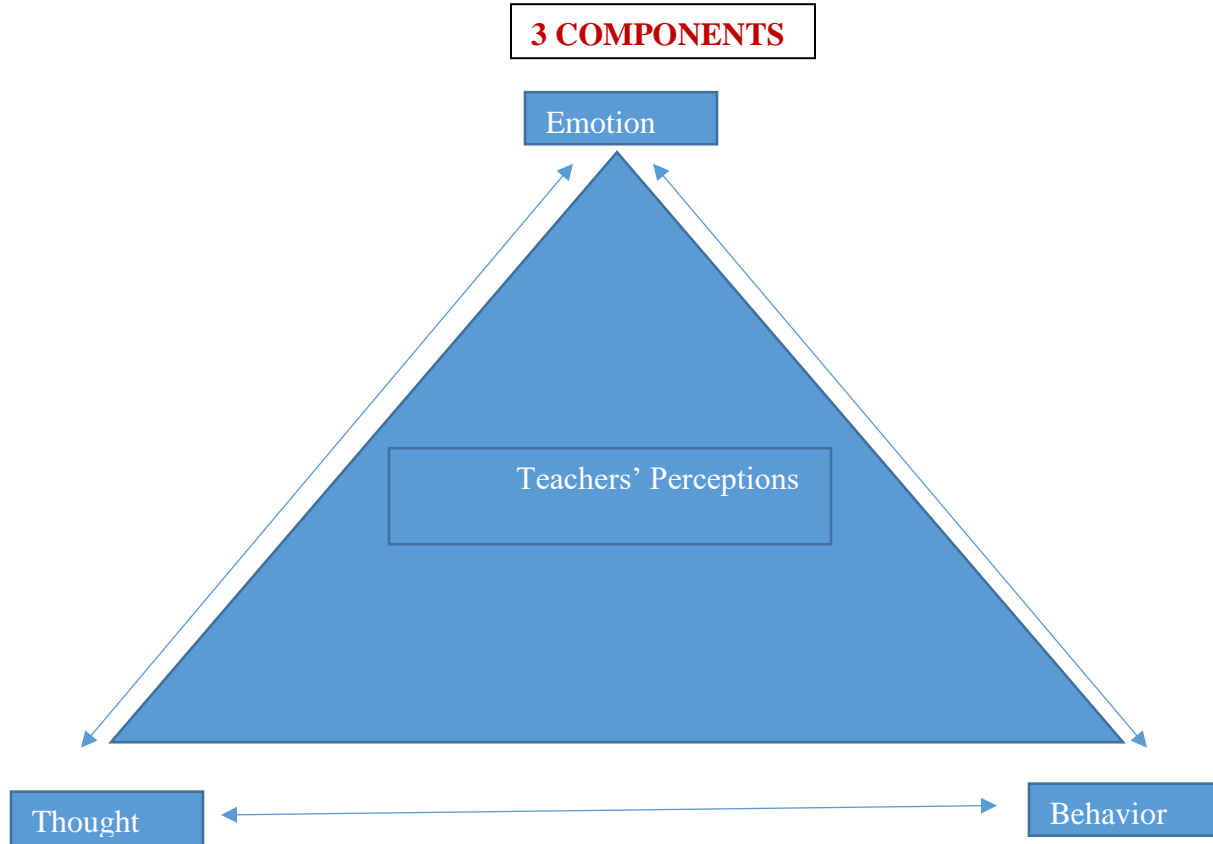
3 COMPONENTS

Emotion

Teachers' Perceptions

Thought

Behavior

The components of the cognitive triangle connect in either direction.

Emotions to Thoughts to Behaviors; Behaviors to Thoughts to Emotions; The

individual may not perceive experiencing all three components, such as

Behavior to Thought.

Table 2: Cognitive Triangle

Name	Emotion	Thought	Behavior
Dominique	Sad; not angry because some SpEd students don't know it's bullying	Thinks where do we go from here; how can I manipulate positive interactions	Give her student space from the bully and talk to her student; May talk to bully in general education class
Jamell	Frustrated; Mad	Recalls being bullied in middle school and thinks how the student might feel	Remove the bully from the classroom
Jerrell	Powerless; Helpless; failure in protecting students	Think of a plan to get the students out of the room from the bully	Remove innocent students to avoid physical altercation with the bully; Collaborate with peers; other situations Pull bully to the side; Counsel; Mediation;
Katrina	Upset; Angry	Considers that students are at school to learn, not to be bullied	Verbally intervene; Remove student from the classroom
Krashauna	Hurts; heartbreaking	No thought mentioned	Separate and remove the bully to help him think about his actions; sometimes remove the bullied student to de-escalate and breathe
Krystal	Mad; furious	First observe to be sure of what she is seeing; Breathing exercise to self-calm	Remove bully; talk with student
Marlotte	Irritation; Angry	Why did not the general education teacher intervene; thoughts of going with her students	Discusses her concern with the general education
Otani	No emotion expressed	Thinks no, no, no; that's inappropriate	Verbal response: you need to stop it right now; makes student take responsibility for actions; take ownership; use mirror analogy

Table 2 connects the Cognitive Triangle to the participants' responses while observing bullying.

Dominique – Identified Emotions, Thoughts, and Behaviors

Response: Um, definitely the thought, um, would be more like, where do we go from here because we can't necessarily, like I said, the bullying is very subtle, and you can't force certain kids or students to interact with them. Or, you really can't force a kid to, you know, like be friends or acknowledge this kid, so I think my thoughts are like, how can I better set up situations where it's naturally going to be a good experience. Um, so I think about that, but unfortunately when I do see bullying, it does make me sad. Not necessarily angry because certain students, they don't know. But, it does make me sad because it's like they're, they're not even given a chance sometimes. I'm thinking about socially, um, but once that barrier is broken, I would say that it is a good experience.

(when asked if emotions determine behaviors)… Um, I do intervene, but it's more subtle like, doing it separately. I don't cause a scene. I kinda separate them a little bit, and I talk to my student and see how they're doing. Then, I'll go and talk to the other student if it's appropriate.

Jamell - Identified Emotions, Thoughts, and Behaviors

Response: It frustrates me and makes me mad because I was bullied when I was in junior high and I feel like how he feels that he has no one to turn to. And I just, you know I want to step in; I step-in in a positive way and not put my hands on him; try to use it as a teachable moment. I normally remove; in my class I normally remove a student, and the student doing he bullying have them leave the room. And I have the other student, they like to step outside also just to get themself together.

Jerrell - Identified Emotions, Thoughts, and Behaviors

Response: Oh, you know, we try to pull it to the side, we try to do some type of counseling, some type of mediation immediately because, like I previously stated, you know, a lot of the times it's

you getting on a kid for the same disability you got. It just doesn't make sense, and often times, my students are hurt because they're just trying to get back and put that hurt on another student. Um, but as we get through the mediation process, it's a lot of successes in dealing with um, bullying in a center like SECEP because it's easier for them to understand that um, you know we're all wearing a burgundy shirt; we're all… we're all in this together. And, you know, we don't move classes. We're together all day. So, if something occurs in the morning, you got to sit with that all day. And so, some type of mediation is needed, and typically before the end of the day, you know, everybody's back on the same page. It doesn't linger over as much as it did when I was in a public-school setting, um, in the traditional setting

Katrina - Identified Emotions, Thoughts, and Behaviors

Response: Um, but in order for me to say something, you know, I would just feel upset and angry in the moment for them talking about a student like that, and that's why I would intervene because I can't; they would feel the same way, so nobody can continue a lesson if we're all feeling angry and upset right now, so. Like I said, kids are here to learn so like, they can't learn while they're being bullied. You know, I'll say them, to be respectful and not just speak about their peers like that. And, if it gets like increasingly worse, then I'll try to remove one of the students from the situation so that they're not in that situation anymore**.**

Krashauna - Identified Emotions and Behaviors

Response: For one, I see it happening a lot. Um, one particular student, he doesn't have… well he just told me recently that his washer and dryer is not working. So, when he comes in, he's pretty much wrinkled. His… he kinda smells, so the students, you know, always jokes on him. He puts his head down, and I have to tell them, please leave him alone. So, you know, he doesn't entertain it. He ignores it. So, it can be challenging for him when it comes to being

picked on, and they don't seem to get it. He doesn't have the latest fashion with the shoes and things like that, so. It's very hurtful, and it hurts me to see him feel the way that he feels. And, I tell him everyone is not as fortunate as he is. Everyone is not rich. You guys are not rich; I'm not rich so. One minute you can be up and the next you can be down, so please don't think that because you have money doesn't mean that you will have it the next day. So, you need to be mindful of them, of other people's feeling.

Krystal – Identified Emotions, Thoughts, and Behaviors

Response: Um, it makes me up, like mad. It makes me furious inside, but I can't, well I can act on it, but I have to act professionally on it. Sooo, (laughter) I have to take a minute to take a breath. What is it, smell the flower, blow out the candle (laughter) before I start talking about whatever I'm observing at the moment. And, um, I try to remove, like, I think there's been a situation where I've tried to, where I have removed the student, like the student considered a special needs student, I'll remove him from the situation first before I start talking to the kid that is, um, bullying. Cause you gotta make them understand, like, although they're a little bit different, it doesn't mean that you can pick on them like that, and still, I try to give them something to self-reflect on. So, like, you don't, like, even though you're not in their shoes, it could be you; it could be someone in your, one of your family members. Like, do you want someone to treat your family members like that just because they're, quote, different than what your perception of normal is?

Marlotte - Identified Emotions, Thoughts, and Behaviors

Response: I don't know if I should (inaudible) (laughter). Um, I'm one of those people that always joke with my students, and I'm like, cause they're like you're not my mom; I'm like, well I'm the closest one you have here from 7-2, so (laughter) um, I take it personally. So, I stay in

the room a lot, but um I had to go talk to some of the other teachers because the instances I

describes with the noises and stuff. And, I get very irritated when I'm trying to explain to them

that… cause again, they're not considering these noises or anything as bullying; Um, but it is

bullying and they need to talk to their students; well, I can talk to them, but it doesn't mean

they're going to do it.

So, I get very um irritated when I have to address it sometimes because when I have to address it,

it's never like in-house. It's not the kids in our program. It's having to address it with teachers

outside of the program because I have to explain why this is a problem. Why this, you know

what I mean, there's a lot of, and that can be very um, I don't know, I guess it can get me a little

irritated. Moreso, more angry than irritated when it happens. So, maybe a lil defensive

(laughter).

Otani – Identified Thoughts and Behaviors

Response: (when asked if she experienced thoughts and emotions)… I did. I did. And, even

down to, um, even down to, um, just telling the person, this, no, no, no. That behavior is

inappropriate. You need to stop it right now. That is not respectful; you don't need to say that.

Okay. Um, that's unacceptable. (no emotion identified).

7. **Teachers' Hearts Themes: Care   Positive Role Model   Assistance   Greater Purpose**

Care	Positive Role Model	Assistance	Greater Purpose
No holds barred when some messes with my kids	Be the positive role model for the child	Help them feel better about themselves	It is ministry; not just a job
Provide guidance	It could be someone in your family	Students do not come to feel unsafe or bad	Teach them to self-advocate/intervene for themselves

Possibly their only form of love and attention	We do our parts and will see less bullying	Cannot pick on them because they're different	Protect students
Cannot learn when bullied		Collaborated with staff for more knowledge	
		Help them feel better about themselves	

1. **Teachers genuinely care for their students, defend the students, and consider their ability to learn in stressful bullying situations.**
2. **Teachers strive to model positive behaviors because students are watching and learning from them. Teachers defend their students and encourage them to feel good about themselves.**

Dominique – Teachers' Heart Theme: Care; Assistance

Response: Um, hmm, I would say it was a time unfortunately, it was a hard situation to handle. Um, but I had a student that was in PE. He loved to go to PE, and it, you know, it drew a little attention to him because he would come into class already dressed. He wasn't allowed to go into the locker room per us. And, he came with his own personal stall, so you know kids are gonna look. Um, he was just really upset that day. He did have a pretty big behavior, and unfortunately, we had to restrain him in the gym. Um, it was just a safety concern, and unfortunately, other kids saw it. Um, and then after that it just got to the point where they did not wanna include him, they refused to play with him. It was definitely like he' not even existing in class anymore, and unfortunately, um, he started to pay attention, then he would get upset. It was just like a ripple effect and he would get upset, and he would have another behavior, then he would get upset and have another behavior because he wasn't understanding that was what was causing the other students to not like him. You know, um, it got to a point where we had to address it in class. Some kids came around, but unfortunately, it kinda like, it, kinda done. Yeah, yeah, so it was a bullying situation, but I don't think they understood that.

Jamell - Teachers' Heart Theme: Care; Assistance

Response: I normally remove; in my class I normally remove a student, and the student doing he bullying have them leave the room; take them to the uh, we have a quiet room now; it's not a (inaudible); we have a quiet room; take them to the break room or the quiet room, let them get themselves together because they're initiating the bullying. And I have the other student, they like to step outside also just to get themself together. And now we try to de-escalate by talking, offering options, offering the student options, trying to remove the uh the cause of the situation.

Jerrell - Teachers' Heart Theme: Care; Greater purpose

Response: (referencing a bullying incident) (notes of the incident intentionally not inserted)… Again, like I said, that was a difficult one because for the first time, the whole class was moved by, or, or, the whole class was bullied; the whole class was bullied; they were bullied into doing something that they didn't want to do. And it was nothing that could be said about him at the current time. And, for the moment, the kid had authority. Um, in the moment, um, I felt powerless for the A students, so, um, and I felt that, um, I had let them down as an educator, as a protector. They should've been able to receive what they had. In retrospect, we probably should've moved the other kids, um, but yea… you know, had to go back to the drawing board and get some more knowledge. Um, speak to one of my colleagues. Um, meeting of other minds after work; probably one of those days I left work about 4:30 or something. Come up with a plan before, you know, like I said, we decided to take them out two at a time; and they could get it in like that, um; or they wouldn't have that fear, um, of someone telling them they shouldn't be able to enjoy a snack. They were participating, you know.

Krystal – Teachers' Heart Theme: Care; Assistance

Response: I've seen, I've seen a couple of times where they're, um , bullying has been the root of their behavior in a not positive way. Or, and I've seen also where it affects their self-esteem or it makes them feel like they're less than a person, and that they're not important just because; because they're being bullied. Because, like I said, it's more like I said there's a belonging and you're not getting it like from the person they want to hang out with or, you know, their peers, like, you know, like… I'm in a different classroom, but I'm a teen just like you trying to figure it out.

Marlotte - Teachers' Heart Theme: Care; Greater purpose

Response: Um, I'm one of those people that always joke with my students, and I'm like, cause they're like you're not my mom; I'm like, well I'm the closest one you have here from 7-2, so (laughter) um, I take it personally. I guess it can get me a little irritated. Moreso, more angry than irritated when it happens. So, maybe a lil defensive (laughter).

Otani – Teachers' Heart Theme: Positive role model; Care; Assistance

Response: (teaching responsibility) I'm not just cleaning up behind you; that's not what we're gonna do, okay, because you made this mess… because you wanted to throw a tantrum… because you wasn't getting your way. Um, we're not cleaning up behind you. You made the mess, you're gonna clean it up. Take Responsibility.

…because we talk a lot about ownership in our classroom. Okay, and so, at the end of the day, you have to own up for where you are. Okay, you have to take ownership for how your day is going; you have to take ownership for why you didn't make your goal today; you have to take ownership for how your day ended up; you have to own up to those things.

8. Staff/Student Relationship Themes: Protective, Caring Parent   Mutual Respect and Honesty   Communication and Trust

Protective, Caring Parent	Mutual Respect and Honesty	Communication and Trust
Teacher jokingly says she is their mom from 7-2	I didn't make a good decision. Student informs that they messed up and will correct it	Come with a mind to be successful and do the work
Takes bullying her students seriously		Holds the student accountable for how he/she embraces the school day
I love my kids		Student confides in teacher; teacher responds with inspiration and encouragement
Reminding the student that I'm here if he/she needs me when it gets too tough to handle		Confess when they mess up

1. **Some teachers have established mutual respect and trust with their students, which is easier in some settings.**
2. **Teachers ensure students that they will protect them and demonstrate love for their students. In return, students display less bullying activities and demonstrate self-awareness of how they approach the school day, the teacher, and their classroom peers.**

Marlotte - Staff/Student Relationship Themes: Mutual respect and honest; Protect caring parent

Response: So, I guess, I have a range of moments. I have those flashes of momma bear, um, and I'm like look either you can fix the problem, or I can get somebody to cover my classroom and I can sit in here for the class next time because when the kid does it, I guarantee it I will address the problem. Only because um, most of it does occur with one particular student, and it's kind of like, I told him, I said you know, I can stick up for you when you're here, and your mom can

stick up for you when you're home, but eventually you have to say something and defend yourself; you gotta say something, like, at least stop doing that; you know, something. So, there is times where I'd there and I'd hear, you know, I'd hear him make the noise. And, I'm like, did you say anything? And, he'll be like, no. Like, did you say anything? No. Next day. Do I need to go with you to class? He be like, if I need you, will you be here? I will always be here if you need me, but I want you to stand up for yourself. He finally stood up in the middle of class: I told you I don't like that noise!

But, I like that I've gotten to the point with them where I don't need the staff to tell me. Even if they made a mistake in the other room or made a bad choice, the first thing I hear when they come through that door is Ms. Sam, I did not make a good choice. I'm just letting you know. I'll be honest when I do my points. I'm gonna go get it back together. I'm like, okay. Like they, so, if something's happening, they'll tell me

Otani - Staff/Student Relationship Themes: Communicate and trust

Response: The child, the child, the child was pretty defiant. The child kind of… the only way that the child knows to respond is to put on this hardness kind of… and this has been the child all of the child's life. Um, before I got there, and so, but the child was able to break down to me and really confess. And um, and I kinda let the child know that you don't need other people to define who you are.

Individual Interview Summaries

Pseudo-names were assigned to each participant. The interview process began in February and ended in April. Due to Covid-19, all interviews were conducted through Zoom and lasted 15-20 minutes. The first to interview was Jamell and the last to interview were Krashauna and Jerrell in April who contacted by email on the same day. With each participant, many

interview sub-questions were answered while responding to the two structured questions. Note that responses to questions of perception are according to each individuals' interpretation of perception. These are individually analyzed responses of the interview questions to answer the research questions. The interview summaries are statements of the participants, as Sutton & Austin (2015) suggest for presentation of data. The following relevant headings were constructed during analyzation, which are recycled from interview questions, except numbers seven and eight: 1) Perception of Bullying; 2) Perception of Bulling Special Education Students; 3) Perception of Alternative Middle School Settings; 4) When and How Staff Intervenes; 5) Frequency that Staff Intervenes; 6) Cognitive Triangle; 7) Staff Hearts; and 8) Staff/Student Relationships.

Dominique

In summary, Dominique perceives bullying as a negative act that entails ostracizing students, making them feel badly about themselves and not good enough, and to feel like their possessions, such as shoes and clothes, are not good enough. Dominique refers to cyberbullying as a subtle cue that has changed the dynamics of bullying from times past and is easily overlooked as bullying. Bullying special education students leaves a negative impact on the students. Even when the student does not perceive bullying, the student is negatively impacted for the way the activity is experienced by the student. Dominique perceives that the alternative middle school setting has more pros than cons at a ratio of 60/40. She expressed that staff support and teamwork contributes to low bullying incidences.

Dominique explained that she intervenes with bullying activity 75% of occurrences, but thoroughly explains why it is not more frequently. Dominique's students are not cognitively capable of identifying bullying behavior. Therefore, when her students are bullied and are not

aware, Dominique feels that intervening or correcting the general education student would defeat the purpose. Since the students are only integrated during physical education (PE), she feels that 25% of occurrences are not worth addressing. However, when she sees any of her students in that situation, even if they are unaware of the bullying situation, Dominique is saddened. She simply walks her student away from the bully and verbally check-in with her student concerning their well-being. It is frustrating and saddening to Dominique when one of her students shuts down socially, does not want to come to school, and feels uncomfortable in school due to others not wanting to include them in activities. However, those students are reacting out of fear from previously seeing the special education student have meltdowns, not due to intentional bullying. The end result is Dominque's care for her students and her desire to prevent emotional meltdowns motivates Dominique to intervene when her students are in perceived bullied situations.

Jamell

In summary, this participant made it clear that he does not tolerate bullying and intervenes 80-90% of the time that he observes bullying. He perceives bullying as teasing others because of deficiencies. He shared that he was bullied during middle school and can relate to how youth might feel today when bullied. He recalled feeling that he had no one to turn to when he was bullied and is concerned that today's youth might feel the same way. Yet, he approaches bullies gently because he feels that they bully because they are currently or have been bullied by others. He believes that the alternative middle school has bullies because those individuals were initially bullied in traditional schools and in the community. Therefore, he does not hold bullying activities against bullies. Jamell's previous experiences of being bullied influences his decision to intervene when observing bullying. He also explains that intervening quickly

prevents other students from following or mimicking the bully and making the situation worse. When he observes bullying, he calmly intervenes and removes the bully from the room. In summary, Jamell gets frustrated and mad when he observes bullying, thinks of how the bullied student may feel, and reacts according.

Jerrell

In summary, Jerrell's perception of bullying is that it is very unfortunate and is used to deter students from accomplishments. Jerrell's program consist of all special education students, which means special education students bullying other special education students for similar differences or by talking about one's disability when the bully has the same disability. Jerrell perceives bullies as attempting to make others feel inferior, trying to bring others down to their level because they feel unvalued, and attempting to impart their will upon others. In his setting, more bullying incidents are observed ranging from eating others' snacks to fights. Jerrell expressed that the alternative middle school setting is intriguing with an intriguing age group becoming aware of their surroundings.

Jerrell described a bullying incident whereas one student bullied the entire class, including teachers. The teachers began removing students from the classroom two at a time to be away from the bully and to allow time to enjoy their earned reward. Jerrell mentioned that he felt powerless and helpless because he could not stop the bullying behavior. Thus, the thought of what he could do to protect the students was a critical moment for him. This resulted with removing the students instead of physically removing the bully. Jerrell stated that he currently intervenes during bullying activities immediately 90% of the time, especially when he perceives emotional distress, safety issues, or disengagement of other students. He expressed that bullying should be interrupted when it is first observed or perceived.

Katrina

In summary, Katrina's perception of bullying is that bullying occurs daily at her location and she sees how it affects the students. Her concern is that often it is special education students bullying special education students. Katrina's student population consists of students with emotional disability, who are likely to display bullying. Katrina intervenes most of the time because students are there to learn, not to be bullied, and she does not want learning disrupted. Katrina does not intervene during bullying incidences she feels are attention seeking and states that withholding attention during those times eliminates the behavior. Katrina's form of intervening is contingent upon the perceived severity of bullying. For example, during minor incidences of students talking about students, she intervenes verbally, if she deems it necessary. However, during extreme incidences, such as students yelling racial slurs at another student, she separates the students by removing one of them from the room. Collectively, during minor and extreme incidences, Katrina intervenes about 90% of the time. When she does not intervene, she is too fed up to respond. However, if she is simply upset and/or angry, she considers that students are there to learn, and makes the decision to interrupt the bullying behavior.

Krashauna

In summary, Krashauna perceives bullying as picking on an individual and states that special education students are teased due to clothing, shoes, and intellect. Krashauna perceives bullying special education students as belittling students' intelligence when they are unable to answer questions correctly. Taunting during bullying includes openly proclaiming that the bully could answer that question and calling the bullied student dumb or stupid. For Krashauna, it is challenging to keep special education students engaged in learning in the alternative setting because of the 90 minute class time. Most bullying observed by Krashauna is picking on a

student who is often dirty and smelly. She attends to the student by taking him for a walk to de-escalate, and she removes the bully to ask what if he/she was in the unclean student's shoes. She did not express any particular thoughts before intervening but stated that emotionally it hurts and is heartbreaking.

Krystal

In summary, Krystal perceives bullying as unacceptable on all levels and does not like the behavior. She feels that people bully when they do not understand someone's differences. Therefore, in response to not understanding and possibly fearing what they do not understand, bullying becomes the response, especially when it is general education students not understanding special education students. Krystal becomes angry, sometimes furious, when a general education student bullies her special education student. She first observes the behavior to assure and confirm that she is assessing accurately. Then, she takes a few deep breaths to de-escalate before removing the bully. She explains to the bully that they or a family member could be in her students' shoes. She also highlights that it is not okay to bully others simply because they do not appear to be normal. She hopes it encourages the bullying student to self-reflect and choose not to bully others perceived as different. Still, Krystal states that her motivation to intervene is not emotionally driven but is driven by thoughts and morals. Morally, Krystal cannot observe bullying and not say something. Krystal did not give a percentage of frequency of intervening, but she stated that she intervenes more often than not. Additionally, when she does not intervene, she asks another responsible party to do so. Therefore, she feels she intervenes 100% of the time either directly or indirectly. As for the alternative middle school setting in which she works, Krystal feels that students' success depends on the students'

openness to communicate and work through whatever behavior got them there, not the school itself.

Marlotte

In summary, Marlotte's perception of bullying is that it is discreet and can be missed if not paying attention or being mindful of what bullying looks like. She perceives that bullying, when it does occur, is general education students bullying special education students in subtle ways. Marlotte does not observe much bullying at her school. General education and special education students integrate only on the buses and rarely during specific subjects, which is when bullying occurs. Marlotte's frustration is that general education teachers in the integrated classrooms do not intervene when special education students are bullied. Marlotte feels that the general education teachers are not aware of what different, especially subtle, forms of bullying look like, which leaves her students exposed to dealing with bullying activities. A subtle form of bullying discussed consists of verbally teasing students to intentionally get a particular negative reaction when they cannot answer a question at the board. Another example is making clicking noises with one's mouth knowing that the sound irritates a special education student.

Marlotte shared her definition of bullying to describe how her example demonstrates bullying. According to Marlotte, bullying is doing something to purposely embarrass someone or to make someone feel badly about themselves. She perceives physical altercations are considered typical bullying, which is not an issue with her special education students. Name calling is another form of which her students are not subjected. Thus, her students have been subjected only to subtle incidences of bullying that Marlotte still considers unacceptable. Marlotte feels that students do not attend school to be made to feel bad or unsafe; thus, she is protective of her students and is motivated to intervene. Marlotte stated that she intervenes about

25% of the time because she is educating and encouraging her students to speak up for themselves.

In connection to the Cognitive Triangle, Marlotte is irritated and angry when her students are bullied because she considers herself a mother figure to them. Her emotions cause her to wonder why the general education teacher does not react. She has entertained thoughts of having another staff cover her classroom so she can monitor her students who transition to the other classroom. However, Marlotte reacts by discussing the matter with the general education teacher instead of approaching a general education student who is not on her roster. Consequently, the behavior of having to ask another teacher to acknowledge bullying and to react to bullying irritates Marlotte even more.

Otani

In summary, though Otani has been employed at her site for merely five months, I still found it conducive to this study to interview her. This shows if there is a difference with perception of seasoned staff and fairly new staff. Otani observes targeting behaviors, such as name calling and saying demeaning things, on a daily basis. Otani consoles students by explaining that bullies only bully to feel good about themselves and hopes the statement keeps bullied students from taking the bullying personally. Otani's perception of bullying is singling out individuals, targeting them by any means including sexually, saying demeaning things about them, making them feel bad about themselves, and making them feel uncomfortable. Otani highlighted the difficulty of some special education students to defend themselves against bullying, so they lash out and have meltdowns. She also highlights that some are not aware when they are bullied. Otani did not express emotions to bullying, but she does not agree with the behavior and wants students to understand how others feel when bullied. Therefore, she

intervenes verbally by painting the picture for students to see themselves in the bullied students'

position and to take responsibility for their actions. No frequency of intervening was established,

but she stated that she intervenes whenever she perceives bullying is even about to occur. Lastly,

she feels that the alternative middle school setting is a place to nurture and care for students.

Group Forum

The group forum did not occur due to staff lack of attendance. During the first contact to

schedule the group forum, none of the teachers responded. During the second contact to

schedule the group forum, only one teacher, Krashauna, replied and stated her inability to attend.

Jamell later replied with an apology that he had not checked his email. During the third attempt,

the Zoom meeting was scheduled, invitations were sent to each participant, and an email was

sent with an explanation for the invitation and a plea to accept and attend. Two participants,

Marlotte and Otani, accepted the Zoom invitation, but no one showed up for the group forum.

Summary of Findings

In the search to know alternative middle school teachers' perceptions of and motivations

to intervene in bullying of special education students and to understand and interpret the meaning

of their language, this qualitative phenomenological study was conducted with careful study and

documentation of the data obtained. Theoretically, pursuing the presence of the Cognitive

Triangle when observing bullying activities is also observed in this study. The hermeneutic

circle was employed to analyze the data while bracketing and using my unbiased interpretation

and mind's eye to organize the data to make it plain to even a minimalistic reader. The

following highlights the collective findings of each section.

Perception of Bullying

The participants' perceptions of bullying special education students in the differing alternative middle school settings is that bullying is often visible as targeting and taunting with occasional physical aggression. Teachers perceive the purpose of most bullying is to lower students' self-esteem by causing them to feel badly about their differences and intellect. The teachers proclaim that bullying behaviors are unacceptable on any level and is not tolerated in their classrooms most of the time. I said 'most of the time' because some teachers stated that they will not intervene if the bullying behaviors are attention seeking or if the bullying does not distract or gain attention from other students.

Perception of Bullying Special Education Students

Most bullying incidences are between special education students in these settings because interactions with general education students are strongly limited. Teachers address these behaviors among special education students gently with the mindset that they do not fully understand bullying nor the negative effects of bullying.

Overall, four out of eight teachers suggest that bullying incidents are between two special education students. Two of eight teachers suggest that bullying incidents are primarily general education students bullying special education students on the rare occasions that they interact. One of eight teachers state that they equally observe general education students bullying special education students and special education students bullying special education students. Lastly, one teacher reports the biggest concern being taunting special education students.

Perception of Alternative Middle School

Four of the eight teachers noted that the alternative middle school structure is conducive to lessening bullying activities. Transitioning in a single file through the hallways while refraining from communication and contact with oncoming students eliminates the opportunity for negative behaviors, including bullying, in the hallways. Also, staff noted that minimal contact with non-disabled peers in the general education settings limits opportunities for bullying to occur. Furthermore, the staff to student ratio supports limiting bullying behaviors from special education students to special education students. Teachers also state that staff support, and the ability to obtain assistance through walkie talkies as needed encourages positive classroom atmospheres and behaviors. Therefore, staff can focus on being positive role models and emotional support for students.

There are a few challenges to the alternative middle school structure. To begin with, the opportunity to speak with a student one-on-one is difficult because someone is always around. Since someone is always around, students always have an audience when they have meltdowns, which leads to other students teasing and shunning the individual. A student with Autism Spectrum Disorder may not understand why they are teased or shunned for meltdowns they could not control. This creates a cycle that causes the student to meltdown even more. Lastly, it is challenging to keep special education students engaged in learning during 90 minute increments of class periods.

Two teachers focused more on students being conscious of themselves in the alternative middle school setting. One of the two suggests that the efficacy of the alternative middle school is determined by the student's willingness to be receptive of the program and their ability to openly communicate their emotions with staff. The other teacher suggests that setting is

intriguing because middle school teachers are in a position to assist students as they enter puberty and are figuring out who they are. He implies that the alternative middle school structure supports aiding students as they grow and change.

Frequency Intervening Bullying

One teacher intervenes 100% of occurrences. Two teachers intervene 90% of occurrences. One teacher intervenes 80-90% of the time. One teacher intervenes about 75% of occurrences. One teacher intervenes about 25% of occurrences. One teacher replied intervening more than not intervening without giving a percentage. Lastly, one teacher did not give a response but indirectly answered the question with an example of a student bullying a peer. However, the teacher stated definitely intervening during a physical altercation.

When and How Staff Intervenes

Since staff is aware that some students are not aware when eliciting bullying behaviors, staff choose to inform and educate the bully. Teachers use the incidents as teachable moments to invoke thinking and better decision making. Teachers hope for deeper thinking on how one would not appreciate being bullied in the same manner and for the same reasons that the bully is bullying. One teacher calls this the "eye opener moment"; another deems it hold students accountable for their actions. The teacher hopes that once students emotionally identify how they would feel if they were bullied, the student will stop the behaviors, even if not permanently.

Most teachers acknowledge that their usual form of intervening is to remove the bully from the classroom to have separate one-on-one conversations to encourage eliminating the behavior. Staff also remove the bullied student from the room to give the student the opportunity

to escape the embarrassment of being bullied, to de-escalate, to walk off the negative emotions, to take some breaths, and to mentally and emotionally be prepared to return to the classroom.

Most staff, five out of eight, intervene immediately when bullying occurs or is perceived to begin. However, two teachers stated not intervening when they perceive the behavior as attention seeking. They suggest that withholding attention from the attention seeking behavior causes the behavior to be short lived. In other words, when the attention the student is seeking is not given, the student discontinues the behavior. One staff stated that she will intervene if she perceives that the activity will draw attention from other students. If so, bullying is addressed immediately. Otherwise, it may not be necessary to address the behavior.

Cognitive Triangle

The Cognitive Triangle is used to show if teachers experience emotions when observing bullying of special education students. Next, does thought processes or behaviors follow the emotion? The occurrences can function in any order, such as the teacher reacting to bullying first then thinking about their reaction and experiencing emotions after the thought. According to Table 2, six teachers first experienced an emotion that triggered thoughts, and the thoughts triggered responses. Otani's reaction to observing bullying of special education students began with thoughts that led to actions. She focused more on rationalizing with students, getting them to think about their actions and the effects of their actions. Krashauna, however, progressed from emotion to action without thought mentioned.

Teachers' Hearts

Six of the eight teachers included sentiment in the interviews of sincerely caring for their students as human beings. They implied care for their students' well-being inside and outside of

school. One teacher discussed possibly being the only attention and love that their students receive. Another teacher is concerned about protecting his students in the classroom, even if it is from each other. Teachers care about the students' emotional, mental, and physical health. Some of the teachers directly stated that they love their students. Their love, care, and consideration encourages their frequency of intervening during bullying incidences. These teachers focus on being positive role models for the students while acknowledging their positions as having a greater purpose than education, academics, and behaviors.

Staff/Student Relationships

This section is last because only two teachers shared information on relationships with their students. Evidence of teachers seeing their positions as more than teachers are apparent when students are openly honest with teachers and trust teachers to be open and honest with them. It is not often that students tell on themselves when they do something unfavorable out of their teacher's presence. However, some of those students inform their teachers when they have misbehaved out of the classroom, and they trust that their teacher will respond appropriately and still love them. One teacher ensures that her students know that she is present for them by telling them she is their protective momma bear. One of these teachers focus on preparing their students for life outside of alternative school. She holds them accountable for their actions and calmly explains and reasons with her students concerning their behaviors. Her students listen to her and gain insight into managing their behaviors, which shapes them for the real world.

Answering the Research Questions

RQ1: *What are teachers' thoughts, perceptions, and reactions when witnessing special education students bullied in alternative middle school settings?*

The alternative middle school teachers in this study indicate that bullying special education students in their settings is unacceptable and not tolerated at any time. The exception is two teachers who do not intervene when perceiving attention seeking behaviors. However, they intervene most of the time when it is not attention seeking. This group of eight teachers have mixed emotions ranging from mad, sad, angry, and frustrated, to furious when they observe bullying of their special needs students. All except one teacher stated experiencing one or more emotion. Therefore, most reactions to bullying special education students are teachers intervening, even if it is perceived that bullying is about to happen.

RQ2: *What factors contribute to teachers' decisions to intervene or to not intervene during bullying activities toward special education students in alternative middle school settings?*

With this group of eight teachers, they intervene due to:

1. **Care and consideration for their students** - Teachers intervene because they care for their students' everyday well-being

2. **Moral judgment that bullying is not right** - Teachers who feel that bullying is not right or accepted tend to intervene regardless of an emotional attachment

3. **Seeing their students as human beings who deserve to be treated right** - Teachers intervene because they realize that their students are human and deserve to be treated like they matter regardless of students' disabilities and limitations

4. **Thoughts of how their student feels emotionally when bullied** - Teacher considers students' feelings when being bullied and makes decisions to intervene

5. **Wanting to teach their students to make good decisions** - Teachers intervene to use bullying as teachable moments to encourage bullies to choose not to bully

6. **Preparing their students for life outside of alternative school** - Some teachers intervene to prepare their special education students for life outside of school, to teach them how to respond to and not accept bullying, to instill advocating for themselves, and for bullies to eliminate bullying behaviors

7. **Obligation to safeguard and protect** - Teachers are protective of their students and make safety a priority

8. **Preventing emotional meltdowns** - Teachers intervene to prevent their special education students from having meltdowns to prevent non-disabled students from bullying them and/or shying away from them out of fear or lack of understanding

9. **To prevent low self-esteem** - Teachers intervene to prevent students from developing low self-esteem and to feel valued

10. **For students to feel better about themselves** - Teachers intervene because they want special education students to feel better about themselves instead of looking down on themselves and not feeling good enough

11. **For students to know that the teachers care for them** - Teachers intervene because they want their special education students to know that someone cares for them because teachers feel that some students may not experience that level of care outside of school

12. **Teachers feel that their job has a greater purpose than teaching** - Teachers intervene because they feel their jobs have a greater purpose than teaching, as one teacher calls her job ministry and another feels she is a momma bear looking after her students

As for the Cognitive Triangle, Table 2 shows that the components of this theory are active during observations of bullying and is a factor in determining if these participants intervene in bullying activity of special education youth in the alternative middle school setting.

Summary

Chapter four consists of pre-analysis and the data analysis process from beginning to end as follows. Firstly, pre-analysis, or data collection and transcribing, consisted of contacting participants, accepting them as participants, conducting recorded individual interviews, and transcribing the recorded interviews to use for data analysis. The group forum originally planned did not occur due to participants' lack of attendance. The pre-analysis process lasted for two months.

Secondly, the data analysis process began with reading and rereading the transcripts and listening to the audio recordings of the interviews. Information that was repetitive or similar among the participants was bolded in the transcripts and participants were assigned colors to identify which participant delivered the statements. Details were then color coded; thus, coding similar statements, words, and phrases. Themes were becoming visible during coding, but coding was first condensed and categories began to surface. Categories and themes were formed. Headings that derived from the interview questions were used, and the themes were placed under the headings for structure. Lastly, data findings were interpreted and reflected upon.

Finally, the entire process from contacting prospective participants to this final of step of documenting research findings was recorded. Following reflection of the data and research findings, detailed descriptions of the process were documented within chapter four. Table 1 was inserted to show participants pseudo-names, their school's pseudonyms, and professional years working in the alternative school settings. Table 2 was inserted to show the workings of the Cognitive Triangle within each participant when observing bullying. A diagram was inserted to show the flow of the Cognitive Triangle and that the participants' perceptions are connected.

Finally, the findings of the study are recorded as well as the connection between the participants'

perception and the components, emotion, thought, and behavior, of the Cognitive Triangle.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to know alternative middle school teachers' perceptions of bullying and their motivation to intervene. During the research, data on the frequency that teachers intervene was also recorded. Data was also collected to know how teachers intervene. A major part of the study is also to know how the Cognitive Triangle is experienced when observing bullying of special education students and if the theory impacts the decision to intervene. Ten individual interviews were conducted, but only eight are used for data analysis. Data from the eight participants was analyzed using the hermeneutic circle and the findings were documented.

Discussion

Bullying is prevalent in schools throughout the world and has much research discussing its details, but not much research exists on bullying special education students particularly in alternative middle school settings. Also, little research examines teachers' perceptions of bullying particularly of special education students in alternative middle school settings. An overwhelming amount of research exists on bullying in general, teachers' perceptions of bullying in general, types of bullying interventions and anti-bullying programs, as well as the prevalence of bullying across the world. Additionally, much research exists on teachers' relationships with students who become bullies. For this study, research of existing data began in 2019; still, few articles exist as of 2022 pertaining to this specific study's dynamics.

This qualitative phenomenological study examined eight alternative middle school teachers' perceptions of bullying, perceptions of bullying special education students, and

perceptions of their alternative middle school settings. This study also examined the teachers' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors when they observed bullying of special education students. To examine these phenomena, two interview questions were comprised: 1) What is your perception of bullying, bullying special education students, and the alternative middle school setting; 2) What thoughts, feeling, and behaviors have been activated while observing bullying of special education students? Thirteen sub-questions were constructed but only asked if more data was needed to thoroughly answer the research questions.

These examinations were to answer two research questions: **RQ1:** What are teachers' thoughts, perceptions, and reactions when witnessing special education students bullied in alternative middle school settings? **RQ2:** What factors contribute to teachers' decisions to intervene or to not intervene during bullying activities toward special education students in alternative middle school settings?

Let me begin with discussing the three areas of perceptions addressed in this study. This study found that individual perceptions collectively resounded that bullying is negative, inappropriate behavior, and should not happen. Teachers also expressed perceiving bullying as harmful, as used to make student peers feel inferior to others or to feel bad about themselves, and as unacceptable behaviors. According to the teachers, most bullying observed include verbal bullying with demeaning words and relational bullying of excluding students from activities. The teachers suggested little to no incidents of physical bullying. However, two teachers stated not addressing bullying on occasions when bullying is perceived as attention-seeking behaviors. Yet, Bell & Willis (2016) note that whichever form of bullying is observed needs to be addressed by teachers, even if it appears to be minor. These researchers highlight that the bullying incident may appear minor but may have serious implications of the bullied student. Agreeably, Rosen et

al., (2017) note that any bullying is a form of aggressive behavior, regardless of the type or intensity. These two studies suggest that teachers are to understand bullying as bullying and to intervene not according to perceived levels or harm of bullying. Rosen's study questioned teachers' perceptions of bullying and found that most teachers in their focus group perceived bullying as physical aggression and ignored other forms of bullying.

While examining the eight teachers' emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, six teachers experienced emotions which led to thoughts and ended with behaviors of intervening to stop bullying. Yet, one teacher's process started with emotions and went straight to intervening. On the other hand, another teacher did not express or identify any emotion but started with thought and progressed to the behavior of intervening. I did not find past or current research linking the Cognitive Triangle's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to teachers' perceptions in the areas of this study. This creates an avenue for more studies within this context.

The beauty of this study is that it revealed that positive, trusted teacher/student relationships among these teachers encourage intervening during bullying incidences. As previously stated, other research focuses on students becoming bullies due to unhealthy teacher/student relationship. Of most recent studies, Berchiatti et al., (2021) conducted such research and found that those bullies are produced from negative student/teacher relationships. Knowing any aspects of what produces bullies increases the chance of changing the trajectory of producing bullies, which is pertinent information to possess. Though Berchiatti's research is significant and provides meaningful data, my research compels me to further seek the importance of positive teacher/student relationships that focus on vulnerable populations that are prone to bullying and what helps them to experience safety and security in alternative middle school settings.

Research question one was answered using the Cognitive Triangle and the teachers' expressions of their care for their students. Again, no studies were found using the Cognitive Triangle to identify if emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of teachers when observing bullying, but studies exist on the impact of teachers' care, or lack thereof, producing bullies. Research question two listed 12 reasons why the teachers in this study intervened during bullying of special education students in their alternative middle school settings. Those reasons are listed in the previous chapter. However, their reasons are not applicable to teachers in other settings, whether alternative or traditional. The alternative school setting is vastly different than the traditional school setting, as noted in chapter one of this study. Moreover, not all alternative school settings are alike, though they have many similarities. As with other parts of this study, little research exists on studying reasons why teachers in alternative middle schools intervene or do not intervene when bullying occurs. However, Deluca et al., (2019) conducted a study on teachers intervening during bullying. An interesting concept uncovered found that teachers intervene more often during bullying incidences whey they are confident in their ability to intervene. This interests me because I have wondered if teachers' confidence is a factor. Yet, confidence does not appear to be a factor with the teachers in this study as some of them mentioned yearly training in bullying every October.

To sum up discussion, this study is a trailblazer in addressing teachers' perceptions of bullying special education students, teachers' perceptions of alternative middle school settings, as well as teachers' perceptions of bullying special education students in alternative middle school settings, and the impact of the Cognitive Triangle when teachers observe special education students bullied in alternative middle school settings. It will be interesting to follow

other studies produced from this research and taken to another level. Lastly, it will be interesting to see this research conducted using a quantitative method of analysis.

Theoretical Implications

Using the Cognitive Triangle from Aaron Beck's Cognitive Behavioral Theory, this theoretical implication is that the components of the Cognitive Triangle are experienced by teachers as they observe special education students being bullied in alternative middle school settings. The components consist of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, and may be experienced in no particular order, as seen in this study. One of the participants did not express an emotion but had thoughts and actions. Another participant did not express thoughts but experienced emotions and actions. Experiencing the components of the Cognitive Triangle can be experienced when observing positive and negative phenomena. In closing, insight into the workings of the Cognitive Triangle in this study connects teachers' perceptions when experiencing the phenomena to the Cognitive Triangle.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations associated with this research includes participants at least age 21 to indicate a level of maturity and insight needed for such a serious topic. The participant is required to be a teacher or teacher assistant because students are in their presence and care the majority of the school day, with the exception of sending students to integrated classes for certain subjects in some settings. Also, participants must teach at an alternative middle school. No data was gathered or needed from general education settings. For the sake of possibly observing bullying more than once, the participant is required to have worked in the alternative middle school setting for a year. There is one exception in this study who was employed five months but have

observed bullying on several occasions and shared usable data. Lastly, the participant must have

observed bullying, which is the basis of determining whether or not to intervene.

The participants of this research all volunteered from a single school district, therefore

the results are not applicable to other districts' alternative middle schools. The framework and

training on bullying prevention and anti-bullying strategies of this school district may not reflect

the framework and training on bullying as other districts in that state nor other states.

Additionally, the findings cannot be applicable to alternative high schools in the same school

district because of the different age groups. Moreover, findings are not applicable to general

education populations nor private schools because dynamics and structure differ. Lastly, due to

Covid-19, interviews were conducted on Zoom versus face-to-face. While one cannot suggest

with certainty that the interview or data collected would have resulted different findings if

conducted face-to-face, one cannot suggest with certainty that the interview or data collected

would not have resulted different findings. The inability to conduct classroom observations prior

to interviews may also be considered a limitation.

Recommendations

Firstly, I recommend repeating this study with the same school district, but it might yield

different result if one definition of perception is clarified at the beginning of the interview.

Though I appreciate the participants differing perspectives of perception, the concept is too

broad. Secondly, I recommend rewording some of the interview questions for clarity. During

interviewing, two participants asked for clarity on two different questions. Now, this study was

conducted with the assumption that the participants had a clear definition of bullying. In

repeating this study, I recommend giving a clear definition of bullying prior to interviewing. For

the sake of clarity for the researcher, I recommend asking more follow-up questions for unclear

responses. Moreover, it is recommend to narrow the focus of the interview question to obtain responses only geared to the research questions to eliminate or shorten the process of ridding unnecessary data not conducive to addressing the research questions. Lastly, conduct classroom observations when using differing sites or locations to have a first-hand account of the different dynamics and on-site workings of the classrooms and staff. This may adhere deeper insight into which interview questions would yield the best results according to each setting. Though these participants are in the same school district, it is not a one size fits all.

Future Research

Since bullying is a phenomenon that occurs daily in schools throughout the world, repetition of this study could prove beneficial in alternative middle schools settings wherever they exist throughout the world, not just within the United States. There are also alternative high school settings where it could prove beneficial to repeat this study in the same school district and throughout the world. Repeating this study in differing geographical areas, such as rural, suburban, and urban regions, may give insight into differences in acceptance or unacceptance of bullying behaviors and differences of intervening. Moreover, using a quantitative method could also prove beneficial to research.

Also, instead of using teachers, it would be interesting to include support staff and administrators who could offer a different perspective of bullying and intervening, especially since all are responsible for addressing bullying. How often do they observe and intervene during bullying incidences. In a differing aspect, curiosity has me wondering how administrators respond to reports of bullying and how often teachers report bullying incidents. Is bullying ever reported to administrators? Is bullying reported only if it yields a serious outcome? Future studies could yield significant findings to these questions.

Summary

Overall, this study was constructed to see responses from a small group of eight teachers in alternative middle school settings who have observed bullying of special education students with whom they work. To know these teachers perceptions when observing bullying and to know what motivates them to intervene or to not intervene, two research questions were posed, and the Cognitive Triangle was implemented in this study to know if and how emotions, thoughts, and behaviors impacted their perceptions and influenced their decisions to intervene.

The manuscript began with outlining the purpose and importance of the research, a clear definition of bullying, the research questions to be answered, the related existing literature, and the proposed method of data analysis. Research of existing literature was conducted to know and understand other researchers' works and insights of bullying, bullying in alternative school settings, teachers' perceptions and responses to bullying, frequency and prevalence of bullying, protective laws for the special education population, teachers' responsibilities during bullying incidents, and the Cognitive Triangle and its impact.

The qualitative phenomenological approach was selected to guide the study, and the hermeneutic circle was implemented for data analysis. Teachers were interviewed to gather their knowledge of and insight into their perceptions. The hermeneutic circle allowed me to use verbatim statements of the participants and to organize and extract meaning and language of their statements. Data analysis was conducted thoroughly and ethically, and research questions were answered with integrity through findings of the research.

After concluding and documenting the study's findings, the final write-ups were completed. Firstly, there is a detailed discussion of the study relatability to previous studies and examines if this study and previous studies share like or differing findings. Next, the theoretical

implications of the Cognitive Triangle's presence and impact are noted as existing when the

eight teachers in this study encounter bullying of special education students in their alternative

middle school settings. Then, delimitations and limitations that could have possibly affected the

outcome of the findings are noted, and recommendations to possibly offset those delimitations

and limitations are also noted. Lastly, several future research suggestions are posed to repeat this

study, and to design and conduct similar studies and/or other research related to this study. Since

bullying is prevalent in schools worldwide, exists in every population of students, and continues

to have negative, sometimes fatal, impacts on youth, further research to me is necessary.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Date: 11-18-2021

IRB #: IRB-FY20-21-581
Title: Middle School Staffs' Perceptions of Bullying and Traumatization of Special Education Students in an Alternative School Setting
Creation Date: 2-7-2021
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Marlene Williams
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Limited	Decision	Exempt - Limited IRB

Key Study Contacts

Member	Daniel Marston	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	
Member	Marlene Williams	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	
Member	Marlene Williams	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	

APPENDIX B – RECRUITEMENT DOCUMENT

November 10, 2021

[Teacher's Name]
[School District]
[Email Address]

Dear prospective participants,

As a graduate student in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand teachers' perceptions of bullying special education students and what influences teachers to intervene. The purpose of the study is for completing a doctoral degree. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be at least 18 years of age, have at least one year of experience, must be general education or special education teachers or full-time teacher assistants working in alternative middle schools, teachers of special education students in that setting, and have observed bullying of special education students in that setting. Participants, if willing, will be asked to join me on WebEx for audio- and video-recorded individual interviews to answer semi-structured questions, as well as sub-questions if needed, and lastly, to participate in an audio- and video-recorded WebEx group forum with all participants to respond to only one semi-structured question. It will take approximately 30-60 minutes to interview each participant and approximately one hour for the group forum. As I transcribe and analyze the data, I will contact participants to confirm its accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at Email Address Removed to schedule an interview.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, please sign the consent form physically or by typing your name and return it to the email prior to your interview. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

Sincerely,

Marlene Williams
Doctoral Student at Liberty University
Phone Number Removed

APPENDIX C – INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consent

Title of the Project: Middle School Staffs' Perception of Bullying and Traumatization of Special Education Students in an Alternative School Setting

Principal Investigator: Marlene Williams, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be at least 18 years of age, have at least one year of experience, must be general education or special education teachers or full-time teacher assistants working in alternative middle schools, teachers of special education students in that setting, and have observed bullying of special education students in that setting. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to know and understand teachers' perception of student bullying of special education students in alternative middle schools and to know what influences teachers' decisions to intervene. Directly knowing teachers' perceptions and what influences decisions to intervene will help administrators understand how to assist teachers dealing with bullying. In addition, administrators supporting teachers may increase the likelihood of teachers' willingness to intervene, decrease bullying incidents, and spare many youths from traumatization, failing school, stress, maladaptive behaviors, suicide ideation, and suicide completion.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Meet with me 1:1 virtually via WebEx (due to Covid-19) and answer open-ended questions on your perception of bullying incidents and what influences your decision to intervene. I will video record the interview, unless you prefer audio only, for accuracy during transcription. The interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes to complete.
2. Participate virtually in a group forum with all other participants to respond to one question. The group forum will be scheduled to last only an hour and will be video recorded for accuracy during transcription. As I analyze the information, I will contact you virtually or through email to confirm with you that I am accurately analyzing your input and language.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive benefits from participating. However, benefits participants may receive from taking part in this study are having the opportunity to have your true heart heard concerning your perceptions and decisions to intervene in bullying incidents. As administrators know and understand your perceptions and what influences your decisions to intervene, your chances of receiving effective assistance to intervene during bullying incidents

Last Page of Consent Form

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Marlene Williams. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ████████ and/or ███████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, ██ ███████, at ███████████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at ████████.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

APPENDIX D – EXAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPTS

█████: **In school to bully other kids who might not look like them**

Me: May I interrupt you for a second?

█████: Yes

Me: The recording just started because I just heard it. So, I'm sorry (laughter). So let me just recap. Um, for those who have to view this video, I have already established the criteria with █████. We've done our greetings; I've established consent; um, the form has been signed; and my first question for him was asking him his perception of bullying in the alternative school setting with special ed youth. Um, my recording hadn't started. It just started in the middle of his sentence, so I'm just going to ask him to repeat what he said please. I'm so sorry, Mr. █████.

█████: You're fine. You ready for me to start?

Me: Yes

█████: Go ahead and start?

Me: Yes

█████: Okay. Again, my opinion and my feeling is that a lot of our kids in alternative setting experience bullying at home or in their early years in the public school system. And what the bullying they experience it at home and in the community, they bring it to the alternative setting, and they tend to tend to bully other kids who don't look like them or kids from different communities, kids with physical discrepancies.

Me: Okay, alright. Thank you for that. What thoughts or feelings or behaviors have you, have been activated within you while observing bullying…specifically of special education students?

█████: Can you start the beginning of that question over again?

Me: Absolutely. I was asking What thoughts or feelings or behaviors have you, have been activated within you whenever you've observed that bullying, that type of bullying with special education students?

█████: It frustrates me and makes me mad because I was bullied when I was in junior high and I feel like how he feels that he has no one to turn to. And I just, you know I want to step in; I step-in in a positive way and not put my hands on him; try to use it as a teachable moment.

Me: Gotcha, okay. It (audio) started dragging again. I think you said you were in middle school

█████: Yes ma'am, it was junior high school back in the 70s.

APPENDIX E – BEGINNING DATA ANALYSIS – SAMPLE (meaning units)

We have different programs on our wing, but we're not integrated with our regular ed peers on the other side of the building. **(separate from mainstream) (description of alternative middle school)**

at the alternative base we're much, we're much more structured. We have more staff to facilitate everything **(Perception of alternative middle school)**

But, again it was cause we had a very high staff-to-student ratio. So, most of the time, kids, even if you know, they're, they're in an integrated class with them, they're not going to say anything cause there is so much staff there. **(team work) (perception of SpEd students)**

And, I definitely think that the um, the expectations for students are very clear, and because they have to meet these expectations to get some of the liberties that they want. **(perception of SpEd students)**